

Two Faces of Apocalypse: A Letter from Copenhagen

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In December 2009 I travelled to Copenhagen for the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 15). I did not attend any of the official meetings in the Bella Center, where the conference was based, but rather participated outside the conference in a range of protest activities directed against the actions (and more importantly the inactions) of the official parties. There is much to be said about the protest tactics employed in Copenhagen as well as the strategy of summit protests more generally, but the events led me primarily toward theoretical reflections about the relationship between the two predominant components of the protests: anticapitalist social movements and social movements to address climate change. These two groups of movements share a profound link, it seems to me, in that they are focused on the management of *the common*, which is quickly becoming the central terrain of political struggle across a wide variety of political contexts. And yet these movements stand in different relation to the common and even focus on different forms of the common, posing a series of conceptual antinomies and political challenges. The interactions among the activist movements surrounding the Copenhagen Summit was for me a first opportunity to see clearly and work through some of these antinomies and challenges.

The primary political differences among the movements, in my view, as well as the antinomies that to some degree stand behind them, flow from the fact that they focus on distinct forms of the common, which have dissimilar qualities. On the one hand, for climate change movements and ecological movements more generally, the common refers primarily to the Earth and its ecosystems, including the atmosphere, the oceans and rivers, and the forests, as well as all the forms of life that interact with them. Anticapitalist social movements, on the other hand, generally understand the common in terms of

the products of human labor and creativity that we share, such as ideas, knowledges, images, codes, affects, social relationships, and the like. These common goods are becoming increasingly central in capitalist production—a fact that has a series of important consequences for efforts to maintain or reform the capitalist system as well as projects to resist or overthrow it. As first approximations you could call these two realms the ecological common and the social/economic common, or the natural and the artificial common, although these categories quickly prove insufficient.

There are at least two essential respects in which these two domains of the common are animated by contrasting logics. First, whereas most ecological discourses regarding the common highlight the *limits* of the Earth and the forms of life that interact with it, discussions of the social or artificial forms of the common generally concentrate on the open, *limitless* nature of the production of the common. Second, whereas many environmental discourses generate a sphere of interest much broader than the human or animal worlds, the social/economic discourses generally maintain the interests of humanity as central. My suspicion is that these seeming oppositions will eventually turn out, after investigation, to indicate potential complementarities rather than contradictory relations between these two guises of the common as well as between the forms of political action required in each. But much work is required to arrive at that point.

Before looking more closely at these differences, though, and the political challenges they present, I want to dwell briefly on the potential and existing connections among movements for the common. In many but not all respects the two guises of the common function according to the same logic, and this is primarily what constitutes the basis of the profound link among the diverse movements. Both forms of the common, for example, defy and are deteriorated by property relations. In addition, perhaps as a corollary, the common in both domains confounds the traditional measures of economic value and imposes instead the value of life as the only valid scale of evaluation. Indeed the divisions between the ecological and the social become blurred from this biopolitical standpoint.

The theoretical discussion must begin by establishing the centrality of the common, which is much more advanced and widespread in ecological thought than in other domains. Not only do we generally share the benefits of interaction with the Earth, the sun, and the oceans but also we are all affected by their degradation. Air and water pollution are not confined to the location where they are produced, of course, and they are not limited by national boundaries; climate change similarly affects the entire planet. This is not to say that such changes affect everyone in the same way: rising ocean levels, for example, may have the most immediate impact in Bangladesh or a Pacific island nation, whereas increasingly severe droughts may most dramatically affect Ethiopia or Bolivia. The common, though, is the basic foundation of ecological thought against which the singularities of specific locations stand out.

In social and economic thought, however, the centrality of the common is not as widely recognized. The claim for its centrality relies on a claim or hypothesis that, along with many others, Toni Negri and I have explored over the last ten years: we are in the midst of an epochal shift from a capitalist economy centered on indus-

trial production to one centered on what can be called immaterial or biopolitical production. This claim is today increasingly but by no means universally accepted. For clarity let me break down the claim into its three component elements. The first of these is generally acknowledged: for much of the last two centuries the capitalist economy has been centered on industrial production. That does not mean that most of the workers throughout this period were in factories—in fact, the majority were not. Indeed who worked in industry rather than the fields or the home was a central determinant in the geographical, racial, and gender divisions of labor. Industrial production was central, rather, in the sense that the qualities of industry—its forms of mechanization, its working day, its wage relations, its regimes of time discipline and precision, and so forth—were progressively imposed over other sectors of production and social life as a whole, creating not only an industrial *economy* but also an industrial *society*.

