COMMONS THINKING

the ability to envisage and enable a viable future through connected action

Justin Kenrick, University of Glasgow, and PEDAL – Portobello Transition Town

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What is Commons Thinking?

The further we move into this century, the more urgently we realise that we need to relearn the political and personal skills of envisaging and enabling a viable future. This skill is not new: it is at the heart of commons regimes the world over. Commons regimes manage socio-environmental relations in ways that attend to the finite nature of human and natural systems in a way which – paradoxically – ensures their infinite abundance continues. Vandana Shiva notes that in Commons or Sustenance Regimes 'People work directly to provide the conditions necessary to maintain their lives . . . Sustenance economies exist even where capital markets do not. Yet capital's market cannot exist without the sustenance economy because externalising the social burden is the very basis of profits and capital accumulation' (2005: 17).

The Commons are life-sustaining or life-enhancing resources and services that have not been divided up and assigned a monetary value in the global economy but instead are shared - according to evolving arrangements and agreements - among members of a community or group. They range from the air we breath, pollination provided by bees, land that provides food for gathering, sharing, cultivating and dwelling rather than selling, to libraries, public parks, pavements we walk along, and on to childcare, care for the elderly and words of comfort given freely and willingly rather than at an hourly rate. Pitted against the Commons, however, are the forces of Enclosure, which attempt to appropriate, own and sell resources that were once accessible not through the power of money but through the rights and responsibilities gained by being a member of a community. The processes of Enclosure spread from England to the rest of the British Isles: dispossessing people of their land, displacing them, and using these same people to colonise and appropriate the land of peoples in Commons regimes the world over. However Commons regimes continue all over the world. These range from place-based communities agreeing how to use and share resources for the well-being of all their members (whether in the rainforests of Central Africa or through community buyouts on the west coast of Scotland) to emerging communities of practice - such as educators passionate about sustainability and empowerment. Wherever and whenever people find ways to ensure that our well-being ensures the well-being of others - and to refuse the logic that asserts that our well-being depends on exploiting (human and ecological) others - then the we are re-asserting Commons processes and resisting processes of Enclosure which now threaten us with extinction.

This chapter aims to describe one important skill for rebuilding political, community and personal resilience: the ability to think in a Commons way. This way of thinking is crucial to tackling the root causes of economic and ecological meltdown, to restoring the local, national and global Commons, and so recovering a future that can often – to say the least – seem

precarious. Commons regimes persist and re-emerge wherever people retain the political space to concern themselves with maintaining social and ecological resilience. They persist in the face of pressure from more powerful outside forces which seek to exploit, in a short-sighted way, the social and ecological resources upon which the community depends.

Commons thinking involves identifying the way one is complicit in the Enclosure or destruction of the Commons, in order to extricate oneself from such processes and instead identify with and strengthen the processes that maintain abundance for all. In essence, Commons approaches assume a world of abundant relations from which individual entities emerge and are sustained, whereas the Western dominance perspective assumes a world of scarcity where discreet entities are brought into relationship through processes of control and competition.

Putting it bluntly, these contrasting problem solving approaches can be thought of in terms of:

A *Commons approach* which assumes that:

> ➤ we live in a common life-world upon which we all depend,
> ➤ any problems stem from a breakdown in relationships, and
> ➤ solutions are primarily about restoring these relationships

and a *dominance approach* which assumes that:

> ➤ one's well-being ultimately depends on controlling the devalued other (whether other life forms, other humans, or other aspects of oneself),
> ➤ problems are about the lack of such control, and
> ➤ the solution involves the dominant realm (the mind, the 'developed' world, the adult, the expert, or humans in general) imposing control on the supposedly inferior realm.

How dominance thinking misrepresents the Commons

When the 'Commons' is referred to at all in dominant thinking, it is usually in terms of the so-called 'Tragedy of the Commons', and this term is used to argue that left to ourselves (without the market and government to control our behaviour) we would each choose to exploit our ecological context for our own individual benefit even though this would inevitably lead to the destruction of the ecosystems (the Commons) on which we all depend. In fact, the opposite is the case. Even Garrett Hardin, the inventor of the term, later admitted that the phrase describes, not a Tragedy of 'Commons regimes', but a Tragedy of 'Open Access regimes' (Kirby at al 1995).

