

# THE CORNER HOUSE

## Reclaiming the Commons

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FIRST PUBLISHED 31 MAY 1995

### Summary

For many people in the West, the word “commons” evokes a medieval village pasture which villagers did not own but where they had rights to graze their livestock. Yet, for the vast majority of humanity today, the commons is an everyday reality which provides sustenance, security and independence. The commons is neither private nor public: neither business firm nor state utility, neither jealously guarded private plot nor national or city park.

But it is not usually open to all: the relevant local community typically decides who uses it and how. Indeed, commons regimes can be defined more through their social and cultural organization than their physical location: for example, local or group power, distinctions between members and non-members, rough parity among members, a concern with common safety rather than accumulation, and an absence of the constraints which lead to economic scarcity.

Industrial development, the creation of empires and states, business conglomerates and civic dictatorships has only been possible through dismantling the commons and harnessing the fragments to build up new economic and social patterns responsive to the interests of a dominant minority. The modern nation state has stripped power and control from commons regimes and created structures of governance from which the great mass of humanity (particularly women) are excluded. The market economy has expanded by enabling state and commercial interests to gain control of territory that has been used and nurtured by others, and by transforming that territory -- together with the people themselves -- into expendable “resources” for exploitation.

Enclosure is a change in the networks of power which enmesh the environment, production, distribution, the political process, knowledge, research and the law. It reduces the control of local people over community affairs. But enclosure has never gone unchallenged. Resistance to enclosure takes place in countless everyday ways in both the South and the North.

This article is based on a presentation at the 1995 annual Conference of the Political Studies Association of the United Kingdom held in York.

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## [Introduction \(#introductionref\)](#)

To Western eyes, the streets and lanes of Bangkok, like those of many cities in the South, may seem a strange mixture of order and chaos. In the shadow of high-rise hotels, apartment and office blocks, people live in dark, seemingly random collections of shacks near railway lines, on construction sites, and over swamps. In front of rows of concrete shophouses and air-conditioned banks, carts and stalls selling noodles, dried squid, curries and iced drinks jostle for kerb space with amulet sellers, fruit vendors and beggars. Souvenir merchants block pedestrian traffic by jamming their tables up against those of purveyors of cheap baby clothes, leather goods, sweets and dubious athletic shoes. Street corner vendors show open contempt for the solemnities of intellectual property by loudly inviting passers-by to invest in fake Rolex watches, pirated rock music cassettes and bogus Lacoste shirts. Under the eyes of bored traffic police, pedestrians jaywalk across roads congested with trucks, buses and motorcycles.

The hints of anarchy in these scenes may trouble the Western mind. Who are all these people raising chickens and drying clothes next to the railroad tracks? Why don't the police do something about the jaywalkers, the hawkers and the polluting vehicles? What is the law here? Is there a law here? Why doesn't anybody seem to know what it is? A Westerner setting up a food stall on the kerb of a busy street might have an uneasy sense of encroaching on public space, enforced by a worry about bureaucrats and police. Not the Bangkok vendors! Like squatters they seem ready to take all the space they can get. of course, now and then the police clear them off. But this hardly seems to be out of a real concern for public order. More likely the World Bank or a foreign dignitary is arriving for a meeting and some high official, fearful of losing face, has sent out an order to spruce up the streets. In any case, as soon as the police are gone the vendors trickle back. In a week things are back to normal.

## [A Hidden Structure \(#index-01-00-00-00ref\)](#)

Longer acquaintance with Bangkok may shift the Westerner's view. Beneath the seeming vacuum of public order and responsibility the outlines of a different kind of moral and environmental order begin to appear. It becomes clear that while public space may not always be respected, informal boundaries are well marked within communities of people who know each other. In the city are ramshackle shanty towns or along the row of street vendors, anyone who takes up too much space, or the wrong space, or leaves too much of a mess, is brought back into line by neighbours. The community may not possess much space, and has little opportunity to make it clean and attractive, but it makes the most of what it has. And because no one group is powerful enough to usurp too much space for itself, everybody has a share.