The second element of the claim is also relatively uncontroversial: industrial production no longer holds the central position in the capitalist economy. This does not mean that fewer people are working in factories today but rather that industry no longer marks the hierarchical position in the various divisions of labor and, more significantly, that the qualities of industry are no longer being imposed over other sectors and society as a whole.

The final element of the hypothesis is the most complex and requires extended argument and qualification. The claim, to state it most briefly, is that there is emerging today in the central position that industry once occupied the production of immaterial goods or goods with a significant immaterial component, such as ideas, knowledges, languages, images, code, and affects. Occupations involved in immaterial production range from the high to the low end of the economy, from health care workers and educators to fast food workers, call center workers, and flight attendants. Once again, this is not a quantitative claim but a claim about the qualities that are progressively being imposed over other sectors of the economy and society as a whole. In other words, the cognitive and affective tools of immaterial production, the precarious, non-guaranteed nature of its wage relations, the temporality of immaterial production (which tends to destroy the structures of the working day and blur the traditional divisions between work-time and nonwork-time), as well as its other qualities are becoming generalized.

This form of production should be understood as *biopolitical* insofar as what is being produced is ultimately social relations and forms of life. In this context traditional economic divisions between production and reproduction tend to fade away. Forms of life are simultaneously produced and reproduced. Here we can begin to see the proximity between biopolitical production and ecological thought, since both are focused on the production/reproduction of forms of life—with the important difference that the ecological perspective extends the notion of forms of life well beyond the limits of the human or the animal (but more on that later).

One can also approach the hypothesis of the emerging dominant position of immaterial or biopolitical production in terms of historical changes in the hierarchy of forms of property. Before industry occupied the central position in the economy, up

to the early 19th century, *immobile* property, such as land, held a dominant position with respect to other forms of property. In the long era of the centrality of industry, however, *mobile* property, such as commodities, came to dominate over immobile property. Today we are in the midst of a similar transition, one in which *immaterial and reproducible* property is taking the dominant position over material property. Indeed patents, copyrights, and other methods to regulate and maintain exclusive control over immaterial property are subject of the most active debates in the field of property law. The rising importance of immaterial and reproducible property can serve as evidence for or at least indication of the emerging centrality of immaterial production.

Whereas in the earlier period of transition the contest between dominant forms of property turned on the question of mobility (immobile land versus mobile commodities), today the contest focuses attention on exclusivity and reproducibility. Private property in the form of steel beams, automobiles, and television sets obey the logic of scarcity: if you are using them, I cannot. Immaterial property such as brands, code, and music, in contrast, can be reproduced in an unlimited way. In fact, many such immaterial products only function to their full potential when they are shared in an open way. The usefulness to you of an idea or an affect is not diminished by your sharing it with me. On the contrary, it becomes useful only by being shared in common.

This is what it means to say that the common is becoming central in today's capitalist economy. First, the form of production emerging in the dominant position results generally in immaterial or biopolitical goods that tend to be common. Their nature is social and reproducible such that it is increasingly difficult to maintain exclusive control over them. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the productivity of such goods in future economic development depends on their being common. Keeping ideas and knowledges private hinders the production of new ideas and knowledges, just as private languages and private affects are sterile and useless. If this hypothesis is correct, then, paradoxically, capital increasingly relies on the common.

This brings me back to the first logical characteristic shared by the common in both the ecological and social/economic domains: they both defy and are deteriorated by property relations. In the social/economic domain, not only is it difficult to police exclusive rights over immaterial forms of property, as I said, but making biopolitical goods private also diminishes their future productivity. In other words, a powerful contradiction is emerging at the heart of capitalist production between the need for the common in the interest of productivity and the need for the private in the interest of capitalist accumulation. This contradiction can be conceived as a new version of the classic opposition, often cited in Marxist and communist thought, between the socialization of production and the private nature of accumulation. The struggle over so-called bio-piracy in Brazil, India, and elsewhere is one contemporary theater of this clash. Indigenous knowledges and the medicinal properties of certain Amazonian plants, for example, are patented by transnational corporations and made private property; the results are not only unjust but also destructive.

