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Common Dreams
or Vulgar Delusions?
Elite Preoccupations
in Discourses about the
'Commons'

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Our age is witness to a proliferation of discourses about the 'commons'. They are emerging from more and more quarters, and the word is being applied to more things than ever before. One important strand of discourse, claiming to be communist, seeks to apply it to all kinds of spheres, from the earth and its natural bounty to culture, and to all sorts of resources, from the most immaterial, such as common knowledge, to the most material, such as the use of the earth's finite natural resources. Internet activists refer to information and knowledge that exists on the web as the 'digital commons'. Businesses, powerful countries, and international agencies, while they do not invoke the 'commons' in discussions of domestic policy, are in the forefront of invoking the notion of 'commons' in the international sphere, applying it to impressive array of spheres, from the high seas to airspace, to outer space and cyberspace. There is a notion to apply the term only to 'non-excludable' goods, goods whose enjoyment by some does not prevent that by others, either because they are plentiful, such as the fresh air, or because they are not 'used up' by any single user, such as a song. There is, however, the idea to also apply it to excludable goods too, such as food or housing, or health-care, or schools and universities, or social services, which, they argue, should be shared in some fashion that is fair and just beyond present, typically capitalist, arrangements.

By using the term 'commons', these discourses are all, each in their own way, appealing to some notion of justice and fairness. On the left, for instance, the term 'commons' and the practice of 'commoning' refer to a resistance to privatization and commodification of that which should be enjoyed in common, whether it is forest resources, or grazing land, or the use of information provided free on the Internet. An increasing number of activists and intellectuals claiming to be on the left are even seeking to place the centuries-long struggle for communism in a new basis, that of the 'commons'. For them, it is now a struggle for the defence of the 'commons'.¹ More widely on the left, struggles of the oppressed around the world are articulated as protection of the 'commons', from that of the Zapatistas (the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, Mexico) to those of the landless throughout Latin America, to the Narmada Bachao Andolan of the dam-displaced in India. Urgent environmental discourses are articulated as a struggle to protect our common natural heritage. At the same time, governments, corporations, and international organizations use the idea of the 'commons' in declaring their interest in obtaining access to hitherto un- or minimally governed realms while giving their claims a halo of legitimacy and responsibility.²

¹ Costas, D & Zizek, S (eds), 2010, 'The Idea of Communism', London: Verso; Hardt, M, 2010, 'The Commons in Communism', in Douzinas, C & Zizek, S (eds.), 'The Idea of Communism', London: Verso, p. 131-144.

² Barrett, M, Bedford, D, Skinner, E & Vergles, E, 2011, 'Assured Access to the Global Commons', Norfolk, Virginia, USA. Available from: http://www.alex11.org/wpcontent/uploads/2013/01/aagc_finalreport_text.pdf

Struggles for the 'commons' are associated in the popular imagination with progressive and deeply legitimate causes. Even non-Marxists, for instance, are familiar with Marxists' famous discussions of enclosures in Part VIII of *Capital*³ and associate them with the myriad struggles since that have sought to preserve lives and livelihoods. That, however, is also why contemporary discourses about the 'commons' require us to delve deeper. There are at least two layers of misunderstanding that we need to peel off before we can begin to judge specific claims about the 'commons' and 'commoning'. The first has to do with the meaning of the 'commons' itself and how the concept relates to property forms and governance. The second has to do with the domestic and/or international politics involved in claims about the 'commons'. Once we have removed these understandings, we will be in a position to ask exactly what the social, political, and economic implications of this or that 'commoning' claim are and decide for ourselves whether we would support this or that claim.

Nobody's Property?

The modern work to which most discussions of the 'commons' refer to is Garret Hardin's 1968 article, *The Tragedy of the Commons*. Relying on the 19th century Malthusian economist, William Foster Lloyd, Hardin argued that human selfishness would inevitably lead to the overuse of common resources and their depletion.

