

Alexis Stamatis
Greece

The Aegean Belongs to its Fish

THE HELIOS CORPORATION

Let's suppose we woke up one day and found a bill in our mailbox never seen or thought of before: a bill asking us to pay a sun tax. The government of Greece has just privatized the sun, which now belongs to Helios Corporation, selling it at two euros per month to any citizen of the country wishing to consume it. The sole responsibility of Helios Corporation is to maintain that same quality of sunlight that humanity has known since the times of the famous "Attic light".

What a shock! Must we now pay for the sun? What? Isn't the sun a free good for everyone? Isn't that a given? Isn't it common to all? Quite naturally! But what exactly do we mean by the term "common?"

The working hypothesis as regards Helios Corporation, is not exactly one belonging to the sphere of science fiction. Let us not forget that markets have in recent years invaded areas which traditionally have been considered incommensurate with the economic sector. Markets now claim a piece of the pie on every inch of the planet, ranging from the depths of the solar system to the most private corners of our personal lives. In fact, this new age includes DNA, the 'landscape' of the human brain, even the genetic code of life. But why do we take the sun, the founding element of the "Commons" for granted?

All inhabitants of the planet are in some way "united owners" of some goods, some resources, which are considered natural extensions of our daily experience. These resources, the elements of nature, air, water, forests, but also the societal creations of

humanity, such as science, art, even the Internet, constitute a part of our common heritage on the planet earth. All of these are vital to our existence and help the very continuity of life and history. Let us consider what these "Commons" are. The term is not an easy one to deal with. We could argue that the Commons include all of nature's creations, as well as those, which we as society have created, inherited and maintained, in order to pass them down to the coming generations.

A brief historical survey will prove that the Romans exercised three types of private ownership. The *res privatae*, those things which could belong to an individual or a family, the *res publicae*, those which could be constructed by the state for public use, (public buildings and roads) and the *res communes*, those which were free for consumption, such as air, water, and wild animals.

The *Magna Carta* of 1215 included forests and fishing waters in the *res communes* – as free and available to all. Starting in the 15th century and up until the mid-17th, the landed gentry enclosed the Commons by literally fencing in forests and livestock areas. This action was symbolic and not coincidental. What the dukes, the counts and barons of the time did 500 years ago is what companies and corporations are doing today. Through corporate influence, national governments and commercial organizations attempt to 'fence in' or 'privatize' all those or parts of the 'Commons' that could bring them profit. And, as we all know, such parts are many, almost the whole.

If we were to use an economic model in order to evaluate the “Commons” according to the laws of the market, there would be so many zeroes that they would run off the margins of the page, and we would be obliged to resort to the use of exponents of ten. But where is the problem, one might ask, playing the role of the devil’s advocate. As history goes on, in one way or another – even when privatized – the ‘Commons’, remain in the hands of humankind, which somehow deals with the problem and life goes on.

Yet, there is a problem here, and that is that this common heritage is being dealt with in a wrong way for the most part, since its use is based on the exclusive criterion of profit. During these times of excessive consumption and commercialization, our natural base is being wasted, mutilated and destroyed. What must be done? Should the “Commons” belong to the state, or to private owners, or to all? The answer is not easy, yet, considering the real danger lying ahead – a Kafkaesque kind of reality - and which is to be expected coming from some variant of our Helios Corporation, it is certain that some initiatives and reactions must enter the picture.

Fortunately, something is already happening. Today we have private and group owners taking advantage of the ‘Commons’, with the aim of serving our common welfare. People who volunteer to work at public parks, artists who offer their creations free of charge through the Internet, scientists and intellectuals who permit their colleagues to have access to their research projects. However, this happens to be the exception. Commercialization remains the rule.

The Internet is a very good example. The freedom it offers is mostly due to the open architecture of the system. Its technology is designed to mostly cater to the average user, permitting individual creativity, exchange and common use. Of course, commercialization soon took advantage and invaded this otherwise free landscape. If

one wishes to create a low-cost personal site, he/she would have to do so under the headline of a large company, or by allowing advertising. The result is that, gradually, the Internet itself has come to be a part of the Commons, but its use is controlled by oligopolies – a great difference compared with the 90s, when we had 4.000 internet service providers.

