The Global Idea of ‘the Commons’
Critical Interventions: A Forum for Social Analysis
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Edited by Donald M. Nonini
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Edited by

Donald M. Nonini
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What is now at stake at this point in world history is control over ‘the commons’—the great variety of natural, physical, social, intellectual, and cultural resources that make human survival possible. By ‘the commons’ I mean those assemblages and ensembles of resources that human beings hold in common or in trust to use on behalf of themselves, other living human beings, and past and future generations of human beings, and which are essential to their biological, cultural, and social reproduction.¹

Various kinds of commons have long existed as viable and durable arrangements for providing for the needs of human survival. This is best documented in the case of natural-resource commons by a very large literature in human ecology, political ecology, and policy studies, with hundreds of case studies of long-term stable arrangements for the use of common-pool resources, such as land, waterways and irrigation works, forest stands, fisheries, and game and wild food plant catchment areas (Bromley et al. 1992; Dietz, Ostrom, and Stern 2003; National Research Council 1986; Ostrom 1990). This research shows
that Hardin’s (1968) supposed situation of the “tragedy of the commons,” in which users compete with one another to appropriate commons resources, thus beggaring one another and so exhausting the commons, is far from inevitable. This is not to say that common-pool resources may not be depleted or that commons do not come to an end, but that the outcome depends on social and institutional arrangements. According to Ostrom et al. (1999: 278): “Although tragedies have undoubtedly occurred, it is also obvious that for thousands of years people have self-organized to manage common-pool resources, and users often do devise long-term, sustainable institutions for governing these resources.” It is particularly worth noting that when left to themselves, poor people have worked out commons arrangements for sharing scarce resources (e.g., coastal fisheries, highland irrigation water, unfarmed pasture lands) essential to their survival, often in marginal ecological zones and in some places for centuries (Cordell and McKean 1992; McKean 1992; Netting 1981; Trawick 2003). Commons do not come with guarantees, but some do endure over long periods of time without them.

However, during the last three decades, corporations allied with Northern scientists and universities, national and regional governments, and international financial institutions (IFIs) have, through a variety of mechanisms associated with neo-liberal globalization (international treaties, adjudication tribunals, structural adjustment policies, etc.), acted to dispossess large proportions of the world’s population of their commons’ resources and enclose them for profit making. Those belonging to the corporate alliance (firms, governments, IFIs, illegal and illicit enterprises, criminal networks, Northern universities, professionals, technocrats) have acted as if the people who have long depended on these resources for survival are no longer entitled to use them—or even to exist, since
they have become increasingly superfluous to capitalist production.

The issue for those being dispossessed is one of survival. The impoverished peoples living in the cities of the North, the slums of the urban South, and the rural regions of the South have not accepted their relegation to the status of living dead with equanimity or passivity. Instead, throughout the global South and in the cities of the global North, large numbers of people have formed movements to defend the commons in all their variety. They have come together in diverse settings in struggles against the corporate alliance’s control of the common-pool resources—natural, social, intellectual, and cultural—upon which their own social and personal survival depend. These conflicts are not only for control of common material resources, but also for control of the cultural meanings that define the commons and the processes that would preserve or destroy them. Why the commons has now become a social fact for so many people in so many diverse settings, and why it embodies so many cultural associations, requires further discussion below; however, the claim that it has become a salient social (and political) fact over the last three decades is not in dispute.

The idea of the commons has emerged as a global idea, and commons have emerged as sites of conflict around the world. The essays in this forum seek to assay strategically the situations of selected commons in a variety of diagnostic sites where they exist, the ways in which they are being transformed by the incursions of capital and state, and the ways in which they are becoming the locus of struggle for those who depend on them to survive.
What Kinds of Commons Are There, and Why Does It Matter?

It is theoretically valuable and politically crucial to distinguish the kinds of commons now under threat by the onslaught of the corporate alliance. All commons are functioning arrangements that connect people to the material and social things they share and use to survive and operate outside of—but most frequently alongside—capitalist markets. Studies in human ecology refer to commons as “common property regimes” and distinguish ‘common property’ from ’state’ and ’private’ property (Bromley 1992; McCay and Acheson 1987). The distinction between common and private property is misleading in that all commons (with the exception of global commons, such as space or Antarctica) include some people but exclude others from membership, and are private in the latter extended sense. In case anyone was tempted to treat commons as utopias, it should be pointed out that often outsiders are excluded by violence from the commons resources when they try to use them—as fishermen seeking to move into fishing areas controlled by a fishing commons have often learned to their regret when their boats have later been sunk or their nets or traps cut (Acheson 1987; Cordell and McKean 1992).

Strictly speaking, private property is individually owned property, which state law and policy allow to be treated as a commodity, whereas members of a commons refuse to allow the resources that they jointly control as common property to be so treated, even though legally they often could be. Nor is common property always easily distinguished from state property. Ambiguities occur when governments subject already existing commons systems to monitoring and regulation, for example, when the state acts as arbiter between competing commons groups seeking access to resources. Moreover, the kinds of commons discussed below all may operate on more than one
scale—the local, infra-national, national, transnational, or global.