External borders are defended as well. When the police undertake a sweep of sidewalk vendors, furious mutterings spread down the lines of stalls. "This is our turf! We've been here for years! What right do the authorities have to evict us?" Elsewhere, outrage may lead to more organized resistance. In an area of orchards nestled in a bend of the Chao Phraya River near the city centre, landowners and squatters join together to protest the proposed conversion of their land into a "public park", pointing out that they and their ancestors have kept the place green for over a century. When lines of policemen step forward to begin dismantling squatters' homes, children rush forward to grasp their legs. Shaking them off, the police advance a few steps further only to come up against a phalanx of angry, taunting women, baring their breasts to shame them into retreat. Behind them, in reserve, wait the men of the community. People may recognise the city's law as a fact rather than as a social norm, and value customs more than contracts, but their sense of rights and justice is sharp.

The order people seek is seldom a public one. Few are overly concerned about obligations toward unseen strangers. Few set much store by anonymous and formal words typed or printed on headed paper, or on proclamations that this or that area is "public property". Rather, people try to establish personal, face to face connections. Strangers feel each other out to find out where they stand. Who is the most powerful person here? Who the most senior? Do I know any of their relatives? Where can I carve out a space for my family? How much can my family and friends get away with before we offend our neighbours? As new acquaintances jockey for position on the pavements, in the alleys, in the communities and restaurants and meeting rooms, invisible grid-lines are drawn, connections made, and unspoken rules laid down. As relationships become established and power is balanced, interdependence grows and benevolence is exchanged for respect. Insiders are distinguished from outsiders, and consideration and love flourish among familiars. Indulgences quickly become rights which cannot be violated without denying the growing personal ties themselves. It is in these right and ties, more than in the formal machinery of the law or an inculcated sense of "the public", that ordinary people, and even police and businesses, place their faith.

This order does not emerge from nowhere. It recreates in broken form a long tradition visible more clearly in the countryside: a tradition of the commons.[FN See for example: S. Ekachai, "Traditions resist Change" in S. Ekachai, Behind the Smile: Voices of Thailand, Thai Development Support Committee, Bangkok, 1990, pp.86-95.] There, until recently, the category of "the public" barely existed. In day-to-day practice, it was the community which exercised dominion over time, space, agriculture and language. Woods and streams feeding local irrigation systems remained intact because anyone degrading them had to brave the wrath of neighbours deprived of their livelihood, and no one was powerful enough to do so. Everybody was subject to everybody else's personal scrutiny and sanctions.

Bangkok twists this tradition. Benefiting from the growth of the state and "economic development", elites have gained the power to usurp larger and larger domains of common space - streets, clean air, green space - without having to concern themselves with the reaction of others. Webs of personal relationships have been stretched or frayed, losing their anchorage to a particular locality, reducing people's ability to defend their space and make it liveable. People whose livelihoods have been taken away by this process fall into increasingly abject dependency on those who have taken it away. At the same time, new webs of personal relationships ramify across the upper levels of society. Dynastic, commercial and military alliances concentrate and reconcentrate power largely beyond the ability of ordinary people to place checks upon it.

In this sense, disorder in Bangkok originates less in the city's huddled shacks or the haphazard rows of street vendors than in the forces - partly foreign - that lie behind the modern public and private high-rise buildings, fast-food outlets and brightly coloured billboards which look so reassuring and orderly to the Western visitor. Indeed, it is in commons such as those found on street vendors' turf that the order which can safeguard the interests of ordinary Bangkokians and their environment is largely found. When subsistence is at stake, they often improvise or reconstruct rough-and-ready new commons regimes rather than pin their hopes on either the market economy or public institutions. For better or worse, the commons is the social and political space where things get done and where people derive a sense of belonging and have an element of control over their lives. In Bangkok, as in many places throughout the South, when the commons is gone, there is little that can take its place.

