

COMMONS AND HOUSEHOLDS IN A SMALL FARM FUTURE

How might a future agrarian society organise ‘land for the tiller’? CHRIS SMAJE considers the delicate balance between the commons and autonomous household farms.

It seems likely that the numerous and growing global problems caused by modernisation and globalisation will devolve into lower energy, less carbon intensive, more labour intensive, more rural and more agrarian ways of life than the ones to which we’re accustomed in the wealthy countries today. In *The Land* 27 Simon Fairlie sketched a possible human geography for such a world.¹ In my book *A Small Farm Future* I sketch, among other things, a possible sociology – in other words, how people might organise their property, social and political relationships.² This article summarises these aspects of my book, and extends them somewhat in the light of responses received.

In contemplating this future, there’s a rich historical storehouse available from societies of the past and present that have lived in this way and that for convenience I’ll call peasant societies – essentially, situations where large numbers of people spend at least some of their time on small local landholdings where they produce most of their basic needs for food, fibre and other necessities for themselves. This has played out in very different ways in different times and places that are by no means reducible to the stereotype of a miserable hand-to-mouth existence under the thumb of landlords or aristocrats, although regrettably that fate has been common enough. Peasant societies are so various that generalising about them is questionable.

Still, there do seem to be some recurrent features born of producing a low-energy, partly non-market, local subsistence which are worth pondering as we contemplate the possibility of a similar future for much of humanity. To what extent does the peasant way inherently impose certain kinds of social structure, to what extent can we now exercise different choices over those structures, and how might peasant societies of the future differ from or resemble ones of the past? These are some of the issues I address here, while asking the reader’s forgiveness for a degree of over-generalisation. The examples are global, but I don’t presume to speak for the whole world in outlining a possible small farm future – my main focus is the wealthy countries of the ‘west’, and more particularly my home turf of lowland England.

The Commons

One aspect of peasant societies is their collective self-organisation. Peasant societies are societies of the commons, a point that people often champion nowadays as a welcome corrective to the present unchecked power of both private interests and the state. And it’s true enough – thorough local cooperation is essential in any low impact agrarian society. But it’s not always appreciated that commons almost always go hand in hand with and are circumscribed by private household production. It’s worth examining how this works in practice.

There are four key aspects of commons, which I call the four ‘E’s’ – commons are usually extensive, elemental, extra and/or exclusive. They’re extensive in the sense that they’re particularly appropriate to situations of diffuse and irregular resources – hunting or fishing rights, forest firewood gleanings and suchlike – where individual ownership or management would be impossible or impossibly inefficient. Where such extensive

resources are the mainstay of provisioning, as for example with many foraging societies, the economy can be almost entirely based on commoning with little development of private rights, but in agricultural societies extensive commons are usually a supplement to more intensive household production effectively involving private property rights.³

Commons are elemental in the sense that they often form around the larger elemental features of the landscape – fire, water and earth – that elude household control. For example, Australian aboriginal societies often managed landscapes and fire risk through controlled large-scale burnings organised on a clan basis; various rice-growing communities in southeast Asia created local irrigation associations to organise water flow to the fields; and the open-field systems of premodern England were organised around shared use of draught animals.⁴ But in all these cases, the day-to-day work was undertaken by smaller units of household or individual labour.

Commons are extra in the sense that they can be cleverly organised to squeeze extra productivity out of given resource inputs (for example, through the complex private/commons mix in traditional dairying arrangements, with private ownership over animals, hayfields and milking, but common grazing and cheese-making). In similar ways, common grazing historically enabled people who were otherwise too land-poor to keep animals, therefore operating as a form of redistributive welfare, while some societies organise commons around labour bottlenecks in the production of subsistence staples but not for cash crops. So commons can be ‘extra’ in supplementing or underwriting the returns from the established organisation of production.⁵

Finally, commons are exclusive in the sense that they aren’t a free-for-all available to all comers, this being one of the main ways they avoid Garrett Hardin’s notorious ‘tragedy of the commons’, in which open access leads to ruinous overuse, as in numerous collapsed maritime fisheries where there’s no local community to regulate use and prohibit outsiders. In many peasant societies, to be a commoner is to count for something locally. But the corollary is that the interests of the commoners may not be the same as the common interest. Who’s included, who’s excluded, who gets to decide and the livelihood implications of these decisions are of great importance to the shape of peasant society and the fortunes of those within it.

