

Duchrow, Ulrich

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# The Commons in an Age of Uncertainty: A Review Essay

By ULRICH DUCHROW\*

ABSTRACT. Franklin Obeng-Odoom's recent work offers an alternative to both conventional economics and to what he calls the "Western left consensus." Obeng-Odoom's option involves placing justice at the center of policy regarding commons, not as a side note. Justice requires a focus on the land issue. This much is true, but Obeng-Odoom ignores the plurality of views that are critical of the dominant political economy. A successful transition to a sustainable future will make use of many cultural and religious traditions working together.

## The Right, The Left, and the Radical Alternative

*The Commons in an Age of Uncertainty: Decolonizing Nature, Economy, and Society*, by Franklin Obeng-Odoom (2021), is an ambitious project that seeks to transcend not only the conventional wisdom of neoclassical political economy but also what the author calls the "Western left consensus." The book develops a radical alternative, centered on the basic and systemic importance of land, conceptualized in the broad sense of nature itself, not in the narrow sense of a factor of production. The rest of this essay is structured around the four parts that make up this book.

Part A describes and analyzes the problem: the age of uncertainty. It is characterized by growing inequality leading to pressing social problems, particularly in the Global South. At the same time, the warming of the planet is moving towards catastrophe. Both factors

\*Professor of systematic theology, University of Heidelberg, Germany, specializing in ecumenical theology and theology-economy issues. Author of *Property for People, Not for Profit* (2004). Co-founder and co-moderator of Kairos Europa, an ecumenical grassroots network striving for economic justice together with organizations of the marginalized and with solidarity groups (secular and church-related) linking North-South and East-West with inner-European social and ecological issues. Kairos Europa together with WEED and Pax Christi founded Attac Germany. Email: ulrich.duchrow@ts.uni-heidelberg.de

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produce forced migration and extreme political movements and leaders. As Galbraith has done, Obeng-Odoom summarizes this as an “age of uncertainty” that is produced by capitalism, colonialism, and post-colonial imperialism. How can the causes of these developments be explained? One of the classical answers is Garrett Hardin’s analysis of the “tragedy of the commons,” which claims that the common use of nature leads to social and ecological problems that stem from overuse. The standard solution is a market approach that institutionalizes private property in nature. Against this, the Bloomington School of New Institutionalism, with the leading figure of Elinor Ostrom, defends the commons, but only as “common-pool resources.” Ostrom’s approach is not enough. As Obeng-Odoom (2021: 8) observes: it “overlooks the political economy of land, it is neglectful of justice, and it pays only scant attention to the social production of ecological crises.”

Obeng-Odoom is also critical of the “Western left consensus,” which proposes to collectivize everything. As a third way he proposes a consensus approach to the commons (anti-capitalist, anti-racist, anti-patriarchy) that interacts with the spheres of land, human rights (including civil, social, economic, and cultural rights), and governance by ordinary people. Obeng-Odoom (2021: 11) aspires to show how all of these concepts can be understood in an indigenous African sense. Land “protects, feeds, holds, heals. So, land is sacred; it is to be revered and protected, indeed it is to be shared both intra- and inter-generationally.” Land is nature, earth in its all-embracing sense (including minerals, water, and air). In African thought, land can only be used as possession, never owned as absolute and exclusive private property. So it cannot be a commodity. Concretely, there are “redistributive institutions such as *abunu* (dividing a harvest into two) and *abusa* (dividing a harvest into three).” The radical alternative is to be unfolded locally and globally, aiming at prosperity without destructive growth, linking technology, ecology, and social relations. Part A closes with an overview of the chapters of the book.

### **Studying the Commons Historically and Contextually**

Part B unfolds the historical and actual debates around the topic, starting with the history of private property, linked to the emergence of

money and debt. It also touches upon the very interesting question of how religions and philosophies reflect and criticize developments. As Karl Marx and Walter Benjamin have argued, capitalism itself is now the dominant religion. This section follows the critical analysis of the conventional wisdom—the property rights approach—from classical liberalism to neoclassical mainstream, from Adam Smith to Friedrich Hayek. A special feature of this book is the critique of Elinor Ostrom, who is normally regarded as the rediscoverer of the commons. One key aspect of Obeng-Odoom's critique is that Ostrom does not speak about equal rights, but joint rights. According to Obeng-Odoom (2021: 51, 61), she strays from the path to justice: "Conceptually, she confuses common property resources with common-pool resources." On ecological issues, she addresses the role of the state but not the activities of transnational corporations. Her main concern is "how individuals avoid free-riding, achieve high levels of commitment, arrange for new institutions, and monitor conformity to a set of rules," but she pays little attention to society-wide threats in terms of economy, ecology, and society.

