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Under the watchtower *Or, First Growths of a 'Commons' Capitalism*

What at first you take for woodchip turns out to be gravel, heaped like slag across a desolate plain. You press on, gnawed by a cold wind coming straight off the North Sea by way of Siberia, until you hear the bright, vertiginous song of a skylark marking its territory. Closer to the ground, a pair of woodlark takes off in alarm and small flocks of goldfinch twitter among the scrub. After a hundred or so yards the going levels out to reveal close-cropped grass with clots of furze and veins of heather browsed by cattle. If you ignore the sough of traffic in the valley and the vacuous farting of a biplane overhead, you could imagine yourself in Hardy country. Then you notice, in the hazy distance, the control towers and abandoned missile silos.

This is Greenham Common, in the southern English county of Berkshire, half way through the first decade of the twenty-first century: an intermediate place, windswept, devoid of birch or pine or thicket, a land of gorse and overgrazed heather with just the occasional hawthorn needling its way up where fifteen years ago Cold War jets flew.

The landscape has changed more than once in living memory. Victor Bonham Carter, who spent part of his childhood at Greenham, described it after the First World War as “a mighty wilderness... threaded by a single dust road.” For centuries this ‘wilderness’ (as it would have seemed to the eyes of a small boy) had constituted a shared public resource where members of the population without agricultural land of their own had the right to graze livestock and collect fuel.

Like many commons across England, including London’s now leafy Hampstead Heath, Greenham would have been dominated by heather, with areas of grass and gorse, or furze. The North European heaths constitute a unique biome, evolved over centuries from slash-and-burn agriculture on poor sandy soils. The naturalist and historian Oliver Rackham, writing in the early 1980s, succinctly described the cultural and biological significance of what many continue to regard as wastes.

Heathland is an ancient and beautiful part of our heritage. It is a symbol of liberty: most heaths are *de facto* open to the public, and their destruction has curtailed the Englishman’s already meagre right to explore his own country... It is the habitat of the nightjar, stone-curlew, Dartford warbler, smooth snake, and many other celebrated plants and animals; it is full of antiquities and of complex and fascinating soil and vegetation patterns. It is a special responsibility of England: the Dutch, Danes, and Swedes have been even more single-minded in destroying their heaths, and most of what is left in Europe is ours.

Rackham’s anxiety is understandable, for ninety percent of England’s heaths have been lost to development and agriculture since 1800.

Until the nineteenth century, the land at Greenham survived as commonly grazed heath and occasional manoeuvres by the army left only temporary marks. The situation changed radically in 1941 when the

Common was requisitioned as an airfield. Local hopes that the land would be restored after the war were dashed when, in 1951, the United States requested permission to base heavy bombers on the site. Popular protests went unheeded even as work began on the longest military runway in Europe. It is difficult to quantify the ecological damage that followed and there has never been a satisfactory explanation for the threefold increase in the number of leukaemia cases diagnosed in the Newbury area. What is certain is that a heath that had stood for centuries – a place of biological as well as cultural significance – had ceased to exist.

Although the appropriation by landed interests of commonly-held fields and heaths dates back well before modern times (Shakespeare devoted much of his last years to the assertion of private property rights over common land near Stratford), it was only when innovations in farming practice made it possible to cultivate, for profit rather than subsistence, all but the most difficult soils that the process really transformed rural life. Parliament in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries passed nearly four thousand Acts legalising the appropriation of more than six million acres of land: about a quarter of all cultivated acreage. Those dispossessed, sometimes even of their homes, were invariably poor and deprived of influence, while the needs of a growing population created an understandable desire among the ruling elites to see ‘Dark frowning heaths grow bright with Ceres’ store’ (James Thomson, *Castle of Indolence*).

The dark satanic mills of industry depended on increased yields but these were amassed at the expense of the rural labourers who produced them. One of these was the Northamptonshire poet, John Clare. When he was sixteen Clare’s native parish of Helpstone, where for generations the population had farmed strips in a circular field-system, was the subject of a parliamentary act for enclosure. While it may have been true that ‘the said Commons

and Waste Grounds yield but little Profit’, the fact that they offered a subsistence living to many was not deemed worthy of consideration. Freeholders, no matter how poor they had been, were reduced to the status of labourer, set to the hard work of ‘improving’ land they had once shared.

In his poem ‘The Mores’ (moors), Clare marks the passing of familiar native ground, where after enclosure

Each little tyrant with his little sign

Shows where man claims earth glows no more divine...