Commons Problems

One thing to be learned from these examples is how essential collective organisation is to the functioning of low energy agrarian societies. Another is how difficult it is to organise a successful commons, with the result that commons usually only form when they make practical sense in particular circumstances – not out of some generalised faith in the joys of human collective organisation. As I see it, there are four main reasons why it’s difficult to create successful commons, all variants of a wider ‘tragedy’: humans are complex social beings who can and must work collectively with each other, but also can and do find working with each other troublesome.

The first reason is that while it may be true that modern capitalist society has foolishly made selfishness and free-riding the cornerstone of economic action, these traits are sadly not confined to capitalist societies alone, as becomes apparent from a glance through the history of commons and commons failures in non-capitalist societies. Creating structures to protect commons from abuse is costly in human time and energy, and may not be worth it unless other options are worse.

The second point is a more subtle variant of the first. It's not that most people are inherently selfish or ill-motivated towards collective arrangements, but unless it's specified very clearly exactly who is responsible for doing exactly what, and the holders of these responsibilities actively embrace them, then the potential for failure is high. The writer Eve Rodsky calls this a 'CPE fail', when conception, planning and execution of a task aren't well enough integrated.⁶ The easiest way to integrate them is to make a single person responsible for the whole CPE of a given task. The larger the number of people with a stake in the CPE, the more work and communicative energy is required to avoid CPE failure. When Oscar Wilde joked "the trouble with socialism is that it takes up too many evenings" he might equally have been addressing this aspect of commons.

But, third, the reason it takes up so many evenings isn't just because it's tricky partitioning out tasks. It's also because people disagree on fundamental details. When the benefits of collective work – such as sharing a plough team – obviously outweigh the disadvantages, people willingly swallow their differences and find ways to work together. But when it comes to personally assembled and specifically crafted inputs or outputs (on my multi-household farm this includes compost heaps, split kindling, chainsaws, scythes, certain crops and living spaces) the benefits of personal autonomy usually win the day. This is a consistent finding from numerous peasant societies worldwide.

Fourth and finally, coming back to the prospect of evening meetings, when work is organised collectively some people's voices usually carry more weight than others. This can hold not only in relation to obvious social differences, such as the relative weight accorded to women's voices compared to men's, or those with greater political status and authority compared to those with less, but also in relation to individual personalities.

For example, the people who have most aggressively disputed with me my reservations about collective work and insisted on the unqualified superiority of co-operation have (without exception) been men of such abrasive disposition that they can barely compose so much as a tweet on the matter without resorting to aggressive putdowns. It seems ironic in view of their insistence on humanity's fine-tuned abilities to get along, but I'm not sure it is. The people likely to gain most from collective organisation are the ones with the loudest voices who are most practiced in the arts of domination and best able to get others to dance to their tune, perhaps without even realising that this is what they're doing (human communities always seem the most beautifully functional wholes from the privileged vantage point



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of their centre). These are likewise the kind of people who go into politics, or in peasant societies become the self-appointed custodians of the commons. Those of quieter voice face the choice of subordinating themselves to the dominants or spending a lot of precious energies trying to defuse them.

Or, when they're able, of walking away. Imagine justifying your farm enterprise to the busybodies on your local authority planning board not once or twice during your farming career, but on an almost daily basis. What applies to planning boards also applies to allotment associations, manorial courts or village soviets – the 'big man' politics of personal domination transcends the specific colour of the political regime. And so, for all the reasons discussed above, it's hard to overstress the appeal in peasant societies of autonomy. In societies where physical escape may not be easy, juridical escape is keenly sought – the ideal of 'three acres and a cow' of one's own (or, as one of my correspondents prefers, 'five acres and a cow and a donkey').

