COLLECTIVISM, UNIVERSALISM, AND STRUGGLES OVER COMMON PROPERTY RESOURCES IN THE ‘NEW’ EUROPE

John Pickles

Anyone who studies post-socialist political economy probably has to begin a discussion of ‘the commons’ and common property resources by explaining the relationship between common property and collectivism, and the enormous impact that liberal and neo-liberal thought and institutions have had on the social economies of the Eastern European commons. In this article, I want to do this in three ways. First, I argue that contemporary accounts of socialist and post-socialist common property resources and practices have been shaped by the commitments of neo-liberalism and have had the very particular effect (and perhaps intent) of discrediting certain kinds of collective action and common property institutions. Second, I illustrate the ways in which a new definition of the commons has emerged in Europe—one that struggles to harmonize juridical and political aspirations for a peaceful and inclusive European Union with a common economic project and space of harmonized markets and trade policy. These twinned projects of this new ‘common economic union’ and their own versions of what constitutes a public, a commons, as well as their universal value, are increasingly conflated with post-colonial notions of a return to Europe and with deeply historical and racialized views of identity and commonality. The building of markets through the institutions and projects of structural adjustment and shock therapy has resulted in a thoroughgoing integration of the economies of the region with those of the broader international market and a fundamental recomposition of class forces in the region. One result has been a reworking of notions of inclusion and exclusion, whose focus has centered on citizenship, rights, and obligations, and on public and private spaces. Third, I suggest some of the ways in which the conjuncture of globalization, European integration, and social and racial reordering has rendered the struggle over the commons more important to those in the region desperately seeking economic security.
1989 and All That

Let me give you my vision: A man’s right to work as he will, to spend what he earns, to own property, to have the state as servant and not as master … They are the essence of a free country, and on that freedom all of our other freedoms depend. (Thatcher 1998)

For many commentators on either side of the Iron Curtain, the revolutions of 1989 represented what Tismaneanu (1999: 69) called “the triumph of civic dignity and political morality over ideological monism, bureaucratic cynicism, and police dictatorship. Rooted in an individualistic concept of freedom and skeptical of all ideological blueprints for social engineering, these revolutions were (at least at the outset) liberal and non-utopian.”

Some were less optimistic about the transition process and the immediate consequences of the emerging liberal outlook across the region. For others, the alignment of economic and political institutions around a monolithic anticommunism also signaled the emergence of a new hegemony for building capitalism and with it a triumphal market ideology forged in the trenches of Thatcher’s Britain and Reagan’s America. As Jacques Derrida (1994: 51-52) pointed out at the time:

No one, it seems to me, can contest the fact that a dogmatics is attempting to install its worldwide hegemony in paradoxical and suspect conditions … This dominating discourse often has the manic, jubilatory, and incantatory form that Freud assigned to the so-called triumphant phase of mourning work. The incantation repeats and ritualizes itself, it holds forth and holds to formulas, like any animistic magic. To the rhythm of a cadenced march, it proclaims: Marx is dead, communism is dead, very dead, and along with it its hopes, its discourse, its theories, and its practices. It says: long live capitalism, long live the market, here’s to the survival of economic and political liberalism!

Margaret Thatcher’s vision was of a new political and economic dispensation for Europe—free of the planning mechanisms of the bureaucratic state (be it in its state-socialist or social-democratic form) and fueled by the unfettered individualism of a liberal polity and economy. This was wielded with uncompromising force by the Bretton Woods project and its associated institutions of transformation (most specifically the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development; see World Bank 1996), with their ready-made prescriptions to privatize collective property and liberalize markets. National politicians in the region also sought to outmaneuver the more social-democratic tendencies in reform movements themselves, including Solidarność in Poland, the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, and in the reformed socialist parties and more cautious nationalist and agrarian parties throughout the region. For young and old ‘democrats’, collectivism could only mean—as it did for Thatcher and Hayek (1994)—a ‘road to serfdom’. The post-socialist transition meant private property, market logics, political individualism, and a deep commitment to the universalism of a common neo-liberal European project (Gowan 1995, 1996).
Hidden here was also a broader positivist and objectivist belief in what the nineteenth century had understood as the stationary state—a state of generalized social equilibrium arising from the ways in which rational market decisions are made by individual and social actors. For Balibar (2004: 106): “The result of this is not, of course, to render any further transformation impossible; cultural and technological changes can, in fact, go on and even accelerate. But transformation would henceforth occur without essential conflictuality between classes, social groups, powers, and counterpowers, ‘systemic’ and ‘antisystemic’ forces.” This was a “return to Europe”—the restitution of an interrupted path to democracy and capitalism in which history had come to “an end” (Fukuyama 1989, 1992).

