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‘The Commodification and Re-Claiming of Trust: ‘Does Anyone Care About Anything but the Price of Oil?’

James Arvanitakis

Abstract

The commodification tendencies of neoliberalism continue to enter new realms. From the environmental world, throughout communal institutions and into our bodies, neoliberalism is in the process of commodifying the final frontier of our subjectivities and relationships – our hopes and who we trust. What may have once been considered as ‘spaces’ outside the sphere of commodification, images of a better world and cooperation crossed the personal and communal frontiers and included visions of peace, safety and trust. These are none other dimensions of what may be defined as ‘societal sense of trust’. Trust operates both on the societal and personal level. However, this sense of trust has now been enclosed, commodified and transformed into individualised ‘self interest’. That is, rather than believing that we can trust those around us, we feel a constant sense of scarcity and competition. We refuse to trust those around us because we feel there is not enough to ‘go around’. This sense of scarcity often dominates our subjectivity and has become a defining feature of both the political and personal spheres. This may provide insights into why nations such as Australia are experiencing record levels of growth but turning their backs on refugees and other dispossessed persons. Despite this, new spaces of trust continually emerge, breaking down the commodifying logic of neoliberalism. This rupturing takes many forms including the creation of noncommodified spaces of cooperation and hope. Such non-commodified spaces depend on an open and mutual distribution of trust that does not exclude, but rather expands as it is shared. Consequently, these spaces of trust can be described as social or ‘cultural commons’.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, Trust, Commons, Hope

Introduction

ON A WARM (southern hemisphere) spring morning in September 2001, the Australian public woke to find that our political landscape had changed dramatically. While September 2001 is inextricably linked with the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, 4 September 2001 is also remembered – and for many mourned – as the day the Australian government declared ‘war’ on refugees. This is the day that the Australian public learnt that our elite SAS troops were sent to intercept a Norwegian freighter, the MV Tampa, that had followed international conventions by rescuing 124 refugees and heading to the nearest international port. These refugees, mostly from Afghanistan and Iraq, found themselves at the nexus of the war on terror, the war on refugees and the commodification of trust and hope into scarce resources.

The newspapers splashed images of the SAS troops surrounding the refugees and making them kneel in the unrelenting sun. The troops were portrayed as heroes, protecting the purity of Australia's borders. In contrast, the refugees were treated as an invading army, termed 'illegals' and 'queue jumpers' and, were accused of a number of crimes that were later proved false. The refugees were also subject to mandatory detention and had a number of their basic human rights withheld – a course of action that, according to Cohen (2002), has been increasingly reflected in the policies of other countries around the world.

The decision to declare war on refugees was orchestrated by the Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, who was facing an election before year's end. With his popularity in decline, John Howard argued that his government's decisive action on the issue would ensure Australia's security. The Australian public rewarded John Howard with a landslide election victory that not only transformed Australia's political landscape, but also led to additional regressive measures taken against refugees. Not even the drowning of 353 refugees on the vessel that became known as the SIEV X near Australia's waters in the same year was enough to create a policy shift (Marr and Wilkinson 2004).

While a majority of Australians supported the Howard Government's policies, many Australians reflected how, at a time of sustained economic growth, record stock-market profits and personal wealth that had been unimagined only a decade before, we declared war on some of the world's most vulnerable people. While the sustained economic growth experienced in Australia was reflected globally, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that 1 in 300 people globally are either a refugee, an asylum seeker, or an internally displaced person (UNHCR 2004). This equates to 20.5 million people internationally – approximately the size of Australia's population. According to Hage (2004), these refugees can be described as 'nonpeople' and they have become a significant characteristic of our time.

This disregard of refugees can be contrasted to the way that global capital and its managers are embraced by modern nation-states. Rather than SAS troops, international capital experiences the world as a smooth and open space, moving free of any constraints. In this way, capital is 'transcendental' as it "...simply hovers over the earth looking for a suitable place to land and invest ... until it is time to fly again" (Hage 2001: 4). The nation-state's challenge is to attract capital by working to make potential 'ports' attractive. Likewise, 'global cities' such as Sydney must work hard to ensure that the 'managers' of global capital – Sklair's (2000) "transnational capital class" – also find these ports appealing.

