

**MEANDERING
ON THE SEMANTICAL-HISTORICAL PATHS OF COMMUNISM AND COMMONS**

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The story begins at Blue Mountain Lake in the Adirondacks when, at a gathering of cultural workers for the commons and through no wish of their own, Peter and George Caffentzis were asked to speak about violence and the commons. Accordingly, following dinner after what had been a chilly October day, they settled into armchairs by the fire and explained to the gathering that way back in the day (history) the commons was taken away by blood and fire and that, furthermore, as we all basically knew, it was still violently happening which ever way you happened to look. Indeed, this violent taking-away, or “expropriation,” was the beginning of proletarianization and thus of capitalism itself!

George added that he thought that there was a difference between the commons and ‘the tradition of communism’ which began in the 1840s. Peter (that’s me) wasn’t so sure about that, thinking that it was earlier, and that in any case there was considerable overlap. He said something about Cincinnati and promised to get back to everyone. So, making good on that promise, here’s what I had in mind.

Not far from Blue Mountain Lake, on the western side of those ancient mountains, is Whitestown, N.Y., known to you already perhaps as the location of the Oneida commune where property was once communistically shared. But that particular utopia wasn’t established until 1848, after our story had well begun.¹ Our story continues with two brothers, Augustus and John Otis Wattles, who left the Oneida Institute, a Presbyterian outfit, in 1833 in 1836 respectively. Their destination was ‘the gateway to the west,’ Cincinnati, the fastest growing city in north America at the time, a.k.a. Porkopolis, a meat market in more senses than one, where people slaughtered swine and hunted man, woman, child.

Augustus moved to attend the Lane Seminary in Cincinnati whose president was Harriet Beecher Stowe’s father. Augustus helped form the Lane Seminary Rebels, ultra evangelical abolitionists, and he helped start the

¹ 30 years later this utopian commune dissolved and became the worlds leading producer of stainless steel eating implements, Oneida flatware.

Ohio Anti-Slavery Society. Sabbath services, night school. Lyceum and library, day and night school offering courses on topics such as sewing or salvation. In the next two decades he founded 25 schools in Ohio for African American children.

John worked as a tutor in Augustus schools for blacks.² “Colors are more vivid; odors more delicate, flowers more beautiful, and music more thrilling when tested by the senses of J.O.W. than by those of ordinary men; - he transcended transcendentalism.” John believed in diet reform, women’s rights, abolition, and communal living. John attempted to build several utopian communities where ‘all things were held in common’, and of them I’ll tell you in due course.

Before that, however, a little etymology, and a trip to Paris.

“*Common* has an extraordinary range of meaning in English, and several of its particular meanings are inseparable from a still active social history,” says the 20th century critic, Raymond Williams.³ The root word is “*communis*, Latin, derived alternatively, from *com-*, Latin – together and *manis*, Latin – under obligation, and from *com-* and *unus*, Latin – one.” It thus points to either “a specific group or to the generality of mankind.” What is striking is the absence of the material or economic meanings which are so pervasive in local and agrarian history and from there into law.⁴ We tend to think of the commons in relation to a specific place – John Clare on Northamptonshire, U.K., or Lewis Henry Morgan on western New York, or Luke Gibbon on co. Kerry, Ireland – while communism concerns ‘the generality of mankind.’ In the actuality of commoning the place of children and the activities of women were more open, less enclosed, than in the subsequent regimes of private property.

Karl Marx himself wrote that such expropriations of commons were what first sparked his interest in economics or material questions, referring to the criminalization of a commoning practice in the Moselle river valley

² Lynn Marie Getz, “Partners in Motion: Gender, Migration, and Reform in Antebellum Ohio and Kansas,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies*, volume 27, no. 2, p. 118.

³*Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976).

⁴ The *OED* gives twenty-two meanings to the adjective common, fifteen meanings to the noun, and eleven meanings to the verb.

near Trier (where he was born).⁵ In his day the vineyard workers fueled their winter stoves by customary takings of forest estovers (windfalls, dead wood, and such). Growing up, Marx knew something about this since his parents owned some vines themselves. This wood however was criminalized at the behest of the timber companies, and the young Marx was shocked into philosophical outrage which he expressed in a series of articles for the *Rheinische Zeitung*.⁶ But the loss of the actual commons of his neighbors did not lead directly to the politics of communism. In his case nearly a decade intervened.

