

Commoning the City

Presentation: Introduction

From the PLP Manifesto:

‘Land’ is all the earth’s resources: the physical surface of the earth, both land and water, urban and rural, what lies beneath, and the atmosphere above. Land is also more than its physical attributes. Land is home to people and other species. It contains history, memories, stories, dreams and aspirations. It is a ‘place’ that people are rooted in, the context in which their lives are played out.

However, for centuries land has been an economic asset for a small minority, its value determined by how it is used and priced by the market, displacing the majority - physically, economically, socially, politically and culturally. The process of dispossession can be seen in the Norman Conquest, the enclosures, the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism, and colonial expansion. In recent times, land grabs by corporations and investors, means that how land is used depends on what makes the most profit.

Problems of current land system

“Our land system affects what foods are available and how food is produced. It dictates who has access to housing, who has access to green spaces, and it determines where we get our energy from. As MSP Andy Whitman says, ‘Land is about power... how it’s derived, how it’s distributed, how it’s exercised and how its transferred.’ Currently, our land system creates and maintains deep inequalities both in England and in the countries from which we import food, energy and other goods, in what can be considered neo-colonial Extractivism. While land is essential for all human life, it is allocated to those who can afford to buy it or who can inherit it, rather than to those who need it, or who can use it for public benefit”.

Elise Wach: *Future Natures* <https://futurenatures.org/how-could-land-in-england-be-reformed-for-the-commons/>

Alternative: The Commons

The concept of the commons is often referred to as an alternative to the current system.

Tradition

The Commons has been traditionally seen in terms of rights. Commoners had rights to use common land to graze livestock or take wood for fuel. However, much Common Land was enclosed and there is very little common land left.

Today only 3% of England and 12% of Wales is Common Land. However, Common Land is still owned by someone, it not necessarily land that is collectively owned and managed for the public good. Only some people may have commoners’ rights on a piece of land. In urban areas most urban commons are not community-owned- a variety of legal designations, some with no legal protection except that given by the planning system (<https://theconversation.com/urban-commons-are-under-siege-in-the-age-of-austerity-heres-how-to-protect-them-121067>).

Alternative Ways of Looking at the Commons

Winstanley: The Earth is a common treasury for all.

1. Definitions: Commons, Commoning and Commoners

What are the commons?

Three elements:

- a pool of common resources
- a community that uses and reproduces these resources

- a set of values, protocols, and norms for collaboration, sharing and care that the community agrees upon (Urban Commons Handbook)

What is Commoning?

- Not just about governance but about relationships.
- Linebaugh: “The commons is an activity” - the continuous making and remaking of the commons through shared labour and capacities. Also involves relations with non-humans and nature. (Urban Commons Handbook)
- Commoning is a process of learning to work together. Commoners are those who are doing this. (Marina Chang- lecture)

PLP Manifesto: Our alternative vision sees land as a ‘Commons’. This means that land is a common inheritance, a gift of nature to benefit all in which we act as stewards or caretakers so that it can sustain us both now and in the future. The Commons is a social process, a community of people who work together within democratic and fully participatory structures to ensure ecologically responsible production and equitable distribution of the land’s wealth and to create resilient communities of care, embedded in place.

2. Differences between urban and rural areas

- More complex
- Density
- Diversity of its inhabitants
- More than just a community of commoners as there are many external factors that impact
- Mix of the material and immaterial (social, economic, political, cultural)
- Not just access to and governance of a common pool of resources (pastures, fishing waters, woods)
- Community gardens are examples of urban commons because they are collectively managed assets, use land and tools in common (not based on private property), offer spaces for reproduction (food growing) and socialising to urban dwellers who are the commoners.

Summary

Commoning the City: Turning land into something that is stewarded by all people who have a relationship to that land. Developing processes and institutions that can make decisions about how land is used and who benefits which are fully participatory and inclusive.

- Alternative forms of ownership to private and state- community, co-operative, land trusts etc with stewardship not ownership being important
- About resources, physical, social and cultural, and making use of land for public benefit
- Governance, building relationships etc is as important as how resources are used.

Key Questions for session:

1. How can food contribute to this process?
2. How can growers work with others in a locality or across wider areas?
3. What changes are needed? Eg land reform, developing participatory methods?