In his 1968 essay entitled “The Tragedy of Commons”, biologist Garrett Hardin, argued that the “Commons” embody a ‘tragedy’, since, without some political status quo or a system of private ownership, any given resource will inevitably be led to overuse and finally to exhaustion. In some cases, what belongs to all finally comes to belong to no one. Yet the essay assumed that there is only one type of “Commons”, while in reality there are many, and they among one another as much as there are ways of handling them. History itself has already given the answer. Without the support of any private ownership, "the commons" has for centuries been managed by the human activity of its users to its growth and self-protection, through a variety of methods of self-organization and management such as the adoption of use policies – as in the case, for example, of public libraries or parks.

The entire human civilization is based on the use of a set of given “Commons”. However, inevitably, at some point some of these entered the market domain while some others did not. And our hope is that they never will. The question remains: who and where, does one draw the line?

PLATO’S THOUGHT

On a broad level, we could divide the “Commons” into “natural” and “cultural”. The sky, for example, constitutes one of our major “Natural Commons”. It offers us air, the atmosphere, the life of ozone, yet also protection from radiation.

As regards the “Natural Commons”, we have inherited these either from God, or

from the phenomenon of Big Bang. The answer depends on the view of each one of us. The “Cultural Commons”, however, are solely our own creations. Throughout history they have exercised a significant influence on the “Natural Commons” by evaluating them and by imposing themselves on the ways we exploit the latter. Science, for instance, has radically changed the way in which we view energy or the mineral world.

My knowledge of economics is not the best possible. So, as writer, I would like to talk mostly on “Commons” as regards their cultural dimension.

The issue is rather broad. If by “Commons” we mean all those human achievements in thought, literature, art and philosophy, then which is the way for their best ‘protection’? I am not talking about, say, the management of books, works of art or films on the part of the market. These are for the most part taken for granted in our times. I am referring to the management of broader forms of common cultural experience such as thought, innovation, even talent.

Market logic has it that everything can be bought and sold. Are we, then, to expect the moment at which some multinational company will buy Plato’s thought? Are we to expect the moment at which the rhetorical question, “Who owns the sun?” will expand itself to the question “Who owns talent?”

Let us consider the case of literature. The view that a literary work embodies a standard use value, which is usually unforeseeable, no longer prevails as it did in the past. Millions of books read throughout the world enjoy no more than a few months of life. Books jostle with one another in the columns of Sunday newspapers, in no way different than the statistics of industrial products in the financial sections of these newspapers. Literature has gone from being an inherited value to a product sold everywhere under the same logic as an electrical device or a pair of slacks.

BOOKS, OR SHOES?

I recently attended a discussion on recent developments in Greek literature. After a few minutes I realized that something was not right. Did I come to the wrong conference? Ninety nine per cent of what I heard did not in any way include terms or phrases related to literature as plot, narrative, style. On the contrary, the terms I heard were of economic nature: absorption, distribution, deposit. In fact, at some point, a reference was made to the world of books as a problematic enterprise.

So, what I did was to substitute the word ‘shoes’ for the word ‘book’ each time I heard the latter. Much to my surprise, instead of creating a surreal, or even an allegorical one-act play, I ended up having reformulated an absolutely logical analysis of the status of shoes in the Greek economy. Authors became shoe designers (shoe-makers, as we used to call them), publishers became shoe companies – for instance, Nike, Ferragamo, or Adidas – and literary works became the shoes themselves, shoes with heels, sneakers, walking shoes and modern, revolutionary designs.

As the French philosopher Jean François Lyotard said some time ago: “The question posed by the professionally oriented student of our days, by the state or the higher education institution is no longer ‘Is it true?’ but ‘Of what use is it?’” Substitute literature, for scientific knowledge and the professionally oriented author for the professionally oriented student, and what you get is the present state of literary affairs. Likewise, at one time the question posed to the author was: “What are you trying to say with your book?” In our days, this question has become, “How many copies have you sold?”

As we said before, the logic of the market dictates that everything can be bought and sold. Are we, then, to expect the day when some multinational corporation will buy out Plato’s thought? Recently, a Greek blogger argued that this time has already come and

it is called ‘software patents and patents of business methods’... Perhaps he was kidding, perhaps not.

COPYRIGHT

Copyright is a relevant issue in this discussion. For hundreds of years cultural commons (tales, great stories, even language itself) have been passed from one generation to another without the need of copyright or patent, though we all learn in Greek literary history that our national poet, Dionysios Solomos used to buy words from passersby in the streets of Zakynthos..