### [An Everyday Reality \(#index-02-00-00-00ref\)](#)

The tale of Bangkok and its broken commons may seem remote from Western experience. For many people in the West, the word "commons" carries an archaic flavour: that of the medieval village pasture which villagers did not own but where they had rights to graze their livestock. Yet, for the vast majority of humanity, the commons is an everyday reality. Ninety per cent of the world's fishers rely on small inshore marine commons, catching over half the fish eaten in the world today.[FN E. Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, Cambridge University

Press, Cambridge, 1991, p.27.] In the Philippines, Java and Laos, irrigation systems are devised and run by villagers themselves, the water rights being distributed through rules laid down by the community.[FN See, for example: M.C.J. Cruz 'Water as Common Property: The Case of Irrigation Water Rights in the Philippines' in F. Berkes (ed), Common Property Resources: Ecology and Community-based Sustainable Development, Belhaven Press, London, 1989, pp.218-235.] Even in the North, there are communities which still manage their forests, pastures, fisheries and water supplies jointly.[FN See, for example: J.M. Acheson, 'The Lobster Fiefs Revisited: Economic and Ecological Effects of Territoriality in Maine Lobster Fishing' in B. McCay & J. M. Acheson (eds), The Question of the Commons: The Culture and Ecology of Communal Resources, University of Arizona, Tuscon, 1987, pp.37-65.]

Moreover, new commons are constantly being born, even among what might seem the most fragmented communities. In the inner cities of the US, the dialects of black communities express concepts that the language taught in state schools cannot touch. In southern California, water users have crafted self-governing institutional structures, basin by basin, and watershed by watershed, to control water abstraction from local aquifers.[FN W. Blomquist, Dividing the Waters: Governing Groundwater in Southern California, ICS Press, San Francisco, California, 1992.] At toxic dump sites and around proposed nuclear plants in France, Switzerland and elsewhere, people have insisted on their "rights" to keep the earth and air around their communities free from the threat of poisonous and radioactive substances, damning the economic and "public" rationality which dictates that their homes are "objectively" the best locations for waste sinks. For them, the sentiments expressed by an elder of a Brazilian tribe, despite the religious language in which they are couched, cannot be completely unrecognizable:

"The only possible place for the Krenak people to live and to re-establish our existence, to speak to our Gods, to speak to our nature, to weave our lives, is where God created us. We can no longer see the planet that we live upon as if it were a chess-board where people just move things around." [FN Quoted in World Commission on Environment and Development, Our Common Future, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1987, p.114.]

### **The Commons: Neither Public nor Private** (#index-03-00-00-00ref)

Despite its ubiquity, the commons is hard to define. It provides sustenance, security and independence, yet (in what many Westerners feel to be a paradox) typically does not produce commodities. Unlike most things in modern industrial society, moreover, it is neither private nor public: neither business firm nor state utility, neither jealously guarded private plot nor national or city park. Nor is it usually open to all. The relevant local community typically decides who uses it and how.

The unlimited diversity of commons also makes the concept elusive. While all commons regimes involve joint use, what they define access to is bewilderingly varied: for example, trees, forests, land, minerals, water, fish, animals, language, time, radio wavelengths, silence, seeds, milk, contraception and streets.

More fruitful than attempts to define commons regimes through their domains are attempts to define them through their social and cultural organization: for example, local or group power, distinctions between members and non-members, rough parity among members, a concern with common safety rather than accumulation, and an absence of the constraints which lead to economic scarcity. Even here, however, it would be a mistake to demand too much precision. For example, what does the "local" in "local power" mean? In Shanxi province in China, communal forests were owned by villages, several villages together, or clans. In India, the relevant bodies may be caste groups, while for Switzerland's city forests, it is "citizenship" (election to a given community) that counts.

Similarly, what does the "power" in "local power" consist in? Sometimes it is the power to exclude outsiders or to punish them if they abuse the commons. Often this power lays the foundation for an additional structure of internal rules, rights, duties and beliefs which mediates and shapes the community's own relationship with its natural surroundings. Sometimes the meshes of power internal to commons regimes give rise to

notions of "property" or "possession", but in many cases the relevant group does not regard itself as owning, but rather as owned by, or as stewards to, water or land.

