



## **Nonini, Donald M. ed. 2007. *The global idea of "the commons"*. New York: Berghahn Books.**

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This edited volume provides a clear and insightful introduction to the varying forms of ‘commons’ held around the world today. The title ‘The Global Idea of ‘the Commons’ refers to the discursive phenomenon of ‘the commons’ and its various practical instantiations in hugely different contexts. The book is suited for audiences interested in the idea and breadth of commons organizations worldwide but also behaviour of state and consequences of neo-liberal policies. It would be suitable for teaching advanced undergraduates given the wide scope of ethnographic and thematic contexts it explores.

Nonini’s definition of ‘the commons’ as ‘those assemblages and ensembles of resources that human beings hold in common or in trust to use on behalf of themselves, other living human beings and which were essential to their biological, cultural and social reproduction’ is necessarily broad, given the variety of examples addressed in the chapters. Together, the selected essays seek to unpick forms of control over commons, and the consequences of both different formations of commons and their governance.

To this end, Nonini has collected a series of diverse topics, areas and fields which all speak to his central concern, that of problems facing the contemporary commons both in theory and practice. The result is a rich and accessible book which contains some provocative material that, as General Editor of the series, Bruce Kapferer notes, is not widely available in the media.

The dilemma at the heart of the book is the ways in which commons are ‘being transformed by the incursions of capital and state, and the ways in which they are becoming the locus of struggle for those who depend on them to survive’. Citing previous research which has moved discussion beyond Hardin’s (1968) tragedy of the commons’ in which ‘users compete with one another to appropriate commons resources, thus beggaring one another and so exhausting the commons’ Nonini stands with Ostrom et al (1999) in arguing that for ‘thousands of years people have self-organised to manage common-pool resources, and users often do devise long-term, sustainable institutions for governing these resources’. The authors in this volume further demonstrate Ostrom’s counter to Hardin with a fresh consideration of new threats to contemporary commons coming primarily from mechanisms associated with neo-liberal globalization, corporate alliance and state practises. They also seek, in their short offerings, to provoke a rethinking of the example commons provide in a fast moving, dynamic and dispersed struggle against the ‘incursions of capital’.(ref)

The book is organised into six sections, each short essay presenting a concise account of the commons under study, and reflection upon the context, problems and responses to threat from ‘within’ and ‘outside’ the



commons. Nonini's introduction situates the essays in a global framework and recounts some of the existing literature. He also offers a broad overview of the kinds of commons which the essays identify: natural-resource, social, intellectual and cultural and species commons. These general types are then placed within the capitalist context through discussion of hybrid arrangements, commons on the peripheries of capitalist expansion, and co-existing yet incommensurate scales of value.

His guiding concern with 'weardown' of the commons and increasing 'enclosure' of commonly held resources provides the cautionary impetus for the volume and indication of its timeliness, by suggesting that 'the frenetic efforts of the corporate alliance to enclose new resources is leading to the worldwide 'weardown' of the commons arrangements on which capitalism itself depends. As a result, Nonini sees capitalism's 'conditions of production' as undergoing rapid degradation, a process implicating both reconfigured corporate like states and state like corporations. In bringing together these essays, Nonini draws attention to 'uncoordinated, decentralized and spontaneous' movements against the 'radical assaults of the corporate alliance' and the articulation of this through the global idea of the commons.

The strength of this collection is the way in which thematic ideas in Nonini's introduction are echoed in the concrete examples provided by his contributors. Themes, here considered in turn, run implicitly through the chapters in each illustration of very different commons facing very different threats. Firstly, the theme of political and economic moves against commons as a result of neo-liberal policies runs through several of the examples. Pickles, in the first essay, stresses the political dimension and 'enormous impact that liberal and neo-liberal thought and institutions have had on the social economies of the eastern European commons'. Recalling the late 1980s and early 90s, he describes a 'radical individualism and anti-collectivism' sweeping across the region, and quickly labelling 'collective and common property regimes, some long pre-dating communism, to be barriers to economic development and 'efficiency', being quickly dismantled. A parallel emerges in Scharper and Cunningham's discussion of the 'Genetic Commons', tellingly subtitled 'resisting the neo-liberal enclosure of life'. Here the economic dimension is emphasised as the authors explain the dialectical relationship between biomolecular engineering and legal mechanisms, particularly intellectual property regimes which have led to rapid commercialization of genetics and 'neo-liberal enclosures of genetic material' (59) For Pickles, political change brought about serious economic re-evaluation, and for Scharper and Cunningham, economic incentives are driving political discussion on the 'reinvention of state sovereignty' (60) and 'what is ultimately not for sale' (59)

Such deliberations introduce the second theme, the re-workings of public and private which go on around commons. Scharper and Cunningham draw out the process by which 'nature' came to be viewed as falling within patenting jurisdictions. That which had previously been public, 'nature', became subject to bioengineering, and patentable as 'human made'. Just as the law intervened in redefining the possibilities for public and private, so too are universities stepping in to lay claim to the fruits of intellectual labour.



In Nonini's own essay on the Intellectual Commons, he observes how state initiatives have at times sought to place 'useful knowledge' in the service of private capital, but at other times have implemented broader definitions of the 'public interest' (73)

Nonini raises in his discussion of intellectual commons the point that relations which arise in the creation of intellectual matter are interdependent, and the 'debts they create between people are always on'. In this account he reveals a sociality 'that cannot be reduced to contracts between putatively sovereign individuals engaged in market exchanges, but instead connects persons and groups with one another through processes that acknowledge moral authorship, gifts and the debts they create'. (69)

In doing so Nonini cements the third and possibly most pervasive theme -commons as relations. Present in all of the essays, this account of non-alienated social relations within social orders dominated by capitalist exchange reinforces the anthropological point that these, like all property relations, are about people not things. Particularly worth of note is Lu's discussion in her essay 'An Amazonian Context' of the complex interaction of Native Amazonians with agri-business, corporate petroleum extraction, and conservation rhetoric. Her emphasis is on commons as culturally embedded, and the important characteristic of their being expressions of sociality (43) As she writes, the maintenance of good social relationships, the minimization of conflict, and the fostering of reciprocity are reinforced through the property regime...by holding resources in common, people establish duties and responsibilities to each other.' This theme is picked up again by Boyer, whose reflection on the historical creation and contemporary 'reinvention' of the Appalachian commons incorporates both analysis of mechanisms of commons sustainability from gossip to religious condemnation as well as the fate of the commons in the face of divisive political issues. The majority of the authors in this collection are based in the United States, and together they provide a critical reflection on the role of the USA on commons worldwide. From Smith-Nonini's article which calls explicitly for thinking a US national health service through the notion of commons to Scharper and Cunningham who locate the 'biotech boom' in the United States work in 'isolating, identifying and absorbing' genes and their various components in to the market as commodities, the role of the USA State is rarely far from these scholars' gaze.

Though the book is reliant on a good knowledge of political economy, and is enhanced by a sound understanding of anthropological renderings of property, it makes efforts to lay out terms and provide historical background where necessary. It is not admittedly not free of sometimes turgid theoretical jargon, but is generally clear. Given the brevity of each case study, many of the contextual issues it addresses do not go much beyond good summaries, and a thematic conclusion would have been a welcome addition in drawing together the ideas the authors invoke. Despite these caveats, 'The Global Idea of the Commons' is a valuable and readable addition to thought, discussion and perhaps even action on the plight of commons resources around the world.