Therefore, Obeng-Odoom turns to the American political economist Henry George (1839–1897) as the main traditional source to inspire the development of a holistic vision of the commons congenial with indigenous African experiences and context. For George, the commons represent nature, land as an inclusive gift to which each person on earth has equal rights (natural rights, as distinct from Ostrom's "joint rights"). Besides land, publicly created goods also belong to the commons. The fruit of labor belongs to the laborer as an individual right, but when work involves use of the commons, that usage does not constitute the basis of private property in land, as Locke claimed. Obeng-Odoom (2021: 62) summarizes:

The role of the state, according to George, is to 1) ensure that the results of labor are due to the laborer, 2) ensure that land/nature is common for all, and 3) take steps to protect the commons, both by preventing its destruction and by avoiding conflation with what is private.

The third step is highly relevant for ecology. On this basis George calls for a tax on the *value* of land, replacing the taxes on labor and

other taxes. There is one difficulty with Georgists: they have no understanding of indigenous people's autochthonous rights. Obeng-Odoom (2021: 21, 80) argues that their "conception of commons is consistent with the notion of African commons," but it needs to be developed further in order to cope with the challenges of the future, by looking at "the embedded approach" of Karl Polanyi and the postcolonial perspective of Frantz Fanon.

### **The Commons Today: Empirical Analysis**

Part C of *The Commons in an Age of Uncertainty* is entitled "The Proof," presenting concrete case studies of cities, technology, oil, and water with the aim of checking the validity of the different theoretical positions. "Cities face pandemic ecological crises that threaten their nature and future as the common meeting point of humans and other living and non-living organisms" (Obeng-Odoom 2021: 111). The conventional answer is to privatize the city and its resources, with the well-known effects of impoverishment and ecological destruction. But Ostrom's polycentricity through urban common pools is also problematic. For example, she regards gated communities of the rich and informal economies of the poor as the result of rational choices and part of the solution. Obeng-Odoom shows with case studies concerning waste and waste-pickers that the ecological crises cannot be healed in this way. The informal communities of waste-pickers do not freely choose their work. They decide under the constraints of oppression. The central structural challenge, the monopolization of land, is not addressed by these approaches.

The same applies to *technology*. Conventional wisdom applies patent regimes so that innovators can appropriate the fruits of their labor. But they also appropriate the enabling infrastructure offered by society. Moreover, technology is being used in "growth-centric" ways, and that leads to ecological destruction and increasing inequality. While inequality is addressed by the Western left consensus, the growth problem is not. The whole question of land speculation is ignored by both conventional thinking and by the left consensus. The role of land is particularly important, considering the ways in which urban

technology and industry are highly dependent on the extraction of minerals, especially rare minerals used in electronic technology.

This is even more evident in the case of *oil*. Here, the debate is about the conventional position of continuing to drill for private gain or to leave it in the ground (the Western left position). Obeng-Odoom offers a third position of multi-scalar property rights. He analyzes the situation of the oilfields in several West African states. In all of these countries, which are under the domination of transnational corporations, the state fails to provide social services and economic prosperity to citizens but rather tends to support Western nations and corporations by allowing them to privately appropriate socially created rent in Africa. They do not use the economic rent to achieve “energy sovereignty,” for example. Nor does leaving the oil in the ground reflect Black and indigenous needs. So, the radical alternative aims at developing the resources as a sustainable common through processes of just transition. The same model of argument applies to *coal*: “Africa can usefully seek self-reliance in the use of its coal resources” (Obeng-Odoom 2021: 146).

He criticizes renewable energy as a panacea. The proposal by the Western left consensus to leave oil and coal in the ground involves a self-contradiction: replacing fossil fuels with renewables involves some reliance on biomass, which generates “mass displacements through widespread land acquisitions.” In Africa, TNCs control the renewables, creating a new rentier class and exploiting laborers on many green farms in Africa. By contrast, the radical alternative asks us “to regard land and all fossil [fuels] as commons to be used in the satisfaction of the common rather than for profit.” A tax on coal extraction “recognizes that the value of coal, of land, is created by labor locally.” “In this system of the commons, coal for energy will be scaled down and eventually phased out” (Obeng-Odoom 2021: 154ff.). The same applies to nuclear energy. This approach, developing regional multi-scalar energy strategies in the tradition of Henry George, would lead to energy sovereignty.