Household Farming

But this ideal itself is also a collective one. People in peasant societies rarely live on a landholding in hermetical isolation. Instead, they usually share a household or a hearth with a small group of other people and work with them to provision the household. In some ways, the hearth is a commons in microcosm, and faces similar problems. But before looking at the problems, let's consider the advantages of hearth-based farming.

Most importantly, household production is self-limiting in a way that commercial production for wider markets rarely is. The farm household defines its needs for itself, works to meet them, then stops. There is no inherent tendency to increasing production and profit (in fact, 'profit' has little meaning on the household farm), and this is important in our present populous world increasingly poisoned by the consequences of such increase.⁷

Another way of saying this is that costs and benefits of production are internalised by the farm household. The economic growth from which we supposedly benefit in modern capitalist societies too often comes from the immiseration of other people

somewhere else, or the destruction of wild ecosystems and the drawdown of nonrenewable resources. But on the household farm, the heavier work demanded to grow productivity is work you have to do yourself, and the ecological destruction it wreaks is on land you have to husband. So an important part of the self-limitation of the household farm is the kind of direct economic and ecological feedback that's sorely missing in capitalist society – there is no incentive to destroy the ecological basis of your own livelihood, nor to immiserate yourself in pursuit of a larger one.

An implication of this household self-limitation is that, although the household farm is inevitably integrated into a wider community in numerous ways, it usually guards its autonomy of labour quite jealously, which is one reason why commons are an extra and often relatively minor feature of the working landscape in peasant societies. The CPE difficulties of a commons are one thing, but so is the loss of labour autonomy it involves. In peasant societies, kitchen gardens and arable fields whose flourishing responds mostly to individual labour deployment are rarely organised fundamentally as commons.

Household Responsibility

The reader may notice that these virtues of the household farm I'm extolling sound rather like the justifications for private property and private markets invoked in orthodox economics and right-wing politics, with their emphasis on making people bear the consequences of their own actions – reaping the rewards for their industry, and the punishments for their folly. In modern societies where the monopolisation of capital in few hands and speculative returns on investment deny most people significant economic autonomy, such arguments for private initiative easily become victim-blaming exercises that see the poor and powerless as the authors of their own misery.

But in certain peasant or household farming societies where people do potentially enjoy such autonomy, there's a stronger case for centring economic self-responsibility and ecological feedback on people and their households. In these situations, there's no need for abstract and moralistic political ideologies about individual responsibility and the good life. People create their own institutions, typically a mix of private property and commons, an autonomy-in-community that enables it. It's no coincidence that China's post-Mao economic dynamism started with a bottom-up peasant activism later co-opted by the state under the term 'household responsibility'.⁸

Household responsibility has been ubiquitous throughout global history, often in peasant societies wholly or largely untouched by the capitalist world. So when the eminent analyst of household farming Robert Netting wrote "Where land is a scarce good that can be made to yield continuously and reliably over the long term by intensive methods, rights approximating those of private ownership will develop" we need to look at it through a different lens to the one we use when considering how private property functions in modern capitalist societies.⁹

Capitalist societies are geared to the accumulation of financial capital, which is put into the private hands of a few, whereas in the kind of societies Netting is talking about private property rights are widely distributed in the hands of many household farmers, while 'capital' operates more as the specific forms of working capital the household needs to build and maintain the farm and a decent way of life, and transfer it to the next generation. The sense is more usufructuary – the household 'uses the fruit' of the land, but doesn't prioritise financial returns from it or appropriate it as a primarily financial asset.

Unfortunately, perhaps due to the persistence of outdated 19th century thinking about 'primitive communism' and the recent

origins of private property, we're still saddled with the notion on the left that private property in any form is the root of all evil. But as I discuss in more detail in *A Small Farm Future* – and indeed as anyone who's sought planning permission for an agricultural dwelling well knows – private property involves a bundle of distinct rights, some of which can be quite enabling of low-impact smallholding, and some of which remain resolutely within the control of the wider community, with its planning boards or other structures of collective local power.