Prior to these ‘improvements’ there had been – according to Clare’s biographer, Jonathan Bate – ‘an intimate relationship between society and environment. The open-field system fostered a sense of community: you could talk to the man working the next strip.’ In Clare’s elegy for this ancient system, where neighbours once met, ‘Fence now meets fence’ and ‘men and flocks’ are ‘imprisoned ill at ease.’ The imagery of confinement is significant; for as a boy the poet was able to roam freely about the fields and heaths of Helpstone. By the time he was working as a labourer, the psychological perception of such unenclosed spaces as belonging to everyone had been shattered and Clare, a true rural conservative, drew a startling analogy for the destruction of an ancient birthright:

Inclosure like a Bonaparte let not a thing
remain,
It levelled every bush and tree and levelled
every hill
And hung the mole for traitors – though the
brook is running still
It runs a naked brook, cold and chill.
(‘By Langley Bush’)

While it would be disingenuous to pretend that the hard, subsistence life that preceded enclosure was idyllic, there is little doubt that the appropriation, without compensation, of commonly held assets was ruinous for thousands. The nineteenth

century advocate of land improvement, Arthur Young relented, when he saw the social consequences of the changes he had fought for: 'I had rather that all the commons of England were sunk in the sea, than that the poor should in future be treated on enclosing as they have been hitherto.' William Cobbett, by the 1820s, was speaking of the 'madness of enclosures' and pointing out that the increased investment in the land had 'worked detriment to the labourer. It was out of his bones that the means came.'

This is not old news. Globalisation is unhappily replete with instances in which an economic process seemingly justifiable in its own limited terms has social and ecological results which contradict it. The profits of the soy bean magnates of Brazil are at the expense of the forest itself as well as indigenous people, small farmers and rubber-tappers who depend upon it. Similarly, Japanese and Chinese corporations as they strip their Asian neighbours of their forests dispossess present and future generations of their birthright without offering meaningful compensation. Globally, whether through unsustainable exploitation of limited natural resources or bequeathing a degraded planet to future generations, the enclosure and appropriation of common assets continues at an unprecedented rate. If the process seems to have slowed in Britain, it is merely because we exhausted it generations ago.

But the situation, in my country at least, is not without hope. Membership of conservation groups has grown substantially; government is attempting – in its usual schizophrenic manner – to reverse some of the damage done by intensive agriculture, and it is perhaps indicative of changing attitudes that Greenham Common in 2006 is not yet another civilian airport for London but a place in transition, slowly being restored to nature.

Returning to our wintry ramble, it is not difficult to see – and even feel underfoot – the outlines of the vast runways. Work to

remove the hardstanding began in April 1995, with over one million tonnes of material broken up, recycled and sold and the revenue ploughed back into restoration work. Bioremediation to clean up fuel contamination has only recently been completed; on the far north-eastern edge of the plain the stumps of a partly dismantled POL, or Petroleum Oil Lubricant Station, still stand like the remains of some industrial gallows. Exploring the common, one has only a sense of what it once was and may become again. There is little of the biodiversity one would find on long-standing heaths, yet some of the bird and invertebrate species endemic to the ecosystem are beginning to return, and the martial symmetry of the runways is receding.

If the enclosures – a visible manifestation of industrial capitalism – represented the triumph of the straight line, might the restoration of Greenham Common herald a return to non-linear and more sustainable models of behaviour? With the Countryside Rights of Way Act passed by Parliament in 2000, an attempt has been made to reopen landscapes that were enclosed, fenced in and degraded by private capital. With a renewed freedom to roam come new conceptions of open and natural landscapes, where biological processes may be resumed free of human intervention. Models for such wide-scale 'rewilding' come chiefly from the United States where there is more room, but I sense in Britain a growing appetite for wild spaces of our own, be they restored fens in East Anglia or the regenerating forests of the Scottish Highlands. Demographic pressure will necessarily limit such ambitions, but the remarkable success, in the equally crowded Netherlands, of Oostvaardersplassen, proves that with sufficient will (and capital: these ought to be affairs of state), even the most populous regions of Europe can find space for wildness.

