ARTICULATING VOICES FROM THE COMMONS : INTERPRETATION, TRANSLATION AND FACILITATION

Roles and Modes for Common Property Scholarship

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Let me begin by trying to repay our organizers for the chance to deliver this keynote address by saying how important this Association is. Its arena of interest has no long and discrete status in the disciplinary categories of academia and is sometimes regarded with bemusement by scholars comfortable with convention. It is, however, part of a healthy academic trend to redress the disciplinary fission which has characterized university history in this century through interdisciplinary approaches to given issue-sets. The common property focus is part of this trend, with multi-faceted significance for a range of issues which scholarship has in the past tended to treat in a fragmented, piece-meal fashion.

I suggest, however, that the single most relevant aspect of common property scholarship today is its salience for environmental concerns, if we take these to be humankind's contemporary concerns for systems of enduring and sustainable livelihoods on a planet with variable and finite resources. Defined in this way, environmental concerns relate both to human/resource interactions and to human/human relationships. Contemporary environmentalism recognizes this in its collective manifestos and conventions. But generally its focus remains on the resource base and its scholarship remains the fiefdom of natural science. When this scholarship approaches social issues it tends to flounder in generalities, lacking the informing paradigms required.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the contemporary policy enthusiasm to link conservation and development objectives. Recently I participated in a wildlife policy consultation organised by a major development agency, presenting a paper under the title *"Wildlife in Sustainable Development: Approaches to Community Participation."* The rather prosaic title was not mine; it was prescribed by the organizers who were interested in finding "robust cost effective and efficient, non-subsidized systems and institutions" for the use of wildlife resources in rural African development and who were concerned about what they perceived to be the inconclusive results of "community participation" approaches. Using insights from common property theory, I suggested that much of the problem might lie in the conceptual ambiguity of the term "community participation." Policy could in fact be looking for the wrong things. Instead of talking about "participation" it should be looking at secure entitlements; instead of looking for "communities" it should be looking for contextualized profiles of sustainable communal property rights regimes. (Note that I am much more comfortable dealing with the adjective than the noun).

My example suggests the ability of common property scholarship to conceptually produce a more operationally relevant analysis of environmental management than many of the popular abstractions in common currency today. Common property theory stands astride two of the main environmental vectors of our era : governance and incentive. Governance, in terms of the contested issues of the appropriate locations of power and responsibility for common pool resources across a vector from centre to periphery. Incentive, in terms of reconciling disparate modalities of interest in resource allocations along a vector of appropriation and investments with both structural and temporal dimensions. It is these two issues which lie, often unspecified, beneath the heated environmental debates of paper and platform today. To the extent that they are ignored, these debates continue to address symptoms rather than substance.

So the relevance of common property scholarship is there, perhaps intuitively grasped by the more insightful of our policy makers and power brokers. But the relevance is often opaque,

mystified by the obfuscating idiom of the scholarship best placed to bring it into sharp focus. In large part this is due to the academic location of our scholarship with its coded discourse and jargon and its incestuous incentives of professional status. The result is that we share our insights with each other but not with those who can use them to make a real difference. We have, perhaps unwittingly and not by deliberate design, appropriated what should be common intellectual property and made it into the communal property of a professional academic elite. This will not do. It blunts our own articulative impact and may obscure other, more important voices. As Hardin once wrote, "... in socially important questions, academic specialties cannot be granted exclusive property rights." [1]

The underlying concerns of this address should now be clear. Firstly, common property scholarship has powerful conceptual tools but has not been particularly adept in the delivery of its insights to the audiences that count. Secondly, the delivery of conceptual analyses to the discourse on common pool resources and environmental management does not exhaust the responsibilities of our scholarship if it is to be relevant. Relevant scholarship has an analytic voice which should be heard, but it also has an obligation to facilitate the expression of voices which arise from other social and cognitive locations. These concerns are encapsulated in the theme of this Conference, directed at "emphasizing the role of IASCP in articulating the challenges and issues of those involved in common property systems and communicating them to larger audiences."

