

**The commons in crisis:  
Experiments in resource sharing and participation in the transatlantic world**

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Novel thinking on how to share resources as well as experiments in self-governance have often emerged at times of acute crisis. It is often during periods of rapid social, economic, religious or political change that different groups across the Atlantic space - some dissenting or dissident - have conceived of new ways of collectivizing land, finances, and material goods, as well as worship, mutual assistance, care and solidarity or common decision-making, at a scale below the state or international level. It is sometimes outside the parameters provided for by the law or existing institutions, on a local or communal scale, that different ways of managing resources or decisions in common have been put in practice, often later going on to reshape or influence those broader national structures.

The Reformation of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century and the advent of private enclosure in England led to the disruption of traditional usage of the land and the dislocation of poor members of the community. Such sudden changes prompted utopian thinkers such as Thomas More to cast a critical eye over the society they lived in and devise a blueprint for an alternate structuring of human relationships to labour. The Reformation also prompted, in the long-term, the creation of separatist congregations, groups of worshipers who, on either side of the Atlantic, set up independent structures outside of the remit and hierarchy of the Anglican Church, in order to collectively ensure their religious practice conformed to their conscience. Equally, the dramatic changes wrought by intense industrialisation between the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the Revolution in France, led to new experiments in social and labour practices such as those of Robert Owen in New Lanark and in New Harmony, Indiana. Thomas Spence's radical land plan for ending private property and returning the land to the people garnered some support among ultra-radicals and anti-slavery activists in the 1810s.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, world wars and the specter of nuclear disaster have also led to the emergence of protest movements proposing innovative models of self-governance outside the State. The inevitable boom-and-bust cycles of capitalism have motivated workers to organize into cooperatives that distribute authority and profits equitably. The sudden migration of populations fleeing violence or natural disasters has given rise to acts of radical solidarity with migrants, including the Sanctuary movement's sharing of space and other resources providing protection from immigration law for Central American asylum seekers in the 1980s. In the most successful of cases, these experiments have managed to surpass class-based antagonisms or long-standing mistrust among communities divided along ethnic and racial lines, social dynamics which have contributed to a devaluation of the commons. For groups attempting to rehabilitate and reconstruct new forms of the commons, the presence of indigenous populations living on reservations in the United States, providing alternate models of land use and of power-sharing, has been a continued source of inspiration.

The ATHIP workshops over the next 2-3 years will focus on the question of how periods of upheaval – understood as war, revolution, rapid social and industrial change, acceleration in capitalism, colonisation or decolonisation, or sudden climate or global health crises – have led to the development of new and pioneering models of collective local, small-scale action and resource-sharing across the space of the transatlantic world. We hope that these seminars and discussions may give rise to an edited publication based on the seminars held and discussions pursued over this period.