Retaining such collective rights over land is absolutely necessary for a fair society. But everything depends on who controls them and for what purposes. Usufruct is all very well, but the devil is in the detailed politics of defining and allocating usage rights. Much of the history of peasant societies can be told in terms of the conflicts over these rights, the fight for household autonomy over land, and the danger of losing control of it to more powerful players. I'd suggest this is true pretty much regardless of the flavour that politics takes. Wherever political power is invested – in a village council or soviet, a liberal democracy, an autocratic state purportedly ruling on behalf of 'the people', or in a local landlord class – from a peasant perspective there's an ever-present danger that there will be a 'big man' politics associated with it that will remove their autonomy. But in certain perhaps unusual situations the opposite can be true and all of these seats of power can be supportive of peasant autonomy. Many of the premodern agricultural commons in Europe whose loss we lament today arose out of collaboration between local peasant cultivators (usually the better off ones), aristocracies and the state.¹⁰

Future Peasantries

We may soon be entering another unusual situation of this sort where there will be scope for creating peasant autonomies. The immediate precipitating factors will be climate change, energy descent, soil crises, water crises and political crises connected with the inability of capitalist nation-states to deliver expected levels of welfare to their citizenries, all of which are likely to fuel large-scale migration within and between countries, mostly to places tolerably well suited to intensive horticulture. Land will be a scarce good and people will garden it intensively. The emphasis will not be on 'saving' labour, but on increasing the productivity, diversity and resilience of local agrarian economies through various means, including intensifying the application of newly abundant labour to the land.

So by the lights of the quotation from Robert Netting above, it's likely that in these situations property will mostly be small-scale, privately-owned and household-operated. This is particularly so given that most people will lack deep local roots, so the who's in/who's out logic of traditional agrarian commons will be ill-suited to the situation. Such commons will develop in time, but in the short-term the commons that really matter for creating fair access to land will be ones that can create access to smallholdings for all-comers. They will have to be apparently paradoxical 'commons of private property', allocating cropland equitably to private households in 'tight' farming situations where pressure on land is high.

More than one reviewer of *A Small Farm Future* has commented that ecological and political crisis might as easily result in the authoritarian retrenchment of centralised nation states rather than their eclipse, and that widespread access to land will only be won through class conflict against landed interests. I accept these points, and in fact made them myself in the book *sotto voce*. Authoritarian retrenchment is likely, but won't provide stable solutions to present crises, so in many places will probably lose its grip on local affairs and will not endure. Between the smooth power of the centralised modern state and the chaotic lawlessness



A romantic view of teamwork and community in the fields at harvest time.

of ‘collapse’ there’s a wide spectrum of political possibilities. It’s worth contemplating the point on that spectrum involving semi-autonomous, low energy, local, agrarian societies responsible for providing for themselves most of the resources they need for daily life, including their politics.

To achieve such societies there will have to be ‘class’ conflict over access to land, whose result isn’t foreordained. But in most places I doubt it will be the kind of class conflict still often heralded on the left, where the political activism of the most downtrodden somehow generates society-wide revolutionary renewal that unlocks the treasury of capital for all without the need for hard and socially complicated graft in the fields and workshops.

Instead, I think we’ll see more localised, more chaotic, more populist reconfigurations as capital melts away, where the interests of the disparate, displaced majority who have no access to land will contest mostly with the interests of the few who hold a lot of it. The ideal outcome for this kind of populism – none too different than for certain strands of libertarian leftism – is that national, ethnic and other such historical identifications will be superseded by a shared socioeconomic interest in accessing ‘land for the tiller’ in new historical circumstances entirely different from the ones that generated older historical identities. If it succeeds, the outcome of this popular conflict for the majority could be successful access to smallholdings and the creation of the kind of peasant society I’ve been describing.

It’s a long shot, I admit. But, as I see it, it’s a shorter one than every other scheme for sustainable and just social renewal. As with all societies, small farm societies of the future will involve numerous tensions and points of conflict, although the ones they face as they wrestle with the decline and death of capitalism are unlikely to be the same as the ones faced by small farm societies that wrestled with its birth and development. Some schools of thought consider peasantries as inherently unstable, apt to differentiate into landowners and labourers, but this conceals a more complex reality and has usually only been true in modern

situations of economic growth and capital penetration (and sometimes not even then). The dynamics of new peasantries emerging in situations of economic contraction and capital decline are unlikely to be the same. So in the present world historical moment there’s a good case for addressing ourselves to the challenges of creating small farm societies and keeping them convivial and integrated, without importing too much baggage from the way those challenges played out in past circumstances of capitalist growth and colonial domination.

