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[**Translated Interview – Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval: “The challenge of the politics of the common is to move from representation to participation”**](https://hiredknaves.wordpress.com/2015/07/14/translated-interview-pierre-dardot-and-christian-laval-the-challenge-of-the-politics-of-the-common-is-to-move-from-representation-to-participation/)



Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval

This is a translation of an interview with Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, conducted by Amador Fernández-Savater, and originally published on the [Interferencias](http://www.eldiario.es/interferencias/Laval-Dardot-comun_6_405319490.html) blog at eldiario.es on 3rd July, on the topic of their new book *Commun. Essai sur la révolution au XXIe siècle.*

First, a translation note. One of the difficulties with translating from Spanish is that English does not have a neuter article. Hence the term ‘lo común’ in Spanish (‘le commun’ in French), is most closely translated to English as ‘that which is common’. For the sake of brevity and sanity, I have translated most instances of ‘lo común’ as ‘the common’, since it means something different to ‘the commons’. However, *The New Way of the World,* the English translation of *La nouvelle raison du monde: Essai sur la société néolibérale* finishes off, impeccably but somewhat unhelpfully for the purposes of this piece, with ‘la raison du commun’ translated as ‘the reason of the commons’. I have left this phrase in its official English translation.

**Laval & Dardot: “The challenge of the politics of the common is to move from representation to participation”**

*Some months back, we interviewed French intellectuals Pierre Dardot (a philosopher) and Christian Laval (a sociologist) on the topic of their penultimate work: The New Way of the World. It is an ambitious reconstruction of the history and present of neoliberalism, understood simultaneously as a macro- and a micro-politics: structural adjustment plans side-by-side with the production of certain subjective ways of living in the world.*

*A few months later, their latest book appeared in Spain. It is titled* Common*, with the subtitle* Essay on revolution in the 21st Century*. Having critically analysed neoliberal logic, Dardot and Laval now sketch out the alternative: the common as the central terminus of a logic of thought and action that might break the deadlocks of the politics of the 20th century (left/right, State/market, public/private).*

*In our introduction to that interview, we said that* Common *could become a major reference point for contemporary political thought, just as Empire by Toni Negri and Michael Hardt was in its day. Indeed, the book is already the object of lively debates in France and Italy. But it is perhaps in a country such as Spain where it may find a more active and practical readership, both among people involved in grassroots movements and those taking part in new political and institutional forms.*

*It was not by chance that certain councillors from* Ahora Madrid *swore into their posts with the phrase* Omnia sunt communia! *(“Everything for everyone”), nor that the word “común” appears in the name of important municipal initiatives such as that of Barcelona. What, then, is this new politics of the common?*

 **From neoliberal reason to the reason of the commons.**

1. *What was your intention in writing the book? Why set out this key idea of the common here and now?*

**Pierre Dardot:** This book follows the same trail as our previous works, particularly *The New Way of the World*. The latter ends with a somewhat elliptical expression: “the reason of the commons”. We wanted to suggest that the ‘counter-conducts’ we spoke about in the book, that is, the practices of resistance and subjectivation, ought to be articulated as a new political reason, an alternative political reason to the neoliberal reason we had analysed.

What we were not so sure about was this very articulation, or, to put it another way, what kind of direct and positive participation in conducts of resistance could help build an alternative rationality. We had in mind an opposition between two principles: competition (a principle of neoliberal logic) and the common [lo común], but it was still very abstract. Ultimately, what was at stake was what we might call the *positivity* of practices of resistance: we cannot be satisfied with a resistance to power that is purely defensive or reactive. Rather, we have to think about a resistance that can produce new rules. It is only in this way that we will be in a position to overthrow neoliberal reason.

**Christian Laval.** We were prepared to map out the path from resistance to emancipation, in that sense moving beyond Foucault and his mistrust of the “big projects”. But what was ultimately decisive in writing *this* book, with *this* title, were the different movements contesting the private and state-led appropriation of resources, spaces, services, etc. And, most especially, the movement of the occupation of squares (15M, etc) which has set forth new demands with an incomparable energy.

In all these movements a radical questioning of ‘representative’ democracy has developed, in the name of a ‘real’ democracy, linked in certain cases to ecological demands concerning the preservation of ‘common goods’ (urban spaces above all). So something that was for us still rather a matter of intuition at the end of *The New Way of the World* has now taken shape. We believe that the common is the principle that literally emerges from all these movements. The common is not, then, something that we have invented, but rather emerges from current struggles as *their own principle*.

