Author’s reply
I welcome Derek Hall’s review of *Stop, Thief!* not least because as a professor at a university in Waterloo, Ontario, its author is a neighbor of mine insofar as we share the region of the Great Lakes, the largest bodies of fresh water in the world. I live in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Were we to visit one another we’d pass through Detroit, U.S.A., and Windsor, Canada. Detroit, once the pivot around which the world’s automobile civilization turned, is currently being starved of water, or at least efforts to privatize it are advancing with alarming speed. The water cooler in the factory or the water fountain in the street were part of the urban scene not so long ago. No more. “Water, water everywhere, and not a drop to drink”, as the poet Coleridge said. The water commons has disappeared.

One might say that we belonged to another commons as well, that of scholarship, the republic of letters in the classical phrase, only this commons, the commons of intelligence, is also undergoing profit-making privatization with its access codes, pay-walls, and licenses. This is the context for quoting the 14th century author William Langland from the time of the Peasants’ Revolt, “For human intelligence is like water, air, and fire–it cannot be bought or sold. These four things the Father of Heaven made to be shared on earth in common.” What I say, overall, is that you don’t have to be religious or a medievalist to say the man makes a righteous point.

As regional neighbors we share not only a history against exploitation, I think of the internationalism of the auto workers, but we also share a history against expropriation
and this is why perhaps Derek Hall notes Tecumseh’s speech of 1810 in favor of the commons. Tecumseh was slain for his pains, halfway between our homes.

Derek Hall makes an excellent suggestion. In my enthusiasm in finding in the past so many proponents of the commons I neglected differences among them, for example, Tecumseh and Morris, the Levellers and Tahrir Square, or E.P. Thompson and Elinor Ostrom. This work of refinement remains to be done; people are thinking about it all over.

My “commitment to communism is at the heart of Stop, Thief!” he writes. Not quite: the subtitle refers to the commons not to communism. They are not the same but there is a relationship between them and that is why I put this book together. You can’t really write or think about either without thinking of their opposites. In the former case that would be enclosures, in the latter case that would be capitalism. What they both share is the class system: privatizers versus commoners or capitalists versus proletarians. One could make the point even more simply, the Few versus the Many or the 1% versus the 99%.

*Omnia sunt communia* is of course a slogan (Peasants’ Revolt of 1526) and Hall is right to distinguish the call for “everything in common” from a political program. Nevertheless, it has been, even in Christianity, a starting point for political thinking. The law allows for it only in “extreme cases”.

Communism “would be made up of relatively small groups”, he thinks I say but I refer to the commons not communism. There is a problem of scale, and there is the political problem, or the problem of power. “[S]mall-scale, face-to-face groups … more or less self-sufficient, producing their own food, shelter, tools, clothing, and everything else themselves…”, he writes not I.
I’ve always enjoyed the Irish photographer Tom Maguire’s approach to scale. He was a West Riding (Yorkshire) socialist pioneer. Looking back from the vantage point of 1892 Maguire summed up the class struggle of the previous decade: “some thought that we might advantageously limit the scope of our ideal to the five continents, while directing our operation more immediately to our own locality. Others were strongly of the opinion that our ideal was too narrow, and they proposed as the object of the society the internationalization of the known and undiscovered world, with a view to the eventual inter-solarisation of the planets … They entirely ignored the locality to which, for the most part, they were comparative strangers” (quoted in Thompson 1994: 36). If the commons is real, you can’t forget locality. The privatization of outer space has commenced.

Derek Hall says I am “for” the commons and then lists what I’m “against”. “[T]he things he is against include private property, the bourgeois state, money, and machinery”. This isn’t quite right. Derek Hall’s voice, otherwise welcoming and temperate, becomes a tad ironical. I don’t know how he could have left out the death penalty and prison; I am totally against those. Moreover, capitalism no longer delivers the goods. It has always been alienating, white supremacist, and dehumanizing. How anyone could be “for” it is beyond me. I am not writing a blueprint, or a recipe for the cookbooks of the future. I thought that’s what political scientists such as himself did. However, for those who are looking for such recipes I can’t think of anything more delicious (and realistic) than bolo bolo by “P.M.” (2012).

