

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Peter Linebaugh, *Stop, Thief! The Commons, Enclosures, and Resistance*, Oakland: PM Press, 2014. ISBN: 978-1-60486-747-3 (paper)

Stop, Thief! is both a work of history and a manifesto. In this collection of essays, Peter Linebaugh ranges across several centuries of North Atlantic history to unearth tales of enclosure and resistance to it, and does so by engaging in what he nicely calls “the vast and exciting project of rewriting history from the standpoint of the commons” (p.8). Linebaugh assembles this remarkable collection of stories of struggle not just to educate his reader but to rally her behind the project of ‘communism’ (rightly understood). By the end of the book I felt educated but not rallied, and I would like in this review to explore why. In doing so, I will discuss the kinds of arguments that Linebaugh makes for communism and the kinds he does not, and argue that the absence of one type in particular—the type that envisages in some detail how a modern society based on commoning might actually work—undermines Linebaugh’s political project.

The 15 chapters in *Stop, Thief!* are united by the themes in the book’s subtitle: commons, enclosure, and resistance. One of the pieces is a classic and influential 1976 article on Karl Marx and the theft of wood in Germany in the 1840s. The others were all written between 2007 and 2012 (with the exception of one from 2001). After two short conceptual pieces on the principles of commons and commoning, most of the chapters focus on history. While Linebaugh devotes some space to the arguments and projects of exponents of enclosure, his central focus is on struggles to defend actually-existing commons in the “UK” and “USA” (scare quotes his), and on a collection of individuals—some famous, some not—who have spoken and written on behalf of commoning as the collective project of communities that work and hold resources in common. The list of

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

events, movements and people Linebaugh engages with is far too long to reproduce in full, but includes Tecumseh's speech to Governor Harrison in 1810 (p.93-94, 222-223); the Luddites (Chapter 6); resistance to enclosure at Otmoor in England (p.150-156); the work of E.P. Thompson (Chapter 7); and the English Peasants' Revolt of 1381 and its depiction by later radical thinkers. Linebaugh also returns many times to certain authors, notably William Morris and the English romantic poets.

The history unearthed in *Stop, Thief!* is often fascinating. Linebaugh's research draws mainly on an extraordinary range of secondary literature, and in some places on primary documents as well. His approach usually involves the presentation of a set of vignettes, observations and comments connected by a broad overarching theme—the years around 1811-12, for instance, or Paine's life and writings. Linebaugh's energetic writing style, combined with his extensive use of quotations, brings these episodes to life. The flip side of this approach is that the writing frequently jumps very quickly from topic to topic or from vignette to thinker, and the specific arguments being made can be hard to perceive other than in quite broad terms. While the dynamism of the text is refreshing, I often found myself wishing that Linebaugh had lingered a little more over developing his points.

Communism

Peter Linebaugh's commitment to communism is at the heart of *Stop, Thief!* At the end of 'Frau Gertrude Kugelmann and the Five Gates of Marxism' (Chapter 5), he writes that "[t]he essence of Marxism is the class struggle. The resolution of that struggle is communism. One is in our face, and the other is not far away" (p.74). Communism for him is not the state-dominated, planned economy of the former Soviet Union. It is the

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

“generalization” of commoning practices (p.206), or a form of social life that—as he put it in *The Magna Carta Manifesto*—“vests all property in the community and organizes labor for the common benefit of all” (Linebaugh 2008: 6). The idea that people in a commoning society will hold “everything in common” (as Woody Guthrie—quoted on p.139—put it) recurs several times in the book, though Linebaugh also approvingly quotes other figures who seem to have had a more limited sense of what should be held in common under communism (see, for example, p.126, 203).