The common: co-participation and co-involvement

1. *What is your definition of the common?*

**Pierre Dardot**: The definition of the common that we propose at the beginning of the book does not seek to be a general definition, independent of time and place. If we go back to the etymology of this term (cum-munus) it is certainly not to give the impression that the common has always held the meaning we give it today. In Aristotle, the *koinôn* is what arises from the activity of common endeavour that constitutes citizenship, the activity that involves the back-and-forth between the rulers and the ruled. In the Roman Republic, the word *munis* meant, above all, the dimension of obligation imposed upon all magistrates that held public office. Today, by the lights of the movement of the squares, the term has a rather different meaning: the only valid political obligation is that which proceeds, not from belonging to the same thing, but from participation and involvement in the same activity or task. This demand is one of participative democracy and as such it stands opposed to representative democracy, which authorises a few to speak and act on behalf of the many.

1. *Could you explain the difference between your approach to the common and what we find in other discourses at play in more or less the same field? To be specific: 1) What distinguishes the common from the public-state owned? 2) What distinguishes the common from ‘common goods’? 3) What distinguishes your thoughts from those of other intellectuals such as Toni Negri and Michael Hardt?*

**Christian Laval:** The public-state-owned rests upon two demands that are perfectly contradictory: on the one hand, it purports to guarantee universality of access to public services; on the other, the state administration reserves the monopoly over running these services, thereby reducing users to consumers, and excluding them from any kind of participation in their running. The commons must be precisely to put an end to this baleful division between “public servants” [funcionarios] and “users”. To put it another way, the common could be defined the public/non-state: to guarantee universality in access to services through direct user participation in their running.

**Pierre Dardot:** Secondly, the common is for us a political principle and not a property that might pertain by nature to a certain kind of “goods”. We distinguish between *the* common [lo común] as a political principle that is not to be instituted but rather applied, and *the commons*, which are always instituted through the application of this principle. The commons are not ‘produced’, but rather ‘instituted’. This is why we are very reticent with regard to ‘common goods’. Because all goods considered in this way share this quality of being ‘products’. We think this reasoning needs to be turned around: every common that is instituted (whether natural resource, knowledge, cultural space etc.) is a good, but no good is in itself common. A common is not a ‘thing’, even when it relates to a thing, but rather the living tie between a thing, an object or a place, and the activity of the collective that takes charge of it, that maintains it and cares for it. The common can only be instituted as that which cannot be appropriated.

**Christian Laval**: Finally, our perspective also calls into question the thesis set out by Negri and Hardt of a spontaneous production of the common, which would be at once both the result and the condition of the process of production (in the same mode as the expansive dynamic of the forces of production in a certain kind of Marxism). We think that by idealising the autonomy of immaterial labour in the era of ‘cognitive capitalism’, this thesis fatally ignores the mechanisms for subordinating labour that capital nowadays operates.

Instituent Praxes

1. *‘There are no goods that are not common goods [by their very nature, by their intrinsic qualities], but rather commons to be instituted.’ These are the words that round off your work and in a certain way summarise it. How is the common instituted? What kind of institutions are appropriate?*

**Pierre Dardot:** To institute does not mean to institutionalise in the sense of rendering official, of consecrating or of recognising a posteriori what has already existed for some time (for example, in the form of habit or custom), nor does it mean to create out of nothing. It means to create the new with -and starting from- what already exists, as such in conditions passed down independently of our activity. A common is instituted by a specific praxis that we call ‘instituent praxis’. There is no general method for the institution of any given common. Each praxis ought to be understood and carried out *in situ* or *in loco*. That is why we must speak of ‘instituent praxes’ in plural.

**Christian Laval:** Opening up a service that had been until that moment closed down, in a psychiatric hospital, following a discussion with the health workers and the patients, involves an instituent praxis, though it might be a ‘micropolitical’ extension, as Foucault would have it. Similarly, instituting a seed bank for peasants or setting up a cultural centre for common use. And it is these practices that prepare and build the revolution understood as ‘auto-institution of society’.