The tragedy of the 'commons' develops in this way. Picture a pasture open to all. It is to be expected that each herdsman will try to keep as many cattle as possible on the 'commons'. Such an arrangement may work reasonably satisfactorily for centuries because tribal wars, poaching, and disease keep the numbers of both man and beast well below the carrying capacity of the land. Finally, however, comes the day of reckoning, that is the day when the long-desired goal of social stability becomes a reality. At this point, the inherent logic of the 'commons' remorselessly generates tragedy.⁴

However, as a very early critique⁵ of the Garret Hardin's (1968) understanding of the 'commons' pointed out, Hardin was assuming that the 'commons' meant 'everybody's property' or, what would amount to the same thing, nobody's property. However, the 'commons' were historically always

³ Marx, K, 1867/1977, *'Capital'*, vol. 1, London: Penguin.

⁴ Hardin, G, 1968, *'The Tragedy of the Commons'*, *Science (New Series)* 162, no. 3859, December, p. 1243–1248.

⁵ Ciriacy-Wantrup, SV & Bishop, RC, 1975, *'Common Property as a Concept in Natural Resource Policy'*, *Natural Resources Journal*, no. 15, p. 713–727.

defined by complex institutional arrangements which provided certain specific rights to certain specific users on certain specific terms. They explicitly excluded others. 'Commons' were a form of property, clearly defined, of a determinate group of people for definite purposes and on definite terms. If there were incentives for all or some users to overexploit such common resources, this had to do with deficiencies in the property and management structures. Indeed, in response to criticisms, Garrett Hardin himself agreed that the problem to which he was pointing was not any general tragedy of the 'commons' but a 'tragedy of the unmanaged commons'.⁶

More recently, Elinor Ostrom⁷ won the Nobel prize for her extensive empirical studies of the 'commons', demonstrating how a great diversity of institutional structures have been evolved in societies across the world to manage common natural resources. This research also draws attention to the conditions – such as clear definition of those with rights in the 'commons', the extent and nature of those rights, clear self-management structures including sanctions for violations, etc. – which are necessary for common property structures to work without depleting commonly owned and/or managed resources.

Finally, there has recently been another important addition to our understanding of the 'commons' as a historical phenomenon and 'commons' discourses. Peter Linebaugh⁸ elaborates vividly and informatively on the point that the 'commons' can exclude, indeed, dispossess, as well as include and that, in the latter form, 'commons' discourse has created the foundation of the regimes of exclusion on which the present capitalist world and its international order depend. Linebaugh shows that while the 1215 Magna Carta limiting the power of the monarch and guaranteeing the customary rights of free men is generally regarded as the great charter of liberty of the modern world, there was another, equally important charter, the Charter of the Forest of 1225, which assured customary users of common pastures and woodlands access to them. Of these two charters preserving the ways of the people, the latter has been entirely forgotten while the former has been used to claim and establish private property, turning it essentially into an instrument of exclusion.

⁶ Hardin, G, 1991, 'Tragedy of the Unmanaged Commons: Population and the Disguises of Providence', in Andelson, RV (ed), 'Commons without Tragedy: Protecting the Environment from Overpopulation: A New Approach', London: Shephard-Walwyn, p. 162–185.

⁷ Ostrom, E, 1990, 'Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action', Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

⁸ Linebaugh, P, 2009, 'The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All', Berkeley: University of California Press.

The United States Declaration of Independence, which is generally regarded as another document asserting the rights of the common people, was, however, also a 'document of acquisition', Linebaugh argues, which dispossessed entire peoples of lands to which they had as much right as any other peoples in the long historical process of ethnogenesis.⁹ And, over the course of the history of the United States, 'the key to understanding Magna Carta ... is private property'.¹⁰ For Linebaugh, it is an irony that documents that were drawn up to limit power became so complicit in asserting it. However, any such irony dissolves once we realize that there are no rights without property and governance, and even the most inclusive forms of property and governance must exclude as well as include.

