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## **Defending, Reclaiming and Reinventing the Commons**

by Maria Mies & Veronika Benholdt-Thomsen

### ***From fodder to waste: destruction of the commons and EU agrarian policy***

Before discussing the need to reclaim and reinvent the commons in industrialised countries we want to start with two stories, which we hope will contextualise our quest; they will also raise some questions which in our view are necessary if one wants to get clarity about the issue of commons today, namely: Why is this issue raised today? Who destroys the commons? Why have the commons to be reinvented? Can there be something like global commons? What can 'new commons' be in rich industrialised countries?

I, Maria Mies, come from a small village in the hilly area south of Cologne, called Eifel. When I was a child the village had thirty-two peasant households. All were subsistence farmers whose only regular money income came from milk production and the sale of potatoes and sometimes a pig or a calf. The village still had forests, land, brooks, roads as commons, and these commons were maintained through a system of free communal labour, which each household had to contribute.

For instance, when a road had to be constructed or snow had to be cleared off the road, or trees had to be planted in the village forest, each household had to contribute free labour - male and female - to do this necessary communal work. I remember that these community actions were occasions of great fun. On the other hand each household also benefited from these commons. Even today every family still gets a certain amount of free firewood from the village forest. In former times, cows and pigs used to be driven to the village forest for grazing, and the village land was to be used by the poor.

Today only two households are left in this village who are still farming the land. All the others have either given up farming or left the village. The village commons have either been privatised or are being leased out to a few big farmers who buy or lease all the land. The only commons still left is the village forest. But the system of free communal labour has been totally abolished and replaced by wage labour.

These changes are a consequence of EU agrarian policy since the fifties. According to this policy the number of farmers was to be drastically reduced through the modernisation, mechanisation, chemicalisation and capitalisation of agriculture. Europe considers itself an industrialised region, and agriculture is subordinated to industry.

This development model decreed that the subsidies and cheap credits given to farmers were all tied to expansionism, big investments, big machinery and production for the market. Those who could not compete in this field gave up farming, particularly young men who sought wage employment in industry.

Along with this development model came a campaign to 'beautify the villages'. Beautifying meant to make the village look like a suburban area, with parks for children, pavements, well-kept

houses whose barns and stables were transformed into flats for tourists, while kitchen gardens were turned into well-trimmed lawns. Due to such 'development' schemes, the village of my mother, Steffeln, now has a debt burden of DM 1 million.

On the other hand, since more and more peasants have given up farming, the natural methods of using organic wastes as fodder for pigs and chicken, or as fertiliser, or compost, have also disappeared. Grass growing on the byways, which formerly was used to feed goats and cows, has become 'green waste'. Moreover, the lawns in the new village park and in the private gardens are another new source of 'green waste'. The same is true of the shrubs and trees along the community lanes, which have to be trimmed from time to time.

The amount of waste, particularly organic waste, has increased tremendously. But since the old cycles of production and reproduction have been disrupted, there is nowhere any more, even in the village and its surroundings, where this organic waste can be dumped.

As a way out the district administration has introduced the 'green garbage bin' for 'organic waste'. And this waste is now exported as far as Thuringia where it is composted by an industrial composting firm. The reason for its export to Thuringia - the most easterly part of Germany - is the cheaper wages in the former GDR. Hence, a small rural community that some time ago was still more or less self-sufficient and had a commons regime which kept intact the community, the ecosystem, the local culture and economy now has to export its so-called 'organic waste' to a faraway industry for elimination.

The absurdity of this situation is enhanced by the fact that both the village and the district administration are indebted to such a degree that they cannot afford this garbage tourism, financially speaking. But since the peasants themselves have been declared 'garbage population' by the ED's agrarian policy, the produce of the land that cannot be directly turned into saleable commodities has also to be declared waste and somehow got rid of. But this getting rid of is not only causing further ecological damage - due to long-distance transport - it is also very costly.

While analysing these processes we began to understand that waste, particularly organic waste, could be called 'negative commons'. On the one hand, the old commons regime has been destroyed. The old system of free communal labour has been replaced by private wage labour. Commons and users' rights have been transformed into private property, and individual self-interest as a motive is considered supreme. This has not only changed the ethics of the community but also destroyed the community as such. This is because now people no longer feel responsible for their waste. What is declared waste, and where it is dumped are not their concern. Their only worry is to get rid of the undesired physical remnants of the processes of the production of life. And as this production of life is no longer imbedded in a living interconnected whole, an ecosystem with its organic cycles and symbioses and its continuity with the human community and its culture, but is instead cut off and segregated from other organic beings (plants, animals, microbes) these remnants cannot be valued and understood as part and parcel of this life process. They become Waste. They have to disappear. At least they have to be removed from people's sight and smell.

If one looks at waste in modern, industrialised societies, societies based on the institution of private property, individual self-interest and the logic of accumulation, one begins to understand that the tragedy is not the inescapable destiny of the commons, as Garret Hardin suggested, but rather that private property and self-interest cannot solve the problem of waste or of 'negative commons'.

As all common space is already occupied in these societies by private interests, and as the recycling or elimination of waste will be done only if it is profitable to such private interests, there is a frantic search now to export and dump organic or industrial waste, toxic waste particularly, into some other people's 'commons', mostly in the South, which are then called 'free access' areas. Air, water, rainforests and deserts are becoming waste dumps for affluent industrial society.

### ***No reinvention of the commons in the North without defending the commons in the South***

If one looks only at the processes happening today at the local village level an industrialised society like Germany, one understands only half of the context within which these processes happen. Because what is happening at the village level in Germany is not determined by the village, nor even by the German nation-state or the EU, but is the result of a process of global restructuring of the capitalist world economy. In this global 'free' market system the Ricardian principle of comparative advantages is applied. Therefore it is cheaper to import food items from cheap labour countries of the South than to buy them from small farmers in industrialised society. The institutions that today regulate and promote this system of capitalist global trade and investment are the World Bank, IMF, GATT, WTO, regional trade blocs like the EU, NAFTA and APEC, and the Multilateral Agreement on Investment.

Hence, if we want to understand what is happening to the commons in industrial society or how they could be reinvented, we have to go to the other side of the globe and examine what is happening to the commons there. Because these two processes are causally linked by global 'free trade', though they are apparently separated. They are also separated in the minds of people. But if we want to reinvent the commons we have to realise that the global is in the local and vice versa.

