

but not on free trade; on forests but not on logging; on climate but not on automobiles. Agenda 21 — the Summit's "action plan" — covered clauses on "enabling the poor to achieve sustainable livelihoods" but none on enabling the rich to do so; a section on women but none on men. By such deliberate evasion of the central question of how economic expansion poses for human societies, UNCED condemned itself to irrelevance even before the first preparatory meeting got under way.

The best that can be said for the Earth Summit is that it made visible the vested interests standing in the way of the moral economies which local people, who daily face the consequences of environmental degradation, are seeking to re-establish. The spectacle of the great and the good at UNCED casting about for "solutions" that will keep their power and standards of living intact has confirmed the scepticism of those whose fate and livelihoods were being determined. The demands from many grassroots groups around the world are not for more "management" — a fashionable word at Rio — but for agrarian reform, local control over local resources, and power to veto developments and to run their own affairs. For them, the question is not *how* their environment should be managed — they have the experience of the past as their guide — but *who* will manage it and in *whose* interest. They reject UNCED's rhetoric of a world where all humanity is united by a common interest in survival, and in which conflicts of race, class, gender and culture are characterized as of secondary importance to humanity's supposedly common goal. Although they acknowledge that a peasant in Bihar shares the same planet as a corporate executive, they view the suggestion that the two share a common future as farcical. Instead, they ask, "Whose common future is to be sustained?" Their struggle is not to win greater power for the market or the state, but to reinstate their communities as sources of social and political authority. *Whose Common Future?* is an attempt to describe the background to that struggle.

*The Ecologist, Whose Common Future?*

*Reclaiming the Commons.*

1993; New Society, Philadelphia.

# 1 THE COMMONS

## *Where the Community has Authority*

To Western eyes, the streets and lanes of Bangkok, like those of many cities in the South, may seem a strange mixture of order and chaos. In the shadow of shining high-rise hotels, apartment and office blocks, slum dwellers squat in dark, seemingly random collections of shacks near railway lines, on construction sites, and over swamps. In front of rows of concrete shophouses and air-conditioned banks, carts and stalls selling noodles, dried squid, curries and iced drinks jostle for kerb-space with amulet-sellers, fruit-vendors and beggars. Souvenir merchants block pedestrian traffic by jamming their tables up against those of purveyors of cheap baby clothes, leather-goods, sweets and dubious track shoes. Streetcorner vendors show open contempt for the solemnities of intellectual property by loudly inviting passers by to invest in fake Rolex watches, pirated rock music cassettes and bogus Lacoste shirts. Under the eyes of bored policemen, pedestrians jaywalk across roads congested with roaring, grinding, smoke-belching trucks, buses and motorcycles.

The hints of anarchy in these scenes may trouble the Western mind. Who are all these people raising pigs and drying clothes next to the railroad tracks? Why don't the police do something about the jaywalkers, the hawkers and the polluting vehicles? What is the law here? *Is there a law here?* Why doesn't anybody seem to know what it is? A Westerner setting up a food stall on the kerb of a busy street might have an uneasy sense of encroaching on public space, enforced by a worry about bureaucrats and police. Not the Bangkok vendors! Like the slum dwellers, they seem ready to take all the space they can get. Of course, now and then the police clear them off. But this hardly seems to be out of a real concern for public order. More likely the World Bank or a foreign dignitary is arriving for a meeting and some high official, fearful of losing face, has sent

out an order to spruce up the streets. In any case, as soon as the police are gone the vendors trickle back. In a week things are back to normal.

### A HIDDEN STRUCTURE

Longer acquaintance with Bangkok may shift the Westerner's view. Beneath the seeming vacuum of public order and responsibility, the outlines of a different kind of moral and environmental order begin to appear. It becomes clear that while public space may not always be respected, informal boundaries are well-marked within communities of people who know each other. In the slum or along the row of street vendors, anyone who takes up too much space, or the wrong space, or leaves too much of a mess, is brought back into line by neighbours. The community may not possess much space, and has little opportunity to make it clean and attractive, but it makes the most of what it has. And because no one group is powerful enough to usurp too much space for itself, everybody has a share.

