

THE TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS: Public and Private and the Culture of Waste

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Grammar, myth, prophecy and environmentalists

The understood definitions of public and private is of separate and mutually exclusive realms of operation where “public” includes what is common and general as well as commonality itself, whether in the shape of a defined sector with specific rights and interests, or in the looser, more amorphous sense of community. The word “community” itself with its warm echoes, is usual where the political is not too defined and so can exclude or include. The rights of community are informal, and by association, but it is the association, with its benign accretions, that carries the edge of meaning. “Private”, of course, is what is not open or available to the public and in this sense it is restricted to an individual or groups of individuals and has privilege as well as rights attached to it.

From the Kantian point of view, the private world belongs to the a priori universe with its dangers of solipsism, while the public world belongs to the empirical and epistemological sphere with its burden of history and social development. Since the age of mass production, particularly of culture, what was once private and individual has crossed over, usually in the form of artistic or literary narratives, to the public domain. Under the inherited system of capitalism, however, the private musings of poets have become a public pop industry, while the skeleton frame of capitalism has remained to stalk the public with rights stemming from ownership, such as copyright and the profits adhering thereto. In the world of multinationals, mass marketing which is rooted in the private sphere of ownership by a few individuals has produced countless artifacts particularly of drinks containers which litter the public landscape and become the content and policy making decisions of public corporations who collect and process waste. Perhaps the motor car is the best example of a private space bought at the cost of public amenity – especially air - but as we note more and more people becoming addicted to the private space at a cost to the environment, it behoves us a little to look into what has become private, and public, in our culture. The inheritance from the French revolution gives us ideas which can confuse the ground

of our understanding. Since the revolution 200 or so years ago we are still not clear on the complementary categories of community and private ownership. Marx and his dialectical followers tried to exclude the private altogether, leaving the individual with no rights at all, not even to a private conscience, while in the West individual ownership rights were paramount and excluded any kind of responsibility. Ownership means that you literally have the right to destroy what is deemed your property. The West offered unlimited personal freedom, keeping areas like private property separate from the idea of stewardship. Hence in the western democracies, which are now categorized as globalization, we have the cultural freedom of the throw away artifacts whose cumulative effect is waste of resources, especially resources such as landfill, which have become a focus of child abuse in the poorer countries –as we see children grapple in these waste areas of dirt and contamination for a small left over which can help their parents survive, and waste products which are released into public areas such as air and water are common in the developed world.

The creation of private wealth through the acquisition of common resources has been at the heart of the Cold War. The progress of capitalism from the 19th century meant that this method of creating wealth came to be seen as normative. Individuals with capital could purchase resources in a particular country, and use the population of that country to manufacture goods which brought more wealth to that individual. After the Second World War the opposition between capitalism and communism became so marked that it defined the beliefs in the private and public domains as the Cold War.

The commonality of resources was largely ignored. The social contract in what was the Eastern bloc “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary it is the social being that determines consciousness” defined the tyranny of totalitarianism which disallowed personal responsibility in the former communist states. In communism, there was no perception of what private meant, everyone and everything was defined as belonging to the public sphere, even at some stages, private sexual relations. While the state took overall responsibility for the commonality of resources, individuals were punished if they felt any responsibility in the private sphere, their very consciousness was defined as false if it did not embrace the concept of what was public. Property, therefore resources, was public, individual autonomy was seen as essentially corrupt and parasitic. The result was that the realm of objective reality, the Kantian categories of epistemology, experience, and society, were disavowed, and following Hegel, were all seen as a thing in itself, a power of itself which acted on society and history and took on the characteristics of a moral entity. This thing in itself, materialistically defined, took over the so called outworn categories of conscience and

responsibilities, and while all people looked to the masses and the public for motivation, work and reward, in real terms they were rendered powerless to make any contribution to the common good, since all their actions were interpreted as being determined, fatalistic, and without any sanction save in the bureaucracies of the state. There were no personal values or virtues, therefore no incentive to preserve what was public. The waste created from centralized economies was only paralleled by the waste created by private ownership in the West. We must remember that one in every five persons were in the secret police, so people were afraid to risk the wrath of their co workers and neighbours and embrace any cause that would put their head above the parapet. . The result was, behind a veil of probity and public good, there were covert and secret agencies who behaved badly and were rewarded for corruption, and resulted in the deterioration of the environment that went along with state socialism.