Bolt Hostel, Dublin

1. *There is a classical suspicion among the more egalitarian and horizontal movements with regard to the idea of ‘institution’: the danger of bureaucratisation, the consecration of tradition, the excessively rigid channelling of the ‘flow’ of the movements, etc. How would you respond to this suspicion? How should we think of the institution in a way that responds to these risks? How can we crystallise without freezing?*

**Christian Laval:** Throughout history: there is a ‘curse’ that lies in wait for social mobilisations, for movements of struggle, for revolutionary experiences: the alternative between their swift dissolution due to lack of structure, or their bureaucratisation. Certain writers hold that we cannot escape the petrification of movements, their degradation into a fixed organisation, headed up by a small conservative oligarchy. Sartre, for example, thought that the insurrectional episode of the *groupe en fusion* inevitably led to an institutional reification. The concept of institution therefore wound up in one thing: the inertia of a dead body.

But this thesis can only be understood as the reverse of the old Marxist-Leninist theory of the Party that saw, in the absence of a disciplined organisation capable of seizing the centre of power, the cause of the defeat of revolutions (particularly the Paris Commune). The Marxist-Leninist party, the keeper of the knowledge of history, was no more than a simulacrum of State, based on the model of the central bureacracy. The challenge of contemporary movements consists in having the capacity to refute this double fatalism.

**Pierre Dardot:** We have to tackle this feeling of historical impotence that says that effective and lasting politics can be nothing other than the monopoly of the dominant. And to this end there is only one solution: to create institutions whose principle is such that the rules can be the object of a constant collective deliberation so as to avoid a bureacratic ‘freezing-over’. What is essential is that the institution, whatever it might be, should have the capacity to open up to the unforeseen and adapt to new necessities: its functioning must therefore allow at every moment a relaunching of the instituent. [*lo instituyente*]

**Present struggles: reinstituting society**

1. *Thinking about movements of the squares such as 15M, Syntagma or Gezi, and electoral instruments for the ‘institutional assault’ on political power, such as Syriza and Podemos, how do you weigh up the struggles and movements against neoliberalism in recent years, from this question of yours about a new institutionality?*

**Pierre Dardot:** The movements of recent years are profoundly inventive, creative, the bearers of new political forms. This does not so much mean that they bring with them, spontaneously, a new ‘constitution’ (in the political-legal sense of the term) but rather that they pose (in practice) the problem of the link between the construction, in the ‘here and now’, beginning from existing conditions, of new forms of relating and of activity, and the general transformation of society. That is how best they can be characterised, and the Spanish process is in this sense gives very clear testament.

**Christian Laval:** Each experience has its particularities. Syriza was born, for example, out of a coalition of small left parties, whereas the municipal lists that have won the elections in Barcelona and Madrid have been constituted from multiple associations and groupings that are not confined to Podemos and that are rooted in the experience of 15M. The shared element is the will to rupture with an entire ‘system’, that is, an oligarchical political order, tightly bound up with the economic interests of dominant social groups. But one cannot struggle against the ‘system’ without inventing, at the same time and on the plane of practice, new forms of society and politics. We think that this is another important ‘lesson’ of the struggles of recent years.

**Pierre Dardot:** In this sense, the recent movements are deeply ‘autonomous’ in the etymological meaning of the term: they show by their acts the need to reinstitute society as a whole according to the logic of the common. And it is for this very reason that we say that they are revolutionary movements, giving the term of ‘revolution’ the very precise meaning of ‘reinstitution of society’. The revolutionary direction of the current movements does not so much lie in the mode of action they opt for, whether electoral or not, nor in how clear the awareness is of the final objectives being pursued, but rather in the transformation, of the tenacious and courageous resistance of broad fractions of society to austerity policies, into the will and the capacity to change the political relation itself.  That is, in passing from ‘representation’ to ‘participation’.

1. *At what point are we right now in this struggle?*

**Christian Laval**: The dominant forces in Europe and the world have deliberately entered into a logic of political confrontation, under the pretext of returning debt to creditors, in order to break these fractions of the population that resist neoliberalism and rip the heart out of any will for political rupture. We are entering a new period of struggles. Greece and Spain are the vanguard. The important thing is that they must not remain alone, and that other forces in other countries must come to their aid in order to break these austerity policies.