Marx remained a city man, Berlin, Brussels, Paris, London, and the urban proletariat became his subject of study and his hope for the future. The urban proletariat were commoners without a commons, their customs having been criminalized. The conjunction of the struggle to retain common rights with the urban struggle expressed in the food or subsistence riot became one of the factors of the revolutionary insurrections which annually punctuated the French Revolution. When this conjuncture takes place in conditions of cultural or racial oppression, as it has in Ireland, the pre-conditions of communism arise. This conjuncture has also given us, via the Irishman Bronterre O'Brien's translation of Buonarroti's *History of the Babeuf's Conspiracy for Equality* (1836) the very powerful concept, the moral economy.⁷

“More than any other movement within the revolutionary tradition, communism was born with a name,” writes a scholar.⁸ This begs the question assuming as it does the relative novelty of the practice of cooperation and sharing in the use of land, means of production, and means of subsistence when it was precisely this novelty which the recovery of

⁵ *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Chicago: Charles Kerr, 1904), p. 10.

⁶ Karl Marx, “Debates on the Law on Thefts of Wood: Proceedings of the Sixth Rhine Province Assembly,” *Rheinische Zeitung* (1842) translated in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 1 (International Publishers: New York, 1975), pp. 224–263.

⁷ E.P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd” in *Customs in Common* (Merlin: London, 1991)

⁸ James H. Billington, *Fire in the Minds of Men: Origins of the Revolutionary Faith* (Temple Smith: London, 1980), p. 243.

commoning challenged. Conversely, it correctly implies that commoning did not have a name. We find this over and over again. Part of the power of *The Communist Manifesto* was that it conflated both the revolutionary future of communism (the spectre haunting Europe) and the hidden obviousness, the invisible given, of the commons in the present. The hobgoblin (as “spectre” was first translated) belonged to a folk discourse that presupposed the commons.

The communist tradition is said to have started with Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* published in 1848. *The Oxford English Dictionary* quotes the first English translation (Helen MacFarlane’s) of Marx and Engels of *The Communist Manifesto*. “It is not the abolition of property generally which distinguishes Communism; it is the abolition of Bourgeois property ... In this sense, indeed, the Communists might resume their whole Theory in that single expression – The abolition of private property.”

In March 1840 a conservative German newspaper wrote, “The Communists have in view nothing less than a leveling of society – substituting for the presently-existing order of things the absurd, immoral and impossible utopia of a community of goods.” In Lyons after the suppression of the revolt of 1834 a secret Society of Flowers survived which is sometimes called the first communist society. After the failure in 1839 of the revolt in Paris of August Blanqui another greenish name sprouted for the communists, and the Society of the Seasons was created.⁹

The actual appearance of the word, at least in English, occurred in 1840. The *OED* as its earliest recording in English of “communism” quotes Goodwyn Barmby writing in *The Apostle* in 1848. “I also conversed [in 1840] with some of the most advanced minds of the French metropolis, and there, in the company of some of the disciples of Babeuf, then called Equalitarians, I first pronounced the word Communism, which has since ... acquired that world-wide reputation.”

Who was Goodwyn Barmby? We know that at the age of sixteen he harangued the expropriated agricultural laborers of Suffolk against the New Poor Law. Then at the age of twenty with a letter from Robert Owen he crossed the English Channel to Paris to establish “regular communication between the socialists of Great Britain and France,” calling himself a “friend

⁹ James H. Billington, *Fire in the Minds of Men: Origins of the Revolutionary Faith* (Temple Smith: London, 1980), p. 246.

of socialism in France, in England, and the world.”¹⁰ He reported that people were “on fire with the word” and he eagerly seized upon it himself.