The irony here is that an excellent example of an 'Open Access regime' is that of capitalism, where the only understanding of being 'rational' is of acting in one's own immediate, narrow self-interest. 'Open access regimes' describe situations where people are persuaded to act in a way that has no consideration for the longer term of themselves, their children or others. Commons regimes, in sharp contrast, always have unwritten or written rules about who can use what resource when and for how long, in order to ensure everyone's well-being over the longer term (Kirby at al 1995, Kenrick 2005). Some may be wealthier than others, and there is

always negotiation, argument or conflict as the rules are changed, kept, or broken; but the basic principle is that you don't get a free lunch (getting a free lunch is exactly what advertisers, political parties and any other open access regime pundit tries to persuade us we can get). Commons regimes are how humans have effectively self-organised for millennia; and it is somehow typical (in an Orwellian 1984 kind of way) that the term is then used to denote a 'tragedy' in order to assert that our only hope is a market system regulated by government, when it would be blindingly obvious to a Martian anthropologist that such a system has brought us to the brink of extinction, and that we need to change it fast.

Commons systems have recently re-emerged in the UK – both through the land reform movement and community buy-outs that have swept through rural Scotland since the mid 90s, and through the proliferation of Transition initiatives (see Quilley, this volume) in Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales since the mid 2000s. These are recent examples of Commons regimes re-emerging because people realise that it is more rational to base their well-being on collectively caring about those around them, than to believe they can – over the long term - improve their own lives at the expense of their neighbours. The Transition approach embodies Commons thinking and is a creative, empowering, and immediately gratifying proof that – if we come at problems from a Commons perspective – our solutions will improve life for us all, rather than deal with symptoms in ways that exacerbate the original problem.

Naming the problem: Ecological Collapse, or why it is Rational to be *Scared*

The first step in bringing Commons thinking to bear is to recognise the problem, and the way in which all aspects of it are related. In today's Sunday Herald newspaper (2009.03.29) under the headline: 'Two Months to Save the World', Professor Jacqueline McGlade, the European Environment Agency's executive director, states that:

> Even if all the current promises to cut greenhouse gas emissions are honoured, the world will still see global temperatures rise by an average of four degrees centigrade by the end of the century. . . This is hot enough to make most of the world uninhabitable.

Climate change demonstrates that it is short-sighted in the extreme to base our well-being on destroying the life support system upon which we depend, and hoping that imposing technological or political solutions can protect us from the consequences. Climate change is a consequence of a system in which: companies are legally obliged to maximise profits for shareholders, profits are made by externalising the social and environmental costs, and if companies aren't willing to externalise these costs to make these profits, then they are simply swallowed up by those who will. Ongoing destruction of the earth's life support system ensues. From a Commons perspective, climate change is as much a reason to be hopeful as a reason to be fearful, since it is an urgent wake up call to stop this socio-ecological devastation which would destroy us sooner rather than later if we don't act now.

To take a brief snapshot of the current ecological situation, we can see accelerating climate change feedback loops are evident in the Arctic, which – as recently as 2007 - was predicted by the UN's IPCC to be ice free in summer by 2100, but is now predicted to be ice free by 2011-2015. Accelerating climate change feedback loops are also evident in the Amazon, Southern Europe and Australia, where drying out forests and bush are vulnerable to

devastating fires; and in the weakening of the planet's carbon sinks – especially the Southern Ocean – to absorb our carbon pollution (Climate Safety 2008). Meanwhile we are persuaded that only economic growth can meet our needs. The responses to climate change by corporate compliant governments focus on carbon trading, which does not directly reduce the CO_2 going into the atmosphere, but turns it into a tradable commodity. The focus is also on maintaining the so-called 'carbon sink' forests of the Global South so that economic growth can continue unchecked, while justifying Global players appropriation of local peoples' forests and livelihoods (Griffiths 2007).