So our task, in terms of the theme of this Conference, is to "articulate." An interesting word, this, which has two dictionary definitions. The first is to "join" or "put together", in our case different perceptions and understandings of the "challenges and issues of those involved in common property systems." We are dealing with a variety of social groupings and social actors; our analysis must enlighten the interactions between them and the expression of that analysis must reflexively be multidirectional. Not only multidirectional but comprehensible, which covers the second dictionary meaning of the verb, which is "to express clearly."

Articulation is thus a complex task, requiring different roles and modes of action from common property scholarship. This complexity demands more attention to a strategy of articulation than we have produced so far. As a contribution to this strategy, I suggest that we see ourselves as operating in three modes, as interpreters, translators and facilitators.

The first mode, interpretation, is the one with which through training and professional location we find ourselves most comfortable. Interpretation is to grasp meanings and explain them to others. As scholars this is what we claim to do, although we like to give this activity the more prestigious titles of analysis and theory-building. But to grasp meaning we, like non-academic interpreters, draw on our own assumptions and repertoire of epistemological stances, and these in turn critically shape any strategy of articulating results. One of the predominant stances in common property scholarship is the structuralist approach, often appearing in its political economy mode. This approach is implicit in what I have said about the vectors of governance and incentive. We are dealing with structured modalities of social groupings and categories on these vectors and the interactions between them. Explanations arising from our interpretations thus need to be multivocal and idiomatically tailored to the various audiences involved.

Another complementary analytic framework common in our scholarship is the actor-orientated approach, with its emphasis on conflict, process, and shifting accommodations. Abel and Blaikie's analysis of natural resource use and wildlife policy in Zambia provides us with a good

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[1] G. Hardin, Filters Against Folly. New York: Viking, 1985, p. 5. It is, of course, almost mandatory to quote Hardin in any paper on common property issues. A dismissive analysis of his 1969 "Tragedy of the Commons" paper is apparently *de rigueur* for the introductory chapter of any thesis on the topic; perhaps another tragedy is that students appear not to have read further into his writings, including this one.

example of this approach, where they observe that "The utilization of natural resources at a particular place and time is the outcome of conflicting interests between groups of people with different aims. Usually there is no absolute dominance by one group, so there are commonly a number of different ways of using resources at the same place and time."[2] This actor-orientated approach acknowledges structure, but also provides an analytic caveat to structural reductionism by its inclusion of cognitive and normative factors in our equation of human motivation for collective action.

For our understanding the actor-oriented approach has the great advantage of bringing into sharp focus the dynamic and contingent character of the phenomena we are dealing with. Neither nature nor the systems of its social use are static. Every accommodation to ecological variation or social conflict is an experiment. There are no once-off, permanent solutions to environmental issues. But, if we can learn from these experiments, there can be an incremental improvement in their quality. This adds great weight to the articulative obligations of our scholarship since if it is to be something more than social history its insights must be fed back into the experimental process expeditiously and continuously.

To reiterate briefly, I have suggested that the interpretive articulations of our scholarship should be multidirectional, polyidiomatic and reflexively rapid. Unfortunately, I find few signs that it is generally so. Our interpretations are unidirectional, addressed primarily to an intellectual and policy elite; to each other or to government and donor agency bureaucrats. Few consider audiences at locality or lower-tier levels of governance, or indeed to political, as contrasted to bureaucratic, audiences at higher levels. When they do, they are usually couched in form and language which are unintelligible to their audiences. "Give us the results of your research directly, and not through our bureaucrats," said one Member of Parliament to the academic researchers (including myself) at a regional conference on Parliamentary Research and Information Needs held in Harare last year. "But give it to us in 4 pages, not 400." This is a formidable challenge, and one that will probably go largely unanswered. To address our audiences at these levels requires too much professionally unrewarded effort, and requires communication skills which our academic apprenticeships have not provided.

