

# Kosmos

the journal for world citizens creating the new civilization



People Power | The Global Commons

America's Dark Passage

What, Really, is the Commons?

Kosmos Treks to Ancient Mustang

\$10 US | \$11 Canada  
Fall / Winter 2010  
Volume X, Number 1

# Commoners Converge on Berlin

David Bollier

What might the world look like if governments and public policy actively helped people create and maintain their own commons? A major international conference hopes to find some preliminary answers at an historic gathering in Berlin, Germany, from October 31 to November 2, 2010.

Convened by the Heinrich Boell Foundation and the newly formed Commons Strategy Group, the event, “Building a Commons-Based Policy Platform,” will bring together more than 150 activists, academics and project leaders from 35 countries. Participants will explore new strategies for developing the emerging ‘commons sector’ and provide a space for ‘commoners’ to discover how they might collaborate.

At the moment, the global movement of commoners is eclectic and growing but fragmented. There are a number of flourishing trans-national commons movements, such as free software, Wikipedia and various pools of Creative Commons-licensed content, such as open access scholarly journals and amateur video sites.

Many other commons projects are more modest in size, locally based, and focussed on natural resources. There are many communities, for example, trying to save their groundwater from multinational bottlers. Indigenous cultures are struggling to preserve their land and sacred traditions from market appropriation. There are commoners in Croatia trying to prevent government giveaways of urban spaces to private developers, and farmers in India fighting the privatization of seeds by large agribusiness corporations.

Can a shared commons discourse emerge from this rich stew of projects seeking to defend the commons? And how might governments and public policy begin to play a more constructive role in protecting and supporting the commons? The simple

but powerful question is: What does a commons-based policy framework look like? What are the principles a commons-based culture has to embrace?

These questions are more urgent since the economic crisis of October 2008. It is clear that an epoch in modern history has ended. It is no longer credible to propose that privatization, deregulation, lower taxes and reductions of social services will usher in a progressive future. It is also evident that the growth imperatives of market capitalism are endangering the planet’s ecosystems, aggravating social inequality and failing to meet the needs of substantial numbers of people.

Yet confidence in government has also been shaken by the crisis. Now that corporate power is so overwhelming, corrupting the integrity of policymaking, science and democracy itself, citizens are losing confidence in government as a trustworthy steward of the people’s interests. To take just one example, in the face of an overwhelming scientific consensus about the planetary perils of climate change, governments around the world showed little sense of urgency at the Copenhagen climate conference in December 2009. Can we responsibly entrust the fate of our atmosphere to our governments?

One stream of the Berlin conference will focus on “The Commons as a Challenge for Classical Economic Patterns and Thinking.” The Minister of National Patrimony in Ecuador, Maria Fernanda Espinosa Garcés, will speak at a public event about ‘the commons as the template of our future.’

Another conference stream will examine how new forms of commons-based governance challenge ‘the market/state duopoly.’ As the systemic failures of nation-states and global markets grow worse, the commons has come to the fore as a working

alternative. Yet another stream will explore “The Generative Logic of the Commons” by exploring the new business models that work constructively with the commons, and alternatives such as ‘gift economies’ and the Solidarity Economy movement.

Conference organizers are quick to note that the commons is not a ready-made blueprint for action or rigid ideology. It is a work in progress—a call to commoners to participate in the process of building new governance mechanisms, new social norms and innovative practices.

Talking about the commons serves two important functions. First, it helps us name one of the great, unacknowledged scourges of our time—the *enclosure* of the commons. Enclosures are the forced conversion of our shared resources into private property. When our air, water, genes, culture, land and much else are regarded as mere commodities—objects that have no intrinsic importance beyond their price in the marketplace—we lose our motivation to act as long-term stewards of those resources. The second virtue of the commons is its ability to reorient our vision. For example, it helps us see the gifts of nature as a shared inheritance that we are duty-bound to bequeath to the next generation.

The vision of future commons has many manifestations; that is its beauty and functionality. But what all commoners share is the desire to build new social and institutional systems that can manage resources in more equitable, sustainable ways. The Berlin event will surely yield many important insights about those challenges. For more, visit the website [http://p2pfoundation.net/Berlin\\_Commons\\_Conference](http://p2pfoundation.net/Berlin_Commons_Conference).

**David Bollier** is a pioneer of the political economic and cultural commons movement and a convener of The Berlin Conference. He is editor of *OnTheCommons.org* and author of *Viral Spiral: How the Commoners Built a Digital Republic of Their Own*. [www.bollier.org](http://www.bollier.org)