While this extensive scholarship on the 'commons' has certainly advanced our understanding, the prejudice against any role of the state and any notion of organization and management so widespread on the left, and the closely connected neoliberal biases of much mainstream thinking means that the implications of these advances are not fully absorbed, sometimes not even by the scholars making them.

State, Organization, and Management

It is particularly important to address this problem in the 21st century for at least two reasons. Firstly, while the consensus on the 'commons' has gone from assuming that 'commons' are incapable of protecting natural and other elements of the common heritage of humankind to claims about their near-universal suitability for the same, the concerns that normally lead to discussions about the 'commons' remain the same: fear of competing claims on resources over which rights are unclear or contested. Not only was this the case with the Magna Carta, the Forest Charter, or the Declaration of Independence, it is forgotten that Hardin's original thesis and its inspiration, the work of William Foster Lloyd, was prompted by a concern about rising populations and the potential demand of additional human beings on the world's resources.

⁹ Van der Pijl, K, 2007, *Nomads, Empires, States: Modes of Foreign Relations and Political Economy*, London: Pluto.

¹⁰ Linebaugh, P, 2009, *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

While today the consensus among demographers is far from the Malthusian assumptions Hardin was making,¹¹ there is, undoubtedly, considerable anxiety in the West about Western access to the world's resources. For the first time in modern history, the claim of the West to the primary products of most of the world arises. This claim that was originally enforced through colonialism and imperialism and, after the decolonization of most of the colonized world, through the variety of forms of formal and informal domination, known as neo-colonialism, including in the settler colonial countries that comprise so much of the West. Owing to the working out of the historical dialectic of uneven and combined development¹² – between dominant countries, seeking to maintain the complementarity between their manufacturing and high value production and the primary or low value production of the rest of the world through colonial or neo-colonial means, and contender countries, which seek relations of similarity through state-led industrialization instead¹³ – for the first time in the history of capitalism, formerly colonial and semi-colonial countries are emerging to challenge the dominance of the established centres of capital accumulation, leading to the world economy's centre of gravity to shift away from them.

Moreover, this shift is resulting not merely in what is widely referred to as multipolarity but, arguably more accurately, in what Hugo Chavez called pluripolarity – a world of numerous concentrations of productive, political, and military power which are also organized on the basis of substantially different principles, particularly principles that differ from, if not directly contest, those on which the Western powers are organized.

While this is most true of China, socialist or non-capitalist countries, such as Cuba or Venezuela, may be economically considerably less significant but are politically and culturally not without their importance. Moreover, there are also other countries, not only Russia, India and Brazil, but also other emerging economies that have their own historically evolved economic structures and where popular expectations place important limits on the exercise of governmental power to advance the interests of a narrow – Western, global, or even national – propertied, or capitalist elite alone. This means that not only are there rival claims to the world's resources, but these claims are increasingly staked by states which may dispute Western principles. Their rise will require

¹¹ Baird, V, 2011, *The No Nonsense Guide to Population*, Oxford: New Internationalist Publications.

¹² Trotsky, L, 1934, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, London: Gollancz.

¹³ Desai, R, 2013, *Geopolitical Economy: After US Hegemony, Globalization and Empire*, London: Pluto; Desai, R, 2015, *Geopolitical Economy: The Discipline of Multipolarity*, Valdai Club Paper no. 24, Valdai Discussion Club.

that discussions of access to what are sweepingly called the 'Global Commons' must take into account the specificities of the particular resource concerned, the differential placement of those staking claims, the manner in which both can be expected to change in the future, and a whole host of other specificities.

Secondly, it is important to unpack persisting misunderstandings about the 'commons', particularly the persistent refusal to recognise the centrality of property and governance issues also because much of the discourse about the 'commons' emerges from the Western left even if it claims to champion distinctively non-Western constituencies and their struggles, whether of the landless, or peasants, or women, etc. This feature of discourse on the 'commons' requires us to appreciate the fate of the Western left in recent decades.

