

# The Commons Revolution: 1

## Towards Sustainable Qualitative Development

By Zeki Ergas

### I - What Is the Commons?

There are several questions humanity will have to grapple with consciously and deliberately in the coming years: How can we live in a way that does not endanger life for our descendents? How should we work, get around, power ourselves, feed ourselves, house ourselves? How many of us should there be? Everyone living has a stake in the answers. In these times of trial, it is useful to recall the words of Marshall McLuhan: *There are no passengers on Spaceship Earth. We are all crew.*

The concept of commons goes a long way to answer the questions asked in the previous paragraph. Let us begin by an example which illustrates two of the most important principles or values concerning it which could be defined as: *temporary use*, as opposed to permanent ownership and abuse; and *sharing*. Together, these two principles or values increase the overall quality of life for a majority of people. And, not only in the present and for ourselves, but also, and more importantly, in the future for the generations that will follow ours. So, here is the example:

We are in cruise-boat. Deck-chairs have been put out on the upper deck for the comfort of the passengers. Let us assume that: one, the chairs are in a proportion of one to three passengers; two, the chairs cannot be reserved for the whole day by putting beach towels, or other occupation-symbols, on them; and three, the cruise is composed of two parts, lasting one week each. During the first part of the cruise, the arrangement described above makes it possible for all the passengers to occupy the chairs for short periods of time, say, up to a maximum of two to three hours per day. During the second part of the voyage, however, the new passengers that come on board insist that the rule of *no* permanent occupation of the deck-chairs should be scrapped. They are able to impose their will. Now the passengers can occupy the chairs for the whole day, and for several days in a row. As a result, the majority of the passengers are now unable to relax on the deck-chairs. As a result of this, tempers become frayed, conflicts and arguments break out, and the majority of the passengers are unhappy.

Vandana Shiva says commons are *webs of life* in the natural, social, cultural and digital realms. *Natural commons* are necessary for our survival; *social commons*, for our social cohesion; and *cultural commons*, for our identities. But being the product, of unique historical circumstances, of local cultures and specific economic, social and ecological conditions, the commons are all different. Elinor Ostrom, who has done groundbreaking work on the commons, insists that there is no 'master inventory', no single definition, of the commons. One can see them by looking at the links and relationships between them, and at what they all have in ... common. For example:

Why are the defence of biodiversity and the efforts to provide free computers, and software to the poor, related? Why is the struggle to share knowledge and information, and providing clean water for African villagers and slum-dwellers, linked? Thus, the idea of the commons allows us to *unify* in our minds what at first *seems* separate.

However, one has to be careful because: while they are certainly omnipresent everywhere, they can often be invisible; they can also be destroyed by market forces, or by the State, and get lost and forgotten; and the *tragedy of the commons*, underlines Silke Helfrich, is that we often become conscious of its enormous *value* to us when it is no longer there – when a river has dried up, a glacier has disappeared; a war has broken out or a genocide has occurred; the gap between the rich and the poor has widened, etc.

Furthermore, while, as Helfrich underlines, the *architecture* – or structure -- of the various commons varies greatly, they are all based on three broad *Generic Building Blocks*.

A. *Common Pool Resources (CPRs)*. There is a very large number of those which are essential -- like, *inter alia*: Water, air, biodiversity, the genetic code, algorithms (or methodologies to produce knowledge, such as, in reading and writing), musical notes, the airwaves and the electromagnetic spectrum, time and space, the rules that we have agreed upon and adopted, *Wikipedia* on the Net, the digital code enclosed in a software programme, the silence, and the capacity of the atmosphere to absorb carbon dioxide emissions. The point here is that *CPRs* belong to all of us, and that we should, all of us, have, or should have, an equal right to use them.

B. *Temporary use*, as opposed to permanent ownership, and *sharing*. We have already seen it in the example of the cruise ship above. Here is a second example: In many Boston neighbourhoods, at the beginning of the winter, residents clear out the snow in front of their houses and put chairs, crates and garbage cans to claim temporary ownership (for the winter) of the space thus 'liberated'. Thus, a public space has, *temporarily, been privatised*. According to Elinor Ostrom, 'This is a commons', because a *group* composed of the members of a certain community share an idea and adopt it democratically. The size of the group involved in a commons can vary enormously, of course. In the case of the global commons – such as, air, water, the oceans and the tropical forests -- it is the whole of mankind. The Kyoto protocol on the environment (which will end in 2012) and the forthcoming conference in Copenhagen concern all of humanity.

C. So, it is, in final analysis, all about *Us*: Humanity – and the Spaceship Earth we live in. Thus, as emphasizes Peter Linebaugh, we should rather think of the commons as a verb, and not as a noun. Because, ultimately, it is not about the water, the air or the genetic code in and by themselves, what matters really is what we do about them, the decisions that we make and their implementation. Thus, he insists: *There are no commons without common-ing*. That is why the self-ordained rules by the various groups and communities are so important..

## II- What Needs to be Done

Let us, again, begin with an example: Most people in the world have heard of Bill Gates, the founder and owner of Microsoft, but very few people have heard of Tim Berners Lee, the inventor, in 1989, of HTML (Hypertext Markup Language), without which www (world wide web) could not exist. Berners-Lee did not patent his invention. He insisted that it should be free for everyone to use. His philosophy is thus compatible with the two core ideas of the commons that we have underlined: *sharing* and *temporary* use (as opposed to owning). Thus, Berners Lee greatly contributed to the commons. But, in a world dominated by the old paradigm based on permanent ownership and the profit-motive, he could not stop 'the market', and indirectly the States, from exploiting the Internet for selfish and individual reasons.

For the commons to play a determinant role in our society and economy, all major players – multinational corporations, the States, international organizations and civil society -- must have the commons and sustainable qualitative development as *the* goal and priority, and the present system of unlimited quantitative growth (as measured by the Gross Domestic Product) must be gradually phased out.

Therefore, we urgently need new ideas to contribute to the creation of a commons-based economy and society, and sustainable qualitative development. Some of these are:

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- promoting (at home and in the schools) *quality* versus quantity, to enable the new generations to appreciate the (almost) free and beautiful things in life, such as: reading a good book, taking a walk in the woods, listening to good music, exercising and eating healthy food, convivial relationships with friends, etc.;
  - generating, based on *collective intelligence* (which needs to be developed), new rules and (energetic, renewable)resources;
  - reducing *waste* (which is enormous, for example, in the United States);
  - *sharing and temporary use* (as opposed to permanent ownership);
  - *decentralized* production and self-reliance ;
  - increased *cooperation and collaboration* at local and global levels.
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## Notes

1. This short essay is very largely based on: Silke Helfrich, *The Commons: A New Narrative for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, a paper she presented at the World Commons Forum organized in Salzburg, on 29 – 30 September 2009, by the Global Marshall Plan Foundation, [www.globalmarshallplan.org](http://www.globalmarshallplan.org) . See: [www.commonsblog.de](http://www.commonsblog.de)