Resources

- Peoples Land Policy: www.peopleslandpolicy.org
- Podcast by PLP: Part of Adam Calo's Landscape podcast series (<https://landscapes.libsyn.com/>)

<https://open.spotify.com/episode/5NUh991QRbGPnM4JZCeZ9t?si=80BhhnHbTiqR-lTIOWfrDg>

- Information about all the community gardens in UK (Sustain).

<https://www.goodtogrowuk.org/>

- Just Space: <https://justspace.org.uk/>
- Southwark Planning Network: https://www.peckhamvision.org/wiki/Southwark_Planning_Network
- Granville Community Kitchen: <https://granvillecommunitykitchen.org.uk/>
- Glasgow Community Food Network: <https://glasgowfood.net/>
- Shared Assets: <https://www.sharedassets.org.uk/resources/a-21st-century-commons>
- Project in London where people work together on common projects. <https://www.publicworksgroup.net/projects/r-urban-wick/>
- Dr. Marina Chang- lecture UCL https://www.commoners.coop/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1NZlvuX_S-oa-definition-of-the-commons/
- *Urban Commons Handbook*: <https://dpr-barcelona.com/urban-commons-handbook/>
- *A Conceptual Framework for Urban Commoning in Shared Residential Landscapes in the UK* by [Aimee Felstead](#), [Kevin Thwaites](#), and [James Simpson](#) Department of Landscape Architecture, University of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 2TN, UK (<https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/11/21/6119>)
- <https://iasc-commons.org/about-commons/>
- Commons Registration Act 1965 <https://www.oss.org.uk/about-us/our-history/saving-open-spaces-commons-registration/>
- <https://theconversation.com/urban-commons-are-under-siege-in-the-age-of-austerity-heres-how-to-protect-them-121067>
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Panel Discussion

1. Ebany Dohle Glasgow Community Food Network

Aim is to get fair access to land, work with individuals to raise awareness and also with the local government. Individuals are largely disempowered. The city of Glasgow has identified urban sites for land for food growing. She is working with communities which has been a positive experience. It can be difficult to get the council moving and to get them to provide infrastructure and support. One of the projects involves a council-owned golf course which is on long lease with the council.

The challenges have been to engage people with the land in Glasgow. In the indigenous culture she worked with, nature was the basis of everything- you need the land to live and you have to collaborate with nature and each other. Nature is the main protagonist. In Glasgow the work is very

slow- need to get a critical mass of people who see land differently. People need to have a shared vision. More funding would help to do this.

2. Dee Woods Granville Community Kitchen

South Kilburn has over 400 languages spoken. The GKC started with a group of women who were getting older and wondered what to do to change things in their community. A housing co-op did not seem right so they developed a multi-stakeholder model which brought in a community element- so food, housing and education. They started with food growing with a garden but needed to access land. They involved the community- it was caring, slow work. They were also having to fight gentrification and social cleansing. Governance is crucial- the community needs to be a central part of the work.

We need to politicise people. They are disillusioned with party politics and the way everything is left to the market and corporations. The local is important, giving people agency.

3. Sarah Williams Sustain

Public sector land is their main focus. Their role is to facilitate local people creating new growing sites. We need to normalise food growing. People organise in many different ways. Many are worried about getting involved in community/collective work so they start with their own plots and gradually link up with others. We also help groups protect their land. The main issue is the rapid sell-off of public land. There can be tension between housing, rewilding, food- we need multi-functional land use.

4. Richard Lee: Southwark Neighbourhood Planning Network

The Southwark Land Commission was a proposal from the community as a way of resisting the encroachment of demands from developers and to have land used for the public good. One idea was a Public/Commons Partnership.

The Southwark Planning Network has been working collaboratively, bringing people together in a sustainable way. One idea is to have People's Land Assemblies.

Comments/Questions:

1. Guy Standing: need to be aware of the state- cannot trust it- neither national or local
2. Cambridge commoners?
3. If land is not to be owned privately or by the state then we need other forms of tenure, eg community land trusts.
4. Need to use the laws we have now to take over more land for commons and the public good, eg the right to compulsory purchase
5. Need to monitor local authorities who are often obstacles to commoning and using land for the public good.