I want to make three comments about this first use of “communism” in English. First of all, in opposition to the nationalism of the day or that patriotism which is the refuge of scoundrels, we note that communism right from the start was world-wide. He proposed an International Association that summer. In 1841 he formed the Central Communist Propaganda Society, later called the Communist Church. It had five branches including ones in London, Merthyr Tydfil in Wales and Strabane in Ireland. He corresponded with French, American, and Venezuelan communists or potential communists. Barmby was affected by the orientalism of the day and proposed that the best place to site the first utopia would be in Syria.¹¹ He toured the industrial midlands of England.

(Though Peter, your author here, received his advanced training as a social historian in Coventry at the University of Warwick and though he studied with one of the most knowledgeable of 20th century English communists,¹² he never did hear tell of Goodwyn Barmby’s 1845 tour into Warwick or his speech in Coventry on “Societary Science and the Communitive Life.” What might he have missed? Barmby’s *Book of Platonopolis* offers a clue containing as it does forty-four ‘societary wants’ for humanity and many scientific projects for the future, including a steam driven automobile. Each community would have its own baptistery or hydropathic centre complete with frigidary, calidary, tepidary and frictionary for cold, hot, warm bathing followed by vigorous exercise.)

The second comment I wish to make concerns ‘the most advanced minds’ of Paris. Readers understood that communism arose in the context of revolution. Parisian thought was advanced only in the context of a theory of the progress of history. Barmby’s theory was this. History evolved through four stages. First, paradisation which was pastoral, clannish, and nestled in the Vale of Arcady. Second, barbarization, which was both feudal and municipal. Third was monopolism or civilization, and communization was

¹⁰ Billington says, he “became perhaps the most prolific – and surely the most forgotten – propagandist for communism anywhere.” P. 254.

¹¹ Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (Pantheon Books: New York, 1983), p. 176.

¹² E.P. Thompson

to be the last. It too would go through four stages, first, the club or lodging house, second, the common production and consumption center, then the city, and finally the world. We note, incidentally, that he treats communism actively, as a verb, something which William Morris also would do at the end of the century.

A communist banquet was held on July 1, 1840, for one thousand artisans in Paris, and speaker after speaker extolled the “explosive impact” of communism. Laponneraye and Théodore Dézamy, the organizers of the event, were “the true founders of modern communism.”¹³ Dézamy asked the “unhappy proletarians to reenter into the gyre of the egalitarian church, outside of which there can be no salvation.” When another communist banquet was planned at the Institute of Childhood to celebrate the secular marriage ceremony of leading communists the government prohibited it. At its beginning communism was associated with both spirituality and reproduction. Barmby was in touch with William Weitling, the tailor and revolutionary, who also visited Paris and who also sought the followers of Babeuf. Weitling was active in the League of the Just which later became the Communist League which commissioned *The Communist Manifesto*.

The revolutionary egalitarians, François-Noel Babeuf and Restif de la Bretonne, were progenitors of modern communism during the French Revolution of 1789 which we celebrate on Bastille Day. Babeuf was a commoner from Picardy who became a proletarian canal navvy or ditch digger (hence, the first line of his autobiography, “I was born in the mud”). Babeuf, like Marx, had experience with the violence of commons expropriation, and like Marx, Babeuf became a communist revolutionary. In the trajectory of their biographies from commons to communism it was the crucible of international revolution which effected the transition.

Babeuf crossed paths with James Rutledge in May 1790 in Paris. Rutledge, a “citizen of the universe” as he called himself and an Anglo-Irishman, he petitioned for agrarian laws with “no ownership of property.”¹⁴ Perhaps it was a result of this encounter that led Babeuf to change his name to Gracchus indicating his utter revolutionary identification with the ancient Roman brother who advocated equality and the ‘agrarian law.’

¹³ Billington, p.248

¹⁴ Billington, pp. 71-2.