In the discourse on the new 'global commons' the 'global resource manager,' (Goldman) of the World Bank and IMF and the transnational corporations (TNCs) often use the idyllic concept of the 'global village' when they want to suggest that there is something like a harmonious 'world community' which only needs some global decision-making elite to manage the 'global commons'. If one goes beyond this rhetoric and looks at reality, however, one realises that the very global institutions that represent the capitalist world-market system use its mechanisms of violent intrusion, enclosure, division, fragmentation, segregation and then hierarchisation and centralisation to get access to the resources that are still controlled and used by local communities as commons.

The destruction, fragmentation and enclosure of local commons and communities in the South are justified in the name of development, progress and efficiency. Thus Daniel Bromley and

Michael Cernea of the World Bank see the need 'to improve development efforts to make the commons and the commoners more productive and efficient' (quoted by Goldman 1995: 8).

Here the words 'To make the commons more productive' through 'development' remind us of the World Bank's self-proclaimed aim to draw peasants away from subsistence', in order to make them 'more productive' or 'to use women's labour' in the South 'more productively' by making them produce for the world market, not for their own subsistence.

### ***Defending the commons: the case of Papua New Guinea***

Our second subsistence story deals with the successful struggle of people in Papua New Guinea to defend their commons. These movements against the Land Mobilisation Programme of communal land have right from the beginning resisted the World Bank/IMF structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) for which registration, privatisation and control of land are some of the key issues.

The structural adjustment programmes have been imposed on Papua New Guinea, as in most other indebted countries of the South, to repay its debt - of 3 billion kina - to the World Bank and other foreign banks (Faraclas 1992b: 3).

What makes the movement here against the neocolonial enclosure of commons so interesting is the clear analysis by the local people of the 'development' policy of the World Bank and IMF and the TNCs. The latter want to get access to the communal land of the clans because they want to start oil palm plantations or to search for minerals, or to get access to tropical timber. On the other hand there are the communities who want to hold on to customary communal rights and use of the land, which is the basis not only of their livelihood but also of their culture and language.

In Papua New Guinea 97 per cent of the land is still traditional commons land. And as Professor Faraclas from the Department of Language and Literature at the University of Papua New Guinea writes, not only has each clan its own communal land, but the four million people speak 869 distinct languages which are linked to the clan or tribal land. 'No indigenous linguistic or ethnic group predominates, either politically or numerically (none makes up more than 7% of the population)' (Faraclas 1992b: 1).

Land, language, culture and community are not separate departments but interwoven in such a way that everybody has access to land:

While 85% of the population live in rural areas and have access to the benefits of this land usage system directly in day to day life, most of the 5% of the population that live in towns and the 10% that live in rapidly growing urban shanty settlements can return at any time to their ancestral areas and use the land. Because of this system, hunger, homelessness and unemployment are unknown, an achievement that should make Papua New Guinea a much more convincing case and model for true developmental success than other countries which, in the name of development, have reduced their populations to landless, homeless, hungry paupers, desperate to sell their bodies and their work at any price'. (Faraclas 1992b: 1)

The resistance to 'land reform' at the dictate of the World Bank is therefore a struggle not only for control over communal land but also for the preservation of languages, cultures and livelihoods. The government tried to sell the 'land reform' to the people as 'land mobilisation' or 'freeing the land' in the name of modernisation and development. The political elite saw a close relationship between its own destiny, the nation-state and development'. Thus one commentator in the daily National complained:

*Today, as the nation faces a drastic shortage of foreign reserves, landowners [customary commoners - M.M.] are holding up no less than three multimillion kina [local currency] projects .... In the end it looks like the landowners [the commoners - M.M.] are really the people with power. They give the final green light, a travesty on the meaning of governance. It makes useless the role of the national government.*  
(National, 18 April 1995)

What this commentator deplores, namely the impotence of the national government to disempower the local communities, is indeed a sign of the sovereignty of these communities. The communities in Papua New Guinea understand that the modern nation-state and its elected government cannot protect their interests and their livelihood. They hold on to a different concept of democracy, namely people's or communal democracy, or communal rights, based on common ownership of land, language, culture. Community rights are something the Western concept of sovereignty cannot - or rather can no longer - accommodate. Rights are only rights of the individual or of a nation-state, but not of a village, a tribe, the community of peasants, the community of women, etcetera. So long as resources like land, water and biodiversity remain under the control of communities, private property rights - today promoted by GAIT /WTO - and the Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) clause of the WTO cannot easily be put into practice.

Therefore it is also clear that Western-style capitalist entrepreneurship cannot develop if the land remains under communal control of the people; nor can the TNCs have access to it.

Another commentator writes:

In most areas of the country land is communal property. Such a system makes nonsense of the Western private enterprise concept in that individuals will find it difficult to tie up communal land for the long period of time necessary for a plantation or any other enterprise. The pressures from the community would break up the business in any case. (National, 17 July 1995)

Financial institutions do not dare to commit money to enterprises on communal land. The local press also makes very clear that it is the World Bank that is behind the land mobilisation or 'freeing of the land' policy of the Papua New Guinean government: 'Being a promoter of free and unhindered success of the free market economy it is only natural that the World Bank fund this process [of 'land mobilisation'] as part of its commitment to assisting Papua New Guinea' (National, 17 July 1995). These sentences are not meant critically. They show, however, how difficult it will be for the World Bank/IMF and the TNCs to continue capital accumulation if local communities continue to hold on to customary commons and resist privatisation and enclosure of commons.

The Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, Sir Julius Chan, saw himself under pressure from two sides: on the one hand from the World Bank/IMF, the structural adjustment programme and

promises of new credits and of foreign investment, on the other from the people who simply refused to implement the Land Mobilisation Act. In despair the prime minister urged the people to obey the law, because 'beggars can't be choosers'. This sentence, however, sparked off a wave of furious protest letters to the press. Here is one example:

**WE DON'T WANT TO BE BEGGARS IN RICH COUNTRIES**

*...The dictionary defines beggar as a person without money and resources. And beg means to ask formally humbly and earnestly. Let me now ask:*

*Why do we beg?*

*This statement was made as a counter to the people's protest on July 18 led by students and the National Coalition for Socio Economic Justice, comprising NGOs, unions, Melsol and churches against customary land registration and all other aspects of the Structural Adjustment Programme contained in the World Bank/IMF policy matrix ....*

*We in Papua New Guinea have never been beggars and we do not wish to be one.*

*For the many thousands of years that our ancestors walked this land, they survived without begging from the outside world. They developed their own system of survival to sustain life. Had they lived by what you suggested, Mr. Prime Minister, you and I could have gone down in the book of extinct species of the human race.*

*If our ancestors have taught us some lessons, they are that we can live without excessive control and manipulation from outside people and international institutions.*

*The Prime Minister has reduced us to nothing when we know we are blessed abundantly with resources. We are a rich people with what we have.*

*People who know their true connection to land will understand this. Take the land and we are true beggars on our own soil. ...*

*The people, NGOs, student unions, churches and concerned Papua New Guineans have been issued a challenge to formulate home grown alternatives. ...*

*Our agenda is simply the survival of our indigenusness and welfare and not be dictated by outsiders ... (National, 27 July 1995)*

The protest movement had been preceded and inspired by an 'awareness training campaign' and 'critical literacy movement' among the people of Papua New Guinea. In this awareness training, people were informed about the implications of the World Bank/IMF structural adjustment on social, economic, cultural and educational life in Papua New Guinea. (Uni Tavu/, 4 August 1995)

The students' protest movement against the World Bank/IMF structural adjustment programmes and the 'land mobilisation' law was started in July 1995. It was supported by most of the people, by regional governors, trade unions, the churches and even the minister of commerce. Women were active in this movement. They were mostly organised at the parish level. In New Britain, where the clans are still matrilineal, women were called upon never to give up their customary land rights. Here is the appeal of Ms. Bata, leader of the East New Britain Women's Council:

*I as the president of the East New Britain Council of Women am telling you women not to allow our precious land rights to be taken away from us by the government's Land Mobilisation Program. We must hold on strongly to our land and protect it by all means from being opened up to exploitation by a few well-to-dos .... we must keep our land as it is, without registration, so everybody from the richest to the poorest can still have access to the land. (Post-Courier, 3 August 1995)*

The people in Papua New Guinea defended their communal land rights because they believe in a different concept of development, based on subsistence and autonomy rather than on growth and global trade. They saw clearly that so-called modernisation would turn them into beggars, as had happened to so many former colonies. On 29 July 1995 the movement published the declaration: 'PEOPLE OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA SAY NO TO CUSTOMARY LAND REGISTRATION'. The last sentence of this declaration is: 'The bottom line is you cannot trust the government or the big companies when it comes to customary land. You must control your land yourselves' (Saturday Independent, 29 July 1995). As customary land rights were guaranteed by the constitution, the prime minister was in a difficult situation. What escalated the movement was the students' protest marches during which a few cars were burnt and a student was shot by the police. This movement was strongly supported by the people, who praised 'student power'. At the end even a platoon of soldiers marched into Port Moresby to support a student rally. Two women activists spoke at this meeting. One of the leaders of the soldiers said that soldiers, like any other citizens, were co-owners of the communal land. Therefore they would protect, if necessary, these land rights. (National 19 July 1995)

The prime minister had to yield to this massive protest movement. On 19 July he withdrew the Land Mobilisation Act (National 19 July 1995).

The example of Papua New Guinea not only shows clearly who destroys the commons today in the name of modernisation and development, but also that the World Bank and IMF, international capital and even a local government are helpless if communities stick to the principle: YOU MUST CONTROL YOUR LAND YOURSELF.

### ***Is there a connection between these two situations?***

If we compare the above two stories, a number of theoretical issues around commons become clearer. We shall state some of them in the form of brief theses:

- Capital has to continue the colonial enclosure of other people's commons if it wants to continue its constant growth or accumulation.
- The fact that small peasants in Germany can be made 'rubbish people' or redundant is causally linked, on the one hand, to their integration into modern, industrial agriculture with heavy external inputs and production for the market, and on the other to imports of raw materials and food items from the cheap labour countries of the colonised South. Thus soya or tapioca for cattle feed exported to Europe from Brazil or Thailand destroys the small farmers' existence in Europe as well as in these countries.
- Whereas people in the South can still see the connection between their sustenance or livelihood and their control over their commons, this insight has almost totally vanished in the North.
- In Europe the enclosure of the commons began in the nineteenth century. Natural resources are mainly either private or state-owned. On the other hand, the people made redundant by this process found alternative livelihoods by migrating to the industrialised cities or to the colonies. As more and more food is imported from the global market into the supermarkets of the North, not only the urban consumers but also rural producers have largely lost the



consciousness that their livelihood depends on their relation to the land. They consider money and the market as the sources of their sustenance.

- This has direct implications for resistance against new enclosure movements by capital. In Papua New Guinea there is still a close link between community and commons which is the basis of people's power and sovereignty. In the North, even villages are no longer living communities. Their livelihood and sustenance are no longer guaranteed by their control over land or commons; instead they are affected by the global supermarket and, so far still, by some support from the state. This is the reason why there was hardly any resistance in Germany or elsewhere in Europe against the GAIT, the elimination of small peasants and the further enclosure of the commons. Moreover, so long as the colonial exploitation of the resources of the South goes on under the stewardship of the World Bank and IMF, WTO and the TNCs, the nation-states in the industrialised world can still afford to feed the victims of their enclosure politics for some time: peasants made redundant, the jobless, the landless, the homeless. But as recent statistics show, even in these rich countries the welfare state is crumbling and poverty is mounting rapidly.
- In this situation it is indeed time to learn from Papua New Guinea, as Faraclas tells us, how to defend what commons we have that still exist, also how to re-create new ones. This is a question of survival also for people in industrial society in the North.

### ***New commons and new enclosures***

It is usually assumed that the violent processes of enclosure and colonisation of commons, both in the North and the South, belong to the dark, ugly 'prehistory' of modernity. Marx saw in them manifestations of the primitive accumulation of capital, which would disappear with scientific progress and with capitalism as a self-reproducing growth machine.

