DEFENDING AND RECLAIMING THE COMMONS THROUGH NONVIOLENT STRUGGLE

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Contents

Summary

This chapter traces the history of enclosures and identifies responses to land and resource alienation by less-powerful groups. A range of contemporary social movements in the global South that are struggling to defend, reclaim, or recreate the commons are identified. Significantly, many contemporary struggles attempting to promote a more equitable distribution of land and resources prosecute their conflicts using methods of nonviolent action. They implement a range of tactics from across the three main methods of nonviolent action: protest and persuasion, noncooperation, and nonviolent intervention. Three specific social movement organizations are examined: *Ekta Parishad* (India), the Assembly of the Poor (Thailand), and the Landless Rural Workers Movement (Brazil). Finally, the implications of these social movements for promoting grassroots democracy, sustainable development, and nonviolent futures are discussed.

1. Introduction

For most of human's social history the Earth's resources were used cooperatively and sustainably. Only recently, in historical terms, have some individuals, groups, or corporations expropriated a portion of the Earth's land, life, or resources, declaring themselves to be the sole owners and denying others access or use. Significant historical turning points in the process of expropriation include the advent of agricultural societies, the enclosure of the commons, industrialization, and colonization.

Neoliberal globalization, which has developed over the last quarter of the 20th century, can be considered a continuation and intensification of the process of expropriation. Each of these historical turning points led to the dispossession of people from access to or control over land and natural resources. The more recent of these historical processes (enclosures of the commons, industrialization, colonization, and neoliberalism) have also decreased the autonomy of people by making them more dependent upon selling their labor and purchasing goods in order to survive.

Expropriations and enclosures have generated resistance in one form or another, from evasive everyday forms of resistance to outright violent rebellion. Over the last quarter of the 20th century,, numerous resistance movements have emerged throughout the world with goals of defending or reclaiming the commons. Significantly, the prevailing strategic tendency of most contemporary struggles is the implementation of methods of nonviolent action.

In this chapter, the history of enclosures and responses to enclosures by less-powerful groups are briefly traced. Then, a range of contemporary social movements in the global South that are struggling to defend or reclaim the commons are identified, and specific movements from India, Thailand, and Brazil are examined. Finally, the implications of these movements for developing social alternatives are discussed.

2. Enclosure of the Commons

The commons refers to land and resources held in common and collectively managed by a local community. The commons regime refers to the set of norms and rules adhered to by members of the community concerning the use of the commons. The commons regime embodies social relations based on interdependence, cooperation, and democratic and consensual decision-making. Under a commons regime, any one party is prevented from using the commons in a manner that would benefit it at the expense of others. Thus, expropriating more than one’s fair share, using the commons in an unsustainable manner, and environmental degradation are averted.

While the abstract concept of land ownership emerged with the transition from hunting and gathering societies to agricultural societies around 10000 years ago, the enclosure of the commons, that is, the taking of common land for private commercial use, can be traced back to the thirteenth century England. Enclosures intensified during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as landowners realized that sheep farming, for example, was more profitable than extracting tribute from peasants. As a result, peasants were evicted from the commons, sometimes in a very violent manner, and the land became private property. As England industrialized and market relations intensified, the rate of enclosures increased. Similar processes of enclosure subsequently occurred in other European nations as they underwent industrialization.

During the era of European colonization, from the sixteenth into the twentieth century, the process of enclosure, the commodification of land and resources, and the dominance of market relations spread throughout the world. In the post-colonial era following the Second World War, the United States government, through the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), encouraged policies that opened up developing countries to the operations of transnational corporations. Alternatively, countries within the socialist bloc closed their markets to transnational corporations and implemented centralized state-run planning and development policies. In both cases, however, the effect of these policies implemented in the name of 'national development' was to further erode the commons and to consolidate the power of national elites who gained increasing control over a country's land and resources.

In the current era of neoliberal economic globalization from the 1980s onward, novel forms of enclosure have emerged. As a result of structural adjustment programs and pressures from governments of the most developed countries, public goods, such as water and electricity, and public services, such as health, education, communications, and transportation are being privatized in less-developed countries. According to the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement of the World Trade Organization (WTO), corporations are allowed to patent life forms that they have 'discovered' or genetically modified. Thus, for example, seeds developed by peasants can be slightly altered through genetic engineering and patented, thus transforming them into the private property of corporations. Moreover, the knowledge of indigenous peoples about beneficial uses of plants can be patented by corporations. Some refer to this form of privatization as 'biopiracy.' The current wave of privatizing knowledge and information is often referred to as the 'new' or 'second' enclosures.

Thus four stages of expropriations can be discerned. First was the enclosure of the commons in industrializing countries. Second was the colonization of land throughout the world by European powers. Third, was the era following World War II in which 'national development' policies were implemented in either a capitalist or socialist version. Fourth, from the 1980s onward, neoliberal policies have been implemented that further promote the privatization of land, resources, and public goods and services, as well as lead to novel enclosures of common knowledge, information, and life forms.

Elaborate ideologies have been developed to either justify or to condemn processes of enclosure, privatization, and the commodification of land and resources. Enclosures and the expropriation of land and resources, violent or otherwise, have been justified by ideologies of the dominant groups which have drawn on distorted notions of the superiority of whites, Christianity, or capitalist market relations. Political and legal mechanisms have been developed to institutionalize these processes.

