

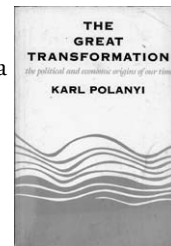
# Groups—Reclaiming the Commons—Books

Tomales Bay Institute sports the motto “reinventing the Commons.” Their mission is to develop an intellectual framework that includes the Commons as well as the market and the state, and to inject that expanded framework into America’s vision of possibilities. A project of the Earth Island Institute, it is a treasure trove of information about the Commons including 12 pages of people involved in thinking about the Commons. Their main thrust is that humans own the Commons and that by using market mechanisms we can be compensated for the loss of the Commons. They oversee two useful websites: [friendsoftheCommons.org](http://friendsoftheCommons.org) and [ontheCommons.org](http://ontheCommons.org).

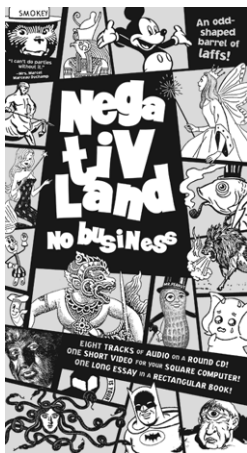


by Chris Calder

Three books read in the following sequence give one a historic and present day sense of the Commons and how we treat them. Karl Polanyi’s *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of our Time* is a sometimes dense and exhaustive tale of the fatal flaw that has brought misery to life. Polanyi finds his flaw in the fact that our society has given itself over to a “self-regulating market.” It is the story of the great transformation of common lives into commodified lives. His depictions, often using first-hand sources, of the human ravages in Britain of the early Industrial Revolution, are memorable, especially compared to the generalized or Dickensified accounts usually offered. His description of how unprecedented and extreme it was to link society so powerfully to economic concerns is an eye-opener.



Negativland, like the Commons, is hard to describe. Wired Magazine calls them “America’s most skilled plunderers from the detritus of 20th century commercial culture... media addicts who see society suffering under a constant barrage of TV, canned imagery, advertising and corporate culture.” Band, artists, social critics, their website [negativland.com](http://negativland.com) has a great collection of information on intellectual property rights. They point out that “no one should be allowed to claim private control over the creative process itself. This struggle is essentially one of art against business.” Their CD/Book *No Business* is their comment on intellectual property rights and the Commons.



Economist Herman E. Daly and theologian John B. Cobb pick up on this point in their book *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the Environment and a Sustainable Future*. They start with an assessment of the failure of the “great transformation” to provide for the common good. They modify classical economic theories substituting community benefit for the dominant individual benefit. Their effort includes a wide survey of alternative and often neglected thinkers, a deep source of new/old ideas relevant to many headline-grabbing issues that have roots wrapped around the very basis of our society. Their efforts launched a whole new field of economic thinking now known as ecological economics.



International Society of Ecological Economics brings together economists and ecologists to rethink how we can view our world to create a sustainable world. Realizing that human economics exists within the sphere of our environmental Commons, they are involved with distinguishing the natural systems of the environment as valuable functional entities that must be allowed to thrive if life as we know it is to survive. They have regional societies including the US Society of Ecological Economics which holds a biannual conference and produces a regular newsletter. See their websites at [ussee.org](http://ussee.org) and [ecoeco.org](http://ecoeco.org).



Then, *The Fox in the Henhouse: How Privatization Threatens Democracy* delivers a current account of privatization in many of its manifestations, with a focus on its effects on democracy. Authors Elizabeth Minnich, a philosopher, and Si Kahn, an artist and activist, cover a wide field: privatization’s effects on nature, the military, public services, retail economics, the penal system ... their list goes on. The impressive batch of examples they’ve assembled and their direct and personable writing style vivifies and unifies their account. Kahn and Minnich throw in a generous selection of relevant poems and songs, an unusual tactic given the subject, but effective when combined with their passionate approach.



Science and Environment Health Network is directed by Carolyn Raffensperger who authored the Ten Laws of the Commons. Their website at [sehn.org](http://sehn.org) has information on the Precautionary Principle, Public Trust and Ecological Economics. The Science and Environmental Health Network engages communities and governments in the effective application of science to protect and restore public and ecosystem health. SEHN has been the leading proponent in the United States of the Precautionary Principle as a new basis for environmental and public health policy.



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