The fact that we are discussing 'new commons' today shows, as we have already pointed out earlier, that this process of primitive accumulation has never ended but is accompanying capitalist accumulation. This, however, points to a problem inherent in this mode of production: it can enclose, colonise and exploit material and non-material commons, but it cannot create them. And yet it needs such areas for the ongoing process of accumulation. What is it to do? The recent neoliberal phase of globalisation of the capitalist economy has the aim of opening up ever more areas of the world and ever more dimensions of reality, and this also means ever more commons, for enclosure or the process of ongoing primitive accumulation. The 'objects of desire' in this process are not only land, mineral resources and tropical forests, but also the biodiversity of the tropical countries and indigenous people's traditional knowledge of plants, animals, seeds and processes of regeneration. Globalisation of the economy in combination with biotechnology, particularly gene technology, the new 'technology of the future', leads to a new phase of enclosure of commons. Jeremy Rifkin writes about this:

The granting of patents represents the culmination of a five-hundred year movement to enclose the planetary commons that began inauspiciously on the village green in small rural hamlets scattered throughout England and the European continent. Now even the building blocks of life itself have been enclosed, privatized and reduced to a marketable product. (Rifkin, *Ecologist*, 1992)

The GATT, today guaranteed by the WTO, with its clause on Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs), is a clear case of this neocolonial attempt at enclosure or piracy of indigenous peoples' traditional common knowledge. The patenting of India's neem tree - whose pesticidal qualities have been common traditional knowledge of the Indian people since time immemorial - is one example of this new enclosure of local peoples' common knowledge. In 1992 the US citizen Tony Larson, together with the US firm W.R. Grace, were able to get a patent on neem products, although Larson had discovered or developed nothing new. He had simply isolated and preserved the pesticidal substance of neem (azadirachtin). But he privatised and commercialised the traditional knowledge of the Indian people which, so far, had been a commons (Shiva 1995b).

The case of neem shows why international capital has such an interest in getting 'free access' to hitherto non-declared commons. Those who are able to get patents on bio-pesticides like neem products will have a tremendous competitive advantage in the global market. The latest item in the list of areas of reality under threat of enclosure is the Human Genome Project. A UNESCO Ethics Committee, set up to work out an ethical framework for the manipulation of the human genome, declared the human genome as the 'common heritage of mankind' or a 'global commons'.

A close look at the UNESCO document on this issue, however, reveals that the very definition of the human genome as 'global commons' opens it up to 'free access' by commercial and scientific private interests. On the one hand the human genome - in the name of human dignity - is declared inviolable and a global commons. On the other hand, gene technology and commercial interests are allowed access to it.

This kind of double-speak is typical of today's discourse on the commons. Vandana Shiva describes how big pharmaceutical and agro-business corporations are trying to get free access to the Third World's genetic resources. They are putting pressure on the GATT and FAO to 'recognize such resources as a "universal heritage" in order to guarantee them free access to the raw materials. International patent and licensing agreements will increasingly be used to secure monopoly over valuable genetic materials which can be developed into drugs, food and energy sources' (Shiva 1993: 82).

If TNCs want to declare resources that up until now were in the hands of and protected by local communities (peasants, tribal people) as 'universal human heritage' or 'global commons', we can be certain that they want to privatise, commercialise and monopolise these resources. The process by which this happens usually follows the following steps:

- Other people's or communities' commons are declared to be 'global commons' or the 'universal heritage of mankind';
- The TNCs are given free access to these global commons, while at the same time this theft is legitimised by new laws (patent laws) and by declaring the nation-state to be the guardian of the 'general good';
- Privatisation, commercialisation and monopolisation is legitimised in the name of progress and development.
- The consequence is expropriation and pauperisation of local communities (Mies and Shiva 1993).

The global resource managers (GRMs) of the World Bank and the IMF, whom Goldman identifies as one group of people who have an interest in getting access to commons, all follow the same double-faced philosophy of pretending to protect the commons in order 'to improve development effort~ to make the commons and the commoners more productive and efficient (Goldman 1995: 8). The people of Papua New Guinea have shown that they do not believe in this paradigm of development.

### ***Reinventing the commons in the North***

It is against this background of the factual assault on commons of all sorts by worldwide forces keen on capital accumulation that we have to spell out what reinventing the commons could mean for communities in industrialised societies. After what has been said before it should be clear that to reinvent the commons cannot just mean to open up new 'free access' areas for further enclosure, investment and capital accumulation but must mean rather to reclaim material and non-material areas of reality, of life, of nature as the foundations for the production and reproduction of life by local communities. If we do not want to be fooled by the 'enclosure of language' we have to say in clear terms that there are no global commons. Because commons presuppose a community. Wherever commons have existed over time they were protected, cared for, used, regulated by a distinct local community of people for whom these commons constituted the basis of their livelihood. The forces today who pretend to be the guardians of the global commons or 'the common good of mankind' are by no means a community but are torn apart by antagonistic interests. They do not depend on a concrete territory or region for their livelihood but on the global market. Their aim is private profit and accumulation.

To reinvent the commons within industrialised society, fed by an anonymous world-market system, would mean, first and foremost, to re-create communities who would take charge of and feel responsible for concrete ecoregions or areas of life and reality as a basis for their livelihood. We are aware of the difficulty of establishing such communities within atomised industrial society, where the dogma of individual self-interest reigns supreme.

The second point to be clarified is the necessary link between community, commons, culture and subsistence ethics. A commons regime, as long as it functions, is part of a subsistence or 'moral economy' (Mies 1992). It cannot be described and analysed by categories derived from a paradigm of private property, permanent growth and self-interest. In such a moral economy the various dimensions of life processes are not separated from one another as is the case in the compartmentalised, fragmented capitalist world market system.

In such a moral economy also, the boundaries between the human community and nature are not rigid and hard, but permeable. Economics is not separated from ethics, culture and spirituality. Production is not separated from and superimposed on reproduction. None of the dichotomous and hierarchically ordered and antagonistic dualisms can be maintained in a moral economy of which a commons regime is a substantial part.

This is particularly true for the continuity between production and consumption. In a commons regime they are not two separate economic spheres but are linked to each other. Production processes will be oriented towards the satisfaction of needs of concrete local or regional communities and not towards the artificially created demand of an anonymous world market. In such an economy the concept of waste, for example, does not really exist. Things that cannot be

consumed and things whose waste products cannot be absorbed within such a distinct eco-region cannot be produced. Such a moral economy in a particular region requires, evidently, a community that feels responsible for sustaining the self-regenerative capacities of this region. In today's capitalist market regime such a sense of responsibility and care for a particular region cannot emerge, because production and consumption are segregated by a worldwide distance. Moreover, the two processes follow a different logic. The producers - the wage workers - have no interest in the use-value of their products as such. Their main interest is their wage. The consumers, on the other hand, do have an interest in the use-value of the commodities they buy. But they do not care where they come from, or where their waste products go to. Their self-interest demands the immediate satisfaction of their individual needs. It does not reach out either to the producers of these commodities or to the ecological consequences of production processes, or to the question of what should happen to the waste products of their consumption process.

