RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE IMPOLITIC NARRATIVE OF GRASSROOTS MOVEMENTS AGAINST NEOLIBERAL DE-POLITICIZATION
The case of commons

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ABSTRACT: The essay aims to demonstrate that the process of de-politicization does not only affect political institutions but also the inspiring narrative of grassroots and anti-systemic movements engaged against neoliberalism. This circumstance is one of the most important reasons why, despite the huge and persistent crisis of neoliberalism, we do not witness a real hegemonic shift, and politics continues to be a very marginal forge of social life, as the neoliberal recipe prescribes. De-politicization is the main effect of "horizontalism", i.e. the descriptive and normative belief that social order is and has to be the ex post result of the interaction dynamics between social actors. Thus, a social order is much more desirable insofar as it leaves out the subject "as is", promoting a process of self-revelation. Our thesis is that both neoliberalism and the largest part of anti-systemic movements who pretend to oppose to it share this basic frame. The narrative of "commons" represents a special case of what we call "conformist alternatives". It develops an ambivalent tension: on the one side the search for pre-symbolic spontaneity and, on the other, the unmentionable search for hyper-symbolism. Finally, we identify a structural and then a socio-cultural reason that currently prevent re-politicization.

KEYWORDS: Commons narrative, Neoliberalism, Horizontalism, Crisis, De-politicization.

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1. Introduction

The focus here is not on de-politicization but on the opponents of neoliberal de-politicization. Particularly, on the inspiring narrative of grassroots and anti-systemic movements who aspire to counteract neoliberalism and the de-politicization it entails. Our hypothesis is that, despite the long crisis of neoliberalism that started in 2008 (Stiglitz 2010; Farlow 2013), a re-politicization of the world is prevented by the lack of a consistent narrative legitimizing a regime shift. Contrary to other similar seasons of Western civilization, a really different, alternative and legitimated view has not yet been produced by the opponents of the ruling institutions. More precisely, the paradigm that supports the present regime of de-politicization is forged in the same fire as the alternative discourses. The commons narrative provides, in particular, a vivid explanation of this short-circuit and it represents an emblematic case on which we will focus. It stands on a basic contradiction between a generic "ideal" aspiration to re-politicization and a "real" vocation to de-politicization. In order to understand this fundamental ambiguity that jeopardizes any chance to fruitfully face up to the ruling institutions, we have firstly to reconsider the very nature of neoliberalism. We will thus proceed as follows:

- in the second paragraph, we re-describe neoliberalism starting from the wider notion of "neo-horizontalism" that allows, in our opinion, a better understanding of the viral character of de-politicization and its spreading well beyond the specific political borders of neoliberalism;

- in the third paragraph, we analyze the specific posture of anti-systemic movements, focusing on the case of commons narrative and its basic ambiguity;

- in the fourth and final paragraph we try to detect the factors that prevent the emergence of a new re-politicization paradigm.

2. More than neo-liberalism: de-politicization in the light of neo-horizontalism

De-politicization is the main effect of "horizontalism" (Romano 2014), namely the specific form of the neoliberal paradigm (Fawcett, Marsch 2014; Streeck 2014; Flinders, Wood 2015). From the analytical point of view, horizontalism is the domain of immanence, so to understand society it first refers to individuals and their relational strategies. In general, it is believed that we can find the true meaning of a social organization by looking at its single players and the networks they interweave. The order doesn't radiate from a central control room, but it is the ex post result of the interaction dynamics

between social actors. The single parts may be independent of one another, or melt according to common principles, but in any case they do not respond to a central intentionality.

The analytical level has a political translation. Here the dominant narrative sounds more or less like this: a social order is much more desirable insofar as it leaves out the subject "as is", promoting his realization. "Let it be" is the motto. Individuals must be what they prefer to be. The more social players are free to act and interact based upon their own preferences, the more society as a whole will be "good". The acephalous logic is seen as the most proper to understand social life and, consequently, to frame society.

Between the end of the seventies and the beginning of the eighties of the last century a true upset of the paradigm inspiring social regulation in Western countries occurred: the "verticalist" model (based on the primacy of the State in the social order management) adopted in the *Trente glorieuses* – the thirty glorious years – gave way to a "neo-horizontal"[1] regime.

What is the meaning of the change?

It was prepared for a long time during the decades of verticalist development, and in particular during the thirty glorious years, by an ample and diversified literature, coming from epistemology, philosophy and, last but not least, social theory. The direction of the change lies in a sort of "free exit" principle, applied to the elementary particles of the social system. The singularities composing the system, first of all "individuals", are deprived of the strength, of the protection but also of the "weight" of collective organization. In all its forms: institutional structures and intermediate bodies that frame and forge the social space. No longer are the actors integrated inside collective consortia but they are left free (or forced – depending on the point of view) to act according to an individual logic. This mechanism of liberation spreads through all spheres of society, not only in the economic field. Everywhere the project of order is lost to the profit of the autonomy of the peripheral molecules: more precisely, the representatives of the collective will are expelled from the cockpit and an "autopilot" is installed in their place. The idea that society as a whole could be ordered by a "human" central intentionality

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[1] We prefer this expression because the mainstream use of "neoliberalism" has a double, improper limitation. First of all, it is rooted in a clearly distinguished political area, excluding wide portions of the checkerboard (the left, in particular), which, far from being alien to the new climate, are fully involved; secondly, the common sense of the word mainly refers to the economic field (regardless of its semantic scope). Nevertheless, a general change of the social regulatory pattern occurs, which involves the multiple dimensions of social life, not only the economic one. The horizontal logic impregnates the social system as a whole as well as the forms of regulation of each of its sub-systems. For this reason, we think it more appropriate to talk of the "neo-horizontal" regime, instead of "neoliberalism".

irreversibly fades. It becomes an unlawful idea. Sovereignty is no longer concentrated at the center of the system (i.e., public institutions), but it is scattered into the singularities that compose that system. Any sovereign center that overcomes (and that is not the fruit of) horizontal interaction between singularities becomes marked by a stigma.

