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## Defending the Common Wealth

What's being sold around the clock and around the world as the "American way of life" is mostly a cheat and a lie. It's an infantile dream of endless consumption, endless novelty, and endless play. It's a pacifier for the ego to suck on. It's bad for us and bad for the earth.

We need a dream worthy of grown-ups, one that values simplicity over novelty, conservation over consumption, harmony over competition, community over ego. We need a story that recognizes our well-being derives not from the private wealth we hold as individuals or as corporations, but from the common wealth we share as members of the human family. We need a new vision of the good life. Or, rather, we need to recover an old vision, one well known to our ancestors but now largely forgotten.

In England, "the commons" originally referred to lands and waters that were used by the community as a whole—the pastures, woodlots, tillable fields, springs, lakes, and rivers on which everyone depended for sustenance. Even if the land was owned by a feudal lord, a church, or a monarch, it was partly or entirely open to use by those who lived nearby, and the terms of that use were defined primarily by the community rather than by the owner.

If one goes far enough back in time, of course, the whole earth was a commons—as the Americas were at the time Europeans first encountered the indigenous people they called "Indians." One must be wary of making generalizations about the hundreds of cultures that evolved in the Western Hemisphere

before 1500, but everything I have read suggests that, while indigenous peoples recognized territories for hunting and gathering, they did not recognize private ownership of portions of the earth.

The Europeans who colonized the Americas began carving up this commons and turning it into private property, as the wealthy classes were busily doing back in England and on the Continent. Between the 1500s and the mid-1800s, nearly all of the English commons was privatized, initially through the actions of landlords and later through acts of Parliament. In the process, centuries-old relationships between people and place were torn apart; a view of land as the source of livelihood for the whole community was replaced by a view of land as a commodity to be bought and sold for the benefit of the propertied class. Those who did not own land became, if they were lucky, the tenants or wage servants of those who did; and if they were unlucky, they starved.

Where there had once been free passage for people and animals, now hedges, fences, wardens, and legal barriers blocked the way. The legal barriers were imposed by Parliament in bills called "acts of enclosure," and "enclosure" thus became the shorthand term for privatizing the commons. The first great surge of enclosures occurred in the late Middle Ages, propelled by the lucrative wool trade. By 1516, the leading character in Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* could lament that mild-mannered sheep, grazing on what had once been common land, were devouring men and villages as well as grass.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau could trace the origins of social inequality to the privatizing of the commons:

The first man who, having enclosed a piece of land, thought of saying, “This is mine” and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society. How many crimes, wars, murders; how much misery and horror the human race would have been spared if someone had pulled up the stakes and filled in the ditch and cried out to his fellow men: “Beware of listening to this impostor. You are lost if you forget that the fruits of the earth belong to everyone and that the earth itself belongs to no one!”<sup>1</sup>

In a gloss on this passage, Voltaire remarked, “Behold the philosophy of a beggar who would like the rich to be robbed by the poor!”<sup>2</sup>

The following centuries have shown that Voltaire needn’t have worried. By the end of the nineteenth century, 99% of England’s agricultural land was owned by just over half a percent of the population.<sup>3</sup> Except for occasional setbacks, as during the French Terror and the Bolshevik Revolution, the rich in Europe and the United States have easily held their own, and they have done so, in large part, by enclosing more and more of the commons. Today, the fences encircle far more than land. In America, individuals and corporations are patenting life forms and genetic information; they are profiting from scientific research conducted at public expense; they are selling water drawn from aquifers and springs, and they are exploiting public waterworks for farming and real estate development in arid regions; they are building in flood-prone areas thanks to insurance underwritten by taxpayers; they are hijacking the public airwaves and the Internet; they are drilling for oil, mining for minerals, felling

timber, and grazing livestock on public lands, paying fees far below market values or paying nothing at all; they are polluting the air, water, and soils and passing on the cost of that pollution to all of us. These private grabs of public goods are widening the gulf not only between rich and poor individuals but also between rich and poor nations, even as they are degrading the commons.

Enclosures are by no means the only threat to the health of the biosphere. Anyone who takes an honest look at the evidence realizes that natural systems are breaking down under the pressure of a swelling human population, which consumes more resources, releases more toxins, disrupts more habitat, and drives more species to extinction year by year. The consequent human suffering—from war, drought, famine, and disease—is incalculable and unconscionable. As a result of these disasters, we now realize that we depend on far more than the lands and waters originally belonging to the commons, although of course lands and waters are crucial. We now recognize that we depend for our well-being on countless shared goods, from a stable climate and a prolific ocean to honest government and effective schools.