The situation of confrontation on a European scale shows the practical need for a new internationalism. And hence one of the current risks, undoubtedly the major risk, is that when confronted with the ravages of neoliberalism, some end up succumbing to the deadly siren calls of nationalism and sovereigntism. This is what is currently happening in France, not only on the far right with the Front National, but also in the ‘radical’ left.

**The common and the movements**

1. *We believe one of the virtues and strengths of your book is that it can appeal both to those involved in grassroots experiences as well as those who have opted for the ‘assault on the institutions’. Regarding grassroots movements, how might your book help to rethink and reassess one of their major problems, that of duration? How can the (egalitarian, inclusive etc) political practices that emergge in exceptional moments of struggle be turned into ‘habit’ or ‘custom’?*

**Pierre Dardot:** Regarding the movements, the reach of our book, at least that which we are seeking, is that the institutional dimension of ‘real democracy’, in the words of 15M, be taken seriously, that it become the object of experiments, debates, collective reflections. For us, real democracy is a matter of institutions. And this is the condition for ensuring the duration and the strength of the movements. It is for this reason that we are opposed to all these illusions regarding the spontaneous development of ‘immanent communism’ in grassroots struggles. These illusions are dangerous, because they short-circuit the decisive question of the institution, that is, in our perspective, the investigation regarding the effective forms of instituent praxes. The dialogue can be established on these grounds.

We should not underestimate how difficult it is to invent new institutions whose functioning is geared explicitly towards preventing their appropriation by a small number, the distorting of their purposes, or the ‘rigidification’ of their rules. The question is not how to ‘create’ new ‘customs’ or ‘habits’, because neither one nor the other can be the object of acts of institution, but rather how to allow practical rules to prevail that allow for debate, deliberation, collective decision-making even in *the very definition of the rules that organise collective life*.

1. *Do you have practical organisational examples in mind?*

**Pierre Dardot:** We do not want to ‘give lessons’, and less still offer an instruction manual to those who are involved in alternative economic, social or political practices. Rather, we have a gret deal to learn from the experiments taking place everywhere. For example, the experience of the Cooperativa Integral Catalana involves in its own way an instituent praxis.



Asilo Filangeri, Naples

There is an abundance of initiatives and experiments carried out independently of the State, out of which the phenomenon of ‘occupations’ of places that have been abandoned or are in disuse is one of the most striking. For example we have the old palace in the centre of Naples, L’Asilo Filangieri, which has been turned into a centre for various cultural activities (theatre, dance, cinema). This case poses the question of use arising from a collective decision-making regarding its fate, not so much who owns it. “The space belongs to whoever uses it” is its slogan.

**The common and public institutions.**

1. *And regarding public institutions, how might one contribute from these towards the common? Is it possible, for example, to transform public institutions into institutions of the common?*

**Christian Laval:** As we have said, there is a close relation between the ephemeral nature of mobilisations and the more or less ‘grassroots’ spontaneity that condemns any kind of political activity in the name of distrust regarding everything that looks like “politics”. But at the same time, it is not enough to “conquer power” and “occupy the positions” of the State in order to change things. The deep and undoubtedly irreversible crisis of representative democracy in the neoliberal era clearly shows the need to invent *another politics, another relation to politics*. And that is precisely the challenge of the politics of the common.

**Pierre Dardot:** We must remember that the common does not come from the State. The State is by no means the owner of the common, except illegitimately. It is from the very inside of society’s movement, through the struggles that transform it, that new political forms are invented. Institutions are born out of conflict. It has been forgotten, no doubt owing to the degeneration of the organisations of the socialist and labour movement, that workers in the 19th century were able, under very difficult conditions, to build new institutions in their day, such as unions, cooperatives, mutuals etc.

The current abundance of associations of struggle and defence of citizens links back to this history while at the same time gives it a deep renewal. It is not only the workplace that needs to be reinstituted politically, as socialists of years past wanted, but all social activities and all spheres of life: the hospital, the school, the home, the city, the culture.

**Christian Laval:** There is no preestablished plan for this new politics. We only have concrete experiences that need to be considered, compared, synthesised. For example, all that has been explored for years under the name of ‘participatory democracy’ at a local level, in very different regions and under very varied forms, in Latin America, in England, in the Kurdish region of Rojava with its communalist utopia etc. And, above all, this irresistible wave on a global level of collective care of ‘common goods’, which entails (despite its erroneous designation) the participation of citizens in its definition, care, production. The example of the democratisation of water services in Naples, as promoted by the mayor Luigi de Magistris, stands out in this sense, despite its limits.