External borders are defended as well. When the police undertake a sweep of sidewalk vendors, furious mutterings spread down the lines of stalls. "This is our turf! We've been here for years! What right do the authorities have to evict us?" Elsewhere, outrage may lead to more organized resistance. In an area of orchards nestled in a bend of the Chao Phraya River near the city centre, landowners and squatters join together to protest the proposed conversion of their land into a "public park", pointing out that they and their ancestors have kept the place green for over a century. In a slum, when lines of policemen step forward to begin dismantling squatters' homes, children rush forward to grasp their legs. Shaking them off, the police advance a few steps further only to come up against a phalanx of angry, taunting women, baring their breasts to shame them into retreat. Behind them, in reserve, wait the men of the community. People may recognize the city's law as a fact rather than as a social norm, and value customs more than contracts, but their sense of rights and justice is sharp.

The order people seek is seldom a public one. Few are overly concerned about obligations toward unseen strangers. Few set much store by anonymous and formal words typed or printed on headed paper, or on proclamations that this or that area is "public property". Rather, people try to establish personal, face-to-face connections. Strangers feel each other out to find out where they stand. Who is the most powerful person here? Who the most senior? Do I know any of their relatives? Where can I carve out a space for my family? How much can I enlarge it by cultivating the right people and making the right alliances? How much can my family and friends get away with before we offend our neighbours? As new acquaintances jockey for position on the pavements, in the alleys, in the communities and restaurants and meeting rooms, invisible grid-lines are drawn, connections made, and unspoken rules laid down. As relationships become established and power is balanced, interdependence grows and benevolence is exchanged for respect. Insiders are distinguished from outsiders, and consideration and love flourish among familiars. Indulgences quickly become rights which cannot be violated without denying the growing personal ties themselves. It is in these rights and ties, more than in the formal machinery of the law or an inculcated sense of "the public", that ordinary people, and even police and businesses, place their faith.

### ORIGINS, CHANGE, REVIVAL

This order does not emerge from nowhere. It recreates in broken form a long tradition visible more clearly in the countryside: a tradition of the commons.<sup>1</sup> There, until recently, the category of "the public" barely existed. In day-to-day practice, it was above all the community which exercised dominion over time, space, agriculture and language. Woods and streams feeding local irrigation systems remained intact because anyone degrading them had to brave the wrath of neighbours deprived of their livelihood, and no one was powerful enough to do so. Everybody was subject to everybody else's personal scrutiny and sanctions.

Bangkok twists this tradition. Benefiting from the growth of the state and "economic development", élites have gained the power to usurp larger and larger domains of common space — streets, clean air, green space — without having to concern themselves with the reaction of others. Webs of personal relationships have been stretched or frayed, losing their anchorage to a particular locality, reducing people's ability to defend their space and make it liveable. People whose livelihoods have been taken away by this process fall into increasingly abject dependency on those who have taken it away. At the same time, new webs of personal relationships ramify across the upper levels of society. Dynastic, commercial and military alliances concentrate and reconcentrate power largely beyond the ability of ordinary people to place checks upon it.

In this sense, disorder in Bangkok originates less in the huddled shacks of the slums or the haphazard rows of street vendors than in the forces — partly foreign — that lie behind the modern public and private high-rise buildings, fast-food outlets and brightly-coloured billboards which look so reassuring and orderly to the Western visitor. Indeed, it is in *commons* such as those found in slums and on street vendors' turf that the order which can safeguard the interests of ordinary Bangkokians and their environment is largely found. When subsistence is at stake, they often improvise or reconstruct rough-and-ready new commons regimes rather than pin their hopes on either the market economy or public institutions. For better or worse, the commons is the social and political space where things get done and where people derive a sense of belonging and have an element of control over their lives. In Bangkok, as in many places throughout the South, when the commons is gone, there is little that can take its place.

#### AN EVERYDAY REALITY

The tale of Bangkok and its broken commons may seem remote from Western experience. For many people in the West, the word

