

Green Economy vs. Commons

Quito
May 2012



Gaining a critical perspective on the “green economy” can be difficult for middle-class intellectuals because its assumptions and vocabulary are all around us.



We have many words for resources, economic growth, private property, human rights, administration, management. But there is no universal vocabulary for (what some people call) “commons” or for what others call “territories”.



This is important because **commons** and **territories** provide a good perspective for criticizing and resisting the green economy. But even the people who best understand commons do not have “book” words for it that can easily communicate it to outsiders.



“It was always a problem to explain the commons within capitalist categories.”

E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (1990)



But some examples might help
make a start toward finding a
vocabulary that can help us see
the “green economy” more
clearly for what it is.



Some examples from Europe and Asia ...



Gleaning



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Estovers (England)



(the “poor's overcoat”)

Allemansrätten (Sweden)





Agistment (England)



Wood pasture



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Turbary (England, Scotland)

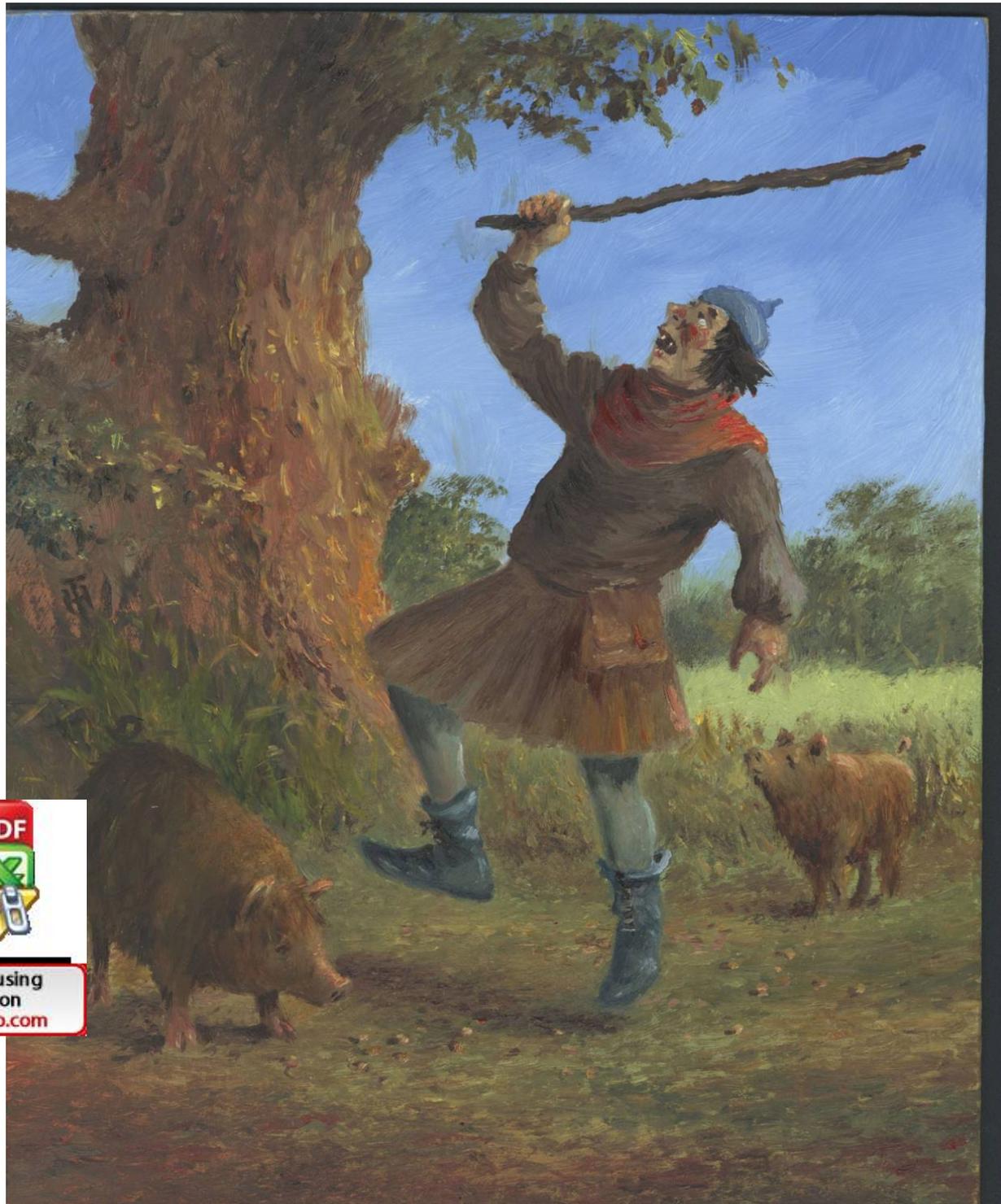


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Pannage



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“Red ant commons” (Thailand)





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Common pathways (Thailand)



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Common pathways

29 Oct 04



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บริษัทโรงแยกก๊าซฮับเอา
ที่ตีนวากัฟ มสลิม รัแล้ว
วายิบทุกค่นรับผู้คชอง
รักัน



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Looking at examples like this, we can slowly begin to make out some interlinked characteristics of commons ...



(1) The right to subsistence takes precedence over the price system and private property rights





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HINTS TO FORESTALLERS, or a SURE WAY to reduce the PRICE of GRAIN!!

VERY CLOSELY RELATED:

(2) The nature/society dichotomy (and the power relations and institutions it is associated with) are resisted





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Resistance to a society/nature distinction is not something “exotic” or “rustic” but is also present and available to Europeans and middle-class people in both past and present ...