### **Perception of Scarcity** (#index-04-00-00-00ref)

A further characteristic often ascribed to the commons is that, unlike resources in the modern economy, it is "not perceived as scarce". This is not only because many things available as commons, such as silence, air or genetic diversity, will renew themselves continually until deliberately made scarce by the encroachment of outside political actors. More importantly, the needs which many commons satisfy are not infinitely expanding. They are not determined by a growth-oriented external system producing goods and services, but rather are constantly adjusted and limited by the specific commons regime itself, whose physical characteristics remain in everyone's view. Without the race between growth and the scarcity which growth creates, there can thus be a sense of "enoughness". Even where produce from the commons is sold, the "needs" defined by consumerism and external market demand for goods and services will be subject to internal revision.

### **The Worldly Commons** (#index-05-00-00-00ref)

Despite their resolutely local orientation and resistance to being swallowed up by larger systems, commons regimes have never been isolated in either space or time. Nor have their social organizations ever been static. Commons regimes welcome, feed upon and are fertilized by contact, and evolve just like any other social institution.[FN R. Norgaard, 'The Rise of the Global Exchange Economy and the Loss of Biological Diversity' in E.O. Wilson (ed), *Biodiversity*, National Academy Press, Washington, D.C., pp.206-211: I. Illich, *Gender*, Pantheon, New York, 1982.] Communities maintaining commons often work out arrangements over larger geographical areas with other groups. For example, in the Philippines competing claims to water rights among different *zanjaras*, or communal irrigation societies, have customarily been decided by inter-village councils composed of *zanjara* officers and family elders in the community.[M.C.J. Cruz 'Water as Common Property: The Case of Irrigation Water Rights in the Philippines' in F. Berkes (ed), *Common Property Resources: Ecology and Community-based Sustainable Development*, Belhaven Press, London, 1989, pp.218-235.]

Systems of common rights, in fact, far from evolving in isolation, often owe their very existence to interaction and struggle between communities and the outside world. It is arguably only in reaction to invasion, dispossession or other threats to accustomed security of access that the concept of common rights emerges. Today, such rights are evolving where access to seeds, air and other resources previously taken for granted are being challenged through commoditization, legal enclosure or pollution.

### **Defining Oneself** (#index-06-00-00-00ref)

Each commons regime may be as different culturally from the next as all are from, say, a factory. But it is not only their cultural diversity that makes such regimes difficult to "capture" in technical or universal terms. Ivan Illich makes this point when he says that the "law establishing the commons was unwritten, not only because people did not care to write it down, but because what it protected was a reality much too complex to fit into paragraphs." [FN I. Illich, 'Silence is the Commons', *Coevolution Quarterly*, Winter 1983, pp.5-9.] This is inexact; commons rules are sometimes written down; and where they are not, this is not so much because what they protect is complex as because the commons requires an open-endedness, receptiveness and adaptability to the vagaries of local climate, personalities, consciousness, crafts and materials which written records cannot fully express. But Illich's point is important. What makes the commons work, like the skills of wheelwrights, surgeons or machinists, cannot easily be encoded in written or other fixed or "replicable" forms useful to cultural outsiders. These forms can make some of the workings of commons regimes "visible" to those outsiders at the expense of commons regimes' viability.

In this and other respects, the concept of the commons flies in the face of the

contemporary wisdom that each spot on the globe consists merely of coordinates on a global grid laid out by state and market: a uniform field which determines everyone's and everything's rights and roles. "Commons" implies the right of local people to define their own grid, their own forms of community respect for watercourses, meadows or paths' to resolve conflicts their own way; to translate what enters their ken into the personal terms of their own dialect; to be "biased" against the "rights" of outsiders to local "resources" in ways usually unrecognized in modern laws; to treat their home not simply as a location housing transferable goods and chunks of population but as irreplaceable and even to be defended at all costs.

### **No Free-for-all** ([#index-07-00-00-00ref](#))

For many years, governments, international planning agencies (and many conservationists) have viewed commons regimes with deep hostility. Nothing enrages the World Bank more, for example, than the "Not-In-My-Back-Yard" or "NIMBY" mentality which so many communities display in defending their commons against dams, toxic waste dumps, polluting factories and the like.[FN World Bank, World Development Report 1992: Development and Environment, Oxford University Press, New York, pp.15 and 83.] Many conservationists and delegates to the United Nations "Earth Summit" in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, similarly, view local control over land, forests, streams and rivers as a recipe for environmental destruction. The only way to secure the environment, they say, is to put a fence around it, police it and give it economic value through development.

