Stop, Thief!
The Commons, Enclosures, and Resistance

Peter Linebaugh
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CHAPTER TWO

Stop, Thief! A Primer on the Commons & Commoning

We’re losing the ground of our subsistence to the privileged and the mighty. With the theft of our pensions, houses, universities, and land, people all over the world cry, “Stop, thief!” and start to think about the commons and act in its name. But what is the commons? Its twenty-first-century meaning is emerging from the darkness of centuries past.

Primers were once prayer books for the laity. Usually “primer” refers to the elementary book used to teach children to read. In another meaning of the word the primer is that which ignites the blasting powder in the old, revolutionary flintlock rifles.

So here is a primer on the commons and commoning. It does not contain prayers, though the matter here is solemn enough. It also has a list of books from the simple to the complex. Finally, if this primer leads to action, detonating greater energy or exploding for the common good, so much the better.

This short primer notes eighteen of the common places in this discussion (food, health, etc.) and sixteen-books.

Food: The potluck, the principle of BYO, the CSA (community supported agriculture), the kitchen, are the profoundest human expressions of commoning. The extra seat at the table, the principle of hospitality, are inseparable from human community. The meal is at the heart of every religion. Our daily bread. Food was “rations” on the unhappy ship, on the happy one food was the sailor’s commons.

Health: Public health, exercise, sports, prevention of accidents and disease, access to hospitals are dire needs. There was a time when hospitals were places of reception for guests, for strangers, for travelers. The practice of the hospital was the embodiment of the principle of hospitality. Salus publica populi romani referred to the goddess of health and well-being, “the public health of the Roman people.” Surely, her worship in our day has fallen on evil times, as medical, pharmaceutical, and insurance companies in league with government strangle her in their coils. Once the woodlands were a common pharmacopeia not the private property of Big Pharma.
Security: Militarism and money do not safeguard us. On 9/11 the most expensive military in the world failed to protect the American people or even its own HQ. Instead, citizen passengers after twenty-three minutes of deliberation and voting were able collectively to disarm United Airlines flight 93. A sacrificial collective was formed for the common good. As for the Pentagon, the conclusion is obvious. Our protection is our mutuality.

Housing: Squatting, the group house, intentional communities, the hobo’s jungle, the boarding house, the homeless camps are rarely anyone’s idea of utopia yet they meet real needs, they arise from direct actions, they are actual mutualism, they enliven dead spaces, they are cooperative.

Gender: Birth, nurturance, neighborhood, and love are the beginnings of social life. The commons of the past has not been an exclusively male place. In fact, it is one very often where the needs of women and children come first. And not “needs” only but decision-making and responsibility have belonged to women from the neighborhoods of industrial “slums” to the matriarchy of the Iroquois confederation to the African village.

Ecology: Look! Look at Tahrir Square. Look at the young and old people in Athens. Look at the popular mobilizations in Spain. People are creating spaces in the urban environment where it becomes possible to engage in the conversation and debate that is essential to commoning. The barber shop, the corner grocery, the church basement, the ice-cream parlor, the local co-op may not be available. The town hall has gone and the town square has become a parking lot. So the first step in commoning is to find a locale, a place, and if one is not easily to hand, then to create one. The emerging geography of the future requires us actively to common spaces in our factories and offices.

Knowledge: The commons grows without copyright; lighting your candle from mine does not diminish me or put my candle out. As Thomas Jefferson said, “He who receives an idea from me, receives instruction himself without lessening mine; as he who lites his taper at mine, receives light without darkening me.” Conversation and just talk, or rapping, was once the people’s internet. Common sense arises from the web of family and neighborhood relationships. But we need a place to meet! How about the school? Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Semantics: The gigantic Oxford English Dictionary has four to five pages on the word “common,” beginning with, “belonging equally to more than one.” We get some of our most powerful words from the commons, such as community, communal, commonage, commonality, commune, communion with their social, political, and spiritual overtones and histories. Etymologically, these words are the offspring, so to speak, of two Latin parents, com meaning
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together, and munis meaning some kind of obligation. Of course we don't need to stay with English and Latin. In the Andes mountain range, for instance, the allyus is the key word; in Mexico the ejido was the key word. The word "commons" can be tricky, subject to double-talk or the forked tongue, as when it is used for its opposite as in the privatized housing tract (gated community) or the privatized market (the mall) which will call themselves "the common" but which are actually based on exclusivity unless you possess the do re mi!