It is widely appreciated that the world-wide crisis of the 1970s, which manifested itself in different ways in different countries, led to the emergence of the New Right, which combined neoliberalism, i.e. economic liberalism, with social and cultural authoritarianism.¹⁴ It is less widely appreciated that parties of the left also ended up moving to the right, producing the phenomenon of Blairism or Clintonism, historically novel combinations of neoliberalism and social liberalism, the combination of the miserly and punitive economic policies recommended by neoliberalism and permissive social views on gender, race, sexual orientation, and identity that remained confined to cultural and social recognition and did not extend to any material redress.

This left is historically novel because, for more than a century, modern Western left politics has combined the working class with a significant, often a majority, of the intellectual classes.¹⁵ This educated intellectual class has expanded in our times to constitute a more sizeable professional middle class than ever before in history. Owing to the structures of modern society, which has expanded their role in the state and voluntary sectors as well as in the private and corporate sectors, this expanded class has been amply accommodated and provided positions of secure employment and high, and sometimes very high, income levels. With the professionalization of politics,¹⁶ this class has divided, rather neatly, with those employed in the private and corporate sectors leaning

¹⁴ Desai, R, 2006. 'Neo-Liberalism and Cultural Nationalism: A Danse Macabre', in Plehwe, D, Walpen, B & Nuenhoeffer, G (eds.), 'Neo-Liberal Hegemony: A Global Critique', Routledge, New York, p. 222–235.

¹⁵ Desai, R, 1994, 'Intellectuals and Socialism: 'Social Democrats' and the British Labour Party', Lawrence and Wishart, London.

¹⁶ Mair, P, 2007, 'Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy', London: Verso; Mair, P, 2006, 'Ruling the Void: The Hollowing out of Western Democracy', *New Left Review*, no. 11/42, November–December.

towards the parties of the right and those involved in the state, welfare state, and voluntary sectors inclining to the left. Both of these have played a role in pushing their respective parties to the right but also, in the process, severing their respective relationships with their social bases.

This shift lies at the root of the root and branch discrediting of the political establishment among the electorates of both left and right parties, now dominated by the professional middle classes. This shift has not been without its effects on the currents further to the left of the Blairist/Clintonist parties as we shall see in our example of a characteristic left discourse about the 'commons'.

State and Politics in 'Commons' Discourses

Although the mainstream of discussion of the 'commons' has moved far beyond the notion that the 'commons' are an ungoverned realm which any comer can use as he or she wishes, there are important left intellectuals who persist in using the term 'commons' to denote, not a specific and highly complex, type of property but precisely the absence of property relations. According to them, this makes the 'commons' the basis for communism.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri¹⁷ are among those who propose this. For them, communism should be conceived as a resistance to the privatization of the 'commons'. In making this assertion, they are breezily unconcerned about any proper historical understanding of the 'commons' or, for that matter, of communism. They insist only that neither should have any truck with state or party. They also reject both the Collapse Theories, which 'envision the end of capitalist rule resulting from catastrophic crises, followed by a new economic order that somehow rises whole out of its ashes', and 'the notion of socialist transition that foresees a transfer of wealth and control from the private to the public, increasing state regulation, control and management of social production'. Thus, Hardt and Negri explain the 'kind of transition we are working with'. It 'requires the growing autonomy of the multitude' – the agent which, in their position, takes the place of party or any organized collective agent in realizing their brand of communism – 'from both private and public control; the metamorphosis of social subjects through education and training

¹⁷ Hardt, M & Negri, T, 2009, 'Commonwealth', Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

in cooperation, communication and organizing social encounters; and thus a progressive accumulation of the common.¹⁸ The resistance to the neoliberal privatization of the 'commons' must not assume 'that the only alternative to the private is the public, that is what is managed and regulated by states and other governmental authorities'.¹⁹