On the one hand, the globalised world has created a group of non-people – overlooked despite their growing numbers and increasingly close proximity¹. When this group attempts to move beyond their 'designated space', they face borders and fences that are often wrapped in barbedwire and protected by security forces. On the other hand, the managers of global capital have no restraints. Rather, they make demands upon nation-states to establish the right environment to fulfil their many needs.

¹ It should be noted that while this example concentrates on the plight of refugees, the term non-people can be used to describe marginalised people more generally, including the increasing numbers of poor and homeless in the wealthy nations of the North. Also, in his most recent work, Ritzer (2004) uses the term to describe anonymous workers in service industries such as call centres.

While many have attempted to explain this contradiction from the perspectives of Australia's historical 'white only' immigration policy (Burke 2004), the rise in global insecurity (James 2005), or the political manoeuvring of a desperate prime minister (Marr and Wilkinson 2004), this paper aims to reflect on these events from an alternative perspective: the commodification of (what I term) the 'cultural commons' of trust and hope. These cultural commons are the final domain of neoliberalism's commodification desires and turn resources that are available to all – commons – into rare and tradable commodities. This process of commodification creates a sense of scarcity even in times of material abundance.

Commons and Communities

Before discussing how Australia's response to refugees more broadly can be understood through the lens of the cultural commons, I would like to present a brief overview of the concept of the commons and extend their relationship to communities. In so doing, it is not my intention to romanticise the commons; I acknowledge their associated history within a feudal past (Reid 1995). Rather, the 'commons' is used conceptually to describe the resources and dimensions of life that are shared within a community, allowing them to benefit from their abundance. This definition is used to contrast the way that commodities are most valuable in their scarcity. In so doing, I establish an abundance/scarcity binary that provides a framework to analyse the ongoing commodification processes that are such a key feature of neoliberalism.

While references to the commons can be traced back to ancient Rome, clearly physical commons such as the atmosphere, oceans, air and water existed long before the concept was ever defined. These are aspects of the environment that historically no-one owns but we all enjoy. However, even such 'physical' commons have both tangible and intangible elements, such as the pleasure or enjoyment derived from visiting a forest within a national park or swimming in the ocean. Within the category of physical commons, it is also possible to identify the 'biodiversity' or 'genetic' commons that we also benefit from when these are abundant (Shiva 2000; Latham 2000)².

Bollier argues there are also "institution-based" commons (2002: 20). These are the publicly provided infrastructures of provision that serve the broader public interest that I identify as 'institutional commons'. Examples of institutional commons include universities that provide free public education, health centres that offer care for the broader public good, the infrastructure that allows our society to function (such as the water delivery and sewerage systems) and even public space³. Again, these have both

² The definition as well as a number of broader issues concerning 'genetic commons' were debated during the drafting of the agreed Bonn Guidelines on Access and Benefit (2002) – cited in Pearce (2002a). Pearce notes that concerns have been raised by activists regarding these Guidelines, who see them as allowing national governments to sell monopoly rights to bio-prospecting of genetic resources. The fear is populations that require such resources for their livelihood will be excluded from accessing these genetic commons.

³ The argument that such institutions can be thought of as commons is based on a particular conception of the welfare state. My position here is not to defend the welfare state or argue that 'the state' is the paragon of resource management. Likewise, I am not attempting to argue that the infrastructures of provision for the public interest are commons – a position that seems to reflect that of Bollier (2002). Rather, I am presenting such examples to highlight how once communally owned and managed institutions that were open and relied on cooperation have been marginalised simply because they are not privately run and profit driven.

tangible and intangible dimensions such as the confidence of living within a city that delivers safe and quality drinking water.

According to *The Ecologist* (1996), all categories of commons have a number of definitive characteristics. To begin with, commons cannot be commodified and made exclusionary and, if they are, they cease to be commons and become commodities and private property. Further, commons are abundant and if facilitated and managed properly, can overcome scarcity. In this way, commons can be understood to be ubiquitous and functioning all the time. Finally, we should envisage the commons as neither public nor private, but inherited from past generations. In this view, any governing body holds them in trust for the public as well as for future generations.

