

## **On Common Goods and Common Good of Humanity**

We have reached that point in the evolution of our “modernist” (or “post-modernist”) civilization that we have put to risk our own humanity. We have also put to risk the only known planet in our galaxy that has life. Since it is a challenge that faces all humanity, it is necessary and important to be conscious of what divides us as human beings, and why. We are divided along the fissures of gender, race, class, tribe, nation, religion, culture, region, and so on. The divisions themselves are not a problem; on the contrary, our plurality is a reason for celebration. In our rich and colourful plurality lies our humanity. What can cause a human tragedy and an existential threat to our planet is the manner in which we resolve our differences and contradictions that are inevitable products of our divisions and history. This paper seeks to address this tentatizing question.

## **On Common Goods and Common Good of Humanity**

### **Introduction**

There is widespread recognition that humanity faces multiple crises in our times. We have good analyses of these by François Houtart and Birgit Daiber in their various publications that form a useful starting point for a discussion among progressive circles on this important current subject. (Houtart, 2012 and Houtart & Daiber, 2012) Three strategic questions form the core of these writings.

1. We live in transition phase from Capitalism to Socialism: how do we define “Common Goods” in this phase?
2. How to build new social actors that are “real agents of change”?
3. How to link struggle for change with other struggles in a holistic manner under the banner of “Common Good of Humanity”?

The various meetings organised by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (Brussels, October 2010; Quito, February-March 2012; and Rome in March 2012) offered an opportunity to reflect on alternative strategies to the prevailing neoliberal capitalist agenda on how we relate to each other as humans and how we as humans relate to nature. Houtart and Daiber suggest a new dialectical symbiosis between humans and nature. They agree with Samir Amin (see his “Audacity, More Audacity”, 2012) and Immanuel Wallerstein, among others, that capitalism has run its course; it cannot sustain the social metabolism of humanity. However, capitalism, they say, will not fall by itself. For this to happen, there needs to be a convergence of all social and political struggles that challenge the prevailing dominant system and offer

alternatives to it. Among many suggestions there is also the idea of a "Universal Declaration on the Common Good of Humanity" (UDCGH) within the UN framework.

I agree with most of the above propositions. And although I have some reservations about the possibility or desirability of shepherding the UDCGH through the United Nations under its present power configuration, I agree that we need to move from 'Common Goods' to the 'Common Good of Humanity'. The latter concept has its attraction because it is broader and opens the possibility of initiating a left solidarity movement. I will come to the issue of solidarity later in this paper.

What is important for now is to recognise that we are still in the early stages of our deliberations. Although some of us have been thinking along these lines for quite some time, there are others who are still trying to catch up, and trying to understand what this is all about and what the strategic and tactical consequences are of our collective deliberations. It is in this spirit that the following thoughts are offered.

### **Who or what is “the left”?**

This is not an easy question but it is an important one. If we are going to move together on a new trajectory of the “left” strategy then it is fair to ask who constitutes the left; how is the left constituted; how is the left strategy going to be packaged and by whom? There may be no answers to these questions in the abstract, since the “identity” of the left may be defined in the course of the struggle, or more appropriately in the course of several parallel struggles. But the questions are important and unavoidable.

There is sometimes an unstated assumption that the “left” constitutes those who take their epistemological and pedagogical bearings from the various writings of Karl Marx (as, in terms of the general application of the method of dialectical materialism, I do), or more loosely those who subscribe to “socialism” in our present epoch. In the same breath people also say that they are averse to any kind of “dogma”. This cautionary note is an important check on linear and abstract thinking - we must bear in mind that all struggles are dialectical and by the nature of things unpredictable. We must acknowledge that although the term “dogma” is often associated with religion - especially with structured or institutionalised religions - there is no denying that “dogma” has its secular side too. To go back to history a bit, we know that the Crusades of the “middle ages” (roughly end of the 11<sup>th</sup> to the end of 13<sup>th</sup> centuries) were garbed in the ideological clothes of religious dogma, and many atrocities were committed in the name of religion. But we also know from the experience of the Soviet Union in the 1930s and of China during the Cultural Revolution, that violations of human rights committed in the name of secular (even “revolutionary”) dogmas can be no less heinous. These are usually recognised – sadly - only after the fact, from a vantage *posteriori* perspective.

