

The Future of the Commons

Notes from a Retreat Exploring the Potential of the Commons to Fight Enclosures and Build Commons-Based Alternatives.

Twenty-one thinkers and activists from around the world met at Crottorf Castle near Cologne, Germany, on June 25-27, 2009, to discuss their shared interest in the commons as a new paradigm of politics, economics and culture. What emerged was a clearer sense of how the commons might be developed; how it could be used to confront the pathologies of neoliberalism; and how it could serve as a proto-political philosophy for building more eco-friendly, humanistic forms of self-governance. [This abridged version of Bollier's notes reflect his perceptions of what he heard during the retreat.]

Neoliberalism as the Catalyst for a New Commons Movement

Many diverse individuals are interested in the commons because of the intensifying market enclosures, much of which originated from neoliberalism logic which Bollier describes as taking form in the '80s when Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher ruled. The problem is that neoliberalism "seeks privatization, deregulation, strict limits on government social programs, state action to protect capital, and debt-servitude for developing countries."

The Notion of the Commons

The current crisis expands neoliberalism's agenda, which is why interest in commons has accelerated. David Bollier (Onthecommons.org, Amherst, Massachusetts) spoke about confronting neoliberalism while also "imagining a modern commons that enables people to live their lives and earn their livelihoods in new and better ways. The challenge is to devise commons regimes based on people's participation and consent while establishing rules that assure the continuity of the commons itself over time." Bollier says the commons provides "a new vision and worldview that is historically rooted, politically insightful, culturally attractive and practical. It is a new master narrative that can connect and coordinate many disparate, seemingly isolated campaigns."

Aspects of the Commons

Among others, Wolfgang Sachs (Wuppertal, Germany) thinks defining the commons isn't necessary but view it as a shared 'problematique.' From his notes, Bollier writes: "The commons does not compete on price or quality, but on cooperation" and "out-cooperates" the market, which it does by itself eliciting personal commitment and creativity and encouraging collective responsibility and sustainable practices."

Historical Perspective and Why the Commons Matters

Understanding the history of contemporary commons is indispensable as political attacks are faced. Peter Linebaugh (University of Toledo) states: "The crisis of human subsistence in today's world – housing, food, water, knowledge – has a lot to do with the enclosure of the commons." Bollier shares, "The goal is not to romanticize the commons, but to recover a collective memory that can help us recognize and name oppression in the moment as *enclosure* – and pierce the presumption that

only elite managers and experts can govern. By claiming commons governance as a historical reality, we can defend our customary rights and assert the legitimacy the commons.”

A Developmental Theory of the Commons

Stefan Meretz (Keimform blog, Berlin, Germany) proposed that “the commons represents a qualitatively new step in history.” Bollier summarizes, “The commons paradigm challenges this paradigm of neoliberal capitalism by introducing *direct social production*. Individuals know their own needs, by themselves, and can self-select tasks that engage their talents and passions. Socially based production in this scenario becomes the basis of social relationships; the making of a livelihood (money from the market economy) blends with the making of a life (purpose and meaning).”

The Power of Peer Production

Michel Bauwens of the Peer to Peer Foundation (Bangkok, Thailand) made a presentation about “the self-organizing capacities of people on the Internet, often known as commons-based peer production.” Bauwens asserts that “commons-based peer governance and production will tend to prevail over closed, proprietary business systems,” and argues “that companies that open up their organizations will out-compete and out-cooperate closed companies in the marketplace.”

A Divide Between Digital Commons and Physical Commons?

A discussion ensued about how the digital and physical commons are intertwined and integrated through culture. Examples: Rainer Kuhlen (of the University of Konstanz in Berlin) spoke about community gardeners using e-mail to manage their shared garden; the more than 150 Transition Towns that communicate and collaborate through digital technologies about re-inventing their local economies and cultures to prepare for the impact of climate change and Peak Oil. Franz Nahrada of Vienna, Austria who founded the Global Villages Network talked of goal to “to pioneer new models of attractive, smaller-scale habitation and community design so that man and ecosystems can live together in harmony.” He cited “instances of design visionaries trying to use digital technologies to improve the economic autonomy of communities while enabling them to live in greater harmony with the environment.”

Enclosures of Bytes, Atoms, Nano-Matter and Geology

Executive Director of the ETC Group Pat Mooney (Ottawa, Canada) spoke of fighting enclosures of “bytes, atoms, nano-matter and geology,” what he calls “BANG” and painted a bleak picture of “just how far enclosures are proceeding as a result of corporate consolidation, cutting-edge technologies, stricter intellectual property laws and corporate-state partnerships.”

Sustainable Forestry

Hermann Hatzfeldt (Crottorf, Germany) pioneered a number of sustainable forestry practices on the 7,000 acres of forest that he owns, the third largest privately owned forest in Germany and explained that his management philosophy is to work in partnership with nature rather than trying to dictate to nature because its results are more stable and productive over the long term. Hatzfeldt’s enterprise is essentially about the sustainable management of a common pool resource by a private owner, saying that “By honoring the organic integrity of a resource and its own natural propensities, the commons helps cultivate a ‘value proposition’ that the neoliberal markets cannot understand or capture.”

The Global South and the Commons

Nicola Bullard (Focus on the Global South, Bangkok) declared that there is “a profound crisis of the commons in the global South,” citing the many enclosures of seeds, minerals, ethnobotanical knowledge and much else. In recent years, the global South has been developing a number of commons-based responses to enclosures. Examples include fair trade organizations and cooperatives that help farmers get fair prices, trade unions, open source software projects, local currencies, and “free shops” where there is no exchange or prices to obtain goods. A feature of some South African commons, said Richard Pithouse (Port Elisabeth, South Africa) is that commoners are “asserting the right to be intellectuals” who can interpret their circumstances directly, in their own voice, “avoid a movement struggle led and defined by experts, and to enable everyone participating in the struggle to be a peer.”

The Dark Side of the Commons

Participants voiced that the commons is not always constructive. Examples are: “open-source biologists” who try to develop “do it yourself” genes which could wreck catastrophic disruptions on nature; and residents of the black “homelands” of South Africa once governed themselves, but the government strictly limited their sovereignty and resources.

The Future of the Commons: Unresolved Issues

There is a need to institutionalize a commons strategy and agenda to bring together the isolated areas of commons work. A key strategy is to research how commons emerge which occurs frequently due to enclosures or results of tragedies of the commons. Unresolved issues include: the relationship between the emerging digital commons and the “physical” or natural commons; the “digital divide” between rich and poor nations; how commoners can generate funding for commons advocacy, networking, innovation and building commons infrastructure; and a need to determine the organizations and individuals can advance these goals.

Summary

The three-day Crottorf retreat represented a diversity of perspectives from academics to activists from many disciplines and policy arenas. Although many troubling issues were discussed, there was agreement that the commons offers the inspiration and legitimacy of history, and many successful models of commoning. The most important contributions the commons may make: helping to learn new ways of knowing and being, and interacting with each other and the Earth. Politics and economics are not something that occur in a zone apart; they exist in our consciousness and culture. The commons speaks to all of these realms, and therefore offers some hopeful paths toward the future.