1. *To be more specific: what message would you give to the municipal initiatives (Ahora Madrid, Barcelona en Comú, Marea Atlántica) that view ‘the defence of common goods’ as a key axis of their programmes?*

**Pierre Dardot:** One of our ‘proposals’ is to transform public services into instituted commons. This would mean that they would no longer belong to the State as if it were the proprietor, the sole custodian, the overall authority. A public service is only worthy of that title if it is a service that society gives to itself in order to realise its rights and satisfy its needs. We need to *break the monopoly of state administration in order to guarantee universality of access to these services*: users must be considered, not as consumers, but rather as citizens who take part in the deliberations and decisions that concern them, alongside the ‘public servants’.

**Christian Laval:** Another condition to be imposed: *politics must not be a matter for professionals*. Politics is not an office, and least of all an office for life. On the political plane, one of the hinges of the revolution we are tasked with today is the radical modification of the definition of the political mandate, at every level, in order to eliminate the political ‘caste’, who, ever closer to the ruling economic powers, has done so much harm to our societies.

**The common and history**

*12. Finally, in your book there is a very considerable amount of historical work. Without historical analysis, you say, there is a risk of superficial answers, of contradictions, of inconsistencies. Our question is: what does it mean for you to think historically? What can history teach us? How can we avoid the construction of new ‘grand narratives’ (and now that of the common) that crush the singularity of the present, its novelty.*

**Pierre Dardot:** Indeed, we do think it is very important to capture the common in its historicity. This is a necessary condition for thinking about it in the singularity of its emergence rather than inscribing it in a transhistorical continuum. ‘Thinking historically’ does not mean waiting for history to teach us the right ‘lessons’ for the future, but above all thinking onl the level of a historical singularity, that which constitutes our present moment. This is what we have tried to do in our book.

**Christian Laval.** Two examples. If we have dedicated an entire chapter to the critique of the way *Common Law* presents itself as self-perfecting and self-purifying simply by dint of its organic growth, it was not to suggest there was a really existing ‘customary right’ equipped to uphold the promises that *Common Law* could not keep, but rather to question the idea that the coming law of the common could be constituted simply by extending ‘common law’, whatever its form. *The law of the common opens the present state of practices onto the future, whereas common law subordinates them to the past*.

Or, if we have reviewed the thesis of a ‘customary right’ of the poor (Marx) or of a ‘proletarian customary right’ (Maxime Leroy), this is not to set out its contemporary relevance, but rather to highlight the intrinsic insufficiency of all customary right, whatever its social content. The question today is not that of passing on old customs, or the institution of new customs, but rather the creation of new institutions through the production of laws that can be turned into customs through force of practice.

**Pierre Dardot:** Generally, examining the past can teach us to mistrust rushed and misleading analogies that arise very often within movements contesting the existing order. In particular, there is the one that establishes a parallel between the current struggle for the commons of knowledge and that of peasants for common lands in the 15th to the 16th century. To think historically, then, is to reject the flattening out of the singularity of the present under analogies and similarities that distract us from the struggle to transform the present in a revolutionary direction.

**Christian Laval**: And this is also the reason we did not want to build one of these ‘grand narratives’ that postmodernism roundly denounced: the common does not at all take up the batton of ‘citizen emancipation’, the ‘realisation of the Spirit’ or the ‘society without classes’ (to take the main narratives mentioned by Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* in 1979). We have no need to link up again with this tradition that orders history towards an ‘end’ that supposedly confers it meaning.

On the contrary, we believe that it is desirable and necessary to subtract the idea of emancipation from the empire of ‘grand narratives’. Our idea of emancipation therefore cannot be dissociated from the logic of confrontation: it does not announce the end of struggle, nor does it promise the advent of a society that is finally transparent and pacified. It recognises that the problem of conflict is insurmountable. When asked by an American journalist what his idea of happiness was, Marx replied with a single word: “struggle!”. That is, we will never be finished with the struggle or with conflict. There is no “final struggle”, there is only a struggle that opens up again and again, each time in a mode that is singular, historic.