For Hardt and Negri, the 'commons' include, on the one hand, 'the commonwealth of the material world – the air, the water, the fruits of the soil, and all nature's bounty – which in classic European political texts is often claimed to be the inheritance of humanity as a whole, to be shared together' and 'those results of social production that are necessary for social interaction and further production, such as knowledges, languages, codes, information, affects and so forth', on the other.²⁰ It is most interesting that it leaves out the content of most traditional visions of communism: the goods and services actually produced in any economy. These, it seems, are not to be included in the 'commons' or subjected to 'commoning'. These, one can only surmise, are to be produced and distributed by the (capitalist) economy as it functions today, outside the purview of their communism.

Hardt justifies this new vision of communism through a re-reading of two passages from Marx's work – the section on Private Property and Communism in the 1844 Paris Manuscripts and one from the final part of *Capital*, Volume I. In the former, while Hardt notes that Marx equates communism with the abolition of private property, he goes on to make the claim, that would have been incredible to Marx as well as any commonsensical person, that this involves not its replacement with any other form of social or common property but 'the abolition of property as such'.²¹ Hardt quotes Marx saying 'private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only ours when we have it',²² and goes on to ask:

What would it mean for something to be ours when we do not possess it? What would it mean to regard ourselves and our world not as property? Has private property made us so stupid that we cannot see that? *Marx is searching here for the common.* The open access and sharing that characterise use of the common are outside and inimical to property

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 311.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. VIII.

²⁰ *Ibid*.

²¹ Hardt, M, 2010, 'The Commons in Communism', in Douzinas, C & Zizek, S (eds.), 'The Idea of Communism', London: Verso, p. 139.

²² Marx, K, 1867/1977, 'Capital', vol. 1, London: Penguin, p. 351.

relations. We have been made so stupid that we can only recognise the world as private or public. We have become blind to the common.²³

Thus, Hardt elides the distinction between the abolition of private property, a historical form of property Marx, Juris Doctor that he was, considered inimical to genuine human community as well as genuine historical progress, and property as such, in all its forms, individual, social, common, or national.

I have discussed elsewhere how this conception of the 'commons', itself a misinterpretation of Marx, combined with the misinterpretation of other aspects of Marx, including the socialization of labour (mistaken for ungoverned cooperation) and of human labour (conceived as 'fixed capital' in the allegedly 'immaterial' capitalism of our time). Hardt and Negri aim to re-conceptualize the 'commons' in a way that places people like themselves, knowledge workers, at the centre of any left politics, one allegedly aimed at a communism formed through expanding the realm of the 'commons', which is consubstantial with the expansion of the activities of the professional classes under capitalism.²⁴

Quite apart from the swaggering disingenuousness of this venture, we may note that their conception of the 'commons' ignores two things. First, the earth or culture and language are only open to corporate predation to the extent that they are not protected by regimes of property rights, or when the regimes which do protect them are too weak. Second, protecting them requires creating rules of access and use that have to be made and enforced by states. While under feudalism, with its dispersal of political power, such regimes were necessarily local, they are not under modern capitalist conditions and are unlikely to be at least in early socialist or communist ones.

Today, there is no way of securing regimes of common property against such powerful predators other than the state. Having explicitly ruled out any role for the state, Hardt and Negri's vision leaves open all resources, natural and cultural, to such predation. Worse, having rejected the party as a form of collective self-organization, they leave those concerned with such predation no remotely effective instrument of resistance. Just as their vision of communism corresponds to little more than their carrying on as before within capitalist society, so their vision of resistance to corporate predation corresponds to their everyday politics

²³ Hardt, M, 2010, 'The Commons in Communism', in Douzinas, C & Zizek, S (eds.), 'The Idea of Communism', London: Verso, p. 131-144.

²⁴ Desai, R, 2011, 'The New Communists of the Commons: 21st Century Proudhonists', *International Critical Thought*, June, p. 204-223.

nowadays. It is a politics of verbal condemnations of corporate wrongs, which amount to little more than incantations of political piety combined with willing self-subjection to a political economy of corporate power.