We could speak about the whole realm of shared goods as “the commons,” as Vandana Shiva does in talking about the indigenous knowledge bound up in strains of rice and wheat developed by generations of Indian farmers; as Jeremy Rifkin does in arguing against the privatizing of the human genome; as Peter Barnes does in proposing how to defend the atmosphere from pollution; as David Bollier does in protesting the giveaway of knowledge derived from publicly-funded research; or as Elinor Ostrom does in writing about the protection of ocean fisheries.<sup>4</sup>

The Internet, itself a valuable addition to our shared wealth, has become an arena for vigorous efforts to define, defend, and enhance the commons. A sampling of those

efforts might include the Global Commons Institute from Great Britain; the “On the Commons” project from the Tomales Bay Institute; “The Leadership for a New Commons” initiative from the Whidbey Institute; the public-domain licensing venture called the “Creative Commons”; and the Digital Library of the Commons hosted at Indiana University.<sup>5</sup>

While “the commons” is a serviceable term with a noble history, the one I prefer to use is “common wealth,” which originally meant “the general welfare.” I believe we need to recover ways of speaking about “the general welfare,” especially in the United States, where public discourse has been taken over almost entirely by the rhetoric of individualism and free enterprise. I separate the compound word into its two parts, “common” and “wealth,” to distinguish my usage from that of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and other political philosophers, who equated the “commonwealth”—one word—with the body politic.

As I understand it, the common wealth embraces much more than the body politic; it embraces all those natural and cultural goods that we share by virtue of our membership in the human family. A short list of these goods would include the air, waters, soils, and oceans; outer space; the electromagnetic spectrum; the human gene pool and the diversity of species; language in all its forms, including mathematics and music; knowledge in all its forms, from art to zoology; all manner of artifacts and machines, from knives to supercomputers; the practical arts such as cooking, building, herding, and farming; the practice of medicine; the body of law, the structures of democratic government, and the traditions of civil liberty; parks, community gardens, state and national forests, wildlife refuges, and protected wilderness areas; museums, libraries, schools, plazas, and other public spaces.

None of us, as individuals or even as nations, could create these goods from scratch or replace them if they were lost. For example, no amount of ingenuity or toil on our part could mend the tattered ozone layer, restore balance to a destabilized climate, or revive an ocean fishery that has been depleted below the threshold required for biological recovery. And none of us creates wealth purely through our own endeavors, but only by drawing on this vast inheritance. At most, we may add some mite of value—an idea, an invention, a song—but whatever we contribute is minuscule compared to the riches we inherit. We are born into the legacy of the common wealth, and we pass it on, either enhanced or diminished, to future generations. As recipients of this gift, we should feel obliged to protect and preserve it, and to assure that it remains accessible to all.

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For the past quarter century, U.S. politics has been dominated by attempts to ransack the common wealth, benefiting the few at the expense of the many. This plundering takes many forms: below-cost timber sales in national forests, over-grazing of public lands by privately-owned livestock, oil drilling in wildlife refuges, subsidies for the nuclear industry and agribusiness, pork barrel highway projects, sweetheart deals for military contractors, off-shore tax havens for corporations, on and on. The looting of the commons has been carried out through the privatizing of prisons, the transfer of tax dollars to religious schools, the commercial rip-off of the Internet, the scouring of the oceans by factory ships, the opening of national parks to snowmobiles, and the patenting of organisms. The result of all this plundering is to diminish the wealth we hold in common.

Our politicians and merchants seem not to notice that we hold any wealth in common. The story they tell is almost entirely about

private wealth and private solutions. If the streets are unsafe, instead of reducing the poverty that causes crime, buy an alarm system, move into a gated community, pack a gun. If the public schools are failing, instead of fixing them, put your kids in private schools. If the water is tainted, don't work to clean it up; buy your own supply in bottles. If the roads are clogged, don't push for public transportation; buy a bigger car. If cancer is epidemic, instead of addressing the causes, try the latest therapies. If Social Security looks insecure, instead of overhauling the system, funnel the dollars into private accounts, so those who guess right on the stock market will win and those who guess wrong will lose. If more than forty million Americans lack any form of health insurance and tens of millions more lack adequate coverage, instead of expanding Medicare to cover everyone fairly, establish private health accounts so the rich can buy superior care and the middle class can take their chances and the poor can live in fear of accident or illness. Even churches, which might challenge this epidemic of selfishness, enlarge their congregations by preaching the gospel of prosperity rather than material simplicity, and personal salvation rather than service to one's neighbor.

