

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 DeMoor

The distant past and other ‘pasts’ as fodder for understanding state-society relations and extra-local influences on society

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The neglect of the distant past – i.e. pre-1800 Europe or the equivalent of pre-1800 (pre-industrial revolution and expansion of a market economy) Europe elsewhere in the study of commons is perhaps due to mistaken perceptions of the past as relatively static and insular as compared to the upheavals of the 19th century. Wars, collapse and alternatively amalgamations of kingdoms, disease – were all substantial upheavals in themselves. The question is to what extent did such phenomena affect the ability of a community to create sustainable rules of governance over a common pool resource. The answer would be quite obvious, I would suppose - to a significant degree. They were in fact as disruptive of rules of the commons as the expansion of the market, the advent of mercantilism, and the Industrial Revolution in England and subsequently in the rest of Europe in the late 18th to 19th century. In addition, these upheavals often affected the nature of social interactions within people in a community and people between the community and the rest of the kingdom or country, as the case may be. And it is precisely the form and nature of such social interactions, the level of trust, the level of social capital, if you will, and perceptions of a common interest that affects the creation of institutions that govern common pool resources.

As such, I would agree with Tine that we should expand our scope of analysis to beyond the recent past to the more distant past. The question is – how do we do it, without subscribing to a sort of path dependency that leaves no room for theoretical integration.

My first answer would be – to seek how such events affected social interaction of such communities. The tendency to overlook this aspect of analysis is perhaps the misconception that such ‘communities’ were relatively homogeneous and hence interactions between members of a community were also relatively homogeneous. More importantly, the implication of such an assumption also leads to seeing the ‘community’ as a static entity that does not change or adapt to exogenous shocks. Institutional change does indeed happen over a period of time, in response to structural conditions, but they also require human agency to mould those conditions. It is not always the case that humans are subject to conditions of which they have no power over and are reduced to creating rules that are ultimately still contained within the structural conditions of the game. Institutional theory tells us that it is possible to change the rules of the game, indeed, people do that all the time. However, it is also possible to change the nature and objective of the game itself, and by extension the rules of the game. Think outside the box. Shift the focus of the game – that requires agency, and an appeal to more fundamental feelings of human association

as well as ideological and moral exhortations beyond the mere homo economicus or even bounded-rationality model. And it is often human agency that is very much ignored in our focus on institutional arrangements.

I would surmise that the focus on the 1800s onwards is due to the events/phenomena that I listed above – namely the emergence of free-market capitalism and the Industrial Revolution which fundamentally changed social relationships and the way that exchanges of goods and commodities were done. These two phenomena affected the nature of social interactions in very significant ways. Firstly, the mechanisation of production processes rendered the factory/industrial production paramount in people's lives rather than the agricultural (or other) communities in which people lived in, during which production was aimed at more or less the local consumers or for self-consumption. Secondly, mechanisation enabled the accumulation of surplus premised upon a higher level of extraction of natural resources. The higher demand on natural resources required a change in the way which local communities managed their resources and adapted to the community as well as industrial pressures.

However, the status of the community vis-à-vis the extra local, and the nature of extraction of natural resources are also factors that are affected by nation-building – a process that is not unique to the period after the 1800s. The rise and fall of kingdoms, and the question of how rulers mobilised natural resources and people for war against other nations, or kingdoms, as the case may be, are the proverbial questions of nation-building that accompany each stage of political transformation. As with my research of China in the early stages of nation-building after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the state sought to control far-flung places that were previously considered the 'periphery' and in order to fold these places into the state-led developmental fold, they tried to transform society and rural communities in ways that were unprecedented in China. The measures they employed sought to break the hold of traditional authority in these places, and supplant the Party-State as the eminent authority of all aspects of political and economic life, including the way people managed natural resources. Natural resources no longer belonged to the communities, they belonged to the state.

Communities were relegated to custodians of the environment, and had to follow state initiatives that were often very much against the traditional concepts of forests, land, and water. The disasters of the Great Leap Forward, for example, that precipitated rampant exploitation of forests and timber must have ruled against local ideas about timber use. How did people and local communities justify or come to terms with such exploitation? What is the role of local communities, the role of leaders (widely defined) in shaping the discourse of exploitation and hence successfully challenging externally imposed rules on their communities? Although these are questions that are frequently-asked these days in the development literature, they are seldom asked of periods often deemed too distant and remote to warrant comparison.

As is with the case with globalisation and how that is often recreated and reshaped at local levels, the same logic applies to periods that experienced extralocal influences on conceptions of the common good, the usage of natural resources, concepts of leadership, the role of the individual and the community within which the 'common good' is to be defined. What I am suggesting therefore (as perhaps some of the many experts have already started doing) is an examination of central-local and region-local interactions that affect not just the ability of local 'communities' to

create and enforce their own rules of governance, but also how the discourse of the 'common good' that has shaped these rules. As with the Great Leap Forward, and seemingly irrational policies of the Chinese Party-State that runs against ingrained knowledge of certain natural resources, studies suggest that there was substantial resistance to statehegemonic discourse of the common good and usage of natural resources. However, in people's adaptability, we also find a certain complicity to state-rhetoric that can range from reasons of political self-interest to something as fundamental as survival.

As such, my agreement with the author's call to study the distant past stems not from an intrinsic interest in Europe pre-1800s, but rather from the belief that there are certain societal transformations that not just the 1800s onwards are privileged to. From this premise, the past and history provides a rich source of information on which to dwell on the adaptability of societies and communities, the ingenuity of the human race in adjusting to changing conditions, and the role of ideas, ideology and values in shaping what is the common good. The common good, then, I suppose would define then what is considered as the optimal outcome. Ignoring how the common good came to be shaped or defined, and the role of human agency (either in response to endogenous or exogenous changes) in this process of definition would neglect a whole lot of sociopolitical dynamics within and without these local 'communities'. These sociopolitical dynamics translate into the strength and form of social capital, and contribute or detract from the effective governance of any resource.

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