It doesn't mean that individuals stop obeying external authorities –just the opposite, as we will see. The shift can also be interpreted as the restoring of capitalistic command (Harvey 2005 and 2011; Formenti 2011 and 2013; Crouch 2011). We stop obeying the institutional entities which bear the collective will: we stop obeying the "legitimate" authority, i.e., in a Weberian sense, the "Herrschaft" (Weber 1968). So, the field is reopened to "Macht", i.e., to any authority that imposes itself in the "formally horizontal" interaction.

Participating in the formation of a central intentionality to which one must obey is discouraged. The only recognized sovereign center is the single player (under any form), driven by his own will, even though in the frame of the constraints represented by the strength of others' intentionality and the objective conditions under which he/she operates.

In Italy the regime change had its symbolic manifestation in the so-called "march of the forty thousand", in Turin, in the fall of 1980 (Crainz 2003; Ginsborg 2003). A long season of strikes followed the threat of mass dismissals, wages and rights cut by the Fiat automotive company, involved in a harsh restructuring. After a period of impasse, the company "white collars", who had gathered for a simple assembly, decided to give rise to an impromptu procession along the central streets of the city, explicitly addressing to the blue-collars a request to stop the strikes and accept the company plan. The Turin forty thousand marchers symbolically wanted to stop the claim of any collective body to give an order and a form to reality, demanding the return to a sort of sovereign "naturalness" of the market game.

Magatti (2009) proposes a very effective expression to describe the sense of the new regime: "techno-nihilist capitalism". Neo-horizontalism is characterized by a clear separation between "functions" and "meanings", i.e., by a disconnection between the social organization, on the one side, and the collectively elaborated values, on the other. Social order is no longer founded on a set of shared values and meanings, but on mere functionality, aimed to enable each one to make her/his own game and freely circulate towards the individually chosen destination. The goal is to build "an order without a project". The order is not anymore a collective and deliberate task (Lasch 1995). *Legein,* intended as the discursive elaboration of the meanings giving order to society, gives way to *teukein*, which refers to the verb "to make", evoking the aim to increase beyond any

limit the power of each citizen to operate, to transform reality, to "make it be", regardless of the destinations of these activities and their inspiring values (Castoriadis 1975). So we access a maximum of institutional neutrality. The two adjectives of Magatti's formula –technical and nihilistic– are very telling. The new regime decrees an absolute "reversibility of meaning": all values are worthy of being pursued, provided that they are concretely, i.e., "technically", actionable. The public institution has only to increase at its best the ability of each citizen to act, regardless of his purposes and of the values orienting the choice of his goals. In the end, it is nothing but a radicalization of the classical posture of modernity: let man elaborate and implement his own sense. To this end, institutions self-neutralize. Sovereignty is transferred –ideologically speaking– from the political and institutional authorities to the grassroots: the elaboration and the choice of the meanings orienting action become an exclusive prerogative of individuals. The meaning issue is integrally delegated to individuals, so it is no longer a public affair, around which the community gathers.

Once again, after the long season of the twentieth century, social organization is entrusted to a blind self-regulating device (as in the nineteenth century). Social order is no longer governed by collective meaning, but by a "technical macro-system" and by a set of "functionalized institutional spheres" (Magatti 2009). The technical macro-system integrates in a single code all the technological innovations that impose themselves by virtue of their power to increase, in general, the ability of the actors in making, operating and transforming. The big organizational systems of society are managed by this technical integration that follows self-referential logics, without responding to political inputs or local normative specificities. Giving space to human sovereignty in this mechanism jeopardizes the general functioning of the machine. Let's think for example of the international organization of air or marine transport: without a transnational standardization of the organization, founded on the integration and the harmonizing of technical devices within a single macro-system, it would be impossible to circulate. Nor could the single states imagine upsetting the general mechanism by adopting different technical standards from those internationally required.

Technical standards are then doubled by the integrated systems of transnational and trans-cultural rules and procedures, which give order to the so-called "functionalized institutional spheres" (financial markets, health systems, law, sport, scientific research and so on). Here also arises a principle of self-organization that completely deprives any "authority" embodying the collective will. Functional efficiency, the promotion of the most fluid circulation of players and materials are the only legitimated coordinates.

Every collective trail is evacuated, in order to prepare a smooth space where individuals can slip with the least possible number of restraints. The public institution does not

aim to recompose individual preferences, because they are an exclusive prerogative of the private realm: it has to simply make sure that preferences do not limit each other, i.e., that the pursuit of the one does not hamper the realization of the other. The public sphere is, de facto, reduced to being a traffic controller. It is nevertheless evident that, even though the keys to meaning-creation are granted to individuals, the chance to practically implement projects and aspirations is greatly limited by the individual character of sovereignty.

How does this general logic translate in the different social dimensions?