Combining this with certain intangible aspects of the commons, *The Ecologist* offers the following definition:

...the commons is the social and political space where things get done and where people have a sense of belonging and have an element of control over their lives... [providing] sustenance, security and independence (1996: 6-7).

These are what a community shares and can include the need for trust, cooperation and human relationships. These are the very foundations of what makes 'a community' rather than merely a group of individuals living in close proximity to each other. For communities to use and maintain the commons, cooperation, collaboration and communication is required (Hardt and Negri 2004). This understanding of the commons involves people operating on a collective rather than individual basis.

It is possible to expand *The Ecologist's* conceptualisation of the commons into the 'cultural' or social sphere. The commons can also include certain human factors such as a shared desire for safety, trust and cooperation. These are aspects of culture that our society shares and that promote an authentic community: something I describe in more detail below. These cultural commons have similar features to the physical commons described earlier. That is, as commons they are openly shared, available to all, and if managed appropriately will remain abundant and ubiquitous.

The cultural commons operate on the biopolitical level and represent a form of biopolitics that promotes the potential for greater cooperation. They produce relationships that are non-hierarchical and inclusive, allowing communities to work together to overcome scarcity, crisis and fear (Hardt and Negri 2004)⁴. Here the cultural commons describe the social relationships which operate on a biopolitical level and that allow communities to function cooperatively rather than compete.

While elsewhere I have discussed the concept of the cultural commons in the broader context (see Arvanitakis 2006), here I would like to concentrate on 'trust' and 'hope' as commons. By trust, I mean confidence in a person or system. This confidence is expressed as controlled faith in the "probity of another" or "in abstract principles" (Giddens 1991: 34). Trust is "bound with contingency" as it carries connotations of

⁴ Importantly, Hardt and Negri actually use the term "biopolitical commons" though they do not expand on exactly what they mean (2004: 207).

reliability (ibid). In this way, trust is not the same as faith but is derived from the link between faith and confidence.

For Giddens, trust is the essential element that defines modern society; we trust technicians to ensure the plane we are in appropriately functions and that builders will properly attach a roof so that it does not collapse. Just as importantly, we trust the stranger who is walking down the street or sitting on the train near us to ‘behave like a stranger’; that is, ignore and not threaten us. In reality, we have no reason not to trust the stranger – no matter the colour of their skin, the religious emblems they wear or the way they sit – unless they are acting aggressively.

Uslander (1999) extends this, arguing that community and civic involvement is directly related to levels of trust. If a community is to function then some basic level of trust must exist. Pusey’s (2003) research confirms this point, arguing that trust in both others and government is related to how well a community’s social structure is operating. This reflects Robert Putman’s (1995) well-established position regarding how trust is central to ‘decent’ communities. Expanding the logic of the stranger, we can only live in a community if we trust those around us even if we do not know them.

Associated to trust is hope, which is based on a belief that a better world is possible not just for me and my immediate friends and family, but for all, even those I may never meet. Consequently, hope exists both on a personal and societal level – though these are interrelated (Zournazi 2002; Hage 2003). Hage (2003) believes that in this sense, hope allows individuals to define a meaning for their lives. Lingis (2002) argues that hope involves a vision that is outside oneself. In secular societies, hope is faith without certainties – it moves out of the religious sphere and is found in struggles for justice and political activity.

Hage argues that in ‘decent’ societies we witness a “surplus of hope” that allows for it to be freely distributed (2003: 17). Here hope is abundant, and is something that cannot be consumed but is shared. Hage is inspired by Bourdieu in his description of hope, and goes on to argue that the “key to a decent society is above all this capacity to distribute... opportunities for self-realisation, which are none other than what we have been calling societal hope” (2003: 16). Such hope relates to our sense of being with other people, it is non-commercial and moves beyond the personal to the political.

Like other commons, if openly shared and freely available, both trust and hope can spread throughout a community. Trust and hope do not diminish when openly distributed, but expand, becoming abundant. As a result, both trust and hope can be open and available to all. It is for these reasons that Putman argues trust, if shared, is inexhaustible – something that Hage extends to hope.

