

FORUM

INTRODUCTION

The Global Idea of ‘the Commons’

Donald M. Nonini

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.² 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 (Oakerson 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, Holt, 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.

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).³ 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.

The Prevalence of Commons and Hybrid Connections

As to why ‘the commons’ has become a global idea, one might start by making the obvious point that although large numbers of persons are increasingly being treated as economically superfluous, this by no means implies that the majority are bereft of control over commons resources—indeed, it is the processes of dispossession that are only now separating them from such resources. Following on a point that Eric Wolf (1969) made long ago with respect to insurgent “middle peasants,” I would argue that those who still have access to commons resources possess the assets and capabilities required to engage in political struggles over the commons, and also have most personally at stake as to the outcomes. However, even those who make up the most dispossessed and distressed groups, such as urban lumpenproletarians of the global South or the ‘precariate’ of Eastern Europe, are engaged in efforts to create social commons within their lives to provide access to resources needed for their survival—food and living space, for instance (Price 2004; see also Pickles’s essay, this issue). Occasionally, those who seek to preserve the commons are victorious in such struggles with corporations, national governments, or other elements in the corporate alliance. Goldman (1998: 7–8) observes that “disgruntled fisherfolk,

forest extractors or women rights' activists actually have the power to stop a World Bank steamroller"—but not in all times or places.

One implication of this point is less obvious. The methods of market valuation that corporations and their sponsoring states apply to common-pool resources and the ways in which these are valued by those who use them on an everyday basis are radically incommensurate, although they frequently co-exist. The functional webs of interdependence that people who organize their lives around common-pool resources have created—not only with respect to these resources but also with respect to one another—cannot be reduced to market valuations, although at the margins the collective product may be subject to external market pricing. There is an ontological gap between inside and outside: within a commons, participants reject the individualist and economic basis of capitalist evaluation (Goldman 1998: 16–17), and deploy discourses of fairness and need, in contrast to outside, where market valuations usually prevail.

This is to say that the whole process of “combined and uneven development” in the history of capitalism (Trotsky 1961) has not gone away; instead, a remarkable variety of hybrid arrangements for the use of common-pool resources exist. There are instances of small-scale, non-capitalist economies with functioning natural-resource commons that still can be found in the peripheries of capitalist imperial expansion (see Holt's essay, this issue). New common property among those experiencing precariousness by being excluded from post-socialist economies has emerged in Eastern Europe (see Pickles's essay, this issue), while remnants of socialist property relations endure elsewhere, as in China (Nonini under review). A large number of residents of the South in rural areas, cities, and towns still have substantial control over public goods such as water treated as common-pool resources (Olivera and Lewis 2004).

Some local economies combine communal natural-resource use with limited capitalist-valuation methods, for example, in selling resources jointly allotted and collected, as in the case of fisheries or other natural-resource commons in the North (Acheson 1987). Wherever capitalist relations of production prevail, as Gibson-Graham (1996: 46–71, 206–237) has pointed out, non-capitalist practices and caring centered on domestic units and the work of social reproduction by women provide common social resources that make men's participation in the capitalist labor force possible. In the tropical and semi-tropical regions in the South, curers, farmers, and others organized around intellectual commons have incorporated into their local knowledge practices using biological materials that confer use-value (for healing, fertility, etc.). These materials have not, until quite recently, been disembedded from these knowledge practices and subjected to market valuations by corporations (Chander and Sunder 2004; Escobar 1995).

In Northern universities, scientific commons formed in the sharing of research knowledge generate products (theories, methods, data, materials) that have not yet been subject to enclosure, although recently their situation has changed radically (see Washburn 2005: 146; Nonini essay, this issue). Cultural commons in music, art, and handicrafts—many of whose creations are being threatened by the copyrighting practices of media corporations (Coombe 1998)—are nonetheless widespread. Cultural commons are particularly central

to sustaining the cultural heritage of ethnic and national minorities (Coombe 2005). Most remarkable has been the emergence of species commons at a number of scales whose participants seek to reserve certain fundamental attributes of the person from commodification.