On the international front, after the rejection of the Bretton Woods agreements, the relation between currencies was again adjusted by market exchange; and there were no forms of control of the capital flows. This made any sovereign development policy unfeasible. A true reversal occurred: in the verticalist age, international constraints have promoted institutional diversity and the autonomy of the nation-states; in the new horizontalist regime, the outcome of international de-regulation was in fact institutional homogeneity and a hetero-directed economic policy. International institutions inherited by Bretton Woods have completely changed register: the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank now had the task of globally promoting the dictates of the "Washington consensus" (Arestis 2005; Stiglitz 2003), i.e., cuts in public spending, restrictive monetary policies, liberalization of trade and inward foreign direct investments, privatization of public enterprises in a frame of general restraint of the role of the State in the economy, etc. Every state had to provide an environment consistent with the requirements of international competition, regardless of the national needs.

The economic sphere underwent the most incisive restructuring actions. Productive factors –labor, land and capital– regained the status of commodities from which they had been emancipated at the beginning of the twentieth century. The idea of a development planned by the State, by the fiscal and monetary levers, by the publicly owned enterprises in the key sectors and in the basic services, by the redistribution of the fruits of the economic production by rights and welfare protection, gave way to a principle of global competition. The saturation of the internal market spaces, led to bet everything on the ability of the economic actors to get back on track in search of new global development opportunities (Harvey 2006). A further way to escape from saturation was the investment in post-material (Inglehart 1990) and de-standardized economic sectors. Services, care, relations, personalized commodities etc. This effort required new forms of accumulation and capitalistic organization, the so-called flexible accumulation (Harvey 1990 and 2011).

The State progressively lost its sovereignty: enterprises, in fact, were no longer rooted in the national space due both to their international projection (that leads to rearticulating the whole productive process on a transnational basis) and by de-materialization and financialization (Gallino 2011). They lost contact with the land and this implied the dissolution of the compromise between capital and the State, which was the basis of the verticalist regime. States no longer had the resources to organize civil life, because a productive system like this escapes taxation. In particular, the fiscal burden shifts from capital to labor (Bauman 1999). So the role of the State in the economy changed significantly: it was no longer the maker and the driver of national development, but it had to simply provide the conditions needed to make its jurisdiction attractive for foreign investors, and to promote the competitiveness of national enterprises on the global stage. This goal implied the progressive lightening of the social costs and bonds weighing on the productive system, i.e., the compression of rights and protections for workers and their families.

Regarding development policies, direct investment by the State was replaced by self-employment measures. The incentives for self-activation from the grassroots was preferred to wage subsidies and the direct participation of the State in the economy and public services. Globalization was combined with local commitment. Here a horizontal logic clearly emerged: central leadership was erased in favor of stimuli to individual players in the system (Streeck 2009).

In politics, the principle of government was generally replaced by governance (Bellamy & Palumbo 2010; Streeck 2014; Jessop 2015). The first was founded on decisions by the public institution that directly involved reality aiming to give it the desired order, stated ex-ante by the same institution. The action of the players appearing on the scene on which public decision intervened was thus decisively oriented by the institution.

Governance moved in another direction. Here priority was given to the aims and the interests the same players autonomously held and chose. The aim of the public institution was not to superimpose its course, but to ensure that each player could effectively pursue and implement his goals and his interests, in a context of general protection of the public interest (which normally coincides, recursively, with the aim of increasing each player's chance to play his game). The role of the public institutions was increasingly that of an arbiter.

Also inside the public administration, all the post-1980 reforms were oriented by the desire to reactivate the employees. Specific executive tasks are no longer assigned. All the work is redesigned according to a "project" logic (Boltanski & Chiapello 2007), by which the directors set the general objectives, allowing the operators the possibility of autonomously arranging the ways to implement them.

About welfare, a progressive, general dismantling of protections and rights took place, mainly engendered by the so-called fiscal crisis of the State (O' Connor 2002) and the dissolution of the pact between State and capital. In these conditions a strong ideology of self-protection developed, updating and reinventing great traditions both of the working-class culture, like the nineteenth century mutualism (Ciccarelli & Allegri 2011; 2013), and of catholic communitarianism (Donati 2012). The maternal and protective attitude of the "thirty glorious years" State was stigmatized as passivizing social energies. The dismantling of welfare was thus interpreted as a chance for local communities to re-mobilize and to regain autonomy. There followed an emphasis on the third sector and on active citizenship as ways to build a new pattern of local and community welfare, which no longer needs formalized structures, implementing a warmer and more meaningful idea of social ties (Cotturri 2013). Also in the social sphere, the stability of rights was replaced by a project logic: now the same welfare recipients were called to build their needs and to work out the projects to fulfill them. Only at this stage would the public institution possibly intervene to accompany the community in the self-protection process, with some (more and more limited) services and resources. This twisting toward the project logic implied both the shrinkage of the range of beneficiaries (the social policies target was no longer the population as a whole but specific groups, identified each time) and the structurally provisional nature of public intervention.

The EU policy pattern in the areas of social and economic development very eloquently translated the new horizontalist coordinates. Central planning of actions was obviously excluded. The EU established the allocation of funds, identifying some very general objectives and then leaving it to local players to plan and implement the actual interventions.

What happens on the cultural front?