In 13th century England as well, forests were neither “natural” nor “social”

In 1631, the legal scholar Edward Coke commented that in the 1215 Magna Carta, (royal) forests consisted of:

Officers

Game (animals)

Soil

Covert (shelter, vegetation)

Laws



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boundaries



In the early modern era in Europe

Resistance to *commodification of land and of people*



Resistance to the *erection of a new nature/society divide*



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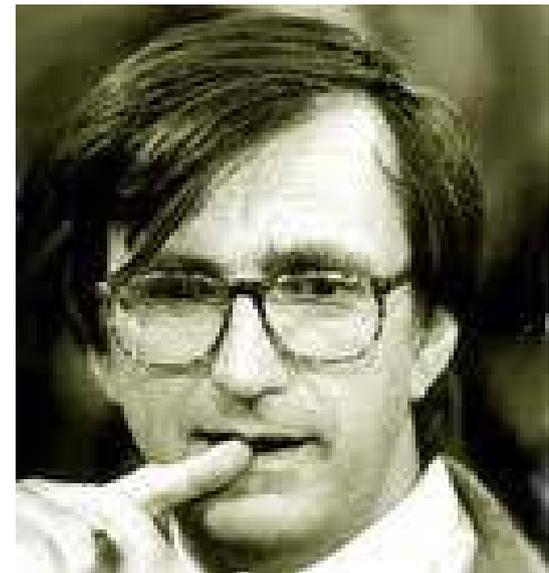
Resistance to the *violation of commoners' rights* (not “human rights”)

Dividing things between “society” and “nature” amounts to “assembling the common world without due process ... The appeal to nature shortcuts political debate and contestation.” It posits facts separated from values and politics.



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Bruno Latour



“Dichotomies like that between nature and society are *governmental* practices for dividing up the common world as areas that are of public concern subject to popular decision and other *fi* to be administered *u* alternative methods of *c*

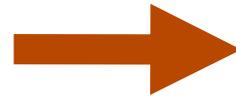
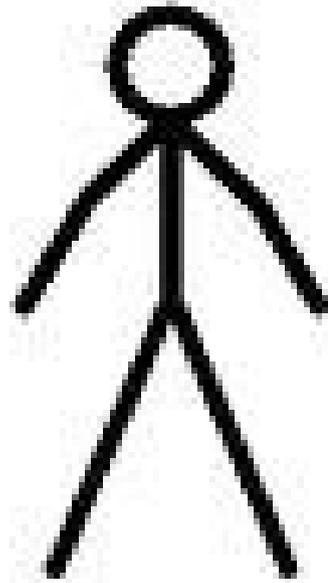


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Timothy
Mitchell

With this in mind, let's return to the “green economy”'s picture of “nature vs society”.

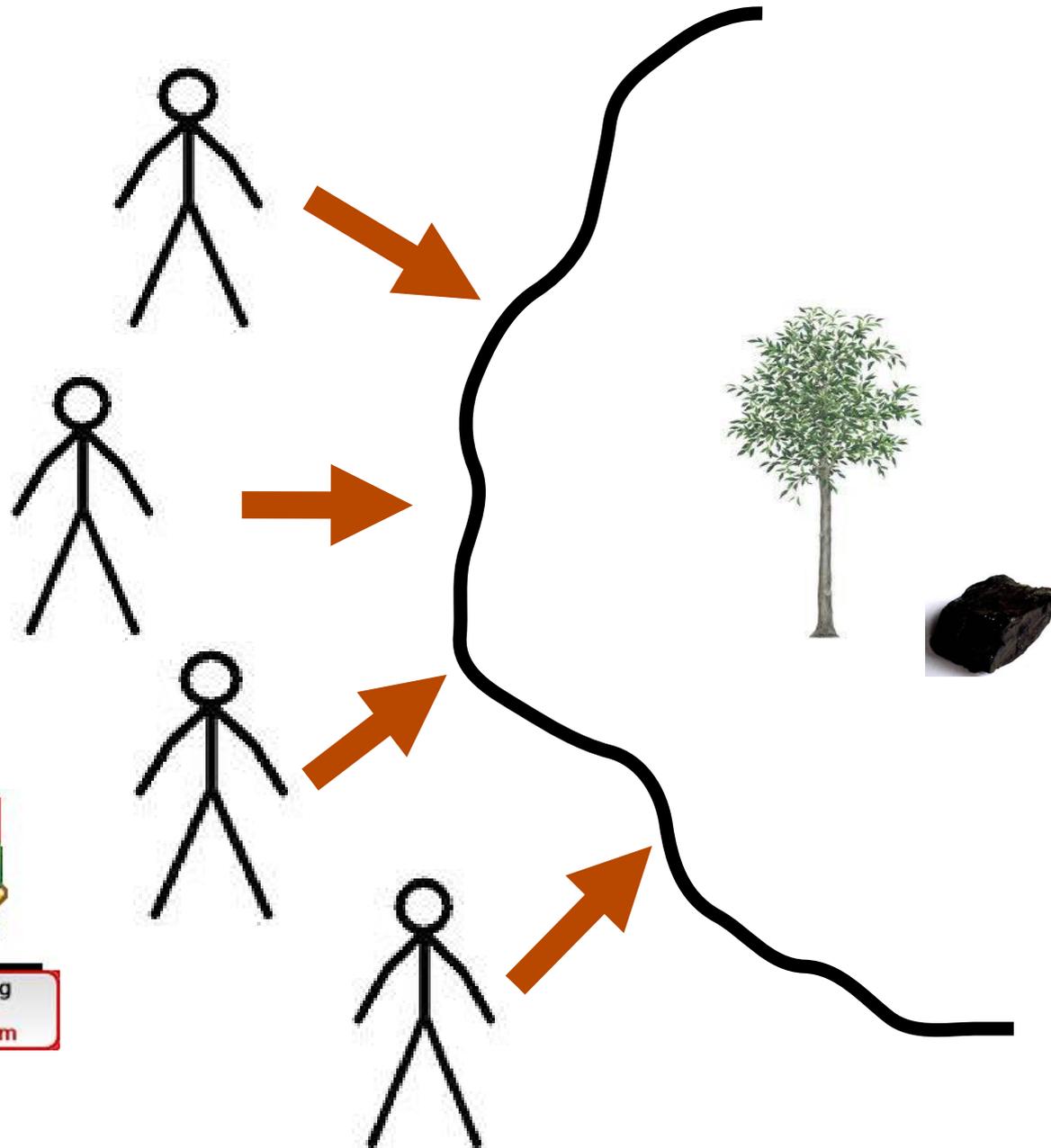


e)

