

UNCOVERING THE TRUE COST OF WHAT WE BUY: PART II. THE COMMONS AND COMMONERS¹

One of the issues which keeps rearing its head every once in a while is the concept of public land versus private land, and what each type of ownership can do for our economic well-being. The concept of public land is not a new one – it has its origins in the idea of ‘the commons.’ A commons is a resource, most often land, and refers both to the territory and to the ways people allocate the goods which come from that land. The commons traditionally provided food, fuel, water, and medicinal plants for those who used it – it was the poorest peoples’ life-support system. To value something involves both identifying it and setting up rules through which it can be used by society. When capitalism was spawned, it became obvious that the rules of communing were fundamentally incompatible with capitalism. By turning public land into private property, not only did land become a commodity, but the rural poor were cut off from their only means of survival, and forced to sell the only thing they had left – their labour. From the enclosure of the commons came two new kinds of payment – rent and wages.

As well, when faced with a shared resource, people are overrun by their own selfish desires to consume it, even if they know that they are destroying it in the process. Propelled by urges of self- (and instant-) satisfaction in a world of scarcity, people end up destroying the thing that they depend on for survival. The pace of destruction has become more frantic because of the current recession. What is our motive for acting in this manner?

How and why we compete for scarce resources is based on a foundational model in which people are, for whatever reason, prepared to override their own better judgment in service of their selfish natures. People are rapacious and untamable creatures of passion and impulse. These drives lead us inexorably to consume endlessly, but we have seen that people are not always like that, while corporations are always like that – the profit motive makes them so. Thus, we have seen and are seeing the commons being taken over by this motive. If we examine environmental disasters of the twentieth century, we do not see people running amok – we see the exploitive behavior of corporations, of capitalist agriculture, forestry and fishing.

Commoning involves a web of social relations designed to keep our baser urges in check, fostering different ways of valuing our world, and of relating to others. We can see the destructive effects of enclosure not only in the scars left on the natural environment, but also within the most intimate of social relations around gender. When the way society valued work was changed, the socially acceptable roles for men and women changed. Enclosure was not just about fencing off patches of land – it was also a way of foreclosing a set of political processes and replacing them with novel ones in which women’s participation was circumscribed in new ways.

To understand the concept of ‘commons’ today, one must look back in history – to the time of the Magna Carta, no less (1215 AD). The Magna Carta included a strong set of protections of common rights, providing common access to the food, fuel, freedom, and fruits of the forest provided for common people, returning to the public the natural resources King John has taken for himself. In 1217, a twin charter, the Charter of the Forest, was brought forward. The Charter of the Forest guaranteed the ability of commoners to access pasture for their animals, to till

¹ Excerpted from: Patel, R. 2009. The value of nothing – why everything costs so much more than we think. HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., Toronto, ON. 250 p.

land, to collect wood, harvest honey, use medicinal plants, and so on. This access was granted to the King's lands (referred today as Crown Lands in British Columbia).

A commons right assured freedoms in perpetuity over local resources for everyone. The precise shape of commoning was negotiated in a particular place and time, depending upon the local environment and community. Common rights evolved over time, shaped by the relative power of those around the table, as well as the changing geography of the physical commons itself. The commons was, in other words, both a place and a process of freedom in which people fought for the right to shape the terms on which they could share the commons. The people figured out how to manage and maintain access to a scarce resource, despite the desire of kings and nobles to privatize it. Gradually, over about four centuries, enclosure was used to remove land out of public lands. The process through which land was taken under private ownership resulted in the destruction of the commons, the true 'tragedy' of the commons. Fields, forests, and waters were enclosed, with the lords preventing access to ponds and streams well-stocked with fish, and forests teeming with game which had provided the poor with meat. The private land not only provided land resources to private owners but also allowed the landlords to drive up the price of rent.

The justification for property and ownership yields an important clue about how a different market system might work. Private property requires society to approve of it being taken out of common lands. Property is, in essence, social – there is nothing natural about the way some people are allowed to exclude others from land. Some specific examples of property being social are: (1) governments own and deal with the broadcast airwaves; and (2) while animals can be owned as pets and livestock, there are laws against cruelty and miss-treatment of animals. Under the Napoleonic Code, there are similar provisions when it comes to other private property. Land, for example, can be privately owned as long as it is being put to use. The moment the land is left derelict, or if the land is held purely for speculation, ownership rights to the land are forfeit, and it becomes available to anyone who will put it to greater use. Property rights can, therefore, be far more flexible and elastic than we currently view them.

When the social role of the land was decided by the standards of the colonial British, things did not work out well for indigenous peoples in Canada and the United States. The colonialists had no understanding or appreciation for the aboriginal lifestyle, which relied on the resources available from the commons. The colonizers saw rich and fertile land which appeared to be occupied by First Peoples only for a short period of time each year – they did not recognize systems of sustainable nomadic grazing; they did not recognize the sophisticated agro-ecological methods utilized by some tribes to maintain soil fertility and ecological integrity; they did not recognize the role of women in indigenous agriculture; and they did not recognize the value of indigenous agriculture. As a result, the native land was expropriated. The colonists did not understand the nature and value of indigenous economies, and, for example, the potlatch celebrated by West Coast tribes was declared illegal.

In addition to the loss of free access to the commons, there is a cultural loss which attends this kind of destruction – the disappearance of knowledge about sustainably managing natural resources for the local community. Preserving this knowledge about how to value natural resources can mean the difference between sustainability and extinction. The global enclosure of the commons has destroyed the rich networks of knowledge which once helped guide the way we valued the world. Yes, there are always practices, ideas and experiences which persist, and offer tools with which we might begin to think of new ways of valuing beyond profit-driven markets.

We are in the midst of acute ecological and economic crises because in part of our abuse and destruction of the commons. Why has society not begun to ‘automagically’ heal itself from the violence of profit-driven markets? The answer we have heard time and time again is that things are not quite bad enough yet, and it will take immense tragedies to mobilize enough sentiment to spur political change. Such an answer does not wash anymore. Where is the counter-movement to effect change and motivate decision-makers to have a serious look at today’s society.

But, if we look at what we refer to as the ‘local’ world, we see that there are counter-movements – progressive and reactionary, inclusive and exclusive. Such counter movements are not popular in the mainstream media so are just not widely reported. Plus, the widespread perception is that the people leading the counter movements are the poor, the dispossessed, the marginalized, the people on whose shoulders the externalities of the rich often fall, the world’s least free people who are discovering that we are “the change we have been waiting for.”

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