Therefore, the former Eastern bloc fared no better than the West in protecting the environment. Just as existence precedes consciousness – what one would see as a Cartesian reversal – consciousness cannot be generally understood without the articulation of language by self-conscious observers. No one in the West suggested at the time, or were allowed to suggest, that the commonalty of resources should be considered as the actual grounds of the social contract or construct which could be implemented by trans-national and international environmental organizations. This was the pivot of the East West divide, and explains the delay of a developing a consciousness towards the common resources or environment. This did not happen until much later, the Kyoto agreement did not take place until the early 1990s, and denial of common responsibility to the environment remained the hallmark of capitalist countries like the US. The public in America took a long time to convince just how much their addiction to the motor car and cheap oil was affecting the world climate. This has been as a result of the isolationism that has characterized politics since World War II.

Since that time, as capitalism advanced its remit of private wealth in the West, all resources were seen as being the property of certain powerful individuals. After the Second World War, the West embarked on an unparalleled technological development which deployed common resources, and made consumer goods available to the public at a reasonable cost. The world of throw- away came into being after the Second World War. Food, which had been tinned and packaged during the period of the war, now became the focus of more and more packaging. There was going to be no tomorrow, so throw-away was born. Both Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan were at an impressionable teen age when the atom bomb was exploded at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It is conceivable that deep in their hearts they did not anticipate there would be a future

for the planet at all. During the rise of monetarism with Reagan and Thatcher during the eighties, no individual responsibility was attached to matters in the public arena. Ownership was absolute, and resources could be used without their owner being held to account. During the Cold War, and especially with the rise of uncontrolled capitalism in the 'eighties, the West polluted the environment with unprecedented waste and chemicals.

It was the continual success of technology, coupled with the political philosophy of advanced capitalism, that caused the huge environmental crisis we have today. Finite resources were used and developed without a thought for the future, or the unborn grandchildren of this generation which grew up after the war, and for the first time in history, savored and enjoyed consumer goods which were expendable. With the aggregate power of each individual, each individual produced household waste which was unprecedented in the whole of human history. It wasn't until the advent of the German greens in the early 1980s that recycling and re-usage appeared on the agenda as the greens were the first political party to articulate the dangers of unlimited waste production and link it to the economic systems of the time.

However, it was because of humanity's need for freedom that the battle for capitalism was won, and unlimited consumer goods were part of the armory of propaganda for the capitalist cause. The deeply felt need for human freedom has almost cost us the earth.

However, because many of the moderate political parties proposed a golden mean between freedom and determinism, between the market and social responsibility, some countries in the west evolved a method which was inclusive of the public good, such as the National Health Service in the UK, initiated by the Labour party, and other initiatives such as social insurance which covered the remit of the social obligations of the community in, for example, the Scandinavian countries. So far this social remit towards the environment has been slower to develop.

Generally in the western liberal democracies, what has taken over community today is not the agreement on what rights they must hold to be a moral entity, but rather the aggregate of individual rights, known as the public. If the public are misinformed or misled by advertising, then authorities feel no obligation to keep checks or balances based on actuality. Common resources like air and water are polluted shamelessly. In Ireland, the advertising industry is self regulated, so there is no established public body with executive powers which could counteract advertising. For example, although we now in the past two decades have an information centre dedicated to giving the public

