



# What's in a word?

*Reframing the Language of Fiscal Sponsorship through Commoning*



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## How did we get here?

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***We should consider reclaiming our work in the nonprofit sector for what it is: commons and commoning.***

The nonprofit sector has been built, intentionally and accidentally, in the image of the *private sector*, leading to the *inappropriate application* of free-market, private-sector thinking, language, and assumptions to what is really a *commons sector*.

Free-market, neoliberal values are the dominant culture in America today. These values support a culture of asset accumulation, winner-take-all, nothing-less-than-#1, transactional relationships, winners/losers, *and scarcity for most of us.*



## What's the alternative?

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### *Thinking of the nonprofit sector as a commons.*

A commons is a defined, but open group of people who actively build and steward (govern) a shared resource for the benefit of the group. Any resource can be “commonized”: land, teams of workers, technology, money, etc.

Commoning is the activity of stewarding, or governing commons, which is done by the people or “commoners” who benefit from the commons.

Sound familiar? Fiscal sponsors are stewards—*commons managers*—of shared resources (staff, technology, knowledge, etc.) for the commons sector.



# A story of three sectors.

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**State**  
(Government)

Collects Taxes

Governance:  
Legislatures

Checks & Balances  
Three Branches of  
Government

**Commons**  
(Non-profit)  
(Public Trust)

Collects Donations

Governance:  
Boards of Directors

Checks & Balances  
Attorney General  
(Charitable Regulators)

**Private**  
(For-profit)

Pays Taxes

Governance:  
Board of Directors

Checks & Balances  
Attorney General  
(Private Regulators)



# A short history of commons thinking.

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Institutes of Justinian and the ideas of *res communes* and *res publicae* as distinct from the assets of the “state”.

535 A.D.

1215

King John and the *Magna Carta*. Two years later the *Charter of the Forreest* is created and incorporated into the *Magna Carta*.

King Henry VIII begins the first great “enclosure of the commons” during his reign—a project that would penetrate through the Modern Era fueled by free-market capitalism.

1536

1601

Queen Elizabeth I creates the *Charitable Uses Act* or “Statute of Elizabeth” the first modern definition of charitable purpose.

British economist William Forster Lloyd introduces the idea later termed “tragedy of the commons” by ecologist Garrett Hardin.

1833

Economist Elinor Ostrom publishes her Nobel-winning critique of Hardin in *Governing the Commons* and a new era of commons thought is born.

1990



# The language of commoning.

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Stewarding commons, or *commoning*, is an active process. There is no commons without commoning, which requires a certain worldview, values, and *language*.

Commoning requires a view of the world in which there is no “us” and “them”, only “we” (a concept commoners refer to as “nested I”), where mutual care is the focus.

Language can help us shift from the *transactional*, competitive, combative world of capitalism and private-sector thinking, to the *relational* world of commoning.



# Shifting our frame

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## Capitalist/Private

Radical Individualism  
Freedom in Individualization  
Property Enclosure  
Assets/Commodities  
Citizen  
Do It Yourself  
Hierarchy  
Government  
Universe



## Commons/Social

Nested "I"  
Freedom-in-Connectedness  
Property Relationalized  
Care-wealth  
Commoner  
Do It Together  
Heterarchy  
Governance  
Commonverse/Pluriverse



Talk like a commoner.

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## **Capitalist Economy**

*(Private Asset Building)*

*Sale/Fee* .....

*Asset (service, money, space, etc.)* .....

*Client* .....

*Partner* .....

*Competition/ Competitor* .....

*Institutional Capacity Building* .....

*Sustainability* .....

*Excellence* .....

*Quality* .....

*Non-profit* .....

*For-profit* .....

**SCARCITY** .....

## **Commons Economy**

*(Care-wealth Building)*

*Contribution/Allocation/Pooling*

*Care-wealth*

*Stakeholder/Commoner/Contributor*

*Member/Commoner*

*Collaboration/Collaborator/Peer*

*Community Wealth Building*

*Flourishing*

*Intentionality*

*Benefit*

*Social or Commons Purpose/Benefit*

*Private Purpose/Benefit*

**PLENTY**





## What's at stake?

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Fiscal sponsors and nonprofits that share commons resources are in a position to shift the culture and assumptions to a more collective and sustainable paradigm.

***We can move from transactional to transformational.***

Social norming is among the most powerful motivators of choice behavior.

***We can move from loss/gain to more mutual reciprocity.***

The magnitude of pain we experience with loss is 2x the magnitude of joy we feel with gain.

***We can move from care-worn to care-wealth.***

The practices of commoning and mutual care guide us, rather than dog-eat-dog competition.

***We can move from scarcity to plenty.***

In the commoning world, enclosure and exclusion are removed to reveal a vista of plenty.





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Generous support for the development and work of Social Impact Commons has been provided by:

THE  
ANDREW W.  
**MELLON**  
FOUNDATION

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