Commodifying the Commons – Manufacturing Scarcity

Life for the commons, however, is precarious under conditions of neoliberalism. Radin (1996) argues that the dominance of free market ideology means that everything has a price and can be traded – including commons. Any attempt to control this, is seen as “paternalistic and interfering in free decisions” (Bollier 2002: 24). In fact, where commons exist, there is a broader market-led belief that exploitation and

even conflict must follow. This philosophy has led to aggressive forms of enclosure including commodification and is fuelled by an acceptance of the ‘myth’ of the ‘tragedy of the commons’ (Hardin 1968). Based on a belief in the dominance of homo-economicus, Hardin argues that humanity inevitably exploits resources that are not assigned clear property rights including commons. Hardin concludes that “the survival of the commons depends on ‘mutual coercion mutually agreed on’” (1968: 31). While, at the time, Hardin argued that some kind of ‘administrative elite’ – a type of benevolent dictator – should undertake this ‘coercion’, today this appears to have been replaced by promises offered by ‘the market’ and its proponents⁵. That is, it is through the processes of commodification that the commons can be protected from the selfishness of people.

Goldman (1997) notes that, while Hardin’s position was never based on empirical evidence and has been continuously ‘debunked’, the assumptions underpinning it persist and continue a long neoliberal tradition that suggests we must commercialise to get the best out of people. As a result, these assumptions are continually applied to commons⁶.

This commodification, privatisation and enclosure of the commons create a crisis of scarcity. Consequently, *The Ecologist* argues that we are not seeing the tragedy of the commons, rather a “tragedy of enclosure” (1996: 15). This position can be confirmed by following the basic laws of ‘supply and demand’ economics that characterises the trade of commodities. For the scarcer commodities are, the higher their value will be. Accordingly, to maximise profits it suits the owners of resources to ‘manufacture scarcity’ (Farhat 2001). This does not occur when the commons operate; rather it occurs when commons are enclosed.

However, this is not just a scarcity of natural resources and other physical commons, but scarcity in the broader sense. This is a theme identified by Bauman, who argues that we are witnessing the disappearance or a scarcity of the “public sphere” (1999: 69)⁷. This enclosure of the public sphere links to Habermas’ focus on the structural change of the public sphere under the contemporary era of state capitalism and the

⁵ Though the managerial justification for the enclosure of the commons can be found in Hardin’s 1968 essay, Hardt and Negri (2004) believe that the commons were essentially destroyed with the advent of private property. Such a position echoes well-established arguments by Thomson (1963) who described the commodifying tendencies of capital including the enclosure of the commons. Fiedler (2000) confirms these sentiments, noting that the conditions for industrialisation and a market economy were created by capital through the colonisation of common lands and common modes of production. Bollier meanwhile, argues that the aggressive enclosure of commons was initiated by the frontier wars that came to define the birth of the United States as a nation, and were an extension of its “frontier constitution” (2002: 70).

⁶ This was highlighted in a recent debate in Australia over indigenous communal-owned lands. Senior members of the federal government including the Minister for Health, Tony Abbott, and the Prime Minister, John Howard, argued that communal land ownership continues to hold indigenous communities back from economic development (Wood 2003; Metherel 2004a). In fact, Tony Abbott branded native title as “economically useless and called for it to be replaced” (Wood 2003: 13). Such a process, according to the Prime Minister, would be likely to breed “a more entrepreneurial” culture (Metherel 2004b: 7). These discussions have been welcomed by senior Australian Labor Party (ALP) officials including the former ALP national President Warren Mundine, himself an indigenous Australian (Karvelas 2004), although disputed by many other indigenous leaders (see Yunupingu 2005 for example).

⁷ Bauman is describing the public sphere as the area of legitimate public discourse. Bauman’s position is that we are seeing the colonisation of the public sphere and a re-definition of the “notoriously mobile boundary” between the public and the private (1999: 70).

increasingly powerful positions of economic corporations in public life. Habermas argued that economic and governmental interests have taken over the public sphere, while citizens have become content to be (primarily) consumers of goods, services, political administration and spectacle.