"commons" carries an archaic flavour: that of the medieval village pasture which villagers did not own but where they had rights to graze their livestock. Yet, for the vast majority of humanity, the commons is an everyday reality. Ninety per cent of the world's fishers rely on small inshore marine commons, catching over half the fish eaten in the world today.<sup>2</sup> In the Philippines, Java and Laos, irrigation systems are devised and run by villagers themselves, the water rights being distributed through rules laid down by the community.<sup>3</sup> Even in the North, there are communities which still manage their forests and fisheries jointly (lobster harvesters in Maine, for example, or forest communities in many areas of Finland), bestowing on themselves the power to divide up what they regard as "their" patches of sea or soil among their own communities and kin.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, new commons are constantly being born, even among what might seem the most fragmented communities. In the inner cities of the US, black communities' dialects express concepts that the language taught in state schools cannot touch. At toxic dump sites and around proposed nuclear plants in France, Switzerland, and elsewhere, people have insisted on their "rights" to keep the earth and air around their communities free from the threat of poisonous and radioactive substances, damning the economic and "public" rationality which dictates that their homes are "objectively" the best locations for waste sinks. For them, the sentiments expressed by an elder of a Brazilian tribe, despite the religious language in which they are couched, cannot be completely unrecognizable:

"The only possible place for the Krenak people to live and to re-establish our existence, to speak to our Gods, to speak to our nature, to weave our lives, is where God created us. We can no longer see the planet that we live upon as if it were a chess-board where people just move things around."<sup>5</sup>

#### THE COMMONS: NEITHER PUBLIC NOR PRIVATE

Despite its ubiquity, the commons is hard to define. It provides sustenance, security and independence, yet (in what many West-

erners feel to be a paradox) typically does not produce commodities. Unlike most things in modern industrial society, moreover, it is neither private nor public: neither commercial farm nor communist collective, neither business firm nor state utility, neither jealously-guarded private plot nor national or city park. Nor is it usually open to all. The relevant local community typically decides who uses it and how.<sup>6</sup>

The unlimited diversity of commons also makes the concept elusive. While all commons regimes involve joint use, what they define access to is bewilderingly varied: for example, trees, forests, land, minerals, water, fish, animals, language, time, radio wavelengths, silence, seeds, milk, contraception and streets.

Trying to find some order in this field, some theorists claim that the commons are "resources for which exclusion is difficult" and boundary-setting not worthwhile, or which "are needed by all but whose productivity is diffuse rather than concentrated, low or unpredictable in yield, and low in unit value": for example, seasonally inundated swamplands in Borneo, moorland in England, semi-arid rangeland in Botswana or Ethiopia, and scrubby *maquis* or *garrigues* in France and Spain.<sup>7</sup> Yet smaller, more easily divisible, and more highly productive and defensible arable lands are often also treated as communal property. In traditional Malaysia and Laos as well as Ethiopia and much of the rest of contemporary Africa, plots have been traditionally allocated to individuals by the community, which nevertheless reserve the authority to redistribute them if they are not used for subsistence. In such cases of usufruct, common rights can be defined as the right not to the land or the soil, which rests with the community, but the right to what the soil brings forth over a particular period.

Other theorists suggest that the commons are jointly-used resources whose use by one person may subtract from the welfare of the next, and which are thus potentially subject to crowding, depletion and degradation. Yet while this may be true of a great range of cases, genetic diversity or knowledge of contraception (to cite just two examples of "resources" often maintained by commons regimes) are not "subtractible" in this way.

## SOCIAL ORGANIZATION IS THE KEY

More fruitful than such attempts to define commons regimes through their domains are attempts to define them through their social and cultural organization: for example, local or group power, distinctions between members and non-members, rough parity among members, a concern with common safety rather than accumulation, and an absence of the constraints which lead to economic scarcity. Even here, however, it would be a mistake to demand too much precision. For example, what does the "local" in "local power" mean? In Shanxi province in China, communal forests were owned by villages, several villages together, or clans. In India the relevant bodies may be caste groups, while for Switzerland's city forests, it is "citizenship" (election to a given community) that counts.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, what does the "power" in "local power" consist in? Sometimes it is the power to exclude outsiders or to punish them if they abuse the commons. Often this power lays the foundation for an additional structure of internal rules, rights, duties and beliefs which mediates and shapes the community's own relationship with its natural surroundings. In Maine, for example, it is only in strongly defended territories that lobster harvesters have successfully enacted informal and formal regulations on the numbers of traps used, and elsewhere in North America there have been clear "post-fur-trade linkages between the existence of viable hunting territories and intentional conservation measures."<sup>9</sup> Sometimes the meshes of power internal to commons regimes give rise to notions of "property" or "possession", but in many cases the relevant group does not regard itself as owning, but rather as owned by, or as stewards of, water or land.

