

# The struggle to reclaim the commons and the double movement

Today eight rich individuals control as much wealth as half of the people on Earth, or more than three billion people. In his book *The Great Transformation* (1944), economist Karl Polanyi showed that for much of human economic history, the motive of individual profit did not dominate economic life. Rather, family, community, religion and political relationships strictly regulated market exchange based on the normative principle of reciprocity, or mutual dependence. Norms for commerce and market relations constrained behaviour in order to serve people's basic needs. Society and community shaped market relations, and not the other way around. In short, the economy was submerged or embedded in society and a servant to the common good, not its master.

## 1.5 Watch "5minU: The Great Transformation." (6:05)

<p>5minU: The Great Transformation</p> 
<p><b>Michalski, Jerry.</b> "The Great Transformation," video, 6:05, posted by the creator to YouTube, August 8, 2013. <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rSuz01zvOjE">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rSuz01zvOjE</a> (<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rSuz01zvOjE">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rSuz01zvOjE</a>)</p>

Communities developed customs and practices to regulate common lands that provided people in a local vicinity with the means of living. Michalski's video on Polanyi shows how communal values and customs determined commons uses and the redistribution of surplus and set penalties for breaking co-operative conventions. Over the last five centuries, at first slowly, and then with greater rapidity, capitalism transformed the commons and its protective social economy. Polanyi describes a dialectical struggle between those who wanted private property and markets as the means of allocation of land, labour, and capital, and those who resisted enclosure of commons and sought to build just alternatives. He described this historical process within capitalism as a double movement. It included popular resistance to enclosure by means of riots, land invasions, and strikes, and the development of alternative community systems of social defense including mutual and friendly societies, co-operative worker-owned industries, and later, trade unions.

Polanyi's analysis remains important for us today. He helps us locate the roots and branches of present-day struggles within the arc of history. Citizen and worker movements built the foundations of the cooperative and labour movements, and the democratic welfare state emerged from these struggles inherent to the double movement dialectic. They achieved changes in legal and state regulation to improve working hours and environmental conditions, to end child labour, to build and strengthen health, education, housing, and welfare safety nets; to regulate capital; and afford some protection of the natural environment.

However, as our next thinker Silvia Federici points out, while neoliberal capitalism steadily undermines, erodes, and purposefully dismantles these gains, much of our focus still overlooks the role of women, gender, and global feminism in resisting neoliberalism and proposing alternatives.

**1.6a Watch “The Struggle for the Commons,” an interview with Silvia Federici. (14:12)**

<p>Silvia Federici: The Struggle for the Commons - Kontext TV</p> 
<p><b>Federici, Silvia.</b> “Silvia Federici: The Struggle for the Commons—Kontext TV,” video, 14:12, posted by KontextTV to YouTube on October 23, 2014. <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJwFT3a3J_4">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJwFT3a3J_4</a> (<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJwFT3a3J_4">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJwFT3a3J_4</a>)</p>

**1.6b Watch Shiva, Vandana. “Rio 2012: Commons, Our Rights for a Future.” (2:31).**

## Rio 2012: Commons, our rights for a future. Vandana Shiva



**Shiva, Vandana.** “Rio 2012: Commons, Our Rights for a Future,” accessed January 1, 2018.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BdqTv2lkhaQ> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BdqTv2lkhaQ>)

Federici discusses the return of the idea of the commons as a response to neoliberal capitalism’s harmful impacts; in particular, she introduces many responses led by women. Federici recalls, as does the Indian critic of globalization Vandana Shiva, that for much of human history it has been women who have been responsible for maintaining commons, whether growing food, protecting biodiversity, performing unpaid care work, nurturing others in the paid workforce, or reproducing everyday life. Note her analysis of contemporary thinking about feminism, gender identity, and the commons. Today, women play a critical leadership role at the forefront of oppressed communities, giving voice to issues of injustice. Defending and rebuilding social and ecological commons. Connecting gender issues with various anti-capitalist struggles in order to reconstruct the social fabric of everyday livability. See the video from Vandana Shiva, “Rio 2012: Commons, Our Rights for a Future” in Supplemental Readings. Other women activists and practitioners remind us that the commons is not simply a thing, but a process. As Gibson-Graham et al. (2016) state, “productivity increases not when the common is controlled and privatized but when it is shared and added to.”

Real time manifestations of the double movement and the struggle to reclaim the commons are in play across the globe. When Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico on September 20, 2017, Puerto Ricans almost immediately began worrying that the disaster would afford opportunities for the wealthy to swoop in to buy up beleaguered public utilities and damaged beachfront property on the cheap. In the mini-documentary below, Naomi Klein visits Puerto Rico six months after Hurricane Maria to see how the government and investors are taking advantage of the disaster—and how teachers, farmers, community organizers, and others are working towards their own vision of the future of the island.

### 1.7 Watch “The Battle for Paradise: Naomi Klein Reports from Puerto Rico.” (17:27)

## The Battle for Paradise: Naomi Klein Reports from Puerto ...



**Klein, Naomi.** "The Battle for Paradise: Naomi Klein Reports from Puerto Rico," video, 17:27, posted by The Intercept to YouTube on April 7, 2018.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pTiZtYaB3Zo> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pTiZtYaB3Zo>)

In the exercise for Module 1 (at the end of this module) we ask you to review the Klein video to locate the double movement unfolding in Puerto Rico in the 21st century. As you watch, track the diverse examples of privatization, resistance, and alternatives that you encounter. Like Polanyi, Federici, and Klein, pay attention to the constellations of power and privileged groups that take advantage of crises, as well as the historical struggles of other groups, men and women, to secure a future for all living beings.