

THE WEALTH OF THE COMMONS: A World Beyond Market and State

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The Economy of Wastefulness: The Biology of the Commons

By Andreas Weber

There is an all-enclosing commons-economy which has been successful for billions of years: the biosphere. Its ecology is the terrestrial household of energy, matter, beings, relationships and meanings which contains any manmade economy and only allows for it to exist. Sunlight, oxygen, drinking water, climate, soil and energy – the products and processes of this household – also nourish the *Homo economicus* of our time who, despite all his technological and economical progress, still feeds on products of the biosphere.

I wish to argue that nature embodies the commons paradigm *par excellence*. With that definition I do not only mean that man and other beings have been living together according to commons principles for an overwhelming majority of time. My argument is more complex: I am convinced that ecological relations within nature follow the rules of the commons. Therefore, nature can provide us with a powerful methodology of the commons as a natural and social ecology. The goal of this chapter is to give a brief outline of this “existential commons ecology.”

Liberalism as a hidden metaphysics of life

But which nature are we talking of? To analyze nature’s household without the bias added by the liberalist metaphors of nature as capitalist marketplace we will have to reconsider the underlying ecology and economy of natural housekeeping step by step. Particularly, we will have to question the mainstream view of ecological interactions as competition and optimization processes between mechanical actors (or “genes”) due to the pressure of external laws, e.g., selection. We will rather discover in nature a deep history of evolution towards more freedom, where the players are autonomous subjects bound together in mutual dependence. This idea, however, is in opposition to the current view of matter and information exchange in biological and economic theory.

In the last 200 years few models of reality have been influencing each other so strongly as the theory of natural evolution and the theory of man’s household of goods and services. Both disciplines received their current shape in Victorian England, and both reciprocally borrowed and reapplied each other’s key metaphors. Consequentially, social findings have been projected on to the natural cosmos and scientific knowledge, and in turn reapplied to socioeconomical

theories. Today both paradigms together form a bioeconomic metaphysics which does not so much deliver an objective description of the world as an assessment of civilization itself.

In this context it is important to notice that a political economist, Thomas Robert Malthus, delivered the crucial cornerstone for the modern concept of biology as evolution. Malthus was obsessed by the idea of scarcity as explanation for social change – there would never be enough resources to feed a population which steadily multiplies. Charles Darwin, the biologist, adapted that piece of theory which had clearly derived from the observation of Victorian industrial society and applied it to a comprehensive theory of natural change and development. In its wake such concepts as “struggle for existence,” “competition,” “growth” and “optimization” tacitly became centerpieces of our self-understanding: biological, technological, and social progress is brought forth by the sum of individual egoisms. In perennial competition, fit species (powerful corporations) exploit niches (markets) and multiply their survival rate (return margins), whereas weaker (less efficient) ones go extinct (bankrupt). The resulting metaphysics of economy and nature, however, are less an objective picture of the world than society’s opinion about its own premises.

By this exchange of metaphors, economics came to see itself more and more as a “hard” natural science. It derived its models from biology and physics – leading all the way up to the mathematical concept of *Homo economicus*. This chimera – a machine-like egoist always seeking to maximize his utility – has become the hidden, but all-influencing model of humanity. Its shadow is still cast over newer psychological and game-theoretical approaches. Reciprocally, evolutionary biology also gained inspiration from economical models. The “selfish gene,” e.g., is not much more but a *Homo economicus* mirrored back to biochemistry.²

We can call this alliance between biology and economics an “economic ideology of nature.” Today it reigns supreme over our understanding of man and world. It defines our embodied dimension (*Homo sapiens* as gene-governed survival machine) as well as our social aspect (*Homo economicus* as egoistic maximizer of utility). The idea of universal competition unifying the natural and the social sphere is always rival and exclusive:³ You have to eliminate as many competitors as possible and take the biggest piece of cake for yourself – a license to steal life from others.

Historically therefore, the reinvention of nature as an economical process of competition and optimization has been an organizing template for the enclosure of the commons. It has served as a mental fencing-off which preceded the real dispossessions and displacements and invented a context of justification.

