It takes thirty leaves to make the apple.
—Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh

Rediscovering Our Common Wealth

By David Bollier

Americans are a people so fixated on the market and so habituated to thinking about property as tangible things owned by individuals—this is *mine!*—that we have trouble understanding that some of the most valuable wealth we own is collective and social in character.

These forgotten assets and social resources can be called the American commons. They sit plain as day in our midst. They are indispensable to our daily lives and to the proper functioning of education and science, culture and democracy, creativity and the economy. Yet as a people of the market, we are blinded by some deep and entrenched cultural prejudices.

We take for granted wilderness and open spaces, for example, not seeing that they invisibly provide irreplaceable ecological services to farmers, foresters, and fishermen. We do not realize that federal drug research quietly generates most of the therapeutic breakthroughs later touted by private companies as their own. And we do not fully understand that countless business innovations and bodies of knowledge have been generated via the Internet only because it functions as a commons open to all, not as a market accessible on a pay-per-use basis.

Just as a previous generation considered clean air and water to be an inexhaustible form of wealth, so this generation regards the words, images, and characters of our shared culture—the public domain—to be infinite and self-replenishing. But, of course, the public domain cannot last very long when McDonald's threatens food businesses that use "Mc" in their names; when Mattel goes after art photographs and websites that use Barbie dolls to comment on American beauty; when a German magazine publisher claims that he, not Oprah (or the public), owns the letter "O" as a magazine title; and when the American Book Publishers Association accuses public libraries of copyright piracy for sharing digital works.

The commons, in short, is under siege. This is largely because we do not recognize its presence or value. If it takes thirty leaves to make an apple, it is our Western conceit to focus exclusively on the apple, as if the leaves of the tree, the roots, the trunk, the orchard, and the ecosystem really don't count for much. This may be why so many of our commonly owned resources are abused. Fixated on the fruit, we only belatedly realize that a vast, complex apparatus of collective wealth lies behind even the simplest output. "The thing that troubles us about the industrial economy," writes essayist Wendell Berry, "is that it tends to destroy what it does not comprehend, and that it is *dependent* upon much that it does not comprehend."

It is important to realize that the commons is not the relic of some pastoral age or a quaint throwback practiced by villagers in Africa and Indonesia. Even in high-tech America, home to the biggest, most muscular market system in the world, the commons is ubiquitous. It is an underrated reservoir of value-creation. It is also a powerful system of social governance and a crucible for democratic aspiration. One of the preeminent challenges of our times is to recognize the commons for what it is: a vulnerable, much-abused genre of wealth that we must vigorously protect from heedless market activity.

New York City's Community Gardens

It helps to consider a few examples. A good place to start is a parable from one of the most market-obsessed sites on the globe: New York City.

A few years ago, the people of New York City were embroiled in a controversy about dozens of community gardens that had sprung up, as if by magic, without the help of either markets or government. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the New York City real estate market had abandoned hundreds of buildings and city lots as unprofitable. Investors stopped paying taxes on the sites, and the city became the legal owner of most of the properties—some eleven thousand nontaxable vacant lots by the late 1990s. Soon, many became rubble-strewn lots for trash and junked cars, for drug dealing and prostitution, with predictable effects on neighborhoods.

Distressed by this deterioration, local residents began reclaiming the abandoned sites. More than eight hundred neighborhood groups, using their own sweat, imagination, and community spirit, organized themselves to clean up the discarded tires and trash and plant dogwood trees and vegetable gardens. Families gathered in some gardens for baptisms, birthday parties, poetry readings, mentoring programs, and weddings.

By the 1990s, a surprising thing happened: the greenery and social vitality engendered by the gardens boosted the rents of nearby storefronts and apartment buildings. The commons was starting to deliver what the private market alone could not—the rejuvenation of blighted neighborhoods. Alerted to the growing economic value of the sites, Mayor Guiliani in 1997 proposed auctioning 115 of them to developers in order to raise between $3.5 to $10 million (at a time when the city had a $2.1 billion surplus). One city official, in support of the mayor, declared, "These properties should go for some useful purpose, rather than lying fallow."