Ironically, “secularism” itself can become a dogma. In our own times, the “secular” doctrine of the so-called “Washington Consensus” (based on the economic “reason” of “the market”) is as fundamentalist and genocidal as the crusades of yester centuries and yesteryears. I generally see myself as “secular”; but I hold that the spiritual too has a place in human

society. A wholly secular world, one that is ruled by “reason” alone, could also be horrendous. These matters of ethics and epistemology raise complicated questions.

### **The Transition to Socialism**

So a breadth of scepticism is a necessary antidote to dogma. It is in this spirit of scepticism that I pose the question about the much discussed subject among the left on “the transition to socialism”. This is not to doubt, for one bit, the enormous impact made by the Soviet and Chinese “transitions to socialism” and their liberatory and emancipatory contribution to, for example, the African (and generally “the third world”) struggles against the ravages of colonialism, apartheid and racism. But a word of caution is nonetheless necessary in terms of what we understand by “the transition to socialism”.

In a paper I wrote for a symposium organised by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in October 2011, I wrote, a.o. the following:

*To be more specific, for us in Africa it is not the struggle against capitalism in general; it is capitalism in its neo-colonial manifestation. Most of the European Left that come from Marxist leanings would consider the struggle between "capitalists" and "the proletariat" in general as the defining idiom of the "progressive" content of their political struggles - not only globally but also in the neo-colonies like South Africa, Zimbabwe and Libya. For those of us who come from Africa, including those who come from Marxist tradition (like the present author) the worker-capitalist contradiction defines the "epochal" struggle, yes, but it cannot overshadow the "here and now" struggle for national liberation. So long as our nations are under the control of imperialist nations, and so long as we have not consolidated our national independence, what defines the progressive content of our struggles in Africa is its anti-imperialist character.*

So the question “who is the left” still remains an open question. For the left in Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Japan (the “developed” countries of the West), they may well have reached a point in their historical moment to be in a “transition to socialism”. They are not “under occupation” of outside forces. They are not fighting for “national liberation”. On the contrary, their countries *ARE* the “occupiers” of the rest of the world. I might be persuaded that “socialism” is the political agenda today if I were living in (unoccupied) US or Germany or Japan. But I am part of that larger humanity that is “occupied” (directly or indirectly) by the military *deus et machina* of NATO and an Empire that is dying but not yet quite dead.

I am aware that the word “occupation” can also be tricky, for it could be argued that the *WHOLE* world is “occupied” by finance capital and so, globally, it is a struggle against capitalism and it follows that the whole world is in transition to socialism. I agree, up to a point. But such a conclusion is both economic and undialectical. Occupation has both a political (and military) content as well as economic. Also, history is constantly on the move – nothing is static. Greece, for example, was an independent nation yesterday; but it is fast becoming an “occupied nation”. It is occupied by the dominant forces of capital (at the economic level) and of Europe (at the political level). Its present (2012) Prime Minister is an

international technocrat who is accountable to the European Union and the IMF and not to the people of Greece. Such is the fate of “democracy” in a country that is (or was) an iconic nation in the evolution of Western civilization. The people of Greece could well be a part of the joint struggle with the people of Africa, Asia and Latin America for democracy and national emancipation from the forces of “occupation”.

### **The changing dynamics of contemporary international relations**

The above brief, very brief, exploration of a complex reality at least serves to underline that the three strategic issues raised in the introduction are very big questions. There are no simple answers. It is a matter of dealing with a changing geo-political reality that defies a linear understanding of history or a dogmatic reiteration of “solutions” (including even “socialist” solutions). The Soviet and Chinese revolutions were major moments of history that emancipated millions of people, but there have been serious reversals since then, and both Russia and China are now well on their road to new forms of state capitalism which, in essence, is just as exploitative of labour and of nature as the older capitalist countries.

