

Introduction - Issue 09: Spring/Summer 2004

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Introduction

In this issue of *The Commoner*, we bring together diverse contributions all highlighting what people and communities are up against in creating and sustaining modes of life despite capitalism, whether these modes of life are in the street of Miami, along the rivers of Colombia, emerging from the flows of migrants, or flourishing within the post-scarcity cyberspace. We bridge these with one paper by Ariel Salleh making the case for the need to bring the invisible work of reproduction, what she calls meta-industrial labour, at the center of a Synergistic politics. This labour is characterised by the direct mediation of human and natural cycles whereas productivist labour, is linear and pursues a single goal regardless of consequence.

We see this in agribusiness, mining, manufacture, and science as usual, where human instrumental rationality leaves disorder in nature, and human poverty as collateral to it. Globally invisible, meta-industrial work instead maintains the necessary biological infrastructure for all systems of reproduction of livelihoods, but with capitalist expansion, this labour is carried out at growing material cost to the life conditions of meta-industrials themselves – mostly women.

The first contribution by James W. Lindenschmidt is a detailed analysis of the dynamic of revolution and counter-revolution of cyberspace. Borrowing from the theoretical frameworks of *Midnight Notes* and of this journal, he explains the nitty-gritty of the creation of virtual commons and the open and subtle strategies promoted by capital to enclose and commodify this space. In this way, it is possible to identify how capital creates scarcity in a post-scarcity virtual space. These enclosures of the virtual commons are not enforced by shotguns or by depleted-uranium missiles. The virtual enclosures are perfectly enforceable, because the rules of enforcement are being architected into the code of the Internet itself. Cyberspace is malleable, and it is increasingly being cast into a space with an infrastructure of built-in, centralized control.

This analysis is echoed by Matthias Studer, who analyzes the free software movement in terms of the theory of gift exchange developed by the M.A.U.S.S. (Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste en Sciences Sociales), a network of researchers developing the insights of the founder of the French school of anthropology, Marcel Mauss who is relatively unknown in the Anglo-Saxon world (see Olivier de Marcellus' article in *The Commoner* N. 6). The paper provides an insightful analysis of how hackers communities creation of free software gravitate around practices of liberty and cooperation. It discusses the horizontal organizing principles that emerge in these productive communities, what happens to issues such as leadership and hierarchy when freedom is an organizing principle of production, and compares how the logic of gift exchanges differ from the logic of commodity exchanges. And we discover that we do not need to be programmers to be hackers, as one can very well be a hacker in philosophy or astronomy, or even in the politics for another world, for being a hacker is mainly a question of attitude.

Mercedes Moya's contribution, with a contextualising introduction by Olivier de Marcellus, is a gift to us directly from those commons created by rebel slaves setting up communities along Colombian rivers and thus detaching themselves from the world market of the 18th century. As Columbian afro-descendent, she tells us about a struggle for freedom that ended in intimate association with commons, she give us an image of river banks along which the afro-colombians constructed a social identity marked by interdependance with the rivers, lagoons, woods, flatlands, periodic floods, torrential rains, days of sun with rain and days of sun with sun. And she tells us how these commons

face up the enclosing force of contemporary global markets and “economic development”. And while the agents of these new enclosures are the state, industry and national or international finance, or violent traffickers and paramilitaries, the attitude of the left (reformist or “revolutionary”) is often not much of help. They are often reluctant to admit the right of this “world” to organise itself autonomously, by its own standards, without sacrifice to the gods of national interest or “development”. Often the left considers communities based on commons as backward, since they measure them in terms of the devastation of natural resources. For these communities instead, the real measure to judge development is common goods and as a vital space of resistance. Our Afro-colombian friend tell us (with a little twinkle in their eye) that white Colombians of the highlands – long since stripped of its tree cover – point to the fact that the black communities haven’t razed their forests as proof of their inherent laziness...

With Franco Barchiesi’s paper, we move from the virtual to the actual space occupied by border police and hiding-out migrants in a context of world-wide enclosures. The impact of international migrations on Western capitalist societies questions their very capacity to define borders and regulate access to citizenship rights, to decide who are citizens and who are not, and what resources citizens can enjoy. Migration in other words, is a social movement that challenges the existing concept of rights. Instead it poses a new understanding of social rights that is linked to de-commodification and the claim for new commons. By cross-contamination and circulation of the struggles of the migrants and of the movements in receiving countries, they can both themselves start seize back what had been taken away from them in the decades of neoliberal restructuring, through struggles that transcend the narrow boundaries of nation-state institutionality.

Amory Starr’s contribution is a reminder of what stand in between the space of communities and commons and the strategies of commodification and intensification of global market discipline. It is an account of the events in November 2004, when US unions and activists planned a large presence at the FTAA/ALCA/ZLEA negotiations in Miami, Florida. The city of Miami bragged that the law enforcement for the events would be a “model” for Homeland Security — the draconian post-911 federal legislation which created a new agency for anti-terrorism and justified broadbased violation of rights during investigation and prosecution. While activists of all stripes bravely prepared educational events, marches, political art, and direct action to disrupt the legalization and codification of hemispheric corporate plunder, no less than 40 law enforcement agencies violated protesters’ rights. Even elders and those attending educational events were targeted. The police plan was to “limit” protest in order to “prevent violence”. In practice they created a “deliberate and pervasive pattern of intimidation” including hunting activists violently and indiscriminately for over 30 blocks from the actual meeting site. This police operation seemed intended to terrorize citizens (both participants and observers) from future acts of dissent. Here we present Amory Starr report of the week “Hunted in Miami” as well as the lawsuits filed against the agencies detailing the terrorizing tactics of the police.