In the ecological domain it is equally clear that the common both defies and is

deteriorated by property relations. It defies property relations simply in the sense that the beneficial and detrimental effects of the environment always exceed the limits of property like they do national borders. Just as your land shares with the neighboring land the benefits of rain and sunshine, it will share too the destructive effects of pollution and climate change. Although the strategies of neoliberalism have been aimed perhaps most visibly at privatizing the public in terms of transport, services, or industries, they have also significantly involved projects to privatize the common, such as oil in Uganda, diamonds in Sierra Leone, lithium in Bolivia, and even the genetic information of the population of Iceland. The deterioration of the common by private property here also suggests a contradictory relation: the private nature of accumulation (through the profits of a polluting industry, for example) conflicts with the social nature of the resulting damages (the detriment that pollution causes to a wide range of forms of life). By putting together the two formulae, then, we can see the contradiction with the common on both sides, so to speak, of private property: the increasingly common nature of production clashes with the private nature of capitalist accumulation and that private accumulation, in turn, clashes with the common, social nature of its detrimental effects.

Numerous powerful struggles have arisen in recent decades to combat neoliberal privatization of the common. A successful struggle that illustrates part of my argument here is the war over water that centered in Cochabamba, Bolivia in 2000, which, together with the war over gas that peaked in 2003 in El Alto, contributed to the 2005 election of Evo Morales. The events were precipitated by a classic neoliberal script. The IMF pressured the Bolivian government to privatize the water system because it cost more to deliver clean water than the recipients paid for it. The government sold the water system to a consortium of foreign corporations, which immediately “rationalized” the price of water by raising it several-fold. The subsequent protests to de-privatize the water intersected with a variety of other efforts to maintain control over the common, in terms of natural resources, the forms of life of indigenous communities, and the social practices of the peasants and the poor. Today, with the disasters of neoliberal privatization becoming ever more evident, the task of discovering alternative means to manage and promote the common has become essential and urgent.

A second characteristic shared by the common in both domains, which is more abstract but not for that reason any less significant, is that it constantly disrupts and exceeds the dominant measures of value. Contemporary economists go through extraordinary gymnastics to measure the values of biopolitical goods such as ideas or affects. Often they cast these as “externalities” that escape the standard schema of measurement. Accountants struggle similarly with what they call “intangible assets,” the value of which seems to be esoteric. In fact, the value of an idea, a social relation, or a form of life always exceeds the value that capitalist rationality can stamp on it, not only in the sense that it is always a greater quantity but also and more importantly in that it defies the entire system of measure. (Finance, of course, plays a central role in the valuation of biopolitical goods and production and the current financial and economic crisis derives in large part, I would argue, from the inability of capitalist measurement to grasp the newly dominant forms of production. This is a complex

discussion, however, that I have to leave to another occasion.) A central character in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* is a factory owner, Thomas Gradgrind, who believes he can rationalize life by submitting to economic measure all aspects of it, including "affairs of the heart" such as his relationships with his children—but, as the reader quickly guesses, Gradgrind learns in the course of the novel that life exceeds the bounds of any such measure. Today even the value of economic goods and activity, since the common is increasingly central to capitalist production, exceeds and escapes the traditional measures.

In the ecological domain too the value of the common is immeasurable or, at least, does not obey the traditional capitalist measures of economic value. This is not to say that scientific measurement, such as the proportion of carbon dioxide or methane gases in the atmosphere, is not central and essential. Of course, it is. My point is rather that *the value of the common* defies measurement. Consider, as a counterexample, the much-publicized arguments of Bjørn Lomborg against taking action to limit global warming. Like Mr. Gradgrind, Lomborg's strategy is to rationalize the question by calculating the values involved in order to set priorities. The estimated value of the destruction expected by global warming, he concludes with an air of unimpeachable logic, does not merit the costs to combat it. An obvious problem with such an argument, however, is that one cannot measure the value of forms of life that are destroyed. What dollar amount should we assign to the submersion of half of Bangladesh under water, permanent drought in Ethiopia, or the destruction of traditional Inuit ways of life? Even contemplating such questions elicits the kind of nausea and indignation you feel when reading those insurance company schedules that calculate how much money you will be reimbursed for losing a finger at work and how much for an eye or an arm.