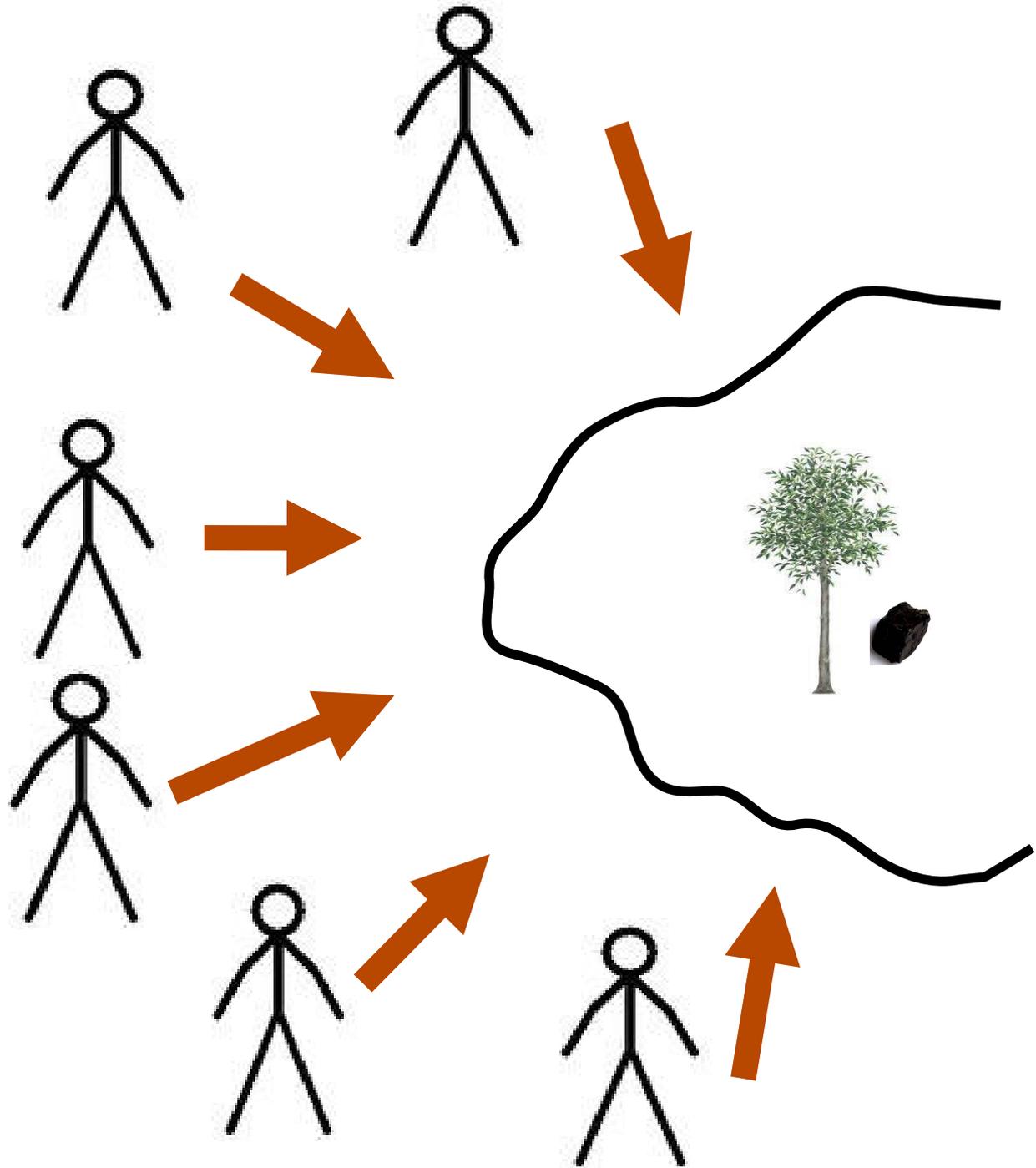
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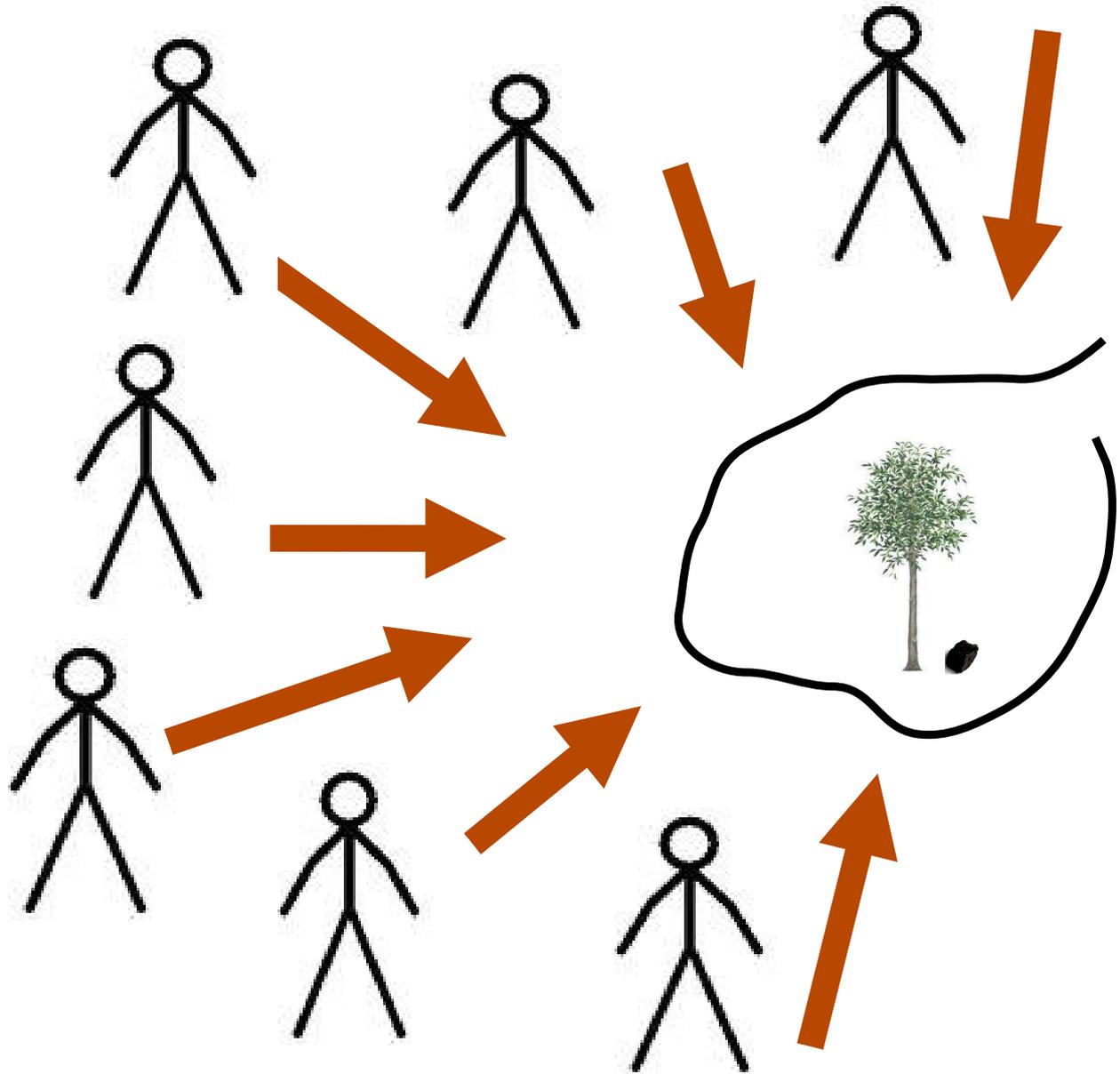
(passive)