The issue of waste points to the need to bring production and consumption together again, as was said before. Only then will a new sense of common responsibility for the continuation of life in a particular region emerge. If people begin to feel responsible for the leftovers or waste products of their life processes again - and this can be done only as a community - the patterns not only of the consumption but also of their production will have to change. In industrialised societies the reinvention of the commons could start with communities taking responsibility for their waste within their own region.

### ***Garbage as commons***

After what has been said so far it is obvious that 'reinventing the commons' in local communities in industrialised societies will appear to be an almost impossible task, at least at the present juncture. And yet precisely this is already happening in a number of social experiments in the US and Europe, partly out of necessity (because the welfare state no longer takes care of a growing number of people), partly because people on their own want to try out new forms of producing and living that are not dictated by the logic of private property and accumulation. The creation of communal gardens in the midst of the ruins of de-industrialised cities could be called a movement towards new commons. Similarly, movements towards building new communities through local and regional economies, new systems of direct exchange of services and goods (like LETS experiments with new forms of money) are all trying to overcome the limitations of a society made up of atomised egotistic individuals, dependent on capital and the state for their survival. But we think we can go a step further in this direction by looking at the contradictions and absurdities of the existing system of garbage disposal as demonstrated in the first story in this chapter.

Let us repeat a common insight: in a constantly growing economy, waste too has to increase, but on a planet of limited size there is no longer enough space on which to dump it. The attempt to turn waste into an economic good only exacerbates the problem. There is no satisfying solution for the problem of garbage disposal within the framework of the capitalist global market. Satisfying the problem would mean not doing harm either to the people or to the ecosphere, either here or somewhere else.

This insight began to dawn on people in Maria Mies's village when the question was discussed of where to establish a composting plant in the district, because exporting organic waste to Thuringia was becoming far too expensive for the district administration. The district authorities tried to solve the problem by engaging a private firm which was to compost the whole organic waste of the district in a modern composting plant. But when the question arose of where to establish the plant, none of the villages was ready to give communal land for this purpose, because people had understood in the meantime that this modern plant would not create more than two or three jobs, but would do harm to the groundwater and would increase the transport of garbage. Moreover, since this company would want to make profits and to expand, green waste from other regions would have to be imported into the district. Most villages refused to have a composting plant in their backyard.

Although this protest was, to begin with, a typical NIMBY (not-in-my backyard) response, it was not difficult in that situation to remind people that the concept of 'organic waste' is nonsensical in a rural community where there are still some farmers with dung heaps and where there are still gardens. It became immediately evident that the export of organic waste from West German villages to a composting plant in Thuringia in East Germany was an ecological and economic absurdity. In this situation it was not difficult to discuss the possibility of re-establishing a communal form of taking care of organic leftovers by each village community. Such a decentralised solution would not only avoid the need for transportation but also would not damage the ecosystem and would even create work, if accomplished in an ecological manner.

In the concrete case the awareness and the protest did not go beyond the NIMBY level. But what became visible in this case was the prospect of declaring waste, particularly organic waste, a 'negative commons'. This means that a community declares itself responsible for taking care of the left-overs of its life process according to the motto 'We take care of our rubbish ourselves!' If waste is again seen as part and parcel of our life processes, which cannot be dumped 'somewhere', but which has to be reinserted into the regenerative cycles of distinct ecosystems on which communities depend, then also the production processes as well as the circulation of goods will have to change. There will necessarily be an interest in avoiding waste, particularly packing materials and unnecessary advertisements. A new communal responsibility for garbage as 'negative commons' would as a necessary next step lead to new regional economics.

In the present situation in the North, reinventing the commons would imply, first and foremost, as in Papua New Guinea, that people would begin to question the right of local or national governments to privatise common resources, because they would want to get out of their debt trap. Commons and common resources should be preserved as basis for the livelihood, the subsistence, of the poor - particularly at a stage when the welfare state is no longer capable of guaranteeing the well-being of everybody.

### ***Commons, women and nature***

A few years ago, we the authors of this book were invited to participate in a workshop with the title 'Reinventing the Commons', organised by the Transnational Institute. We decided to attend as we were convinced that local people have to rediscover and revive their commons. In a way they have to reinvent them as we have been arguing above at length. However we were surprised when we learned through the introduction by Michael Goldman, reviewing and

summarising the literature on the topic, that the essay by Garret Hardin entitled 'The Tragedy of the Commons' (published in December 1968 in Science) was considered a key contribution in the Anglo-Saxon world and that the whole debate could basically be structured according to whether a writer's position was pro or contra Hardin. We were surprised because in the debates on commons in which we have been involved, this author had no importance. Why, we will explain below.

Re-examining 'The Tragedy of the Commons' we learned a lot about the new emerging discourse of the 'global commons'. Hardin, in fact, contributed a good deal to the invention of the 'global commons' by deconstructing (here the term 'deconstruction' applies very well) the real commons of local people in their communities. We furthermore learned that there are two different opposite concepts of 'reinventing the commons': first ours, which means to defend, to reclaim and to reinvent the commons from below, through grassroots action of local people for local people; and, second, the concept constructed and invented from above, namely the concept of 'global commons', which is being introduced by international agencies and global players, mostly for the benefit of TNCs. This is also a reinvention, however, in a perverted form, that is because it is based on the neglect (or enclosure) of real, historical commons, usurping the term, the idea and, as we will see, people's positive feelings towards the commons in order to serve capital. The way in which Hardin has neglected and slandered the real commons of communities teaches us a lot about the intentions and the ideology of the invention of the 'global commons', to which he has contributed remarkably.