The first two chapters of *Stop, Thief!* expand upon the principles of commoning that Linebaugh seeks to generalize. Central to these are that “[c]ommoning has always been local” (p.14), face to face, and based on custom, and that the commons “provides its own security”, both internal and external (p.17-18). Linebaugh also acknowledges that commoning is an exclusive practice—not everyone can take part—because “it requires participation”. If commons and commoning are what Linebaugh is for, the things he is against include private property, the bourgeois state, money, and machinery.¹ Commons for him means community rather than state, custom rather than law, sharing, reciprocity, and collective ownership rather than markets and money. While *Stop, Thief!* does not give a strong sense of how Linebaugh’s preferred society would be organized other than to say that it would embody the principles of commoning, those principles suggest that it would be made up of relatively small groups (small enough that interactions can be face to face) that would share everything in common, organize their labour collectively, and run their own affairs.

¹ For the bourgeois state, see p.206; for money, p.28; and for machines and industry, p.19, 77, 85. Chapter 3 (‘The City and the Commons: A Story for our Times’) suggests that he may also be opposed to cities, but I found his position on this point to be unclear.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

History as Politics

Linebaugh's goals in *Stop, Thief!*, then, are unabashedly political. He writes in the introduction that the book seeks to remind us that history gives us "ground to stand on" in our own resistance to enclosure (p.3). In pursuit of this ground, Linebaugh turns to history largely in search of heroes and (to a lesser degree) villains. While this approach has led him to bring together stories that are indeed often moving and inspiring, it also has consequences for the nature of his analysis (discussed in this section) and its relevance to our own, contemporary situations (discussed in the next).

A first analytical consequence is that Linebaugh tends to unite his heroes, to see them all as fighting for the same thing. While his accounts of their ideas and lives imply some substantial differences between them, he does not do much to compare them to one another; he does not ask what might separate, for instance, Tecumseh from William Morris, or the Levelers from the protesters at Tahrir Square, or E.P. Thompson from Elinor Ostrom. (One substantial exception here is his comparison of Morris and Thompson in Chapter 7.) A related issue here is that because what interests him about these people is mainly what they had to say about the commons, he generally presents those views out of the context of their wider thought.

Second, while *Stop, Thief!* contains a great deal of information about struggles by commoners against enclosure, it says little about how their commons actually worked or the place that commoning held in their lives. These omissions prevent Linebaugh from exploring two key empirical questions. The first is: to what extent did people who relied on commoning also own many things individually or as families, things including houses, land, tools, furniture, money, clothes, animals, or what have you? Linebaugh does not

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

consistently acknowledge forms of property other than commons and “privatized, capitalist property”; only rarely do we glimpse the possibility that commoners might have had things which they clearly saw as theirs, not the community’s, but which still were not commodities or capital.² The second is: to what extent have people—even those for whom defending the commons has been a matter of life and death—also depended on institutions other than commoning, such as the market or paternalistic protections? The problem created by the lack of such discussion is analogous to the one discussed in the previous paragraph; by approaching history from the point of view of the commons, Linebaugh has little to say about how commoning interacts with other aspects of life (other, of course, than enclosure). The exception here is the 1976 piece on the theft of wood, which makes some of these connections much clearer.

Third, Linebaugh seeks to enlist any struggle for an existing commons on the side of communism. At various places in the book, he raises the question of “the relation between the actual reality of commons and the revolutionary ideal of communism”, and his clearest statement on this point is that “[w]hen the actual is threatened or destroyed, as in the 1380s, again in the 1540s, the 1640s and 1790s, or in our era, then people are reminded of the other, the one that consists of dreams, theories, ideals, hopes, fantasies, utopias, theologies, and we can imagine realistically, as Massimo De Angelis has put it, the beginning of history” (p.122, 160-161). Linebaugh’s argument is thus that people fighting to hang on to the commons they have will also have commitments to the “generalization” of commoning as a practice—that they will be communists. Linebaugh certainly shows examples in which struggles for the actual and the theoretical have gone

² He does make in-passing distinctions between enclosure and privatization (p.25) and enclosure and commodification (p.80), but these are not developed or made use of analytically.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

together, and these are some of the most powerful moments in *Stop, Thief!* But how necessary that connection is—how likely it is, “in our era” in particular, that struggles against enclosure will incline people to be communists—is not at all clear. I develop this point in the following section.