However, just as Solomos never secured his writings, none of the great inventors of the past thought of securing their inventions with patents. Had things taken another course, we would not have musical scales, the Gregorian chant, Homer’s *Odyssey*, even Chinese cuisine... Today’s system is as follows: a writer has the monopoly for fifty years, after which her or his work is openly available to the public. A kind of intellectual ecology. The seed dies in order to live. However, the continuous extensions of the duration of the copyright (since this benefits the big organizations) end up with the opposite result; the land in this case does not breathe from the presence of large plants... Solomos would have to be a billionaire today had he wished to go on with such a hobby...

USE VALUE AND TRUTH

Product theory informs us that anything can be reproduced in a mechanical way-- be it a thought, an emotion or an action-- as long as it can be ‘re-printed’ in thousands or millions of copies. In this process, what really matters is quantity, while quality (or uniqueness) is less important (and it is precisely here that the question “what is true?” becomes “of what use is it?”) Let us consider for a moment that this is an ‘evil’ thing per se. The problem arises when quantity entirely overtakes quality, when use value overtakes truth, when reproduction overtakes production and creativity itself.

And this is precisely what prevails today. The strategy of “Holy Economy” – this modern undisputed deity – is quite simple: we locate a ‘wealth-producing resource’ (i.e. talent or an oil well), that is to say, a quality, we subject it to the ways and means of quantity and go on to exhaust it.

And then what? Then we come to the point of forgetting how shoes are made, how books are written. We manage to forget that there is an issue of truth and quality and that if we do not face it, the resource will exhaust itself.

Someone may ask: how can talent be subjected to quantification? Is talent a wealth-producing resource? Let us once again play the role of the devil’s advocate. If we define “wealth-producing resource” as anything that can attract attention, that can impress and mobilize people to research and decipher it (in all the meanings of the term), then, yes, perhaps talent also fits the description. In this case, then, the process of reproduction and quantification is nothing more than a process of redistribution of this resource, which is in itself something unique, “rare” and of quality. It amounts to saying, as the phrase goes, “I share my talent”, I spread it throughout the world. That sounds fine up to a point. The problem arises at the moment when reproduction/quantification comes to dominate over quality and uniqueness. This happens when (as in our times) use value dominates over truth. When the exploitation of one resource is considered more important than the cultivation of creativity, quality, uniqueness and inspiration.

In Greek, the word for exploitation is ἐκμεταλλεψία (*ekmetallepsi*), meaning literally “to dig out of metal”. Now, how the creative process of extraction of the “Commons” which had offered sources of life, art and so many other benefits to humankind, came to mean “to use something for one’s personal benefit”, says a lot for our times. Let me just add here, that the word for creativity in Greek is

δημιουργία (*demiourgia*) a word that comes from the words δῆμος (*demos*) (free people) and ἐργασία (*ergasia*) (work).

It is not by chance that our times constitute the first historical period in which some artists, perhaps for the sole reason of remaining authentic in their creativity, turn consciously against the rules of the game, stubbornly refusing to negotiate, as they (quite rightly) feel that the entire process is demeaning. It is one thing to be a creative person in a world that cultivates talent, which respects and does not attempt to take advantage of it to a humiliating degree, and another thing to be talented in a world, which takes advantage of your talent without cultivating it.

THE SACRED AND THE USEFUL

One may easily argue that each historical period is in its own way utilitarian and focused on profit. The present one, however, is unprecedented in this respect. The meaning of ‘sacredness’ (which no longer exists) in past societies defined precisely one area of human existence which considered as forbidden actions aiming at utility and profit. The ‘sacred’ operated under the supervision of the ‘divine’, and the ‘divine’ defined that which mortals could not tamper with. In ancient Athens, for instance, the market (*agora*, a place where profit was made) was supervised by the state government (*Πρυτανία*) which, in turn, was supervised by the sacred, that is, Parthenon.

Today we have come to the point at which the idea that the human species shares a moral and social heritage that cannot be damaged, commercialized or sold, is considered romantic.

As I said above, we can expect the Helios Corporation to knock on our door any day. This thought reminds me of some years ago when during a conflict between Greece and Turkey regarding some Aegean Sea demarcations, the slogan of the times was “the Aegean belongs to its fish”. Also, when

Andreas Papandreou (the president of the Hellenic Socialist Movement) was the leader of the opposition in Parliament, his own slogan - which came to be quite popular thereafter - was “Greece belongs to the Greeks.” The way things are going, I wouldn’t be surprised if in the near future slogans will be of the nature “the Sun belongs to its own plasma,”, or “talent belongs to those who possess it”...

•••