Finally, the delivery of our interpretations is typically delinquent, retarded by our ponderous conventions of research design, execution and analysis. These usually insert far too many stages into the analytical feed-back loops from observation to the delivery of relevant meaning and exclude our scholarship from any significant role in the stochastic experimentation which social process involves.

If these assertions offend or appear overly-cynical, don't take my word for it. Do your own survey of major grant proposals for common property or environmental research. Don't waste too much time on the long preambles which argue the shortcomings of other research and the superiority of the one proposed. Go right to the end and look for the brief sections on "timeframe" and "dissemination of results". Typically you will find predictions of interpretive results two to three years down the line, these results being packaged in reports and books and delivered to inbred workshops and conferences of other "experts". This is not to suggest that these experts are an unimportant audience. But is this mode of delivery sufficient to discharge our articulative responsibility? I think not, and an exclusive preoccupation with it may obstruct our attention to the full range of interpretive imperatives which we face.

The second mode in which we can operate to articulate voices from the commons is translation. Translation involves the accurate conveyance of expressed meaning in one language or idiom to another. Unlike interpretation, this conveyance should be undistorted by meanings and explanations interposed by the communicator. It would therefore appear to be a relatively mechanical and routine exercise without conceptual dimensions. It can, however, be an

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[2] N. Abel and P. Blaikie, "Elephants, People, Parks and Development: the Case of the Luangwa Valley, Zambia." Environmental Management, Vol.10, No.6, 1986, p.735.

extremely difficult thing to do, since expression involves meaning grounded in emic frames of reference and experience. Thus translation easily slides into interpretation, and the expression of the emic becomes an etic overlay.
The difficulties of faithful translation should not, however, blind us to the need for it. Users and managers of the commons, particularly those at the periphery in state hierarchies of power, are often effectively mute because they lack the translation necessary to convey their voices to the centre. Oscar Wilde, that quixotic but incisive cynic inextricably if uncomfortably located in the English upper class of his day, once defined fox hunting as "the unspeakable in pursuit of the inedible". For those whose voices are the theme of this Conference, the chase is too often one in which the inaudible pursue the indispensable. That they will do what they have to do is a message which planners persistently seem to ignore; that the voices telling this message are throttled for lack of translation is a matter which our scholarship cannot neglect.

We cannot neglect it because our intercalary location with one foot in elite discourse and the other in field research well situates us to be translators, even if our profession predisposes us to be interpreters. Often the people who are our hosts in the commons and who provide us with the grist for our analytic mills see this as the most useful function which we can provide in reciprocation for their hospitality. What they want is a translator who can insert their views and wishes into decision-making forums which they cannot otherwise penetrate. The translation sought may be from one idiom to another, or it may be one of turning the verbal into the written through the services of a faithful amanuensis.

One of the panels of this Conference includes a paper presented by the people of Masoka, a communal resource management regime in the Zambezi Valley of Zimbabwe. Ten years ago the Centre for Applied Social Sciences and colleagues from the WWF research unit in Harare started a research programme in Masoka. In an inaugural village meeting to gain permission for our long-term research presence, I was asked bluntly what the possible benefits of such research to the local farmers might be. These moments of truth and pragmatic realism are always difficult for academics to handle, and my wafflings about the importance of analysis and understanding were met by polite but stony silence. But then I hit a responsive chord when I suggested that the researchers had certain communication skills and could write down and convey their views and aspirations to others. At this an old man stood up and took the floor. "Ah, yes," he said, "now this is something worthwhile. Nothing that we think of down here will ever get up there to Harare until it has first gone through a typewriter."

That is what they wanted and this, I am pleased to say, is what they got. At a subsequent meeting we suggested that it might be time for them to do some detailed land and resource use planning. We had soil and vegetation mapping which might help. "But we've already done our planning" was the response. "The problem is that we can't show it to you on paper, its in our heads. Perhaps you can help us to put it on paper." And so the translation process began. The first stage was to transfer what was in the head to the foot. The researchers walked with the farmers through the lands for days and what was learned on foot was transferred to mapping. Draft text was produced and then revised through three successive iterations. The product was a land and resource use plan, faithful to local aspirations but in a style and format acceptable to technocrats. It was carefully examined and approved at a general meeting and formally presented to the ward councillor with the charge: "This is our plan. Take it to the District Council for approval, but remember that it is our plan, for our land and resources, and we do not want it changed by others."