## PERCEPTIONS OF SCARCITY

A further characteristic often ascribed to the commons is that, unlike resources in the modern economy, it is "not perceived as scarce". This is not only because many things available as commons,

such as silence, air or genetic diversity, will renew themselves continually until deliberately made scarce by the encroachment of outside political actors. More importantly, the needs which many commons satisfy are not infinitely expanding. They are not determined by a growth-oriented external system producing goods and services, but rather are constantly adjusted and limited by the specific commons regime itself, whose physical characteristics remain in everyone's view. Without the race between growth and the scarcity which growth creates, there can thus be a sense of "enoughness". Even where produce from the commons is sold, the "needs" defined by consumerism and external market demand for goods and services will be subject to internal revision.

### THE WORLDLY COMMONS

Despite their resolutely local orientation and resistance to being swallowed up by larger systems, commons regimes have never been isolated in either space or time. Nor have their social organizations ever been static. Commons regimes welcome, feed upon and are fertilized by contact, and evolve just like any other social institution.<sup>10</sup> Communities maintaining commons often work out arrangements over larger geographical areas with other groups. For example, inter-village commons boundaries are acknowledged by villagers in the Munglari area of Tehri Garhwal: each village has a recognized "turf" and encroachment by other villages for fodder-collection is likely to provoke objections.<sup>11</sup> In the Philippines, competing claims to water rights among different *zanjaras*, or communal irrigation societies, have customarily been decided by inter-village councils composed of *zanjara* officers and family elders in the community.<sup>12</sup>

Systems of common rights, in fact, far from evolving in isolation, often owe their very existence to interaction and struggle between communities and the outside world. It is arguably only in reaction to invasion, dispossession or other threats to accustomed security of access that the concept of common rights emerges.

Today, such rights are evolving where access to seeds, air and other resources which were previously taken for granted are being challenged through commoditization, legal enclosure or pollution.

Existing commons regimes, too, vary continuously with changes in their natural or social environment. Property-rights systems can shift back and forth in long, short or even seasonal cycles from communal to private and back again, depending on struggles among prospective beneficiaries, ecological change, and shifts in social relationships. For example, common-field systems are instituted in some new or revived villages in Ethiopia to attract labour and people; where this succeeds the tenure system may be switched to one based on inheritance. Later on, villages may revive communal tenure.<sup>13</sup>

### DEFINING ONESELF

Each commons regime may be as different culturally from the next as all are from, say, a factory. But it is not only their cultural diversity that makes such regimes difficult to "capture" in technical or universal terms. Ivan Illich makes this point when he says that the "law establishing the commons was unwritten, not only because people did not care to write it down, but because what it protected was a reality much too complex to fit into paragraphs."<sup>14</sup> This is somewhat inexact; commons rules are sometimes written down; and where they are not, this is not so much because what they protect is complex as because the commons requires an openness, receptiveness and adaptability to the vagaries of local climate, personalities, consciousness, crafts and materials which written records cannot fully express. But Illich's point is important. What makes the commons work, like the skills of wheelwrights, surgeons or machinists, cannot easily be encoded in written or other fixed or "replicable" forms useful to cultural outsiders. These forms can make some of the workings of commons regimes "visible" to moderns but have generally functioned to transfer local power outside the community.

82 takes power over subsistence out of the hands of the less well-off. Changes in the power base of a local élite or increases in effective community size entailed by integration into a global social fabric can rapidly undermine the authority of the commons. The sense of shame or transgression so important to community controls, as well as the monitoring of violations themselves, is diluted or denatured by increase in numbers, while envy of outsiders unconstrained by those controls flourishes. At some point, "the breakdown of a community with the associated collapse in concepts of joint ownership and responsibility can set the path for the degradation of common resources in spite of abundance."<sup>35</sup>

It is precisely this process that development fuels. The expansion of modern state, international and market institutions entails a shrinking space for the commons. Today, virtually all "human communities are encapsulated within or fully integrated into larger sociopolitical systems" as are their "local systems of resource use and property rights",<sup>36</sup> making enclosure an ever-present threat. As political, social and ecological boundaries are erased, control is centralized or privatized, skills are made obsolete, people put at the service of industry or made redundant, and land is commercialized or placed under management. As their environments are destroyed or degraded, their power eroded or denied, and their communities threatened, millions are now demanding a halt to the development process. As the social activist Gustavo Esteva writes, "if you live in Rio or Mexico City, you need to be very rich or very stupid not to notice that development stinks . . . We need to say 'no' to development, to all and every form of development. And that is

that the social majorities — for whom development was great — are asking for."<sup>37</sup> For them, the struggle is to defend or create their commons and with it the rough sense of equity that flows from sharing a truly common future.