Natural-resource commons (fisheries, forests, land, water supplies, etc.) show depletion of a resource-base stock or flow over time (Gudeman 2001: 52–53), with the consequence that the resource is a “rival good,” in that a quantity accessed by one user prevents another potential user from using that quantity of it (Nelson 2004: 462). Viewed overall, natural-resource commons show this “subtractability”—what one user takes is not available to another, and over time continued use subtracts from the total quantity of the resource available to all users (Oakeson 1992: 43–44). One form of natural-resource commons would be organized around resources that are not only depletable but also non-renewable. No amount of technical effort could be expended to renew and regenerate more of these resources for future use. Such commons exist only hypothetically at this point. If access to fossil-based fuels were organized around commons, this would be an example. The other form of natural-resource commons is organized around resources that are depletable but renewable. Resources such as farm land, pastures, forests, fisheries, coral reefs, irrigation, and potable waters can be regenerated through appropriate human effort at restocking. Such commons exist in large numbers. What is at issue is not just whether a resource is capable of being renewed under specific ecological conditions, but also whether sufficient and effective efforts at renewal are in fact occurring. This latter question is precisely the political one of whether arrangements exist that do or do not provide for renewal. Simply put, within ecological parameters, commons create the conditions for renewal while neither current capitalist processes of production nor state interventions do. In this forum section, the articles by Pickles, Lu, and Boyer deal with such natural-resource commons.
Social commons are organized around access by users to social resources created by specific kinds of human labor: caring for the sick, the elderly, and children; educating children; maintaining households; finding or creating pure water; removing waste; even policing. There is a vast variety of such arrangements, of course, whose differences can qualitatively be determined, but the point is precisely that all polities have some variant of social commons, often organized and administered in part by the state. These social resources are finite and thus depletable, once a certain stock of them has been created at a specific stage of social development. But they also renewable, if investment by their users in maintaining them within the commons occurs at a rate sufficient for their replenishment. Again, whether they are renewed or not is a political question. Most social-resource commons are organized along lines of family, kin, and local affiliations: ‘community’ might be most viably defined as all those who self-reflexively have rights to partake of and obligations to renew certain common-pool resources (Gudeman 2001: 27). Common social resources are rival goods (e.g., if one person who is sick or injured has access to a physician’s time, another will be unable to see that doctor), but they also possess ‘positive externalities’—that is, positive effects on the lives of people who are not their users. The more people who use pure drinking water, the fewer the number of people who need access to health care; the more children who receive adequate care when they are reared, the fewer who later develop anti-social traits requiring policing. In short, the greater the number of people who have equal access to these social resources, the less stress placed on their stocks as a whole. In this forum, the essays by Pickles, Boyer, and Smith-Nonini bear directly on such social commons.
Introduction

Intellectual and cultural commons are organized around shared intellectual and cultural resources, such as scientific concepts, theories, methods, data, technologies and devices of research, and artistic and musical products, artistic and creative skills, artistic and artisanal technologies, etc. Both kinds of commons are constituted by human activities defined by “deep” and serious play (Huizinga 1955). Although like all resources they are finite, intellectual and cultural resources are non-rival goods; that is, one person engaged in learning a scientific method or playing music does not diminish the learning or pleasure of other people simultaneously doing the same. To the contrary, one can argue that intellectual and cultural resources can be created and regenerated only through social exchange and sociability—and often the more intense and frequent the social interactions, the greater the use-value of the intellectual or cultural products that come out of them. The greater the number of scientists working on a research problem sharing data, methods, etc., the more readily the problem is solved and the more effective the solution. The more people who share their musical skills, tastes, and instruments, the richer and more diverse will be the music they will be able to play and listen to. Unlike natural-resource and social commons, which are subtractive, intellectual and cultural commons are both non-subtractive and generative. Both intellectual and cultural commons operate on the basis of a “gift economy” (Bollier 2002: 31), whereby those participating share a sense of a common project and contribute what they produce to it in return for a variety of non-commercial motivations (e.g., seeking prestige).

Finally, there is the recent emergence of species commons, where the resources in question are a number of inherent attributes of humans as a species—human bodies as such, body organs, and gene sequences,
etc.—considered by widely shared (if not universal) moral or religious codes to be ineligible for commodity status, or “market-inalienable” (Radin 1992). Those who participate in these commons do so by enunciating and enforcing shared norms that these resources are inalienable attributes of living persons and should never be treated as commodities: because they are not fungible, their separation from a person of whom they are attributes does that person irrevocable injury. Thus, norms have come into existence against the commodification of embryos, of body organs, of children for adoption, and of human beings as slaves. Many people also treat laboratory-derived human gene sequences and genetically modified organisms as market-inalienable. What is being shared within a species commons among participants are not these attributes as such, but the human labor expended to protect them from commodification. To participants in a species commons—whether activists in the women’s movement seeking to block trafficking of sexual slaves, or physicians seeking to prevent the trade in human organs—commodification of human attributes is a ‘category mistake’ incommensurate with their status as definitive for species or personal integrity.

These commons in species attributes have largely gone unnoticed, emerging only recently as objects of struggle for those opposed to new illicit and illegal markets that have been made profitable for the first time by contemporary trends in transnational travel, trade, invention of new financial mechanisms (e.g., derivatives), and risk management (LiPuma and Lee 2004). Although species commons are new, they deserve attention because the species attributes they seek to sequester from commodification are almost universally considered essential to definitions of what it is to be human. In this forum, the essay by Scharper and Cunningham deals with one such commons—that of human genetic materials.