This new liberalism rode triumphant into Central and Eastern Europe, often with the support of actors as diverse as right-wing communists, left-wing liberals, and internationalist free-marketeers. The radical individualism and anti-collectivism that swept across the region quickly labeled collective and common property regimes, some long pre-dating communism, to be barriers to economic development and ‘efficiency’, and they were quickly dismantled, often by force (Pickles 2005). In Bulgaria, for example, collective animal farms were broken up and breeding stock that had been developed over decades was slaughtered for market. Collective farms were ‘restituted’ to their 1948 owners, many of whom were now elderly or urban residents lacking interest in the land. Even when former owners agreed to maintain the agricultural cooperative as a cooperative of private owners, the government of the time required that ‘restitution commissions’ first distribute land titles, equipment, and stock to individuals. Only when asset distribution was complete could cooperative members attempt to reconstitute the collective assets of the farm. In the industrial sector, the logics of decollectivization and privatization of assets also dominated political struggles. In part, these struggles were about the timing of the distribution of private assets, with enterprise managers desperately attempting to run asset values down and delay privatization auctions until they had positioned themselves to be able to buy. In many cases, it was this willed running down of enterprise assets that subsequently was interpreted as collective enterprise inefficiency.

In this transition, complexity and diversity were understood mainly in terms of a new universalism of preferences, choices, and marginal utility. Economic governance was to be structured by price signals among presumed autonomous and equivalent economic actors, and the diverse economies of actually existing socialism and capitalism (with their dense social networks and practices of gifting, reciprocity, and exchange) were rendered as signs of ‘backwardness’. The project managers of structural adjustment had, ironically, come to agree with Lenin’s ([1899] 1967: 607) earlier assessment of capitalism in Russia, in which he had argued that “in no single capitalist country has there been such an abundant survival of ancient institutions that are incompatible with capitalism, retard its development, and immeasurably worsen the conditions of the producers, who ‘suffer’ [quoting Marx] not only from the development of capitalist production, but from the incompleteness of that development.”
In the post-1989 process of adjustment, projects of collective economy and support for the regulation and management of common property resources received crushing blows. For many enterprises and communities, the blows were fatal: farmland went out of cultivation, marginal lands were overgrazed, timber resources went untended or were stripped, industrial enterprises saw their equipment sold off, wages were captured by the management of central plants, and workshops and factories were closed. Investment capital dried up, and social infrastructure funded either by enterprise or by cooperative budgets collapsed. Health care and education suffered serious declines, and fundamental services such as pre-natal care, kindergartens, and rural transport collapsed (see Hekimova et al. 2004; Meurs and Giddings 2004).

The consequences of this kind of expansion of market logics to ever broader geographical and sociological regions is a project that leads to what Bali-bar (2004: 106-107) has called "inner exclusion." Across Central and Eastern Europe, it effected a deep transformation in the social practices of the commons, at the level of both the state economy and its bureaucratic collectivism and also at the level of the everyday community economy (ibid.):

Once all human activity takes the form of commodity exchange, or occurs under the constraint of the law of value, there is no place available for alternative practices and modes of life. There exist only forms of inner exclusion, synonymous with extreme precariousness and verging on elimination. Likewise, if the allocation of resources is more and more regulated on the global level ‘in real time’, it is difficult to see where there could be space for individual and collective adventures, for economic challenges or projects for autonomous development. The only question would be how quickly and easily one can adapt to changing technological conditions.

