

# Plunder, extinction and resistance

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Guy Standing (2019) *Plunder of the Commons. A Manifesto for Sharing Public Wealth*. Milton Keynes: Pelican Books

Extinction Rebellion (2019) *This is Not a Drill. An Extinction Rebellion Handbook* Milton Keynes: Penguin Books

**T**hese two books have been published within months of each other this year and they deal with some very pertinent environmental issues but from slightly different perspectives. They both have implications for what a National Education Service should support.

Guy Standing's *Plunder of the Commons* starts with a detailed account of the Charter of the Forest which was drawn up and agreed at the same time as the Magna Carta in 1217 but is much less well known. Standing describes it as 'the first class-based set of demands on the state made by, and on behalf of, the common man (and woman), asserting the common or customary rights of "freemen"' (p4).

It sets out the right to the means of subsistence, the right to raw materials and, to a limited extent, the right to the means of production. It placed a limit on the exploitation of natural resources and recognised the importance of maintaining and reproducing them - very relevant to the current environmental crisis. It also recognised some rights for women, giving widows the right to refuse to be remarried, to keep some of their husbands' land and to take the means of subsistence, thus operating as a form of basic income.

The Charter of the Forest saw the commons as a place of refuge where people who were without work

or were excluded from their community could live. It placed an obligation on the monarchy to return enclosed land to commoners and to stop future enclosures for hunting. It was an attempt by an alliance of interests to limit the power of the monarchy.

Gradually, over many centuries most of these rights were destroyed, through more enclosures, legal rulings which gave landowners rights over commoners/citizens and making illegal many of the rights which the Charter had set out. By the nineteenth century the concentration of land ownership reflected the situation today. Today, the percentage of land defined as commons is 5 per cent of the total land area in Britain compared to 50 per cent in the Middle Ages.

## Precarious

Standing has written several books which cover precarious work, basic income and critiques of neo-liberalism. In the same way as he used his book on precarious work to draw up a precariat charter, he uses this book to explore different types of commons concluding with a new Charter of the Commons and a Commons Fund for Common Dividends. He provides a very useful analysis of the decline of public services, public space and the public world in terms of what commons can mean today. This provides a way of understanding the implications of the Charter of the Forest in a contemporary context.

Perhaps one of the most relevant for higher education is the chapter on the Knowledge

Commons which covers information (news and facts), intellectual (ideas) and educational (learning processes). Like other aspects of the commons - natural, social, civil and cultural - the Knowledge Commons is shrinking. Although the internet has provided more access to information, the power of Alphabet (Google), Facebook and Amazon in collecting and controlling the use of personal data is another form of enclosure because they are not transparent about how information is collected and restrict how much information can be used. Any competition is bought up as with their monopoly power they dictate how other companies buy and sell products. These corporations have created a glut of information and misinformation which leads to information overload.

The creation of a global intellectual property regime has given intellectual property to corporations and rich individuals but restricts access to low income groups. Although there are some exceptions, for example, the founder of the internet, Tim Berners-Lee, refused to take out a patent, the general trend is for large corporations, for example pharmaceutical companies, to use intellectual property rights to safeguard their profits at the expense of the public interest. This is a major blow to the idea of an Intellectual Property Commons because multinational companies have taken over control of these property rights which are underpinned by trade deals.

### Privatisation

The Educational Commons is the 'physical facilities, the institutional fabric and the people that enable learning, available to all' (284). This too is under threat and already subject to extensive privatisation. The public management reforms which gave the private sector funds to set up their own schools have often wasted funds which would have been better spent on improving state schools. Budget cuts as a result of austerity are limiting the teaching of a wide range of subjects, including music, art and drama, as well as limiting how long schools are open. Tertiary Education is now also subject to commercialisation and privatisation. This is not an Educational Commons because schools, universities and students are not free to follow their interests in learning. Standing recommends in his new Charter of the Commons "Article 42: The privatisation and commodification of all levels of schooling and education should be reversed" (306).

His book provides a way of analysing the attacks on a wide range of rights that are undermining the public sphere. Although often anti-state, Standing calls for social movements to campaign and demand

fundamental changes in the way in which we live according to shared values. Many of the demands could be incorporated into a more democratic state although the sense of collective ownership would have to be created and supported. A National Education Service has a key role to play in preparing citizens for an appreciation of what these different commons mean and how they can exercise their entitlement to participate in them.

### Fracking

Standing analyses the threats to the Natural Commons in terms of threats to national parks, the right to roam, the decline of village greens and public parks, privatisation of open spaces and the massacre of urban trees. He identifies an underground commons which is threatened by fracking. The action needed to reclaim the Natural Commons can usefully draw from *This is Not a Drill. An Extinction Rebellion Handbook*. The Extinction Rebellion is a 'decentralised mass movement of concerned citizens which has been created in response to the climate breakdown [and] wants to transform society into one that is compassionate, inclusive, sustainable, equitable and connected' (11). It believes that radical action is needed to reduce the worst effects of climate breakdown.

The first part of the book is about the effects of climate breakdown, the severity of the situation and how to find a way out of the crisis. It is written by a wide range of activists. It explores some of the feelings of powerlessness that the climate breakdown can trigger and ways to overcome them. Like Standing, *This is Not a Drill* points out that there has been transformation of the earth from 51 per cent forest and grassland to crop land, cities and grazing lands and this needs to change. A zero carbon city is described in terms of how to create a new city commons, led by citizens not consumers.

The second part of *This is Not a Drill* provides information on how to take action and deal with some of the consequences, for example how to create a roadblock and what to do when arrested. The book ends with an outline 'Social Contract' between the individual and the state. This could be used in tandem with the proposed 'Charter of the Commons'.