Such 'new communists of the commons' are, I have argued, 21st century Proudhonists. Stemming from the new petty bourgeoisie of the credentialed professional managerial classes, while 19th century Proudhonism was the ideology of the traditional petty bourgeois of petty property, it is subject to the same criticisms that Marx made of Proudhon in the mid-19th century: of railing at big property while ignoring the organic relation between big and small property and assuming that there is no need to organize a transition which is expected to occur, instead, as a result of the inevitable spread of the every-day practices they are already engaged in. Essentially, this is a vision that re-designates capitalism as socialism.²⁵

While the vast majority of people, including socialists, have little time for such quixotic notions as these, the reason why they appear convincing even to their little platoons of followers is that the bias against any serious socialist politics takes precisely the form that Hardt and Negri give to their communism itself: an aversion to any form of larger social management and to any organized politics. Elinor Ostrom's conception of the 'commons', which is much more widely shared, is a good example. Her examples of the 'commons' are all small community arrangements that seem to operate without any state legal structure and enforcement. Her work does not challenge the neoliberal consensus against state or party that the mainstream right and left share. Such arrangements can exist in the interstices of society but cannot contest the dominance of capitalist property and production structures.

Cui Bono?

There is no doubt that the spreading use of the term 'commons' is drawing our attention to certain critical realities of distribution and access in our time, internationally and domestically. Internationally, there are indeed large realms – our natural environment, our culture, outer space, radio waves, etc. – that everyone would agree are the common heritage of humankind. So far, however, humanity has either not been permitted to operationalize this idea,

²⁵ Desai, R, 2011, 'The New Communists of the Commons: 21st Century Proudhonists', *International Critical Thought*, June, p. 204-223.

owing to the workings of an 'imperial' or 'global' (whichever term is preferred), or has not needed to do so because the resources in question are sufficiently plentiful that there is no need to govern them.

With the power of the West being challenged, with human activity encroaching on these spheres more deeply and intensively than ever before, and with more and more of humanity laying legitimate claim to these resources, however, this situation cannot go on for long. This is what the rising use of the term 'commons' connotes in the international sphere. However, addressing this can only be hampered by the bulk of the discourses around the 'commons' which either indulge in fantasies of an ungoverned 'commons' or accept only spontaneous forms of their governance. In place of these, we need new or revamped structures of governance, agreed upon and enforced by states in cooperation, to reapportion access to these resources more equitably than they have been in modern history. This will be no small challenge.

Domestically too, the word 'commons' is pointing to struggles to prevent the depletion or denaturing of common cultural and natural resources, whether of ordinary citizens' access to clean drinking water or to a freer Internet. And here, the word is also being extended to excludable goods and services. New distributive questions about these are emerging either because the idea of common or public consumption of more and more goods and services – basic nutrition and housing, or health services, or education, or transport, etc. – is increasingly appealing to societies, rich and poor, or because, with technological change making employment more and more scarce, ideas such as basic income are increasingly separating the right to a decent livelihood from employment.

In all these realms, however, as a major research project of the Rosa–Luxemburg–Stiftung (Rosa Luxemburg Foundation) in Germany on the subject finds, it should never be forgotten that the 'commons' are always managed, that they include as well as exclude, that their governance structures determine who benefits and how much. These questions are necessary to bear in mind.²⁶ 'Commons' are, at the end of the day, another form of property – more inclusive, fairer, more just, more ecologically sustainable, to be sure – but still another form of property. Much of the future of human kind and human societies depends on developing this form well.

²⁶ For an overview, see: Dellheim, J & Wolf, FO, 2015, 'Can "Commonification" Be Used As an Alternative to "Commodification"? A Report on a Debate on What Can Be Achieved by "Going Along with the Ostroms"', *International Journal of Pluralism in Economics Education*, no. 6/1, p. 82–99.



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