Working class: The Supreme Court has ruled against class action by women workers. Let us, the entire working class, employed and unemployed, men and women, rise from our slumbers and show that we do not wait on the Supreme Court for permission to act as a class!

Some say the precariat has replaced the proletariat. This simply means that life for us, the common people, has become more insecure, more uncertain, and more precarious. Whether we are old or whether we are young, whether we are poor or getting by, the institutions that used to help us have disappeared and their names have become bad words, like "welfare" or "social security." As we have learned from our experiences of Katrina or the mortgage crisis, neither government nor corporations are able to abate the situation. As the disasters accumulate we are left more and more to our own devices and find we must dig deeper. The remembered commons of old as well as the spontaneous commons of now need to be available when need arises. Who runs the workplaces anyway?

Being: The commons refers neither to resources alone nor to people alone but to an intermixture of them both. The commons is not only "common pool resources" nor is the commons purely "the people." In other words it is not a thing but a relationship. In medieval Europe the forests, the hills, the coasts, the estuaries were locations of commoners who were respectively foresters, shepherds, fishers, and reed people. The commoner was the person who commoned in such lands, and one parish to another parish intercommoned, and the bullying giants of legend, the lords and ladies, discommoned. In this struggle our landscapes were formed, even our human "nature," as well as Nature herself.

Knowing: Often you don't know of the commons until it is taken away. The neighborhood without sidewalks, the water fountain that has gone dry, the land that once your family could use, the fresh air that used to renew your spirit—gone! They are taking liberties with what we took for granted. No more! Stop, thief!

Politics: The commons is outside the government. Commons provides its own security. Custom, or habit and socialization, rather than police force, regulate relations, as anyone knows who has organized a neighborhood softball
game or football in the street. In English history, politics began as a negotiation between lords and commoners. This is why there is a House of Lords and a House of Commons.

**Law:** Generally custom, rather than law, safeguards and defines commons. Custom is local, it is held in memory, and the elders are the keepers of community memory. From Africa and Latin America we learn that this may be another guise of patriarchy and privilege. Thus while we respect custom, we do not romanticize it.

**Economy:** The commons is often outside of the realm of buying and selling or the realm of the commodity; it is where life is conducted face to face. The commons is neither a gift economy nor potlatch. No, not everything is free, but yes, everything may be shared. It is a place of reciprocities. This economy is not grounded in those triplets of evil named by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., namely, militarism, racism, and consumerism. The Industrial Revolution was neither. Quite the contrary. In England mechanization was actually counter-revolutionary and what it produced, besides soot and grime, was the opposite of industry: misery for workers and idleness for the rulers. Talk about oxymorons!

**History:** The commons is old and it is all over, from Iraq to Indiana, from Afghanistan to Arizona, it is associated with indigenous people and it has many recent modifications. History is not a story of simple progress along a straight line of stages or up the rungs of a ladder. There have been many stages, overlapping, returning, leap-frogging, if never actually disappearing. Beneath the radar there have been many communities, commoning along. Besides, progress for whom?

**Religion:** The good Samaritan, the principle of all things in common. The Franciscans say *juri divino omni sunt communia*, or by divine law all things are common. The Christian New Testament reports that the early Christians held all things in common. Marie Chauvet, the Haitian novelist and observer of voudou, writes, “Someone touched the calabash tree, my Lord God! . . . Someone touched the calabash tree . . . someone touched the calabash tree . . . You cut down all the trees, and the earth is no longer protected. Look, she’s going away and shows you her teeth in revenge.”

**Poets and Writers:** our poets and theorists, our revolutionaries and reformers, have dreamt of it. Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Maya Angelou, Thomas Paine, Karl Marx, Peter Kropotkin, Claude McKay, Tom McGrath, Marge Piercy . . . oh, the list goes on and on, from the mystics to the romantics to the transcendentalists, from the democrats to the anarchists, from the socialists to the communitarians, from the Wobblies to the reds, from the folkies to the rockers.
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England: Some associate the commons with England’s so-called “green and pleasant land” and are apt to quote the following as an ancient bit of wisdom.