## 2 DEVELOPMENT AS ENCLOSURE

### *The Establishment of the Global Economy*

The creation of empires and states, business conglomerates and civic dictatorships — whether in pre-colonial times or in the modern era — has only been possible through dismantling the commons and harnessing the fragments, deprived of their old significance, to build up new economic and social patterns that are responsive to the interests of a dominant minority. The modern nation state has been built only by stripping power and control from commons regimes and creating structures of governance from which the great mass of humanity (particularly women) are excluded. Likewise, the market economy has expanded primarily by enabling state and commercial interests to gain control of territory that has traditionally been used and cherished by others, and by transforming that territory— together with the people themselves — into expendable "resources" for exploitation. By enclosing forests, the state and private enterprise have torn them out of fabrics of peasant subsistence; by providing local leaders with an outside power base, unaccountable to local people, they have undermined village checks and balances; by stimulating demand for cash goods, they have impelled villagers to seek an ever wider range of things to sell. Such a policy was as determinedly pursued by the courts of Aztec Mexico, the feudal lords of West Africa, by the factory-owners of Lancashire and the British Raj, as it is today by the International Monetary Fund or the Coca-Cola Corporation.

Only in this way has it been possible to convert peasants into labour for a global economy, replace traditional with modern agriculture, and free up the commons for the industrial economy. Similarly, only by atomizing tasks and separating workers from the moral authority, crafts and natural surroundings created by

their communities has it been possible to transform them into modern, universal individuals susceptible to "management". In short, only by *deliberately* taking apart local cultures and reassembling them in new forms, has it been possible to open them up to global trade.<sup>1</sup> As one advocate of development argued in the early 1960s:

"Economic development of an underdeveloped people by themselves is not compatible with the maintenance of their traditional customs and mores. A break with the latter is prerequisite to economic progress. What is needed is a revolution in the totality of social, cultural and religious institutions and habits, and thus in their psychological attitude, their philosophy and way of life. What is, therefore, required amounts in reality to social disorganization. Unhappiness and discontentment in the sense of wanting more than is obtainable at any moment is to be generated. The suffering and dislocation that may be caused in the process may be objectionable, but it appears to be the price that has to be paid for economic development: the condition of economic progress."<sup>2</sup>

To achieve that "condition of economic progress", millions have been thrown onto the human scrapheap as a calculated act of policy, their commons dismantled and degraded, their cultures denigrated and devalued and their own worth reduced to their value as labour. Seen from this perspective, the processes that now go under the rubric of "nation-building", "economic growth" and "progress" are first and foremost processes of expropriation, exclusion, denial and dispossession. In a word, of enclosure.

### ENCLOSURE IN BRITAIN

They hang the man and flog the woman  
That steal the goose from off the common,  
But let the greater villain loose  
That steals the common from the goose.

(Traditional Rhyme)

Although enclosure of commons has taken place at many isolated moments throughout world history, it was in Britain between the 15th and the 19th centuries that the phenomenon became identifiable as a historical process. It is no coincidence that the country

which gave birth to the expression "inclosure", should also be the country that spearheaded the drive towards an industrialized market economy, for the one was essential to the other.

Enclosure in Britain can be distinguished from earlier forms of expropriation and enclosure in that it did not merely involve a transfer of power from the commons to an expropriating elite, but also signalled a more profound change in the social order in two related respects. Firstly, enclosure, by redefining land as "property", gave it the status of a commodity, tradeable within a rapidly expanding market system; and as a corollary, since the majority of people were denied access to the land and forced to become wage-labourers, labour also became a tradeable commodity. Secondly, enclosure in Britain has consistently been justified by its perpetrators and apologists as "improvement". The first legal act to enforce enclosures, the Statute of Merton of 1235, spoke of the need to "approve" (ie., improve) the land in order to extract greater rent.<sup>3</sup> "Improvement" was seen as linked, if not completely synonymous, with profit in the same way that the later term "development" has come to be associated with "economic growth".