In defense of such views, development agencies have played upon two related confusions. The first, promulgated most famously in the 1960s by Garrett Hardin and others, is the myth of the "tragedy of the commons". According to Hardin, any commons (the example he used was a hypothetical rangeland) "remorselessly generates tragedy" since the individual gain to each user from overusing the commons will always outweigh the individual losses he or she has to bear due to its resulting degradation.[FN G. Hardin, 'The Tragedy of the Commons', Science, 162, 13 December 1968, pp.1243-1248.] As many critics have pointed out, however, and as Hardin himself later acknowledged, what he is describing is not a commons regime, in which authority over the use of forests, water and land rests with a community, but rather an open access regime, in which authority rests nowhere; in which there is no property at all; in which production for an external market takes social precedence over subsistence; in which production is not limited by considerations of long-term local abundance; in which people "do not seem to talk to one another";[FN A McEvoy, 'Toward an interactive theory of nature and culture' in D. Worster (ed), The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990, p.226.] and in which profit for harvesters is the only operating social value.

### **Tending the Commons** ([#index-08-00-00-00ref](#))

The difference is critical. Far from being a "free-for-all", use of the commons is closely regulated through communal rules and practices. For example, amongst the Barabaig, a semi-nomadic pastoralist group in Tanzania, rights of use and access to land are variously invested in the community, the clan and individual households. As Charles Lane explains, "the Barabaig recognize that, to make efficient use of resources, access to grazing needs to be controlled to prevent exploitation beyond the capacity to recover. Although surface water is universally accessible to everyone, its use is controlled by rules ... water sources must not be diverted or contaminated ... a well becomes the property of the clan of the man who digs it. Although anyone may draw water for domestic purposes from any well, only clan members may water their stock there."[FN C. Lane, Barabaig Natural Resource Management: Sustainable Land Use under Threat of Destruction, Discussion Paper 12, UN Research Institute for Social Development, Geneva, 1990, p.7.] Whether land is privately or collectively owned, there are rules ensuring that the use made of it is not detrimental to the community as a whole, while certain species of tree are regarded as sacred for the same reason. Disputes, which are rare, are resolved by a public assembly or all adult males, though sometimes in the case of a particularly difficult issue a special committee is formed. There is a parallel council of women, who

also have property rights over land and animals, and occasionally may be the head of a family. Women have jurisdiction in matters concerning offences by men against women and in matters concerning spiritual life. Lane describes how recently a women's council upbraided the men for ploughing sacred land. At a regional level, a similar council oversees the movement of herds and people to ensure that there is no overgrazing.

### **The Tragedy of Enclosure** (#index-09-00-00-00ref)

A second confusion that muddies the debate over the commons is between environmental degradation which can be attributed to commons regimes themselves and that which typically results from their breakdown at the hands of more global regimes. As many authors have pointed out, "tragedies of the commons" generally turn out on closer examination to be "tragedies of enclosure".[FN D.W. Bromley, *Environment and Economy: Property Rights and Public Policy*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1991.] Once they have taken over land, enclosers, unlike families with ties and commitments to the soil, can mine, log, degrade and abandon their holdings, and then sell them on the global market without suffering any personal losses. It is generally enclosers rather than commoners who benefit from bringing ruin to the commons.

### **Commons Regimes and their Natural Surroundings** (#index-10-00-00-00ref)

None of this is to suggest that all commons regimes are always capable of preventing degradation of forests, fisheries or land indefinitely. But as Martin Khor of Third World Network puts it, "local control, while not necessarily sufficient for environmental protection, is necessary, while under state control the environment necessarily suffers."[FN M. Khor Kok Peng, presentation at World Rainforest Meeting held on Land Insecurity and Tropical Deforestation, 1 March 1992, New York.]