In the verticalist system, culture played an eminent role of social integration. It provided the symbolic order justifying the functional organization. It assured the conjunction between systemic integration and social integration. In this dimension, basic values were elaborated and promoted in order to hold the national community together and to guide its members' actions. So culture, although preserving a projection towards universal values of humanism, was strictly tied to the nation, permitting the individuals to feel they were part of a larger subject and of a common path. Instead– as Magatti (2009) suggests–, the neo-horizontalist age witnesses the birth of a "de-territorialized aesthetic space". Cultural materials are cut off from their own roots and access to a self-referential orbit, detached from the social system. The latter, indeed, is no longer forged by collectively elaborated "meanings" and no longer responds to a symbolic order, but is deployed according to a merely functional logic: it doesn't embody a specific project of

society, but only the project of the unlimited individual planning. So culture becomes a "separate" domain, and as such infinitely forgeable, divisible and reducible to small fragments, which any "world citizen" can appropriate, use and transform following his needs. As it is no longer a tool for giving order to reality (because this function is assured by the unified technical system), as it doesn't have stakes in reality, culture can take on a thousand colors. It becomes a mere "signifier" detached from any reference to a "signified". It doesn't shift reality. For this reason, cultural materials can be created and infinitely reshaped. Their function is not to influence or change reality but only to decorate it and to permit escapism and refreshment. Culture no longer aims to create a symbolic order (as such, necessarily tied to the community), but it properly becomes an "aesthetic" domain, i.e., oriented to stimulate the senses of the individual, always providing him with new sensory experiences (Magatti 2012). The cultural system loses its internal consistency, implying an expression and a hierarchy of values and languages. It is now a bundling of codes, signs and modular materials freely appropriable and mouldable, following individual needs. The "value of cultural values" depends only on their ability to create emotions and opportunities for enjoyment and to create *pathos*.

In the cultural domain, the shift from verticalism to horizontalism translates in the passage from the primacy of transcendent symbolic order to the emphasis on the immanent dimension. In the circulation of cultural materials, the "body" becomes the main point of fall (Scheper-Hughes & Wacquant 2001). It is the catalyzing element and the criterion of selection and validation, by its sensory reaction. Once the central identity is erased, only the peripheral capillaries remain, i.e., individual bodies: the latter impose the cultural agenda. Values are less and less determined by *legein* and more and more by *pathos*. The only factor of re-unification is, also here, the technique. Cultural materials mainly circulate on the global technological platforms, from radio-television networks to the worldwide web. Therefore the relation between individuals has a double bond: the more ephemeral one, determined by the instantaneous sharing of an emotion (*pathos*) and the other, more structural, coinciding with the use of the same technological support, to which all cultural materials have to conform, in order to flow. Anyway, technique and *pathos* exhaust the space of *legein*, i.e., the conjunction of individuals by the elaboration and the sharing of a meaning.

The neo-horizontalist regime holds high the expectations for the improvement of living standards, but –without using any tools of authoritarian repression– it deprives individuals of the collective platforms by which, in the verticalist age, they were able to easily and cheaply satisfy their growing expectations. The institutions are now relieved of the responsibility to fulfill them. So, if one wants to satisfy his growing expectations he must

simply "roll up his sleeves" and self-activate. It is possible to reconnect what during verticalism was disconnected: i.e., the "need", on the one hand, and the individual effort (work), on the other. In the verticalist era, the individual was legitimated to ask (by intermediate bodies and claiming the institutional duties in the field of welfare) for the satisfaction of his needs without paying a price in case of low activation, because the right to personal dignity was independent from individual merits. Now, due to the fall of collective institutions, the individual in search of satisfaction has to self-activate. This gives the social system an extraordinary push, powerfully re-energizing the social and economic machine.

The case of subprime mortgages is emblematic, from this point of view. The desire to have a big and highly comfortable house is strongly stimulated in all social strata. But, at the same time, the social system tells the potential beneficiary: "neither the State, nor political parties or trade unions will give you that house. Even less your job, whose value inside this economy is structurally low. But if you really want a beautiful house, you can get into debt. Just "you". And if afterwards you may not be able to re-pay your debt, the responsibility will be only yours". This narrative has an extraordinary re-mobilizing effect: the individual adopts a perspective of over-commitment, maximizing his productive effort. His mortgage, once fragmented and launched on the financial market provides institutional investors and speculators with higher remunerations than the ordinary yields, due to the strong insolvency risk of the debtor. Everything perfectly fits. And when the bubble bursts, the State runs to the rescue to cover all the losses. The game is reset and restarts all over again.

3. The narrative of commons: an ambivalent building

Neo-horizontalism shows nowadays many signs of decomposition. The economic crisis that started in 2008 is both less devastating and more worrying compared with those encountered during industrial modernity. It trickles down slowly from the financial to the productive sphere. The fall in GDP is remarkable, but it has no common measure with –for example– the Great Depression of 1929, when in a few years the Us national product was almost halved (Galbraith 1997). But in exchange, we face a "long slump" (Petrosino & Romano 2017; Perna 2017) and this feature reinforces the argument by most analysts about the structural (not cyclical) character of the crisis. It progressively proves to be a systemic crisis. So, the question is: why, despite the long impasse of horizontalism, hasn't a new regulatory system arisen? Our thesis is that a functional jam, in

itself, cannot engender a regime shift if in the intellectual and political domain a consistent narrative hasn't been produced legitimizing and alluding to a new regulatory system. Currently the narratives circulating in the public arena –self-representing as alternative to the ruling institutional patterns–, are internally inconsistent and share in fact the same "form" with the hegemonic paradigm, despite the content. Anti-systemic movements are not able to design a narrative that can challenge the system and then foster a re-politicization process, because they deeply follow horizontalism. De-politicization is the effect of the "form" taken by the regulatory system, not of the values it promotes. The change evoked by anti-systemic movements concerns the values but not the form of the current social system. So the narratives they support can be considered as "conformist alternatives". They follow a very simple outline, based on a double movement:

a) first of all, they clearly and sharply denounce the harmful effects of the current regulatory pattern, on different planes (economic, political, social, ecological and so on). In our opinion, these effects are nothing more than the manifestation of the classical problems of the horizontal form, but the protagonists of such strategies tend not to recognize this link at all. The disasters of horizontalism are rather attributed to the "values" promoted by the system and not to its "form".

