

Commons vs Commodities

Paper by Giovanna Ricoveri

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The Commons as an alternative to capitalism

In this paper I propose that the subsistence commons of the past can form the backbone of an alternative social order to capitalism, which has dominated the world for the last three centuries. This is because they are based on cooperation, not on competition; they are jointly used, neither private nor public property; they use natural resources sustainable, and they promote forms of direct democracy that integrate and reinforce representative democracy. In brief, they provide goods and services which do not become commodities to be exchanged on the capitalistic market.

I realize that my proposal may be perceived as unfair in the so-called less developed countries, engaged as they are striving to reach Western living standards. I answer this question in two ways: first, my proposal addresses countries of the North, which use more than their share of natural resources at the expense of the South. Second, my proposal is paradigmatic, and it can therefore concern both the North and the South. Its purpose is to underline modes of production and ways of living that are ecologically sustainable and socially determined.

My proposal (see my recent book *Beni comuni vs Merci*, Milano, Jaca Book, 2010) is not limited to scholars and activists discussions. It represents a historical necessity vis-à-vis the crisis of the capitalist system, aimed at stopping the plunder of Nature and the disintegration of society, which in the South translates into hunger and death from hunger for more than one thousand million people. Climate change, privatisation of natural resources and public spaces, new forms of poverty, unemployment of the young and women, social exclusion, food insecurity, new diseases caused by pollution of water, air and food chains are only some of the emerging features of capitalism in its present financial phase, producing “paper” wealth while destroying real wealth.

In support of prioritising subsistence commons, consider the following: *first*, evidence shows that at the beginning of the third millennium the profit frontier has moved into natural resources and public goods, to appropriate natural goods, infrastructures and services, which are both a gift of Nature and the result of human work and ingenuity by local populations and communities. It is a collective wealth that multinationals and financial capital try to appropriate by any mean necessary through wars of low and high intensity. It is therefore an imperative for local communities to resist this trend and reclaim the common wealth in order to survive. (Paolo Berdini, “Se crolla il muro tra pubblico e privato”, *il manifesto* 14 aprile 2010).

Second, although nobody would deny that life depends on “subsistence” goods and services, in Western cultures - which have spread to large parts of the South – it is taken for granted that basic goods and services are supplied by the market. The market is nonetheless unable to “produce” air, water and land, the basic goods essential to the lives of poor and rich alike. The market is unable even to allocate natural resource in such a way as to grant everybody, rich and poor, their share of water, air and land. Nor is the market capable of avoiding the wastage of natural resources, in spite of efforts so far made to regulate the market: the water shortage is indeed created by the capitalist market. There is no water shortage when water is managed by water communities which still exist North and South, because they use techniques of rainwater collection, traditional ways of

conservation and utilization, all of which exist thanks to the traditional knowledge coming from the work and inventiveness of all the present and previous members of the community.

Moreover, subsistence is socially and environmentally determined and therefore it changes over time and according to different places. Resources such as iron, on which depends industrial production mainly located in the West, could therefore be considered part of subsistence, now that iron ores are depleted and iron supply is insufficient to satisfy demand. On the other hand it is true that iron substitution is possible but only within certain limits, and it is also true that iron is not renewable relative to human life spans. If this outcome – formally advanced by several communities of the South – were to be followed, many of the environmental and social problems created by the capitalistic system would not exist because communities use natural resources without depleting them.

The claim that subsistence or material commons exist only in so-called less developed countries of the South and that non-material commons are mainly a problem of the industrialized countries of the North, is widely accepted in the West by scholars and activists. This belief is wrong as shown by the evidence of all empirical studies on the commons, *in primis* Elinor Ostrom's work (see her *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, Cambridge University Press, 1990). Moreover such a notion is dangerous because it reinforces a false dichotomy between the North and the South, thus favouring ideologies of exclusion and racism.

In brief, it is a powerful device through which the North keeps its privileges and legitimises the plunder of the South.