The Mayor's plan provoked hundreds of citizens to protest, some through civil disobedience, in attempts to save the gardens. Defenders of the gardens saw the auction as a privatization of public resources, a government seizure of community-created economic value that would chiefly benefit investors and speculators. "We're all for development," said one activist, "but when community gardeners go in and make a neighborhood livable, I think that needs to be respected and rewarded."

The debate essentially was about whether the gardens should be regarded as commons—a type of wealth creation that stems from people acting together as a community—or as an economic resource, pure and simple, which should be alienated from its social and local context and sold for as much money as possible.

And how did it all end? I'll save that for later. The point of the story is that New York City's community gardens represent a special kind of wealth created by the people. Neither government nor the market is capable of creating this kind of wealth because it is based on social and moral relationships among individuals and rooted in sharing, collaboration, loyalty, and trust. These intangibles are unquantifiable and, to economists at least, are often presumed to be of little consequence.

But the coming together of people in a commons is not just a warm and fuzzy social phenomenon. It also has economic value. This is easily overlooked because the surplus value generated by the commons is frequently privatized or converted into money (alienated), and so there is no chance to *see* the commons as functioning and intact. Assumedly, only the market matters.

But sometimes, legal or technical ingenuity can find the means to prevent the enclosure of the commons. Enclosure is the term used to describe the aristocratic seizure of common forests and meadows in England during medieval times and especially in the eighteenth century. In order to exploit these resources for the marketplace, the protocapitalists of the time privatized and pressed into market production all sorts of natural resources that had previously been shared in common. Such enclosures introduced new market productivity, but they also deprived the commoners of what was rightfully theirs and created vast inequalities of wealth.

How Gift Economies Create Wealth

Commons that are based on the moral and social cooperation of a community have been called gift economies. Participants in a gift economy relate to each other not through market transactions but through voluntary gifts that have no assurance of a payback. The community's very functioning rewards participants over time.

This seems counterintuitive. How can something of value be created by giving away one's time, energy, or property? Conventional economic theory cannot explain it. Yet the community gardens show that gift exchange in a commons can create enormous value.

Perhaps the more obvious example for our times is the Internet, a gigantic platform for spawning and hosting gift economies. The rewards that accrue from participating in such an economy are not embodied in money, which is impersonal and transferable. The rewards accrue through having good-standing membership in a robust community that works together to create value.

For example, genealogical websites have proved to be incredibly efficient in enabling people to research their family trees. Online sharing and advice conducted among members of a social community, without money changing hands, is typically more effective than any business-based scheme for facilitating genealogical research.

The same dynamic can be seen in websites that amass thousands of bird-siting reports for a database that charts the ecological health of a region. So, too, with the Los Alamos e-Print Archive, an information commons that hosts more than 170,000 research papers contributed by physicists around the world. There are literally thousands of other affinity-based websites that organize and generate new forms of wealth creation in ways that the market simply cannot.

One of the most stunning examples of this may be the Linux computer operating system. A global community of tens of thousands of volunteer Linux programmers created a program that is now used on more than 27 percent of U.S. servers. Despite the lack of a corporate organization, capital, or market incentives (pay for work), Linux programmers collaborated via the Internet and created a highly complex operating system that Microsoft regards as a serious threat.

Key to the success of Linux—and to hundreds of other open source programs—is a licensing contract known as the GPL, or General Public License, which allows anyone to alter and reuse the code but not to privatize it. This assures that all surplus value created by the programming community remains in the commons. The GPL allows free riders but prohibits them from seizing the shared resource for themselves alone. In this way, the GPL has enabled the software commons to survive and flourish.

Most of the commons considered so far revolve around either information or social relationships, which do not get used up. But can a commons flourish if the resource is tangible, finite, and depletable? Skeptics might correctly point out that a commons of land, water, or air, is more likely to end up as a "tragedy of the commons," the proverbial situation in which overexploitation of the resource ends up ruining it.