information about the environment, and it has had some successes, such as the encouragement of recycling, in actual fact there is no statutory or legislative body to counteract the claims of advertising and how it impacts on the social or public sphere. There are now protective agencies for the air and water, but no agreement on how common resources should have the effect of stopping waste being poured into water and air. We have legislation against pollution, but it tends to be post-hoc and piecemeal. Manufacturers consider these natural essentials as waste receptacles. Ireland obtained a derogation on the Kyoto agreement whereby it agreed to limit the aggregate growth of carbon emissions, but it did not have to agree on reducing the limits to match the real dangers which are evident today. The biggest job has been persuading the media to take the threat of global warming seriously. All the media at this date, November 2006, carry large advertisements for cars which are carbon polluting, and adding to the danger of a catastrophic situation when the polluted air, treated as a waste receptacle, becomes so full of carbon that it precipitates global warming. The ownership of resources considered to be private, such as the ownership of a car, means not only has an individual bought a vehicle, but right to a private space, and a commensurate right to pollute public areas, such as the air we breathe. The Irish government not only gains import tax on cars, but also what is known as vehicle registration tax, then value added tax on the price of the car, and every time the consumer buys petrol. In the eighties, Ireland obtained a derogation from the EU on lead being added to petrol for a five year period, a time when carbon emissions were growing, but also children were exposed to the high lead content of petrol. A study published in Edinburgh in the 'eighties and which was the basis of the EU legislation phasing out lead in petrol, showed that inner city children's IQ in some UK cities dropped to more than 70% of what would be considered normal. However, the specific nature of anti pollution legislation (banning chemical components stage by stage rather than an outright embargo) is still piecemeal and the dangers arising now of carbon emissions from the private space and private ownership of the car have become more acute in the overall common problem of air pollution with its attendant dangers for people, and the planet.

During the capitalist expansion during the Cold War, the line between private consumption and public good was rarely drawn. Even where there were developments of social responsibility, they tended to take expression in the private sphere. Each member of the public can be said to hold rights but these rights are often vested in individuals seeking empowerment for themselves, so an unofficial private agenda could decide the outcome for the common good or ill, depending on how much power an individual has. For example, the trade unions became powerful and the privilege of trade union

membership became more important to the bus workers than responsibility to the public or planet, hence their frequent resort to sudden strikes meant the public lost confidence in bus transport with the result that car ownership increased hugely, thus facilitating the oil companies. The electric car was a feasibility as far back as the 'Sixties, and bio fuels are today a reality, but the grip of the oil companies has been so powerful that these environmentally friendly alternatives were little publicized and are only now at this stage being considered as oil resources are being depleted.

So we have seen that, even when a commonality of resources is identified, and virtue created in a commonwealth of interests, the power play of aggregate individuals masquerading as the public view can be far from true and it can actually be dangerous to the commonalty of humankind.

We know, like in the case of the oil companies, wealth in the hands of a few multinationals can hold the entire world up to ransom. The Coca Cola company can make unlimited cans, but they themselves take no responsibility for recycling them. This is most noted in so called third world countries, who having had a pristine environment after the war, a mere fifty years ago, now are dotted with dumps full of waste. Even the rural areas are littered with packaging and throw away drink cans. The EU philosophy of making the polluter pay is wise only after the event, when in fact, it would be much better to have environmental protection matters built into the actual manufacturing and distribution stage, and not make the polluter responsible only after the harm has been done. For harm is not always reversible. The manufacturers should be responsible for collecting and recycling their waste cans and containers.

Social change can be brought about by pressure groups, but behind these groups often lies the idea of the amorphous masses, and there is the danger that the politically powerless can become uncritical of their own image of powerlessness. The root problem is that the individual is unable to contribute to the community in a way that is meaningful for him or her, since in advanced capitalism there is no real responsibility to anyone or anything in the public sphere, especially at the manufacturing stage. Individual recycling is not cost or waste-effective as much as if it were a manufacturing responsibility.

For the moment, it is this division at the centre of our thinking which allows a certain kind of community, but one without responsibility. Private wealth knows no bounds, and the owners of supermarkets, car manufacturers and arms manufacturers have the

sanction of the law to promote throwaway policies, and waste and pillage of the environmental resources we all have as a people.

