COMMONS: HISTORY, PRESENT ... AND FUTURE?

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“Commons” are everywhere!
Commons?

Refers today to many different things:

• Different types of **resources**: from tangible to virtual
• Different **governance regimes**: club goods, public governance, open access

=> Very wide definition: Wikipedia: “The **commons** are resources that are owned in common or shared between or among communities populations”
BACK TO THE FUTURE...?

1. What do commons really mean?

2. Where does this meaning come from?

3. How did commons (and similar institutions) evolve over time?
OUTLINE

1. The original commons.
2. Commons and other institutions for collective action in the history of Europe.
3. The disappearance of the commons in the 18th -19th centuries.
4. The bad reputation of the commons in the 19th-20th centuries.
5. Commons strike back! Elinor Ostrom... and beyond?
ONCE UPON A TIME IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE...

• « Land that is used and managed in common »

• Growing *formalization* in Europe from the 12th-13th centuries

  • In reaction to *demographic pressure*

  • Main aim of *institutionalisation*: checking *overexploitation risks*. 
Marke Raalterwoold, Overijssel, Netherlands.
Before 1445 - 1859

Klik om de modelstijlen te bewerken

- Tweede niveau
- Derde niveau
  - Vierde niveau
  - Vijfde niveau
ESKDALE COMMONS, CUMBRIA, ENGLAND.
MIDDLE AGES - C. 1859

Common rights: pasture, peat and turves, bracken
Gemene and Loweiden (Near Bruges, Belgium): 14th century-today

Common rights: pastureland
Commons: just one historical form of an institution for collective action

- Commons: one example among a set of similar institutions.

- From Middle Ages: cooperation among individuals to solve their common problems

- Cooperation outside the family or the clan

- Weakness of alternative institutions:
  - State: fragmentation in small power units.
  - Market: emerging and unreliable

A ‘silent revolution’ in Western Europe?
INSTITUTIONS FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION (ICAs)

- Commons. Guilds. Waterboards. Different functions

- But a similar governance structure:

INSTITUTIONS FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION

- Main features:
  - Bottom-up formation
  - Minimal interference by higher authorities
  - Exclusive membership
  - Self-governance
  - Trust and social pressure
  - Persistence over time of institutional framework
Number of Established Commons Per Year in the Netherlands (1000-1820)
Number of Established Craft Guilds Per Year in NW Europe (1000-1820)

Twenty-year Simple Moving Average

- Netherlands
- Italy
- Belgium
FROM 18TH CENTURY ONWARDS...

• The ‘individual’: central unit in society [Enlightenment]
• The market: free interaction of self-interested individuals as the best formula for progress.
• The liberal nation state:
  • Removal of any constraints on individual freedom and property
  • Exclusive decision power about society’s institutional framework

 Commons, guilds, etc.: obstacles for progress.

Between 1750-1850:
• Abolishment of commons and guilds all over Europe.
• Enforcement of private property rights.
Guilds, commons...
Such a bad thing!

Persistence of negative views on commons and guilds among contemporary scholars.

Both social scientists...

Economics Nobel Prize, 1990: Douglass North.

Private property rights explain economic development
Guilds, commons... Such a bad thing!

And also others...

Garret Hardin.
‘The tragedy of the commons’, 1968

Parallel with a common: Unavoidable outcome: resource depletion

Main solution: State or market. No user-based approaches
The commons strike back: Elinor Ostrom’s work

‘Governing the Commons’, 1990.

Main idea: under certain conditions, communities may use the resources in a sustainable way so...

Markets or states are not always needed.

Cooperation among individuals may be an effective and efficient way of organizing economic activities.
ELINOR OSTROM
2009 Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences

Nobel medal © The Nobel Foundation
Impact Stories

The International Association for the Study of the Commons (IASC) has brought together an impressive array of evidence from around the world that communities are able to manage common property resources effectively and sustainably. But there is more to IASC than just great ideas, theory, and even cutting-edge research: we also have impact on the ground.

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Program now online!
Commons: an Alternative for the market?

- Commons are primarily meant for self-subsistence
- Threat of commercialisation: “as a rational being, each heardsman seeks to maximize his gain” (Hardin, 1968)

-> Can market development go together with development of institutions for collective action??
  - Market stimulates need for regulation of rights
  - Market pressure helps to identify what commons are intended for: Self-sufficiency
  - Collective action as a *modus vivendi* in stabilizing developing markets?
Commons or do-it-yourself-governance: alternative for the state?

- **Essential features of governance model of the commons:**
  - Participation of stakeholders in decision making processes
  - Identifiability of those with rights
  - Bottom-up formation
  - Self-governance

**Via:**
- Right to vote in meetings (linked to household)
- Obligation to attend meetings
- Election of representatives
- Rotation of responsibilities (incl. the annoying ones)
- Intensive social control
- Sanctions for malefactors (often graduated fines)
- Liability of those who shirk responsibility
What can we learn from commons-research?

- Self-governance can work, can be effective and efficient
- Effectiveness of management by immediate stakeholders
  -> “those who use the land, know the land best.”
- Recognition by authorities is essential
- Collective resource management can deal with market pressure

-> BUT: no one-size-fits-all solution!
  - local conditions vary
  - value of resources also influences type of institutions
  - technology and local conditions matter and deserve attention