### ***The so-called tragedy of the commons***

Hardin's thesis goes as follows: 'From a certain degree of intensity of use onwards, the commons require a morality which cannot be fulfilled by the individual any longer because this morality goes against his self-interest. The solution of this problem can only be a political one' (abstract to the publication of Hardin's text in German, 1973). He illustrates this thesis by an example. 'Picture a pasture open to all... each herdsman will try to keep as many cattle as possible on the commons ... As a rational being, each herdsman seeks to maximize his gain.' The result will be overgrazing. 'Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all' (Hardin 1977: 20). Transferring this problem to the level of the whole world, it means that we are too many people for a limited space. The tragedy lies, according to Hardin, in the fact that the personal freedom of the individual leads to the ruin of all individuals together, that is, of all mankind. Therefore we cannot continue 'our present policy of laissez faire in reproduction' (Hardin 1977: 19). In order to avoid this tragic end of the commons they must be enclosed and privatised. Only by this will it be guaranteed that the single individual assumes responsibility for the correct relation between space and the number of cattle. Instead of being ruined the pasture now will reach its maximum productivity. But every limitation of access to the commons reduces the freedom of the individual. However, 'When men mutually agreed to pass laws against robbing, mankind became more free, not less so' (Hardin 1977: 29). Therefore we have 'to relinquish the freedom to breed' in order to 'avoid the evils of overpopulation'. Hardin does not say what this would concretely mean. But he can assume this attitude as he is a 'genetically trained biologist' and not a UN functionary.

Hardin's key text in the debate on the commons is indeed remarkable. Already his arguments contain in a nutshell all the ideology and justification of globalisation, liberalisation and privatisation. First of all, Hardin refutes the (traditional) moral economy as inadequate for our present times. Instead of this, he believes, politics - that is, a centralised apparatus of power from above can best solve the problems of this world.

Then he introduces the concept of freedom in the sense of liberalism. Today the main elements of freedom, according to Hardin, cannot be based on the equality of birth and equal rights for all, but only in the limitation given by private property. Survival would not be mutually guaranteed by people organised in local communities. Partitioning the globe under private capital is what would lead to the best organisation of survival for all, namely under the control of capital.

We are surprised by the flatness of the argument. However, what surprises us most are the images Hardin uses for his arguments and moreover that they seem to have been convincing. He compares the world to a pasture and mankind to a herd of cattle - more precisely to a herd of female cattle with their young. The capital owners/managers/ politicians, the real 'new lords of the world' (Ramonet 1995) in times of globalisation, are the good herdsman who constructs the fences and the prudent breeder who cares for adequate reproduction.

### ***Domestication of women and enclosure of commons***

Why is it so difficult to become aware of the hidden agenda behind the discourse of the global commons? In fact, most of us, when we first approach the idea that water, the atmosphere (ozone layer, climate) or biodiversity are a common heritage of mankind, feel that this is the right way to protect them against destruction. Why can our feelings be so easily cheated? In other words which are the elements of the discourse of the global commons that lead to this mystification? As we will see, the discourse works with all the known elements of the ideology of capitalist patriarchy, namely that nature and the work that exchanges directly with nature - in this case through communal access to nature - are considered unproductive and without value.

The way in which commons are actually being invented as a matter of global concern reminds us of another process of enclosure, namely the domestication of women's work in emerging capitalism. In this process, slowly but steadily the economic importance of work in the house, with children, and on the subsistence farm - all mainly done by women - was neglected, until it became socially totally invisible. Now it is no longer considered as work, but only as a mere labour of love. In other words, women's work has been idealised and at the same time de-economised. A positive feeling, namely the high esteem of work and persons engaged in activities concerning the re-creation of life, has been separated from its concrete, material manifestation. The effect is two-sided. The esteem becomes an inauthentic feeling, not to be taken seriously any longer, a sentimental affair. Economy, on the other side, becomes something done without love, that is, without positive feelings towards other economic actors, plants, animals or the objects of work.

Once women's subsistence work was no longer considered to be work, it was legitimate to appropriate it without remuneration, a fact that did not even appear to be exploitation. We have called this process 'Hausfrauisierung', housewifeisation or domestication, not only of women's work but of women themselves (Bennholdt-Thomsen 1988b). From the beginning of the Modern Era onwards, that is, since the long sixteenth century and through the modern witch-hunt, the social category 'housewife' has become reality for women. Parallel to this, the social category 'proletarian' has taken shape for men. Women, of course, become proletarianised as well, but with the difference that socially they are categorised as housewives anyhow. This is a stigma by means of which women become a lower caste. Lower, because what they are supposedly destined for by birth has no (economic) value. This explains why women as wage workers get less pay than men (today they still receive everywhere on an average only half to two thirds of men's wages). This continues to be the effect of idealising women's subsistence work as pure love.

Something very similar happens to the commons with the advent of the modern era. They are no longer considered part of a certain type of economy, socially and customarily organised; they slowly but steadily disappear as a necessary part of how local people produce their living. The commons formed part of moral economies within which everybody belonging to the community had customary rights and could find the means to produce his or her survival. Today this type of economy simply does not exist within the narrow range of categories in affluent, culturally ignorant societies.<sup>2</sup> The social and at the same time economic aspect of commons has become invisible. Commons, on the contrary, become highly idealised, and everybody feels entitled to 'protect' them, that is, to manipulate them according to what is said to be 'everybody's' interests. By means of this process commons are being idealised, apparently deeconomised and then expropriated from those who used to rely on them for their living.

The positive feeling towards the commons, namely that they grant survival, is separated from the concrete material need, the moral is separated from the economy. Still the moral feeling survives, but somehow hanging in the air. Therefore it can easily be manipulated as everybody's right to have access to the commons, whether he or she belongs to the community that reproduces the commons or not. As the commons are no longer considered part of the economy, the fact is ignored that they are not pure nature or 'wilderness' but have materially to be reproduced. This fact becomes more obvious in the case of 'negative reproduction', that is, destruction. People in the North tend to forget that they destroy their commons, socially and materially. Nevertheless they feel the moral right to demand that the Amazon rainforest should be 'protected' for them because it purifies their global atmosphere. (The way in which positive feelings like mother love or identification with one's own native area can be perverted and manipulated, once abstracted from the concrete personal and economic, local context, can be seen in the case of the Third Reich.)

