

# Our Global and Local Commons: The New Narrative for Justice, Peace, Environmental Security and Shared Prosperity for All

## Realizing our Sovereignty: The first step in reclaiming the Commons

Sovereignty is power vested by people in a leader or government through a social contract agreed on between them. [In North America], the native communities also had sovereignty, but in a form different than the Europeans. About 1090 AD -- more than a hundred years before the signing of the Magna Carta in England -- the native peoples of eastern North America ended their previous conflicts and united as a single nation through an oral agreement called the Great Law of Peace. Over the next five centuries, they developed a unique kind of federalism to promote peace and social harmony among their tribes. Decisions were made by tribal representatives assembling together under a Great Tree of Peace. There they discussed the common interests and values of all the native communities -- thus maintaining the sovereignty of their people within the larger context of national sovereignty, promoting peace and harmony within the whole.

By the time that the first colonists arrived in the 17th century, the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederation -- the Iroquois, the Onandaga, Cayuga, Mohawk, Seneca and Oneida -- had created an efficient government that was ruling equitably across a wide geographic area. Historical records indicate that many representatives of the Iroquois, drawing upon their own experience of intra-tribal government, advised the colonists to unite as a single people in defiance of the British. Some scholars even say that the Iroquois model of 'states within a state' had a direct impact on the transformation of the Thirteen Colonies into a political union and the development of the Constitution of the United States of America. Both the Indian and United States governments included historically unique features like the commitment to life, liberty and happiness; political representation; the concept of public service of leaders to their people; political debate; checks and balances; government through reason and consent, not coercion; religious tolerance rather than a state-based church; and equal rights before the law.

In their ceremonial images, the Native Americans often used the symbol of a Tree beneath an Eagle, which carries a clutch of arrows in its talons, to represent the strength and protection of the people through unified government. Subsequently, during their period of rebellion against the British, several of the colonies adopted a nearly identical symbol of an Eagle atop a Tree to depict their own united purpose in establishing a free and independent nation. After gaining independence from Great Britain, however, the new American government retained the image of an Eagle with a Latin slogan 'E pluribus unum' ('Out of Many One') in its official symbolism (as still portrayed on the backside of the American dollar bill), but eliminated the Tree upon which the Eagle was formerly perched. The excision of the Tree from this symbol reveals a key difference between the Native and Colonial American forms of government. **From its beginning, the United States was more interested in projecting the modern image of a warrior power with strong social control (the Eagle) than in depicting the agrarian roots and branches of a peaceful, representative democracy (the Tree). The 18th century American colonists, like their European forebears, were developing national sovereignty as a top-down concept, in which the role of the state was to champion and protect property more through commercial rights and enforcement than through individual or human rights.** For the Native Americans, sovereignty had been an expression of representative democracy; but for the Colonial Americans, sovereignty and representative democracy were already becoming a rationalization for class domination and popular control. (James Quilligan, Economist and Policy Analyst, G6 Billion Interfaith Service, 9/20/09 prior to Pittsburgh G-20)

**It would be interesting to see where the USA would be today if we had maintained the full symbolism of the tree with its connotations for a natural sovereignty rooted in the commons, maintained by representative democracy for the whole. Since then, we have lost sovereignty over many of our commons as privatization and degradation of commons continues to expand.**

## Recent Historical Motivations for the Formation of a Commons Movement:

During the past few centuries, as physical space became increasingly quantified and commercialized, our mental categories for resources and goods were gradually oriented to that new social and economic system. The Commons were devalued and shrouded through

- private enclosure of property and legal enforcement
- commons production was commodified into private goods and accumulated wealth
- domination by — and dependence on — the private and public sectors

([www.globalcommonstrust.org](http://www.globalcommonstrust.org))

There is a reason why so many diverse and unrelated people around the world are showing a keen interest in the commons: market enclosures are [still] growing and intensifying. Much of this stems from the normal logic of neoliberalism, a particular kind of capitalism that took root in the 1980s with the ascension of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. Over the past generation, neoliberalism has steadily expanded to become the default worldview governing economics, public policy and human aspiration. It is a system that seeks privatization, deregulation, strict limits on government social programs, state action to protect capital, and debt-servitude for developing countries.

After decades of enclosures, the various resistance efforts initiated by commoners are starting to coalesce. People are starting to self-identify themselves as commoners with a stake in the resources that neoliberal markets seek to appropriate. And so there is a gathering resistance to the neoliberal project. Commoners are now more able to name the problem...as a feature of the neoliberal worldview and economics. (David Bollier, OnTheCommons.org, "Neoliberalism as the Catalyst for a New Commons Movement", Crottorf, Germany, 7/21/09)

"Neoliberalism is directly intent on destroying the commons," said George Caffentzis (University of Southern Maine), noting that it combines sophisticated human intelligence with great brutality in its primary mission — "the totalization of the commodity form." In pursuit of this mission, neoliberal capitalism asserts its domination of nature and crushes social relations that would impede its ordering principles. (See "Promissory Notes: From Crisis to Commons," a 2009 essay by the Midnight Notes Collective and Friends)

The difficulty in writing about [the] commons is its seemingly limitless diversity.... Commons can be a revolutionary movement in Mexico, the second enclosure movement (Boyle 2003b, Evans 2005), smart-mobs (Rheingold 2002), increasingly vocal neighborhood associations, online peer production (Benkler 2004), or new types of markets (Barnes 2006). **The rise of new commons signals alarmed reactions to increasing commodification, privatization, and corporatization, untamed globalization, and unresponsive governments. The new commons "movement" is charged with electrical currents beckoning citizens of the world to develop new forms of self-governance, collaboration, and collective action.** An online naturalist, writing about "American Commons," urges readers: Don't trust anyone who wants to take something that we all share and profit from equally and give it to someone else to profit from exclusively. Our parks, waterways, and aquifers, our North American flora and fauna, our fresh water and fresh air (at least what's left of it) represent our shared natural heritage. (Charlotte Hess, [hess@indiana.edu](mailto:hess@indiana.edu), Mapping the New Commons, 6/19/08)