Because no agreement (Save Kyoto) was made until recent years on the basis of our common ownership of the planet, the environment has only recently been taken up in the language of our rulers and it is now only slowly being negotiated, while we need it more urgently as spoilage and pollution is happening all around us. The earth is our own, yet people have won the right to despoil it as there are no conditions attached to ownership, just rights. Hence, in our day, the tragedy of the commons. Our common inheritance, the air, sea, and countryside is being used as a dump for private individual and corporate waste. The air and the sea “belong to no one” so people dump everything into these precious and finite resources. The limited agreements which are in place need to be much expanded, and the European Union is now inviting submissions from the public and interested parties to draw up a new agreement for the marine environment which will protect resources and species. It is encouraging to see these developments, but one has to wonder as to how long it took before the wake up call was heard.

In the past, our society had felt no sense of obligation to pass on these resources as they are in the state of nature. Water is being privatized so that a resource which is essential for life itself is being used as an expendable commodity. Pollution means that there may be serious water shortages in the future. It is a further insult when we see water sold in plastic bottles. If sold at all, it should be in glass bottles. There are some indications that plastics leaking into water have become part of the food chain, and may be responsible for the rise of cancer. But because of absence of absolute proof, the connection is not made.

People have lost completely the idea of common resources. “Common” now means “what belongs to nobody”. British Nuclear Fuels can discharge radioactive waste into the Irish Sea, the atmosphere itself is now the waste repository of pollutants and streams and rivers are the dumping ground of poisonous effluents of pig farms, pesticides, slurry and factories. The anti-pollution legislation has attempted to deal with this, but as long as we have social “double-think” – advertising with its appeal to private irresponsibility – we will have the common resources abused. The claim of advertisers to our consciousness and time must be debated and challenged. The cultural freedoms we enjoy must not give us a licence to waste earth’s resources.

Today, the idea of the public calls to mind a group of people with interests in common, such as a nation or a reading population, who informally receive information based on

social prediction, or a constituency. They may have no status or recourse in law, save in vague generalities. For example, if advertising misinforms or misleads the public, there is no legal obligation to redress the harm, just a system of self-regulation which is inadequate to the problem, based on a very often misinformed public. So if the public are misinformed or misled by advertising which pollutes, there is no immediate access for the public, save in piecemeal legislation and in ad-hoc principles such as making the polluter pay. The actual pollution rather than being stopped by law at source from even being embarked upon, is often recognized too late.

What the public interest needs, as well as reclaiming community and the common, is an open examination of the notion of public and private. If people must have status, it should not be based on their material possessions. Primitive society relied on decoration, or reputation as a social marker. Now the only social marker is money. The private and the public good are confused. Sometimes journalists undertake to solve this, but in piecemeal fashion. In Ireland, we could ask, as journalists sometimes do, how the Industrial Development Authority justify the creation of personal wealth for individuals from public funds, simply in the name of job creation for multinational companies who close down when it suits them, having received tax free trading concessions and having polluted the air and water supply. The discretion at the IDA is in contrast to the public humiliation at the dole queue, the pollution arrived at is in contrast to the frugal lifestyle on the dole. The political language we speak, the very syntax shows the gap in understanding, and shows just how mixed up our paradigms for success and survival are. Now with the advent of the Celtic Tiger the Irish are experiencing wealth at an unprecedented scale, and are investing hugely in private property, taking out loans up to eight or ten times their actual annual income. The wealth generated and saved by their elders, particularly in countries like Germany, have enabled a huge expansion in credit since the advent of the Euro, but the actual investments, the property bought inside and outside in Ireland, is vastly overvalued, and may result in serious hardship later on if interest rates rise and houses do not keep the high prices they command at present.