This said, it would be wrong to place Russia and China in the same category as the US, the EU and Japan. Although they have problematic relations with some of their neighbouring regions such as Chechnya and Tibet, neither of them belongs to the category of the US-EU-Japan Empire. On the other hand, they are also not in the same category as Libya, Ecuador or the Philippines – they are not occupied by the US-EU-Japan Empire. It must be added, however, that it is impossible to predict the future. If current trends are indicative of anything, then it would appear that China especially (but possibly Russia too) are under a palpable threat of war (and possible occupation) from the NATO powers (see below). And that makes them potential allies for the “occupied” countries in the South in their struggle against the Euro-American-Japanese Empire.

Given these uncertainties about the future, there are plenty of open possibilities for alliance and solidarity between forces of the “left” that are fighting their own different battles in their different geo-political conditions - those struggling for socialism in the (unoccupied) developed countries of the West (such as the US, Germany and Japan); those in the less developed parts of the (occupied) world struggling for national liberation (such as India, Brazil and Korea); and Russia and China that are emerging as strong counters to the dying Empire, but are still not strong enough (militarily and economically) to challenge the Empire. To understand the dynamics of this changing reality of international relations constitutes one of the major challenges for the progressive (“left”) forces in our times.<sup>1</sup>

With this brief background in mind, I now move on to the first strategic question raised in the introduction: (If ... keeping in mind my above reservations) we live in the transition phase from Capitalism to Socialism, how do we define Common Goods in this phase?

### **Common Good of Humanity and Common Goods**

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<sup>1</sup> I will take up some of these issues in a book I hope to write in the coming months on “Identity and Solidarity”.

The distinction between Common Good and Common Goods (one in the singular, the other in the plural), as François Houtart explained, is important. The Common Good of Humanity is an all-embracing, philosophical – even existential – matter. It raises deep and weighty epistemological and ethical issues. François did not say this, but let me add that these larger concerns about “humanity” cannot be answered within one philosophical, religious or ethical tradition – be it Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, any other atavistic forms of religion, or within the tradition of Marxism. I shall take the courage to venture into this cross-cultural, cross-religious discourse on “Common humanity” at some more appropriate occasion in the future when I am better prepared.

So I limit this essay to the more manageable concept of “Common Goods”. A useful distinction here is between “common” goods that are *tangible*, and those that are *intangible*. There are as many tangible “common goods” as there are stars in the sky – speaking figuratively of course. The list is endless from land, water, and such other “basic necessities” of life to the global physical environment, and global resources such as oil, forests, seeds, medicinal herbs, elephants, whales, parakeets, invertebrates (many species of all of these are threatened with extinction), and ... the North Pole (also threatened). There is a healthy debate among a variety of scholars, researchers, policy makers, and international institutions about the relative merits of all of these for the title of the “commons”. Many have identified water as the most significant “common”, and I agree with this.

### **The Tangible Commons**

Although the word “commons” goes back to antiquity (western scholars take it back to the Greeks and inevitably to Aristotle, whereas non-westerns to the more ancient Egyptian and Chinese civilizations, a.o.), its more recent historical use was during the eve of the industrial revolution in England when the “commons” that belonged to the peasants were appropriated by an emerging agricultural and industrial bourgeoisie and “enclosed” for their commercial exploitation. In more recent years the “commons” has become a more generalised metaphor and an argument against the “over”-exploitation of finite resources for profit or commercial gain. It has also become a battle ground for the homeless and the landless poor for the loss of what they regard as part of their “common” patrimony.

It is a long and arduous debate couched in philosophical, legal and ethical norms. It is also a seductive and emotional debate. The issues of water scarcity and of land grabs have elicited some of the most anguish and rage amongst social activists in recent years.

For what it is worth, I would argue, furthermore, that the word “commons” when applied to depleting (or finite) resources, lends itself also to abuse. For example, in the “war for resources” between competing industrializing countries, an argument is made that these resources belong to “common humanity” and therefore countries have no right to limit their export just because they happen to lie within their territories. On this basis (as we are writing these words), the US, Europe and Japan have taken China to the court of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) for putting restrictions on the export of 17 rare earth minerals needed for high-tech goods such as hybrid cars, flat-screen TVs, cell phones, mercury-vapor lights,

camera lenses, etc. They say China is indulging in “unfair trade practices” in limiting the export of these vital resources.

