

Investigation

“Officially and Legally Mine”: Enclosure, Wage Labor, and Capitalism

Near the end of Episode 3: Ships, Swords, and Fences, John and Ellen explain how, “over several centuries starting in the 1500s, the British Parliament passed thousands of acts, privatizing almost seven million acres of formerly common lands, and allowing landlords to send peasants away.”

This process is called *enclosure*. Here's more from John:

I'll admit I never heard of it until a few years ago. But it looms large in European history, nowhere more than in Britain. It marked a deep shift in how Westerners think about land. These days, certainly here in the U.S., we're used to the idea that every inch of property is either privately owned – an individual, or, say, a corporation, holds the deed – or it's public. And even with public land, we can point to the government entity that owns it: federal, state, county, city...

Throughout most of human history, people didn't treat land as personal property. In medieval times, in Europe and some other places, only kings and emperors owned land. Or think of Indigenous people in the Americas, Africa, Australia, right up to the recent past and even today in some places: tribes formed customary understandings about their territory, and would sometimes fight over incursions or invasions, but individuals didn't draw lines and say, this patch of the earth is officially and legally mine.

While enclosure is connected to the rise of private land ownership, it also connects to another development. John again:

This drove countless people off the land and, as you can imagine, most of them wound up in cities, looking for paid work. So this gives a big push to the transition, in Britain and other countries in Western Europe, from a rural population to an urban one. And, even more on point for our story about capitalism, it pushes most people into the new world of wage labor, where they have to go find an employer to sell their labor to.

Think about what you've already heard about enclosure and its effects. (It may be helpful to listen to [Episode 3, 29:06-39:30](#), or skim the [Episode 3 transcript, pp. 23-31](#), to refresh your memory.)

Then, examine an excerpt from a 2023 lecture written and delivered by filmmaker, writer, and political organizer Astra Taylor.

Guiding Questions

- How does Taylor argue that enclosure contributed to the development of capitalism?
- How does Taylor believe that enclosure continues to shape our lives today?
- To what extent do you find Taylor's argument convincing?

Excerpt from “Cura’s Gift” in *The Age of Insecurity* by Astra Taylor (2023)

Astra Taylor is a filmmaker, writer, and political organizer, born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and raised in Athens, Georgia. In the fall of 2023, Taylor delivered a series of lectures across Canada as part of CBC Radio's *Ideas* series. Those lectures are also available as a book titled *The Age of Insecurity: Coming Together as Things Fall Apart*.

The passage below is excerpted from the first lecture in the series and the first chapter of *The Age of Insecurity*. It is reproduced with permission from Astra Taylor and House of Anansi Press.

You can also listen to this excerpt from “Cura’s Gift” on [CBC’s website \(28:41-33:29 only\)](#).

Capitalism did not appear fully formed, like a spirit conjured by an incantation in a myth or legend. Instead, it evolved slowly, taking form over hundreds of years as England’s feudal system underwent a social and economic transformation that would come to define the modern world. For generations, the peasantry had exercised customary rights to land held in common – rights to graze their animals, to collect kindling, to glean, to plant, to fish, and to survive by accessing meadows, rivers, and woods they did not own outright but rather shared with others. Beginning in the twelfth century, these traditional rights and ways of life came under attack to make room for a new emerging order of commerce. During the prolonged and varied process now known as the enclosure movement, communal fields and forests were privatized – literally enclosed with fences and hedges – displacing commoners from the land that had sustained them and fuelling an unprecedented change.

Commoner here as a double resonance. The people in question were common, as in not aristocrats, but they also engaged in *commoning* – a word that is a verb, an action, a mode of survival, and a way of relating and being in the world. Commoners lived off land they collectively stewarded as a matter of “common right.” It was commoning that helped them achieve a baseline of material security and independence, and it was the loss of commoning that made them newly insecure in the capitalist sense.

While the enclosure movement manufactured a new form of capitalist insecurity for the majority, it increased the security of the minority of landlords, who fenced and hedged their newly private property. By some estimates, even after centuries of encroachment, approximately one-quarter of the total area of England and Wales was managed as commons into the late seventeenth century, when a new wave of enclosure commenced. More and more land became the sole possession of privileged individuals, and commoners, simply doing what they had always done, were transformed into trespassers and criminals and denied access to their traditional means of survival under the threat of death. Locked out of the pastures and woodlands they had tended to and gathered in for generations, people could no longer meet their own subsistence needs and had to turn to the market for survival. Where commoners had once tilled crops and made items for personal subsistence for their local lord and community, they now had little to sell but their

own labour. The resulting social upheaval was particularly devastating for women, who had played a vital role in agriculture and who had passionately resisted enclosure. With forced migration came slums and squalor, city centres crowded with people desperate for employment, women and children among those forced to work in the dangerous new factories and commercial mills.

