Green Economy vs. Commons

Quito
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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 “textbook” 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
Estovers (England)

(the “poor's overcoat”)
Allemansrätten (Sweden)
Agistment (England)
Wood pasture
Turbary (England, Scotland)
Pannage
“Red ant commons” (Thailand)
Common pathways (Thailand)
IF YOU BUILD, WE WILL BURN NO RETURN FOR THIS LUN
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
(2) The nature/society dichotomy (and the power relations and institutions it is associated with) are resisted
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
- Courts
- Judges
- Certain boundaries
In the early modern era in Europe

Resistance to commodification of land and of people

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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.
“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 fields as to be administered under alternative methods of control.”

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

(active)  →  (passive)
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 agrofuels, exploit synthetic biology, harness nuclear fusion, increase natural productivity, etc.)
(3) Exchange value, the M-C-M' process and capital accumulation are not allowed to dominate subsistence and use values
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.”
KAMI TIDAK AKAN MENJUAL
APABILA YANG TIDAK BISA KAMI BELAT!
"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.”

Karl Polanyi
(4) Communal territory (and other communal things) are distinguished from both *private* property and *state* property.
ฐานศึกษาวิจัยการทหาร
สันปะการังผู้เป็น
สันปะการังผู้เป็น
ตามพระราชบัญญัติ
โลกปะการังเป็นสิ่งแวดล้อมร้านแต้ม
(5) A cautious relationship with written or state law is maintained
(6) Nonhumans are seen not as passive, but as interlocutors, also often with a right to subsistence
'AFH FANI ON NESÁ
DAGING = TANAH

'OEL FANI ON NA'
DARAH = AIR

'FATU FANI ON NUIF'
TULANG = BATU

FILOSOFI MOLLO
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.”
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 peasant revolts of 1848 were aimed at recovering access to 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.
(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
Neoclassical economics

KAMI TIDAK AKAN MENJUAL
APA YANG TIDAK BISA KAMI BHAL!
“green economy”
“green economy”
Struggles against the Criminalization of Commons
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.”

(33) “All fish-weirs shall be removed from the Thames, 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
Forest riots in England

Leicester Forest 1627
Gillingham Forest 1626-8
Forest of Dean 1632

“Here we were born and here we die”
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.
“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 overstocking of them with Sheep and Cattle; and the poor ... are checked by you, if they cut Wood, Heath, Turf ...”
“I would like to fence off and privatize St. James' Park. How much would it cost me?”

“Only a crown, madam.”

Queen Caroline

Sir Robert Walpole
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 long-fallow cycles of swidden farmers, the treks of long hunters and trappers. Mobility of population made political control and taxation difficult.
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, incinerated soils, scorched timber, climatic disaster and social disorder.
... 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 offending passage.
Criminalization of fire in the field

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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®
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.
“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.”
“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.”
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. B. Phatke becomes the “Maratha Robin Hood” and the *father of militant Indian nationalism*. 
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.)
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  An army-backed program to evict these “criminals” is resisted by a movement that later joins with anti-dam struggles, forest commons alliances, etc. in a nationwide movement called the Assembly of the Poor, which marches on Bangkok and occupies Government House for 99 days. The eviction plans are defeated.
“People who live with the forests don’t want REDD.”
“We conserve forests because forests are life, not a commodity.”
FUTSEK
CARBON
TRADING
VOESEK!
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
¡LA TIERRA YELAGUA NO SON MERCANCÍA!!
“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
Emissions trading
Offset trading