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Book Review

By Emily Macrae

Think Like a Commoner: A Short Introduction to the Life of the Commons. By David Bollier. Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2014. 192 pp. ISBN 9780865717688.

What do agriculture in India and urban planning in Croatia have in common? In *Think Like a Commoner: A Short Introduction to the Life of the Commons*, David Bollier brings together examples of co-operative practices from around the world to show how the idea of the commons can transform social relations, challenge economic assumptions, and tackle climate change. Bollier is an author and activist whose research draws on his experiences as a policy strategist and grassroots organizer. Despite Bollier's extensive insider engagement with collective endeavours, *Think Like a Commoner* provides an approachable overview of the commons for the general public by using accessible language and maintaining a conversational tone. Although academics may find the book light on theory, activists will be empowered by the focus on practice.

Think Like a Commoner is divided into eleven chapters. Each chapter consists of a self-contained argument and could easily be read alone, but the chapters also build on one another to create a more sophisticated narrative. The book is premised on the idea that everyone has an instinctual understanding of what constitutes the commons. As a result, Bollier does not provide an overarching definition of *the commons*. Instead, he builds on the concept throughout the book, suggesting early on that the commons is both "things that no one owns and are shared by everyone" (Bollier, 2014, p. 2) and "a parallel economy and social order that quietly but confidently affirms that another world is possible" (p. 4).

The lack of a single, authoritative definition allows Bollier to launch into examples of contemporary commons in Chapter 1. This, however, presents conceptual challenges later in the book. In Chapter 2, Bollier revisits Garrett Hardin's seminal article "The Tragedy of the Commons." Hardin's account of catastrophic mismanagement has defined mainstream understandings of the commons since its publication in 1968. In contrast, Bollier argues that the situation described by Hardin is not a true commons because resource use is not governed by social norms. The next three chapters expose the legacy of the tragedy of the commons and show how the privatization of natural resources paved the way for control of cultural assets and intellectual inquiry. Chapter 6 looks at the neglected history of the commons, while Chapter 7 elaborates on the challenges of private property. Chapters 8 and 9 focus on the commons in areas ranging from digital innovation to Indigenous traditions. Although at times these clusters of ideas seem arbitrary, Bollier resists the urge to categorize the commons, explaining that "any classification system will necessarily reflect the analysts' cultural bias" (2014, p. 127). A similar hesitancy to

establish a system of thought characterizes the final two chapters of the book. Chapter 10 is devoted to the ways that embracing the commons could change the way we think, and Chapter 11 argues that theories of the commons have not kept pace with an explosion of practices in diverse domains.

Think Like a Commoner is a tangible representation of the focus on practice over theory. For instance, Bollier explains how the book is licensed under a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA license, and the appendices incorporate content from other works also under Creative Commons licenses. In essence, these licenses permit content to be used as long as credit is given to the author and derivative uses remain legally shareable. By drawing attention to the agreements that encourage his ideas to be shared, Bollier grounds his work in a concrete commitment to the inclusive and commons-based exchange of knowledge.

While the book is an action-oriented account, it is not without theoretical underpinnings. *Think Like a Commoner* draws on numerous theorists, including Enlightenment philosopher John Locke and contemporary legal scholar Ugo Mattei. However, it is the ideas of economic historian Karl Polanyi that have the most in common with Bollier's analysis of social norms and economic imperatives. Polanyi's book *The Great Transformation* (1944) examines the emergence of the self-regulating market. Although, according to Polanyi, markets had existed throughout history in diverse societies, the industrial revolution and the subsequent growth of capitalism disembedded commerce from broader cultural practices. In the absence of a profit motive, Polanyi claims that "the economic system was absorbed in the social system" (1944, p. 68). Conversely, industrialization organized human life and the natural world into markets, which Polanyi refers to as the "fictitious commodities" of labour and land.

Bollier calls *The Great Transformation* an "underappreciated classic" and even adopts the term "fictional commodities" in his discussion of enclosures (2014, p. 44). Like Polanyi, Bollier explores the challenges that arise when the management of resources is divorced from shared values and collective purposes. However, as well as identifying the problem, Bollier updates Polanyi's argument by showing how the commons offers a solution for a more just distribution of natural resources and human ingenuity in the twenty-first century.

Think Like a Commoner's fresh perspective on the relationship between social objectives and economic activity is all the more pressing given the increasingly contested language of the commons. As Bollier notes: "we have so few words to *name* the pathologies of markets and the feasible common-based alternatives" (2014, p. 5, emphasis in original). It is in this context, however, that Bollier's reluctance to establish a definition of the commons becomes problematic. Throughout the book, he underplays the value of precision in describing the commons and instead acknowledges that the term is used as both a noun and a verb by different communities.

Although this stance is consistent with the emphasis on practice over theory, it neglects the ways "the commons" as a concept can and is being co-opted for contrasting purposes. Bollier does mention the work of Marxist scholars Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri and their book *Commonwealth* (2009). He describes these writers as "some of the most astute commentators" (Bollier, 2014, p. 94) studying the commons, particularly in their analysis of the tendency of markets to erode social relationships. However, economist Jeffrey Sachs also released a book called *Common Wealth* in 2008 with similarly important implications for understanding the concept of the commons (but with a different focus from Hardt and Negri), and Bollier fails to cite this influential work. The fact that two books with almost identical titles represent different perspectives speaks to the need to clarify how the concept of the commons is used, and for whose benefit.

In conclusion, *Think Like a Commoner* is a concise introduction to both the contemporary practices and historical context of the commons. The book's greatest strengths are its enduring optimism in the possibility of alternative economic arrangements and its commitment to these ideals, as demonstrated by the use of a Creative Commons license. Although Bollier does not resolve issues surrounding the conceptual definition of the commons, the examples he provides lay the groundwork for a more theoretical discussion of the term.

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