The historical process of delegitimation of the commons

The underestimation of natural commons and the parallel overestimation of non-material commons prevailing in Western discourse is the consequence of a process that Carolyn Merchant has called the "death of Nature" (*The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1880). With the English Industrial Revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries, Nature ceased to be considered sacred and was deleted from the human horizon, to the point that people have lost even the perception of it. Slowly but progressively, Nature has been transformed into a deposit of lifeless resources, inputs for the industrial production at the disposal of corporations.

The organic metabolism between people and nature, which had made possible the sustainability of the past, was substituted by an industrial metabolism between people and industrial production. (Piero Bevilacqua, *La terra è finita*, Bari, Laterza, 2006)

In the transition from the Middle Ages to Modernity the commons became a hindrance to change and "progress", and were therefore dismantled. In England common lands were enclosed or privatised, both to provide the wool necessary as raw material to the emerging textile industry and to free the labour necessary to run the new manufactures in the cities. To carry out the Industrial Revolution, England conquered large part of the Americas (the colonies) and deported millions of Africans to employ them as slaves in the sugar plantations. (Giorgio Pietrostefani, *La tratta atlantica. Genocidio e sortilegio*, Milano, Jaca Book, 2000). And the same imperial formation conquered and used much of South Asia as the cash cow for investments necessary to develop technologies and techniques necessary to industrialization (Marcello De Cecco, *Money and Empire: The International Gold Standard, 1890-1914*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1974; Andre Gunder Frank, *World Accumulation, 1492-1789*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1978).

The social consequences of these events have been analysed and criticised scholars such as Karl Marx (*Capital*) and Karl Polanyi. (*The Great Transformation*, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1944). Environmental consequences have emerged slowly and are still coming out as in the cases of climate changes, loss of biodiversity and new diseases due to pollution (among others, see Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism. The Biological Expansion of Europe 900-1900*, Cambridge University Press 2004). These processes have been reflected in ideological changes.

The formalisation of political economy as a science, at the end of the 17th century, resulted from and contributed to the end of the social order preceding the Industrial Revolution. The theories of the founding fathers of political economy – Adam Smith, David Ricardo and John Stuart Mill – justified the expansion of the capitalist market, which changed the course of history for the entire world. The invisible hand, the *homo oeconomicus* and the theory of comparative advantages and free competition opened a new phase in ideology, wiping out even the memory of the commons, at first largely among intellectuals and ruling classes of Western Europe. An imperative for vertical competition won over the necessity for horizontal competition.

Characteristics of the commons

Commons were the prevailing form of social organisation in the European Middle Ages and are widespread even now in the South where village – often native – communities still exist. This is the case in most of Sub-Saharan African countries, in all the countries of Southeast Asia included China and India, and in the Andean countries of Latin America. The United Nations estimate that over two third of global population lives in the countryside and the nearby forests and survives thanks to the rural people direct access to subsistence resources.

The commons are jointly-used resources, administered and self-managed by local communities. They are not just resources in the sense of physical entities such as a piece of land to cultivate, a pasture, a pool of water, or a fishing area. The commons may also take the form of common rights to use the fruits of a given natural resource as in Anglo-Saxon common law, or that of “*usi civici*” as in the Italian legal tradition, or that of the “claims” still weighing on natural goods that allow communities to survive or to further their means of survival; or of genetic resources, considered in 2001 International FAO Treaty on the Natural Vegetable Resources of Food and Agriculture. (Lorenza Paoloni, *Diritti degli agricoltori e tutela della biodiversità*, Torino, Giappichelli, 2005).

The commons are hard to define because they vary in time and space. Their strength lays in diversity and specificity, i.e. in the ability of communities to adjust to different situations. It is however possible to define their main characteristics, the first one being flexibility. Another is self-management by local communities, which indicates either a group of people using jointly a natural resource – e.g. a piece of agricultural land – or the village authority which allocates fertile lands among village families of the village, with the provision of cultivating such land for family consumption, not for commercial ends.

The community functions according to a logic entirely different from that of the capitalist market, meaning that exchange is based on interpersonal relationships, not the impersonal exchange of equivalent things. It is also for this reason that community is a controversial concept, often rejected by cultures prevailing in the North which identify community ties with blood and tribal boundaries; not with ties of proximity and solidarity. This is, in any case, pretending that problems specific to Northern societies are representative of all humanity.

