



INTRODUCTION

WHEN MY SEATMATE on the airplane turned to me and abruptly asked, “So what do you do?” I replied that I study the commons and work as an activist to try to protect it.

Polite bewilderment. “Say what?” It was not the first time. So I cited the familiar references—the Boston Common and medieval pastures—and moved on to the so-called tragedy of the commons, the meme that brainwashed a generation of undergraduates.

Sensing a quiver of interest, I ventured further, mentioning open source software, Wikipedia and Creative Commons licenses. At the risk of overwhelming my captive seatmate, I ticked off a list of commons that are rarely seen as commons: the vast public lands containing minerals and forests, the broadcast airwaves that TV stations use for free, urban spaces, the human genome. I mentioned the wonderful community festivals in my hometown, the “gift economies” of blood donation systems and the commons of language itself—a resource that is free to anyone to use, but whose letters and words are fast becoming

proprietary trademarks. Then there are the fisheries, farmland and water that an estimated two billion people around the world manage as commons to meet their everyday needs.

I half expected my new friend to turn back to her book or gaze out the window at the fleecy clouds over the Great Plains. Instead she brightened. “Oh, I get it! The commons are things that no one owns and are shared by everyone.”

Well put.

She mused that the park where she walks her dog and mingles with strangers is a commons—and so is the online list-serve about parenting that she belongs to. She cited a lake near her home, and the downtown plaza where all sorts of public events are held.

In the modern industrialized countries of the world, the commons tends to be a baffling, alien idea. The word may be invoked to make faux-genteel allusions to Merrie Old England (“Coxswain Commons Apartments”), but otherwise it has scant currency. We don’t really have a language for naming commons—*real* commons—and so they tend to be invisible and taken for granted. The commons is not a familiar cultural category. Anything of value is usually associated with the “free market” or government. The idea that people could actually self-organize durable arrangements for managing their own resources, and that this paradigm of social governance could generate immense value—well, it seems either utopian or communistic, or at the very least, impractical. The idea that the commons could be a vehicle for social and political emancipation and societal transformation, as some commons advocates argue, seems just plain ridiculous.

The point of this book is to gently dispel such prejudices and provide a short introduction to the commons. After encountering so much confusion about the commons over the years—and seeing how rich bodies of commons-oriented scholarship are

inaccessible to the lay reader, and commons-based activism and projects are scattered, ignored or misunderstood—I decided it was time to write a short, accessible synthesis of the topic. (Confusingly, “commons” is both the singular and plural of the term, and some people make things even more confusing by using the word “common” instead of “commons.”)

I want you, my reader, to imagine that you are my quizzical seatmate as we begin a short flight. You have intuitions about the commons and the need for social cooperation. You surely know about the dismal performance of corporate capitalism and government. You may even be concerned about the alarming privatization of countless public resources, the proliferation of ads in every nook of everyday life and the growing list of stubborn environmental problems.

For my part, I have many stories to tell about the power of commons to address such problems in innovative, socially minded ways. After researching and writing about countless “enclosures” of commons—in which corporate interests appropriate our shared wealth and turn it into expensive private commodities—I have learned how dangerous our ignorance of the commons is. It simply enables the private plunder of our common wealth, as the subtitle of my first book on the commons, *Silent Theft*, put it.

We have so few words to *name* the pathologies of markets and the feasible commons-based alternatives. I like to think that by naming the commons, we can learn how to reclaim it. We can begin to gain a healthy perspective on the limits of markets and learn how to participate in acts of *commoning* with others. And we can reap many benefits—economic, social, political, civic, physical, aesthetic, even spiritual—that simply can’t be bought at a store.

The many misconceptions that surround the commons bother me. So I want to explain why the history of the commons

and the political vision it sets forth are a cause for optimism. I want to explain how the commons can ameliorate our economic troubles by advancing a richer theory of *value* than conventional economics. This is not just an idle academic concern but an urgent practical one—because too much of the world’s economic and political life revolves around voracious markets and the ecological damage and warped human relationships they engender.

Countless real-life commons—for natural resources, online information and civic life—provide a vital counterpoint. These commons integrate economic production, social cooperation, personal participation and ethical idealism into a single package. They represent a practical paradigm of self-help and collective gain. The commons is essentially a parallel economy and social order that quietly but confidently affirms that another world is possible. And more: we can build it ourselves, now.

As we will see in the pages below, the commons holds great promise for reinventing dysfunctional governments and reforming predatory markets. It can help us rein in our overly commercialized consumer culture. It can usher in new forms of “green governance” to protect the environment. At a time when our representative democracy has become a gaudy charade driven by big money and remote bureaucracies, the commons offers new forms of on-the-ground participation and responsibility that can make a real difference in people’s lives.

I should stress that the commons is neither a “messaging strategy” of the sort favored by campaign publicists, nor an ideology or dogma. It is not just a new name for the “public interest.” It amounts to a kind of political philosophy with specific policy approaches, but it goes much deeper because it engages us as fully human and complex creatures.

As a paradigm, the commons consists of working, evolving models of self-provisioning and stewardship that combine the

economic and the social, the collective and the personal. It is humanistic at its core but also richly political in implication, because to honor the commons can risk unpleasant encounters with the power of the Market/State duopoly.