The F Word

So far, I haven’t said anything about the composition of the households doing the household farming. That’s probably as it should be. It’s not for me to say who other people should choose to share their fields, hearths or bedrooms with. What matters is that people do share them, work together to furnish their household, and stop when the furnishing is adequate.

Nevertheless, it’s noticeable that in many historic peasant societies worldwide, households often comprise an adult female/male couple and their children. In fact, this is also true in the decidedly non-peasant society of contemporary Britain: in 2019, over 80 percent of the population lived in a ‘family’ (defined as a co-habiting adult couple with or without co-resident children, or a lone adult with children), the great majority of them occupying a single household, and the great majority of co-habiting couples being ‘opposite sex’, to use the official terminology.¹¹ In modern Britain, and in every other historical society, people participate in and rely upon wider social networks of kin and non-kin than the occupants of their household, but small, kin-based households based predominantly upon opposite-sex adult cohabitation are historically ubiquitous.

I want to be absolutely clear I am not arguing that this or any other given type of household or family structure is historically ‘correct’ and ‘ought’ to be followed, nor that the demands of self-reliant household farming favour any particular type of family

structure or gender relations. But it's still necessary to consider family and kinship relationships in local agrarian societies of the future. Unfortunately, it's a difficult discussion to have. Even though family relationships are a deep social force and a powerful feature of most people's lives, when it steps onto the political stage the concept of the family too easily becomes a caricatured hero or villain in a political tug of war.

Broadly, the political right makes a particular version of 'the' family the basic building block of a gendered, heteronormative, hierarchical vision of social stability, while the political left opposes all such attempts to make 'the patriarchal family' a building block for anything – the definite article in both cases hinting at the simplifications involved. Like another well-known 'f' word, 'family' is a political F bomb that only seems to accentuate feeling and entrench division.

I take no view as to what 'the' family in the household farms of the future should look like, and I'd hope that people will be able to experiment with endless possibilities for creating households and family structures within local farming communities. All the same, however plausible critiques of the "toxic, totalitarian prominence of the couple" and the need for women's liberation "from the confines of marriage, the family and compulsory heterosexuality"¹² might be, it remains true that many people opt for heterosexual coupledness even in highly mobile, marketised and individualistic modern capitalist societies where that choice is far from obligatory. It seems unlikely this will change in less marketised household farming societies of the future with a heavier loading on the household as the key unit of production. So inasmuch as women indeed are confined or oppressed by marriage and 'the' family, then gender equity becomes a vital political concern in relation to household farming societies of the future.

But even if people actively try to avoid grounding future local agrarian societies in kin relationships, I think it's likely they'll end up reinventing kinship over time. The late anthropologist Marshall Sahlins defined kinship as "mutuality of being", where kinsfolk "participate intrinsically in each other's existence".¹³

So kinship is about living other people's lives long-term within yours, participating in the births, deaths and relationships, the joys and sorrows, of your kinsfolk. It doesn't matter much if these people are considered biological or 'blood' kin. It does matter that you eat with them, work with them and/or care for them, and establish a clear, ongoing *modus operandi* in respect of long-term mutuality.

All of this can apply to non-kin such as friends, neighbours, colleagues or fellow members of an intentional community, but the difference in practice is that people in these categories can usually walk away from the relationship with little cost if they choose. The essence of kinship is that it's not so easy to walk away. Of course, people do walk away from their families, but the pain of family estrangement that fills the agony columns of the newspapers suggests that usually it's not easy. Underlying this is a sense that there are affinities between people in kinship roles that should usually be nurtured, that the roles (sibling, spouse, parent etc.) are ultimately more important in society than whatever specific difficulties and tensions may exist between given incumbents, and that the roles extend outwards (to cousins, in-laws, clan fellows etc.), incorporating large numbers of people within a locally meaningful 'space' of kinship that organises much social interaction and isn't easily dispensable.