Another element of the commons is the joint use of natural subsistence resources, whose property is held neither in private nor in public, in the sense of belonging to the State. This is something

difficult even to perceive in the West, particularly in countries with no tradition of common law such as Italy. It has been pointed out however that private property has prevailed for a limited and recent period of human history while collective property is the original form of land tenure prevailing through the bulk of human history. (Paolo Grossi, *An Alternative to Private Property*, Chicago, Chicago Press, 1981; Edward P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, New York, The New Press, 1993). In Western culture Nature holds no rights, so as to avoid human rights over natural resources being rendered void by the withering of the physical base on which they rest, be it water, air, land, or fire/energy. (see recent Constitutions passed in Bolivia and Ecuador).

The Market-State dichotomy, a founding principle of the market economy under capitalism, is now under attack due to the ecological crisis induced by bad management of natural resources both by the State and by the Market. The Market-State dichotomy is also being questioned by scholars, who point out the role of modern Western States in privatising resources and reducing political democracy to parliamentary democracy. Citizens participation to public choices – scholars say - is not a price to pay, but a resource to utilise. (Ugo Mattei, Laura Nader, *Plunder: When the Rule of the Law is Illegal*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Whatever their geographical configuration and the historical period considered, the commons represent a system of social relations based on cooperation and reciprocity. They provide sustenance, security and independence, yet do not produce commodities. They express a productive and social order based on cooperation, not on competition. (The Ecologist, *Whose Common Future?*, vol. 22, n. 4, July-August 1992)

The commons are an institution that has survived through time in spite of the enclosure to which they have been exposed over the past several centuries. They survive both because they are flexible and capable of adjustment and because they embody inalienable human rights, spaces of self-organising that satisfy the need of social relations embedded in human nature. In brief, they express a mode of social organisation alternative to that of *homo oeconomicus*, as theorised in mainstream economics.

The commons cannot be alienated since communities are not the proprietor of the resources on which the commons subsist; and this holds even when products are exchanged between communities. When the question arises as to whom natural resources belong to, the answer is “nobody” since natural resources and the ecosystem services of Nature are a free gift to all beings, human and non human.

In Feudal Europe property of land and other natural resources on which communities made their living belonged to the “prince” (the aristocracy and the Church), who was also the judge sitting in courts to solve conflicts over the commons. In the countries of the South, instead, the property of those natural resources belonged traditionally to local communities, who were the village authorities. All changed with the national State and private property, competing to appropriate the commons.

Local communities fought back, and in some cases succeeded to keep their rights over the resources. But generally speaking the enclosure went on and made the remaining commons appear as an unwanted legacy of the past, something which is irrelevant and could be done away with. This holds for all kinds of commons - water, forests, fishing rights, jointly run agricultural fields. Natural catastrophes such as that of British Petroleum in the Gulf of Mexico in Spring 2010 or the 2004 tsunami in Southeast Asia show that it is wrong to consider the commons as something belonging to the past; but this seems not enough to stop prevailing trends.

The commons are also eco and cultural systems. They are the foundation of life since they supply essential goods such as water and food, shelter, fuel and medicines. These are goods that the capitalist market can supply only in part, and in any case only as commodities to buy on the market under prices and conditions that consumers are forced to accept, without any control over the allocation of natural resources nor over prices and the quality of the final products.

The distinction between local and global commons, often used in the literature, is not well founded since “the global is always a globalised local”: the global system that today governs the world is not universal in any epistemological way but the globalised version of a local tradition – usually of Western European origin – that has been able to impose itself violently on the rest of the world. “The construction of the global is responsible for the destruction of the environment, i.e. of resources with which local populations survive...., it is the political tool with which the dominant forces escape their responsibilities, letting them fall over local communities.” (Vandana Shiva, *The Greening of the Global Reach*”, in W. Sachs, ed., *Global Ecology*, Zed Books, London 1993, p.150).

To conclude on this point, the commons are local systems, diverse in space even in the same historical period of time, and exactly for this reason they represent a realistic alternative (but not the only alternative) to the paradigm of the market. Their diversity and flexibility allow for the best resource use avoiding over-exploitation, deterioration and destruction which are inevitable in the capitalist system. Moreover they promote human creativity, intelligence and energy, which are the most scarce and most important resources of a society that has to be ecologically and socially sustainable.

