

What We Share: A Commons- Intergroup takes off in the EU Parliament

Commons, common goods -- these terms have become buzzwords of a hoped for disruption towards the revitalization of democracy and community. The discourse on equitable access to material and immaterial resources has now gained new political weight: the European Parliament has formed an intergroup on the issue. Activist and author Sophie Bloemen comments.



The Commons; we hear this term more and more in a wide variety of contexts. Across Europe it is often used in the context of participatory initiatives: co-ops providing care for elderly in the neighbourhood, Greeks cooking for their crisis struck neighbours in social solidarity initiatives, or collaborative production endeavours such as Wikipedia made possible by new technology.

Most often though, the term is heard in the context of the Internet. Users intuitively recognize this digital environment as a commons. Meanwhile, creative commons licenses on cultural works will reach over *one billion* in 2015.

But also in discussions on climate change, on common ownership of water and in discussions on social justice, people have started appealing more to the concepts of 'the common good,' 'commons' or 'public goods' - all in parallel to the use of human

rights. Surely the human rights discourse remains the most powerful social justice language we have, importantly enshrined in international conventions. With the concepts of the commons and common goods also gaining political traction our emancipatory spectrum is now being broadened. Tellingly, this discourse has now also reached Brussels.

Landed in real politics

It's news that makes itself heard: The new European Parliament will see a Commons Intergroup among its 28 [inter groups](#). The Parliaments main political factions decided on the list of intergroups in December. In order to form an intergroup there need to be three supporting political groups at least, which can be quite a challenge as each political group can only join a limited number of intergroups.

Even though the intergroups have no legislative power, it can be valuable having such a representation in the European Parliament. At the minimum, it is a multiparty forum where one can exchange views and propose ideas on particular subjects in an informal way. Those who choose to work with such an intergroup, its Members of Parliament, and civil society or lobbyists, share the notion that a certain topic is important and can focus on how to get things done.

Now there will also be a Commons Intergroup. This particular group will allow for discussions on policy from a shared perspective: the idea that 'the commons' – is an important and helpful way of framing the important themes of present times.

As there can only be so many Intergroups, inevitably the group is the result of a political compromise. It has been formed Members of European Parliament (MEPS) from [the Greens](#), the left group [GUE](#), the large [Social Democrat party \(S&D\)](#) and the group [EFDD](#) which now includes Beppe Grillo with his Cinque Stelle party. The movement on [water as a commons](#) has been instrumental for the mobilization on the intergroup.

Is the commons movement becoming a political force?

The commons intergroup ended up joining the already existing one on Public Services and in the process of political shuffling, the name ended up shifting to common goods. So officially referred to as '*intergroup on commons goods*', it is part of the '*European Parliamentary intergroup on Common Goods and Public Services*.' Practically the group will operate in two subgroups. The president of the sub group on the commons is MEP Marisa Matias from GUE.



The intergroup can be understood as confirmation of the aspirations and discourse of the commons becoming a political force. In a way, the bottom-up movement is given a certain political legitimacy by the intergroup. Nevertheless, the question arise: How can an intergroup, which such a broad a scope as commons or common goods, how can such a group be useful? Aren't the daily activities of the European Parliament in the end about concrete policies, amendments to policy proposals and votes?

Fundamental Change in Sight

We have to take step back and ask: What are commons? What are common goods? There are distinct definitions: On the one hand an operational notions would define

Commons or as shared resources, governed by a certain community. On the other hand a moral notion would say commons or *common goods* refer to goods that benefit society as a whole, and are fundamental to people's lives, regardless of how they are governed.

These could be many things. Politically it will be more about claiming certain matters as commons or common goods, for example natural resources, health services or useful knowledge. Tackling core areas of our co-existence from a perspective of the commons is of great significance. It's important because eventually this will lead to a move towards the sustainable management- and equitable sharing of resources.

Another aspect that makes this approach appealing is that the commons movement takes a community and ecological systems perspective. This philosophy moves away from a purely individual rights-, market- and private property based worldview. No need to elaborate that for many this worldview is at the root of the current economic and environmental crises.