b) Then, the suggested solutions, in order to face the drifts of the dominant pattern, always and invariably rank inside the horizontal form: the criticism against neo-liberalism is designed starting from a horizontalist perspective and the recipes to escape the crisis, although coming from different points of view and being often reciprocally opposed, are taken from the same stream of thought from which the regulatory pattern in disgrace draws inspiration. In order to face the disasters of horizontalism, these critical aggregates even suggest a radicalization, although in an "anti-liberal" mood, of the horizontal regulatory form, i.e., its displacement onto other dimensions of social life (from the "market" to "grassroots", for example). This radicalization and/or displacement is wrapped in the ideological attire of the "third way": neither the State nor the market; neither collectivity nor individual; neither methodological holism nor methodological individualism. The ghost of a third dimension, namely the "relational" (Donati 2012) one is followed, trusting that it escapes the drifts of the other two, already experimented polarities. From the point of view of the dialectic between verticalism and horizontalism, this alleged third dimension is not to be found: it remains unequivocally trapped (mainly on the normative side, but also on the analytical one) inside the horizontal plane. A paradigm shift doesn't arise.

In the repertoire of the conformist alternatives, the "commons narrative" represents a particularly meaningful example. The devotion to "commons" is spreading in our societies. Their consecration occurred in 2009 with the awarding to Elinor Ostrom (1990; 2005) –the leading scholar on the topic– of the Nobel Prize for economics. More and more people believe that thanks to the idea of commons it will be possible to design a different world, alternative to the present order, which better fits our needs and our aspirations for justice.

Is it true? Does the reference to commons help to overcome the horizontal regime and its crisis? Is it possible to imagine, in particular, that a regulatory system re-framed around the centrality of commons could re-politicize society? What do we foresee in it? What are the hidden meanings of this collective devotion?

"Commons" can be considered a typical amoeba-word (Pörksen 1995). It contains an overload of meanings, often conflicting between them. It is a sort of meta-concept in which anyone insinuates his desires. All political parties reserve for it a (greater or lesser) place in their programmatic platforms. But beyond this "necessary" ambiguity, the reference to commons immediately reveals a desire to regain communitarian cohesion, whose loss is clearly due to the liberation of the "elementary particles" of society (i.e., to horizontalism). In our terms, we can say that it contests horizontalism and it alludes to a recovery of some kind of verticality.

Ample literature is by now available on commons. Any attempt to summarize it will be largely incomplete, mainly within the limits of this work. We face a real "paradigm", with an analytic side and a political-normative side (Mattei 2011). On the analytic plane, the epistemological roots of commons align with other con-formist alternatives in their attempt to overcome both methodological individualism and holism. The commons paradigm promotes a third perspective in which the "person" appears as the expression of a relational crossroad (Caillé 1998). The source of sovereignty is neither the individual nor the social institutions, but the relational network. This analytic conviction translates in the rejection of both the market and the State as privileged patterns of social regulation (Ostrom 1994).

In this sense, commons –it is asserted– cannot be framed either in the public or in the private juridical statute of goods. Due to their nature, they cannot be the object of a private appropriation and cannot be managed as public properties by the institutional bodies. They belong exclusively to the "community" as such. So, with them, it is possible to imagine a third form of regulation.

For economic science, commons are characterized by a principle of "non-rivalry" (one's use of the goods doesn't diminish its possible use by another member of the same

community) and by "non-exclusivity" (no community member can be excluded by the use of the goods).

Taxonomies in this field are endless, ranging from the classical examples of water, air, rivers and lakes, to technological infrastructures such as the World Wide Web, to immaterial goods like knowledge or even more abstract dimensions like solidarity, love and friendship.

In short, commons can be defined as those goods that cannot be valorized, due to their nature, either by market exchange or by State administration, but that are nevertheless essential and indispensable for the reproduction of the life of human communities.

In the ideal frame designed by their supporters, commons are essential (Cacciari 2011):

for the safeguard and the survival of the community and future generations;

because they make it possible to rediscover the primary tie between man and nature, to build a harmonious eco-anthropological habitat in the frame of a new civilization respectful of the biosphere, of its balances and limits;

because they enable the individual to rediscover a sentiment of belonging to his community, reactivating the real meaning of democracy (through participation in the common management of the goods), and to restore the sense of belonging to humanity as a whole, reactivating universalism;

because they make it possible to assign to all human beings the essential survival resources, assuring each one a dignified life.

The thesis we will defend here is that the success of the notion is just due to its high degree of ambiguity, typical of all conformist alternatives. On the one hand, commons ideology alludes to verticality and to fighting the effects of horizontalism, particularly de-politicization; on the other, it reveals a strong subordination to the hegemony of that same paradigm, fostering at the end of the day a de-politicized pattern of social organization. So the problem is that the commons narrative contains an almost hidden and anyway unfulfilled aspiration to verticality, but its very substance remains attached to horizontalism. Here below we will discern the "aspirations" to verticality from the topics which actually follow the horizontal frame.

First of all, by the ideology of the commons we aim to rebuild a collective identity, a meaningful community, against modern anomy. A desire to recover the lost human sovereignty. The half-hidden idea is that, taking charge of commons management –so thanks to a merely "functional" activity– it is possible to reactivate a sentiment of belonging to a community, envisaging a common destiny. Functional exercise is used as a *viaticum* to the sovereign realm. By virtue of a common "practice", we expect to meet a

common "sense", a shared identity (so forgetting that functional activity has always been a secondary effect of collective consciousness).