Notwithstanding this “hornet’s nest” character of the “commons” (because of its endless possibility), it does not excuse the wanton exploitation of finite resources for “unlimited growth”. And the important point is that this is inexcusable whether this exploitation is carried out by privately owned profit-motivated corporations, or by state-owned enterprises (the latter, fraudulently, in the name of “socialism”). The only permissible “human” value that would legitimise their exploitation is if it effectively (as opposed to rhetorically) removes human misery and poverty. In other words, it is a class question. The present wanton destruction of limited resources of the world is for the rich, the consuming upper layers of society, at the cost of those at the bottom. A case in point is the water-guzzling golf courses all over the world (including drought prone Africa) when millions have no safe water to drink, let alone to bathe and wash.

### **The intangible commons**

So much for the *tangible* “commons”. Of course, there is (or could be) a similar debate about the *intangible* “commons”. If the tangibles “commons” open up a Pandora’s Box of endless “goods”, so do the intangibles. These could include such intangibles as “honour” and “dignity of the human being”. This is not mere rhetoric. There are those who argue – and with good reason -- that honour and dignity of the poor, the marginalised, and prisoners of war (or “terrorists”) are trampled under the feet of a callous, all consuming, upper strata of society, and their agents of law enforcement. If the poor must be poor, then at least their dignity must not be trampled; they must be allowed to die in dignity; their humanity must be protected.<sup>2</sup>

At this point the debate on the intangible commons merges into the debate on the Common Good for Humanity. It would be useful, in the light of the above discussion, to make a distinction between those “Common goods for Humanity” that belong to the individual, those that belong to the local community or society, and those that belong to the global society.

Broadly speaking, while most “western” civilizations of antiquity and of present times stress the worth of the individual, most “eastern” civilizations stress the worth of the collective in relation to the individual. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was largely a product of western – or more specifically Greco-Roman-Judaic-Christian - notions of “rights”, and had very little input from other cultures and civilizations.<sup>3</sup> Whilst the UDHR has a global resonance in our own time, it is not without controversy. In the cold war period the Soviet Union had challenged its heavy emphasis on the political as opposed to the economic and social rights. That indeed was a fair critique, though the cold war shrillness of the critique has now mellowed down in our times.

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<sup>2</sup> The self-immolation of 27 year old Mohamed Boauzizi in Tunisia in January 2011, and suicide of 77 year old Dimitris Christoulas in April 2012 in Athens were the tragic manifestations of those who preferred to die in dignity than become beggars in the street.

<sup>3</sup> Even Charles Malik, who did most of the writing, was a fundamentalist Christian Arab from Lebanon.

Notwithstanding this, the “individualist” bias of the UDHR is still a matter of controversy, especially for those who come from other cultures and climes that have a more “holistic” perspective on human rights. The human rights debate has acquired a new layer of critique in our own times when the West (especially the NATO countries) flout human rights in a duplicitous manner, using it as a flag to intervene in the affairs of other nations when it suits their political and strategic (and military) interests (as in Libya and Syria) and keep benign silence when it does not (as in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain).

### **Is a global war impending? Peace as a common good**

The issue of intangible common goods is thus also complex and sensitive. One does not quite know where to begin in making a list of the intangible commons. So one has to make a choice, a selection. It is, admittedly, a selection grounded in one’s own personal background, identities, biases and circumstances. Here is my short list, limited only to the “intangible commons”:

1. At the individual level: human dignity
2. At the collective or national level: national self determination
3. At the global level: global peace and knowledge

Having said enough about the first two levels, it may be useful to conclude this section with a brief explanation about the third level – global peace and knowledge.

Peace is not simply absence of war. Nonetheless, war is a particular manifestation of the absence of peace that it has to be taken seriously at its own specific level(s). Here I focus not on civil wars or wars against terrorism, but to “world wars” – wars that engage the whole world in direct military confrontations.