Babeuf publicized the radical feminist Confédération des Dames. He was secretary of Franco-Haitian Claude Fournier. Babeuf was imprisoned for six months when he wrote about his “co-athlete,” as he called the carpenter’s son, *A New History of the Life of Jesus Christ*. Accused of fomenting civil war, he said the war already existed of the rich against the poor. In November 1795 he published his *Plebeian Manifesto* calling for a total upheaval or *bouleversement total*. “Dying of Hunger, Dying of Cold” was the title of a popular song he wrote. In 1796 he placarded Paris with a poster beginning, "Nature has given to every man the right to the enjoyment of an equal share in all property" He was beheaded by the guillotine in May 1797.¹⁵

Restif de la Bretonne was called “Jean-Jacques des Halles,” or the “Rousseau of the gutter.” In 1785 he reviewed a book describing a communal experiment in Marseilles whose author, Hupay, was the first to describe himself as a communist, and who later wrote a *Republican Koran*. He was inspired by Restif’s *Le Paysan perversi*. In this private property is limited to clothing and furniture. Civilization had perverted the peasant whose philosophical community could be restored based on “the principles of the New World.” America, the religious Moravians, and the *philosophe* Mably were the sources of communism. By Restif 1793 begins to use communism to describe common ownership. Restif’s *Philosophie de Monsieur Nicolas* of 1796 spoke much about “communists.” He attacked US republicanism as being “nominal” only.

This ends our short trip to Paris. We can propose some short ruminated contrasting commons and communism. Commoning practices persist among workers and peasants, communism consists of the generalization of such practices. An historic role of the bourgeois state was to criminalize the commons; an aspiration of the communists was to overthrow the bourgeois state. Evidence of the commons will often appear anecdotal or as folklore or as ‘crime’, just a small story, a minor transgression; evidence of commons may appear incidentally to some other, major theme; evidence of customary commons may appear particular to locale or craft, and belonging thus to trade or local histories, not ‘grand narratives’. Evidence of communism, on the other hand, is provided by

¹⁵ See R.B. Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf* (London, 1978) and Ian M. Birchall, *The Spectre of Babeuf* (St. Martin’s Press: New York, 1997)

journalists, philosophers, economists, and controversialists, and grandiosely aspires to become the narrative to end narratives!

Goodwyn Barmby returned to England in 1841 as a feminist, a vegetarian, and a communist. He began to publish *The Promethean or Communitarian Apostle* (“the reign of the critic is over, the rule of the poet commences”). In its pages he urged, “Unitedly let the genii embrace communism, unitedly let the capacities apostolise for Communitisation.” In 1843 he started a Communitorium, named for Thomas More, the Moreville Communitorium where “persons desirous of progress upon universal principles are received in affection and intelligent fellowship.”

The third comment on Barmby arises only after we cultural workers for the commons dispersed from Blue Mountain and after we had completed our farewell water ceremony led by the two soul sisters of Climbing Poetree, we paddled our canoes into the lake on a night of the full moon. Yes, after that spiritual, therapeutical, and comical experience, I received intelligence from an International Commons gathering held in Berlin a month later, to the effect that evidently a faction had arisen and a tendency was described, of “religious revolutionary commoners.” This certainly throws light on our story, because religion was a big part of communism!

“I believe ... that the divine is communism, that the demoniac is individualism,” testified Barmby. In France, England, and Germany this association of communism with religion was widespread. Propagandists exploited the tendency to identify communism with communion. Jesus was “the sublime egalitarian” whose first communion was the type of future communist banquets. Barmby wrote communist hymns and prayers. He demanded the restoration of the monastic lands confiscated by Henry VIII, not as monasteries of the past but as communisteries of the future.

Besides catching the fire of “communism” in Paris in 1840, Barmby also married in the same year, Catherine, a high-minded bohemian woman, who became his ardent helpmeet. She too was communist as we infer from her view expressed in 1844 that the female franchise “would be in vain” unless accompanied by opposition to private property. Women were active in the Communist Church. Barbara Taylor, the historian of socialism and feminism in this period, paints an affecting picture of the couple pushing a cart through the rainy streets of London (they had founded a communist group in Poplar, East London) and hawking their pamphlets to passers-by.

On returning from Paris she declaimed, “The mission of woman is discovered by Communism: will she hesitate to perform it: The grass is growing, sorrow is accumulating – waves are rushing, the world is warring – life and death, soul and body, are in the conflict, the saviour is in the hearts of the redeemed, and prophet is the inspired one, WOMAN LEARN THY MISSION! DO IT! AND FEAR NOT! – the world is saved.”¹⁶ They observed that “The Free Woman who shall give the womanly tone to the entire globe is not yet manifested.” He wrote, “In fine, to be a true communist, or Socialist, the man must possess the woman-power as well as the man-power, and the woman must possess the man-power as well as the woman-power. Both must be equilibrated beings.” Catherine proposed autonomous woman’s societies in every city, town, and village.