The new enclosures

Climate change is one of the most important enclosures to date, caused by the emission of greenhouse gases due to fossil fuel combustions and deforestation. The atmosphere, which was once a commons everybody could use, has now been appropriated by oil, coal, energy, steel, cement and automobile corporations, to discharge the polluting products generated by their production processes. To this end, they discharge in the atmosphere a quantity of gases greater than what the atmosphere can absorb. The amount of CO₂ produced by fossil-fuel energy has deprived human beings, animals and plants of their share of clean air, giving rise to global climate changes for which poor pay the higher price even if least responsible. The market mechanism of CO₂ shares, defined by the 1997 Kyoto Protocol - according to which polluters may buy pollution credits from those emitting less CO₂ – creates a second level of enclosure of the atmosphere giving for free property rights on the atmosphere freely to those who pollute more than others, such as multinationals and the rich countries of the North.

The loss of biodiversity and the patents of seeds and knowledge necessary for their conservation and improvement are another important case of new enclosures, carried out at the expenses of peasants, natives and local communities, who were their keepers for centuries and millennia. Biodiversity changes and evolves through time: the genetic heritage now existing on Earth is the result of evolutionary processes spanning 3.8 billion years. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, one of the most complete and reliable study of the earth ecosystems published by the World Resources Institute in 2005, claims that human impact has fundamentally modified biodiversity to some extent irreversibly, and mostly in terms of species losses.

In the last few decades the slow decline of biodiversity has become a worrisome trend. The 2008 Living Planet Report compiled by World Wildlife Fund (WWF) indicates that in the last 35 years the world population doubled while animal populations decreased by one third and the areas

covered by virgin forests (where most of biodiversity is located) shrank by 50 percent. The WWF report, which covers 1680 animal species, reveals a loss of biodiversity equal to 28 percent, with a peak of 35 percent, in freshwater ecosystems, 44 percent in the drylands and up to 51 percent in the tropics. FAO estimates confirm that 75 percent of crop varieties are already lost and that out of 30 thousand edible species only 30 contribute to food requirements for 95 percent of the world population. It is therefore possible that thousands of other varieties will be lost in the next few decades.

Patents for seeds and traditional knowledge are the other face of the same coin. One of the most controversial steps of the enclosure process is the Papal Bull emitted in the year 1500, which allowed Cristoforo Colombo to conquer the Americas. The 1995 agreements on international trade – the World Trade Organization (WTO) and Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIP's) - consider seeds and plants “intellectual property rights”, i.e. a product of the mind, not an important component of Nature. Agreements on international commerce have thus cancelled the common rights of peasants, natives and local communities to plant their seeds, obliging peasants to buy seeds patented by multinationals which demand royalties and forcing Africans with HIV/Aids to buy patented drugs from companies whose products ultimately come from biopiracy.

World hunger is one of the most serious and immoral problems of the last few decades. It has several causes, each one tied to one or more processes of enclosure of a common. First of all, it has to do with land enclosure in the rural economies of the South. Other structural causes are water scarcity, climate change, interferences in hidrological cycles, loss of land fertility, industrial agriculture, feed vs food competition and the monocultures of basic crops (in the South) to serve as fuel for automobiles (in the North). The 2009 FAO Report on world hunger estimates that the hungry are over one thousand million people and that a few millions – the majority of them landless peasants in the South - die from hunger each year, while the number of Northern overweight people in the North increases each year. According to the FAO, the geographical distribution of y is this: 642 million in Asia and the Pacific, 265 million in Sub-Sahara Africa, 53 million in Latin America and the Caribbean, 42 million in the Near East and North Africa, 15 million in the developed countries.

Water privatisation has taken new connotations in the last years and decades, one of which is particularly odious – the construction of mega dams. The phenomenon is not new but is has become more serious after the Second World War thanks to the World Bank's policy in the field of energy. The World Bank and governments are convinced that large-scale dams are necessary to produce energy and sustain industrial development. But such dams are a serious risk from the point of view of population's security. They imply heavy and devastating environmental and social costs and the creation of large numbers of refugees for dislocated local people, who are moreover excluded from the political decision to build the dam and from the fruits of its work. The energy produced by the dams is used by big farming and manufacturing corporations, not by the displaced peasants.