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The **green economy** sees this picture as **destiny** ...

... but attempts to “fix” it at least temporarily by technical modifications of either the “**social**” side (population control, consumption control, efficiency, hypercars, prices or “value change”, etc.) ...

... or the “**natural**” side (find more oil, develop agriculture, exploit synthetic biology, harness nuclear fusion, increase natural productivity, etc.)



ANOTHER CHARACTERISTIC OF COMMONS:

(3) Exchange value, the M-C-M' process and capital accumulation are not allowed to dominate subsistence and use values





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fotolia

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Madras Board of Revenue 1871:

“Forest rights **cannot be traded** for anything else or compensated for. This is because in innumerable cases, the right to fuel, manure and pasturage will be as much a necessity of life to future generations as it is to the present. Here the forests are, and always have been, a **common** property.”

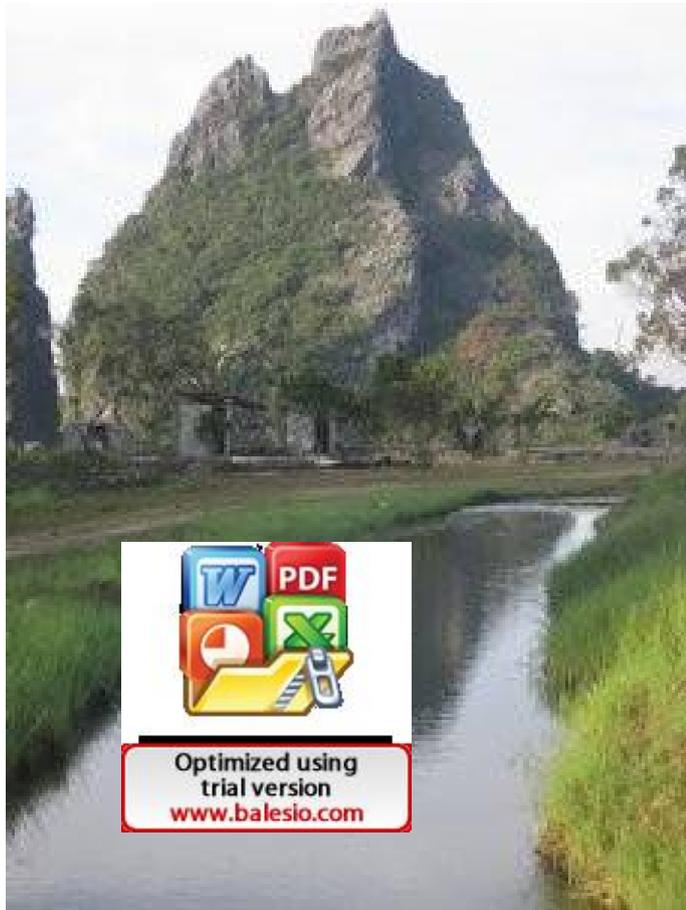


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**KAMI TIDAK AKAN MENJUAL
APA YANG TIDAK BISA KAMI BUAT!**





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Karl Polanyi

"To allow the market mechanism to be the sole director" of how land is used "would result in the **demolition of society** ... to make the use of land fully dependent on the market mechanism would be to subordinate the substance of society itself to the laws of the market ... To isolate [land] and form a market for it was perhaps the weirdest of all the undertakings of our ancestors."