This kinship space has weakened somewhat in modern capitalist societies where work, residence, neighbours and friends loom larger, although family relationships remain surprisingly robust. In Britain in 2016, 2 million adults received unpaid informal

care from other adults, the majority from a parent, spouse or child, and more from women than from men.¹⁴ One argument is that this is how capitalism offloads costs, and that the government should provide better, less gender-skewed welfare services. Another argument, which isn't necessarily incompatible with the first, is that caring for other people and specifically for kinsfolk is what people do, involving the mutuality of being that makes us human.

In small farm societies lacking the abundant cheap capital and energy necessary to create the employment, infrastructures, mobilities and bureaucratised welfare services of modern societies, kin networks are likely to be more important. We see this in examples from numerous peasant societies. Historian of medieval England Rosamond Faith remarks "As so much depended on others, peasant farmers could not afford to trust anyone who was not of good reputation"¹⁵ – and kin networks provide a handy idiom, shortcut and safeguard for reputation. So it seems to me likely that if local agrarian societies of the future are lacking in this idiom, they'll soon reinvent it. Kin relations aren't easily avoided.

Hearthfasting

Let me reprise my argument so far to get to the main difficulty with household farming. In a climate and energy-challenged future with limited ability to mobilise capital, it's likely there will be a turn to small-scale farming and horticulture geared to local self-reliance. Given the pressure on cultivable land, it's likely that the main productive unit will be the household or 'hearth'.

There will also be commons, but these will usually be less significant for the household's total output than the work it directs itself because of the need to intensify household labour, because of various difficulties with the efficiency of commons in this kind of 'tight' farming situation, and because of the desire for autonomy. It's likely that most households will be organised through kin relations – as indeed have been most households of the small farm past and of the non-farming, urban-industrial present – and it's likely that many of these kin-based households will be built around a co-habiting woman and man, and their children.

Again, to be clear, I'm not saying that this is how things ought to be, but how things probably will be. All the same, there are certain aspects of it that may be desirable. One of them is the renewable, self-limiting productivity of the household mentioned above in the face of ecological constraint. Another may be the richness of local relationships. A lot of people lament the loss of 'community' in modern life, and the essence of community is non-optional relationships with kin and neighbours (immediate and more distant) that aren't easily escapable. But the obvious downside of this is the danger of oppressive relationships within the household. This danger attends every kind of household, including ones built around same-sex couples or non-kin intentional communities. So although I'm drawing on gender issues for illustration, the point goes wider. In societies where households loom large as socioeconomic units, so too does the danger of intimate violence within the household.

Still, specifically gendered violence within small farm households is surely a significant concern. The way an oppressively patriarchal family farm works is similar to the way an oppressively dysfunctional commons works. Essentially, conception, planning and execution is split between different people, with the CP largely in the hands of the powerful (men) and most of the E in the hands of the less powerful (women), with the rewards falling inequitably and perhaps also male control operating more generically than just in the organisation of specific tasks.



A family topping and tailing swedes for sheep fodder in the 1880s.

There have been many ways women have challenged and transformed such patriarchal structures across global history, but the one that gets most emphasis in modern 'western' societies is exit, or at least potential exit. Just as people mitigate the potentially oppressive nature of the commons through seeking household autonomy, so have women mitigated the potentially oppressive nature of household relationships through seeking individual autonomy via such things as accessing divorce, education, fertility control, property ownership, financial independence, paid employment, voting rights and human rights.

Obviously, I support these autonomies, but there are some difficulties in realising them for small farm societies. Without abundant capital and energy, it's not easy to build the large institutional alternatives to a local household farming society that make them readily achievable. Indeed, avoiding the ecological drawbacks of abundant capital and energy is a principal advantage of a household farming society, but the risk of patriarchal control is high. Another problem is that while household exit from the domination of the commons may be feasible in peasant societies, individual exit from the domination of the household isn't so easy, not least because it's hard to generate an adequate livelihood as an individual in a low energy, low capital small farm society.

