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*The Diggers: The Unmaking of “Public” Space*



Today, we planted about twenty papaya seedlings on “public” land near our house in Kailua, Hawai‘i. In doing so, we broke the existing laws of the state which has the authority and right to delineate the precise sets of activities and usage of this “public” land.

Our act has two major purposes: one is to grow and share food; the other is to problematize the concept of “public” in “public space.” While public land is supposed to exist as a binary opposite to private property, they are in reality mutually constitutive. Both are necessary to the world of global capitalism and the equally global system of national states. Legislated by nation states, private property laws keep capital investors calm by ensuring that they will personally profit from their ventures. Public property, on the other hand, keeps large parcels of land in reserve for future use. Property “belonging” to the public serves the equally important ideological purpose of assuaging a large number of people into believing that the territorial nation state is indeed “theirs” and is acting in their best interest.

The common understanding of what “public” land should be used for is narrowly defined within the confines of leisure activities: soccer, picnicking, admiring the view, walking a dog. The “public” comes to be understood as that group that has access to private property, where they can conduct all

other activities life necessitates—sleep, work, farm, love—all those things banned from public space.

In planting the papaya seedlings, we invoke the name of the Diggers. The Diggers were a radical group whose members lived in the early stages of capitalist colonization/globalization. In this period of late capitalism we continue their work. By making many of the same points, we are trying to recall and reuse their methods of resistance in the continuing struggle for social justice.



The first Diggers lived in the place we now know as England in the mid- to late-seventeenth century—a time when there was a category of land called the “commons.” Common land was that land communally shared by people to use and belonged, in perpetuity, to the community as a whole. As self-sustenance was dependent on the ability of people to “common”—to hunt, graze, forage, fish and, later farm—the struggle of the Diggers was ultimately the struggle for common land. They understood the continued existence of the commons as vital to the independence of the community from the arbitrary demands of rulers. The common lands were just as vital to their freedom from hunger and desperation. Commoning was well understood as the only way of life in which people could remain free from further bondage.

The Diggers emerged in this the embryonic period of global capitalism and of the national state system. Theirs was the

time when the colonial system was expanding, when the Atlantic slave trade was becoming an inseparable part of doing business and when methods of corporal and capital punishment were becoming the main means of imposing the will of rulers. This was also the period when patriarchal gender relations were becoming increasingly commonplace and ideas of race were beginning to be discussed as rational explanations for gross inequalities.

The Diggers came together in an attempt to hold onto their common lands against its expropriation and transformation into either parcels of private property or into the public property of the nascent national state. The Diggers and their allies, the Levellers, the Ranters, the urban rioters along with the rural commoners, the fishers, market women, weavers and all the other producers were waged in a battle that was about no less than trying to hang on to (or re-gain) a communal life based on principles of self-sustenance. The Diggers therefore raged against the drive to entrap displaced people as either slave or wage labour in the nascent factories, plantations and ships of the emerging capitalist system.

One of the signature actions of the Diggers was to sow the ground with edible foods—parsnips, carrots and beans. A simple gesture perhaps but their goal was no less than global equality, freedom for all and self-sufficiency for all producers. By planting on land stolen from “commoners,” the Diggers gave notice that the battle over what kind of property laws would prevail was far from over.

The Diggers formed communes as a response to “the problems of expropriation, imprisonment, hanging, and slavery, not to mention hunger.”<sup>1</sup> In their own words the Diggers believed that: “[t]his freedom in planting the common Land, will prevent robbing, stealing, and murdering, and Prisons will not so mightily be filled with Prisoners; and thereby we shall prevent that hart breaking spectacle of seeing so many hanged every Sessions as they are. . . This freedom in the common earth is the poor’s right by the Law of Creation and equity of the Scriptures, for the earth was not made for a few, but for whole Mankind [sic]. . . ”<sup>2</sup>

In taking such direct actions to reclaim their stolen land, the Diggers came up against some of the most powerful forces in society at the time: the merchants, lesser gentry and early industrialists. These groups were eager to overturn the existing ruling structure and bring about a new world order made in their image. Such groups backed the leaders of the emerging parliamentary movement against the King. Led by Oliver Cromwell and his militant Puritans, the aim of these “revolutionaries” was to create a liberal democracy with the respectable citizen worker as its national subject. In doing so, they turned the existing world upside down.

The new elites supported the forces for a national parliament because they benefited greatly from the changes being wrought by the emergent state. In England, the new Navigation Acts protected British trade and shipping, new legislation on industry removed pre-existing restrictions on profiteering, changes in the way the stock market was operated promoted speculative capitalism and, of course, the enclosures of common land privatized property making land itself a form of capital.<sup>3</sup> The new parliamentary “democracy” created the conditions of “national security” and the “rule of law” much desired by the ascendant bourgeoisie.

Initially, the emerging elites needed radicals like the Diggers, for they too were opposed to the autocratic rule of Kings and Queens. Indeed, according to the Digger’s manifesto, *The True Leveller’s Standard Advanced* (1649), their goal was “that we may work in righteousness, and lay the foundation of making the earth a common treasure for all, both rich and poor. That every one that is born in the land may be fed by the earth, his mother that brought him forth, according to the reason that rules in the creation, not enclosing any part into any particular land, but all as one man working together, and feeding together as sons of one father, members of one family; not one lording over another, but all looking upon each other as equals in creation.”<sup>4</sup>

However, the Diggers, with their radical, egalitarian principles and their fierce opposition to all forms of slavery, were ruthlessly suppressed by the Puritans once the latter were assured victory against the King. They were represented as a

major threat while being simultaneously belittled. Their planting of foodstuffs, according to the new Council of State, was “ridiculous, yet that conflux of people may be a beginning whence things of a greater and more dangerous consequence may grow.”<sup>5</sup> The “democratic” forces, then, were fearful of the Diggers with their firm belief in equality.