(4) Communal territory
(and other communal
things) are
distinguished from
private property
and *state* property

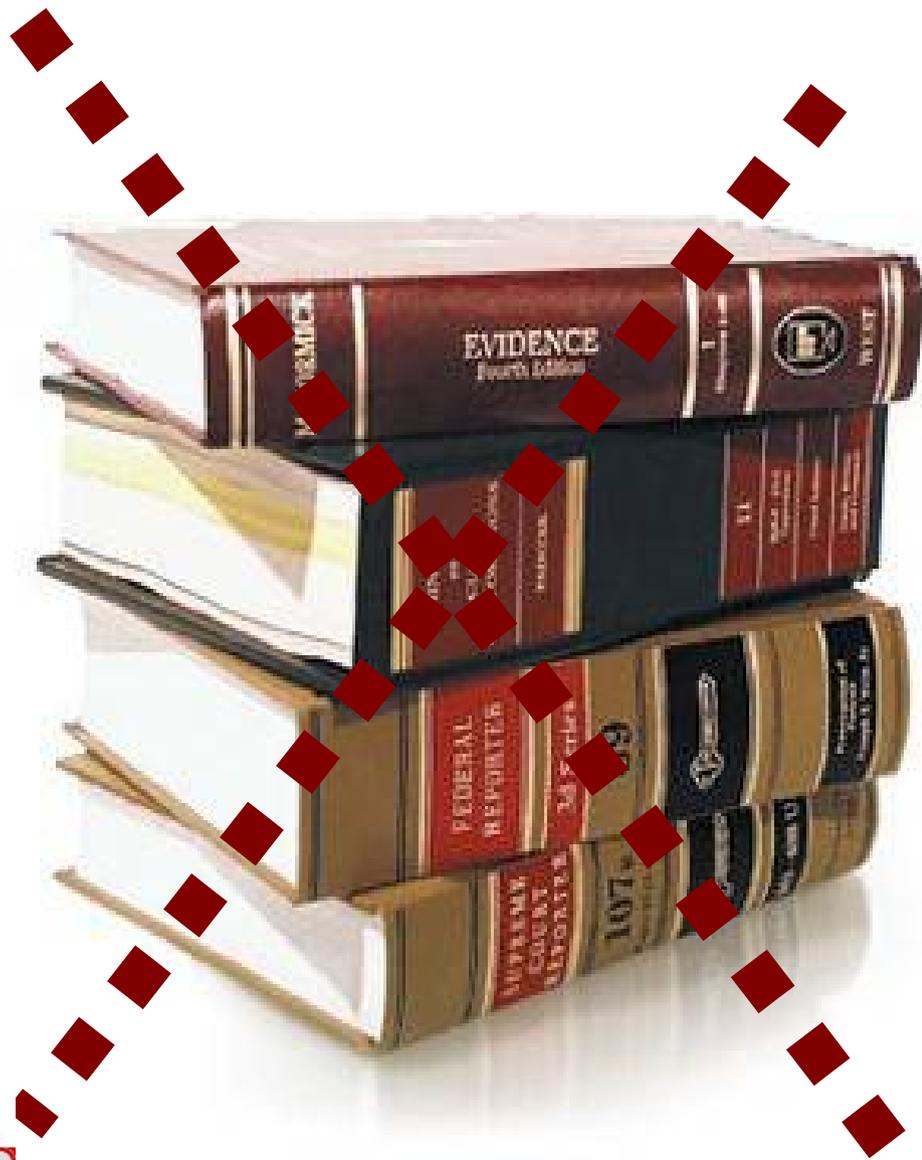




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(5) A cautious relationship with written or state law is maintained





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CONTRACT

THIS AGREEMENT made this _____ day of _____, 20____
by _____
and between _____
and _____

WITNESSETH: That in consideration of _____
kept and performed on the _____
I, Said party of _____
_____ (First Party)
_____ (Second Party),
_____ c/o, respectively as herein stated,
_____ and agrees that it shall:



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BRATING THE BOUNDS IN LONDON.



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(6) Nonhumans are seen not as passive, but as **interlocutors**, also often with a right to subsistence





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Russell Means: “I see the white man chop down a tree without a prayer, without a fast, without any kind of reverence. And yet the tree can tell him how to live.”



“The water
came back.”



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Germany 1830s-1840s

In 1836 76% percent of legal prosecutions in Prussia were about “wood crimes”. In Baden in 1842 there was one “wood crime” conviction for every 4 inhabitants. Many peasants lost their lands in the aftermaths of 1848 and were unable to recover access to their forests.



But the trees also spoke in this struggle. Villagers said that trees that forest owners cut for export would bring bad luck to their ultimate users. The house built of them would burn, the ship would sink.



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(7) An individualistic politics is actively discouraged





Bobek, Manggarai, North Flores

In all of these ways, commons
provide a place to stand from
which you can see capitalism
(and the “green economy”)

more clearly



Neoclassical economics



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APUNYANG TIDAK BISA KAMI BUAT!**



**KAMI TIDAK AKAN MENJUAL
APA YANG TIDAK BISA KAMI BUAT!**

~~Neoclassical
economics~~



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~~“green
economy”~~



“green
economy”



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Struggles against the Criminalization of Commons



1215



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Magna Carta

(7) “A widow ... shall have ... her reasonable **estover** in the common.”

(8) “All forests that have been created in our reign shall at once be **disafforested**. River banks that have been enclosed in our reign shall be treated similarly.”

(3) **fish**-weirs shall be removed from the Great Ouse, the Medway, and throughout the whole of England ...”



1600s



Kings revive old laws
criminalizing commoners who
had been using wood from the
forests.