Thomas Frost, his Chartist publisher, broke away and founded the *Communist Journal* to rival the Barmby’s *Communist Chronicle*. Barmby claimed that copyright had been infringed and forbade its further use in a document sealed with Masonic symbols in green wax, “green being the sacred color of the Communist Church.”¹⁷ With such backsliding into egotistical privatization we can get back to the Wattles brothers and Porkopolis. In 1847 Goodwyn Barmby was approached by John O. Wattles of Cincinnati editor of the *Herald of Progression* and founder of a Communist Church of his own.¹⁸ Wattles proposed to put “the wheat and corn of the west into the hands of the people of your country and keep it out of the hands of speculators.” Here is the crux of this story, where the commons and communism intersect. It was a violent and heroic cross-roads, literally and figuratively. Our story must stop its aimless meandering and begin to march with purpose.

“There had been a long Atlantic roll reverberating throughout the decade of the 1840s,” writes the historian of English utopian experiments.¹⁹ Could the New World with the commercial abundance of the Ohio Valley, come, as Tom Paine trumpeted in the earlier revolutionary generation, to the rescue of the Old World suffering during the ‘Hungry ‘Forties’ with millions starving especially in Ireland? In particular, could the communism of one side of the Atlantic help preserve that on the other side? Barmby and

¹⁶ Taylor, p. 175.

¹⁷ Thomas Frost, *Forty Years of Recollections*

¹⁸ W.H.G. Armytage, *Heavens Below: Utopian Experiments in England, 1560-1960* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 204.

¹⁹ Armytage, p. 196.

Wattles could not accomplish this alone, or independent of the powerful energies of the huge class forces at work.

Babeuf explained at his trial that the class war had begun already, it did not need him to start it. The same thought must be applied to the American Civil War, namely, from the standpoint of the enslaved workers the war of freedom had begun much earlier than 1860. Battles for freedom were fought night and day along the Ohio river valley. That is the reason that the freedom train was an *underground* railway. Cincinnati was the train station. And here the most influential freedom story of the 19th century began.

Harriet Beecher Stowe was all ears at her father's Lane Seminary in 1838. Ripley, Ohio, was about fifty miles up river from Cincinnati. The river was the great thoroughfare from east to west; it was also the boundary between the slave states and the free states. It was both barrier and passage. One of the Rankin boys of Ripley told the incredible, nearly unbelievable story of the runaway slave woman who carried her baby across the river from Kentucky at night upon the slushy ice floes, falling into the freezing water, throwing her child on to firmer ice ahead of her, swimming, stumbling, running, falling, getting up again, with her pursuers and their barking dogs within earshot behind.²⁰ As young Rankin recounted the ordeal, Harriet Stowe absorbed every word, and thus Eliza was born the heroic figure of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* published in 1850, the book that more than any other turned world opinion against slavery.

In 1841 Augustus Wattles and his wife, Susan, bought 160 acres in Mercer County, Ohio, where they developed a manual labor school for black boys. It also contained, as he wrote, "Large farms under fence and cultivation... Nearly every settler is a member of the Teetotal pledge, and *lawing* is almost unknown among them."²¹ The community included twenty-one emancipated slaves. Seeking a location far away from commodity commerce, settler cupidity, and white racism, they settled in Mercer County where (as it happens) some fifty years earlier 4 November 1791 the US suffered the first of many defeats, the Battle of Wabash River, or St. Clair's Defeat. Here Little Turtle of the Miami Indians and Blue

²⁰ Ann Hagedorn, *Beyond the River: The Untold Story of the Heroes of the Underground Railroad* (Simon & Schuster: New York, 2002)

²¹ Getz, p. 21. The OED gives two meanings for "lawing," litigation (going to court) or expeditation (cutting off a dog's claws). It is unclear which was intended here.

