

THE THEFT OF THE COMMONS

Across centuries, land that was collectively worked by the landless was claimed by the landed, and the age of private property was born.

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In the time before enclosure, shared pastures where landless villagers could graze their animals were common. Laxton had two, the Town Moor Common and the much larger Westwood Common, which together supported a hundred and four rights to common use, with each of these rights attached to a cottage or a toft of land in the village. In Laxton, the commons were a resource reserved for those with the least: both the commons and the open fields were owned by the lord of the manor, and only villagers with little more than a cottage held rights to the commons.

As a visitor from the age of private property, it seems remarkable to me that commoners held rights to land they did not own or rent, but, at the time, it was commonplace. In addition to common pasture, commoners were granted rights of pannage, of turbary, of estovers, and of piscary—rights to run their pigs in the woods, to cut peat for fuel, to gather wood from the forests, and to fish. These were rights to subsistence, rights to live on what they could glean from the land. In the course of enclosure, as written law superseded customary law, commoners lost those rights. Parliament made property rights absolute, and the traditional practice of living off the land was redefined as theft. Gleaning became trespassing, and fishing became poaching. Commoners who continued to common were now criminals.

Under feudalism, tenants were obligated to work the land of their lords, and lords were obligated to provide for the basic needs of their tenants. In 1725, the lord of a manor in the Midlands was advised by his steward on how best to allocate pasture land to poor families: “Widow Sutton I think deserves one more than Richard Wilkins, for though he has 3 children he is better able to work for them than this woman, who besides her own 2 small children maintains her husband’s mother, who otherwise must be an immediate charge of the parish.” More striking even than the assumption that this lord should help provide for people who are caring for other people is the way the steward’s argument is made—this argument is not based on morality, or legality, but on necessity. The widow “deserves” the land because she needs it.

Laxton has a tight center where the farmers all live within walking distance of the pub. This makes it distinct from all the rural places I have known. Standing at the center of the village, I had the feeling that I was standing inside an idea, an idea about how to live in relationships of necessity with other people. I felt at home in the idea, and I puzzled over this for a moment, feeling held close by the tight center of a village where I had never been, wondering if I was making myself at home in my own imagination.

The story of enclosure is sometimes told as a deal, or a transaction, in which landowners traded away their traditional relationship with the landless in exchange for greater independence. By releasing themselves from their social obligations to provide for the poor, they gained the freedom to farm for profit. And this freedom, or so the story goes, is what allowed the increased efficiencies that we call the agricultural revolution. Commoners lost, in the bargain, the

freedom once afforded to them by self-sufficiency. Dispossessed of land, they were now bound to wages.

Commoners were “rough and savage,” according to eighteenth-century rhetoric. They were lazy. Their practice of sharing land was “barbarous,” and their economy was “primitive.” They had an inexplicable preference for using their free time for sport, rather than for paid labor. Their defenders argued that commoners were in fact industrious and self-sufficient. “What defenders saw as hard work and thrift,” the historian J. M. Neeson writes, “critics saw as squalor and desperation.” But everyone agreed that commoners were independent, in that they did not have to work for wages. And everyone understood that the enclosure of the commons would force commoners to become wage workers, and that this would cost them their independence.

Around 1800, the notion of a “working class” had not yet been established. The scholar Saree Makdisi writes that, at that time, when the rural poor of England and the poor ██████████ of London were talked about as an uncivilized race, “these wretched people were not merely being compared to other races and civilizations, as though really ‘we’ knew all along that ‘they’ were ‘our people,’ but rather that they really were not ‘our people’; they were not ‘us.’” They were not “us” until “us” became defined by whiteness.

Capitalism, the scholar Cedric Robinson argues, was not a revolutionary departure from feudalism but an extension of it, a new permutation. Under feudalism, the English rehearsed a racial hierarchy based on blood and birth, and this was the first stage in the development of an economic system dependent on racism. Later, Southern planters in the U.S. would imagine themselves as landed gentry and their slaves as feudal subjects. Capitalism here was built on slavery, and capitalism everywhere has depended on the idea that one group of people is entitled to extract profit from another, an idea that is often expressed in terms of us and them.