The Market and State, once very separate realms of morality and politics, are now joined at the hip: a tight alliance with a shared vision of technological progress, corporate dominance and ever-expanding economic growth and consumption. Commoners realize that this is not just a morally deficient, spiritually unsatisfying vision for humanity; it is a mad utopian fantasy. It is also ecologically unsustainable, a crumbling idol that can no longer command the respect it once took for granted.

In response, the commons sets forth a very different vision of human fulfillment and ethics, and invites people to achieve their own bottom-up, do-it-yourself styles of emancipation. It has little interest in hidebound party politics, rigid ideologies or remote centralized institutions. It seeks to build anew, or, as R. Buckminster Fuller memorably put it, “to change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.”

That’s what a robust commons movement around the world is doing. It is pioneering new forms of production, more open and accountable forms of governance, innovative technologies and cultures and healthy, appealing ways to live. It is a quiet revolution—self-organized, diversified and socially minded. It is pragmatic yet idealistic and, for now, only occasionally engaged in mainstream politics or public policy. Yet it has been steadily growing, in most instances outside the gaze of the mainstream media or the political establishment. It seems poised to “go wide,” as they say in the movie business, because the various tribes of transnational commoners are starting to find each other. They are coordinating their work and thinking and developing ways to make common cause in the face of the growing dysfunctions and anti-democratic paranoia of the Market/State.

I hope that in the coming flight I can explain the refreshingly different logic and social dynamics of the commons as it is now unfolding in numerous contexts. I promise to keep things short, accessible and interesting—while pointing as much as possible to the rich complexities and unresolved questions that demand further attention. We will traverse some of the eclipsed history of the commons, revisit the smear known as the “tragedy of the commons” and see how social scientists and activists have rediscovered the commons over the past generation.

We will also explore the ways in which the commons raises profound questions about the standard market narrative about property rights, markets and value—and how it proposes very different foundational premises for a new political economy. In its deepest reaches, the commons goes way beyond the plane of economics, public policy or politics. As we will see in Chapter 10, it points us toward a very different mode of human existence (ontology) and human knowledge (epistemology) than the ones to which we have become accustomed. The commons suggests new models of human morality, behavior and aspiration that go beyond the benighted models taught in Economics 101.

No survey of the commons would be complete without an overview of the varieties of *enclosure* now dispossessing communities and degrading the environment and culture. Diverse realms of our common wealth—water, land, forests, fisheries, biodiversity, creative works, information, public spaces, indigenous cultures—are all under siege. The encouraging news is that, despite rampant market enclosures, commoners are responding with a remarkable range of hardy, innovative models. In the pages ahead, we will encounter some of the more impressive and replicable responses: the “copyleft” licenses for free software and free culture; collaborative websites and other forms of peer production; subsistence commons that share seeds, land, water and other natural resources; stakeholder trusts for

managing large-scale common assets; relocalized food systems that blend community engagement with market provisioning; among many others.

Pull back to a wide-angle perspective and one can see diverse stands of history, politics and commoning crystallizing into a coherent new paradigm. Some of us dare to imagine a commons renaissance. A recent book that I co-edited with Silke Helfrich, *The Wealth of the Commons: A World Beyond Market and State*, documents the staggering international breadth and vitality of commons activities and advocacy. The commons can now be seen in German ecovillages and Chilean fisher commons; in thousands of open-access scientific journals; in an explosion of alternative currencies used by local communities; and in urban gardens that grow food and social connections.

These developments bear witness to the reality, made abundantly clear by the 2008 financial crises, that the prevailing dogmas of market individualism, private property rights and neoliberal economics cannot, and will not, deliver the kind of change we need. And yet the traditional advocates of reform, liberals and social democrats, while generally concerned with market abuses and government malfeasance, are themselves too exhausted to imagine new paths forward. They are too indentured to the Market/State mindset and cultural outlook, and too naive or spineless in the face of finance capital, to entertain new forms of governance and institutional innovation. Contemporary liberals and social democrats may pretend to want ambitious social and political transformation (“Change We Can Believe In,” etc.), but the harsh political truth is that they are content to muddle through and cling to the sinecures of power.

I hope our flight together goes briskly. Before we descend, I want to contemplate the future of the commons paradigm as it confronts the aging dogmas of neoliberal ideology. How can we unseat a “free market” theology that cannot deliver on its

promises and yet will not allow serious consideration of alternatives? Our archaic system of nation-states and international bodies cannot mobilize itself to deal intelligently with a gravely imperiled planetary ecosystem. It resists serious measures to improve social justice and fair distribution.

In the face of the colossal troubling dysfunction of neoliberal governance, a growing movement of commoners from India and Italy, Germany and Brazil, the US and the UK and many other regions of the world—furiously coordinating through the global Internet culture—are cobbling together a new shared imaginary for change. This is no ideological pipe dream or utopian fantasy. It is a piecemeal revolution of savvy, pragmatic dreamers determined to build living, functional alternatives in the face of many looming catastrophes.

There just might be some turbulence ahead...but for now, sit back, relax and enjoy the flight. Let's talk about the commons.