

COMMONS FORUM *RESPONSE*

Response to: "The Past is Not another Country: The Long-term Historical Development of Commons as a Source of Inspiration for Research and Policy," by Tine DeMoer

Living on (under?) the Edge: The Commons between Environmental Risk and Economic Development

Sarah Strauss

Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Wyoming, USA

Sitting in the City Council meeting for hours, waiting patiently as the democratic process played out, I tried to think of what I would say when my turn to speak came around. The concern that had brought me to the meeting was how to get the city of Laramie to take significant steps to reduce its carbon footprint and thus tread more lightly on the planet, reducing the damage done to the global commons. But before that topic could be discussed, we needed to clear the agenda of an earlier question regarding the protection of our local aquifer from the potential negative impacts of another new housing project.

Since this all took place as I was in the middle of writing my response to "The Past is Not another Country," our management of the local commons weighed heavily on my mind. The situation that was unfolding in my Wyoming town this week recalled strongly the kinds of issues that I have learned about through my historical and ethnographic research concerning the village of Leukerbad in the Swiss Alps. As Tine suggests, "The evolution of cooperation over a mere 1000 years in Europe suggests a multitude of new paths of analysis for sociological and anthropological studies of present day commons." Because we are fortunate enough to have access to a roughly 500-year-old historical record for Leukerbad (in comparison to the less than 150-year record for Laramie), it is possible to compare past experiences in managing the commons to avoid collective risks with contemporary situations that pit private gain against public welfare. I could not agree more with the suggestion that historians and social scientists (not to mention natural scientists!) need to spend more time in conversation, uncovering and learning from the experiences of the "longue durée."

Leukerbad is located at the end of a side valley that extends northward from the main valley of the Rhone River, in the Swiss canton of Valais/Wallis. In the past, Leukerbadners have recognized their extreme vulnerability to avalanche destruction. The recorded history of the village over the past five hundred years has demonstrated that attention to this particular type of natural hazard was crucial for survival. Representations of such concern appear in a number of ways; the earliest that I have found are in the White Book, the primary village historical document, which contains written records of legal and administrative decisions regarding the village from 1501 till 1909. This leather-bound book, the current iteration of which was transcribed from earlier documents starting in 1697, had been all but forgotten by most local community members when it was first shown to me in 2001. While all communities in the Valais maintained such records at one time, the majority of them have been lost to fire or other natural

disasters over the years, or simply forgotten. Few remain intact, and the ability to take digital photographs of this document, page by page, and to have the funds to translate it from its original combination of Latin and early modern German into contemporary high German, has allowed a marvelous resource to be preserved to the benefit of the entire Leukerbad community. Attention to avalanche danger in the White Book is represented in two primary ways: in terms of environmental regulation through maintenance of the common resource of the Bannwald, or protective forest zone, and of recognition of the threat to human safety that habitation in avalanche prone areas always entails.

The seventeenth chapter of the White Book, a legal remedy originally written in 1573, discusses two dairy farmers from the Mayen and Supersaxo alps who were forbidden from taking any wood from the Bannwald of that region for a period of twenty years, in order to curb the overuse of forest resources and the resulting weakening of the village's defenses against avalanche damage in this region. The document notes that

“through this excessive tree cutting, the mentioned dairy farm Du Mayen at many, indeed at most locations, slid, slides and is damaged and heavily ruined and its trees are devastated. This has been obvious for a long time and is clearly visible today while visiting the site. [Furthermore, this lumber cutting] [happened] beyond the hitherto customary law; and other [reasons for dispute were brought forward] that are left out here for the reason of brevity. To prevent future damage, it was extremely necessary to find a remedy [and], finally, to [restore] peace, love/friendship and benefit of both parties through the negotiations between righteous men” (The White Book).

Analysis of the White Book has also been facilitated by the existence of a volume of aerial photographs of the region, labeled with place names in the old dialect—a project conceived of and executed by village elders to prevent the total loss of this important information. Leukerbadners have always lived in a landscape characterized by a high degree of avalanche risk, and despite the rather extreme nature of this uncertain life, they have worked continually to deflect the risks in favour of continued development of their waterbased economy.

As Leukerbad's reputation as a Kurort, or spa, grew, the number of guesthouses on the eastern side of the Dala also increased. In this location, which had come to be the village center, the major thermal source, the St. Laurence spring, flowed out of the ground at 50°C and nearly 1000 l/minute. But in each century following the founding of the church in 1501, major avalanches destroyed this highly vulnerable section of town. The worst avalanche catastrophe in terms of human life was that of 1719, in which 52 people lost their lives and all the guesthouses with the exception of the enormous Hotel Maison Blanche were destroyed. The avalanche came just up to the church building, but though slightly damaged, it was for the most part spared. Since then, on the day of St. Antonius—patron saint of avalanche victims—a special mass is said to remember these tragedies. When I attended this ceremony in 2001, the names of the victims, along with marital status, age, maiden name for women, family relationships, and other bits of info available (eg that one person was known as Johannes the Blind) were read aloud, with the effect of making the magnitude of the tragedy for a village of 500 quite clear—10% of the population died in one day.

Additional avalanches in 1720, 1756, and 1767 culminated with the flattening of one of the major bathhouses by another avalanche in 1793. During the 18th century, efforts were made to

build small avalanche deflection walls, but it was not until 1829/30 that construction of an 800 foot long and 17 foot high wall began to secure the village center from its repeated cycles of destruction and rebuilding. The latest effort in this regard was completed only two years ago, with sophisticated structures on the top of the western cliffs.

As more effective controls were designed, however, complacency set in. In 1999, a very heavy snow year, a building at the southern edge of town was severely damaged by an avalanche that was the result of a deliberately set explosive charge. The building that was damaged had been built after 1980, in an area known to native Leukerbadners as a dangerous place, a place where no one would walk in winter, nor keep livestock. In fact, a community development plan created by an architectural design class from the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in the 1960s shows that they recommended the same thing as the old timers— that no development take place in this region because of its vulnerability to damage from avalanches.

By the 1980s, however, one could argue that Leukerbad had become as much of a late modern Risk Society, in Ulrich Beck's sense, as any other place in the West; the villagers' concern with cooperative distribution of "goods" in the largely communal, subsistence-based society had presumably been replaced with a more individualistic perspective accompanied by greater concern for distribution of "bads"—that is, risks. The local council calculated the degree of risk for building large structures in what should have been an avalanche protection zone against prospect for increased profit through low cost housing development for the surging army of guest workers who were providing the foundation for an economic boom in the tourism industry—both in terms of the spas and the ski area—that lasted through the early 1990s; the decision at that time came out on the side of development that would profit individual property owners and employers in the region more than it would protect the wider community.

Yet, we moderns are rarely as completely rational in our maximization of profit as we have been portrayed.

Following our lead essay, I do see, both in Leukerbad and in Laramie, more recent demonstrations that the "sociological debate on individual responsibility of the commoners can be enriched by linking it to the influence of external factors." As we have moved into the 21st century, more choices have been made in support of the range of commons that benefit our communities— whether material, like water or forest resources, or knowledge-based, or even probabilistic risks to health or hearth. We, the people of Laramie and Leukerbad, have continued to show that the imagined chasm between tradition and modernity blurs into a mirage that reflects back upon the two.

For Further Reading:

Beck, Ulrich (1992 [1986]) *Risk Society* (trans. Mark Ritter). London: Sage Publications. White Book, ch.17, p. 100; tr. Latin-German, T. Schmid and tr. German-English, J. Seifert. See also: White Book, ch.8, on the delimitations of woodcutting in other regions, 1508.

strauss@uwo.edu