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## Reclaiming the Commons: Forging a New Political Language

by Starhawk

*The Commons are the universal heritage of people and all living things. They are everything needed to support healthy life on earth: air, water, food, shelter, health care, energy sources and our genetic heritage. They are what is needed to sustain culture: our multicultural heritages, education, information and the means to disseminate it, essential human services, public spaces, the air waves, and political space. They are equally the land, its forests, the oceans, and all ecosystems.*

From the Statement of Unity  
Reclaim the Commons Mobilization  
[www.reclaimthecommons.net](http://www.reclaimthecommons.net)

Over the next ten days, June 3-9 in San Francisco, while the biotechnology industry meets in its annual convention, the streets of the city will be filled with marches, demonstrations, and actions organized by the Reclaim the Commons Mobilization. The schedule of events is ambitious, even for the progressive Bay Area, a solid week of activities designed to highlight the corporate takeover of our economies, governments, and public life. But beyond the events and actions that are planned, the mobilization is an attempt to forge a new political language, that can help us focus not on any single issue or list of issues, but on the links and connections between them, a language to express what we want, not just what we don't want.

What we don't want is clear and overwhelming: the whole laundry list of exploitations, corporate takeovers, and "isms"--racism, sexism, classism, and all the others. We can easily become exhausted trying to keep up a decent level of protest on all those issues. Here in the Bay Area, a determined activist could go to two or three protests on most days. Add a few meetings into the mix, and you'd need to forego gainful employment, family life, and all other meaningful human relationships just to stay abreast. What we do want is less defined. We don't have a consensus on the specific form of economics or the ten-year plan that we are pushing for. Nor should we. What we want is a shift in worldview, a move away from the model of reality that sees the universe as a giant machine, and toward an understanding of the world as organic, alive, dynamic, and changing. That view doesn't lead to monolithic solutions or imposed programs, but rather to experimentation and to a multiplicity of proposed solutions. It's a dynamic view, that understands that any solution, any form, must continuously dissolve itself and reform if it is to remain alive and liberating.

Biotechnology is only one of the many ways in which corporate profiteering imposes on the commons, but it is perhaps especially offensive, as it privatizes the very building blocks of life itself. The patenting of life forms has allowed corporations to claim the rights to and profits on everything from traditional healing herbs and food plants to the

genomes of indigenous cultures. Once released into the environment, altered genes cannot be recalled. While many negative effects have already been documented, the true scope of their impact is still unknown. We are being subjected to a massive, global-scale, uncontrolled scientific experiment that could have potentially devastating consequences for our ability to sustain life. While biotech corporations claim to be feeding the poor, corporate-driven research is directed at designing crops to be used with heavy doses of the herbicides produced by those same corporations. Biotech claims to heal the sick, and has produced some effective drugs for diseases--but corporations have also managed to skew research efforts away from investigating the environmental causes of cancer and ill health. The same corporations that produce the pesticides that give you cancer then claim your gratitude for profiting from the drugs that offer a cure.

Biotech, for all its high-tech gloss, represents the old mechanistic model of the universe, nineteenth-century science. Its basic premise is that one gene equals one trait, and that they can be switched and matched from organism to organism as similar screws can be switched between large and small machines. The mechanistic model assumes that the universe is entirely knowable and controllable. One cause equals one effect--and unintended effects somehow do not count. It's a very good model for isolating single causes and effects, but it does not help us understand complex sets of interrelationships.

The mechanistic model has brought us many advances. I'm not proposing to give up the electric light bulb or modern telecommunications. But widely applied over the earth, this model can also cause extreme damage, not least because of its tendency to not count unintended consequences or hold accountable those who create them. It makes us literally unable to see or comprehend the vast impact of our policies, or to notice when they are not working. So we douse our agricultural crops with 3300 times more pesticides than before World War II, and suffer a 20% greater loss to insect pests, plus uncountable cancers and related diseases, habitat loss, degradation of soil and streams, and loss of many other species. Yet somehow we are unable to notice that this approach to agriculture is simply not working.

The concept of the Commons arises out of a different world view, one more akin to the twenty-first-century sciences of complexity and systems and chaos theories. It sees reality as a web of relationships, of complex, intertwined causes and effects, linked in multiple ways and cycles that may maintain or disrupt equilibriums. It acknowledges that reality contains mystery, huge areas that we don't yet understand and can't control, and that mystery asks from us reverence and humility: at the least, a long pause to observe before tinkering with what we do not fully understand.

What links the issues of biotech, racial justice, war, the environment, and police brutality? The Commons gives us a language to talk about the connections, how corporate control of scientific research, corporate ownership of our very genes, is linked to an agenda which must always keep some people oppressed so that others must profit, and must ultimately use force to maintain that repression. And it gives us a language and an imagery to talk about what we want: a world of rooted abundance, in which enterprises are part of a web of relationships that constitute community and are accountable to those communities, a world in which the integrity of all those commons

that support life takes precedence over profit, a world of real democracy, where all people have a voice in the decisions that affect them, a world that cherishes creativity and nurtures intelligence and vision in all human beings.

When we say we are "Reclaiming the Commons," people ask, "What is the Commons?" And in explaining what the Commons is, we create a new frame, one that assumes that there are and should be areas of life which have a value beyond their value as commodities. "Commons" implies that community is a value, not just individual gain. Moreover, those commons we cherish are being eroded and taken from us, and we need to take them back. And we ally ourselves with the "commoners," not the princes or kings, the emperors or empire builders, but the ordinary people upon whose backs the world is built, and whose rights any true democracy must safeguard. Air, water, seed, a poem, a public space, a conversation, a healing herb, a tree, a flower, a healthy child--all of them are common as dirt, and yet beyond price, like healthy dirt, earth itself, the common ground that sustains our lives.

### **Reclaim the Commons Mobilization: Rough Schedule of Events**

for details, see [www.reclaimthecommons.net](http://www.reclaimthecommons.net)

- June 3-5 Teach-in
- June 5 Form a contingent in the peace march called by ANSWER to oppose the occupation in Iraq. Establish a temporary autonomous zone in Golden Gate Park.
- June 6 Join the vigil against the occupation of Palestine, march by the Biotech Conference to the Really, Really Free Market, where everything is free. Finish up with a Food Fight outside the Biotech gala.
- June 7 Racial Justice Day, rally and march that links the torture in Abu Ghraib with the torture at home in the California Youth Authority. In the evening, the Biotech World Cafe, a process of dialogue.
- June 8 Day of direct actions to disrupt the Biotech Conference, in solidarity with sister actions against the G8 meeting in Georgia.
- June 9 Day of EcoActions, transforming asphalt streets into gardens, and a Really, Really Free Clothing Market at the Gap.

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