Finally, Obeng-Odoom (2021: 165) addresses the global trend to privatize *water*, with dangerous consequences. He also questions alternatives. Conventional wisdom “claims that water markets have

arisen because of the inferior nature of Indigenous systems.” He argues that this claim is not borne out by empirical evidence. The pre-colonial water system functioned very well on the basis of commons in terms of farming, herding, and fishing, as a case study on Ghana shows. Water was regarded as sacred in relation to biodiversity, and it was communally managed. The traditional system was successful in providing security of tenure to water resources and in supporting the economic, social, and ecological needs of the local people. Markets and private water property rights were introduced by the colonial powers to serve the colonizers. The climax was the neoliberal period. The results were overfishing, destruction of forests, and land grabbing for agro-fuel production. The idea is not to get back to the precolonial times, but to “strengthen Indigenous institutions for new and inclusive governance of the water commons” (Obeng-Odoom 2021: 190). The aim is to create the basis for an ecological future.

### **The Future of the Commons**

Part D is the climax of the book: “The Future of the Commons,” which contains a “Requiem for Conventional Wisdom and the Western Left Consensus.” The result of privatizing nature is clear: it leads to compulsory growth of the economy and consumption through the obligatory pursuit of rent (capitalism), resulting in the monopolization of wealth and power by a few, which is suicidal on a limited planet. Obeng-Odoom regards the Western left consensus as unclear because its rejection of growth is ambivalent: it repudiates growth only when it serves the pursuit of profit but not when it serves human needs. Also, it has a governing concept that is top down. The Western left consensus ignores “the element of rent, private property in land, as its core vehicle” (Obeng-Odoom 2021: 202). So only the radical alternative can find the way “*towards a Just Ecological Political Economy*.” The radical alternative avoids “rent theft,” which is the private extraction and appropriation of rent from land and the rent created by society at large. So “land is not just land but *just* land” (Obeng-Odoom 2021: 205, emphasis in the original). The return of land to the commons thus leads to “just sustainability” not only locally, but internationally. Obeng-Odoom (2021: 208) summarizes this principle:

[Just sustainability means] commoning of land, the use of rents to provide social support, and the untaxing of labor to further incentivize them to do work that they enjoy not only in Africa but also generally in the Global South. In this way the Global South can methodologically synthesize the contradicting positions of the colonial and neocolonial times in a just ecological political economy to decolonize nature, economy, and society.

The great contribution of this book, in relation to both mainstream discussions on the political economy and debates about the commons, is the rediscovery of the basic and systemic importance of the land issue. For Obeng-Odoom, this rediscovery applies not only to the traditional sense of land as a factor of production but also to land value, which includes all of nature. This brings a particular African and indigenous (postcolonial) approach into the debate on the commons, transcending Elinor Ostrom's understanding, which has taken on a kind of canonical significance in the Western discussion of the commons. Also, the case studies from Africa show that we are dealing with a holistic approach that includes both community and spirituality (sacredness of land and nature) as central subjects of the commons. The basic importance of land also has historic plausibility. After early capitalism, when the machinery of accumulation was built on commercial and financial (usury) capital, the period of industrial capitalism started with the famous enclosure (privatization) of common land in England. That process included the destruction of community, the individualizing of human beings, and the financializing of human relations. All of those changes went hand in hand with what is called secularization. So, in this sense, the book goes beyond the normal economic and political discussions, aiming instead at what we call a new civilization or a new culture of life in all its dimensions.

### **Critique and Further Theorizing of the Commons**

At the end of the book, Obeng-Odoom (2021: 208) distinguishes between "critical Marxism" and "official Marxism," saying "Marxist political economy is richer historiographically than neoclassical economics." If there is one point to mention critically in regard to this book it is exactly this. Throughout the book, the author tends to schematically reject both conventional wisdom (capitalist approaches



in colonial and neocolonial forms) and what he calls the “Western left consensus” on the same level. I have no problem with clearly rejecting the advocates of privatization of nature. It is also true that very few left-wing protagonists value the problems of racism and land enough, aside from classical left-wing struggles in terms of class, center-periphery, and North-South unequal relations. But the schematic rejection neglects the vast differentiations between state/bureaucratic and democratic/participatory socialism/eco-socialism or approaches towards the commons going beyond Elinor Ostrom. Karl Marx (1976: 530) said himself:

Capitalist production thus develops technology and, as its logical conclusion, the processes of social production only by simultaneously undermining the sources of all wealth—*the earth* and the worker. (emphasis added)

In his analysis of private property, Marx also includes land. Of course, land/nature has to be put into the center after we see the catastrophic results of the still dominant political economy and its ideologues. But this is also attempted by, for example, eco-socialist thinkers such as Christian Zeller (2020). Even in Western traditions, we find voices of dissenters such as Karl Polanyi, the political economist, whom even Obeng-Odoom quotes extensively.