The first transformations of common into private property took place in early modern times (1500–1800). This was the same epoch when our self-understanding increasingly was dominated by the dualist view of the French thinker René Descartes. Mind was no longer intimately entangled with body but rather a rational

1 | Concerning the concept of *Homo economicus*, see Friederike Habermann’s essay on pp. 13–18.

2 | See Dawkins, Richard. 1990. *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford. Oxford University Press.

3 | For an explanation of these terms see Silke Helfrich’s essay on pp. 61–67.

principle that stood above matter. Organisms, the whole diversity of nature, but also man's own body, were conceived of as automata made of subjectless and deterministic matter. This conviction is the refusal of any form of connectedness. The British philosopher Thomas Hobbes expanded on that idea and claimed an absolute separation of society and politics from nature. Nature is seen as the dominion of blind causes and effects and hence is no longer available as a point of reference for human self-understanding – in much the same way as the forest that the nobility had once shared with the peasants became exclusive property and was no longer accessible. The idea that the inhuman forces of optimization and selection dominate the realm of “pure things,” and hence also ourselves, closely parallels that historical exclusion. Both follow a basic model of estrangement and fencing off of living abundance. It is most noteworthy that the human sphere, which in this manner has been purified from nature, does not gain more freedom. Rather, society is also understood as a battle of brute and cruel forces – forces which have lost any connection with creative and lawful powers of existing-within-nature and embodied subjectivity. Hobbes' model of society, which remains influential in our time, shuns all connection with natural objects yet nonetheless becomes the embodiment of a world driven by brute force. It is built upon the idea of the “Leviathan,” the war of all against all as a “natural” state.

The enclosure of nature that had once been accessible by all reaches deeply into our mind and emotions. The inner wilderness of man increasingly has come under control. It has become difficult to understand oneself as an embodied part of a developing whole. Man-as-a-body did not belong any longer to the realm of beings, nor were his feelings about being alive to be taken seriously anymore. Rather, man's experiences and emotions became isolated from the rest of reality. This view culminates in an idea that today is quite common, that “nature” is not real at all but only exists as a mental concept, leaving no room to care for that which does not exist. The economic ideology of nature excluded any wilderness from our soul; unenclosed nature which accomplishes itself by itself and which is possessed by no being, made no sense to the liberal mind. No understanding of ourselves and of the world which reaches beyond the principles of competition and optimization can now claim any general validity. It is “nothing but” a nice illusion which “in reality” is only proof of the underlying forces in the struggle for existence. Love reduces itself to choice of the fittest mate; cooperation basically is a ruse in the competition for resources; and artistic expression shows the economy of discourses.

The enclosure of nature hence finally touches the *Homo sacer*,⁴ the innermost core of our embodied and feeling self, which contains the vulnerable existence in flesh and blood, the nude, emotional, animate existence. If we prefer to think of ourselves as apart from animate life, we have divorced ourselves from the realm of the living. As a final consequence, the enclosure of the commons manifests itself as biopolitics – the bid to own and monetize life.

4 | See Agamben, Giorgio. 1998. *Homo sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford. Stanford University Press.

Natural anticapitalism

A new economy can become a realistic alternative if we can challenge the mainstream biological view that sees life as an endless process of optimization. A new picture of life indeed is overdue – particularly in biology itself. Here, in fact, the Hobbsean paradigm of “war of all against all” is being overcome. The biological view of the organic world – and the picture of man within it – is changing from the idea of a battlefield between antagonistic survival-machines to that of an interplay of agents with goals and meanings. The organism starts to be seen as a subject who *interprets* external stimuli and genetic influences rather than being causally governed by them, and who negotiates his existence with others under conditions of limited competition and “weak causality.”

