

Market vs state vs commons

which future are we heading towards?

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When thinking about how we function as an environmental movement, it's important to consider what we're demanding and what potential future these demands are moving us towards. To do this, I often think about three different models of land management which I've encountered working as an environmental scientist in the UK and how these illustrate how forms of ownership affect outcomes. When I've worked designing and monitoring catchment management schemes for water companies, how we try to change land management behaviour depends entirely on one thing: who owns the land. The three different forms of ownership provide different models of how our future could pan out, one controlled by the state, one mediated by the market and a further future where our resources are held in common and decisions made collectively.

State or top-down model

The first common scenario is where the water company actually owns the land in their catchment. This is quite common in the UK as originally, before privatisation, the water companies themselves were owned by local authorities. In this situation changing management of the farms, for example to stop pesticides entering the river, is easy. The landowner simply tells the farmers leasing the land that they can no longer use pesticides within a certain distance of the river. It's simple and effective.

I see this as analogous to a state-centric model of change. The state, however, typically favours large engineering projects which are easy to control from above and increase our reliance on the state authorities. It does not like projects which increase our independence and ability to provide for ourselves. This is particularly worrying as climate change gets worse, we can expect an increase in nationalism and authoritarianism justified by the need to keep climate refugees out and manage the crisis. This is the very time when we need to be fighting the state rather than depending on it.

An example of the top-down approach favoured by states is the Three Gorges Dam in China. This massive engineering project was justified by the need to provide low carbon electricity, however little concern was given to the millions of people displaced when the gorge was flooded, or the species of dolphin which went extinct.

Market-based model

The second scenario is where the farmer owns their own land. Suddenly we can't just tell them what to do so instead have to pay them for the outcomes we want. This usually takes the form of what is known as a 'payments for ecosystems services' scheme. Essentially, we pay the farmers to provide a service like, for example, pesticide free water in the river passing through their farm.

For the water company this transaction is simple- they know how much building a new facility to remove the pesticides would cost so they can calculate how much it's worth to them to not have to build it. What is more difficult, however, is trying to value the cost of the more abstract parts of nature. What is the value of being able to walk through the beauty of the Lake District? Perhaps more urgently, what is the value of Bangladesh not being underwater? Although never specifically articulated, these are the calculations being made whenever the government decides for further inaction on climate change.

As well as the problematic way in which this model puts a value on nature, we can hopefully also see that allowing whoever can pay the most to decide what happens to our environment is never going to lead to equitable outcomes.

The commons

Although now rare, there are still areas on commons in the UK in areas such as Dartmoor and Exmoor. Here, an altogether different process determines how the land is managed. Instead of dictating from on high or buying off farmers instead we actually have to talk to people and convince them what we want to do is the right thing to do. While more time consuming, the people living in the area usually want what's best for the environment around them and so get on board once we explain why we're restoring the peat bogs, reintroducing beavers or whatever it is.

Whenever I talk about the commons the usual reply is that it never works- the classic 'tragedy of the commons' argument. While well debunked, this argument does have some truth to it- common resources are always doomed to exploitation *under capitalism*. Elinor Ostrom won a Nobel Prize for her work into how the commons can operate harmoniously and effectively. What she showed was that strong community ties and mechanisms for collective decision making over who gets access and to how much. Sadly, this is the exact opposite of conditions under capitalism where neighbours are incentivised to compete against each other and use as much of the communal resource before it is depleted.

An example of this can be found in farmers in Texas and Uttar Pradesh. In both areas the water table is getting lower but instead of preserving the resource, farmers must try harder to pump out water for their farms before their neighbours do. Under capitalism, they must ensure theirs is not the farm that fails and so must do what is the worst outcome for the community as a whole- pump as much water as possible. In Texas this is leading to higher costs; in Uttar Pradesh the consequences are more severe as farmers who've gone into debt are killing themselves when they can't afford to pay back the loans.

It's important to consider these models when we make demands- are we asking the state to mediate capital, pushing us more to the market-based model? Are we asking the state to take control, building new nuclear plants which we could never run ourselves and thus increasing our dependence on them?

If we stay on our current path, we're heading towards the market-based future. One of green capitalism, of solar powered exploitation of the working class. To get a glimpse of what's in store for us it's worth reading the Committee of Climate Change's (CCC) Net Zero report, commissioned by the UK government to map out a path to 2050. Previous carbon budgets suggested we needed to decrease carbon emissions by 80%, meaning the big polluters all claimed to have the right to be in the 20% of the economy which didn't have to decarbonise. The new pathway requires net zero by 2050 so now there is nowhere to hide, although there are still some surprises.

Despite acknowledging the aviation industry can't decarbonise, the CCC suggests it should still be allowed to grow by 60%. This will create a massive requirement for carbon removals somewhere else but capitalism requires growth, and the right for the capitalists in aviation to

make profit can not be questioned. This is a failure of both the left and right to move beyond the talk of growth as the solution to all problems. For years neoliberal economists told us constant growth would be possible because we could simply mine asteroids once we had run out of resources on earth. Now, under the guise of Fully Automated Luxury Communism and the Green New Deal, the left is beginning to swallow this argument as well. All these ideas are predicated on idea of 'green growth' where the economy is somehow decoupled from carbon emissions and resource depletion. Green growth simply does not exist – any reduction in carbon emissions is likely to create rebound effects as over-exploitation of resources is justified as it is now carbon neutral. For example, everyone in the UK switching to electric cars would require more than double the world's annual production of cobalt. Asteroid mining is not feasible in the short timescales needed to halt climate change, so it merely acts as another smoke screen for justifying further destructive growth.

So, the government finds itself in a situation where, firstly, it cannot question the profit motive and so must allow oil & gas exploration and further aviation expansion at the same time as trying to push its green credentials. Secondly, it can not say anything to worry voters as, after all, electoral cycles are much shorter than climate cycles. Instead, the government lies about the scale of the changes which need to happen to every part of our lives if we're to avert climate change. And the reason they're lying is because what the CCC report doesn't address is who will pay. Ultimately, it will be the working class. The costs will be socialised while the profits are kept private. Some people will get very rich from the transition and be able to insulate themselves from any impacts. Others, like the Gilets Jaunes, will find that carbon taxes, although good intentioned, push them over the breadline while doing nothing to halt the consumption of the rich.

Act now, the commons awaits us.

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