Jacket of the Shawnee led the confederation of indigenous people (including the Pottawatomie and Delaware) in wiping out the militia and regulars of General St. Clair, the first war fought by the USA and the first defeat of US imperialism. The victory was temporary and the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794 put an end to effective armed resistance by the Indian confederation yet indigenous ideas of alternative economies and having ‘all things in common’ persisted. The individual settler with his whiskey, Bible, and musket or the collective Indian horticulturalist with tomahawk and calumet were the stereotyped options.

Johann Georg Kohl, a German émigré from the revolution of 1848 sailed to Philadelphia and then spent six months in northern Michigan living with the Ojibway whose “natural generosity develops into a species of communism,” he wrote.²² Lewis Henry Morgan published *League of the Ho-de-no-sau-nee, or Iroquois* in 1851 his study of the Seneca, Mohawk, Cayuga, Oneida, and Onondaga. He addressed the Grand Council of the Seneca in 1844. He was adopted by the Seneca in 1847 for fighting against the Ogden Land Co. in 1842. “The law of hospitality as administered by the American aborigines, tended to the final equalization of subsistence.” “Its explanation must be sought in the ownership of lands in common, the distribution of their products to households consisting of a number of families, and the practice of communism in living in the household.” Thus by the 1850s communism had become a term of art in anthropology or ethnography.²³

After a decade August Wattles lost his community to benefactors among the Philadelphia Quakers, and it became the Emlen Institute.²⁴ Homeless, he wrote in Biblical language, “Now I must wander in sheep skins and goat skins again and seek the caverns and dens of the earth.” Augustus moved to small farm in Clermont county on the Ohio river. The town of Utopia is on route 52 in this county on the Ohio river, founded in 1844 for French Fourieristes. 1845 his brother John asked him to join a utopian community.

²² Johann Georg Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami: Life Among the Lake Superior Ojibway* (1858), chapter six, “they are almost communists.”

²³ Claude Lévi-Straus, the prominent 20th century anthropologist, as a teenager wrote a pamphlet called *Gracchus Babeuf and Communism* (Brussels, 1926).

²⁴ Its subsequent incarnations were the St. Charles Seminary, home of Missionaries of the Precious Blood, then a senior living center.

In 1842 John Otis Wattles helped form Society for Universal Inquiry and Reform to eradicate government, capitalism, and coercive relationships. In 1844 he purchased land in Champaign County [or Logan County, sources differ], Ohio, to build Prairie Home, a community based on cooperative labor and common property. Its members ate at a common table. After six months it failed (“the selfish element was predominant”). Despite this failure I imagine that the vicinity retained enough of its reformist vibrations to influence later inhabitants. To the south lay the town of Yellow Springs, founded in 1825 by followers of the English socialist Robert Owen. It became a busy part of the Underground Railway, and by 1851 the Antioch College was formed there. Celebrated alumni such as Stephen Jay Gould, Coretta Scott King, Harry Cleaver, and George Caffentzis renewed its anti-racist, anti-capitalist traditions, though I do not know that they knew of John Otis Wattles or the communism of the Prairie Home. The mole burrows deep.

John Wattles and his wife Edith moved to Cincinnati where he published the reform paper, *Herald of Progression*. In 1846 established a utopian community on the Ohio River called Excelsior and it was presumably from this one that he made his offer to Goodwyn Barmby, to ship grain without speculation, as one communist church to another communist church. However, tragedy struck in Dec. 1847 when the Excelsior Community was washed away by floods with the loss of seventeen lives.

The Wattles brothers were conductors on the underground railroad, they were educators, and they were utopians who believed in having all things in common. The force behind them was the freedom struggle of the emancipating slaves, just as the force behind Goodwyn Barmby was the struggle for subsistence and the Charter by the factory workers of England.