The voice had become articulate, and was heard. The plan was approved. Equating our scholarship to typewriting may be an oversimplification, but in this example it played an important articulative role. In many cases translation may be the most empowering mode in which we can operate.

My final mode of activity for our scholarship in its articulative function is facilitation. Etymologically "to facilitate" is to make something easy. Common property scholarship deals with an arena in which things are never easy and this is not what I am talking about. I use rather a second dictionary definition in which to facilitate means "to free from difficulty or

impediment". To take this definition and argue that it constitutes one of the roles of our scholarship requires certain assumptions about what the main difficulties are and where the major impediments lie.

My assumptions can be stated briefly. Firstly, although the use of common property resources involves a broad spectrum of foci running from international to local levels the most critical arena for attention is the locality level since it is here that most hands-on management takes place. Secondly, the central problem at this level is not a lack of any fundamental understanding by resource users of what viable communal property resource regimes require. It is rather a lack of societally sanctioned entitlements necessary to make them work and the freedom to adapt them to changing circumstances. By precluding local peoples' ability to conduct experimentation in collective management societies are in fact restricting their ability to learn from themselves. Thirdly, this fettered status restricts the ability of local managers to join the discourse on resource issues with other powerful social actors, both by the orchestration and idioms of that discourse.
My definition of our facilitative role should now be more clear. It is to remove the impediments to opportunities for people to learn from themselves and to speak for themselves. The circumstances of our scholarship allow us to do this in two ways. We can use the processes of our research to become the ground for local experimentation, particularly if we encourage the researched to become the researchers. Research then becomes training, self-training, as research agendas are set and managed locally. Secondly, our circumstances provide opportunities to facilitate the direct expression of voices from the commons in a number of different directions and to a variety of audiences. At the international level the organization of this conference is a laudable example. Attempts to insert the voice of local level perspectives directly into global policy discourse are still embryonic and fraught with difficulties. This Conference constitutes an experiment in this mode of articulation, and I hope that the Proceedings of this meeting will include an evaluative analysis of the impediments involved and the lessons learned.

Important as they are such international forums should not, however, beguile us into the bewitchment of globalism which so often leads us to neglect our own home turfs. For most of the common pool resources with which we deal, the most important nexus for policy discourse lies at the national level, where experiments in configurations of governance and incentive conducive to sustainability in resource use are the most critical. At this level the main dynamic for positive policy evolution is a political one, and its only effective lever is a politically powerful constituency voice from the resource managing commons. The interpretations and translations of our scholarship can be no substitute for this. But, if properly orchestrated, our scholarship can facilitate the ability of constituency voices to speak for themselves. If it does so, it will be contributing to that vital conjunction between adaptive management and political change which Kai Lee suggests has the dynamics to "undermine socially constructed stalemate." [3]

Nothing said in this address has been particularly novel for contemporary social science. But then the congealing inertia of our conventional professional incentives is not new either. These incentives bias us towards a flawed interpretive mode and away from the translative and facilitative roles which we should also play. All fall within our sphere of responsibility, but the articulation of our scholarship remains largely unimodal and unidirectional. We know this, but don't seem to be able to do much about it, locked as we are into our own "socially constructed stalemate." We need to reflect on strategies to break this inertia, strategies which change the weighting of our incentives, strategies which change the balance in our resource allocations to the articulative modes demanded of our scholarship, strategies which produce a new synergy between the voices of science and democracy. If this address adds such reflection to the agendas you bring to this Conference it will have served its purpose.

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[3] K. Lee, Compass and Gyroscope. Integrating Science and Politics for the Environment. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1993, p.12.