The masses of people in the global South and North who live and work in hybrid economies that simultaneously juxtapose capitalist institutions (e.g., labor markets) with commons therefore encompass populations in a great range of different circumstances. But what marks them all off is access to common-pool resources that capitalism has not, as yet, succeeded in taking over or arrogating to its own regimes of market valuation. These resources are vital to their economic and social survival. All kinds of commons, the resources they use, and the communities that both use and regenerate them are now in grave peril. This leads to a logical question: what are the conditions that have jeopardized so many different kinds of commons in such diverse sites around the world and that threaten so many aspects of human flourishing?

Crises Compounded? The Weardown of the Commons

It has long been noted that capitalism is prone to periodic crises of overaccumulation that are internal to it and that recur. There is ample evidence that contemporary capitalism is undergoing such a crisis. However, a second kind of qualitatively new crisis may now be unfolding. It takes the form of multi-dimensional and increasingly ubiquitous degradations in the conditions of material life crucial to the existence of capitalism. Until recently, these processes of degradation have not assumed the form of systemic crisis but rather of many disasters inflicted on localized populations and ecosystems in which corporations have first consumed resources to exhaustion and then moved onward—or ‘cut and run’, so to speak. These processes have long been accompanied by enclosure of the various forms of commons discussed above. What appears to be different now is that this pattern of spatial expansion—leaving populations and residual resources in ruin to recover (to the extent possible)—is now reaching its global limits, with an increasing probability of the exhaustion of the recovery of resources that are undergoing continuous, intensive use. As this prospect for a new global involution in the capitalization of resources grows, the frenetic efforts of the corporate alliance to enclose new resources is leading to the worldwide ‘weardown’ of the commons arrangements on which capitalism itself depends. When wear-down of local commons has been transformed into wear-down of commons everywhere, then the “spatio-temporal fixes” of capitalism (Harvey 2003: 108–124) no longer work, and instead a second kind of crisis confronts capitalism—one qualitatively new. My contention is that both kinds of crisis—a perennial overaccumulation crisis and a new crisis of multi-dimensional and nearly ubiquitous wear-down—are conjoined at present.

There is much evidence that capitalism is currently experiencing an uneven but worsening crisis of overaccumulation of capital with little or no way to reinvest surplus capital, given a glut of commodities brought on by an absence

of new and realizable demand throughout much of the global economy (Harvey 2003). The catalyst for the current crisis has been the massive devaluation of labor globally since the 1980s, brought about by the rise of post-Mao China (Harvey 2005). The new financing and credit mechanisms that lubricate ongoing global demand by increasing the debt-bearing capacities of middle and working classes in the North have only deferred the current crisis, and there are signs that the huge debt burden is reaching its structural limits.

Faced by mounting capital surpluses that cannot be invested, corporations and allied nation-states have responded by making massive incursions into the commons across a broad front of heterogeneous areas of material life. The goal is to 'free up' resources heretofore not accessible for commercialization in order to profitably invest excess capital combined with them in new streams of production. Since these incursions confront areas of life where collective resources are not capitalized—that is, not subjected to market logic—and where those who share them are not inclined on their own to capitalize them, the major means for doing so have been the political measures of nation-states, including violence. These incursions are "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey 2003)—combinations of imposed market forces and state violence that dispossess those to whom these resources belong.

These initiatives by the corporate alliance are so encompassing in the areas of material life they touch upon that they represent no less than a campaign for universal commodification of the use-values central to the survival of human beings. By force (as in the case of Iraq) or by renegotiation of sovereignty with states (e.g., by imposing structural adjustment policies and regional or global treaties such as the North American Free Trade Agreement or the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property agreement), corporations, other businesses and allied states have engaged in concerted efforts to capitalize patches and regions of resources that have at most been only partially privatized but not yet made fully available for capitalist development, such as national forests, offshore oil fields, and fresh-water aquifers. They have capitalized resources formerly controlled by local ethnic and tribal groups—farmers and pastoralists long recognized as having specific collective rights to use these resources. They have sought to transform through privatization previously public goods administered by states for the use of citizens into commodities, such as water and electricity. They have enclosed the intellectual and cultural creations of scientific inventors, artists, and craftspeople, which had once freely circulated among creators and users, through the expansion of private intellectual property rights. They have created new illicit and illegal markets in species attributes—in human beings, children, body organs—that are not considered commodities by most people, and aim to extend as much as possible the markets in commodities whose use is widely regarded as anti-social, such as arms and narcotics.