The law locks up the man or woman
Who steals the goose from off the common
But lets the greater villain loose
Who steals the common from the goose.

True enough, certainly prisons and the loss of the commons went together in English history, though it was an Irishman who composed this bit of wit. Who are the geese in today’s world? In England at the time of the enclosures of commons and prison construction in the 1790s, the Romantic Revolt poured out a huge expression of opposition. Samuel Coleridge writing at the time gave us a few spiritual lines which we can quote as a take away.

Return, pure Faith! Return, meek piety!
The kingdoms of the world are yours: each heart
Self-governed, the vast Family of Love
Rais’d from the common earth by common toil,
Enjoy the equal produce . . .

Further Reading
The books on this list may not be easily acquired just because bookstores are closing, libraries face budget cutbacks, and schools supplant the page with the screen, or the book with the computer. But if you’ve read this far you already know that knowledge, like a place to meet, can be obtained with patience, resourcefulness, and working with others. I have listed the books in rough order of difficulty.

Robert Fulghum, All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten (New York: Ballantine Books, 1983)
Share everything, play fair, don’t hit people, clean up your own mess, put things back where you found them, say sorry when you hurt someone, don’t take things that aren’t yours, and when going into the world hold hands, stick together, and look both ways!

An anthology in ten chapters, with helpful lists, dictionary, solutions, by noted scholars and thinkers. This is a good place to start because it is practical, simple, and short.
The author became, despite himself, subject of a messianic cult, but don’t worry, this is a sensible introduction saying that the age of *homo economicus* is past and that we are all commoners now.

“p.m.,” *bolo bolo* (New York: Autonomedia, 2011)
A new edition of this beautifully creative and visionary set of practical suggestions, full of sweet delight for readers from twelve to seventy and up with lovely new words for new roles and lifestyles in the comedy of life.

Mrs. Anna Amelia Holshouser dressed properly, combed her hair, and applied her make-up before descending the shaking stairs into the maelstrom of the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. Immediately, she began helping her neighbors, and soon the Mizpah Café was feeding thousands. Her extraordinary story is of commoning amidst disasters—Mexico, Halifax, New York, San Francisco, New Orleans—and of the clumsy, counterproductive efforts of authorities who generally make the mess worse.

One of the earliest responses to the onslaught of privatization, especially strong on the internet, influenced by Ralph Nader, well written with the intensity of thorough and quiet conviction. Bollier is a worldwide activist on behalf of commoning.

Documents the commoning projects in northern California in the 1960s and ’70s, including the free theatre in San Francisco parks; Native American occupation of Alcatraz; Black Panther breakfast program; rusticating hippies and back-to-the-landers; the Pacifica Radio network.

Beautifully illustrated, already a classic text, passionately conceived, it helps to reconceptualize the relations among racism, sexism, and capitalism by locating the historical trauma against women and the commons.
Written by European feminists with strong ties to Bangladesh the authors act locally and think globally and vice versa! They provide alternatives to the axioms of capitalism and patriarchy: humans are selfish, resources are scarce, needs are infinite, the economy must grow. They teach standing on our own feet, speaking in our own voices.

Declared by the Nation magazine as “the year’s most lyrical and necessary book on liberty.” Three chapters on American history, one on India, and several on English history, with song, drama, paintings, and murals. Found to be useful to the briefs of the Center for Constitutional Rights in the Gitmo cases.

This is a superior book in defense of the cultural commons. It takes on the absurdities of branding, copyright, and privatization of ideas, thoughts, and beauty. It has splendid chapters on Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. Its twenty-first-century concept of civic virtue calls on us to resist enclosure.

The concluding volume of a trilogy of high academic theory and challenging philosophy which names the republic, modernity, and capital as three obstructions to the commons. It has a terminology of its own. Love is the process of creating the commons and overcoming the solitude of individualism.

She won the Nobel Prize and this book possesses the strengths of American social science. She takes “the tragedy of the commons” and “the prisoner’s dilemma,” and demonstrates their shallowness by logic and empirical inquiry into communal tenure in Switzerland and Japan, fishery commons in Turkey, Nova Scotia, and Sri Lanka.
A political scientist and a cultural anthropologist do their thing for advanced students of political theory and philosophy with surprising and welcome derivations from their experiences in the Appalachian mountains and with the Appalachian people.

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