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The Tragedy of Trump

Jeff Stein

January 31, 2017

Democracy is a commons. The election of Donald Trump is the logical outcome of the modern enclosure movement. The 20th century was a struggle between capitalists and the labor movement and liberals to recreate a commons: old-age pensions for workers, universal health care, public education, national parks and wilderness areas, assistance for the unemployed and children, environmental protection for air and water, and public infrastructure.

Commons were nothing new. Before the industrial revolution local communities set aside common areas for pasturing animals, collecting water and firewood, hunting and fishing, and these provided a form of assistance for low-income families to support themselves. As capitalism developed these commons areas were seized and sold off (or given away) by governments to the capitalists.

Then, as now, this enclosure was justified on the grounds that capitalism would result in a more efficient use of the natural resources and the benefits would magically trickle down to the poor as products became cheaper. The fact that the rural poor were left with no income to buy the cheap goods and were forced to the cities and “Satanic mills” was never a concern. Yet from the ashes of the commons was born the union and socialist movements (including

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Retrieved on 28th January 2021 from syndicalist.us
From Anarcho-Syndicalist Review #69, Winter 2017

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anarcho-syndicalism) that fought back. Threatened by social revolution and by their own excesses, the capitalists relented and the modern commons were born.

But capitalism is still capitalism. Commons only benefit capitalists if they can control them and make a profit. Privatization was advocated as a solution to “the tragedy of the commons” – the tragedy was that resources were being used for the common good instead of lining the pockets of the 1% of greedy families at the top of the economic pyramid.

As an environmentalist and labor activist I paid attention when the term “tragedy of the commons” was mentioned on a public radio program while travelling to work. The phrase was coined by conservationist Garret Hardin to refer to the tendency of an unregulated commons resource to be over-exploited. As Hardin’s argument goes, the enclosure movement was necessary to preserve the environment because the benefit derived from overuse of a common resource goes to the individual but the cost is shared by all, so individuals have no incentive to conserve common resources. On the other hand if the resource was owned by the individual or a family, that person had an incentive to take care of the resource in order to continue to benefit him or herself and their descendants.

I decided to write an anarchist rebuttal of Hardin’s argument but the more I delved into the literature the more I realized that Hardin’s argument falls apart because he misunderstands the nature of capitalism. Capitalists are not small farmers growing crops or raising cattle for their own subsistence, but investors making a profit by extracting as much value from their resources by putting them on the market. Markets are commons. If markets are unregulated, there is the same “tragedy of the commons” tendency for individual capitalists to over-exploit resources – to invest in a resource, use it up and abandon it for the next profit-making opportunity perhaps in another country. Growing one’s capital is the goal, not saving communities, not saving a farm or factory, not saving

the environment, not even saving the market itself. The individual capitalist is oblivious to the costs being suffered by everyone else.

Hardin’s “Tragedy of the Commons” is the “Tragedy of the Markets.” The only way to avoid the tragedy of the commons is to “stint,” to place limits on what individuals can do in common resource areas. (E.P. Thompson, the British historian wrote a number of articles about how pre-industrial villages avoided the “tragedy of the commons” before the 18th century enclosure movement by creating local rules favoring conservation called “stinting.”)

Since the rise of Reaganism in the Republican Party and of Clintonism in the Democrat Party, the capitalist establishment has pursued an effort to once again enclose the commons and sell them to the highest bidders. It is only natural that the enclosure effort would eventually engulf both parties and the government itself.

Democracy has been slowly and steadily eroded. The parties are for sale, the political candidates are for sale, elections are for sale, and finally a billionaire has bought his way into power.

Since being “elected” in a rigged contest in which many voters were denied the opportunity to vote or have their votes counted based upon their race, neighborhood or age, President-“elect” Trump has made it clear that his administration is open for business. Democracy has been privatized. He has sold his administration to the right-wing elements of the Republican Party, appointed billionaires and authoritarian generals to his cabinet, and refused to sell off his business interests or even disclose what they are. Where President Trump and Trump, Inc. begins and ends, no one knows.

We can expect a level of corruption that is unprecedented even for banana republics, for it will be backed by the most powerful military and corporate empire the world has known. It is the “Tragedy of Democracy” come home to roost.