But even here, the commons is greatly misunderstood as a mechanism for managing collective wealth. Contrary to the assumptions of many economists, local communities, especially in developing nations, frequently manage natural resources as commons without any resulting overexploitation. High mountain meadows of Switzerland have operated as grazing commons since 1483, and the *zanjera* irrigation communities of the Philippines have functioned as sustainable commons since the 1600s. A growing literature on "common-pool resources" is identifying the pivotal design feature of successful local commons.

Some U.S. environmentalists are now exploring whether local commons can be devised to manage natural resources more effectively than federal or state regulation alone. There is intriguing evidence that a properly structured commons regime in certain settings—fisheries, western grasslands, forests—may provide a vehicle for warring parties to resolve their conflicts and manage the resource cooperatively.

The Abuses of the American Commons

The larger question is whether, at the federal level, Americans can reclaim and manage the many collectively owned assets that are being rapidly privatized and abused, often with the government's sanction. Americans collectively own forests, mountains, and rangeland that constitute one-third of the surface area of the country. Yet historically, these resources have been grievously mismanaged by the government, which has been more intent on giving mining, oil, and timber interests cheap or free use of the public's natural resources and in turning a blind eye to the environmental harm.

Other examples abound. Americans own the airwaves that broadcasters use, but broadcasters pay nothing to the public for the right to use this valuable capital asset. Once a range of public interest obligations gave the public a modest payback, but those Federal Communication Commission rules were largely deregulated out of existence in the 1990s. To make matters worse, in 1996 Congress gave broadcasters another prime slice of electromagnetic spectrum, this time to help them to convert to digital transmissions. Again, broadcasters paid nothing for this resource, estimated to be worth $70 billion or more.

An MIT study in 1995 found that eleven of the fourteen new drugs that industry identified as the most medically significant over the preceding twenty-five years had their origins in work sponsored by the government. Some of the most well-known drugs that the federal government helped develop include Prozac (for clinical depression), Capoten (for hypertension), and a variety of HIV- and AIDS-related drugs such as AZT, ddI, ddC, d4T, Ziagen, and Norvir. Yet time and again, the federal government virtually gave away its drug research to drug companies under exclusive licenses. It then allowed the companies to charge consumers exorbitant prices. Americans end up paying twice—as taxpayers sponsoring the riskiest kinds of drug research and as consumers forced to pay inflated monopoly prices.

One of the most conspicuous enclosures of the commons may be the commercialization of public spaces and culture. Sports teams routinely try to commodify fan culture by selling the naming rights to sports stadiums. Owners may make millions of dollars, but the sell-off is an act of contempt for local communities and fans who cherish the rich histories associated with names like the Boston Garden, Candlestick Park, and Mile-High Stadium.

Another odious enclosure of the cultural commons is captive-audience "ambush" advertising. Now that small video screens are popping up on buses, elevators, and ATM machines, and ads are being placed above men's urinals and in movie theaters before the feature film, it is becoming increasingly difficult to have commercial-free experiences in public spaces. Or consider how childhood itself is being turned into a seamless web of marketing experiences as merchandisers take over films, toys, video games, fast-food restaurants, action figures, and books.

The rampant privatization and enclosure of the American commons may, in fact, be one of the hallmarks of our time. Everything seems to be for sale while the deeper sources of wealth that are shared, and unacknowledged, are relentlessly colonized by market forces. We Americans are eager to seize the apple but not patient or wise enough to respect the thirty leaves, the tree, the orchard, or the ecology.

And what of the fate of New York City's community gardens? In the end they were recognized as both commons and market resources. With the help of a surprise $1 million donation by actress Bette Midler, the Trust for Public Land bought 112 of the community garden lots for $3 million. The community gardens were saved by enclosing them in property rights, in the form of a land trust. They became "property on the outside, commons on the inside," a phrase coined by Yale law professor Carol Rose to describe marketable property that is allowed to function internally among recognized members as a commons.

A large, unacknowledged question for our time is the fate of the commons. Our challenge is to learn to recognize the many commons in our midst. We must also begin to invent new mechanisms—public policies, technologies, and social norms—for protecting this misunderstood species of wealth.

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