Arguments against restoration projects invariably cite the costs involved. This is to persist in outmoded thinking. William

Cobbett, at the height of the nineteenth century enclosures, argued in solid terms that the value of bees on a particular Hampshire common was greater than the value of the same common enclosed. This, however, would have cut no ice with the landed interests, whose focus, then as now, was on specialisation and scale. To date, the success of organic farmers to return to the more ecologically sustainable mixed farming methods have been limited in relation to the power of industrial agriculture. And this is indicative of a global failure to recognise the value of nature's services. These – the water we drink, the air we breathe, the very weather upon which we depend – are estimated to be worth trillions of dollars each year. When damaged or degraded, the cost is measured in human lives. Areas with mangrove swamps were less badly hit by 2004's tsunami than those without. Flooding in towns is often caused by the loss of floodplains further upstream. The recent, fatal landslide in the Philippines would probably not have occurred without the deforestation of the hills. Examples of the price paid, in human lives and misery, when the environment is degraded, are sadly legion; and of course we have yet to see the full, catastrophic impacts of global warming. Given our unprecedented levels of scientific understanding, it is maddening that most of the world refuses to place the environment at the centre of everything we do.

Economic value is one thing. Less readily quantifiable is a profound *psychological* need for access to the green world: what the American biologist Edward O. Wilson calls 'biophilia'. In Britain this is reflected in a network of 'community forests' to soften the impact of population growth: places where woodland and green spaces are being created, with an emphasis on public access and leisure, on the margins and sometimes at the heart of urban areas. The dreams of landscape-scale restoration, even if realised, will be remote for the majority of the population that lives in towns; yet here too there are growing expectations of access to green space. According to the City of

Edinburgh Council, for instance, the waiting list for Council managed allotment plots 'increased by one third from 600 to 900 in 2005' (*Edinburgh Outlook*, spring 2006). Back in 1973, the critic Raymond Williams observed the extra-utilitarian value of such spaces, describing them as 'important not only for their produce, but for their direct and immediate satisfactions and for the felt reality of an area of control of one's own immediate labour.'

If the urban allotment is akin to the old commons, it benefits from continuing usefulness. The same cannot be said of England's heaths, which, having ceased to be of economic value, have also lost much of their cultural significance. For a majority of a population ignorant of the historical and biological significance of these unkempt 'wastelands', they simply don't figure as places worth protecting. One of the solutions, busily undertaken by national and local conservation organisations, is to inform populations about the 'meaning' of these habitats. But this is not enough, I fear, to secure the commons for the future. A modern equivalent must be found to the social role they once fulfilled.

Once again, Greenham leads the way. Its story in the twentieth century was not purely one of degradation, for the ideal of assets held in common persisted in the form of a national protest movement that greeted the installation, by the Thatcher government, of nuclear-armed cruise missiles in the 1980s. The feminist peace camp outside the base remained until the end of the Cold War and it is perhaps the legacy of the peace activists that the land escaped new forms of exploitation.

When local government founded the Greenham Common Trust in 1997, its trading subsidiary, New Greenham Limited, established the Trust's main asset: a 150-acre business park on the site of the former airbase. Profits from the business park are not only ploughed into the ecological restoration of the common but also distributed to local groups and charities. In

the first five years of its existence, Greenham Common Trust gave £690,000 to over 240 local organisations, as well as £770,000 towards habitat restoration and over £2 million to local hospitals and health foundations. Revenue from the business park also provides £200,000 each year in funding to New Greenham Arts. Nature, culture and society all benefit from the mixed uses to which the old common has been put.

Greenham Common is not the only instance of capitalism adapting itself to ‘stakeholder’ sustainability. The principles of the Brundtland Report, released by the UN nearly twenty years ago, of ‘development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’, are slowly (too slowly?) nudging their way into the European mainstream, inspired to some degree by such pioneering community-based projects as the Sherwood Energy Village in Nottingham. Built on the site of the former Ollerton Colliery, this combination of low energy residential housing, green space and business park (with profits, as at Greenham, returning to the Village and neighbouring communities), has attracted visitors from around the world. The voluntary eco-community, though laudable in itself, will never appeal to a majority of citizens. Projects like Sherwood Energy Village or Beddington Zero-Emission Development (BedZed) in south London, offer models for high living standards combined with low consumption. Such projects are at present a rarity; it remains to be seen if the London Olympic Village for 2012 will live up to its ‘One Planet’ pledge. But with growing demands for sustainable design and the enterprise of people as diverse as former coal miners and Welsh hill farmers setting up community wind farms, it is becoming increasingly difficult for government and business to shirk their responsibilities. The rapidly worsening ecological crisis is doing much – though as yet not nearly enough – to waken a popular environmental conscience and recognition that the old

‘supply and demand’ models of democratic capitalism are unsustainable so long as they ignore the true value of our global commons.

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