Globalization, Common Property Regimes, and Diverse Economies

The aim of a Europe open to enterprise is the moving force behind the creation of the Single European Market by 1992. By getting rid of barriers, by making it possible for companies to operate on a Europe-wide scale, we can best compete with the United States, Japan and the other new economic powers emerging in Asia and elsewhere ... And that means action to free markets, action to widen choice, action to reduce government intervention ... and to remove the constraints on trade. (Thatcher 1998)

The reform of state-socialist collective-property regimes and the depth of their effects received a great deal of attention from scholars and policy makers after 1989 (e.g., Sachs 1995). Much of this discussion focused on the legacy of collective ownership, problems of decollectivization and privatization, new regulatory frameworks, loss of traditional markets, and constraints on entry into new markets. More recently, attention has been given to the uneven achievements of the ‘transition’ and the diversity of property regimes that sustained the embedded social economies of state socialism and post-socialism (Meurs 2001, 2002; Smith and Stenning 2006; Stark and Bruszt 1998; Verdery 1996).
And it is in these new literatures that we see explicit consideration given to the possibilities of models for thinking about disorganized capitalism, social marginalization, and precariousness not as precluding common property and resource mobilization strategies, but as absolutely bound to them.

In this sense, common property resources have become more, not less, important in the daily lives of ‘new’ Europeans, as well as among a broader range of ‘marginal’ workers (the unemployed, low-wage workers, and new immigrants), for whom access to economic resources, social welfare, and citizenship rights has become increasingly precarious. These processes of marginalization and exclusion have encouraged experimentation of all kinds, and this in turn has led to a proliferation of diverse economic strategies: remittance economies among migrants, common housing among immigrant male workers, periodic prostitution among female immigrants, women’s collectives to deal with the crisis of child care, urban squats as responses to inflated property markets, and urban gardening to increase access to food resources.

It is, of course, also the case that these conditions of ‘precarity’ create new spaces and opportunities for violent economies of disruption and abuse—including criminal networks of money laundering, trafficking of women and children, Mafia protection racketeering, illegal immigration networks, and forced labor practices—that are emerging in many parts of Europe, not only in post-socialist countries. Alongside these are the new official economies of incarceration: the camps, deportation offices, walls and fences, and security companies to police the new Europe and define its collective existence in very physical ways. But it is also the case that in response to these gray and institutional practices, social movements throughout Europe have also begun to experiment with ways to reclaim different notions of the commons and in very fundamental ways redefine the nature of common property, particularly around the struggles over space, livelihoods, and basic rights.

The project of reclaiming the city by producing new common spaces and practices has been underway among the underclass for generations, but over the past decade the scale and scope of these reclamation efforts have been astonishing. Squatters have reclaimed empty public and private housing and, through their efforts, have begun to change the way in which even public authorities understand empty housing as common property. Public space, long privatized by either the state or the corporate world, is also under reclamation through these collective-action projects. And art collectives and other social movements are deploying installations, humor, and images, along with coordinated actions, to ‘open’ and ‘delete’ the borders of closed private and state spaces (see, e.g., Notes from Nowhere 2003). The Delete the Borders movement struggles against the Schengen fortressing of Europe to redefine the geographical spaces of interaction. The ‘open citizenship’ debates articulate a new, more expansive—even universal—notion of legal rights and a civic commons to which peoples of all national origins can lay claim, regardless of their origin and status. The movements of the ‘precariate’ signal new spatial and political possibilities of diverse social and economic practices. In all these ways, and many more, the meaning of the commons as an essential...
basis for social life is being reworked, and new spaces and practices are being produced (Cobarrubias 2005).

Of course, the history of the struggle over the commons has also been riddled with class politics, and this is no less the case in the new Europe. For example, recent changes in Bulgarian property law have facilitated the ownership of land by foreigners, and in coastal and mountain areas Western Europeans (especially retirees) have begun to buy up what appear to them as remarkably cheap properties. In ‘favored’ locales, whole communities have emerged as major tourist sites or retirement villages, property prices have boomed, and former residents may now be in the minority. In some cases, new residents are beginning to assert their own claims on the commons: village councils have been forced to zone out ‘nuisances’ such as animals and farm machinery, noisy festival celebrations have been banned, and community resources formerly spent on the upkeep of small rural roads and other infrastructure have been diverted to paving major highways and providing enhanced services in the central village. This is one of the lesser and perhaps more benign forms in which the contemporary projects of globalization and of Europe impinge on the meaning and practice of the commons. But it is no less indicative of the kind of restructuring of the public sphere currently underway in many parts of post-socialist and post-industrial Europe, producing in turn new geographies of citizenship and class. As Balibar (1999) asserts: “In reality, what is at stake here is the definition of the modes of inclusion and exclusion in the European sphere, as a ‘public sphere’ of bureaucracy and of relations of force but also of communication and cooperation between peoples. Consequently, in the strongest sense of the term, it is the possibility or the impossibility of European unification.”

