

From the Netherlands the idea of Public-Civic Partnership as a declination of sharing administration

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- In order to introduce you to our readers, Thomas, I would like to dedicate some introductory space to who you are, what Commons Network is, what do you do and how you are organized.

Commons Network is a collaboratory for the social and ecological transition. We bring together people and ideas and we provide tools and insights for social movements, governments and community groups. We explore new models for economy and society in order to collectively transform the system and shape a caring and just future.

In the next few years, we will focus on the role of cities in this fight: how can we make cities caring spaces, where communities feel empowered, where they are safe from Big Tech, where we can explore new models of working together, new modes of provisioning, new visions for social security, reciprocity and solidarity?

We started as a think tank in Berlin and Brussels, working mostly on changing the European copyright system and intellectual property regime, by re-defining knowledge as a common. Later, we discovered that the commons allow us to re-think other spheres in society as well, like food, public space, and health care, to name just a few.

We have four colleagues in our Amsterdam headquarters and we have a number of fellows all over the world that collaborate with us on a project basis. We work with municipalities and national ministries and we are funded by grants from funders and partially also by these institutional partners.

I'd say that we are uniquely positioned to work on the crossroads of activism, academia and administration, by collecting new ideas and turning them into tools for the transition and by pulling on 'Overton windows' [Overton's windows of political possibility is the range of ideas the public responsible is (not) willing to consider and accept, ed.], by changing the political discourse, by radicalizing the organizations around us and by politicizing the problems that we face.

- Do you want to communicate through Labsus initiatives that Commons Network is organizing for this autumn or next winter?

This autumn is important for us. We just published our [report about degrowth and health](#), after the editing of a manifesto about the caring economy, a study about European digital interoperability, three publications about Community Wealth Building, our guide to the Amsterdam Fearless Cities movement, a new website for Commons Network, a podcast about social and ecological transitions and on top of all that, we will kick-off our arts programme, in which we curate immersive art experiences

throughout Amsterdam to let people experience post-capitalist ecosystems and to discuss new societal models during live events. So I am a bit stressed!

- The French magazine “Horizons Publics” [HP n.21] recently opened an entire issue on the concept of shared administration, which as you know is central to Labsus. Can I ask you for an opinion on this key concept?

When we read your interview in HP, we were really inspired. We know the work of Labsus and Gregorio Arena and you for many years, of course. But we never realised that what you refer to as “administration partégée” [sharing administration, ed.], is similar to what we call Public-Civic Partnerships.

Commons Network is working with municipalities in The Netherlands to develop a model for ‘Public-Civic Partnerships’, to replace the neoliberal model of ‘Public-Private Partnership’. This so called ‘PCP’ works on every level, in cities, in neighborhoods, but also on a national level or in the EU. For us, a PCP is a new organizational model, where the government, let’s say the municipality, takes a big stake in a new endeavor. For instance, in Amsterdam we are trying to set up a worker-owned cooperative for taxi services, to compete with Uber. But without the municipality as a ‘launching customer’ and an initial stakeholder, such an enterprise would never succeed, because competing with Uber is hard. To be clear: this goes beyond a subsidy. A PCP would mean that the city not only supports financially, but also by sitting on the board, being co-owner, and by lending out staff, through secondments for instance.

Why is Commons Network fighting so hard to make PCP’s a reality? Because without them, the commons sector, or the cooperative sector, will never expand. If we want to make real change, we need the re-claim parts of the state and parts of the market. This is about serious money and about power. We want the commons to organize parts of urban mobility, health care, energy production, food, and so on. So that means we need help from governments, we need them to really function as a ‘Partner-State’.

- What is your opinion about Italy as a laboratory for the care of common goods?

We often look at your work and the work of others in Italy to learn how we can change things in The Netherlands too. What is different is the level of politicization: it’s still very rare to have discussions here about capitalism, colonialism, racism or patriarchy, where as in Italy and other southern European countries, those conversations are much more normalized. That makes it more difficult for us here, to challenge certain power structures.

Another difference is that The Netherlands has been taken over by neoliberal politics since the 1980s, which in practice means that almost every sector of our lives has been turned into a business case and a market opportunity. This makes it harder to fight back. Many people cannot even imagine collectively owning a shared resource, because they have been taught to only see that resource as a commodity.

- How would you define Dutch / Northern European commoners?

Especially after working with European municipalist movements for a number of years, I think we can observe one key contribution that the Amsterdam strain of municipalism has added to the larger European movement: radical democratization also means democratizing your economy. And we have started doing that here in Amsterdam by running three pilots around the concept of

'Community Wealth Building', which allows us to combine commons with municipalism to shape a democratized local economy and to empower local communities. It turns out that everyone can relate to the idea of democratizing the economy. So when you look at Dutch commoners, whether they are working on energy or health care or food or technology: what they share is an ambition to democratize the economy and to empower local communities.

- And finally, what do you think could move stronger and more convinced European policies?

The only answer I have is one that you will not like: to really change something, we need to make cities and regions more important, and we need to make nation-states less important. I am very skeptical of the future of the EU and I don't see it ending well. Sorry to sound negative! Where we see a space for improvement is trans-national and trans-local solidarity. Europe as a collection of nation-states does not work anymore, but Europe as a federation of regions and cities might have a chance of surviving...