The system of "open-field" — unfenced and communally managed strips of arable land — that predominated in England throughout the Middle Ages had several advantages for the peasantry as well as disadvantages. Most importantly, it guaranteed access to the land for the bulk of the population. Although the poorer villagers were obliged to work for stipulated periods on the local Lord's land, for the rest of the time they were free to work their own plots. At the time of the *Domesday Book* census in 1086, more than half the arable land belonged to the villagers. This unfenced land was worked with varying degrees of collectivization, which allowed a certain elasticity both to the size of peasants' holdings and to the level of their labour contribution, as the size of their families changed over the years. After the harvest, the arable land became a collective pasture for villagers' stock and remained fallow during the following year. The greater part of the land consisted of meadow, heath, moorland or woodland, all of which were managed communally, and where peasants held many rights,

such as *estovers* (fuelwood), *turbary* (peat cutting) and *pannage* (turning pigs into the woods).

However, the system was not easily adaptable to change. There was no place in it for the ambitious farmer who wished to specialize in breeding sheep, or who in later centuries wished to apply more complex rotations including crops such as turnips or clover. But after the Black Death plague of 1348, which wiped out over a third of the population, the scarcity of labour and the abundance of land prompted a change in land-tenure from the bottom levels of society upward, whereby individual holdings existed alongside the open-field system, while the common pastures and woodlands remained substantially intact.

The rate of change, however, was not fast or lucrative enough for ambitious landowners who found that they could extract more value from the land by turning it over to sheep to supply the booming wool export market. Between the 14th and the 16th centuries, thousands of peasants were evicted from their holdings, while many more saw the common lands that were the basis of their independence fenced off for sheep. Other commoners found that their small plots of arable land were harder to maintain when deprived of the common pasture for cattle and were forced to sell up.

While newer tenants could be summarily evicted, those with traditional rights had recourse to the law. But the courts were invariably biased against the poor, as Bishop Latimer in 1552, testified:

"Be the poor man's cause never so manifest, the rich shall, for money, find six or seven counsellors that shall stand with subtleties and sophisms to cloak an evil matter and hide a known truth... Such boldness have these covetous cormorants that now their robberies, extortion and oppression have no end or limits, no banks can keep in their violence. As for turning the poor out of their holdings, they take it for no offence, but say their land is their own and they turn them out of their shrouds like mice. Thousands in England, through such, beg now from door to door which have kept honest houses."<sup>4</sup>

By Latimer's day, enclosure was seen to be causing a severe law-and-order problem. It had created a dispossessed proletariat of potential wage-earners, without providing any industry to employ

them. Recurrent peasant revolts and the menacing presence of large bands of beggars upon the highways persuaded the 16th century Tudor monarchs to apply legal brakes to the enclosure process, which they did with partial success.

However, the English revolution of 1649–1660 brought to power the very class of landowners that benefited from enclosure and the process recommenced in earnest. "Early in the 18th century there begins the great series of Private Acts of Enclosure, of which 4,000 in all, covering some 7,000,000 acres were passed before the General Enclosure Act of 1845. During the same period it is probable that about the same area was enclosed without application to Parliament."<sup>5</sup> By 1876, the "New Domesday Book" calculated that about 2,250 people owned half the agricultural land in England and Wales, and that 0.6 per cent of the population owned 98.5 per cent of it.<sup>6</sup>

Of these 4,000 Acts of Enclosure, two-thirds involved open fields belonging to cottagers, while one-third involved commons such as woodland and heath. Initially the impetus for enclosure was the still expanding sheep industry. But by the 19th century, as cotton began to be imported, the relative importance of wool declined, although the sheep industry continued to expand to poorer lands in Scotland, where many thousands of peasants were evicted from their homes by the most brutal means and either left to fend for themselves, or else transported to America.<sup>7</sup> In England, newer agricultural methods and more complex crop rotations, which had been developed anonymously over the previous two centuries, were now being vigorously championed by men such as "Turnip" Townshend and Arthur Young; ambitious landlords found that by enclosing and amalgamating several farms and applying these methods they could raise the rents of their lands by phenomenal amounts. The government was happy to sanction this process, since it could derive increased taxes from these higher rents, much of which went towards the costs of war against France, which in turn benefited the farmers by raising the price of food.