“Abuse of the forest laws was a
major grievance leading to the
English revolution.”

– Peter Linebaugh



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Forest riots in England



Leicester Forest 1627

Gillingham Forest 1626-8

Forest of Dean 1632

“Here we were born and
here we die”



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Popular rhyme, 1600s

The law locks up the man or woman
Who steals the goose from off the common
But leaves the greater villain loose
Who steals the common from off the goose.

The law demands that we atone
When we take things we do not own
But leaves the lords and ladies fine
Who take things that are yours and mine.



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Gerrard Winstanley 1649



“A Declaration from the Poor Oppressed People of England”

“The earth was made for us, as well as for you ... you cause the Trees and Woods that grow upon the Commons ... to be cut down and sold; for your own private use, whereby the Common Land ... is impoverished, and the poor oppressed people robbed of their Rights, ... while you and the rich make the most profit of the Commons, by your locking of them with Sheep and Cattle; and the poor ... are charged with you, if they cut Wood, Heath, Turf ...”



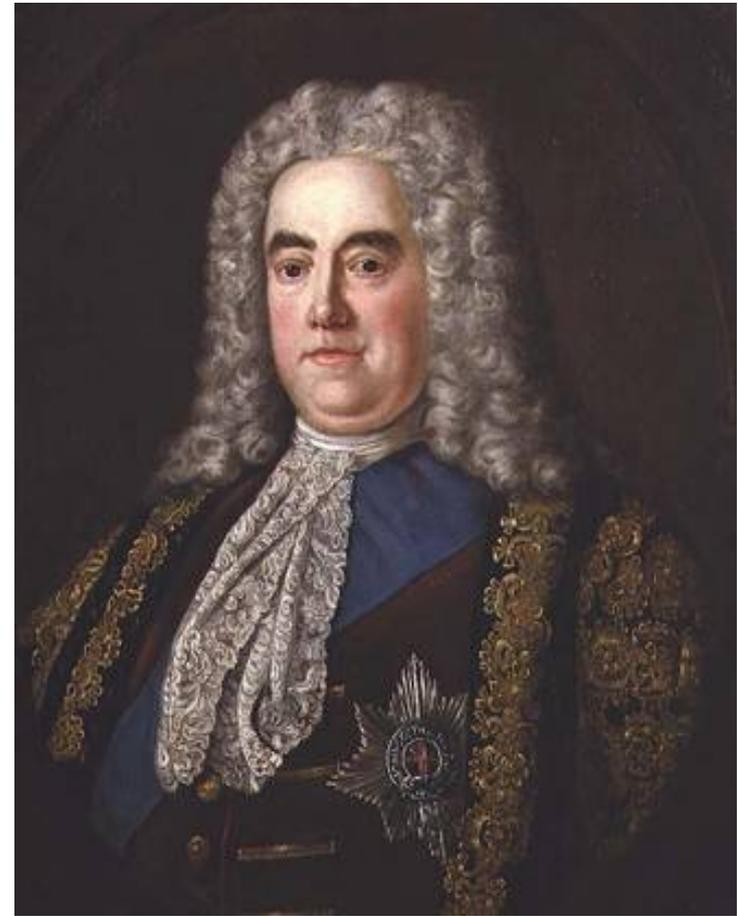
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1730



“I would like to fence off and privatize St. James' Park. How much would it cost me?”

“Only a *crown*, madam.”



Sir Robert Walpole



Que



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PHOTO © PETER VISONTAY

Criminalization of **fire** in field and forest ~1700-2012



Starting from the early capitalist era, Europe's elites were **afraid of fire** in agriculture. They claimed "unexploited" fallows and commons were a waste of "productive" land and an invitation to laziness. Urban intellectuals assumed wrongly that the use of fire in agriculture was mostly just a reckless means of disposing of agricultural trash. Forest officials hated and feared the fire which workers in the woods often exploited.

Elites also hated fire because it was not "improving". So when pressures built up to increase productivity by boosting the reservoir of soil nutrients, fire was blamed.

In addition, fire threatened property. Broadcast fire went hand-in-hand with nomadism -- the seasonal cycling of pastoralists, the cycles of swidden farmers, the treks of long hunters and trappers. Mobility of population made political control difficult.



Stephen Pyne



Urban intellectuals also associated fire with social disorder, and wildfires seemed to appear most often during times of social breakdown. Suppressing unrest and promoting enclosure and high-yield farming seemed to mean eliminating fire, and vice versa.

Control over fire meant control over how people lived. Where peasants saw renewal, intellectuals saw lost revenues, wandering swiddeners and pastoralists, squandered capital, eroded soils, scorched timber, climate change, and social disorder.



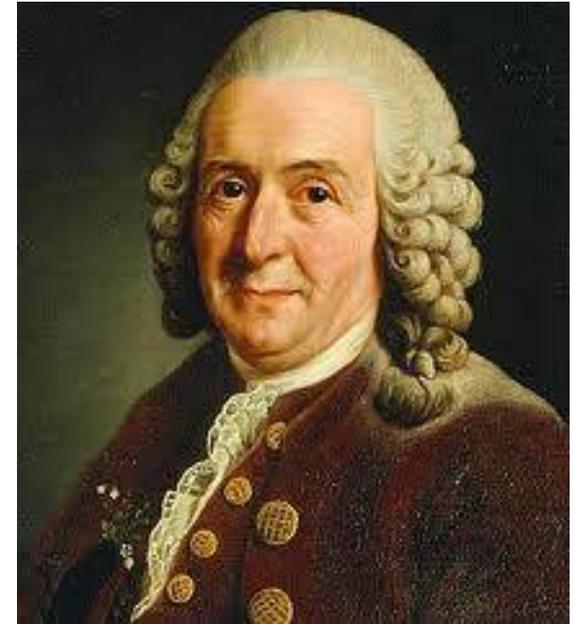
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1749

... so when the great naturalist Linnaeus praised agricultural fire as an aid to fertility and animal raising, he was forced by Sweden's high commissioner of agriculture to replace the official passage.