But there is more to these incursions than coping with an overaccumulation crisis, and it has to do with the broader relationship that corporations have to material life. James O'Connor (1998) refers to the tendency of corporations to seek continually to reduce their costs of production; yet in doing so, they fail to ensure that the "conditions of production," which degrade over time,

are themselves reproduced. O'Connor distinguishes three kinds of production conditions—labor power, natural resources, and urban (and other settlement) spaces—that are essential facilities for or inputs to the capitalist labor process. In the case of all three, corporations and other capitalist enterprises seek to gain access to these conditions at the lowest possible cost to themselves and to externalize the social costs of reproducing these conditions. Corporations require educated and healthy workers but avoid the taxes required to pay for their education and health. They seek out natural resources such as timber but refuse to pay for reforestation. They require the use of urban space but reject responsibility for polluting it or paying for its remediation. Eventually, this tendency to cut production costs and the subsequent failure to sustain these three kinds of productive conditions lead to deep injury and degradation—to what I call ‘weardown’—of the material world on which capitalism depends for its own existence.

In addition to the incursions listed above, wear-down of the commons takes place when corporations and allied states cut the internalized costs of capitalist production and neglect to take measures to reproduce the conditions of production by:

- attriting the bodily conditions under which labor power is reproduced—that is, wearing down the bodies of workers harmed by workplace injuries, occupationally related diseases, and exhaustion from an increase in working hours, and by the stresses arising from unemployment, scrounging, and living in the streets;
- degrading the social resources—that is, the productive conditions by means of which labor power is itself reproduced—by extending the working hours of workers while failing to provide private or government resources to those engaged in the social-reproductive labors of child and elder care, household provision, education, and care for those injured by the production process, especially women;
- generating pollution and waste—such as acid rain, hydrocarbon emissions, poisoned waterways, toxic waste dumps—during production, the remediation of which is not included in the internal cost of production;
- engaging in short-term overuse of (and destruction of the biological and social processes that reproduce) natural resources such as forests, waterways, fisheries (e.g., mountaintop removal by coal companies), and the material infrastructure (roads, bridges, harbors, etc.) connected to their exploitation;
- devaluing urban and other settlement spaces—and the conditions of life of people residing within them—due to depositing and emitting toxic substances relocated there (‘brownfields’) and to cycles of devaluation linked to gentrification and suburban sprawl, with these devalued spaces being occupied primarily by poor people and racially stigmatized minorities;
- more broadly, actively withdrawing social capital (e.g., taxes) and reducing the capacities of the social commons that make the reproduction of

- all three kinds of productive conditions possible—of which imposing neo-liberal state policies of 'downsizing government' is only a special case;
- impeding the free flow of information, theories, methods, and techniques of scientific research by enclosing these as private intellectual property with patents;
 - impeding the control by people of sub-cultural groups over their own distinctive cultural creations, such as popular music, arts, literature, and handicrafts, by commodification and copyright, thus cutting them off from their means of cultural reproduction.

In all of these areas, productive conditions exist not in nature as such but as socialized common-pool resources, and the varieties of assault on them mentioned above represent no less than the wear-down or even outright destruction of the commons through which people share these resources in everyday life.

Insofar as the three kinds of productive conditions are crucial to capitalism's reproduction as an economic system, its own tendencies are cannibalistic. Wear-down means that capitalism 'shits in its own nest', which, unfortunately, is also the nest in which all human beings live (Goldman 1998; O'Connor 1998). If a capitalist overaccumulation crisis is not in doubt, is there evidence that it is currently conjoined with a singular equi-final crisis brought about by the failure of corporations and states to sustain the conditions of production, where spatial expansion is no longer an option, and the extensive wear-down of the world's natural-resource, social, intellectual, cultural, and species commons is characteristic? There seems increasing evidence for some kind of impending pivot point in the history of global capitalism arising from the intensive exploitation of worn-down resources of all kinds. This pivot point would appear to lead if not from capitalism to some radically different systemic state—for example, socialism—then from capitalism to a new period of endemic social disorder, demographic crashes, intensified mass violence, and refeudalizations marked by qualitatively new, nature-imposed global scarcities, in which advanced capitalism as we know it is no longer the dominant formation. It may be that the old dilemma—socialism or barbarism—is becoming a more transparent issue, as is a newer one—the commons or barbarism.