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In the raw young American democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville observed an uneasy balance between the pursuit of personal advantage and a concern for the common good. Since he made those observations in the 1830s, the balance, if it ever existed, has certainly been lost.<sup>6</sup> The spirit of cooperation and philanthropy that so bedazzled the visiting Frenchman is still alive in America, but it has been overshadowed by rampant privatism. The myth of the social compact, which emphasizes our dependence on one another, has been largely displaced by the myth of self-reliance. This trend coincides with the triumph of television, which purveys the solipsistic, hedonistic, ahistorical mindset we

blithely call consumerism.

The political assault on the common wealth and the commercial appeal to "consumers" go hand-in-hand. Both urge us to grab whatever we can, to indulge our appetites without gratitude to the people whose labor supports us, without concern for future generations, without acknowledging that we share the earth with millions of other species and that we draw every drop of our sustenance from nature. While the world decays around us, we are urged to buy our way to security, as if we could withdraw inside a bubble of money. This story, the dominant one in America today, is a self-centered fantasy that leads to loneliness for the individual and disaster for the world.

We need an alternative story, one that appeals to our generosity and compassion rather than our selfishness. We need a story that measures wealth not by the amount of money held in private hands or by the Gross Domestic Product but by the condition of the commons. We need a story that links the health of individuals to the health of communities, a story that reminds us we inhabit not merely a house or a city or a nation but a planet. Rather than defining us as consumers, this new story would define us as conservers; rather than cultivating narcissism, it would inspire neighborliness; rather than exhorting us to chase after fashions, it would invite us to find joy in everyday blessings—in the voice of a child or a bird, in music and books, in gardening and strolling, in sharing food and talk. To live by such a story, we need not be sages or saints; we need simply be awake to the real sources of the good life.

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In crafting such a story, we might begin by reimagining where we live. Most of us, when asked for our address, will give a street number, a postal code, or other markers of

place, but we are unlikely to name the nearest river. As one step toward reviving a concern for the common wealth, we could inscribe on the covers of our phonebooks a map of the local watershed. Grownups would be puzzled at first by this way of describing their true address, but I expect that children would readily grasp what it means. In a number of elementary schools across the country, with help from teachers and parents, students are mapping their local watersheds and monitoring the quality of rivers and lakes. In some communities, after identifying sources of pollution, children have offered testimony to city councils and environmental protection boards. Youngsters readily understand that rivers and lakes gather whatever falls or is dumped on the land, and that streams reveal the state of health for the whole watershed. They understand that each of us lives in the embrace of a river.<sup>7</sup>

My own home in southern Indiana is embraced by the East and West Forks of the White River. With a watershed of 11,350 square miles, wholly contained within Indiana, the White drains roughly a third of the state. So the quality of its water is a fair measure of how well government, municipalities, businesses, farmers, and ordinary citizens of Indiana are caring for this precious common resource. The verdict is: not very well. The White ranks high on lists of the nation's threatened rivers—not because of depletion, as in rivers of the arid Southwest, or because of dams, as in rivers of the mountainous Northwest, but because of pollution. In the upper and lower reaches, it collects runoff from glacial plains, where the deep topsoil is devoted mainly to soybeans and corn and is liberally sprayed with pesticides and herbicides; throughout the watershed, including the unglaciated southern hills where I live, it gathers runoff from lawns, parking lots, highways, factory outlet pipes, municipal dumps, and overburdened sewer systems. The resulting stew of toxins has made it dangerous to drink straight from the river,

swim in the river, or eat fish drawn from the river. In 1999, five million fish were killed by a single factory discharge. The Indiana Department of Environmental Management duly issues warnings. But the word “management” is a misnomer here; no one is managing the White River. At best, our state and federal agencies are monitoring its decline.

I spoke recently with a man whose job is to travel around the watershed explaining to farmers new regulations that limit, for the first time ever, the amounts and kinds of poisons they can spray on their land. His standard reception is to be called a communist. The Indiana Farm Bureau as well as the agricultural companies declare that it is un-American to restrict what a man can do on his own land or what a corporation can sell. Likewise, many developers, industrialists, loggers, and homeowners resist any constraints that might cost them money or sweat. In doing what is easiest and most profitable for themselves, they are obeying the rational self-interest so famously celebrated by Adam Smith and so assiduously defended by apostles of the free market. Added together, however, these selfish choices do not magically serve the “public good,” as if guided by an “invisible hand,” but instead they defile a portion of the public good called the White River.