The desire of a communitarian seclusion against horizontalist elicitation is in fact a dominant motive. The good management of commons in pre-modern societies was assured by a general state of unconsciousness, by a social life arising beyond personal flourishing. Only under these conditions, it is possible to conceive a reduction of human existence to the good management of commons, to the mere reproduction of the community. The success of the ideology of the commons reveals a hidden desire to meet this steady state, i.e., communitarian seclusion, in order to get rid of modern political and individual freedom. This motive is the real source of attraction. If, as we know, capitalism arises with the liberation of land (from the enclosures) and labor (from guilds), so now we evidently aim to regain the communitarian chains, against the chaos and the anomy generated by the liberation of the world.

Finally, the logic of the commons allows us to re-imagine the community as a single unity without conflicting social strata. Community is conceived as a harmonious whole, not framed by hierarchies, in which the actors hold convergent interests. Neither exploiters nor exploited. No conflict (Formenti 2013). The tragic and the unresolved dimensions of social life magically disappear. The lost cohesion returns.

But against these reversal drives another set of topics reveals the commons narrative "conformist" nature and its inability to counteract de-politicization.

The discourse of the commons strictly obeys the paradigm of complexity (Morin 2008; Taylor 2001) –an ideological outpost of the current techno-nihilist capitalism (Magatti 2009). Man is thought as fatally bridled in a complex relational system between nature and human activities, by now constitutively mediated by technique. We are all submerged –according to complexity– in an inextricable network of interdependences. In order for the system to be able to work without any fault, players have to take an "appropriate" posture (that somehow recalls the protestant ethic at the basis of capitalism). They have to deeply understand the logic of the system so that they can effectively respond to its needs, otherwise the balance will be upset and their existence will be jeopardized. The care of commons (as fundamental resources for the survival of the social-natural-technical system), in this framework, is needed for this adaptive effort and not to implement a specific world view, in which man is clearly the maker and the sovereign of his own destiny[2]. Taking responsibility of the commons ensures the survival of the

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[2] "I, Mark C. Taylor, am not writing this book. Yet the book is being written. It is as if I were the screen through which the words of others flow and on which they are displayed. Words, thoughts, ideas are never precisely my own; they are always borrowed rather than possessed. As if it were their vehicle [...]. "My"

planet and of its inhabitants. No question about the meaning of life is implied here. No collective discussion on what a good life could be is needed. The care of commons is only aimed at reproducing life itself, without a specific direction and before any intention. This "impolitic" view is clearly rooted in the horizontal regime.

So the logic of the commons participates to the "functionalization" of society (*teukein* vs. *legein*), that is the systemic prerequisite on which the "liberty of the moderns" (Costant 1988) arises, but also, at the same time, its fatal trap. As we have seen, during modernity, *legein*, i.e., the collective construction of meaning by the words, gives way to *teukein*, i.e., the unlimited expansion of the instruments enhancing individual capabilities, regardless of the goals and the meanings of activation. Commons fully obey this logic. It doesn't matter which is the aim of social action. What matters is that the ability to act of everyone is always assured and, for this purpose, it is necessary to properly mantain the common equipments. It's not by chance that we talk about "common goods" and not "common elaboration of meanings". The centrality of the inanimate "object", of the inert materiality, assures a feature of political "neutrality", an impermeability to any collective meaningful determination, which is the necessary condition in order for the individual to freely act –so that *teukein* could annihilate *legein*. In Hegelian and Bataillan terms, the "servile" dimension casts the "sovereign" dimension (Bataille 1988). Paradoxically, commons work to neutralize the interference of the community on individual action.

The ideology of the commons then aligns with a central device of modernity: what we have called the logic of "unlimited accessibility" (Romano 1993). Public power should not realize a specific view but simply allow citizens to do what they want to do, giving them all the required instruments (rights, resources and so on). Following the same logic, commons ensure community members have a wider accessibility under the given conditions, sharing at best common resources, regardless of the destination of the distributed energy (this is in fact an individual prerogative). In this sense, the logic of commons is rooted in the liberal logic of accessibility. It is not at all subversive in relation to horizontalism. The construction of a collective project is not implied here, but the simple maintenance of the project of individual unlimited self-promotion.

From the analytic point of view, the commons thought indulges in a sort of "utilitarian reduction". In the analysis of communities, commons scholars (see Ostrom, 2005; Lauriola, 2013) tend to isolate the social processes linked to the good management of commons from all the other dimensions of social life, particularly the symbolic, cultural and

thought –indeed my self– appears to be a transient eddy in a river whose banks are difficult to discern. [...] I am not in control of this process" (Taylor 2001, 196-197).

communitarian "glue" (i.e., any vertical dimension). The daily practices aimed at survival are detached from communitarian values and norms, which often do not align with Western conceptions of democracy, equality, autonomy, environmental sustainability, social justice and so on. More often, they hide some principles of authority, hierarchy, violence and oppression (linked to verticalism). Erasing the total dimensions of society in favor of single compartments, this methodological attitude reveals a clear horizontalist imprinting. The practices of good management of commons are more likely the collateral effect of a symbolic totality, from which they cannot be detached.

