

The Commons, Short and Sweet

By David Bollier (2011)

<http://www.bollier.org/commons-short-and-sweet>

I am always trying to figure out how to explain the idea of the commons to newcomers who find it hard to grasp. In preparation for a talk that I gave at the Caux Forum for Human Security, near Montreux, Switzerland, I came up with a fairly short overview, which I have copied below. I think it gets to the nub of things.

The commons is....

- A social system for the long-term stewardship of resources that preserves shared values and community identity.
- A self-organized system by which communities manage resources (both depletable and replenishable) with minimal or no reliance on the Market or State.
- The wealth that we inherit or create together and must pass on, undiminished or enhanced, to our children. Our collective wealth includes the gifts of nature, civic infrastructure, cultural works and traditions, and knowledge.
- A sector of the economy (and life!) that generates value in ways that are often taken for granted – and often jeopardized by the Market-State.
- There is no master inventory of commons because a commons arises whenever a given community decides it wishes to manage a resource in a collective manner, with special regard for equitable access, use and sustainability.

The commons is not a resource. It is a resource plus a defined community and the protocols, values and norms devised by the community to manage its resources. Many resources urgently need to be managed as commons, such as the atmosphere, oceans, genetic knowledge and biodiversity.

There is no commons without commoning – the social practices and norms for managing a resource for collective benefit. Forms of commoning naturally vary from one commons to another because humanity itself is so varied. And so there is no “standard template” for commons; merely “fractal affinities” or shared patterns and principles among commons. The commons must be understood, then, as a verb as much as a noun. A commons must be animated by bottom-up participation, personal responsibility, transparency and self-policing accountability.

One of the great unacknowledged problems of our time is the enclosure of the commons, the expropriation and commercialization of shared resources, usually for private market gain. Enclosure can be seen in the patenting of genes and lifeforms, the use of copyrights to lock up creativity and culture, the privatization of water and land, and attempts to transform the open Internet into a closed, proprietary marketplace, among many other enclosures.

Enclosure is about dispossession. It privatizes and commodifies resources that belong to a community or to everyone, and dismantles a commons-based culture (egalitarian co-production and co-governance) with a market order (money-based producer/consumer relationships and hierarchies). Markets tend to have thin commitments to localities, cultures and ways of life; for any commons, however, these are indispensable.

The classic commons are small-scale and focused on natural resources; an estimated two billion people depend upon commons of forests, fisheries, water, wildlife and other natural resources for their everyday subsistence. But the contemporary struggle of commoners is to find new structures of law, institutional form and social practice that can enable diverse sorts of commons to work at larger scales and to protect their resources from market enclosure.

Open networks are a natural hosting infrastructure for commons. They provide accessible, low-cost spaces for people to devise their own forms of governance, rules, social practices and cultural expression. That's why the Internet has spawned so many robust, productive commons: free and open source software, Wikipedia and countless wikis, more than 10,000 open access scholarly journals, the open educational resources (OER) movement, the open data movement, sites for collaborative art and culture, Fab Labs that blend global design with local production, and much else. In an age of capital-driven network platforms such as Facebook, Google and Uber, however, digital commons must take affirmative steps to protect the wealth they generate.

New commons forms and practices are needed at all levels – local, regional, national and global – and there is a need for new types of federation among commoners and linkages between different tiers of commons. Trans-national commons are especially needed to help align governance with ecological realities and serve as a force for reconciliation across political boundaries. Thus to actualize the commons and deter market enclosures, we need innovations in law, public policy, commons-based governance, social practice and culture. All of these will manifest a very different worldview than now prevails in established governance systems, particularly those of the State and Market.

Eight Points of Reference for Commoning

<http://www.bollier.org/blog/eight-points-reference-commoning>

One of the great achievements of the late Professor Elinor Ostrom was the identification of key design principles for successful commons. She set forth eight of them in her landmark 1990 book, *Governing the Commons*. The wording of those principles is aimed at social scientists who study the management of common-pool resources from a neutral, non-participatory, scientific perspective. As a result, the principles are not as accessible to the general public, nor do they reflect the direct experiences and first-person voice of commoners.

The first German Sommerschool on the Commons, which took place in Bechstedt/Thuringia in June 2012, decided to remedy this problem. Participants took part in intense debates over what a new set of principles for commoning – based on the Ostrom principles – might look like if they reflected the personal perspective of commoners themselves. The result is a statement, "Eight Points of Reference for Commoning," which can be seen as a re-interpretation – remix? – of Ostrom's design principles.

As Silke Helfrich notes on her Commonsblog, the Eight Points of Reference for Commoning “are based on the belief, that commons can flourish in very different contexts.” The German version can be found here. An English translation is below. The German commoners consider the current wording of both the German and English versions as relatively stable, but they invite comments and suggestions for further changes.

Eight Points of Reference for Commoning

Elinor Ostrom and others have formulated eight design principles for the shared use of resources. They distill the lessons of a huge number of case studies from around the world. They are written from a scientific perspective and continue to be of great significance for the commons movement.

We approach the commons from the perspective of active commoners, meaning the people who create and maintain working commons. We are more concerned with creating spaces for community and cooperation than with institutions. As for the resources themselves, we are more interested in how to preserve and use them, than in making distinctions between material and non-material, traditional or new commons. We therefore refer to all types of commons here.

For us Ostrom's design principles provide a template for the following points of reference. We hope that commoners may find them useful in reflecting on their own practice.

Commons do not exist in a perfect world, but rather in one that is hostile to commons. Therefore it is important that commoners be aware of the treasure they hold in their hands, to preserve it and help it flourish.

1. As a commoner I clearly understand for which resources I need to care for and with whom I share this responsibility. Commons resources are those that we create together, that we maintain as gifts of nature or whose use has been guaranteed to everyone.
2. We use the commons resources that we create, care for and maintain. We use the means (time, space, technology, and the quantity of a resource) that are available in a given context. As commoner I am satisfied that there is a fair relationship between my contributions and the benefits I receive.
3. We enter into or modify our own rules and commitments, and every commoner can participate in this process. Our commitments serve to create, maintain, and preserve the commons to satisfy our needs.
4. We monitor the respect of these commitments ourselves and sometimes we mandate others whom we trust to help reach this goal. We continually reassess whether our commitments still serve their purpose.
5. We work out appropriate rules for dealing with violations of our commitments. We determine whether and what kinds of sanctions shall be used, depending on the context and severity of a violation.
6. Every commoner can make use of a space and means for conflict resolution. We seek to resolve conflicts among us in an easily accessible and straightforward way.
7. We regulate our own affairs, and external authorities respect that.
8. We realize that every commons is part of a larger whole. Therefore, different institutions working at different scales are needed to coordinate stewardship and to cooperate with each other.