The effects of commodification also enter the biopolitical sphere, producing neoliberal subjectivities and altering relationships with those around us. Such a neoliberal subjectivity is accompanied by an acceptance of a 'natural order' in which everything is a commodity; human nature is 'greedy'; the commons are an area of potential conflict; and there are no viable alternative visions to manage resources apart from the market. The wider population reflects the operational biopower to bring certainty and 'market disciplines' to the undisciplined operations of the commons in a bid to avoid conflict. The language of commodification becomes the 'eternal truth' of this natural order. The result is that, in many countries, communities are being re-ordered into markets, and commons are thus transformed from shared, abundant and open spaces that are democratically negotiated, to commodities that are scarce and traded based on competition and utility maximisation.

In the face of neoliberalism both the commons of trust and hope become enclosed and commodified. As this occurs, we see a growing sense of 'anxiety' or 'dread' (Giddens 1991) and a belief that we must only care for those closest to us, because others will claim our scarce resources.

As trust and hope are at the base of any 'authentic' community, this dramatically alters the basis of our society. For we no longer trust 'the stranger' to do the right thing such as behaving like a stranger and not threaten us. In such an environment, there is a tendency to want to be surrounded by only those we 'recognise' as being 'like us'. In an environment characterised by a culture of competition over increasingly scarce resources, there is a sense of anxiety that others will defeat us if we do not aggressively compete or act pre-emptively.

We see similar consequences follow as hope becomes a scarce resource. In the current environment, for example, Zournazi argues that we are witnessing declining levels of hope which are replaced with a focus on individualism, competition and consumerism. This is a "negative hope" which is targeted towards economic security and success (Zournazi 2002: 14). In such a world, there is a sense of uncertainty, insecurity and competition, as we feel threatened that hope is limited and will be consumed by others. Socially then, hope is transformed by competition and a sense of exclusion. This prompts Hage (2003), Zournazi (2002) and Taussig (2002) to argue that under such conditions hope is re-worked into a negative frame and has a 'dark side'.

To make this point, Taussig argues that in a highly commodified world hope "masquerades as envy" as it is overtaken by commodity fetishism and materialism (2002: 63). When a community becomes focused on consuming rather than imagining and working towards a better world, Taussig believes hope is displaced, changed or even undone and becomes something else, possibly resentment and greed.

Elaborating this position, I contend that neoliberalism works towards the commodification of hope and trust and, in the process, turns them into 'material aspirations' enveloped in an anxiety that there is never enough to share. This creates a

sense of scarcity that totally transforms these commons into externally focused aspirations driven by fear, competition, self-interest and utilitarianism. When this happens, the cultural commons are enclosed and become both exclusionary and competitive. Citizens compete for the limited opportunities that exist in a world that demands material success. This is the case for both individuals (as part of individualism and competition) and nations (as exclusionary borders are established).

To highlight how this commodification materialises, I will draw on three ongoing trends in Australia. For the sake of brevity, I only briefly describe these trends that are drawn from a broader research project. The first can be found in the private neighbourhoods and gated communities that have emerged as trust and hope are replaced by a sense of anxiety and exclusion (Davis 1992a; 1992b). There is no longer a sense of trust towards the broader community and, as a result, neighbourhoods are privatised to include only those who can pay to reside within them. According to Atkinson and Flint (2004) and Gleeson (2004), this is a trend that continues globally. As privatised and gated communities expand, Davis argues that we are seeing the emergence of “fortress cities” (1992b: 159)⁸.

For Gleeson (2004), this loss of trust and rise in exclusion is leading to a “commodification of community” with the concept of community itself becoming a commodity. The principal product is exclusive community “emblazoned on billboards of new estates” which are no longer simple ‘house-and-land’ packages, but rather are marketed as “giddily utopian promises of happy, wealthy and secure futures for all who take the chance to share the new suburban dreaming... or ‘privatopias’” (ibid). These are limited to those who can both afford their way in.

The second example is the emergence of the ‘aspirational voter’ within the western suburbs of Sydney. Like the cultural implications of the tragedy of the commons, the ‘aspirational voter’ confirms the notion that we are all driven by competitive ‘self interest’⁹. Morton argues that “aspirational politics assumes that our hopes are purely private hopes” and that such a politics projects a “‘me first’ set of values” (2001). Something reiterated by former federal opposition leader, Mark Latham, in his positioning of the ALP as the party that can promote “prosperity with a purpose” by assisting all Australians to climb the “ladder of opportunity” (2004: 4). The self interest implied in this phrase serves to define these voters as solely interested in the advancement of themselves and their families: there is no focus on the broader community bonds that is the focus of societal hope. This is equated to a concern with economic management, interest rates and ‘consumer choice’ in areas like education and health care. This turns the desire for a better future – or societal hopes – into the sort of private and individual interest that appears to neatly fit within the neoliberal agenda.