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Criminalization of fire in the field



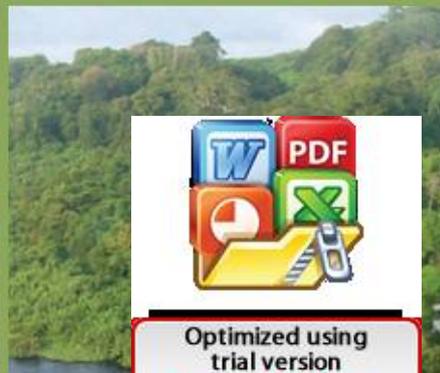
Non-criminalization of fire in the machine



Congo Alternative for Slash and Burn Project (CASB)

Reducing Emission from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD)
and preventing slash and burn in the Maringa Lopori Wamba (MLW)
landscape of the Democratic Republic of Congo

Forest Conservation



Community Benefit



Carbon Credits



Biodiversity Conservation

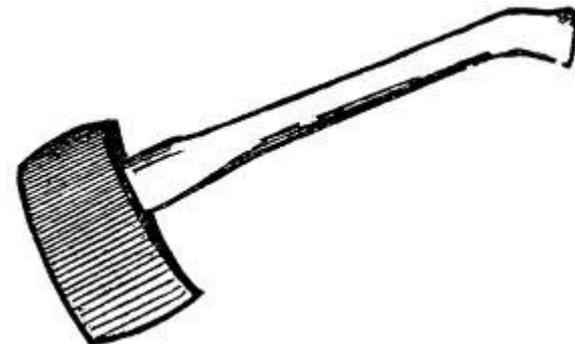


AFRICAN WILDLIFE FOUNDATION®

1831



Warren James, a commoner of Forest of Dean, refuses to cite the law of the commons to support his claim to wood. “This is the voucher of my privilege,” he says, pointing to an axe with which he cut down fences.



1842

“People who gather fallen wood are imprisoned and turned into criminals, to the advantage of the owners of forests. But you will never succeed in making us believe that there is a crime where there is no crime.”



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“An urban deputy opposed the provision by which the gathering of bilberries and cranberries is also treated as **theft**. He spoke on behalf of the children of the poor, who pick these fruits to earn a trifling sum for the parents; an activity which has been permitted by the owners since time immemorial and has given rise to a customary right. Another deputy objected that in his area these berries have already become commodities and are sold in Holland by the barrel ... a customary right of the poor has been turned into a monopoly of the rich.”



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India, 1800s

The British take sovereignty over all Indian forests in 1802 and **criminalize forest customs** in the Forest Act of 1878.

During the famine of 1876-78, women and child gleaners are tortured or killed.

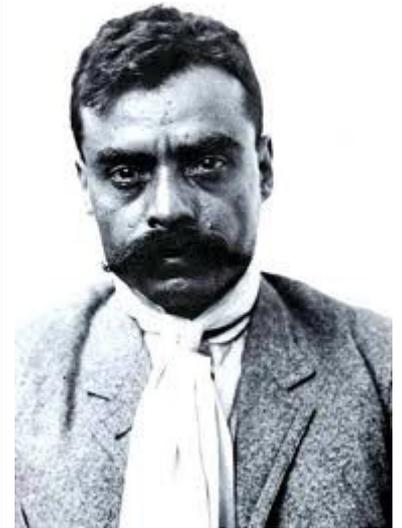
In 1879 B. Phatke becomes the “Robin Hood” and the **father of Indian nationalism.**



Mexico, 1911

Criminalization of commoners is an important motivation behind the revolution.

(Later, repeal of Article 27 of the Constitution in preparation for the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994, which helped re-criminalize commoners, was an important motivation for the Zapatista rebellion.)



Thailand 1964 - 1990s

1964 The National Reserve Forest Act officially criminalizes anyone living and farming in National Reserve Forests, even if they lived there before the law was promulgated.

1980s The number of “criminals” living on this land is estimated at **10 million**. They come under increasing attack as plantation industries move in and “conservationists” raise the alarm about disappearing forests.

1990s A government-backed program to evict these “criminals” is resisted by a coalition of groups that later joins with anti-dam struggles, forest commons allies, and urban activists in a nationwide movement called the Assembly of the Poor. Demonstrations in Bangkok and occupation of Government House for 99 days. The eviction plans are **defeated**.





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People who live with the forests
don't want REDD.”



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Conserve forests because forests are
life, not a commodity.”



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En Cancún el CECOP demanda

* CANCELACIÓN DEL PROYECTO PAROTA

* ALTO A LA CONSTRUCCIÓN DE PRESAS

Emiten gases de efecto invernadero

NO a REDD+ ALTO AL MERCADO DE CARBONO

TERRA Y EL AGUA NO SON MERCANCIA !!

LICARAV
UNU

INO A
PORQ



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“Indigenous Peoples who participate in carbon trading are giving [oil companies] a bullet to kill my people.”