So safeguarding women's rights and other rights within households in small farm societies is vital, but also challenging. At the same time, there's a mirror to this problem – men without households can bring their own challenges in peasant societies where state control is weak. This was explicitly recognised in early medieval English ideas about the *heordfæst*: a society where men are mostly 'hearth-fast', attached to a farm household, poses

fewer threats to the general safety and wellbeing of its members than a society rife with unattached and underemployed men with a point to prove.¹⁶ Finding ways that both women and men can be attached to a household that cares for them and honours their individuality, while also channelling it, is difficult. But household farming societies haven't always failed completely in the task historically.

Ghosts, Politics and Kinship

Building the basis for creating such caring rather than oppressive low impact, small farm households appropriate to present times is a key challenge. If I can't claim to have solved it, I plead in my defence that I'm not alone. Patriarchy and other forms of oppression have remained stubbornly alive across all kinds of societies. It would be fanciful to think there are any simple or foolproof solutions.

All the same, there's a place we can look for mitigating these oppressions. That place is politics. A banally obvious point, perhaps, but I want to suggest a particular kind of politics that could work in a future household farming society as a complement or alternative mode to the kinds of local kinship I've just been describing. Kinship looks to erase differences, emphasise commonalities and create a sense of a harmonious social world. This has its advantages, but it tends to bury social power, gender inequalities and other such uncomfortable truths. Political relations in a congenial small farm society would have to act as a counterweight to kin relations, identifying and transforming tensions and differences.

I won't dwell here on the shape of that politics. In *A Small Farm Future* I briefly discuss the traditions of civic republicanism as particularly apposite for small farm societies of the future. A key attribute of civic republicanism is the existence of a public sphere, where a citizenry of equal standing tries to resolve issues through reasoned argument rather than the exercise of social power. Recent writings on the possibilities for restorative culture are a less explicitly political version of similar ideas.

A case in point is Eve Rodsky's discussion about the politics of CPE and its failures, mentioned above. Although I applied her analysis to problems with commons, which it nicely illuminates, Rodsky isn't writing directly about commons at all but about female-male domestic relationships, where she argues that women usually shoulder a heavier CPE burden for household work than men in ways that men rarely notice or implicitly value.

By bringing this hidden labour into the open and renegotiating the domestic workload on the assumption that men's time is not more valuable than women's, it can be possible to create a better functioning and less resentment-filled relationship or 'domestic commons'. But in view of the gendered histories of labour and domesticity, this probably does require a wider public sphere to make reasonable the proposition that women's time is as important as men's.

Wendell Berry argues that local communities are the necessary intermediary between the alienation of do-as-I-please individualism and the legalistic *force majeure* of centralised states and their associated publics.¹⁷ For him, communities provide the firm foundation of local custom and practice on which good social relations – including good gender relations – must be built authentically from the ground up. While this may ideally be true, too often the politics of local community replicates the don't-rock-the-boat politics of household and kinship, conniving at rather than challenging its oppressions. A more transformative idea of local public deliberation is called for, where anyone can say "my voice will be heard, however important you think you are, and however much you'd prefer not to hear it".

There's a risk my argument involves a 'ghost in the machine', implausibly invoking the public sphere as a stopgap concept to rescue gender relations or other points of social tension from oppressive content in the small farm societies I'm describing. Yet every plausible public politics involves a ghost in the machine, because the essence of politics consists in identifying inherent conflicts or tensions in existing structures and attempting to overcome them with new approaches that inevitably borrow from the ghost of the old, albeit in different contexts (e.g. that if all men are created equal, then perhaps all men and women are created equal too, which was Mary Wollstonecraft's pioneering feminist and republican critique of Rousseau). A future challenge lies in trying to retain this sense of differentiated public deliberation in small farm societies, rather than surrendering political autonomy to the notion that communities, classes, market forces, elders or charismatic leaders know best.

So against the conservatism of kinship and community, I propose the public. And against mechanical political approaches committed to the idea of some objective, underlying process like class consciousness or market discipline as the true motor of social progress, I propose only ghosts, with no guarantees that a small farm future will avoid patriarchy or other forms of domination.