⁸ Gleeson (2004) notes that although gated communities are mainly a North American phenomenon, they are increasingly emerging in Australia. The opening of Australia’s first gated community was the Gold Coast’s Sanctuary Cove in 1985. Although outright gated communities remain relatively rare in Australia, they have started appearing.

⁹ The debate around the aspirational voter is one that also focuses on the changing nature of specific Sydney suburbs – something that is beyond the scope of this paper. What is relevant here is the use of the term to justify a ‘me first’ set of policy prescriptions (Morton 2001).

The final example is raised by *Sydney Morning Herald* economics editor Ross Gittins. Gittins describes the attitude that has come to represent much of today's business ethics and values as, "If it's legal, it's OK" (2002: 35). For Gittins, this attitude, and the capitalist culture that establishes it, orchestrates an "upsurge in competition" and a "preoccupation with monetary rewards" (ibid) – read material aspirations. All this reflects the 'culture' at the base of Garret Hardin's original work. Gittins describes an incentive-driven and competitive world, where "dollars count as points" in some bizarre game of accumulating wealth rather than bringing joy or hope (ibid).

Though the focus for Gittins is on the economic implications of such business ethics, he concludes that there are also broader repercussions, as we live in a world that is rapidly eroding the ethical behaviour which allows communities to function. For, as Taussig (2002) notes, all aspects of a community rely on a certain level of trust and hope to operate, including 'the market' at the centre of Gitten's discussion and, if these disappear, then community itself is under threat.

Exclusion and Inclusion – Debates about Community

Enclosing the cultural commons thus dramatically alters the nature of communities. Once hope and trust disappear, we no longer believe a more just or equitable world is possible and feel in competition with those around us. We then focus on the competing aspirations that capital monopolises. For those who cannot purchase this commodity – such as the abovementioned refugees – we see a process of exclusion as people are forced to remain outside the fences protecting our nations as well as the privatised neighbourhoods.

To explain how the commodification of the commons leads to exclusion, I turn to the work of Rosalyn Diprose who argues that an authentic "community is about the sharing of meaning, but not at the expense of difference; community is not a unity of shared meanings that at best tolerates difference, but rather community lives *for* difference" (2003: 36; emphasis in original). Diprose draws on the metaphor of the handshake – 'hand of friendship' – to signify the bond of community, which is extended to the stranger. This handshake represents a social expression and circulation of meaning. That is, by extending an open hand to the stranger, community begins to form as meaning is produced. In contrast, if the hand is purposely withheld and thus not extended, then a type of violence is produced that witnesses community breakdown, moral implosion and the dissolution of meaning.

Central to Diprose's claim, however, is the issue of what is exchanged and shared. I would argue the exchange in Diprose's handshake involves more than just the offer of friendship but also the sharing of hope and trust: that is, the 'cultural commons'. When I offer my hand to the stranger who may be a refugee, tourist or a new neighbour, I am offering more than just a physical hand but meaning. This may not indicate an invitation to dinner, a place to sleep or even a conversation, but I am presenting my desire to live together in an open, peaceful and authentic community¹⁰.

¹⁰ We can differentiate here the difference between communal hospitality and that offered by the individual. Derrida (1991) argues that hospitality to the stranger can only realistically be offered by a community, rather than through the goodwill of an individual. In contrast, conservative commentators have responded to those who demand more humane treatment of refugees or acknowledgement of indigenous land rights by calling on them to

I may never understand the stranger and they may never understand me but I offer an open community. All I expect in return is the open hand of friendship to be reciprocated. Importantly, this does not require a common subjectivity but an open desire for sharing¹¹.