As things stand, renewable but rapidly depleting natural-resource commons—for example, the world's major oceanic fisheries—are not being renewed. Non-renewable stocks of petroleum and related fossil-fuel sources have been run down in a remarkably short period of time, as recent concerns about "peak oil" (Goodstein 2004) attest. Major environmental processes of atmospheric warming, rising sea levels, deforestation, acid deposition, waterway pollution and poisoning, and coral reef deterioration have been tangibly widespread and accelerated on global, regional, and national scales. There is a massive amount of evidence that the social commons of the world, especially but not only in the global South, have experienced moderate to severe wear-down over the last two to three decades due to diminished state expenditures brought about by dominant neo-liberal ideologies or imposed by IFI structural adjustment requirements and the chaotic conditions now prevailing in states undergoing recomposition

(see Chossudovsky 2003; also Boyer's, Pickles's, and Smith-Nonini's essays, this issue). Weardown of intellectual, especially Northern scientific, commons has occurred as knowledge, competencies, technologies, methods, and so on have been privatized by corporations' and Northern universities' enclosures and the patenting of scientists' inventions. In the meantime, corporate appropriation via patents of the products of local-knowledge commons in the global South has accelerated, thus degrading the regenerative capacity of commons in both regions (see Washburn 2005; see Nonini essay, this issue). Cultural commons have also begun to experience weardown during the prior two decades through the arrogation of much of the world's literary, artistic, and performative skills and products to copyrights held by transnational media and culture industries (see Boyle 2003; Coombe 1998), with weardown only impeded through widespread flouting of corporate intellectual property rights by large proportions of the world's population. Species commons have undergone extensive weardown, given the onslaught of advancing commodification of personal attributes (e.g., human organs) through their illicit or illegal trafficking and 'laundering' through transnational mobility, secrecy, and discrete partitioning. The market in human gene sequences is as yet only in formation, but many feel the patenting of human genetic materials violates basic norms of market-inalienability for these personal or population attributes (see Scharper and Cunningham essay, this issue).

What's Going, What's Gone, and What Remains to Be Defended—and by Whom

This is where the corporate alliance with nation-states makes its appearance, according to O'Connor. When production conditions in any of these areas (or others) deteriorate too far, O'Connor (1998: 158–177) argues, states and IFIs that are patrons of corporations and other business enterprises compensate by intervening with legislation, taxation, and policies to regenerate, restore, or remediate these production conditions. Thus, state rationalities of resource management (or ecological modernization), planning, welfare, environmental treaties, etc., putatively come into play. But these interventions, O'Connor argues, entail the risk of creating a political crisis: this politicization of the reproduction of conditions of production takes on a social character outside of the economy, which is the putative domain of control of corporations. Transparent state intervention on behalf of corporations then becomes the object of active and growing opposition by new social movements in civil society. These groups include people in the women's movement, environmentalist and environmental justice movements, movements against workplace injury, and many more. In O'Connor's view, their demands on states—in particular, those with pretensions of being democratic—may then bring about a political crisis for capitalist states and thus for the entire capitalist system.

Are redemptive state interventions to forestall weardown of productive conditions even possible in the current situation? States are now taking on new configurations. What can be observed is the rise of new "oligarchic-corporate state

formations” (Kapferer 2005), which, as governing entities, have abandoned or are abandoning their support for the survival of the dependent populations of their citizenries. These new formations are aggregations of organizational forms in which, on the one hand, states are becoming more corporate-like through withdrawal from the social contract and through the privatization of public goods and services (even policing and military protection), and becoming more oligarchic through the institutionalization of families, kin-based dynasties, cliques, and networks as ruling groups. On the other hand, transnational corporations are progressively taking on state-like attributes—controlling territories and the resources within them for their use in private accumulation, hiring their own private armies and mafias, and administering through their bureaucracies to privileged client populations of consumers, state officials, regional mafias, and local power holders (*ibid.*: 169).