In our own times, there is ample evidence that the United States and the countries of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) are making preparations for possible war (or threat of war) against what they perceive as the looming danger of China emerging as a “global power”. Events in the last just five years – including those in the Mediterranean and Pacific regions – indicate an unmistakable evidence of the direction in which the “Empire that is dying but is not dead” is heading. There are sound bites coming from that part of the Empire indicating a dangerous build-up of pressure from the far right and the military strategists to take “pre-emptive” action against China. Many of the foreign policy and strategic decisions that are being made by this desperate and dangerous Empire in relation, for example, to Libya, Syria and Iran, are calculated to create the necessary hardware and military bases in the Mediterranean and the Pacific as well as psychological preparedness that are aimed at China; and Russia too, if it does not play its cards to the West’s expectations.

This is the unfolding reality of our times, not conjectural but conjunctural. So peace, in my view – shared by an increasing number of people – is the prime “intangible common good” of our times. Whatever needs to be done to ventilate peoples opposition to this war preparation by the “dying but not yet dead” Empire must be done.

This, then, for me is of the highest priority. There are of course all kinds of wars in which peoples and nations are presently engaged (especially the mutually self-destructive “war against terror”), but these will appear mere pinpricks by comparison if the whole world is engulfed in another “world war”. In the context of this paper, all other “commons” (tangible or intangible) will be put at risk as the warring nations drive towards a competition to mobilise all resources for the war.

### **Knowledge as a global common good**

The second “intangible global common good” is knowledge. This, too, is a vast complex subject. I will make only a few remarks limited to the issues that are pertinent to the issue of the “commons”.

And I will start with an illustration and a personal experience. In the 1980s and 1990s I used to work with peasant communities in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Mozambique, Namibia, and South Africa. Among their “natural assets” – and these include their culture and community spirit – were agricultural seeds and medicinal herbs. Behind these were thousands of years of research and experiment; collection, preservation and reproduction; and above all, community ownership. What I witnessed over the 17 years that I worked in these rural communities was a systematic appropriation (expropriation) of these seeds and herbs (and knowledge about them) by the “scientific” agents of multinational corporations and western research institutions. The research institutions expropriated the knowledge; and the corporations expropriated the seeds and the herbs. They brought lavish “grant aids” to establish footholds in the universities of the region, and to set up a chain of seed companies and pharmaceutical outlets to market “their” products. Once this infrastructure was set up, the ancient knowledge of the people and communities of the region became the private property of these corporations.<sup>4</sup>

No doubt this experience can be multiplied many times over from the rest of the world – from the forests and peasant communities of Borneo through Asia and Africa to those of the Amazon Basin in South America. The ancient knowledge of the peoples of these regions – the “common heritage of humanity” – has been privatised by profit-seeking agricultural and pharmaceutical kleptocrats (for that is what they are – thieves). This historical truth cannot be denied by legalistic chicanery and linguistic subterfuge.

I come from Uganda – today a prized “model” of “development” along the lines set by the IMF, the World Bank and the so-called “donor community”. The reality on the ground is that the bulk of the people of Uganda has remained, and still remains, desperately poor. The workers and peasants of Uganda continue to be directly exploited by finance capital at the level of production itself. This FC takes the form of foreign direct investments (FDIs), machinery and technology, hybrid seeds and genetically modified organisms (GMOs),

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<sup>4</sup> Tandon, Y, “Village Contradictions in Africa”, published in Wolfgang Sachs (ed.), Global Ecology, London: Zed Books, 1993

fertilizers, pesticides, and all similar production resources that are controlled by the transnational corporations and international banks, insurance companies, marketing companies, etc. However, the bulk of the added value in Uganda is externalised as profits; debt payments; graft to government officials that issue industrial and trading licences, control immigration and customs; and "commissions" at higher level of state bureaucracy to those who make decisions on mining concessions to multinational companies. Since very little of the added value in production remains in Uganda, and that which remains is unequally shared, the vast majority of the people are trapped in poverty, whilst a tiny minority gets rich.