Building on this, an authentic and open ‘community’ is established through the reciprocal (noncommercial) sharing of cultural commons. Based on Gudeman (2001) and others, the argument is that the act of reciprocity is a way of making community by extending its base or its cultural commons without discrimination. As a non-commercial act of reciprocity, this is a process that has been described by Mauss (1967) as ‘gift giving.’ There has been much debate about the concept of ‘the gift’ and gift giving since the seminal work of Mauss (1967). Mauss argued there are links between forms of exchange and the social structures that emerge around them. For Mauss, the ‘gift’ is more than a simple exchange of commodities as it rearranges the fabric of society while moving through social relations. For the gift forms a type of obligation and relationship with the parties involved that includes giving, receiving and reciprocating. This transformation, which is dramatically different to that of commercial exchange, is the essence of the gift’s power.

Mauss highlighted that the significance of the gift moves beyond a simple ‘physical swap’. Rather, it is a multi-dimensional exchange that has religious, legal, economic and mythological aspects that are unique to different cultures. Mauss saw the gift as also representing the identity of the giver and thus having enormous symbolic value. For this relationship to continue, the gift must be returned in an appropriate way¹².

Consequently, gift giving presents “irreducible dyadic bonds” establishing non-commercial and nonmarket transactions that are lasting two-way exchanges (Gudeman 2001: 461)¹³. Gudeman notes that this position sees the gift as “setting in motion a temporal, lasting cycle of obligations, which is reciprocity” (2001: 460). This means we see a threelinked obligation: to give, to receive and to return. This sharing, I argue, forms a reciprocal relationship driven by a desire for hope and trust. Further, this is a process which actually establishes and expands community. The ‘gift’ that is offered by Diprose’s hand of friendship may not be returned by choice, but if it is, it establishes a sense of community based on the alterity of the other.

offer their own house or backyard. See for example Jopson’s (2003) interview with conservative commentator Michael Duffy.

¹¹ It is important to consider how we respond to the other’s response – or what Diprose describes as “tact” (2003: 46). As noted, I have a responsibility to extend my hand to the ‘other’ and welcome them with tact. Yet this welcome to the other’s difference is always conditional, as it is two-way or reciprocal. There is no obligation to welcome a body that lacks tact, and therefore negates my expression of existence, presenting a clenched fist rather than an extended hand. According to Diprose, tact dissolves when symbolic or physical violence arises. As a consequence, the reciprocal handshake is also conditional on the way the extended hand is always accompanied by the sharing of meaning providing a horizon to my sense of belonging. If this sharing is absent, then tact is also absent.

¹² Two broad schools of thought have emerged that deal with both the concept of the gift and Mauss’ interpretation. The first is the neoliberal school of economics and the second is represented by anthropologists. While a detailed discussion of how neoliberal economists see gifts continue to be the domain of the atomised individual for economists is beyond the scope of this paper, what is important to understand is that gifts are seen as simply representing another market exchange (Gudeman 2001).

¹³ This is a position that draws on the work of Mauss (1967), Malinowski (1925), Levi-Strauss (1949), Polanyi (1968) and Sahlins (1972).

It is here that I draw the link between the gift, reciprocity, the sharing of cultural commons and the establishment or expansion of community. To begin with, Gudeman argues that every community has a “base or commons that it shares” which may be something physical (such as water rights), a cultural legacy or, possibly, accumulated knowledge (2001: 466). I would extend this by arguing that this includes the cultural commons identified above. Describing this base and its importance, Gudeman suggests the ‘base’ of a community is a cultural heritage that brings a community together. A key feature of a community is that it allots or distributes parts of its base or commons for use or consumption. How this occurs is part of the cultural heritage and accumulated knowledge of a community but is “very different from market allocation that works through individual and separate offers and bids” (Gudeman 2001: 466). If this is fractured or commodified, then both the community and social relationships quickly splinter. That is, if the base of the community is commodified then the commons can no longer be freely shared and the community risks being divided.

The exchange and sharing that crosses boundaries and expands community then, is not simply based on some physical gift, but may encompass this communal cultural heritage or cultural commons. This may include what the community considers to be its most sacred holdings including its cultural commons. This assertion overlaps with Weiner (1992), who distinguishes between two types of gifts: alienable and inalienable. For Weiner, inalienable gifts constitute the core of the ‘community commons’ at the base of one’s identity. By extending these commons through the processes of gift giving, community is expanded.