These oligarchic-corporate state hybrids appear structurally incapable of engaging in successful strategies for remediating the productive conditions that heretofore have been sustained by the various kinds of commons that have already undergone extensive wear and tear and continue to experience it. Nor do the prosthetics of multi-national coalitions of oligarchic-corporate states—like the ‘sustainable development’ programs of the United Nations or the World Bank’s Global Environmental Fund—operate to protect the commons, which still organize the use and reproduction of these conditions. Instead, the official sustainable development era represents the advent of a global technocratic and scientific ethos of ecological modernization (Harvey 1996), in which IFIs and other multi-lateral organizations (such as the UN Development Programme) seek to rationalize the capture of these resources for future corporate exploitation, while engaging in “[t]he resignification of nature as environment; [and] the reinscription of the Earth into capital via the gaze of science” (Escobar 1995: 202).

The protection and regeneration of the different kinds of commons that sustain labor power, the environment, and settlement space, if they are to take place at all, must instead fall on those who are still connected to the commons on an everyday basis and on their allies. People across the world who are linked to these commons are becoming increasingly aware that they themselves must act, not only to preserve their connections to the material resources that sustain their lives, but also to protect and regenerate these resources as such. This is why, as O’Connor (1998; see also Goldman 1998) projects, social movements organized around the concerns of women, farmers, indigenous peoples, and transnational labor migrants, and those committed to environmental justice, workplace safety, resource conservation, health care, disability rights, and many related interests, are now posing and will continue to pose major threats to corporations’ savage ‘business as usual’ and to the oligarchic-corporate states that support them.

The struggles against the corporate alliance by these mobilized social movements to protest against and turn back multiple forms of oppression, and to protect the many kinds of non-commodified arrangements people have for sharing resources critical to their survival, are multi-fronted, occur at more than one scale of engagement, and are worldwide in scope. Appearing much of

the time as uncoordinated, decentralized, and spontaneous, these movements are increasingly taking form self-consciously as connected to, and even part of, a broader global counter-movement against the radical assaults of the corporate alliance. Much is at stake. Although this new counter-movement has many elements and articulates very heterogeneous interests, one of its axial, global ideas is that of the commons.

Notes

1. In this essay, I employ the term ‘commons’ for both the singular and plural to refer either to a single set of arrangements for the use of a specific ‘common-pool resource’ or to more than one such set of arrangements, depending on context, to avoid using the awkward term ‘commonses’.
2. Critics of Hardin’s thesis (see McCay and Acheson 1987: 7–9) have also pointed out that Hardin’s (1968) argument fatally confuses a commons with an ‘open-access’ regime—in which there are no institutions or practices developed to govern the use of an available resource—and fails to take into account the role of capitalism and of individualism in ending commons arrangements.
3. Species commons also include non-human species attributes, for example, the individuals of biological species considered endangered, representing a broad human commitment to the survival of most non-human biospecies. However, these are not dealt with here.

References

- Acheson, James M. 1987. “The Lobster Fiefs Revisited: Economic and Ecological Effects of Territoriality in Maine Lobster Fishing.” Pp. 37–65 in *The Question of the Commons: The Culture and Ecology of Communal Resources*, ed. A. McCurdy and J. M. Acheson. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Bollier, David. 2002. *Silent Theft: The Private Plunder of Our Common Wealth*. New York: Routledge.
- Boyle, James. 2003. “The Second Enclosure Movement and the Construction of the Public Domain.” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 66: 33–74.
- Bromley, Daniel W. 1992. “The Commons, Property, and Common-Property Regimes.” Pp. 3–16 in Bromley et al. 1992.
- Bromley, Daniel W., David Feeny, Margaret A. McKean, Pauline Peters, Jere L. Gilles, Ronald J. Oakerson, C. Ford Runge, and James T. Thomson, eds. 1992. *Making the Commons Work: Theory, Practice, and Policy*. San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies Press.
- Chander, Anupam, and Mahdavi Sunder. 2004. “The Romance of the Public Domain.” *California Law Review* 92, no. 5: 1331–1373.
- Chossudovsky, Michel. 2003. *The Globalization of Poverty and the New World Order*. Shanty Bay, Ont.: Global Outlook.
- Coombe, Rosemary. 1998. *The Cultural Life of Intellectual Properties*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- _____. 2005. “Cultural Rights and Intellectual Property Debates.” *Human Rights Dialogue* 2: 34–36.
- Cordell, John, and Margaret McKean. 1992. “Sea Tenure in Bahia, Brazil.” Pp. 183–206 in Bromley et al. 1992.