### ***Domestication and enclosure of nature***

The ways in which women's subsistence work and the contribution of the commons to the concrete survival of local people are both made invisible through the idealising of them, are not only similar but have common roots. The background is the modern world-view that separates



nature from the economy. According to this world-view, any mode or way of production that is based on exchange between the human being and nature is made invisible as an economic fact and is considered a natural process itself. Nature and the new relation of humans to nature are idealised, the relation not being seen any longer as something necessary. This unnecessary, hence uneconomic, idealised relationship makes 'free access areas' out of the commons and gives free access to the appropriation of women's work without remuneration. In a way, 'women are treated like commons<sup>3</sup> and commons are treated like women,<sup>4</sup> and the link is the modern notion of nature.

In modern society, nature is recognised only as a resource, which must be exploited in order to make nature productive, in order to create. Now, only what has been artificially produced, that is, man-made things, have economic, that is life-(re)producing value. Natural fertility is despised and nature should be violated, as Bacon said, so that she gives away her secrets, out of which scientists design natural laws, the basis for mass production. Before the modern era, nature had been identified as Mother Nature or Mother Earth and venerated. With the shift towards a mechanical world-view with its exclusive high esteem of artificial production, the mother principle loses its sacred aspect at the symbolic level, and at the real level women are confronted with an inferior social position (see Merchant 1980; Fox Keller 1985). Also, communities could be egalitarian only under the rules of 'natural law', which means that the egalitarian human existence was based on the fact of having been equally born of a mother. Therefore the natural law as such is intrinsically mother law, says Bloch (1961). It is no surprise, then, that the reduction of nature to a mere resource destroys the community and the commons, its material base, at the same time as it devalues mothers.

### ***History against 'tragedy'***

When we reviewed Garret Hardin's 'The Tragedy of the Commons' (1968) after having read Michael Goldman's literature review on the commons (1995), it was the first time that Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen took notice of the essay. Hardin's text had not come her way till then, despite the fact that she has been working on commons for about twenty-five years. Her field of research was the *comunidad indigena*, the native Mexican community, namely questions of communal land ownership, of the socio-cultural cohesion of the *comunidad* and of the ritual-religious world-view reproducing the community (Bennholdt-Thomsen 1976). Those who were engaged in the debate about (native) peasant communities in the early seventies discussed whether these communities would be able to continue to exist or would have to disappear. This was the famous *campesinistas- descampesinistas* discourse. We call it 'discourse', using the Foucaultian term (Foucault 1976), because the *descampesinistas* wanted the community to disappear and therefore they continually talked as if it had disappeared already. They followed a socialist political project. According to them, organic solidarity such as the solidarity practised within native peasant communities was inferior to the mechanical solidarity of the working class, and was furthermore hindering the politically correct consciousness of the working class from developing (see Feder 1977/78).

What these so-called progressives were doing was justifying a process that was happening in Mexico anyhow, with or without their approval. The locally based communities were being

expropriated and destroyed by the state, which replaced them by larger, state-run property and production regimes (ejidos), which were collective or cooperative enterprises, seemingly organised according to communal principles. The philosophy behind this policy was, the larger and the more mechanised, the better for everybody. This is the normal argument for industrialisation and maximisation. Concrete local reciprocity is destroyed in the name of efficiency and in the name of the benefits for the generality through the returns from an anonymous, abstract and competitive market.

From this *campesinistas- descampesinistas* discussion it was in fact possible to understand what a community is and what commons are, in historical terms and in terms of the mechanisms of their social reproduction. One can learn to distinguish between a community based on reciprocity, that is, relying on the commoners, and so called communal regimes imposed from above. Collectivisation and the different cooperative steps towards collective enterprise are nothing else but a means of state control over former peasants in order to industrialise agriculture. This has nothing to do with a communal regime. In reality by means of this policy peasants are forced into a rural proletariat. The mechanisms perhaps are even more coercive under socialist politics, but with the positive aspect that employment is guaranteed. Capitalist cooperatives expropriate peasants in a less immediately violent way, but the majority have to give up in the end anyhow. Therefore the opposition between a cooperative and a private regime turns out to be a minor one, or not even to exist. Similarly the difference between real capitalism and real socialism in reality did not exist or was only minor.

By means of this discussion one could learn to demystify the talk about the benefits for everybody emanating from always greater so-called collective entities with centralising rules of economic organisation and property. Based also on this experience we came to the conclusion: no commons without community, and no community without reciprocity.

### **Cultural ignorance**

Here we come back to Hardin's text. It was published in 1968, and he wrote it more or less at the same time as Mexican, Latin American and Middle European researchers in Peasant Studies were involved in the debate summarised above.<sup>5</sup> It is obvious that Hardin has no idea about the whole debate. This may have several reasons. First, it seems, he is not informed because he is not an expert in agrarian or peasant questions. However, the question of the commons is first of all a question of an agrarian land property regime. Second, he did not inform himself about real commons before writing the article, because he was not interested in historic facts about the commons, or in the history of the scientific and political discussion about them. Third, Hardin does not even write an article about the commons, despite the title. He in reality writes about what he calls the 'population problem', which he does not really specify either, though he at least mentions some other authors on the topic. In conclusion, Hardin simply gives his opinion about what he considers are the problems, even such a severe problem as a 'tragedy', without asking for historical facts or for the contribution of experts in the field. This, of course can be done: everybody can write an essay on whatever question. The interesting thing is its effect. And that is what is most striking: Hardin's ahistoric utterance of an opinion that is not even based on expertise on his topic becomes the centre of an experts' debate about the commons. His

thoughts must have echoed a widely held opinion. Or to put it in other words, he obviously spells out a very popular ideology.

In reality, Hardin's essay is neither on the commons nor on population growth. Rather, it is a justification of overconsumption in the North, respectively by the rich and the middle classes of both the North and the South. He writes, implicitly a justification of the economy of maximisation, especially of the attitude of those who benefit from this type of economy at the expense of the majority of people. He does so by turning the truth upside down. He says that poor people are destroying 'our' - that is, rich people's - water, air, space. Therefore population growth should be stopped. His argument is an attack on the sovereign control of other people over their bodies, their cultures and types of economies. their types of social structure, their resources, their water, their air, their space.