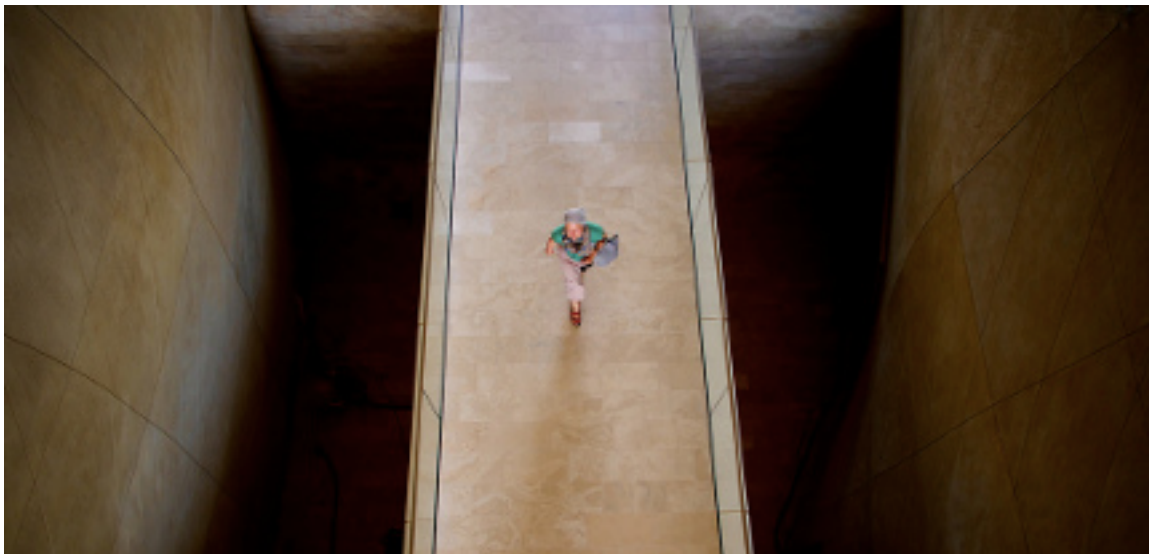
Commons thinking expresses a strong denial of the idea that society is and should be composed of atomized individuals living as consumers. Instead the commons discourse points to the possibility that people can live their lives as citizens, deeply

embedded in social relationships. Moreover, that citizens' active participation is important in realizing wellbeing and a well-functioning society.

No Charter yet

Hence, for politics and policy, what the commons or common goods are is not established and remains dynamic. This makes it all pretty exciting. Like we have charter of human rights, we might have a modern charter of the commons some day. To illustrate what working from a commons perspective might look like in practice we can consider the EU's policies on knowledge management.

Its fair to say these policies are currently far removed from a commons approach: the EU puts great emphasis on what one could call the 'enclosure of knowledge'. This enclosure happens through the expansion of intellectual property protection, both within European as outside of it by means of trade policies. Apart from spurring innovation and helping European industries, this also results in for instance long patent monopolies on medicines and long copyright terms. In numerous instances the EUs policies stifles possibilities to share knowledge and innovation, as well its collaborative production.



There has been quite some push back and the European Commission has taken efforts that recognize the need to share and embrace possibilities of digital age. This view is reflected by commitments on open access, open data in some of its policies and the exploration of open science. However, make no mistake, these moves towards knowledge sharing remain timid. The EU remains mostly conservative when it comes to private interests of publishers or the pharmaceutical industry, which besides have great influence with their armies of lobbyists. Could the Commons Intergroup make a difference?

Resonating with the public at large

The intergroup could allow for an opportunity to work on knowledge policy issues from a collective perspective. Additionally there is the option to work in tandem with political actors working on access to knowledge and digital rights. Perhaps, the policy implications will not always be ground-breaking and often similar to existing proposals, such as exceptions on copyright, sharing of green technologies, net neutrality or conditions on EU funded research. Nonetheless the approach provides an additional political basis and rationale for these policies.

What about the public? While the concept resonates with more and more people, we are far removed from a commons consensus in society. In politics, the promoters of the Commons perspective will have to be strategic, form alliances and make compromises, as one cannot change the world in one go. So it should be approached though fully. For the many of the core issues related to commons-thinking the new Intergroup could provide a useful forum. For the commons movement it will certainly provide, once operational, a good place to find political friends.

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