This shift in the axioms of “biological liberalism” leads to an emerging picture of the organic world as one in which freedom evolves. This is particularly evident in the following issues:

1. *Efficiency*: The biosphere is not efficient. Warm-blooded animals consume over 97 percent of their energy only to maintain their metabolism. Photosynthesis achieves a ridiculous efficiency rate of 7 percent. Fish, amphibians and insects have to lay millions of eggs only to allow for the survival of very few offspring. Instead of being efficient, nature is highly redundant. It compensates for possible loss through incredible wastefulness. Natural processes are not parsimonious but rather based on generosity and waste. The biosphere indeed is based on donation, but it is not reciprocal: the foundation of all biological work – solar energy – falls as a gift from heaven.

2. *Growth*: The biosphere does not grow. The quantity of biomass does not increase. The throughput does not expand – nature is running a steady-state-economy – that is, an economy where all relevant factors remain constant toward one another. Also, the number of species does not necessarily increase. It rises in some epochs and falls in others. The only dimension that really grows is the diversity of experiences: ways of feeling, modes of expression, variations of appearance, novelties of patterns and forms. Therefore, nature does not gain weight, but rather depth.

3. *Competition*: It has never been possible to prove that a new species arose from competition for a resource alone. Species are rather born by chance: they develop through unexpected mutations and the isolation of a group from the remainder of the population through new symbioses and cooperations (as our body cells have done, for example). Competition alone, e.g., for a limited nutrient, causes biological monotony: the dominance of relatively few species over an ecosystem.

4. *Scarcity*: The basic energetic resource of nature, sunlight, exists in abundance. A second crucial resource – the number of ecological relationships and new niches – has no upper limit. A high number of species and a variety of relations among them do not lead to sharper competition and dominance of a “fitter” species, but rather to a proliferation of relationships among species and thus to an increase in freedom, which is at the same time also an increase of mutual dependencies. The more that is wasted, the bigger the common wealth becomes.

In ecosystems where only a few nutrients are freely available, as in the tropical rainforest, this limitation brings forth more niches and thus a higher overall diversity. This is the result of an increase of symbioses and reduced competition. Scarcity on a biological level does not lead to displacement, but to diversification.

5. *Property*: There is no notion of property in the biosphere. An individual does not even possess his own body. Its matter changes permanently and continuously as it is replaced by oxygen, CO₂, and other inputs of energy and matter. But it is not only the physical dimension of self that is made possible through communion with other elements, it is the symbolic as well: language is brought forth by the community of speakers who are using it. Habits in a species are acquired by sharing them. In any of these dimensions the wilderness of the natural world – which has become, and not been made, and which cannot be exclusively possessed by anybody – is necessary for the individual to develop its innermost identity. Individuality – physical and social/symbolic – thus *can only* emerge through a biological and symbol-based commons.

Commons features of the biosphere

In a temperate forest there are different rules for flourishing than in a dry desert. Each ecosystem is the sum of many rules, interactions, and streams of matter, which share common principles but are locally unique. This strict locality follows the fact that living beings do not only *use* the commons provided by nature, but are physically and relationally *a part of* them. The individual's existence is inextricably linked to the existence of the overarching system. The quality of this system, its health (and beauty) is based on a precarious balance that has to be negotiated from moment to moment. It is a balance between too much autonomy of the individual and too much pressure for necessity exerted by the system. Flourishing ecosystems historically have developed a host of patterns of balance that lead to extraordinary refinement and high levels of aesthetic beauty. Hence, the forms and beings of nature can be experienced as solutions that maintain a delicate balance in a complex society. The embodied solutions of individual-existence-in-connection are that special beauty of the living which fills most humans with the feeling of sense and belonging.

Nature as such is the paradigm of the commons. Nothing in it is subject to monopoly; everything is open source. The quintessence of the organic realm is not the selfish gene but the source code of genetic information lying open to all. Even the genes being patented today by biocorporations in truth are nonrival and nonexclusive in a biological sense. Only in being so are they able to provide biological and experiential novelty. DNA was only able to branch into so many species because everybody could use its code, tinker with it and derive the most meaningful combinations from it. This is the way *Homo sapiens* himself came about: by nature playing around with open source code. Some 20 percent of our genome alone is once viral genes that have been creatively recycled. As there is no property in nature – there is no waste. All waste byproducts are food. Every individual at death offers itself as a gift to be feasted upon by others, in the same

way it received its existence by the gift of sunlight. There is a still largely unexplored connection between giving and taking in which loss is the precondition for productivity.