- Dietz, Thomas, Elinor Ostrom, and Paul C. Stern. 2003. "The Struggle to Govern the Commons." *Science* 302: 1907–1912.
- Escobar, Arturo. 1995. *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Gibson-Graham, J. K. 1996. *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Goldman, Michael. 1998. "Introduction: The Political Resurgence of the Commons." Pp. 1–19 in *Privatizing Nature: Political Struggles for the Global Commons*, ed. M. Goldman. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Goodstein, David L. 2004. *Out of Gas: The End of the Age of Oil*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Gudeman, Stephen. 2001. *The Anthropology of Economy*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hardin, Garrett. 1968. "The Tragedy of the Commons." *Science* 162: 1243–1248.
- Harvey, David. 1996. *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- _____. 2003. *The New Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- _____. 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Huizinga, Johan. 1955. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Kapferer, Bruce. 2005. "Introduction: Oligarchic corporations and new state formations." *Social Analysis* 49, no. 1: 163–176.
- LiPuma, Edward, and Benjamin Lee. 2004. *Financial Derivatives and the Globalization of Risk*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- McCay, Bonnie, and James M. Acheson. 1987. "Human Ecology of the Commons." Pp. 1–34 in *The Question of the Commons: The Culture and Ecology of Communal Resources*, ed. B. McCay and J. M. Acheson. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- McKean, Margaret. 1992. "Management of Traditional Common Lands (Iriaichi) in Japan." Pp. 63–98 in Bromley et al. 1992.
- National Research Council. 1986. *Proceedings of the Conference on Common Property Resource Management*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Nelson, Richard R. 2004. "The Market Economy and the Scientific Commons." *Research Policy* 33: 455–471.
- Netting, Robert M. 1981. *Balancing on an Alp: Ecological Change and Continuity in a Swiss Mountain Community*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nonini, Donald. Under review. "Is China Becoming Neoliberal?" Submitted to *Critique of Anthropology*.
- Oakerson, Ronald J. 1992. "Analyzing the Commons: A Framework." Pp. 41–59 in Bromley et al. 1992.
- O'Connor, James. 1998. *Natural Causes: Essays in Ecological Marxism*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Olivera, Oscar, and Tom Lewis. 2004. *Cochabamba! Water War in Bolivia*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.
- Ostrom, Elinor. 1990. *Governing the Commons*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ostrom, Elinor, Joanna Burger, Christopher B. Field, Richard B. Norgaard, and David Policansky. 1999. "Revisiting the Commons: Local Lessons, Global Challenges." *Science* 284: 278–282.
- Price, Charles. 2004. "What the Zeeks Uprising Reveals: Development Issues, Moral Economy, and the Urban Lumpenproletariat in Jamaica." *Urban Anthropology* 33, no. 1: 73–113.
- Radin, Margaret J. 1992. "Market-Inalienability." Pp. 174–194 in *The Ethics of Reproductive Technology*, ed. K. D. Alpern. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Trawick, Paul B. 2003. *The Struggle for Water in Peru: Comedy and Tragedy in the Andean Commons*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Trotsky, Leon. 1961. *The History of the Russian Revolution*. Trans. Max Eastman. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Washburn, Jennifer. 2005. *University, Inc.: The Corporate Corruption of American Higher Education*. New York: Basic Books.
- Wolf, Eric R. 1969. *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century*. New York: Harper & Row.