

Commons-based economies: prefiguring a post-capitalist future

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Abstract

Privatization of common resources is a central characteristic of neoliberalism. In this context, 'reclaiming the commons' is a recurring theme of anti-capitalist social movements. Common-property regimes are promoted as ecologically sound, and as conducive to participatory democracy. This paper situates common-property regimes as sites of resistance outside of the market/state dichotomy and discusses two case studies of actually-existing land commons: urban gardens in the United States, and the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* or the Brazilian Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil.

Research question

To what extent do common-property regimes constitute a viable alternative, and a form of resistance, to global capitalism?

Methods

Consulted a number of scholarly sources for theoretical discussion of the commons, and considered two case studies of land commons.



Figure 1. Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal



Figure 2. Tenth Acre Farms

Urban gardens

There are over 500 urban garden projects in New York City alone. Most urban gardens in New York City were created as part of the National Urban Gardening program founded in 1975. While the land remains state-owned, the gardens are maintained and governed as commons.

In some ways, urban gardens prefigure the infrastructure that would facilitate local food production. Food is produced for consumption, not for commercial use. The 'new agrarian' approach to environmentalism connects anti-capitalism to environmentalism, stressing the need for a fundamental transformation of our way of life. "People [must] have some direct, productive relationship with their landscape, and obtain their food, fuel, furniture, and other necessary items as locally as possible" (McCarthy 2005, 15). Community gardens provide a glimpse of what such a transformation may look like in an urban context.

Landless Workers' Movement

Officially began in October 1983, when landless peasants overtook a 9,200 hectare cattle farm owned by an absentee landlord. Since then the movement has redistributed 30 million hectares of land and settled 350,000 families by occupying land owned by absentees, and by citing Article 148 of the Brazilian constitution which stipulates that the government must "expropriate for the purpose of agrarian reform, rural property that is not performing its social function" (Cato and North 2016, 46).

The MST connects commons to food sovereignty and to climate change. Here, commons are part of a larger vision of social change that entails a radically different way of structuring the economy: a plurality of small-scale, local economies producing for consumption rather than for commercial use.

Implications

Commons imply and require collective self-governance, which is conducive to direct democracy and self-determination

Common-property regimes connect ownership with use, and prefigure a radical restructuring of the economy that is not dependent on fossil fuels.

In both cases studied, commons provide avenues to food sovereignty, and the success of the MST demonstrates how commons can be incorporated into a broader social movement.