The number of dams 15 meters high and above has increased from a little more than 5000 in 1950 to almost 50.000 at the end of last century, most of them located in the South (25 per cent in China). Put under trial since the 1980's by the international public opinion and by popular movements everywhere, particularly in countries such as India where at the time the mammoth Sardar Samovar Dam was under construction on the Narmada river, (Arundhati Roy, *The Grater Common Good*, Delhi, IBD, 1999) their constructions continues although at a lower pace. Part of this trend is evinced in the Three Gorges Dam – called the Great Wall of the 21st century – built on the Yangtze river in China. Inaugurated in 2006 and not yet finished, this dam is 185 meters high and has a water reservoir 600 km long, the biggest in the world. It has taken 13 years to built at the cost of

about 25 thousand million Euro. It has already submerged 13 large cities and 116 urban centres, transforming over one million people in refugees.

The privatisation of the sky is another of the new enclosures. Around Earth there is now a flood of technological tools for telephone, television, computer networks and other means of communication, and by vehicles parking in orbit over people's heads and by military and civilian airplanes releasing heavy quantities of greenhouse gases. All these activities, sometimes illicit or covered in military secrecy, are a source of great profit for multinationals and governments, using a common good free of charge, such as space at the expense of people's health and security. Civilian air traffic is an important aspect of this problem, since air transport has grown quickly and it could grow even more with the introduction of biofuels, wrongly considered to emit net zero CO₂. This proposition is not true, however, when the entire production cycle of biofuels is taken in consideration - from the cutting of virgin forests to the growth of monocultures of soy beans, sugarcane and palm oil, to the likely additional expansion of air traffic to increasing number of new airports.

The lack of maintenance of the territory produces heavy consequences such as increased desertification and soil erosion, and therefore facilitates so-called natural catastrophes which are not natural but socially determined as in the case of landslides occurring when it rains more than expected. This lack of maintenance aggravates the consequences of natural catastrophes, as in the 2004 Southeast Asia tsunami, where almost 300000 people died, many of which could have been rescued if the sea coasts had been protected by mangroves instead of having been built over. Many of the negative consequences of a catastrophe could be avoided or heavily reduced with the appropriate maintenance of a territory to protect the coasts, govern rivers and the flux of water, avoid deforestation so that so that agricultural and forest biomass performs its role of countering soil erosion and landslides, and absorbing CO₂ and other greenhouse gases. For all these reasons, the lack of maintenance of a territory can be included among the new enclosures, whose effect is to appropriate the means of subsistence belonging to local communities.

The return of the commons. A proposal

The crisis of global capitalism, which appeared in all its depth with the defaults on subprime loans in the USA, has accentuated the crisis of politics and that of political parties as the privileged subjects of politics. The demand that political parties make room for movements as the new subjects for alternative is more and more frequent in the West. What movements are we talking about? This is difficult to answer given the differences existing among countries, in general and specifically North and South, the most important being the rule of the law, the concept of democracy and the role of political parties. The rule of the law existing in the North is a Western ideology to justifies the foe of the West over the world. What is needed for an alternative is a strategic vision and a comparative knowledge of different systems, which is not available at the present. The case of Italy I make below can to some extent represent Western European countries, although I am aware of the limits deriving from the Western culture within which is proposal is formulated.

In today's Italy many subjects are a legitimate part of the movements: all the workers in factories in crisis, including those of the Fiat factory in Pomigliano d'Arco (36 percent of the factory total) who recently voted against the referendum by which Sergio Marchionne, Fiat CEO, asked the factory workers to give up the rights granted by law and by contract as a condition for producing the Panda model there instead of Poland; the young unemployed; groups of citizens fighting against urban environmental destruction; all organisations and associations that experiment new ways of producing and living. Other subjects are comprised of some local governments, a part of

the trade unions, some trade and cultural organisations, the entrepreneurs running out of steam, and groups competing on the market in ways different from that of plunder. Subjects such as these exist everywhere in the North under forms specific to each country, but all try to open a new public space.

