

"Globalization and Diversity, UNESCO and Cultural-Policy Making: Imperatives for U.S. Arts and Culture Practitioners and Organizations"
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Global Markets, Culture and the Commons

Abstract of Remarks by David Bollier

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If the advocates of cultural diversity hope to take our message to the mainstream, I believe our biggest challenge is to develop a more compelling grand narrative for explaining how cultural diversity originates, why it is important and how it can be sustained.

In global trade circles, the prevailing story for talking about culture is the story of *the market*. "Globalization" is all about expanding the governance rules of markets to all corners of the globe. It is about subjecting social relations and resource management to a matrix of property rights, contracts and market exchange.

According to this mainstream story, "value" is created by enclosing something in an envelope of private property rights, and through contracts to buy and sell those

rights for money. This will result in robust markets and “development.” According to the market story, this is how “value” is created – with “value” serving as a synonym for “money.”

But we all know, at a certain level, that the real value of the arts, culture and civic life cannot be expressed through any economic measurement. What is the value of indigenous artwork? What is the value of ethnobotanical knowledge? What about Native American folk stories or traditional designs?

Economists tend to believe that such questions have market answers. They point out, for example, how certain native plants can be patented and sold to pharmaceutical companies, or how building a cultural center can help develop a city's economy. The basic idea seems to be that culture is an under-leveraged resource, and that we need to learn the sophisticated techniques for squeezing more money out of it.

But if the idea of “cultural diversity” is going to mean anything, and if it is going to gain mainstream credibility, then we need to develop a better story for why culture has *intrinsic* value. We need a narrative that explains why art, music, film, literature, and other cultural art forms and practices are not simply feedstock for the market, but something that must remain inalienable in key respects if it is going to survive.

The problem, when we try to talk about cultural diversity, is that we do not really have a coherent policy language for expressing its real *value* as a functioning social system. We too easily adopt the default language of the market, which usually

translates into that joke about the Golden Rule – “He who has the gold, rules.” Culture becomes a pawn of the market.

Ultimately, this is the logic of cultural dispossession. It brings to mind the wealthy English industrialists who bought lands with priceless Roman ruins and pagan monuments like Stonehenge, and then proceeded to destroy them because, after all, it was “their” property. To me, it is a sobering thought that only a handful of corporations now own most of photographic archives that document American history – a private repository that is accessible only to those who can pay the money.

If we are going to be serious about recognizing the value of culture – its pluralism, its authenticity, its vigor, its sustainability – then we must start by refusing to let markets be the ultimate arbiter of value.

I suggest that that will not happen unless we begin to develop a new language – a new analysis – for explaining why the market is an inadequate guardian of culture and why culture is valuable in its own right. We need a coherent, shared analysis that can respond to neoliberal market discourse, which is the normative language that American society uses to define value.

Politicians and economists have long assumed that there are really only two sectors for governing resources and “adding value” – the state and the market. Markets are seen as the vehicle for economic progress while government is supposed to take care of everything else.

But the point that I wish to make today is that there is another sector that is at least as important to our well-being. That sector is *the commons*. The commons is a generic term for describing various physical resources, social institutions and intangible cultural traditions that we, the members of a society, collectively own.

The commons includes resources that we have paid for as taxpayers, resources that communities have created for themselves, and resources that we have inherited from previous generations. The commons is not just an inventory of marketable assets. It consists of social institutions and cultural traditions that define us as people and enliven us as human beings. The commons consists of lots of *inalienable* resources that belong to us all.

To talk about the commons is to fill a void in our cultural discourse. It is to name a different class of resources that we currently have trouble naming. It is to assert that there are *sources of important value-creation that lie beyond the market*. It is to say that the commons is at least as important to the development of a nation as property rights and markets.

I am enthusiastic about the commons paradigm because it enables a new kind of dialogue that is not only political and polemical in the best sense, but humanistic and ecumenical. The commons is not a manifesto or ideology but rather a *flexible template* for talking about a wide variety of market enclosures and the rich productivity of social communities, especially online communities. To help showcase the positive and alarming developments on the commons, I recently started a new web portal and blog called OntheCommons.org.

What really interests me about the commons is its practical, strategic value in making a new set of values heard in public policy discussions. My hope, indeed, is that the commons might be a useful framework in discussions about the UNESCO convention on cultural diversity. The commons can be useful here because it provides a new narrative that can explain the value of culture *apart from* its market valuations.

I must stress that the commons is not anti-market any more than environmentalism is anti-business. In each case, what is being sought is a more equitable balance between the market and the commons. In fact, I believe that markets and commons are complementary and synergistic. Both inter-penetrate each other and need each other. Businesses can only flourish if there is a commons (think roadways and sidewalks) that allow private property to be balanced against public need. Privatize the commons and you begin to stifle commerce, competition and innovation as well as social and civic needs. To defend the commons, then, is to recognize that human beings have collective needs and identities that the market simply cannot fulfill by itself.

The commons is appealing for a number of reasons:

- ❑ It underscores the fact that the people own certain resources and must have the right and legal mechanisms to control them.
- ❑ It allows us to move beyond the dichotomy that we are all either sellers or consumers, when in fact we have other identities that are important to us.

- ❑ It brings into focus a wide variety of market abuses and puts them in a coherent conceptual framework.
- ❑ It is a positive vision that seizes the moral high ground; it is not just a reactive critique.

If the challenge in defending cultural diversity is how to “move into the mainstream,” I’d like to recommend that we develop the commons as a compelling and new grand narrative. Yes, we must talk about specific policy proposals for preserving culture. But it just may be that significant progress will first require us to develop a new story about why culture is valuable.