Communism and Commoning in a Complex Society

It seems reasonable to assume that what people think about moving towards a communist society will depend heavily on how they imagine such a society will work. As noted above, Linebaugh provides a broad set of desiderata under the heading of the principles of commoning. He does much less, however, to think about what these principles might mean in practice; about how societies embodying those principles would actually be organized. The following three questions are, I would argue, particularly central. First, will the small-scale, face-to-face groups Linebaugh calls for be more or less self-sufficient, producing their own food, shelter, tools, clothing, and everything else themselves (and together), or will they exchange with one another? If the former, will restrictions on the potential division of labor not mean a dramatic fall in standards of living and a collapse in the range of goods that can be produced—no more printed books, for instance? If the latter, how would that exchange be organized, and how would commoning groups decide between themselves what to specialize in? Second, will there be any overarching political structure connecting these groups to one another, and if so, how will it work and what kinds of responsibilities will it have? Third (and related), if commoning groups are to provide their own security, what will happen if one group attacks another? How, too, might they defend themselves from still-existing capitalist states, or from non-capitalist but still exploitative states that might reconstitute

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

themselves through aggression against neighboring commoners? One might of course argue here (as do many contemporary radicals) that it is inappropriate to try to prejudge the answers to questions like these—that these are issues to be worked out democratically by commoners themselves, and that programmatic responses seek to impose an unwarranted unity on a diverse world. Yet without some very rough sense of how communists might approach such fundamental issues as exchange and security, it is difficult even to imagine what kind of society Linebaugh has in mind.

A second set of issues here relates to a disjuncture between the historical struggles Linebaugh turns to for inspiration and the realities of life for most people alive today. Linebaugh mainly tells the stories of people whose battles for the commons were battles for survival, who depended on commoning and common rights, on pannage, estovers, and their equivalents, for their livelihoods. As I have argued above, this dependence may not always have been exclusive or even primary, but the loss of commons that they had long held and relied on did represent a serious blow to their ability to live. We, however, are not those people. Linebaugh writes that “[c]ommoning is primary to human life ... Scarcely a society has existed on the face of the earth which has not had at its heart the commons” (p.13). One of those societies which has not, however, is ours. The vast majority of people in the North rely profoundly for their survival on the ability of at least one person in their family to sell him- or herself on the labor market and/or on what is still a very wide range of state welfare programs. The inextricable intertwining of state and market is what sits at the heart of our society. Of course commoning practices and the work of household reproduction continue to exist and to be of great importance. But as Linebaugh writes, “we live in post-enclosure time: our country, our world, is closed, shut up” (p.200). It is this contrast that makes it hard to see the history of actual struggle

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Linebaugh tells, however inspiring it might be, as recovering the “ground” for our own struggles. The people Linebaugh writes about were fighting to *keep* resources, rights and relationships that they already possessed and relied upon against the forces (capital, the state, enclosing landlords, empire) that threatened them, but his revolutionary program calls on us to *attack* the system that is fundamental to our own survival in an effort to access and create resources that we do not currently have.³

These tensions in the analysis are further deepened by the implicit assumption in *Stop, Thief!* that the “closing” and “shutting up” of our world has left us with pretty much nothing. Linebaugh pays no attention to the immense amount of stuff that proletarians hold as private property—land, houses, cars, computers, clothes, furniture, and on and on and on. Advocating “everything in common” does not simply involve an attack on the state and capital, it implies some kind of process by which people’s private homes, land, and other property will become the property of the community. While Linebaugh never considers the possibility that some of “us” might not be on board with the project of turning all of our property over to collective ownership, if we assume that some of us will not be—an assumption that is safe to make—then the question arises of how that transfer might take place involuntarily, or, alternatively, of the coexistence of commons-based communities with other kinds.