However it is probably in the area of sexual activity that private and public are more confused than ever. Sexual activity was once the exclusive domain of the private sphere, now sexual activity is part of public experience and public discourse. The private area of sexual morality now receives its affirmation from multinationals who exploit the young. The banks have appropriated the language of love friendship and romance to carry out their often non friendly business. Their invisibility, on the one hand, has allowed all powers of discretion to wane, so we have, along with the language of love in actually alienating circumstances, the complementary incidence of pornography, leading to

enormous suffering by children, women, and men. Sexual morality is considered to be irrelevant yet headlines about leaders and pop stars show and their “shocking sex lives” show there is a more sinister “morality” going on, the doublespeak and newspeak written of by George Orwell. “1984” is actually happening, but the surprise is that it is happening in the capitalist western democracies. We have failed to arrive at a correct social grammar – the freedoms we enjoy culturally do not allow us to reach into a public arena of responsibility. Understandably, after the experiment with communism, our political leaders are unwilling to embark on a new ideology which might lead to a different form of totalitarianism. Even if the experiment with communism failed, we must not use it as an excuse to deny our responsibilities to our commonalty, the planet.

Social prediction and myth embody the wholeness of the community, and now the world is community. If we think of how “primitive” societies held land in common, we can see the land preceded the social contract. And in those agrarian early societies there was no private abuse that led to public waste and littering. There was not a single sweet wrapper thrown away on the Great Plains when the Native Americans roamed that continent. Individualism had to be negotiated in the tribe through proper role models , using example and ritual such as dance. Virtually all primitive people have used a system of encouraging social virtue, while our society encourages greed and waste. In small communities people lived by their reputation and a regard for all was the hallmark. It was possible for the individual to become an integrated autonomous individual with self knowledge and self respect, often linked to non-monetary tokens of wisdom, practice, and decoration which had an echo in the beauty of nature surrounding them. The myth recreated their wholeness through their participation and witness of their truths and responsibilities. The myths we have at present are in advertising, which promote greed and waste endlessly. We have confused ownership and stewardship with self indulgence and irresponsibility.

Ownership in tribal society was community based, even the future of the land. The Indians regarded land and the common ownership of land as a sacred trust, and handed the land back to each new generation in a clean, healthy unpolluted way. No “savage” tribe ever put human or animal waste into the water. Before the whites came to America, the whole continent, its water and air, were unpolluted. The Indians were not saints, they were meat eaters, but said ritual prayers for the animal, realizing they themselves would become part of the cycle of nature in due course. They certainly would not have treated animals as animals are treated today – in battery factories, in narrow pens, in force-feeding with chemicals. With all the poisonous waste being dumped into rivers, we can see how the faults in our thinking have resulted in huge harm to the environment, our

common and public responsibility. The legacy of the industrial revolution need not necessarily be one of waste.

Some modern myths create artificial needs simply in order to sell new products. Myths can provide good models, or false ones. Parties based on the left and right, as we have seen, make social predictions into determinants. The minds of our young people are polluted from advertisers who see them as stereotypes and making profit from it. The older people are failing young people by not passing on survival tactics – they have been seduced by consumerist cold war propaganda which promoted greed and the aggrandizement of the individual with no personal responsibility whatsoever.

We are in danger from the myth of infinite resources and the idol of our personal greed. Montezuma, the Aztec king, saw a fair form on the horizon and presumed it was the return of the god – predicted from the myths of the tribe. Psychologists tell us we need social prediction in order to survive, that we cannot tolerate unpredictably. The cosy world created by advertising despoiled the natural resources and was as far removed from nature as the Aztec prediction of the return of the god. Prediction is necessary for survival, but we have to respond consciously, and with conscience, to it. Montezuma and his tribe were wiped out by the Spanish conquistadore, just as we are in danger of being wiped out by the social predictions of advertisers who pollute and take no responsibility. Myths create belief systems, but unless these beliefs are rigorously examined, we can fail the reality test and be wiped out by the myth.

On the other hand, a myth can create a private distinction without laying waste what is common or public. It must be based in reality, and have a relationship with the natural world. Myth also has a public input, it can mean that a meta-reality is accepted, that a person can accept a role or stricture for the sake of a perceived greater good. In our society sometimes the reality is not understood, or the reality itself eludes the experience of a people, but the myth can convey a model, a pattern, and the right behavior.