Recovering a Commons way of thinking, or why it is Rational to be *hopeful*

Moving towards a society based on Commons sufficiency requires recovering a *Commons way of thinking* and relinquishing dominance thinking, the dualistic problem solving approach underpinning non-egalitarian and unsustainable social systems. Several questions follow from this:

> ➢ How do we make the transition from a system in which problems are made worse by the way solutions are imposed – imposed by a supposedly superior realm on a supposedly inferior realm - to a system that no longer divides the world into superior and inferior realms?
> ➢ How do we move towards a recognition that – in the current system - development workers, police, doctors, social workers and teachers are entirely dependent on others' poverty, criminal acts, ill-health, social problems and supposed lack of education? For example, how do we recognise that ending poverty in Africa does not require the supposedly 'superior' wealthy and educated 'West' to intervene with charity, but requires the 'West' to stop building its wealth on forces of extraction and domination that impoverish Africa?
> ➢ How do we move to a Commons society in which sufficiency and security are grounded in the ability to respond to fear and lack by continually rebuilding relationships of trust? How do we create a society in which the other's problem is recognised as arising from a mutual world, and in which solutions are sought through dialogue and engagement?

Commons thinking recognises the rich resources available to us by starting from ensuring the well-being of locality, and the well-being of others in their localities, rather than from a system of competition over resources made scarce by that very competition. Resources are assumed to be abundant, and are made abundant by ensuring that all people and other species (all ecosystems) have sufficient to meet their needs and to ensure their flourishing. This is predicated on the notion that my well-being depends on your well-being, and on the assumption that solving problems involves working to restore relationships of trust rather than seeking to impose solutions on others.

As Lohmann (2005:20) points out 'Communal use adapts land, water and work to local needs rather than transforming them for trade and accumulation'. In the sustenance economy 'satisfying basic needs and ensuring long-term sustainability are the organizing principles for natural resource use' (Shiva 2005: 18). Such Commons approaches can perhaps best be understood as Life Projects:

> Life Projects are about living a purposeful and meaningful life. In this sense, their political horizons cannot be located in the future, just as living in the present cannot be put on hold in pursuit of a future goal. . . Life Projects have no political horizon; they *are* the political horizon. They are not points of arrival, utopian places, narratives of salvation or returns to paradise. They are the very act of maintaining open-endedness as a politics of resilience. (Blaser 2004: 48)

Life Projects are coming into focus not only through standing out as a force to be reckoned with in the Global South and North, but also through their ability to build alliances through which to wrest political space from corporation controlled governments. This is evident in the way indigenous people have moved to take control of national governments in places like Bolivia, to secure degrees of autonomy through legal means in places like Canada, or through creative modes of resistance in places like Mexico. In the UK, it is evident in crofting communities' successful campaigns to take back collective control of their communities, which led to the Scottish Land Reform Act securing that right for a whole range of rural communities. It is also evident in the emerging movement of Transition Initiatives in villages, towns and cities where local people are seeking to enable their communities to make the transition from an oil based economy, to a local economy where local decision-making can ensure sufficiency for all.

Activity

In small groups, in pairs or by yourself try bringing a Commons way of thinking to problem solving. As you attempt the exercise, notice if your response persistently seeks to revert to habitual dominant, dualistic problem solving approach:

> Think of a political problem that is bothering you (an example given above is that of Poverty in Africa, others could be: the role of air travel in generating carbon emissions, population growth and poverty, ways of ensuring well-being while reducing carbon emissions to zero, supporting an ageing population, the lack of affordable childcare, or 'ghost-town' high streets due to out-of-town supermarkets).

> Instead of thinking about how this problem can be solved by the wealthy/ powerful/ intelligent/ experts imposing a solution on those deemed poor/ powerless/ stupid/ non-experts, *imagine* that the problem does not lie in the devalued lacking something but in the powerful imposing something; imagine that the solution lies in supporting connections rather than controlling others; imagine that it lies in discovering, respecting and responding to people's real needs.

> How can we identify the processes that trap us in relations of domination, and how can we challenge such processes in a way which builds (rather than undermines) common cause between all concerned?

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The Corner House. www.thecornerhouse.org.uk [organisation which supports democratic and community movements for environmental and social justice]

Transition Towns. www.transitiontowns.org