Hardin writes a justification for the type of economy of his own society more specifically for his class or caste, without saying so, simply by asking. What do we have to do in order that things can go on as before, presupposing that this way of living is the best for everybody? We call this methodology 'cultural ignorance'. It consists in simply projecting one single type of existence on to all mankind, in generalising and universalising it as that of the human being in essence. However this abstract human being can easily be identified: he is male, white, over eighteen years old, lives and works in an industrialised surrounding and thinks accordingly; it is a yuppie. Hence cultural ignorance applies not only to others but to one's own society as well, because this way of thinking does not know its own culture either. A basic methodological principle therefore says that I can know about my own situation only by reflecting it in the other. This is at the same time a precondition for overcoming racism.

***The logic of economic rationality:  
'Economy gives life, while mothers and commons destroy it'***

Hardin's essay has been widely criticised, but it nevertheless became, with all the pros and cons, a key article. Our thesis on why this happened points to the singular conglomerate of socially accepted and traditionally inherited positive feelings and values that he presents, combining this presentation with the shameless deconstruction of inherent moral principles, so that the reader at the end feels justified in overthrowing these archaic sentiments and being unscrupulously modern.

The subject matter of Hardin's essay is the repudiation of natural fertility or the mother principle, not only by de-economising or neglecting the economic quality of the exchange and cooperation between human beings and nature, but by categorising natural fertility as destructive. Until Hardin and mostly still today the economic character of the human-nature process has been veiled and hidden. For example women's subsistence work has been made economically invisible. But this happened at least through idealising it, the semblance of high esteem being conserved. Hardin, however, takes the next step and openly declares it not only economically irrelevant but destructive. He takes a 180-degree turn from the world-view that respects mother earth. Now only artificial, man-made production secures life, that is, is fertile; giving birth, according to him, threatens life.

Hardin reaches this conclusion - without anybody being upset - by ignoring that women give birth to children. Giving birth and caring for children according to his approach (which is a widespread discourse), is not a human activity, but pure nature. His concept of population growth is a straight Malthusian one. According to this, people multiply like plants unless they are hindered from doing so. Social determinants and women's conscious decisions are neglected. Here the attitude of the witch-hunters is adopted, who through ritual violence destroyed women's possibility to decide upon procreation.

The same principle is applied by Hardin in his view of the commons. As giving birth and the role of the mother are dehumanised, equally the commons and the community are excluded from conscious human reproduction and maintenance. Hardin cannot imagine a responsible social caring for commons, and the natural surroundings in general, because he himself does not function in that way. For him, only one type of rationality exists, namely economic rationality - which destroys the environment, as he explicitly admits. However, for him, it is not economic rationality that has to be changed; rather, people, societies, cultures that do not act according to economic rationality should disappear.

In Hardin's essay the commons are no longer idealised as something in which everybody, everywhere is equally participating irrespective of concrete material relationships, that is, he de-economises the commons. Such an idealisation, in fact, would still have been a semblance of the feeling that Mother Earth is nurturing us all, though a sentimental one, because separated from the context. Hardin goes a step further. For him, what cannot be privately owned is absurd, because it cannot be productively used in an economically rational way. Therefore, according to Hardin, the commons suffer from an in-built contradiction. They do not offer abundance and liberty, but inevitably lead to the failure of any real economic enterprise. In this version it is not private property that is an enclosure but the commons. Those who possess private property are properly economically acting human beings, the rest are 'surplus' population.

### ***Reinventing the commons: the subsistence perspective***

In our view commons cannot exist without a community, but equally the community cannot exist without economy. In the sense of *oikonomia*, that is, the reproduction of human beings within the social and the natural household. Hence, reinventing the commons is linked to the reinvention of the communal or commons-linked economy.

What does such an economy look like? We think that this reinvention of a communal economy has to be a process. To this process belongs the following:

- the defending and reclaiming of public space. Opposition to further privatisation of common resources and spaces, both in the North and the South. In the North reinventing the commons could well start with responsibility for what we have described as 'negative commons', for example, waste.
- ~~regionalisation and localisation against the trend towards globalisation. This means production, exchange and consumption within the region, so that an ecological regional reproduction takes place. Only in such regions can people form communities and feel responsible for the region.

- \* decentralisation
- \* reciprocity as against mechanical mass solidarity. Mechanical solidarity, we argue, means only that everybody should have an equal share of the boot from the plunder of the environment. This is usually called social justice. This aspect of the process reflects our critique of the socialist belief in technological progress, which provides an apologia for industry and proletarianisation, with the consequence of ecological destruction and women's subordination.
- \* the policy from below instead of the policy from above. This concept means policy as a living process of the people in local communities, including reciprocity. We do not believe in global solutions, nor in the global politics of a new megastate, sometimes referred to as 'global governance'. These global solutions only serve as a legitimisation of a capitalist and imperial power. In the case of women, global politics serve to establish a discourse of all women being equal, so that they can be treated and controlled equally, according to the norm of the white, urban woman of the North under a patriarchal regime. That exactly is the case today and how this discourse functions can be seen very well in global population policy, acting in the way Hardin had envisioned.
- \* manifold ways of realising a community and a multiplicity of communities .

## NOTES

1. In the meantime the district administration has given up its plan of finding a site for its composting plant. Instead it asks people to make compost out of their organic waste in their own gardens. This change of policy is due partly to the fact that the administration is hugely indebted and partly to the resistance and intervention of the people.
2. Instead of speaking of 'Eurocentrism' we prefer to call the phenomenon 'cultural ignorance', because the fact of ignoring the functioning of other cultures has the effect also that one's own culture cannot be understood.
3. After a film in which a Turkish actress performed the role of a Turkish woman having a German lover had been shown on German TV, the actress received many threatening letters from Turkish immigrant men living in Germany. The letters claimed that a Turkish woman should be available to Turkish men only. This idea is strengthened by the fact that significantly more Turkish immigrant men are married to German women than the other way round. The same ideology is inherent in a well-known German expression: 'The Germans and their women'.
4. When a woman is not accompanied by a man, she is much more at risk of becoming a victim of male violence than when she has a (private) 'owner'. This is what happens now to the commons. As they are not privately owned, it is considered that if they do not belong to anybody and can be appropriated by everybody.
5. The debate was not only a Latin American one. Literally everybody engaged in questions of peasant communities and commons had automatically to deal with the debate and what commons are, about the different types of commons, and about whether cooperatives/collectives maintain communal principles or not (see *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Frank Cass and Co. Ltd., London, from Vol. 1, 1973, onwards; see also Wolf 1966; Shanin 1971; Bennholdt-Thomsen 1982).