As we face a common crisis of humanity, the book should lead to an *intercultural* search and alliance process of identifying possible coalition partners for saving the planet. The criteria and common denominator to do this could be the concept of relationality in the holistic sense of this book—including nature. Obeng-Odoom starts from the African concept of *ubuntu* (“We are because you are”). A similar concept is the Korean *sangsaeng* or the Latin American *sumak kwasai* (good life for all, also in good relations with nature). The sciences and humanities are also searching for a way to transcend the classical mechanistic approach of modernity (Boff and Hathaway 2009).

Even *religions* have resources of wisdom that could contribute to coalition-building. In Chapter 2, the book under review touches upon the prehistory of private property in the context of the emergence of money. This analysis could have been deepened. The period starting in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE has been deeply researched in the last

few decades (Seaford 2004, 2019; Schaper 2019; Graeber 2011). In that period, money and private property brought about massive social problems. The split grew between poor farmers who went into debt, lost their land, and became debt slaves, and rich landlords who accumulated land and wealth. Thought and behavior also became more individualized. As a calculating mindset emerged, people asked: “What is in it for me?” Individualism developed and communal solidarity got lost. This is exactly what Obeng-Odoom describes in Africa at a later stage, when Western colonizers appeared. So *The Commons in An Age of Uncertainty* has to be seen in the context of the development of our civilization, starting nearly 3,000 years ago, being driven by the accumulation of money in different phases. The first phase had its climax in the Roman Empire and continued into the mercantilist era of accumulation in the form of treasure-building. The second phase entered with changing money into capital with the mechanism of constant reinvesting of profits (early capitalism as of the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE). We live in the third phase, the development of industrial capitalism, which drove the accumulation mechanism into the sphere of production and then into financial and digital capitalism. There will be no other phase beyond this because we are living the final climax of this civilization. Our world has turned suicidal and will lead humanity into death and destruction if our world is not fundamentally changed.

Here, the world religions can provide additional insights, as Obeng-Odoom (2021: 34–38) notes, but matters of periodization and greater substantive analyses are needed. The first period of the civilization driven by money accumulation and private property was called the Axial Age by the philosopher Karl Jaspers because from China to Greece, via India, Persia, and Judah, all cultures developed philosophies and religions calling for justice and community values (Jaspers [1949] 2010). Obeng-Odoom quotes the text of the Hebrew Bible from Leviticus 25:23, claiming that the land must never be commodified, as it is a gift of God to all people for use, not for absolute ownership. So justice is the key concept to resist the economic and mental privatization of the Axial Age—just as it is Obeng-Odoom’s vision. Although Obeng-Odoom tries to analyze Islamic economics, he does not unfold the analogous developments in Chinese Daoism and Confucianism,

Indian Buddhism, Persian Zoroastrism, Greek philosophy and tragedy, the Jesus movement, and later Islam. We did this in *Transcending Greedy Money: Interreligious Solidarity for Just Relations* (Duchrow and Hinkelammert 2012). Liberation theologies in all religions have rediscovered this heritage and translated its critique and alternative visions in today's struggle to overcome capitalism. In the case of Christianity, this even led to the founding of all international ecumenical organizations, including the Lutheran World Federation, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the World Council of Churches, and even Pope Francis. Thus, all historic Orthodox, Protestant, and Roman Catholic churches have formally rejected imperial capitalism and are working for alternatives. This is a historic event in the church. We also have Jewish and Muslim liberation theologies and the International Network of Engaged Buddhists. So the indigenous and African perspectives of this book should be brought into dialogue with these other alternatives in world religions and philosophies to join forces for a new philosophy of life.

### Conclusion

*The Commons in An Age of Uncertainty* is a *tour de force*. The forces of this common front should now concentrate on the task outlined by Obeng-Odoom (2021: 202) at the end of his book:

I consider this exercise in concluding my arguments as a point of departure rather than arrival. So, additional policy and empirical details will have to be worked out by other students of political economy working on topics such as general debates about "the gift," specific debates on the gift of land, and how these two themes can shed light on the wider implications for the commons.

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