



Written by [Dennis Behreandt](#) on August 29, 2008

The Tragedy of the Commons

Observers have long noted that “what belongs in common to the most people is accorded the least care,” as Aristotle put it. Whether it’s Greece in the 4th century BC, Soviet Russia in the 20th, or America in the 21st, men “take thought for their own things above all.”

That’s true whether the “things” are lands or buildings (compare your neighborhood to public housing’s ghettos) or resources such as the oceans and wildlife. Fishermen will catch all they can from “public” waters, without regard for whether their prey can replenish itself. And why not? If they don’t, a competitor will. Ditto for polluters: since no one owns the atmosphere, everyone from manufacturers to drivers pours chemicals and soot into it.



Through the centuries, many folks have noticed that all abuse what no one owns. William Forster Lloyd, professor of political economy at Oxford, said in 1833, “...where the consequences are to fall on the public, the prudent man determines his conduct, by the comparison, of the present pleasure with his share of the future ill....This share, in the multitude of a large society, becomes evanescent; and hence,...the conduct of each person is determined by the consideration of the present alone. The present good is chosen...”

Ludwig von Mises also discussed the phenomenon in his magnum opus *Human Action*: “If land is not owned by anybody, although legal formalism may call it public property, it is utilized without any regard to the disadvantages resulting.” Common ownership makes all men carefree beneficiaries; there’s no incentive to prize an object’s long-term interests above one’s immediate demands. In effect, users engage in a war of all against all, each man grabbing as many goodies as he can before someone else does.

Since communism causes these disasters, it’s ironic that most Americans assume more communism will relieve them. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) reigns largely because its victims believe that eroding the sanctity of private property, allowing bureaucrats to dictate how owners may use their belongings, will cure pollution. Cities suffering “blight” because of their 1960’s experiments with socialist housing now try to mitigate the damage by stealing more private property through eminent domain. Species face extinction because government claims it can best protect them – though the most numerous animals are privately owned, whether horses and hogs or cats and canaries. Only private property can save us from the horrors of the commons.

What exactly constitutes “property”? John Locke defined it as “lives, liberties, and estates” in his *Two Treatises of Government*: “Every man has a property in his own person. This nobody has any right to but himself. The labour of his body, and the work of his hands...are properly his.”



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Private property provides a bulwark against the State. Our “labour,” converted into property, enables us to live independently: we need not kowtow to any man for our daily bread. Instead, we exchange our work, skills, and time for others’. We are beholden to no one, under no one’s sway. That’s why earlier Americans required voters to own property. These patriots and philosophers weren’t nasty bigots out to trample the poor; instead, they realized that the wealthy and powerful can easily manipulate dependents and debtors.

What we do with our possessions is no one’s business. You don’t need to justify watching a “Rumpole of the Bailey” DVD on your TV to anyone (except, of course, to She Who Must Be Obeyed). But when “everybody,” a.k.a. the State, owns some or all property, autonomy disappears. Government’s agents roam public housing, spying on tenants and ordering them about. More agents cruise public roads, spying on drivers and ordering them about. Ditto for public schools, hospitals, and parks.

Property protects us from the State, keeping us independent and free, so it’s no surprise that politicians constantly attack it. Those assaults can be as blatant as China’s, where farmers are forced off their lands onto collectives. But in countries that give lip service to freedom, the war is subtler. Regulations and codes that ostensibly promote safety replace outright collectivization. Homeowners may not build another bedroom without permission from a planning commission, restaurants must pass scrutiny from the Board of Health, and professionals from cosmeticians to lawyers dare not practice without a license; government controls our “lives, liberties, and estates” as surely as it does the Chinese farmers’. Sadly, so long as politicians claim their inspections and licensing protect us, most Americans cheerfully cede their property rights.

Our rulers succeed just as easily when environmental hygiene is their excuse – and never mind that governments pollute far more than do consumers or corporations. For centuries, common law held polluters responsible for damages: if you dumped sewage into the river running through your land, you had to compensate your downstream neighbor. But during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, American politicians favored wealthy industrialists over property owners. They passed laws freeing manufacturers from indemnity. That produced two predictable problems: befouled seas and skies, and bigger government to save us from the crisis big government caused. Thirty-eight years after its creation, the EPA hasn’t eliminated even a fraction of the pollution that property rights would.

As if clean wind and water weren’t miracle enough, property rights can also save endangered species. Dairy cows will never face extinction so long as people own them. The farmer’s self-interest is tied to his herd’s: when it flourishes, so does he. Likewise, Africans who once exterminated elephants as crop- and village-destroying pests defend them instead when they can sell the ivory. What we wish to protect, we must privatize.

On the other hand, special interests pretty much own the American government. Perhaps that’s why it thrives. Time to return it to the people. Hopefully, when everyone owns it, government will wither from lack of care.

Becky Akers, an expert on the American Revolution, writes frequently about issues related to security and privacy. Her articles and columns have been published by Lewrockwell.com, The Freeman, Military History Magazine, American History Magazine, the Christian Science Monitor, the New York Post, and other publications.



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