Chapter 7
The Collective Creation of Civil Commons:
The Life-Ground of Business Practice

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ABSTRACT

Since the dawn of civilisation, human communities have collectively allowed for the creation, and regularly taken advantage, of concepts, social arrangements and simple as well as complex tools aimed at fulfilling life-enabling ends for their members, under remarkably diverse circumstances. Natural and artificial languages, food recipes, universal health plans, urban sewers, open paths in the countryside, sports and games, pollution controls, old-age pensions, and regulated maximum working hours and minimum wages have all been tokens of "civil commons", a term coined in the 1990s by Canadian value theorist John McMurtry, meaning the "social constructs which enable universal access to life goods". In this chapter, McMurtry's axiology is presented, explained and applied, so as to highlight its implications for responsible and sustainable business practice.

INTRODUCTION

From the long-lived monarchies by divine election of medieval Europe, down to the persisting evolutionary explanations of human cooperation within societies *qua* means of survival of the species, *via* the laws of historical development variously conceived of by Vico, Lord Kames, Hegel, Marx or Spengler, human beings have been acknowledging their collective institutions as a pivotal feature of human existence, while at the same time denying these collective institutions' creative, ultimately contingent, human origin. On the one hand, human beings have recognised that their own mortal lives would be noticeably more brutal and probably much shorter, if not even impossible, were it not for the fact that there exist such collective institutions. On the other hand, human beings have regularly believed the existence of such collective institutions to be the result of a fundamentally non-human power, e.g. God, His Divine Providence or an equally providential invisible hand, Mother Nature and her more or less

maternal laws, Human Nature and its attendant Rights, the cunning of Reason, of the Will to Live, of the Will to Power or, lately, of some selfish gene. Yet, as the Greek economist, philosopher, Sovietologist and psychoanalyst Cornelius Castoriadis (1982/2003) dared stating:

God does not exist, and "laws of history," in the Marxian sense, do not exist. Institutions are a creation of man. But they are, so to speak, a blind creation. People do not know that they create and that they are, in a certain sense, free to create their institutions. And they mix up the fact that there can be no society (and no human life) without institutions and laws, with the idea that there has to be some transcendent source and guarantee of the institution. (pp. 15–16)

Even a secular, sceptical and scientific—if not scientistic—age such as ours is still prone to characterise socio-historical events and the institutional changes emerging thereof in ways akin to the old ones, i.e. as natural catastrophes (e.g. financial 'tsunamis', political 'landslides', economic 'crises'), natural developments (e.g. post-communist 'transitions', industrial 'growth', bureaucratic 'sclerosis') or God-like forces (e.g. the 'will of the markets', 'market discipline', 'market miracles'). The alternative, according to Castoriadis (1982/2003), would be "collective autonomy" (p. 14), i.e. taking full responsibility for the way in which we, as potentially active members of our communities, posit and steer our own creations—or fail to do so. The proclivity to retrieve a non-human, external power upon which we can rest our case, our fears, or our hopes, is still very strong, to the point of leading the most famous American neo-pragmatist thinker of our time, Richard Rorty (2004), to speak of a "masochistic urge to submit to the nonhuman" and not "to take proper pride in our humanity" and its creative abilities (p. 13).

Whether there can be such a power or not is too big a topic to be tackled in this chapter. As a matter of intellectual history, it is a topic that has kept theologians, philosophers, social scientists, essayists and literati busy for a few thousand years. Rather, the attention here is to be set upon a specific group of collective creations, of which Canada's leading value theorist John McMurtry (2013) lists numerous examples:

[T]he nature of language[,] the air we breathe[,] the common fire[,] food recipes[,] universal health plans[,] the world wide web[,] common sewers[,] international campaigns against US war crimes[,] sidewalks and forest paths[,] sports and sports fields[,] the open science movement[,] the Chinese concept of jen[,] the Jubilee of Leviticus[,] public streetscapes[,] effective pollution controls[,] birdwatching[,] city squares and sidewalks[,] Buddha's principle of interdependent origination[,] old-age pensions[,] the rule of life-protective law[,] universal education[,] universal hygiene practices[,] footpaths and bicycle trails[,] fair elections[,] unemployment insurance[,] the global atmosphere[,] maximum work hours and minimum wages[,] public parks[,] clean water[,] the Tao[,] community fish-habitats[,] public broadcasting[,] the ancient village commons before enclosures[,] the unnamed goal of the Occupy Movement. (p. 240)

Prima facie, this list seems quite heterogeneous, to say the least. Why is McMurtry putting all these ideas, institutions and instruments into one bag? Though not immediately obvious, it can be understood that the air we breathe, the water we drink and the food we eat are, to symbolic creatures like ourselves, collective creations too. Apart from forming the corporeal World that we sense around us, they are crucial conceptual-linguistic notions for any culture to agree upon and transmit across generations for the sake of survival, which requires the members of any community to gain consciousness of them and, when

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