But then nor, I think, can any other political philosophy plausibly make the same guarantee. As I see it, there's no machine, but only ghosts to guide our hands in working with the crooked timber of humanity. But ghosts can be powerful, and a patriarchal peasant future isn't foreordained.

Inheritance

There remains a problem of practical politics faced by all societies, but perhaps especially peasant societies. This is the issue of inheritance and intergenerational transfer. Creating a tolerable livelihood in a low-energy, low-capital society involves learning often supremely difficult foraging, farming and/or craft skills, and acquiring the resources from previous generations to practice them. The main way peasant societies have dealt with this is through children growing up in, and learning how to participate in a productive household, and at some point inheriting land and farm property from older generations.

The difficulties involved in this are enormous, but the same goes for intergenerational transfer in all societies. Probably the main difficulty with property inheritance is that it tends to reinforce inequalities of wealth and status over time. Through bad luck, bad choices or naked theft, the sins of the fathers and mothers are visited on the inheritance of the children. Peasant life historically has too often involved a grim struggle not to slide down the social order into poverty or dependence, and multi-generational strategies for rising up it.

Modern societies have moved some distance from this local politics of family and land, with redistributive centralised welfare states, formally equal citizenries and the engines of industry promising an ever-growing monetised wealth rather than a limited landed one down the generations. But given that the poorest 50 percent of the global population owns only about one percent of global wealth, while up to a third are physically undernourished, it can hardly be said this modern alternative is working out well.

As economic growth falters and the various other crises I've mentioned bite harder, the prospects for redistributive, growth-oriented, centralised welfarist states surviving at all seem low.¹⁸ At some point in this trajectory, the idea of being a hearth-fast smallholder may come to seem a more plausible route to a decent livelihood for most people than hitching one's fortunes to the sputtering industrial growth engines of the modern central state.

In *A Small Farm Future* I toyed with ideas like high inheritance taxes as a way of preventing social inequalities, rentier landlordism and the economic effects of historical injustices such as racism from stifling opportunities in societies unable to buy off their populations with the promise of future fiscal growth. Others call for the nationalisation of landownership. Such ideas might work where citizenries have collective commitment and a strong faith in the redistributive goodwill of the state.

In England today, where corporate/government linkages already represent a land nationalisation of a sort, and where radically redistributive governments have been in power for perhaps five out of the last seventy-five years, I wouldn't personally wish to hand yet more power to the Boris Johnsons or Jacob Rees-Moggs of this world to determine how people might access and use land, nor to any centralised revolutionary politics divorced from the particularities of land stewardship. Various forms of localised co-operativism seem more attractive alternatives, but then we get into the minutiae of who gets to be the gatekeepers of local usufruct discussed earlier. In the face of such uncertainties, peasant farmers historically have often opted warily for the tried and tested routines of family inheritance and private landownership when they can.

Individual and Collective

Finally, the notions of property, family and inheritance often articulated within peasant societies can seem disarmingly conservative. Radical politics in modern urban-industrial societies



is usually both more individualist and more collectivist – more individualist in its critiques of family, gender, heteronormativity and the ‘couple norm’ in favour of personal freedom, and more collectivist in its belief that propertyless joint economic endeavour on a mass scale is feasible and liberatory.

I do have some sympathies with this politics, especially its individualist elements (I find its collectivist elements unconvincing in view of the problems of CPE failure and ‘big man’ domination). There’s definitely a place for constructive, radical critique of the peasantisation process I’ve sketched here. But it would have to venture into territory where existing radical politics in the west seldom dares to go: a future world of probable economic and industrial decline and state contraction, with limited energy availability, widespread migration and ruralisation, and the need for many or most people to engage in labour-intensive local food and fibre production finely calibrated to the limited potentialities of the local landscape.

We know that societies of the past have experienced such pressures, and sometimes thrived in the process. Generally, they responded through strong but limited commons, family-based household farming involving bundles of private rights, family inheritance, labour intensification and land intensification. I think it’s worth attending carefully to how and why they did this before assuming there’s nothing we can learn from them in the face of contemporary problems.

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