In the ecological commons a multitude of different individuals and diverse species stand in various relationship to one another – competition and cooperation, partnership and predatorship, productivity and destruction. All those relations, however, follow one higher law: over the long run only behavior that allows for productivity of the whole ecosystem and that does not interrupt its self-production is amplified. The individual is able to realize itself only if the whole can realize itself. Ecological freedom obeys this form of necessity. The deeper the connections in the system become, the more creative niches it will afford for its individual members.

Commons as relations of the living

A thorough analysis of the *economy of ecology* can yield a powerful methodology of the commons. Natural processes are able to define a blueprint to transform our treatment of the embodied, material aspect of our existence into a *culture of being alive*. The term “commons” provides the binding element between the natural and the social or cultural worlds. To understand nature in its genuine quality as a commons opens the way to a novel understanding of ourselves – in our biological as well as in our social life.

If nature actually *is* a commons, it follows that the only possible way to achieve a productive relationship with it will be an *economy of the commons*. The self-realization of *Homo sapiens* can be best achieved in a system of common goods because such a culture – and thus any household or market system – is the species-specific realization of our own particular embodiment of being alive within a common system of other living subjects.

Although the deliberations that have led us to this point stem from a thorough analysis of biology, their results are not *biologistic* – but rather the opposite. The thorough analysis here has revealed that the organic realm is the paradigm for the evolution of freedom. Therefore, even if we determine that the commons is the basic law of nature, the necessities resulting from that basic law are non-deterministic – contrary to the prevailing ideas of optimization and growth. The basic idea of the commons is rather grounded on an intricate understanding of *embodied freedom and its relationship to the whole*: the individual receives her options of self-realization through the prospering of the life/social systems she belongs to. To organize a community between humans and/or nonhuman agents according to the principles of the commons always means to increase individual freedom by enlarging the community’s freedom. (See Table 1).

Contrary to what our dualistic culture supposes, reality is not divided into substances of matter (biophysics, deterministic approach) and culture/society (non-matter, indeterministic or mental/semiotic approach). Living reality rather depends on a precarious balance between autonomy and relatedness on all its levels. It is a creative process that produces rules for an increase of the whole

Table 1: Existential Consequences of Various Modes of Householding

Neoliberalism	Darwinism	Commons (ecological & social together)
concentration	displacement	diversity
dependency	resource dependency	freedom-in-relatedness
fragmentation	sequential optimization	integration
customers	survivors	subject-in-community
local vs. global	local	local and global (holistically integrated)
sustainability = victory	sustainability = victory	sustainability = relationship & commitment
patents	mechanisms of predation and defense	open source
winners monopolize most resources	winners transmit most genes	winners are interwoven most deeply with the community
efficiency	efficiency	diversity of expressions
monopoly	dominance	self-expression as culture
egos in hostile environment	species under selection pressure	constant recreation of community
separation		participation

through the self-realization of each of its members. These rules are different for each time and each place, but we find them everywhere life is. They are valid not only for autopoiesis – the auto-creation of the organic forms – but also for a well-achieved human relationship, for a prospering ecosystem as well as for an economy in harmony with the biospheric household. These rules are the laws of the commons.

The idea of the commons thus delivers a unifying principle that dissolves the supposed opposition between nature and society/culture. It cancels the separation of the ecological and the social. In any existence that commits itself to the commons, the task we must face is to realize the well-being of the individual while not risking an increase of the surrounding and encompassing whole. Here, too, the idea of the commons conflates the realms of theory and of application. Reflections on theory are not isolated in some separate realm, but inexorably return to practice, to the rituals and idiosyncrasies of mediating, cooperating, sanctioning, negotiating and agreeing, to the burdens and the joy of experienced reality. It is here where the practice of the commons reveals itself as nothing less than the practice of life.

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