

Plunder of The Commons

A Manifesto for Sharing Public Wealth

Guy Standing Publican Books.

Review by Karl Matthys, 3 February 2020

Professor Standing has always maintained that a good society is one where people have empathy—an underlying tenet of Basic Income. In this, his latest book, he reminds us that we urgently need to re-instate those commons type institutions that used to promote empathy, institutions long since abolished by neo-liberal governments everywhere seeking more profit for corporations and ruling elites.

He mentions the gradual degradation of the stream and forest near his dwelling. An example of the Commons falling victim to the neglect that has come with the onslaught of neo liberal capitalism: “if something has no price it has no value”. Much of what used to be the commons however has now been privatized or commodified, private property signs saying Keep Out.

The economic theories of F.A.Hayek, implemented by M. Thatcher in the UK, R. Reagan in the USA and R. Douglas in New Zealand in the 1980's have resulted in not only extreme in-equality and poverty but also what now appears to be irreversible damage to the world's ecology.

The book was inspired by the ancient Charter of The Forest which was the commoner's version of the Magna Carta (1217). It lays out core elements of a proposed Charter of The Commons for Britain today. Much of Guy Standing's argument relates to conditions in present day England but apply equally well to today's New Zealand and many other neo liberal economies.

Chapter two is the pre-amble, chapters three to eight deal with the various types of commons, and what must be (can be) done to repair the damage inflicted on society during the neo liberal austerity era. The proposed Charter of the Commons contains 44 articles the last of which states: The Commons Fund should be a means of introducing a basic income as an economic right, paid as a common dividend.

From Professor Standing's epilogue:

*Imagine a country in which libertarians and neo liberals had achieved their aims, in which everything had been privatized and commodified. It would be a dystopia of privation for a majority shovelled into the precariat, unable to pay the entry price to what had been commons, unable to pay for justice, frozen out of cultural channels, deprived of enlightenment education, subject to the whims of data-driven algorithms and multinational digital platforms, watching helplessly as plutocrats amass more and more rental income from 'privatized' intellectual assets, and using their fortunes to fund lobbyists, politicians and parties prepared to serve their material interests. **That dystopia is not far away.....***

And: The Magna Carta and Charter of The Forest are charters of reparation, restoring rights to the commons usurped by powerful interests. We need a new reparations charter to restore the commons which are being snatched so sneakily and illegitimately away from us.....

One of Professor Standing's best works, easy to read, reminding us that humanity will survive only if the empathy and mutual support that come with commons style institutions are re-established.

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