Environmental activists are reviving an old concept to rethink economics and society

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by Nathan Schneider (/profiles/s/nathan-schneider.html) - @nathanairplane (http://www.twitter.com/nathanairplane)

The commons is an old, simple idea but one that we have never needed so urgently. It’s whatever a community of people shares and manages together. A commons can be anything from a lake that has been fished for centuries to a folk song no one owns to a neighborhood garden to the planet itself. Commoning goes back as long as human history, and it was a basic assumption of the Byzantine emperor Justinian’s legal code and the Magna Carta (http://www.ucpress.edu/ebook.php?isbn=9780520932708). It forms the basis for a kind of economics run by neither state nor market but rather by community relationships in which everyone has a personal stake in a shared property or project.

Now, after centuries of being obscured by industrial smoke and no-trespassing signs, people are learning to recognize the commons again. I saw this firsthand at a historic conference last weekend at the Omega Institute — a retreat center in Rhinebeck, N.Y. — called Building the Collaborative Commons.

The first thing one saw upon arriving was a gigantic banner along the parking lot, summarizing the eight principles (http://www.onthecommons.org/magazine/elinor-ostroms-8-principles-managing-commmons) for managing a commons, culled by Elinor Ostrom, who was awarded the 2009 Nobel Prize in economics. Define clear boundaries, Ostrom’s principles recommended. Ensure that commoners can modify the rules that govern them. Vest responsibility as locally as possible. Up the hill from the parking lot, halls typically used for yoga and spiritual talks welcomed 525 registered participants — many of them leading activists and officials from across the Hudson Valley — to discuss the commons in light of threats facing the region and the rest of the world. (http://www.ucpress.edu/ebook.php?isbn=9780520932708)

This was, according to the opening speaker, David Bollier, “the first major conference in the United States exploring the commons as such.” He would know. He has been fostering discussions about the commons for decades, and his latest book, “Think Like a Commoner
The commons are making a comeback |

Sharing the stage at Omega were speakers such as CNN commentator and Barack Obama's former green-jobs czar Van Jones, Indian anti-GMO crusader Vandana Shiva, Native American activist and onetime vice presidential candidate Winona LaDuke, futurist and policy adviser Jeremy Rifkin and Bill McKibben, the writer and climate activist behind 350.org and lead organizer of September's 400,000-strong People's Climate March in New York City. They had varying degrees of fluency with the idea of the commons, but all were using it in one way or another already — even 14-year-old Xiuhteczcatl Tonatiuh. He is a rapper and an environmental activist who has been a plaintiff in a lawsuit against the state of Colorado for failing to protect the environment; the suit relies on the public trust doctrine (http://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/civil-disobedience-as-law-enforcement/), an ancient commons-based legal concept.

The commons is a powerful concept for connecting many struggles and issues. Shiva spoke of seeds as a commons, and Rifkin spoke of Net neutrality and the commons of the Internet. Jones spoke of the commoning taking place in the streets of Ferguson, Missouri, in the form of street memorials and protest encampments. In 2009 at the World Social Forum meeting in Brazil, delegates circulated a document (http://bienscommuns.org/signature/appel/index.php?a=appel) that identified the commons as an umbrella for their many struggles over rights to such essentials as land and water (http://midnightnotes.org/). More recently, in the wake of Occupy Wall Street, veterans of the movement turned to the commons (http://www.makingworlds.org/about/) as a means of connecting the dots among their disparate grievances. In May I went to Ecuador for a policy summit that proposed the world's first national transition plan (http://enwiki.flipsocke.org/w/Research_Plan) toward a commons-based economy — imagining a society of businesses owned by their workers and customers, open seed libraries for farmers, and indigenous medicines that no drug company can patent.

There are good reasons people are talking about the commons more and more these days. It's an approach to resisting the market's profit-driven impulse to pollute the planet and patent every last shred of knowledge by expanding the realm of cooperative activity and mutual concern. Meanwhile, on the Internet, the success of Wikipedia and open-source software has reminded people how well-governed commons can outperform private competitors. Offline, a new wave of cooperative businesses is discovering what is possible when profits stay with workers and customers rather than being syphoned away to Wall Street.

Rifkin spoke as if a commons-based future were a near inevitability, an outgrowth of new technologies like 3-D printers and the Internet of Things that he expects will allow communities everywhere to manufacture whatever they need locally, based on open-source designs. But it is hard to imagine that the powerful corporations he advises will give up their monopolies without a fight; commoning is traditionally how the poor protect their access to the means of survival, not a theory of governing for elites. LaDuke and Shiva emphasized the darker reality that indigenous societies are having to fight harder than ever to protect what's left of their age-old commons.

As I followed LaDuke around Omega's labyrinth of stones arranged on a grassy hillside, she noted how odd it is that people should have to go out of their way to conceptualize the commons. These are practices that, by other names, her indigenous community simply takes for granted. “It's their way of processing it coming from their worldview,” she said. “I accept that other people are going to say things differently than I would.”

It remains to be seen what the commons will come to mean — a catch-all buzzword easily co-opted by the establishment or a genuine shift away from it. Hudson Valley may help decide. On either side of the stage at Omega were dioramas depicting the fights now underway in the region against exploding oil tankers, high-voltage power lines, gas pipelines and a bottled-water company. Robert Backus, Omega's CEO, wanted to test out the commons as a means of uniting the resistance to various local threats and building more sustainable alternatives.

“'We were trying to discover a platform, a language that could speak to the way that all of these issues are interconnected,” he told me. “So far it has been really well received.” A follow-up event is slated for 2016, with several smaller meetings before then.

Far beyond the Hudson, the well-resourced Omega Institute could help the commons framework spread across the United States. “The conference was significant,” Bollier said, “because it validated and explored the commons as relevant to American political culture. For years he has been looking for a home base for discussions on the commons in this country. Alongside meetings earlier this year like
CommonBound, organized by the Boston-based New Economics Coalition, and Jackson Rising, focused on fostering co-ops in black communities in the South, Omega’s political, cultural and spiritual backdrop has powerful potential. Commoning, after all, is not just a kind of economy but a way of life.

Encounters at the Omega campus have had ripples that spread far and wide. During Jones’ speech, he told the story of how a conversation on that stage years earlier, with tree-sitting activist Julia Butterfly Hill, gave him the idea of merging his work among urban youth with the environment. “This was really where the whole green jobs thing got born,” Jones said. A few years later, he turned it into a best-selling book, a law passed under George W. Bush and a signature initiative of the Obama administration.

Commoning, however, won’t be legislated from on high. It’s a practice that spreads from community to community and from generation to generation, at least as long as we still have commons left.


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