In 1647 Thomas Rainsborough, a witness to enclosure, called it “the greatest tyranny that was thought of in the world.”¹ Rainsborough was a leader of the democratic political faction known as the Levellers, a group whose name spoke of their desire to “level off” the differences between toiling and ruling classes, and to level the fences and hedges erected to separate private parcels of land. During the English Civil War, when parliamentary forces engaged in a deadly conflict with King Charles I, another contingent calling themselves the True Levellers, or Diggers, sought the full abolition of private ownership: the earth, they insisted, “was made to be a Common Treasury of relief for all, both Beasts and Men.”² These visionaries enacted their radical politics by setting up an occupation on a small hill, which they planted with seeds – the act of digging by which they got their name – and held their ground for four months. “England is not a free people till the Poor that have no Land, have a free allowance to dig and labour the Commons, and so lie as Comfortably as the Landlords that live in their Inclosures,” they proclaimed.³ As the bloody struggle for a more democratic political system wore on, debates about communal property rights also raged, their memory largely buried after private property became a cornerstone of the new liberal capitalist state.⁴

As the Industrial Revolution advanced, so did the intentional and methodical devastation of old ways of life. In 1735, an anonymous pamphleteer called the commons “a security for those whom fortune shou’d frown on” and noted that enclosure caused pauperism, a dire form of poverty previously unknown.⁵ For landowners, this was the point. They understood that the demise of the commons and the desperation and dislocation of the peasantry would yield a more pliable labour force, and they had the power to make new laws to this end.⁶ Between 1760 and 1870, the tail end of the enclosing process, over four thousand acts of Parliament changed the ownership of approximately seven million acres, one-sixth the area of England.⁷ The aim was to “increase the number of hands for labour, by removing the *means* of subsisting in idleness,” as one outspoken

¹ Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 106.

² Gerrard Winstanley, *The True Levellers Standard Advanced* (London, 1649), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo2/A95059.0001.001>, 7.

³ Winstanley, *True Levellers*, 15. Also see Astra Taylor, *Democracy May Not Exist, But We'll Miss It When It's Gone* (United States: Henry Holt and Company, 2019), 263 and 273.

⁴ Gerrard Winstanley, G. and T. Benn, *A Common Treasury* (United Kingdom: Verso Books, 2011), 6.

⁵ E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (Germany: New Press, 2015), 156.

⁶ J.M. Neeson, *Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure and Social Change in England, 1700-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 28-29, 45.

⁷ Peter Linebaugh, *Stop, Thief! The Commons, Enclosures, and Resistance* (Binghamton, NY: PM Press, 2012), 44.

proprietor put it.⁸ The cultivation of stereotypes helped their cause. Elites condemned commoners as lazy, barbaric, a “sordid race,” and compared them to Muslim infidels or, as colonization advanced, to Native Americans. Enclosure was thus a kind of trial run for the dispossession of Indigenous peoples, who used a variety of communal land management practices to govern their territories.⁹ English landlords, like proponents of land theft across the Atlantic, claimed that commercialization would “improve” the soil and increase its yield, while also “improving” public morals by imposing the discipline of work on the poor, a project both calculated and cruel. For example, in 1807 landowner Thomas Rudge recommended fencing with hedges that did not bear fruit, so they could not be put to life-sustaining use. He didn’t want people to be tempted to eat for free: “the idle among the poor are already too prone to depredation, and would still be less inclined to work, if every hedge furnished the means of support.”¹⁰

In her book *Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure and Social Change in England, 1700-1820*, Jeanette M. Neeson, a professor of history at York University, tracks these debates as they took place in newspapers and parliament while also recovering the culture that enclosure destroyed: the fields commoners plowed, the jokes they told, and their loss of the kind of freedom that comes from being able to provide for your own needs. The deprivation was captured by the poem “The Moors,” published by the peasant-poet John Clare in 1827:

*Unbounded freedom ruled the wandering scene
Nor fence of ownership crept in between
To hide the prospect of the following eye –
Its only bondage was the circling sky ...
Enclosure came and trampled on the grave
Of labour’s rights and left the poor a slave,
And memory’s pride, ere want to wealth did bow,
Is both the shadow and the substance now.*¹¹

Commoners shouldn’t be romanticized, of course. Their lives were hard, and they were hardly free by contemporary standards. Nevertheless, they enjoyed certain liberties that most of us have never known – namely, the freedom to make a living from the earth underneath them, despite not owning that particular piece of ground outright. If they grew food, collected firewood, picked fruit or thatch, or earned income, it was by their own hands and on their own terms. Enclosing landlords decried commoners’ poverty (even as they pursued policies that would leave them much poorer) and were duly perplexed when peasants responded that they didn’t want to be rich – survival was, in the words of at least one commoner, “enough,” because it came with

⁸ Neeson, *Commoners*, 28.

⁹ Neeson, *Commoners*, 28, 32.

¹⁰ Thomas Rudge, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Gloucester* (1807), quoted in Neeson, 29; Richard Mabey, *Flora Britannica* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996), 209.

¹¹ John Clare, “The Moors,” in *“I Am”: The Selected Poetry of John Clare*, ed. Jonathan Bate (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003), 89.

autonomy. It was the upper class who, in their hunger for more and their obsession with crop yields, productivity, and growth, were plagued by insecurity.¹² After enclosure robbed commoners of their self-sufficiency and, just as critically, the collective power that comes with community, insecurity became their lot, too, and wage labour their only option. Enclosure thus helped produce the proletariat, facilitating the transition from feudalism to capitalism.

Today we take for granted that we must work a proper job to earn a wage in order to provide for our basic needs, and we structure our entire lives around this fact. The history of enclosure reminds us that this arrangement is anything but natural. Before the wage earner could emerge as our society's paradigmatic subject, a condition historian Michael Denning calls "wagelessness" had to be imposed. "Capitalism," Denning writes, "begins not with the offer of work, but with the imperative to earn a living."¹³ In other words, it begins with manufactured insecurity – insecurity in a new modern economic sense.

¹² Neeson, *Commoners*, 41.

¹³ Michael Denning, "Wageless Life," *New Left Review* 66 (2010), <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii66/articles/michael-denning-wageless-life>.