We can all remember, as students, that we had to learn the paradigm and only in practice discover its meaning. If children can learn the correct social and legal grammar, we can tie stewardship into ownership. Just as myth was translated into ritual and understanding, we can translate our community wholeness into practical paradigms of conservation and responsibility – by practices such as recycling and the proper use of technology. We can learn environmental lessons from those societies like the Native American. Or we can make serious mistakes from the disinformation we receive about resources, about need, from advertising when crucial aspects of the truth are omitted.

Language can be hidebound in the past and as advertising so far has concentrated on greed, it does not create the solutions we need for the future, just short term gain. Teaching children positive role models, wherever they come from, the cinema, art, or people we know can counteract some of this damage which takes place in the public sphere but makes its way into every home.

We could teach that common ownership of public spaces should lead to stewardship and responsibility for them. The negotiation of human rights has gone along without defining these kinds of obligations for the world community. The idea of ownership at present is that a person can own without having responsibility, to the point where they can destroy a property of any kind. Those who have thought about obligations are often working in a vacuum, but our mutuality and intrinsic inter-action must be emphasized if we and the planet are to survive in a healthy state. Each member of the community should have the right to act as guardian of present and future resources, upheld in the law, and carried out in practice. We can start with proper education, and restrictions on advertising. We should not have to wait until the crisis comes and vigilantes take the place of informed action and debate, but given the present scenario, this may be quite likely to happen.

Territorial disputes continue. Raw tribalism and revenge has been the counter side of aggrandizement and greed, now we need more than shadowy figures and puppet play to understand our rights. Our rights mean more than being a figurehead, it means giving people the opportunity to interact meaningfully with the environment. The people, if they have the possibility, cannot make the mistakes of our consumerist past. The rhetoric of the state, disguised as backhand, must give way to honesty.

It is now a commonplace that colonialist kingdoms beget neo-colonialist ones, that government by the people and the enfranchisement of millions leads to bleary tyrannies, or dreary ineffectual government, that the withering away of the state and the restoration of the people, a dream which has been with us since the eighteenth century, has not been achieved. I think if we research rigorously in our language for the social constructs necessary to the commonalty of the people of this earth, we can do away with the short-term and hold what binds us together. Between the national and the international, the rational and the mystical, there is the real world of land and common resources, which belong to all of us by birth-right, we must construct a correct social grammar.

The private ethos which endorsed unprecedented greed without community responsibility and left us in a society where waste is paramount must be made to end. In

other words, the air, seas and water belong to everyone and should have stewardship agreements. There should be a common understanding, backed up by law and custom, that these precious resources guarantee life and are to be respected. Our society looks upon these resources as a dump. In short, we need a Universal Declaration of Protection for the Environment. It would put all air and water under stewardship, design land agreements based on justice which would include care for the environment. If we do not take stringent measures against non-biodegradable packaging, monitoring supermarkets for selling plastic-bottled goods and any non biodegradable materials, the whole of earth will gradually turn into a dump.

The Earth Summit in Rio was the beginning of negotiations of the responsibilities we bear towards the planet, but we must complete the work by creating an awareness of how urgent such work is. This will bring into play the interrogation of myths of our time, and our task to separate what is good from that which is bad for us and the planet. Even as I write, with global warming now being recognized by the public as a serious and actual danger, the advertising of cars continues unabated in our newspapers and television.

Burke believed that there was no right in the state of nature, just agreements. We have learnt that there are other things besides the rights of agreements and corporations. Territory can be understood to extend both in space and time, in space with possession and in time with history and inheritance. These rights all have responsibilities attached. We must make laws that respect both individual and common responsibilities, we must share both caretaking for the large resources of the planet, which belong to us all, in particular, air and water.

When we look at the world we must be careful to distinguish whether it is a private adventurer, or indeed the god Quetzalcoatl on the horizon. Montezuma failed to do so, because he thought the approaching stranger was like him.

I will leave the American Indian Chief Seattle to have the last word. "Only when the white man knows that he cannot eat money will his ways change."

Do we have to wait until then? Are we at that point now?

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