This is the "inner story" of the poverty of Africa. The lack of democracy, corruption, etc. have all a part in this. But the big monster is control of knowledge – control of the knowledge of peoples' "common goods" by the corporations, and imposition of the "knowledge" of the "strategy for development" by the IMF, the World Bank and the "donors". The first (the true knowledge of the people) must be reclaimed; the second (the pseudo-knowledge of the IMF, WB and the donors) must be rejected.

### **Conclusion**

We have reached that point in the evolution of our "modernist" (or "post-modernist") civilization that we have put to risk our own humanity. We have also put to risk the only known planet in our galaxy that has life. Since it is a challenge that faces all humanity, it is necessary and important to be conscious of what divides us as human beings, and why. We are divided along the fissures of gender, race, class, tribe, nation, religion, culture, region, and so on. The divisions themselves are not a problem; on the contrary, our plurality is a reason for celebration. In our rich and colourful plurality lies our humanity. What can cause a human tragedy and an existential threat to our planet is the manner in which we resolve our differences and contradictions that are inevitable products of our divisions and history.

No one person or group of persons has all the answers. It is in the light of this that we need to be cautious using terms like "the left" and "the right" in political discourse. Of course, this division has some basis in theory and practice, and history. But they are not absolute categories, and certainly not universal. The context is important. Taking history and context in mind (and my personal experience over the last over 50 years), I have come to the conclusion -- as a "left" thinker and activist - that whilst the worker-capitalist contradiction defines the "epochal" struggle, it cannot overshadow the "here and now" struggle for our national liberation from the occupation forces of the US-EU-Japan Empire.

I do understand why the word "national" conjures up monsters in Europe (especially with the experience of fascism and of the two world wars), but for us in Africa it is a different experience. Our battles against colonial occupation were part of our struggle for national self-determination. That struggle is not over yet. We are still under the dictation (and in many cases direct military occupation) of the Empire, even if we have nominal independence. Today the people of Greece may well share our sentiment. It is a dynamic, ever-changing, world, full of surprises.

It is against the background of the existential threat that our planet and us as humans face today that the words “common goods” (CGs) and “common good for humanity” (CGH) have appeared. They are products of our extant material and spiritual realities. They are offered as conceptual pegs to help us conceive of a better world. But they raise a host of complex questions to which there are no easy answers. This paper offers some food for thoughts.

Of the two concepts, the CGH is a more challenging concept, and I explain why. The CGs is a more manageable concept, but that too is full of conceptual traps of which we need to be wary. I divide the CGs between the tangibles (like land, water, etc.) and the intangibles (such as peace and knowledge). However, the debate on the intangible commons merges into issue of the common good for humanity, and I gave examples of human rights and of honour and dignity as matters that lie on the borderline between CGs and CGH. These intangibles I divide into the individual (rights and obligations of the individual human being); the community (rights and obligations of local communities); and the global (such as rights to peace and free access to knowledge, and corresponding obligations of the global community).

The above textual presentation of these ideas might be baffling. The following schematic presentation might capture the essence of what is in fact a complex conceptual model with porous lines between the various categories.

Common Good for Humanity (CGH)	Tangible CGs	Intangible CGs at individual level	Intangible CGs at community level	Intangible CGs at global level
“Humanity” is a complex concept. What it means requires a deep and open-minded inter-cultural and inter-civilizational debate	For example: Water, Land, and Seeds (I identify these three as the most important)	Rights (e.g. right to life, security, food, dignity, etc), and corresponding responsibilities.	Peoples’ right to make decisions that affect their lives at the local level	Peace; and Access to knowledge (I identify these two as the most important in the present historical conjuncture)

Obviously, these are still abstract categories. These need to be concretised in the hard material and social realities of our various communities, regions and circumstances. There are forces of war and deprivation that are bent recklessly to endanger world peace and put to risk the sustenance of our planet, even as they proclaim “human rights” as their motivation. These false gods must be exposed for what they are. And here the vast majority of the world’s population is on the side of peace and justice. How to harness this global goodwill to build a common front against the forces of war and deprivation is a challenge that the “left” - however defined in their specific conditions - must face in the months and years to come.

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Oxford, 5 April, 2012.

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