Under the twin banners of property rights and free enterprise, rivers are being degraded all across America. Elsewhere, the abuse may come from mine tailings, power plants, livestock feedlots, or paper mills; from barge traffic or jet skis; from the pumping of vast quantities of water for resorts in the desert; or from mountain-top removal for coal mining. The pace of such abuse has increased along with growth in population, in the power of technology, and in the sway of corporations. Regulation alone will not be enough to reverse the trend. In spite of treaties, there are constant battles over allocation of water

from the Colorado, for example, and the river is so overdrawn that scarcely any flow reaches the sea. The Clean Water Act has led to improvement in some rivers, but in many cases, it is cheaper for a company to pay the fines for ruining a river than to clean up its effluents. No matter what rules are on the books, any administration in Washington can choose to reinterpret the law, weaken it, or ignore it entirely. Much as we need wise laws and socially-responsible courts, they alone will not protect our rivers or the rest of our shared wealth. The only sure protection is a citizenry that clearly recognizes and fiercely defends the common wealth as the prime source of our well-being, and as our legacy to future generations.

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Fortunately, many people sense this need. Around the world, people are shaping a new story about the sources of peace and plenty. You can see the story come alive in farmers' markets, housing coops, land trusts, neighborhood councils, and town theaters. You can see it in free medical clinics and Habitat for Humanity building sites. You can see it in the Green Belt Movement, launched by Wangari Maathai in Kenya, which is spreading trees and democracy across Africa. You can witness the story unfolding in citizen forums and simple living collectives, in shelters for abused women and children, in efforts to restore eagles or wolves.

Those who embrace this new story are recovering wisdom known to our ancestors but largely forgotten in our narcissistic age. In spite of what the media tell us, we know that the good life is not for sale. We understand that the good life is something we make together, in partnership with other people and in harmony with nature. Because we realize that happiness, health, security, and meaning come to us largely as gifts, we feel called to preserve those gifts, enhance them if we can, and pass them on.

Love of our common wealth is a root impulse behind countless acts of gratitude and kindness that ordinary people perform every day. We all feel it, but we don't always know how to speak of it, or we speak of it so quietly that our story is drowned out by the blare of consumerism. We need to speak up, to say boldly why we fight for a just economy, inspiring schools, decent housing, and universal health care; why we protect open space, why we clean up rivers and replant forests, why we look after the ailing and the elderly, why we insist that government be a force for public good. In a society obsessed with competition, we need to say why we practice cooperation. In a culture addicted to instant gratification, we need to champion long-term-healing.

The glorification of private wealth will go on around the clock, in every medium, without any help from us. We need to counter that chorus by lifting our voices in praise of the wealth we share, recalling how our lives depend on one another, on generations past and future, on the bountiful earth and all its creatures, on the spirit that lifts us into being and sustains us through every moment and reclaims us in the end.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse on Inequality* (1755), translated by Maurice Cranston (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 109.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>3</sup> David Bollier, *Silent Theft: The Private Plunder of Our Common Wealth* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 46.

<sup>4</sup> Vandana Shiva, *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: South End Press, 2005); Jeremy Rifkin, *The Biotech Century* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1998); Peter Barnes, *Who Owns the Sky? Our Common Assets and the Future of Capitalism* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2003); David Bollier, *Silent Theft: The Private Plunder of Our Common Wealth* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge U.P., 1990).

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<sup>5</sup> For the Global Commons Institute, see <http://www.gci.org.uk/>. For the Tomales Bay Institute project, see <http://www.onthecommons.org/>. For the Whidbey Institute initiative, see [http://www.whidbeyinstitute.org/initiatives\\_inc.html](http://www.whidbeyinstitute.org/initiatives_inc.html). For the Creative Commons, see <http://www.creativecommons.org>. For the Digital Library of the Commons, see <http://dlc.dlib.indiana.edu/>.

<sup>6</sup> In an earlier essay, I noted that “Although Tocqueville found much to fear and quite a bit to despise in this raw democracy, he praised Americans for having ‘carried to the highest perfection the art of pursuing in common the object of their common desires.’ Writing of what he had seen in the 1830s, Tocqueville judged Americans to be avaricious, self-serving, and aggressive; but he was also amazed by our eagerness to form clubs, to raise barns or town halls, to join together in one cause or another: ‘In no country in the world, do the citizens make such exertions for the common weal. I know of no people who have established schools so numerous and efficacious, places of public worship better suited to the wants of the inhabitants, or roads kept in better repair.’” I quote Tocqueville from Richard D. Heffner’s edition of *Democracy in America* (New York, Mentor, 1956), pp. 199, 67-68.

<sup>7</sup> For a sampling of watershed-based educational initiatives, see Hamline University’s Center for Global Environmental Education: <http://www.cgee.hamline.edu/watershed/action/resources/curricula/planting.htm>.

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