One reason why local control is essential is that, as Richard O'Connor has argued, "the environment itself is local; nature diversifies to make niches, enmeshing each locale in its own intricate web. Insofar as this holds, enduring human adaptations must also ultimately be quite local".[FN R. O'Connor, 'From Fertility to Order', in *Siam Society, Culture and Environment in Thailand*, Siam Society, Bangkok, 1989, pp.393-141.] Biological diversity, for example, is related to the degree to which one locale is distinct from the next in its topography and natural and human history. It is best preserved by societies which nourish those local differences - in which the traditions and natural history of each area interact to create distinctive systems of cultivation and water and forest use.

This local orientation is displayed *par excellence* in small commons regimes. As Elinor Ostrom notes: "Small-scale communities are more likely to have the formal conditions required for successful and enduring collective management of the commons. Among these are the visibility of common resources and behaviour toward them; feedback on the effects of regulations; widespread understanding and acceptance of the rules and their rationales; the values expressed in these rules (that is, equitable treatment of all and protection of the environment); and the backing of values by socialization, standards and strict enforcement."[FN E. Ostrom, 'The Rudiments of a Revised Theory of the Origins, Survival and Performance of Institutions of Collective Action', Working Paper 32, Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis, Indiana University, Bloomington, 1985.]

A second reason why local control is important is that where people rely directly on their natural surroundings for their livelihood, they develop an intimate knowledge of those surroundings which informs their actions. The Barabaig, for example, fully understand that if cattle were to be kept permanently on pastures near local water sources, the land would quickly become degraded. "As herds of livestock are brought to the river margins every day, whatever the season, they know that the forage there is needed by those who are watering their stock. If others are allowed to permanently graze it, this forage would soon be depleted and not available to those who go there to draw water. This would ultimately result in destruction of the land through over-grazing and damage from concentration of hoof traffic. The Barabaig, therefore, have a customary rule that bans

settlement at the river margins and denies herders the right to graze the forage if they are not there to water their stock."[FN C. Lane, Barabaig Natural Resource Management: Sustainable Land Use under Threat of Destruction, Discussion Paper 12, UN Research Institute for Social Development, Geneva, 1990, p.8.]

The key to the success of commons regimes lies in the limits that its culture of shared responsibilities place upon the power of any one group or individual. The rough equality which generally prevails in the commons, for example, does not grow out of any ideal or romantic preconceived notion of *communitas* any more than out of allegiance to the modern notion that people have "equal rights". Rather, it emerges as a by-product of the inability of a small community's elite to eliminate entirely the bargaining power of any one of its members, the limited amount of goods any one group can make away with under the others' gaze, and the calculated jockeying for position of many individuals who know each other and share an interest both in minimizing their own risks and in not letting any one of their number become too powerful.

Changes in the power base of a local elite or increases in effective community size entailed by integration into a global social fabric can rapidly undermine the authority of the commons. The sense of shame or transgression so important to community controls, as well as the monitoring of violations themselves, is diluted or denatured by increase in numbers, while envy of outsiders unconstrained by those controls flourishes. At some point, "the breakdown of a community with the associated collapse in concepts of joint ownership and responsibility can set the path for the degradation of common resources in spite of abundance."[FN F. Berkes & D. Feeny, 'Paradigms Lost: Changing Views on the use of Common Property Resources', *Alternatives*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 1990, p.50.]

It is precisely this process that development fuels. The expansion of modern state, international and market institutions entails a shrinking space for the commons. Today, virtually all "human communities are encapsulated within or fully integrated into larger socio-political systems" as are their "local systems of resource use and property rights",[FN B. McCay & J.M. Acheson, *The Question of the Commons*, University of Arizona, Tuscon, 1987, p.7.] making enclosure an ever-present threat. As political, social and ecological boundaries are erased, control is centralized or privatized, commercialized or placed under management. As their environments are destroyed or degraded, their power eroded or denied, and their communities threatens, millions are now demanding a halt to the development process. As the social activist Gustavo Esteva writes, "if you live in Rio or Mexico City, you need to be very rich or very stupid not to notice that development stinks ... We need to say 'no' to development, to all and every form of development, and that is precisely what the social majorities - for whom development was always a threat - are asking for."[FN G. Esteva, 'The Right to Stop Development', *NGONET UNCED Feature*, 13 June 1992, Rio de Janeiro.] For them, the struggle is to reclaim, defend or create their commons and with it the rough sense of equity that flows from sharing a truly common future.