The black population of Cincinnati lived on the border between slave and free and in constant danger of kidnapping. Its economy depended on good commercial relations with the slave-holders across the river. Native Americans came south down the river Miami, Afro-Americans came north across the Ohio, settlers from Virginia came from the east, and settlers from New York via Pennsylvania also came from the east. Its population was heterogeneous. The location of white riots against Afro-Americans in 1829, 1836, and 1841. The black community had churches, barber shops, schools, and a few commercial enterprises. Helping slaves off the steam-boats, or across the river, concealing them in town. Residential patterns were dense

and, perforce, cooperative. Many of the emancipated slaves had been purchased by friends, family, or kin. John Wattle canvassed black population finding that about one fifth were self-emancipated, i.e. purchased themselves.²⁵ These like the notorious pass laws of South African apartheid, papers had to be shown. Like the shack-dwellers of SA in other respects the community learned to fight collectively for water, security, roof. But that is not all. Everybody sang. At the Union Baptist Church and Bethel A.M.E. a white visitor reported, “Such hearty singing! – sometimes too fast, sometimes too slow, but to my ear music, because it was soul not cold science.... I went home happy, for I had not fed on husks.”

John Mercer Langston (1829-1897) was in the vanguard of African American struggle in radical anti-slavery politics. He recruited soldiers in the black regiments during the Civil War and was an inspector of the Freedmen’s Bureau after the Civil War. He was U.S. Minister to Haiti for eight years. White father and mother part native American and part black of an emancipated slave. Orphaned, he moved to Cincinnati in 1840. Ohio constitution of 1802 denied blacks the franchise. Large scale riots engulfed the city in 1829 and 1836 expelling blacks and destroying an abolitionist press. Lower cost of living after depression of 1837 and “a near-barter economy.”

The Baptist minister preached in 1837, “Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hand to God’ is the declaration of infinite goodness and wisdom. It must take place, and will doubtless be effected by human agency; and who so proper as educated colored people to be the heralds of the gospel, and teachers of science and civilization to their benighted brethren in all lands.” This preacher did not teach Karl Marx directly. However, the human agency in whose power he never for a moment doubted, would lead to the American Civil War which, as Marx never doubted, was a leap in human emancipation.

When the black abolitionists Martin Delany visited in 1848 he noted of the teaching in the African American schools of Cincinnati, “They don’t capitalize i,” which he took to be a severe criticism whereas we,

²⁵ William Cheek and Aimee Lee Cheek, “John Mercer Langston and the Cincinnati Riot of 1841,” in Henry Louis Taylor, Jr. (ed.), *Race and the City: Work, Community, and Protest in Cincinnati, 1820-1970* (University of Illinois Press: Urbana, 1993), p. 33.

remembering it as a transcendental age, might give an inclusive meaning to the practice – unselfishness, a sign of the common!

John Langston attended the 1 August celebrations in 1841 commemorating the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies. September 3 riot began as city officials refused to intervene against white mob, with bank closings, unstable economic conditions, and a press which blamed the abolitionist movement and the refusal to cooperate with the Fugitive Slave law. City Blacks defended themselves with arms successfully at first, but the combination of martial law and mob law prevailed. It was most severe urban outbreak against blacks in antebellum America. John ran through the backyards, over fences, across bridges, evading the police to protect his brother. Thrilled by courage of black defenders, and thrilled too by news of Cinque and the mutiny aboard the slave ship *Amistad*. He lived with family and boarders of seventeen persons.

In school he wrote an essay on Alfred the Great, the beloved monarch of British history and the only one they call great. “I think if the colored people study like King Alfred they will soon do away with the evil of slavery.” He would have identified with Alfred, who to fight another day had to flee a military rout and seek refuge in a poor woman’s house where, legend has it, while she went to the well to fetch water, he - such a klutz in the kitchen! - let the cakes burn in the oven. From Alfred the Great to those dispersed after Hurricane Katrina the refuge from disaster depends on the kindness of strangers. It is how commons are renewed and class solidarity is maintained, starting in the kitchen.

The Afro-American community began an educational mutual aid society in 1836. It was a cooperative effort to educate the black youth, to educate its members, and others unable to afford school including orphaned and the destitute. “The Education Society is proof,” argues Nikki Taylor, “that African Americans in Cincinnati were community-conscious; they had moved beyond seeing education merely as a means of individual uplift, but as a means of racial uplift and community empowerment.”²⁶ John Gains stevedore and steamship steward and provisions shop owner on the river

²⁶ Nikki Taylor, “African Americans’ Strive for Educational Self-Determination in Cincinnati Before 1873,” in Gayle T. Tate and Lewis A. Randolph (eds.), *The Black Urban Community: From Dusk Till Dawn* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2006), p. 289.

front was Cincinnati's foremost AfroAm antebellum intellectual publicly speaking against the race riot of 1841 and gave the August First address in 1849. His leadership is a direct experience of the formative power of the Cincinnati community.