Democracy reactivation is one of the stakes of the commons' ideology. When community members are directly involved in the management of commons–we imagine–, democracy shines (Dardot & Laval 2014). But, democracy is nothing without *legein*, without the collective discussion on the meaning of life. On the contrary, the community agenda in the logic of the commons is locked in on a single point: how well to manage common goods (that, as Ostrom acknowledges, does not always coincide, in the real cases, with the equal distribution of its fruits), aiming to ensure their reproducibility in the long run. This task –like any servile activity (i.e., aimed at the biological reproduction of a natural entity or of a human practice)– has nothing to do with democracy and with "radical autonomy" (Latouche 2014). The outcome of collective action is predetermined. This is the typical paradox of horizontalism.

Last but not least, in the logic of the commons we can also see the cult of "transparency", typical of the origins of modernity, and a recovery of the *bon sauvage* myth created by Rousseau. A society of commons assumes a "positive anthropology": man is naturally good. The implicit hypothesis of commons is that once people are freed of any institutional and formal framework, then they engage in the preservation not only of their well-being, but also of community and the well-being of future generations (Hardt & Negri 2009). So, evil is always the fruit of formal institutions. Man is innocent by default. If we leave him free, he will certainly act well. This is the essence of the horizontalist narrative. The return to Rousseau removes the fact that the values of universalism and social justice, far from being spontaneous plants, have been the outcome of long and harsh political fights and they continue to require a hard learning process in order to keep them alive in our societies.

Summing up, we can say that the commons paradigm develops an ambivalent tension: on the one side the search for pre-symbolic spontaneity (that is horizontalism and "anti-formism" at its highest degree) and, on the other, the search for hyper-symbolism (wiping out anomy, individual elicitation and restoring communitarian warmth).

This ambiguity is well represented by Rodotà (2012): "commons promote an active and equal citizenship [and] they have to be managed on the basis of equality and solidarity principles, ensuring forms of participation and control by the interested people and embodying the dimension of future" (195). It is clear that the values of equality and solidarity are essential political in character. They are the fruit of a choice, of a human and collective deliberation, of a sovereign act. Rodotà not only denies this evidence, but he asserts that, for example, the subtraction of water from any public or private sovereignty is the condition for its equal distribution and to avoid lacerating conflicts. Commons are "the opposite of sovereignty" –maximum expression of de-politicization (Rodotà 2012, 194). By this argument, the "political" values attributed to commons are "naturalized". They are no longer human values applied to the management of goods, but these values are co-substantial to the same goods, which are "naturally commons". Once again collective will is removed. In fact, Rodotà specifies that these goods respond to the logic of the "commons" and not to "community". I.e., the values of good management, being embodied in the object, are detached from any specific community. They belong to humanity as a whole. On the contrary, Ostrom (1990) demonstrates that commons without the community do not exist. The identification of the members admitted to a good's fruition and the exclusion of the "strangers" is unavoidable. Otherwise, we are no longer in the area of commons, but simply in the logic of "free access". In a free access regime, nothing guarantees that the "fair" values imagined as co-substantial to the goods will be respected. What Hardin (1968) improperly calls "the tragedy of commons" (i.e., the destruction of the resource, due to an unregulated, neither public nor private, consumption) is, to tell the truth, the tragedy of the free access. Rodotà falls in the same misunderstanding as Hardin's, but with a significant difference. Hardin is able to see its realistic outcome. Rodotà, on the contrary, applies to the free access regime a view totally sweetened by a positive anthropology. Commons naturally carry positive values and man, once left free, will enjoy them always by applying the principles of equality, solidarity, and respect for future generations. It is an "ontology of spontaneity" that eventually attributes any perturbation to the improper intervention of politics and sovereignty. This formulation reveals a strong ideological devotion to horizontalism.

The pre-symbolical and the hyper-symbolical realms, in this view, are not contradictory because they both conspire against politicization. They both aim to recover the foundations of human coexistence in an extra-discursive (i.e., extra-political) dimension, not permeable by human autonomy. The apparently inconsistent narrative of commons finds in this impolitic posture its re-composition pivot.

4. Why re-politicization doesn't yet appear on the horizon?

As we have already noted, the crisis of the de-politicization regime has a structural character. Nevertheless, an institutional shift cannot arise. A similar change can be implemented if only the widespread narratives (produced in the intellectual and in the political realm) –especially those assuming an oppositional posture towards the current regime– are able to legitimize re-politicization. Why doesn't it happen? What prevents the settlement of a new paradigm legitimizing a regime shift?

We will discern two main causes.

First of all, a structural reason arises: the progressive shortening of the life-cycle of social patterns, mainly due to NICT (new information and communication technologies).

According to polanyian periodization (Polanyi 2001), the first horizontalist (liberal) pattern of modern age lasted over one century, from 1815 to 1929. The subsequent verticalist model of regulation in the "social-democratic century" (Dahrendorf 1983) arose around 1930 and fell in 1980: fifty years. The neoliberal pattern, i.e., neo-horizontalism, has already been in a crisis since 2008: not even thirty years.