### **Development as Enclosure** (#index-11-00-00-00ref)

The creation of empires and states, business conglomerates and civic dictatorships -- whether in pre-colonial times or in the modern era -- has only been possible through dismantling the commons and harnessing the fragments, deprived of their old significance, to build up new economic and social patterns that are responsive to the interests of a dominant minority. The modern nation state has been built only by stripping power and control from commons regimes and creating structures of governance from which the great mass of humanity (particularly women) are excluded. Likewise, the market economy has expanded primarily by enabling state and commercial interests to gain control of territory that has traditionally been used and cherished by others, and by transforming that territory - together with the people themselves - into expendable "resources" for exploitation. By enclosing forests, the state and private enterprise have torn them out of fabrics of peasant subsistence; by providing local leaders with an outside power base, unaccountable to local people, they have undermined village checks and balances; by stimulating demand for cash goods, they have impelled villagers to seek an ever wider range of things to sell. Such a policy was as determinedly

pursued by the courts of Aztec Mexico, the feudal lords of West Africa, and the factory owners of Lancashire and the British Rail as it is today by the International Monetary Fund or Coca-Cola Inc.

Only in this way has it been possible to convert peasants into labour for a global economy, replace traditional with modern agriculture, and free up the commons for the industrial economy. Similarly, only by atomizing tasks and separating workers from the moral authority, crafts and natural surroundings created by their communities has it been possible to transform them into modern, universal individuals susceptible to "management". In short, only by deliberately taking apart local cultures and reassembling them in new forms has it been possible to open them up to global trade.[FN L. Lohmann, 'Resisting Green Globalism' in W. Sachs (ed), *Global Ecology: Conflicts and Contradictions*, Zed Books, London and New Jersey, 1993.]

To achieve that "condition of economic progress", millions have been marginalized as a calculated act of policy, their commons dismantled and degraded, their cultures denigrated and devalued and their own worth reduced to their value as labour. Seen from this perspective, many of the processes that now go under the rubric of "nation-building", "economic growth", and "progress" are first and foremost processes of expropriation, exclusion, denial and dispossession. In a word, of "enclosure".

Because history's best-known examples of enclosure involved the fencing in of common pasture, enclosure is often reduced to a synonym for "expropriation". But enclosure involves more than land and fences, and implies more than simply privatization or takeover by the state. It is a compound process which affects nature and culture, home and market, production and consumption, germination and harvest, birth, sickness and death. It is a process to which no aspect of life or culture is immune.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers a general definition of enclosure -- to "insert within a frame". Enclosure tears people and their lands, forests, crafts, technologies and cosmologies out of the cultural framework in which they are embedded and tries to force them into a new framework which reflects and reinforces the values and interests of newly-dominant groups. Any pieces which will not fit into the new framework are devalued and discarded. In the modern age, the architecture of this new framework is determined by market forces, science, state and corporate bureaucracies, patriarchal forms of social organization, and ideologies of environmental and social management.

Land, for example, once it is integrated into a framework of fences, roads and property laws, is "disembedded" from local fabrics of self-reliance and redefined as "property" or "real estate". Forests are divided into rigidly defined precincts - mining concessions, logging concessions, wildlife corridors and national parks - and transformed from providers of water, game, wood and vegetables into scarce exploitable economic resources. Today they are on the point of being enclosed still further as the dominant industrial culture seeks to convert them into yet another set of components of the industrial system, redefining them as "sinks" to absorb industrial carbon dioxide and as pools of "biodiversity". Air is being enclosed as economists seek to transform it into a marketable "waste sink"; and genetic material by subjecting it to laws which convert it into the "intellectual property" of private interests.