But although the farming methods looked good on paper, there were a number of "externalities" that the improvers had failed to



anticipate, as Arthur Young in his later life came to acknowledge.<sup>8</sup> The environmental effects, though by no means as severe as those caused by the chemical agriculture of today, were nonetheless considerable. Valuable ancient meadows were ploughed up to take short-term advantage of artificially high corn prices, and then, when prices dropped, allowed to relapse to degraded pasture,<sup>9</sup> and large amounts of heathland and forest were destroyed.<sup>10</sup> Forest land was regarded by the new breed of agriculturalists as “the nest and conservatory of sloth, idleness and misery” and many forests such as Enfield Chase in 1777, Windsor Forest in 1817 and Hainault Forest in 1851 were destroyed by parliamentary Acts of Enclosure.<sup>11</sup>

But the principal “externality” was the creation of a massive proletariat of dispossessed labourers, who could no longer feed themselves, nor afford to pay the high price of corn associated with the high land rents. This, as William Cobbett observed, was an effect that the advocates of enclosure had preferred to ignore:

“Those who are so eager for new inclosure seem to argue as if the wasteland in its present state produced nothing at all. But is this the fact? Can anyone point out a single inch of it which does not produce something and the produce of which is made use of? It goes to the feeding of sheep, of cows, of cattle of all descriptions, and . . . it helps to rear, in health and vigour, numerous families of the children of the labourers, which children, were it not for these wastes, must be crammed into the stinking suburbs of towns amidst filth of all sorts, and congregating together in the practice of every species of idleness and vice.”<sup>12</sup>

The responsibility for the upkeep of dispossessed commoners fell upon taxpayers and for a time was a considerable drain upon the economy. The eventual solution proved to lie in further liberalization of trade at home and intervention abroad. The repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 allowed free importation of cheap American wheat, while the enforced destruction of local textile industries in India and other colonies (*see* Box: King Cotton) provided work for the dispossessed multitudes at home. By 1900, British agriculture, despite the “improvements” of the previous century, was in a state of decline, whereas the industrial workers were beginning to share the rewards of development. This rise in the standard of living has been taken by apologists as a vindication of enclosure, which, even

## King Cotton and the Enclosure of Markets

The enclosure of diverse local industries and markets into a single global system was achieved largely through the medium of a handful of luxury commodities — in particular gold, sugar, tea, cotton and opium. Of these, cotton had perhaps the most far-reaching effects.

The growth of the British cotton industry was phenomenal. Before the invention of Arkwright's spinning frame in 1769, cotton was a luxury material imported in small quantities to Europe from the Orient. By 1912, Britain was importing nearly 900,000 tons of raw cotton, and exporting nearly seven billion yards of woven material each year — almost enough to provide a suit of clothes for every man, woman and child alive in the world at the time. The absurdity of shipping such a staggering quantity of material from all over the world to one island and then shipping it all out again was of no concern to the protagonists of an economic system whose only priority was profit.

The rise to dominance of cotton as a textile in the early 19th century was not due to any inherent superiority of the fibre as a textile, but to two characteristics which made it competitive in a global market. Firstly, being “a plant fibre, tough and relatively homogenous . . . where wool is organic, fickle and subtly varied in its behaviour”, it adapted more readily to mechanization and the factory system. This made it more attractive to industrialists who found the disciplining of a reluctant workforce considerably easier in the centralized factory environment than in a system where outworkers worked under their own speed at home. Secondly, it grew in the tropics, where labour was cheap and land for the taking. The importation of cotton spared land in England for food production, and labour to work in the new factories.

### Enclosure of Land

The repercussions of the cotton trade were catastrophic and affected people of almost every hue and clime. In the US, about 90,000 Cherokee Indians were evicted from their lands to make way for cotton plantations, 30,000 of them dying on the march west. The period 1784–1860 saw an eightfold increase in the number of slaves in the Southern states, specifically for the cotton plantations, an increase which came to a climax in the most bloody conflict of the 19th century, the American Civil War.

In Egypt, the ruler Mehemet Ali:

“initiated in the 1820s a program to decrease the production of grain for domestic subsistence and to increase production of the one crop that could be exported, long staple cotton . . . Peasants were also drafted in large numbers to build irrigation works and canals in order to create the hydraulic infrastructure required for cotton cultivation . . . Between 1818 and 1844, the land in the hands of the peasantry diminished from 85–90 per cent of the total land area to 56 per cent . . . In 1882, the British took over Egypt. They reinforced the pattern of cotton growing on large estates, thus laying the basis for the problems that were to plague Egypt in the 20th century”.