The cultural context within which the movements for the alternative can work is that given by the limits of Nature and natural resources. To follow this perspective, it is necessary to realize an ecological conversion of markets and productions, i.e. to “territorialise” markets and productions starting from the most sensible such as the automobile – in Italy as well as in all industrial countries. The automobile as it is now has no future both because of pollution and because it doesn’t serve the purpose of mobility. Another sector of the economy and society needing quick conversion is that of energy, with must opt for renewable sources the technology for which exists, but not the political will. Another priority is industrial agriculture, which has to make space for peasant small-scale agriculture, using traditional techniques free of agrochemicals. The forth priority is the maintenance of the territory; the fifth, the use and reuse of metals and other minerals both because some of them are scarce - or have become scarce due to over-exploitation - and because metal and mineral extraction is a wound to the Earth. Other priorities are water, public services and so on.

The list is long. What needs to be stressed here is that the conversion to sustainable resource use I am talking about is not that planned by the Western State, centralized and bureaucratic. It is instead that carried out by movements and communities at the local level: at the scale of single factories, of farm, in the districts of a town, in the town. The planning we need is that which results from thousand of initiatives, not from the State monopoly (Guido Viale, *Prove di un mondo diverso. Itinerari di lavoro dentro la crisi*, Rimini, NdA Press, 2009).

Although the overall damage caused by financial capitalism goes beyond the individual advantages that the system once granted (at least to a part of the world population), the critique of the system hasn’t sofar produced any alternative. This is due mainly to strong resistance by the prevailing ruling class who takes advantage of its position and is able to lie and make it appear as if its lies were true. Another reason – the decisive one – is the absence of a leaderships with strategic vision, capable of mobilizing the people. However the situation may change, since the common goods appropriated by the ruling classes are primary goods, indispensable to satisfy the needs of the population impoverished by the crisis and unemployed, that part of the population which is most exposed to the “iron” laws of the capitalist market.

In this context, the strategic questions to face are many, and all as heavy as stones:

First, it should be agreed that Keynesian politics is outdated and that the present crisis cannot be dealt with by raising demand and public expenditure as President Roosevelt did in 1929 to solve the Great Crisis. The present crisis is caused by speculative finance, environmental disruption and bad politics, which in 1929 were not as profound as they are today. Neither did the same level of market globalisation exists, nor the same level of privatisation of nature nor the same level of commodification of life in all its aspects.

Second, it would be necessary to agree that the State-Market dichotomy has become inadequate, that the subjects of change are several and that there isn’t any more a single historical subject for an alternative system– neither the proletariat, nor the working class, nor the enlightened bourgeoisie, and even less the multitude.

Third, in the process of change and territorialisation, local communities or movements have a central role to play. This is a point to be debated so as to avoid the charge that the return to the commons is a return to the past.

Fourth, the word progress is also out. Too often it has been used to justify the greatest injustices of the last century, starting with the war. Another word that is out is development, but progress is even more hard to die, even in the scholar's discourse.

Fifth, it should be recognized that politics is discredited and that this can only be overcome through local communities self-government to decide over local resources and local questions related to their territory. This change is necessary but not simple: history doesn't help. However never in history the movement has been global, and this can make the difference.

The "return" of the commons, as I have called my proposal, goes beyond the reclamation of the commons. It is a proposal to be considered according to the above strategic perspective. It requires us to consider the environmental movements both as instances that represent the needs of the people living in actual ecosystems and as a world movement imposing political change and new forms of direct democracy.

Today the movements of the North are at a strong disadvantage since only governments - state or local - have title to decide, and this limits the democratic participation of citizens over matters that directly concern them. The present setup, according to which common goods are part of the public trust is no guarantee against their erosion and privatisation. This is also because corruption of public power and bad politics are always lurking in the background.

I end by posing two last questions: *first*, my proposal needs to be problematized so as to compensate for natural, historical and geopolitical difference among places, since communities - as people - are not necessarily good hearted and just.

Second: the return of the commons will not be a real alternative to capitalism, unless the new communities are *united* among themselves and *open* to the world or, better still, cosmopolitan.