For example, with the development of capitalist market relations, landowners used the concept of *terra nullius*, or empty land, to justify the enclosure of the commons. According to this concept, if land was not being used to produce marketable commodities, then those who could 'improve' the land by making it 'productive' had the right to take the land. The concept of *terra nullius* served two purposes; it denied the prior rights of land use to the original inhabitants, and it obscured the natural regenerative and sustainable processes of the Earth and nature. The current hegemonic ideology used to justify enclosures is 'globalism,' which maintains that free markets, deregulation, and privatization will lead to global democracy and economic development. Increases in inequality resulting from neoliberal policies, it is claimed, are temporary and will eventually be offset by economic prosperity for all.

The very same processes of enclosures, privatization, and commodification have also been condemned by those who suffer the negative consequences or by those who recognize the negative consequences that these processes may have for society as a whole. Critics claim that the elimination of commons regimes undermines social relations and cultural patterns that prevent any one group within the community from monopolizing power and imposing its will upon others. As land and resources are commodified, individual gain and the profit motive take precedence over cooperation and collective well-being. As profits take precedence over sustainable land use, the degradation of the environment intensifies Intensive and often unsustainable land use practices become defined as ‘development’ and ‘progress,’ while sustainable land use is labeled as ‘unproductive’ and ‘primitive.’

3. Historical Responses to Enclosures

Throughout history, groups whose common land was enclosed and who were denied access to natural resources responded in a variety of ways. They moved to more isolated areas outside the control of landlords or states, they worked as sharecroppers or wage laborers on privatized landholdings, or they migrated to cities where they exchanged labor for wages. Marginalized peoples sometimes organized and attempted to influence economic and land use policies through institutional political and legal channels. However, these attempts often failed due to the biases of institutional political and legal relations that reflect the interests of the dominant classes.

Various forms of resistance have also been implemented in response to enclosures. One type is referred to as ‘everyday forms of resistance.’ These methods entail low profile and evasive actions, such as foot-dragging, tax evasion, and poaching, that while enhancing a culture of resistance, fall well short of outright collective defiance. Another form of resistance is violent rebellion whereby threatened groups take up arms to defend their interests or to attack the expropriators. Early seventeenth century England, for example, was characterized by open rebellion against enclosures in large areas of the countryside. And in parts of Central America, for example, Indian rebellions have occurred on a regular basis since the Spanish conquest in the early sixteenth century. Typically, violent rebellions by peasants, the landless or indigenous peoples have been suppressed by the superior violence of the state. Nevertheless, there have been some notable exceptions in which peasants and the landless were major actors in successful armed revolutionary movements, such as in the Mexican, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions. There have also been wars of national liberation against imperial powers that were successfully waged through violent methods, such as in Algeria and Vietnam. However, once these struggles were won, land and the control over resources tended to become concentrated into the hands of the state or the nation’s elite.

Nevertheless, throughout the world and especially in the global South, struggles over land and resources and attempts to defend or reclaim the commons continue to be waged. While everyday forms of resistance are commonplace, and violent rebellions break out on occasion, an increasing number of contemporary struggles are being prosecuted through methods of nonviolent action. Although nonviolent action has been used in struggles against oppression and injustice throughout history, it was not until the twentieth century that it was clearly conceptualized as a method of collective social struggle. Over the course of the twentieth century, methods of nonviolent action became a deliberate tool for social and political change, being transformed from a largely *ad hoc* strategy based on religious principles or a lack of violent alternatives to a pragmatic, reflective, and organized method of struggle.

During the course of the twentieth century, nonviolent social movements contributed to the independence of colonized territories, the transition from authoritarian regimes to democracies, and the deepening of democratic relations. Nonviolent social movements have had some success challenging patriarchal gender relations and racial and ethnic discrimination. Movements dealing with labor issues, human rights, and peace have also had some success through nonviolent struggle. By the end of the twentieth century nonviolent action became a modular and global method for challenging oppression. That is, the general methods of nonviolent action— such as protest and persuasion, noncooperation, and nonviolent intervention— were adapted to particular contexts and different issues, and these methods were used throughout the world.

Methods of nonviolent action do not involve violence or the threat of violence against human beings. These actions bring political, economic, social, emotional, or moral pressure to bear in the wielding of power in contentious interactions between collective actors. Nonviolent action occurs through: (1) acts of omission, whereby people refuse to perform acts expected by norms, custom, law, or decree; (2) acts of commission, whereby people perform acts which they do not usually perform, are not expected by norms or customs to perform, or are forbidden by law, or decree to perform; or (3) a combination of the two. Rather than viewing nonviolent action as one-half of a rigid violent-nonviolent dichotomy, nonviolent action may be better understood as a set of methods with special features that differ from both violent resistance and institutional politics, as well as from everyday forms of resistance.

From the late twentieth century onward, methods of nonviolent action have increasingly been implemented by those resisting enclosures of the commons, expropriations of land and resources, and neoliberal globalization. Some current examples of these social movements are identified in the next section.

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Biographical Sketch

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