In the end, the Diggers and their attempt to repossess the commons was thought of as too great a danger to the new Parliament. Thus, one of the first actions taken by the new English republic was the brutal, military destruction of one of their most important communes, George’s Hill. Soldiers rode in on their horses and under the command of the new parliamentarians, destroyed the Diggers’ spades, trampled the crops they had carefully planted and tended, flattened their homes and drove the Diggers from their land. Their defeat assured the centrality of the market economy, the further entrenchment, and later racialization, of slavery and the hegemony of both global capitalism and the national state.

It is the consequences of the defeat of the Diggers and their allies that we, today, must contend with everywhere. In what is now called Hawai‘i, the devastation of largely self-sustaining and diverse communities was borne of this defeat of people in ‘England’ fighting for common land and against capitalist colonization. Their loss allowed the new ruling class to entrench themselves deeper into the lives and lands of people they came to dominate. Currently in Hawai‘i, practices of “commoning” have been more or less eradicated—made practically impossible by the imposition of private and state/public property laws, the ecological destruction wrought by cash crops (sandalwood, sugar, pineapple, etc.), the engineering of water canals, industrialization, tourism and the ever ubiquitous automobile.

The site where we planted the papaya seedlings is evidence of such destruction. The papayas grow on a narrow strip of public land separated from the now private Ka‘elepulu Pond (renamed Enchanted Lake by developers) by a chain link fence erected and maintained by the Enchanted Lake Residents Association, its state-recognized owners. Ka‘elepulu Pond was once a thriving fishing cultivation area and its

corollary streams fed taro and rice farms. It is now part of a fetid lake in which the water can no longer flow freely to the ocean. The fence by which the papayas grow is meant to keep out what the ‘owners’ association call “trespassers” who “poach” fish from their lake.<sup>6</sup>

In dealing with these contemporary developments, we need to contend with something that was less of a problem during the times of the first Diggers. During their time, it was fairly clear to people that their land was being stolen, that their labour was being exploited and that nationalism, racism and sexism were being used to sow dissent amongst the motley crew of commoners, peasants, artisans and the emerging proletariat throughout the world. Yet, today, many of the things that the Diggers fought against—private property and the nation state with its “public” lands for example—are so hegemonic that to merely question them is to open yourself up to ridicule and perhaps much, much worse—think of the United States’ use and justification of kidnapping, torture and summary execution in the name of “national security” at Guantanamo Bay, for example.

We live at a time when the very instruments used to oppress and exploit us are seen as the vehicles of our deliverance. The notion of the “public” is one such instrument of capitalist colonization. While the Diggers well understood that the organization of a consciousness of national “belonging” and “citizenship” were being used to destroy the solidarity of the “multitude” whose common bonds lay not in their supposed membership in some “nation” but in their desire for self-sustenance, we now think of national sovereignty as something essential in the fight for self-determination.

Many of us have forgotten that the global system of national states, with its legalization of the expropriating practices of capitalists, has been—and continues to be—an integral feature of the New World Order. We see the fostering of national identities, particularly those of oppressed “nations,” as signs of empowerment instead of seeing such identities as a site where relations of domination and exploitation are organized within processes of capitalist globalization. This is evident in the “progressive” rhetoric that complains about the

loss of “citizens’ rights” while remaining largely mute about the exploitation of “non-citizens”—an outcome that Oliver Cromwell himself had hoped for so many centuries ago. This is evident in both mainstream and “progressive” versions of nationalism.

In this post-9/11 world, where the rhetoric of militant puritans is once again the dominant discourse of the age, our planting of papaya seedlings hopes to stir desires of self-sustenance, a self-sustenance that like the demands of the Diggers is based not on the self-righteous desires of “national entitlements” for citizens but on the recognition of people’s global interdependence and our shared dreams of realizing freedom from capitalists and from national states that, at best, sell us the notion of the “public” in place of our freedom from rulers.

Next to the papaya seedlings we erected a sign. It says “These papaya plants have been planted here for everyone. When they bear fruit, in about a year, you are welcome to pick them as you need. We will return to feed the plants with organic fertilizer once a month. Please feel free to water and weed. Do not use chemical weed killers as this will poison the fruit and those that eat them. *The Diggers, 2003.*”

An old man walked by while we planted and said, “Oh good, I can have free papayas later.” Exactly.



Digger's Song:

Their self-will is their law, stand up now, stand up now,  
Their self will is their law, stand up now.  
Since tyranny came in they count it now no sin  
To make a goal a gin, to starve poor men therein.  
Stand up now, stand up now.

The gentry are all round, stand up now, stand up now,  
The gentry are all round, stand up now,  
The gentry are all round, on each side they are found,  
This wisdom's so profound, to cheat us of our ground.  
Stand up now, stand up now.

Glory here, Diggers all.

*Notes*

1. Linebaugh, Peter and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*. Boston: Beacon Press. 2000. p.117.
2. Linebaugh, p.117.
3. Linebaugh, p.71-72.
4. Linebaugh, p.85.
5. Linebaugh, p.117-118.
6. Aguiar, Eloise, "Kailua Pond Pollution Targeted" in Honolulu Advertiser. September 9, 2003.