The Universalism of ‘Europe’ and the Recomposition of ‘Society’

We have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them reimposed at a European level, with a European superstate exercising a new dominance from Brussels ... Certainly we want to see Europe more united and with a greater sense of common purpose. But it must be in a way which preserves the different traditions, Parliamentary powers and sense of national pride in one’s own country. (Thatcher 1998)

The project of Europe and the European Union was always a project of the commons, aimed at the construction of harmonized laws and norms and a common economy—a Common Economic Community, a Common Market. The irony that this ‘community’ of values was predicated on neo-liberal market models has not gone unnoticed and has created difficulties for those seeking community without society, as Thatcher had insisted (Dauphinée 2003; Smith, Pickles, and Begg 2004). For Bronislaw Geremek (2003: 1): “European integration had to start with the economy, but now its future depends on the European Union making a success of its efforts to give itself a political dimension. And it is now that the challenge arises that we can describe as cultural, although
it goes beyond heritage or cultural policy. It is more about the big questions: where do we come from? where are we? where are we going?”

Post-communist leaders have largely answered these questions in ways that are pragmatic, focused as they have often had to be on the exigencies of challenge or crisis. But as well as seeing their ‘return to Europe’ as a return to an interrupted process of economic and social development (democracy and capitalism), many in the region also see it as a return to a common cultural heritage—as a distinctly Christian European Union, as the Polish government argued during negotiations with Turkey over EU membership.

But for others like Geremek (2005), the future of the European project depends on the construction of Europeans, with all the state institutions and apparatuses that such a project requires, from educational, cultural, and inter-regional exchange and training programs to the broader ideological work of identifying what constitutes this “European ideal”—an ideal that is not articulated in opposition to national identities of member states or predicated on models of inclusion and exclusion. As Strauss-Kahn (2004) sees it: “The community will be consolidated by the creation of a political Europe, and will become the common property of the emerging European people. In this way, a political Europe and European identity each stimulate the growth of the other. But the principle is clear: there can be no political Europe without a European community of values; a political Europe cannot be created unless a European people emerges.”

The project of ‘Europe’ is one that offers enormous promise for a different kind of future for many and poses serious questions for some: For whom does Europe offer promise? What kind of ‘common’ project is being and can be built? What kind of society is envisioned, and with what reach of civic rights and dignity? In *Society Must Be Defended*, Michel Foucault (2003) focused on the ways in which state sovereignty and a community of values emerged in an earlier project of European enlightenment. In this iteration, the meaning of collective identities such as citizenship, common property, the public, rule of law, the social contract, and democracy were bounded by the Westphalian territorial state and the nation it produced. Each was to be defended externally against enemies (by warfare) and internally against contested claims on the state and demands from its ‘public’ over what was to count as common resources and how universal values (such as sovereignty) were to be given substantive meaning (Arrighi 1997: 7).

Those of us interested in collective projects with universal commitments (e.g., forms of open citizenship, borderless states, sustainable commons, and diverse economies) that are broader than those sustained by the tyranny of markets might look for the promise of the new Europe not in the institutionalization of Europeanism or in the forging of common European identities, but through the heightening of the contradictory nature of the project itself (see Bourdieu 1998, 2003). Founded on a set of deep neo-liberal political and economic commitments (and histories), this Europe both rejects collective action and depends on it, refuses to see the economic possibilities of diverse economies but creates them at every turn (both legal and illegal), identifies the necessity for commonalities and universalism but both supports and strives to manage the diverse nationalisms and regionalisms within. Perhaps there is to
be a 'new Europe', but it will be one that emerges in reaction to, not from, the colonial discourses of heroism predicated on individual prowess, competition, and private spaces. In the interstices of the European project, and fostered by it, counter-publics are emerging. Organized around commonalities of difference and respect, they do not ask for universal acknowledgement—just basic recognition and rights.


References


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