Traditionally, thought goes on in opposition to the existing institutional frame. Reflecting on the faults and critical issues of the ruling model, intellectuals exalt the opposite form of society. So, when the institutional form takes a top-down orientation, intellectuals begin to exalt the virtues of *laissez-faire*, *laissez-passer*. Reflecting on the knotty problems of the ruling institutions, they invariably uphold the opposite reversed form. This lag, this oppositional dynamic between theory and institutions has proven very useful in moments of crisis. By focusing on the failings of the current model and imagining its development, theorists have been able to forecast the dire consequences of a given institutional order. So, as a rule, during Western modernity, when a social regulation was based on a horizontal model, we saw the restructuring of social thought around a verticalist paradigm (moreover this imprint widened to social culture and imagery). And vice versa: when verticalism prevailed in the structure of society, then social and political thought embraced horizontalism. In this sense, we can say that thought has always moved faster than reality and its ruling models, ensuring a dynamic equilibrium during modernity. Despite any dramatic social crisis, theory has always provided exit routes. What is new in the current crisis is that theory is finding it harder than ever to keep up with social dynamics. If it once used to be faster than the regulatory model, now we have to recognize that the speed of the social system has overtaken the speed of thought. It did not have the time to detect the shadow zones of the pattern, to register its faults, its

critical issues and its knotty problems. It had even less time, starting from the critical exercise on the current pattern, to outline a new paradigm on which to imagine the profile of a new regime, overcoming the problems of the one in a crisis.

New technologies, mainly the digital ones, undoubtedly speed up transactions, relations and flows. "Saturation" looms. Every "modern" (i.e., not steady) regime, based on the unlimited development of resources, human capital, productive forces and so on, is fated sooner or later to meet its saturation. And this is the first reason for its fall. The time necessary to reach saturation mainly depends on the speed of social development, the speed of the circulating entities (men, information, money, commodities, titles, stocks etc.). The digital revolution, the new media, the improvement of ways and means of transport make the social arena a smooth space in which relations are instantly consumed (Giddens 2000; Bauman 2005; Sennet, 2006). The extraordinary compression of space and time, that is one of the main features of globalization, produces a very fast saturation of the development spaces. So we reach the limits of the system much earlier than in the past. The energy of the system is consumed with much more voracity.

As is well known, capitalism has a natural tendency to expand everywhere and always to colonize new spaces, after having squeezed any drop of value from the resources it employs. When it is launched on the new technological platforms, its work of "creative destruction" (Harvey 2011) becomes more and more difficult. This is one of the reasons why the tendency to create financial bubbles beyond the "real economy" becomes irrepressible nowadays and it returns despite the cracks experienced in 2008 (Arrighi 1996).

In these conditions, thought no longer has the time to analyze reality, to reflect on the social effects of the dominant pattern, to outline new conceptual tools and to suggest some ways out. If we look at the other phases of modernity, we discover in fact that thought, even if anticipating the crisis of the coeval pattern of social regulation, has started to take its reversed form only some decades after the rise of the regime it faced: the golden age of sociology (that fostered verticalism) shone at the turn of the nineteenth century, but the self-regulating market regime started at the beginning of the century; and, in the same way, the horizontal sociology (micro-sociology) arose in the sixties of the twentieth century (thirty years after the crisis of 1929). So, objectively, theorists did not have time, during the neoliberal age, to counteract the development of neo-horizontalism.

The structural cause has an immediate socio-cultural effect (and this is the second reason of the paradigm delay). The crisis of neo-horizontalism has an eminent functional, organizational and economic character. In other terms, neo-horizontalism finds it hard to assure "systemic integration". After the euphoria of the first two decades, in which globalization seemed to gift prosperity and wealth to all the areas it touched, now,

mainly in the old industrialized countries, we face the pauperization of the middle class and the exclusion of large shares of population, mainly young people, from the labor market. The categories linked to public work have seen a strong worsening of their condition (due to the fiscal crisis of the States); those depending on the global market have suffered the shrinking of business spaces and the huge competition of the emerging countries.

But despite these dysfunctions, the lifestyle connected with neo-horizontalism still exercises its full hegemony. It still inflames the imagination of people from all over the world and it canalizes their expectations of self-fulfillment, their dreams of prosperity and emancipation. It remains very attractive for the masses. So horizontalism is in a crisis on its functional side, but it is bursting with health if we look at its socio-cultural side. It misfires on the level of systemic integration, but it still assures a strong social integration.

On the contrary, the trauma of the vertical regime still weighs heavily. In the shared social imagination the memory of the State's awkward presence in social life is still vivid. And it is the object of a continually renewed stigmatization. It often appears under the guise of the communist specter. And also the welfare and social-democratic systems, despite the prosperity they have gifted to Western citizens, figure in the end as "proxies" of the former Eastern European socialist regimes. So they fall under the fire of the same stigmatization. The prospect of coming back to a verticalist regulatory system –that is the only "reasonable" way– is not at all arousing, even for those who suffer the most from the lack of systemic integration due to neo-horizontalism.

The recent uprising of youth movements, in coincidence with the crisis which started in 2008, provides a clear illustration of this mismatch. "Arab springs", "indignados", "occupy Wall Street" etc. have a common feature. The protests are generated by young people's exclusion from the labor market, by their precariousness and social insecurity. Due to their high schooling level, they hold high socio-economic aspirations. The global market proves very inclusive on the cultural plane, but it doesn't keep the promises of socio-economic inclusion. So young people are gripped by frustration: their imagination shines in a world that doesn't protect their lives. One would expect that their political projection should result in the claim for the restoring of a vertical regime satisfying their expectations, for the return of the grand politics. On the contrary, they always show their devotion to the horizontal regime, betting that what prevents their inclusion in the global market are those categories that disturb and subvert the "physiological" functioning of the real economy. So they identify their main enemies in the political and financial "castes". In short, they do not dispute at all either the horizontalist regulatory system, or the socio-cultural coordinates connected to that pattern. They do not claim a new form of regulation; they only aim to be included in the current one.

The current regime lacks in assuring "systemic integration" but it still provides "social integration". In these conditions, it is very difficult to imagine a cultural hegemony shift (Gramsci 1975). But no way out will be accessible if, first of all, we do not recognize the complexity of the challenge.

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