People too are enclosed as they are fitted into a new society where they must sell their labour, learn clock-time and accustom themselves to a life of production and consumption; groups of people are redefined as "populations", quantifiable entities whose size must be adjusted to take pressure off resources required for the global economy. Women are enclosed by consigning them to the "unproductive" periphery of a framework of industrial work, which they can only enter by adopting "masculine" values and ways of being, thinking and operating. Skills, too, are enclosed, as are systems of knowledge associated with local stewardship of nature.

### [New Values](#) (#index-12-00-00-00ref)

Enclosure inaugurates what Ivan Illich has called "a new ecological order." [FN I Illich, 'Silence is a Commons', *The Coevolution Quarterly*, Winter, 1983.] It upsets the local

power balance which ensured that survival was "the supreme rule of common behaviour, not the isolated right of the individual." [FN I. Illich, *Gender*, Pantheon, New York, 1982, p.111] It scoffs at the notion that there can be "specific forms of community respect" for parts of the environment which are "neither the home nor wilderness", but lie "beyond a person's threshold and outside his possession" [FN I. Illich, *Gender*, Pantheon, New York, 1982, p.18] -- the woods or fields, for example, that secure a community's subsistence, protect it from flood and drought, and provide spiritual and aesthetic meaning.

Instead, enclosure transforms the environment into a "resource" for national or global production - into so many chips that can be cashed in as commodities, handed out as political favours and otherwise used to accrue power. The sanctions on exploitation imposed by commons regimes in order to ensure a reliable local subsistence from local nature are now viewed "simply as constraints to be removed." [FN V. Shiva, 'Resources' in W. Sachs (ed), *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*, Zed Books, London and New Jersey, 1992, p.206.]

Control over those resources is assigned to actors outside the community. Most obviously, land -- and in particular, the best-quality land -- is concentrated in proportionately fewer and fewer hands. Enclosure of water and other resources has also generated scarcity and conflict. Large-scale irrigated plantations, for example, deny water to local farmers who work outside the plantation system. [FN V. Shiva, *Ecology and the Politics of Survival: Conflicts over Natural Resources in India*, Sage/United Nations University, New Delhi, 1991.] In central India "whilst staple crops in the drought stricken areas ... are denied water, the sugar-cane fields and grape vines are irrigated with scarce groundwater. a soil water drought has been created not by an absolute scarcity of water but by the preferential diversion of a limited water supply." [FN J. Bandyopadhyay, 'The Ecology of Drought and Water Scarcity', *The Ecologist*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 1988.] In cities, meanwhile, people without motor-cars are progressively shut out from access to the street.

Enclosure thus cordons off those aspects of the environment that are deemed "useful" to the encloser -- whether grass for sheep in 16th century England or stands of timber for logging in modern-day Sarawak -- and defines them, and them alone, as valuable. A street becomes a conduit for vehicles; a wetland, a field to be drained; flowing water, a wasted asset to be harnessed for energy or agriculture. Instead of being a source of multiple benefits, the environment becomes a one-dimensional asset to be exploited for a single purpose - that purpose reflecting the interests of the encloser, and the priorities of the wider political economy in which the encloser operates.

### **New Forms of Exchange** (#index-13-00-00-00ref)

Enclosure reorganizes society to meet the overriding demands of the market. It demands that production and exchange conform to rules that reflect the exigencies of supply and demand, of competition and maximization of output, of accumulation and economic efficiency.

In commons regimes, activities we now call "economic" are embedded in other activities. The planting of fields or the harvesting of crops cannot be reduced to acts of production: they are also religious events, occasions for celebration, for fulfilling communal obligations and for strengthening networks of mutual support. Farming, for example, is carried out not to maximize production -- though a healthy crop is always welcome -- but to feed the gods, enable cultural practices to continue with dignity, or minimize risk to the community as a whole, not least by strengthening networks of mutual support. Thus, when enclosure begins, people feel threatened not only by material expropriation but by the cultural and personal humiliations that inevitably accompany it. Unsurprisingly, much of their resistance against enclosure is also developed and codified in non-economic forms; gossip, songs, jokes, rumours, drama and festivals. [FN J. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1990.]

Because economic relations need not be crucial to survival in commons regimes, they generally take a back seat to other social relationships. *Homo economicus* -- the obsessively rent-maximizing archetype around whose supposed universality modern