³ Linebaugh does write that “[w]e’re losing the ground of our subsistence to the privileged and the mighty. With the theft of our pensions, houses, universities, and land, people all over the world cry, ‘Stop, thief!’ and start to think about the commons and act in its name” (p.16). These lines do envision us struggling to keep things that we currently hold. In the North at any rate, however, pensions, houses, universities, and land are generally not commons, but are rather private, public, or some combination of the two. Struggles in defense of these things are thus not usually struggles for “the commons” as Linebaugh defines that term.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

The relationship between history and politics in *Stop, Thief!* can usefully be compared with the approach taken in another important recent work of radical history, David Graeber's (2011) *Debt*. Like Linebaugh, Graeber turns to history (in his case, 5,000 years worth rather than 500) to identify a fundamental wrong around which our lives are organized. For Linebaugh, the wrong is enclosure; for Graeber, it is (monetary) debt. Both authors call for a return to earlier forms of human relationships⁴ based on interpersonal reciprocity rather than the logics of domination and calculation that underpin state and market. Both are much more interested, too, in the oppressive brutality at the historical origins of enclosure and debt respectively than they are in how people actually make their way in today's closed, indebted world. And both, finally, call for the overturning of the fundamental relationship that they identify as being at the center of modern social relations. Linebaugh seeks an end to private property, while Graeber calls for a "Jubilee", an erasing of debts.

In neither case, however, do they ask what might happen if they got their wish. Graeber makes his Jubilee proposal at the very end of *Debt*. What he is calling for is not entirely clear: he first suggests a Jubilee "...that would affect both international debt and consumer debt", but then expands the scope by writing "[n]othing would be more important than to wipe the slate clean for everyone, mark a break with our accustomed morality, and start again" (Graeber 2011: 390, 391). The details do not go much further than that. There is something astonishing in the way that Graeber, having spent hundreds of pages compellingly showing how central debt is not just to our entire way of life but to who we think we are as human beings, then proposes—in less than a page of text—to knock out the central pillar of social organization. *Stop, Thief!* contains the same kind of

⁴ Linebaugh calls the commons the "preexisting" (p.14) and "previously existing" condition (p.110).

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

disjuncture between the revolutionary nature of what is being proposed and the near-absence of detail on how it might work in practice.

To sum up: Linebaugh makes four types of arguments for communism in *Stop, Thief!* The first is that capitalism is based on centuries of bloody dispossession and theft, that it came into the world, as Marx wrote 150 years ago, dripping blood and dirt from every pore. The second is that a great many people have fought through those centuries, and continue to fight today, to retain practices of commoning. The third is that plenty of people have explicitly called over the years for communism or something like it. The fourth is a set of principles that are meant to describe what a communist society would look like. Important as all four of these types of argument are, more needs to be done to assemble a compelling case for replacing today's capitalism with communism. Such a case would require some practical sense of how a communist society would function, one concrete enough to indicate how fundamental questions of economic organization, exchange, politics, and security might be resolved, and what our lives might actually be like in such a society. In the absence of answers to these questions, calls for communism are unlikely to be compelling to people not already committed to the cause, and who would like to have some sense of how a new society might function before dismantling the one we already have.

The last chapter of Karl Polanyi's (1957) *The Great Transformation* famously confronted the issue of "freedom in a complex society". Polanyi asked how we can keep the best things that industrial civilization and liberalism had created while escaping the appalling blight that utopian *laissez-faire* and the commodification of land, labor and money had cast upon the world. The ideas and experiments (some of them already under way) that Polanyi wrote about can be read as involving combinations of the principles of

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

state, market and commons. It is in new combinations of the private, the public, and the community, I would suggest, that the answers to the problems we face today are to be found. To put all of our emphasis on the commons—to be ‘communists’—will be as unhelpful as joining the libertarians in putting it all on the market or the totalitarians in putting it all on the state.

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