The inability to grasp the value of the common with traditional capitalist measures provides one way to approach the various proposals for carbon trading schemes, which were much discussed in the official meetings at Copenhagen. Carbon trading schemes generally involve a cap to the production of carbon dioxide gases and other greenhouse gases so as to create a limited market in which the production of such gases can be given determinate economic values and traded. Such schemes, then, do not pretend directly to measure the value of the common, but instead claim to do so indirectly, by assigning monetary values to the production of gases that harm or corrupt the common. It should come as no surprise that assigning determinate values to immeasurable commodities and assuming that market rationality will create a stable and beneficial system has in many cases in the past led to disaster—see, for example, the current financial crisis. And such property logics and market schemes are likely not to diminish but to exacerbate the global social hierarchies marked by poverty and exclusion. In any case, it seems clear to me that proposals relying on the capitalist measurement of value and the market rationality that presumably accompanies it cannot grasp the value of the common and address the problem of climate change at the fundamental level, even through such indirect means. Forms of life are not measureable, or, perhaps, they obey a radically different scale based on the value of life, a scale that we have not yet invented (or one that, perhaps, we have lost).

My primary point here is that just as the different forms of the common both rebel against property relations, so too they defy the traditional measures of capitalist rationality. These two shared logics are a significant basis for understanding both guises of the common and struggling together to preserve and further them. The shared qualities of the common in these two domains, which I have analyzed so far, should constitute a foundation for linking the forms of political activism aimed at the autonomy and the democratic management of the common.

The struggles for the common in these two domains do operate in some respects, however, according to conflicting, even opposing logics. The central antinomy from which a series of others follow has to do with scarcity and limits. Ecological thought necessarily focuses on the finitude of the Earth and its life systems. Some argue, for instance, that the common can only sustain so many people living on the Earth and still be successfully reproduced. The Earth, others insist, especially its spaces of wilderness, must be defended against the damages of industrial development and other human activities. The scientific discourses about climate change are filled with limits and turning points, such as what will happen if there continues to be more than 350 parts per million of CO₂ in the atmosphere. A politics of the common in the economic and social realm, in contrast, generally emphasizes the unlimited character of production, although it conceives production primarily in not industrial but biopolitical terms. The production of forms of life, including ideas, affects, and so forth, has no fixed limits. That does not mean, of course, that more ideas are necessarily better, but rather that they do not operate under a logic of scarcity. Ideas are not necessarily degraded by proliferating them and sharing them with other people—on the contrary. There is a tendency, then, for discussions in the one domain to be dominated by calls for preservation and limits, while the other is characterized by celebrations of limitless creative potential.

This conceptual conflict between limits and limitlessness is reflected in the seemingly incompatible slogans of the movements that met in Copenhagen. A favorite rallying cry of anticapitalist social movements in recent years has been “We want everything for everyone.” For those with an ecological consciousness of limits, of course, this sounds like an absurd, reckless notion that will propel us further down the route of mutual destruction. In contrast, a prominent placard at the public demonstrations in Copenhagen warned “There is no Planet B.” For anticapitalist activists this too closely echoes the neoliberal mantra popularized 30 years ago by the Margaret Thatcher government: “There is no alternative.” Indeed the struggles against neoliberalism of the past decades have been defined by their belief in the possibility of radical, seemingly limitless alternatives. In short, the World Social Forum motto, “Another world is possible,” might translate in the context of the climate changes movements into something like, “This world is still possible, maybe.”

In simplistic terms, indeed too simplistic, one might say that whereas ecological thought is aimed against economic development, or for curbs on it, advocates in the social and economic domain of the common are resolutely pro-development. This is too simplistic because the development in question in the two cases, as I said, is fundamentally different. The kinds of development involved in the social produc-

tion of the common depart significantly from industrial development. In fact, once we recognize, as I mentioned earlier, that in the biopolitical context the traditional divisions between production and reproduction break down, it is easier to see that calls for preservation in the one case and creation in the other are not really opposed but complementary. Both perspectives refer fundamentally to the production and reproduction of forms of life.

A second basic conceptual conflict between struggles for the common in the two domains has to do with the extent to which the interests of humanity serve as the frame of reference. Struggles for the common in the social and economic domain generally focus on humanity and indeed one of the most important tasks is to extend our politics successfully to all of humanity, that is, to overcome the hierarchies and the exclusions of class and property, gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, and others. Struggles for the common in the ecological realm are much more likely, in contrast, to extend their frames of reference beyond humanity. In most ecological discourses human life is viewed in its interaction with and care for other life forms and eco-systems, even in cases when priority is still accorded to the interests of humanity. And in many radical ecological frameworks the interests of non-human life forms are given equal or even greater priority to those of humanity. This is a real and important conceptual difference, it seems to me, which implies significant political differences, but I will have to defer to another occasion exploring these more fully.