Central to this position is that an act of reciprocity is “an expression of community” (Gudeman 2001: 467). This is because the distribution or apportionment of the commons is an act of “making and maintaining community” (ibid). So when the giver offers these commons, it is an act of inviting someone into the community. Just as important however, is the reciprocity that invites the original giver ‘out’, blurring any differentiation between the inside and outside, thereby expanding community. Thus, for Weiner the purpose of inalienable gifts is a way of “making kin of non-kin” (1992: 26). In the process of reciprocity, we see a negotiation that expands community by including others. It is this that Mauss (1967) may have been expressing when he discussed ‘the spirit’ of the gift which can extend community to others, including them as users of the base of community or commons.

Mirowski (2001) agrees and extends this by arguing that the reciprocal exchange of gifts expands this base or commons outside its normal circle or established community. This is an expression that promotes community and the commons, allowing them to expand. Gudeman believes it is this offering of gifts and enacting of reciprocity that expands the shared value of a community and its borders. The gift then moves beyond the material plane and, much like the handshake, becomes a gesture of friendship and desire for reciprocal exchange and sharing.

Further, if the gift is reciprocated, it transforms social relationships from atomised to dyadic terms. Gudeman believes the return both accepts “commensality” (2001: 461), yet also signals difference and independence – thus echoing the arguments presented

by Levinas (1981) and others regarding community and alterity. The community may expand, but it does not become homogeneous, as it is formed through multiple bases – or in the words of Hardt and Negri, “multiple singularities” (2000: 105). In this way, reciprocity is a pragmatic act, incorporating a “tension between separation and unity, self-sufficiency and interdependence” (Gudeman 2001: 468).

Concluding Comments: Reclaiming the Commons

So what to make of all this? The open sharing of trust and hope provide us with an insight into the establishment of community and how they function. If they are withheld, communities begin to contract and experience internal pressures as hope and trust disappear.

It is here that we, as academics and activists, have an important role in reclaiming the commons – both in the physical and cultural spheres. The commodification tendencies of neoliberalism must be confronted as they attempt to enter new realms. These spaces, once outside the sphere of commodification, must be reclaimed as we offer our hand of friendship to the stranger.

Trust operates both on the societal and personal level. However, this sense of trust has now been enclosed, commodified and transformed into individualised ‘self interest’. That is, rather than believing that we can trust those around us, we feel a constant sense of scarcity and competition. We refuse to trust those around us because we feel there is not enough to ‘go around’. This sense of scarcity often dominates our subjectivity and has become a defining feature of both the political and personal spheres. This may provide insights into why nations such as Australia are experiencing record levels of growth but turning their backs on refugees and the displaced.

Despite this, new spaces of trust continually emerge, breaking down the commodifying logic of neoliberalism. This rupturing takes many forms including refugee and peace activism and creates noncommodified spaces of cooperation and hope. Just as Australia has been the site of the mistreatment of refugees, we have also seen enormous amounts of hope and trust emerge as activists have directly contested this issue. While the Australian government has continued to pursue a policy of exclusion and marginalisation, resistance movements continue to appear in many different forms challenging this position. Such resistance movements range from lobbying organisations such as Chilout, support networks including Rural Australians for Refugees, to more militant groups, such as No-one is Illegal (NOII). In fact, NOII directly confronted the mandatory detention of refugees by organising a mass breakout in 2002¹⁴. Though the relationship between these groups has not always been harmonious, and they range in size, strategies and membership, they offer a physical manifestation of Diprose’s ‘hand of friendship’ to those held in detention. What is being offered however, goes far beyond the physical hand, and enters into an open sharing of cultural commons – a sense of hope and trust.

¹⁴ The breakout occurred when a group of protesters that held a vigil at the Woomera Detention Centre in the Australian desert spontaneously began to breakdown the fences that had enclosed the refugees. The aim was to protest the Australia government’s treatment of refugees. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/2069478.stm> - accessed October 2004. Follow up protests were held at the Baxter Detention Centre during Easter 2005 (see www.baxter05.info - accessed March 2005).

This creates non-commodified spaces that depend on an open and mutual distribution of trust that does not exclude, but rather expands as it is shared. Consequently, these spaces of trust can be described as social or 'cultural commons'. Within these spaces, people care about much more than the price of oil.

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