

The Commons In An Age Of Uncertainty: Decolonizing Nature, Economy, And Society



Book review by Emily Sims of Franklin Obeng-Odoom's latest work (University of Toronto Press, 2021).

Elinor Ostrom's Nobel prize winning work on Common Pool Resources has served as a light on the hill for a generation of economists seeking to disprove the neoclassical dictum on institutionalised private property rights in nature: there is no alternative.

Her *bête noire* -- that 'open' common resources are doomed to be overused and without investment unless privately enclosed or regulated by the state -- was most famously articulated by Garrett Hardin in his 1968 *Science* article "The Tragedy of the Commons."

The end game for commons is environmental destruction and intractable free rider problems like climate disrupting carbon emissions.

Through empirical investigation Ostrom showed that in the real world the commons were not so tragic. Her work catalogs communities where robust local institutions sustainably steward rival, non-excludable resources like fishing lakes and grazing pastures.

In his new book, leading Georgist scholar Franklin Obeng-Odoom argues that Ostrom is not the piper at the dawn of a new commons-era. In fact, her approach is consistent with a 'not if, but when' view of commons enclosure.

Ostrom's collectives are made up of rational individuals who organise collectively to protect individual rights exercised jointly. Joint rights, Obeng-Odoom argues, are not the same as equal rights: "The two types of rights might, but do not necessarily lead to the same outcome...the superior 'right to land' is not the same as the idea of land rights."

Obeng-Odoom argues that both Hardin and Ostrom “attribute socio-ecological crises to what pertains within the commons or within the common pool, not across common property regimes, or within the nation-state.” This analysis is devoid of any theory of social justice, and shares a “pre-analytic suspicion of the state.” Comparing the functioning of a Common Pool Resource regime to a gated community, the bigger question of the book arises: Will capitalism allow such enclaves to exist forever? What about society-wide threats like imperial conquest?

He posits two flawed analytical approaches to the commons: Conventional Wisdom (the category in which he lumps Ostrom’s institutions) treats commons as a kind of primitive emergence on the road to more effective means of avoiding ecological collapse: individual private property or state-regulation.

The alternative strand he labels the Western Left Consensus which contends that “everything that is collectivised and anti-capitalist is or ought to be regarded as a commons and a solution to neoliberalism.” Neoliberalism, alongside the ‘tragedy of the commons’, is the other devil in the piece, explaining the ongoing socio ecological crises of the Global South. “Nature in [the Western Left Consensus] is not special but rather of one of many relations that can be commoned.” (p9, emphasis in original)

In the Georgist analytical tradition, Obeng-Odoom draws our attention to the specialness of our relationship with land. Beyond George, he is drawing on the rich history and culture of the landed commons within the African tradition. Land is sacred. Possession is not the same as ownership. “Like George and Georgists, Africanist conceptions of The Commons hold that havoc could be unleashed for society, economy and environment in the event of privatising land denying labour of its due reward, and managing the commons from the top-down.” (p81)

Many readers will be familiar with Henry George’s warning: “But whatever else we do, so long as we fail to recognise the equal right

to the elements of nature, nothing will avail to remedy that unnatural inequality in the distribution of wealth which is fraught with so much evil and danger.”

Henry George’s notion of the commons is grounded in the idea that each of us has equal claim to ‘nature’s gifts.’ This is not a means by which individuals cooperate to ensure sustainable on-going access, or some analytically slippery notion of the collective, it is a far more radical claim. “At the heart of Henry George’s conception of the commons is the notion of justice...” (p62) “George argues that humans have both a “social nature” and an “individual nature” -- features that interlock to make the human being a “land animal,” that is, one reliant on common land.” (p62) As Obeng-Odoom writes, “George’s true remedy is “nothing short of making land common property” whereas for mainstream economists, the true remedy is privatising the commons.”

Here Obeng-Odoom has applied the Georgist lens to the persistent, globalised geographies of deprivation and disempowerment: what used to be labelled ‘third world problems’. How can we explain the enduring impoverishment and degradation we witness in Africa and elsewhere in the Global South? What happens when nature is privatised in the Global South? Could the commons be part of the solution? This work is somewhat of a synthesis of his previous scholarship, aimed at an academic audience, and remarkably ambitious: the book is subtitled “Decolonizing Nature, Economy and Society.”

The second part of the book dives into “The Proof”, wide-ranging case studies organised into themes: Cities, Technology, Oil, Water. Cities claims “[i]nformal urban common pools or communities remain widespread but not so much because of a rational decision to self-govern. Rather, they grow from oppression and work under suffocating conditions.” (p112) This argument is supported by a case study of bottled water consumption in Cote d’Ivoire and the commensurate growth in waste picking as a form of precarious, “green work”.

Technology provides a thorough critical appraisal of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with a solid discussion of the role of privatised land commons (private property) in generating unequal distribution of technological progress. This is George's Progress and Poverty thesis applied, with nuance, to SDGs.

Obeng-Odoom's analysis of the political-economy of Oil (including coal, nuclear, energy sovereignty) in Africa gave me pause. Following the framework established earlier, he argues that the debate about oil and coal mining in Africa is based on policy choices of Conventional Wisdom--marketisation, Sovereign wealth funds, net zero emissions trading etc.-- and a Western Left Consensus which wants fossil fuels left in the ground. His decolonising approach asks instead whether governments view fossil fuels as commonwealth, whether they are adequately sharing revenues, and the best ways to do so.

To my reading, the chapter does not satisfactorily engage with two key problems: first, the catastrophic existential risk of climate disruption, and its impact on the African continent. Or the rapidly evolving political context of fossil fuel extraction. In the race to net zero by 2050, is energy sovereignty based on coal power feasible on any continent? Secondly, I take issue with the unwieldy definition of renewables as ranging from "biofuels to green cars"...anything that is not based on fossil fuels. Surely we can define renewables simply as technologies that enable energy to be sourced from wind, solar, biomass, or geothermal (storage being another question).

That "...in the name of renewables in developing clean, green, and sustainable energy, Africa is slowly returning to the days of slavery where people were used as sustainable energy." (p149) is insightful; the idea that solutions like soil carbon capture and reforestation might rely on an obfuscation of the who and the where. The

image of black bodies toiling on carbon capture plantations in service to the demands of a decarbonizing, but not decolonising, world is evocative food for thought.

I agree with Obeng-Odoom's proposition that "extraction is not the problem per se but rather the underlying property relations...". He advocates for greater commoning of African mineral resources, and attendant opportunities for energy sovereignty and self-determination, via robust resource rent taxation. Given Australia's recent failures to adequately tax super profits from iron ore, and now more recently gas, it's hard to know what comes first: the government institutions that have the political capacity to tax resource rents, or the resource rents that strengthen government institutions. With shades of Polanyi, Obeng-Odoom reminds us that just as states can take on capitalist features, "in a commons society the state takes on commons features ...and can drive the march towards the commons." (p200) Indigenous Ghanaian customs such as abunu (dividing the harvest) and abusa (sharing the harvest by thirds) provide an institutional foundation for sharing mineral rents and urban land value uplifts.

In his concluding chapter, Obeng-Odoom posits a new ecological political economy comprising three buttressing concepts: rent theft describes the appropriation of community created value or commons resources such as urban land rents, or mineral wealth. Just land means returning the land to the commons, and the Global South as a dialectical methodology - one that Obeng-Odoom models as he weaves the distinctive Africanist concept of land, with George's theory of justice into a powerful critique of both the 'tragedy of the commons' and collectivist overreach.

<https://researchportal.helsinki.fi/en/persons/franklin-obeng-odoom>