*Casey Camp-Horinek,
Ponca indigenous nation
US*

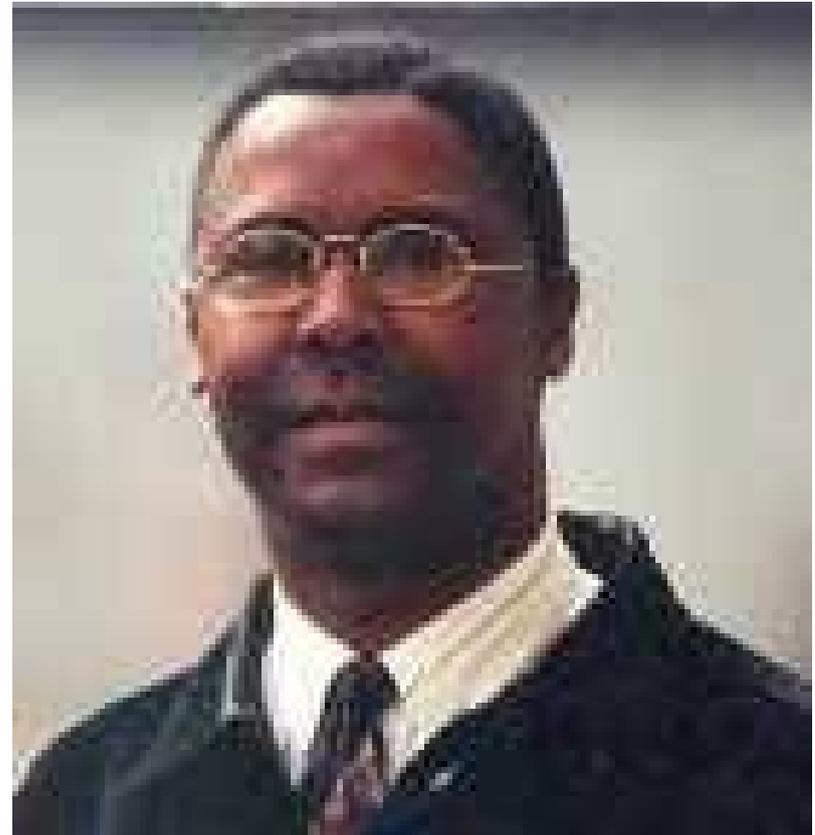


“Our people are sick and dying from the refineries. Trading schemes knowingly concentrate pollution, exacerbating existing ‘hot spots’ in our communities of color.”

*·Dr. Henry Clark,
·West County Toxics Coalition, Los Angeles*



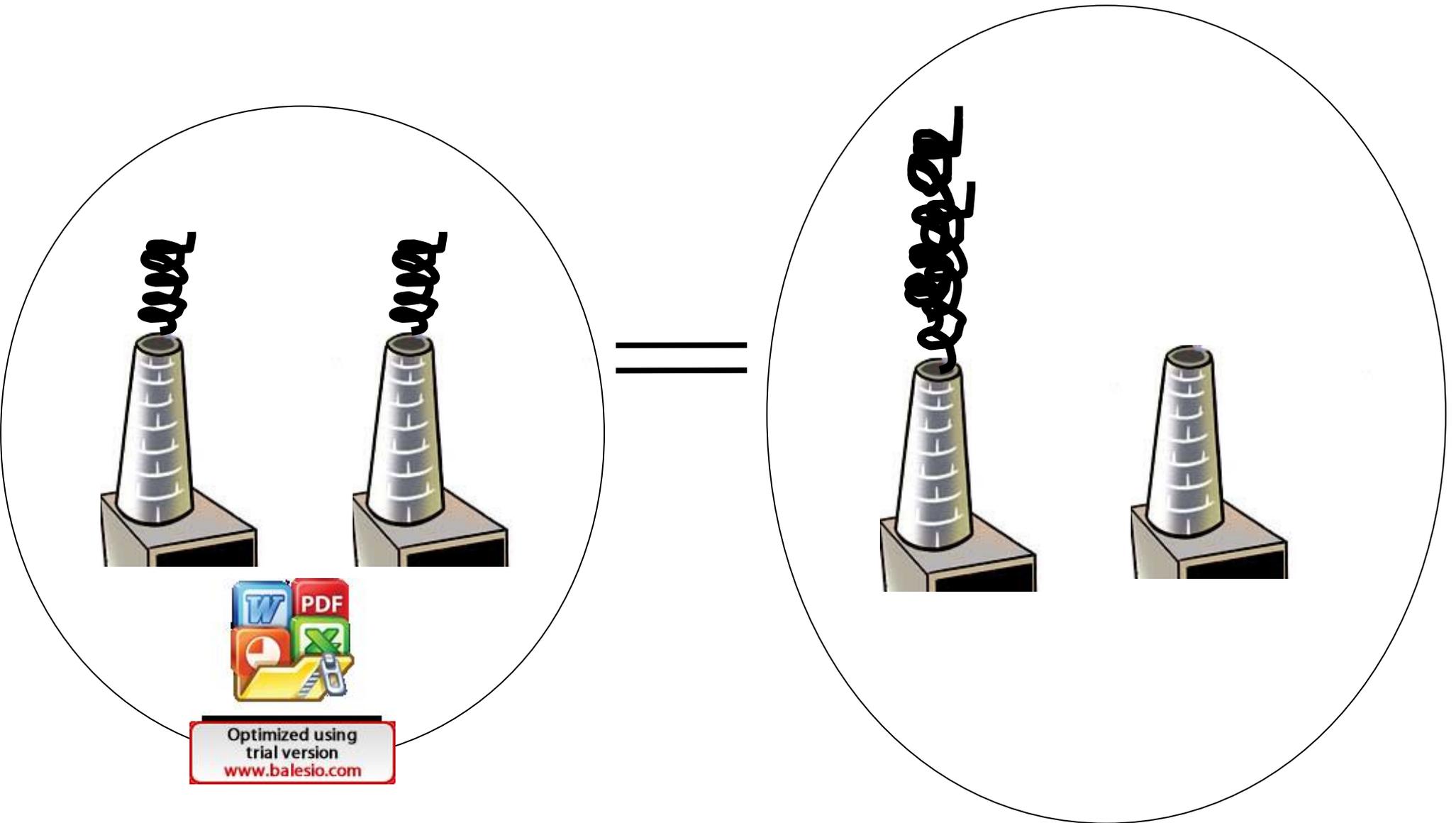
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Emissions trading



Offset trading

