

Our neglected wealth

By Jonathan Rowe

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FOR a preview of the next big turn of the political wheel, we might consider a drama that is unfolding in the realm of computers and the World Wide Web.

For years, tech gurus touted the Web as a new frontier of freedom. Yet something very different has occurred. Fences and toll booths are going up all over. Marketers collect dossiers on us without our knowledge. Ads assault us at every click. The push increasingly is not to liberate information, but rather to contrive new ways to make us pay for it.

At the same time, the main portal of this new computational realm – the Windows operating system – is governed by a secret and proprietary code. Individuals can't fix their own problems or share improvements with others. All innovation must come down through a corporate hierarchy instead.

This is not what high-tech pioneers had in mind when they designed the basic architecture of the Web. Today, they feel a little the way the American colonists did when, having settled a vast new land, they found themselves still dominated by British government. The result has been a renewed interest in an old economic concept – namely, the commons.

The commons is the part of life that is neither the market nor the state, but rather is the shared property and heritage of us all. It includes the gifts of nature, such as oceans and atmosphere, wilderness areas, and the quiet of the night. It has a social dimension, too, such as language and culture, the stories and games of childhood, the street life of a city, the accumulated knowledge of humanity. Nobody owns these. The government does not control them. They are open and free to all.

"The commons is not a relic of some pastoral age," writes David Bollier in his new book, "Silent Theft." It is, rather, a "reservoir of valuable resources."

The commons is easy to take for granted, like a parent's care. But we could not exist without it. Consider the shops on a traditional Main Street. They couldn't thrive without a sidewalk to bring customers, a common language through which to transact business, an ambient civility and respect for law, and so on. Or take scientific research. The great breakthroughs have arisen from a commons of shared knowledge and inquiry; the Web itself thrives on this idea. And, of course, no human undertakings can exist without air to breathe and water to drink.

This isn't the government we are talking about here. It is, rather, the mother lode of government and market both. Yet the present obsession with the market has put the commons under siege. The degradation of the natural environment is by now well known, but it is matched in the social environment as well. Shopping malls have displaced the commons of traditional Main Streets, for example, with their spontaneous mix of social, civic, and commercial life. The commons of childhood stories and play have given way to commercial media. Corporations have hijacked the names of cherished local places, as when Boston's hallowed Garden sports center became the Fleet (Bank) Center.

Meanwhile, cellphones and electronic ampli-

fiers have devastated the commons of quiet. The list goes on and on. Americans feel harried, stressed, and under siege; and the erosion of the commons is a major reason why. It is life's basic buffer zone, support system, and safety net; and without it we feel impoverished, even amid market wealth.

If one looks closely, the effort to reclaim the commons is a hidden thread in many of the movements stirring in the country today. One sees it in the resistance to Wal-Marts, which are decimating local Main Streets, for example, and in the way developers are going back to the traditional village model, with its abundant commons of sidewalks



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and neighborhood shopping. Sports fans are protesting the sale of stadium names to corporations; parents are fighting the assault of advertising in the schools.

Hackers, meanwhile, are taking back their computers through free software they develop themselves through the cyber commons. The new cellphone-free "quiet cars" on Amtrak attest to a growing desire to draw the line and say to the forces that would invade our commons: "Thus far and no farther."

This nascent political movement does not fit the hoary left/right mold. It is not antimarket, because a market needs a commons, just as shops need sidewalks and life needs air. As Mr. Bollier puts it, "protecting the commons is about maintaining a balance, not bashing business."

By the same token, the new commons movement does not seek to expand the role of government in our lives. The state can undermine the commons much as the market can, as the former Soviet Union showed all too well. Instead, this movement invokes government the same way the advocates of the market do, to establish ground rules and boundaries.

Few foresaw that, a decade after the Iron Curtain fell, Americans would be fighting new walls and impositions of their own making. Still less did they expect that an old concept like the commons would reemerge at the cutting edge of techno-economic change. But new problems often lead back to old wisdom. As Wilhelm Ropke, the late conservative economist, once wrote: "The market economy is not everything. It must find its place within a higher order of things."

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**Protect
"the commons"
— our shared
property and
heritage.**