I return to William Morris because his socialist essays are brilliant gems of common sense and because his revolutionary, working-class viewpoint must be recovered to rescue communism from the vanguardism of Lenin or the reformism of the labor
parties. I refer to the English romantic poets because a) our movement needs poetry since its prose is stuck in the “realism” of things-as-they-are, and b) the romantic poets arose in reaction to the enormous Enclosures which did away with the actual Commons in the name of pristine Nature. All this tends to be “anglo” or English because so was capitalism in all its phases—expropriationist, mercantilist, and machinist.

Linebaugh fails to “envisage in some detail how a modern society based on commoning might actually work”. Well, if it were truly “based on commoning” it wouldn’t be “a modern society”, would it? Something’s amiss with that logic. “[I]t is difficult even to imagine what kind of society Linebaugh has in mind”. Yes, like logic, imagination can be difficult too. Society is real; it is not in the mind. Both are riven with contradiction. True, the mind is full of bad ideas, colonized by the boss, brain-washed, white-washed, messed up, pornographed, and clouded by various fog factories of false consciousness, and that from an early age. It makes no sense to talk of society without class and contradiction.

People “…would like to have some sense of how a new society might function before dismantling the one we already have.” The thing about “society” is that it depends where you are in it; it has a way of making “dismantling” a permanent condition. It does so to maintain the class division as well as divisions within the class. People begin to think about law in prison; they think about worker’s control when the factory closes down; they think about the commons bent over in the fields trampling out the vintage; they think about the clachan when the potatoes are blighted.

James Fintan Lalor (1807-1849) linked the nationalism of Young Ireland with the idea of social revolution because he shows that classical liberal economics and imperialist militarist command were entirely dependent on the self-interest of the landlords, be they
Irish, English, or both–Anglo-Irish. As a result the land question became central to the social question! What did Lalor say of “society”? He said, “Society stands dissolved.” “In effect”, he continues, “as well as of right, it stands dissolved, and another requires to be constituted. To the past we can never return, even if we would.”

“If the earth, indeed, with all things therein was made wholly for the few and none of it for the many, then it may continue; if they be bound to submit in patience to perish of famine and famine-fever, then it may continue. But if all have a right to live, and to live in their own land among their own people; if they have a right to live in freedom and comfort on their own labor; if the humblest among them has a right to a full, secure and honest subsistence, not the knavish and beggarly subsistence of the poorhouse, then that constitution cannot and it shall not be re-established again. When society fails to perform its duty and fulfill its office of providing for its people, it must take another and more effective form, or it must case to exist” (quoted in Deane 1991: 166). Lalor himself perished in the cholera sheds of the Irish Famine. It is a small step from this to the communism of James Connolly. Lalor suggested how we could take that step: Ireland’s “demand, in full and fine, is for what is of more effective worth and weight than all the political constitutions that were ever fashioned; for what senates or sovereigns cannot make or unmake, but men must make for themselves–her demand is for a new SOCIAL CONSTITUTION under which to live.”

How did the commons actually work, Derek Hall asks? This is his major point and he provides two reasons. First, commons only work in connection with the market and the state. Second, no one wants to give up their private property. He says I overlook the need for exchange and security provided by market and state respectively. This is what the Japanese New Leftist, Yoshimoto Taka’aki dubbed “the communal illusion”.
Derek Hall writes that the dependence of people in the past “on pannage, estovers, and their equivalents, for their livelihoods … may not always have been even exclusive or even primary, but the loss of commons that they had long held and relied on did represent a serious blow to their ability to live. *We, however, are not those people*” (emphasis added). No, but we still are people who need to quench our thirst, and we are reluctant to do so with plastic bottles or by paying through the nose.

“Linebaugh writes that ‘[c]ommoning is primary to human life … Scarcely a society has existed on the face of the earth which has not had at its heart the commons.’ *One of those societies which has not, however, is ours.*” (emphasis added). I don’t think that this is true. “Our” society is not ours. You have to ask, Who? Whom? The Zapatistas threw the title deeds away in order to recuperate the land. True, the ranchers didn’t like it. I have already referred to water and intelligence, and in keeping with Langland’s *Piers Ploughman* we should add the atmosphere, or air, and petroleum, or fire. These are the beating heart of the body politic.