Let me instead return to the conceptual antinomy between limits and limitlessness to explore some of the differences of political strategy that derive from it. The first of these might be called the antinomy of governance between autonomy and state action. A central goal of anticapitalist and anti-neoliberal social movements has been to promote forms of autonomy and self-governance as means to challenge and destroy social hierarchies. The Zapatista communities have served as a powerful example to show that we can develop our power to rule ourselves by experimenting with democratic forms of governance. In the discourse of climate change movements, in contrast, political strategy generally focuses less on autonomy than on the need to compel states to act. This is due in part to the global nature of the problem. Autonomous communities might reduce their own levels of carbon dioxide production, for example, but that will do little to effect climate change if the major polluters are not stopped. States seem to be the only actors capable of achieving that, along with perhaps major corporations and supranational institutions like the United Nations. The appeal to states regarding global warming is due also to the urgency of the problem. There seems to be little time for experimentation or partial measures before it is too late to address the critical factors causing climate change. This political antinomy is not absolute, of course. Autonomous movements have always also been directed at states: in some cases to challenge state control and in others to cooperate with progressive governments. And, in turn, many climate change movements value autonomy as a principle and even as a part of their strategy. But there remains a significant difference in priority and emphasis.

Another political antinomy has to do with the question of knowledge. Projects of autonomy and self-governance, as well as most struggles against social hierarchies, act on the assumption that everyone has access to the knowledge necessary for po-

litical action. Workers in the factory, people of color in a white society, women in a male-dominated society have the daily experience of subordination that is the seed of rebellion. A long training is required, of course, to transform that indignation into a political project, but the assumption is that all have access to that basic knowledge. This seems to me something like Spinoza's basic assumption in *De Intellectus Emandatione* that "habemus enim ideam veram," that is, we have a true idea or, rather, we have at least one true idea, which serves as foundation that subsequently we can build on and construct an edifice of knowledge. The assumption of a general access to the experience and knowledge of subordination fills a similarly foundational role. Without this basic knowledge being open to all, democratic and horizontal projects of autonomy and self-governance would be inconceivable. The relationship to knowledge in climate change movements seems to me very different. Certainly, great importance is given to projects for public education about the nature of climate change and people's experiences of changing climate is often invoked. But individual experience of climate change is very unreliable. Winters may get more severe in one area or one year and milder in others; rains may increase in one part of the world and decrease in another. None of these are adequate bases for understanding climate change. In fact, once any of us experience the effects of climate change in a verifiable way it will be far too late to stop its effects. The basic facts of climate change—for example, the increasing proportion of CO₂ in the atmosphere and its effects—are highly scientific and abstract from our daily experiences. Projects of public pedagogy can help spread such scientific knowledge, but in contrast to the knowledge based in the experience of subordination, this is fundamentally an expert knowledge.

A third political antinomy, which is perhaps the most determinant, marks the distance between two temporalities. It is true that anticapitalist and anti-neoliberal movements always employ a rhetoric of urgency—insisting, for instance, that their demands be met *now*—but the temporality of autonomous community formation and democratic organizing is constitutive. Time is determined, in other words, by the process of organizing itself. The urgency of demands is really secondary to this constitutive temporality. In contrast, urgency is the primary temporality of climate change politics. Soon it will be too late to save the planet and maybe the time has already passed. This urgency emphasizes or exacerbates the gaps marked by the first two political antinomies. If there is no time then we cannot wait for generalized knowledges to develop or autonomous communities to grow. We need to act now with the experts and the ruling powers that exist.

This antinomy of temporality casts the two movements as two faces of apocalypse. Anticapitalist movements are apocalyptic in the long tradition of millenarian and revolutionary groups that struggle to precipitate an event of radical transformation. The end of days is the beginning of a new world. The apocalyptic imagination of climate change movements, in contrast, sees radical change as final catastrophe. The change of the Earth's climate will greatly diminish if not destroy the existing forms of life. The end of days is just the end.

I think it is useful to recognize the depth of these antinomies in order to understand the challenges we face. I do not mean to suggest, though, that these differences make the encounter between anticapitalist movements and climate change move-

ments impossible. Remember that ten years ago, at the time of the Seattle WTO protests, we faced a similar political antinomy between globalization and anti-globalization. The protesters declared themselves against the current forms of globalization but, rightly, resisted the media label of “anti-globalization” activists. It took time and great collective effort to develop concepts and practices of alterglobalization that shattered this antinomy. It is the task of the movements today to grasp the antinomies of the common, work through them, digest them, and create a new conceptual and practical framework. The work begun in Copenhagen opened the road for a long journey ahead. ■