These urban conditions can be compared to the plantation as an historical setting of AfroAm oppression, but characterized by architectural density, educational mutuality, self-defense, 'criminality' and gambling and dealing. To call it 'the community' is to be true to American usage, to call it commoning however calls attention to the proletarian experience of violent loss shared wherever capitalism seeks self-development by taking away subsistence, the violent expropriation of the common. This urban mass of commoners without commons was a problem to Marx too, and the vexed question of the political and economic composition of the working class, which he posed variously as proletarian and the lumpenproletarian.²⁷

To conclude. If the English origin of the word 'communism' is to be found among the revolutionary workers of Paris, an American origin, at least of the communist communities of Ohio, arose in association with the militant movement against slavery. Certainly, it had become a *proletarian* experience, a term I use with its *class* meaning. That the English semantics and the American politics were connected in correspondence between Barmby and Wattles is surely only a single thread within the world-wide struggle. Reflecting on Indian and Afro-American experience from the standpoint of the composition of the working-class, forced migration became the policy towards the former as in the Trail of Tears, while forced immobility became the policy for the latter as in the Fugitive Slave law.

In the 1840s, then, 'communism' was the new name to express the revolutionary aspirations of proletarians. It pointed to the future, as in 'historic tasks'. In contrast, the 'commons' belonged to the past, perhaps to the feudal era, when it was the last-ditch defense against extinction. Now in the 21st century the semantics of the two terms seems to be reversed with communism belonging to the past of Stalinism, industrialization of agriculture, and militarism, while the commons belongs to an international debate about the planetary future of land, water, and subsistence for all. What is sorely needed in this debate so far is allegiance to the actual

²⁷ Peter Stallybrass, "Marx and Heterogeneity: Thinking the Lumpenproletariat," *Representations*, no. 31 (summer 1990)

movements of the common people who have been enclosed and foreclosed but are beginning to disclose an alternative, open future.

In that debate we need realism and imagination. Marx writes in the well-trodden paths of section four of chapter one, of *Das Kapital*, “The Fetishism of Commodities,” and as we join him in that familiar walk, he appeals to our imagination, “Let us finally imagine, for a change, an association of free men, working with the means of production held in common and expending their many different forms of labor-power in full self-awareness as one single social labor force.”

After 1848 Barmby lost his revolutionary restlessness, closed the doors of his Communist Church, and became a Unitarian. So we can leave him serenely soaking in the gradated temperatures of his tubs of hydrotherapy. Karl Marx was only temporarily upset by the upheavals of 1848 and betook himself and family to London and to the bracing waters of political economy and the poverty-given agonies of boils. John Otis Wattles, meanwhile, moved to Illinois and attempted communal living again in Lake Zurich, and then again moved to West Point, Indiana, and finally to Kansas where he and Edith, his wife, with Augustus and Susan, his wife, started a town, Moneka.

John was known as an “ardent advocate of spiritualism” and as “an optimist of the most pronounced type.” There they provided a headquarters and safe house to hide John Brown and his men when fleeing from a posse of racist, slave-holding murderers. After the failure of John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry in 1859 the Wattles brothers may have had a hand in failed attempts to free Brown and his comrades from jail.²⁸

In Moneka at Brown’s headquarters with the Wattles brothers, “There was a general buffet supper for all, white and black....” Barbara Taylor emphasized something similar in England, the importance of men and women eating together. It is something which brought us together too in the Adirondacks. In conclusion, various forms of commoning, some traditional and some not, provided the proletariat with means of survival in the struggle against capitalism. Commoning is a basis of proletarian class solidarity, and we can find this before, during, and after both the semantic and the political birth of communism.

²⁸ George Martin, *Collections of the Kansas State Historical Society, 1911-1912*, Vol XII (Topeka, Kansas 1912), pp. 429-430.