In 1840 John Goodwyn Barmby first pronounced in English the word “communism”. A few years later Karl Marx and Frederick Engels explained that communism is not a purely local event. What makes events world-historical is in the world intercourse of the division of labor. The exchange of products via the relation of supply and demand “hovers over the earth like the fate of the ancients”. “Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence” (Marx and Engels 1970: 55, 56-57).
“[E]very class which is struggling for mastery, even when its domination, as is the case with the proletariat, postulates the abolition of the old form of society in its entirety and of domination itself, must first conquer for itself political power…” (Marx and Engels 1970: 53). It is true that I put the “U.K.” and the “U.S.A.” in quotation marks but I do this not as “scare quotes”. My intention is far from frightening people, on the contrary, it is to free us from the nationalist pronoun with its white supremacist connotations, the one that says that “we” go to war or that “our” constitution says this or that. The political entity of the United Kingdom destroyed several other kingdoms, as you don’t need to tell an Irish person. As for the United States of America it was designed to monopolize, to wage the Indian wars to take over the Great Lakes and beyond. Its central entity, the Federal government, proved shaky as the Civil War demonstrated. We might constitute ourselves in other ways such that it no longer makes sense to spell Amerikkka with triple “k”s. But to do that we must abolish the class system.

Derek Hall distinguishes those who fight to keep resources as opposed to those who call “on us to attack the system that is fundamental to our own survival in an effort to access and create resources that we do not currently have”. Here is the nub of the issue. The system no longer can guarantee survival; its social contract is long since broken. The system creates scarcity. The system depends on emergency, trauma, war, starvation, and thirst. These have been weapons in its history. Now they are allied with earthquake, hurricane, and wildfire.

He says I do not pay attention “to the immense amount of stuff that proletarians hold as private property—land, houses, cars, computers, clothes, furniture, and on and on and on”. Everything but the means of production and the means of subsistence.
Proletarians do not own the land. The wise ones might have an allotment garden, otherwise the suburban proletarian makes obeisance to the Lawn with its noisy little petrol machines—the edger, the weeder, the mower, the blower. No, that is a tiny and privileged part of the world’s proletariat.

The problem still remains: how do we get from here to there? The answer surely is in the process, and the process must include everyone. That is why the movement of 2011 was so important.

Hall compares the *Stop, Thief!* to David Graeber’s (2011) book on debt. Graeber has a meaning of the everyday communism or the mutualities of kitchen, office, and factory floor, where we hold the door for one another, or say “please”. Hall says that both books have interesting history but that they are devoid of practical proposals, with the exception of Graeber’s Jubilee. He sees this ancient nostrum as forgiveness of debt. However, the Jubilee program also includes manumission of slaves, recuperation of land, and rest for the earth. Many organizations are making political programs from these simple principles.

History is full of roads not taken; the journey is not over; the tale has not half been told. All this is true. But what we can safely say for the future from that half of the tale that has been told or from that part of the journey that has been taken, is threefold. One, the commons is central to human reproduction. Two, the commons is a fulcrum for anti-capitalist resistance. Three, the commons is an ideal against moral recreancy.

One thing communism and the U.S.A. had in common was a debt to Joseph Brant and the Iroquois Confederacy, or the Haudenosaunee. They provided the settlers with model of federalism, and they provided Marx and Engels with an example of matriarchal community sharing its land and goods. The U.S.A. caused Joseph Brant to flee and he
did so to Ontario where in Brantford, not so far from Waterloo, the Iroquois are still struggling for just conditions against the state edicts of the property statute. Perhaps Hall and I should meet there for a cool glass of fresh water while we can.

References

Marx K and Engels F (1970 [1845-6]) The German Ideology. London: Lawrence and Wishart
London: Merlin

Peter Linebaugh
History Department
University of Toledo
plineba@gmail.com

July 2014