

# COMMONS FORUM *Commentary*

## **The past is not another country: The long-term historical development of commons as a source of inspiration for research and policy**

**Tine DeMoor**

**Research Institute for History and Culture University of Utrecht, the Netherlands**

**Managing co-editor, *International Journal of the Commons***

Many negative effects of human use of resources do not become visible until after lengthy periods of time, often even centuries. One could assume it therefore to be obvious to integrate long-term historical developments into case-studies on common pool resources, in particular when we're trying to understand how the regulation of the use of common pool resources worked and what changes of that regulation could bring about.

However, whenever a historical perspective is integrated in the commons studies this is mostly restricted to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The distant past seems to be - for many commons-researchers- another country. At the same time historians, tending to be rather descriptive and often hardly interested in the theoretical implications of their research, hardly search to benefit from the models and frameworks repetitively tested by sociologists, economists, and others. This is a missed opportunity. After all, in the period we can study because of sufficient inheritance of written documents (from the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards), the *homo sapiens* did not change to such an extent that we couldn't compare his behaviour over long periods of time. Seen from a world history perspective, whether this *homo sapiens* behaved as an *economicus* or *reciprocans* is more a matter of circumstances –ecological, economic, social, cultural- than of human biology or evolution. I believe that part of the limited mutual interest between historians and other social scientists is due to the rather negative and static view of the pre-1800 village common that was created in the 1960s. In this short article I will try to start correcting that image. Europe, being the area of the world with the most extensively studied history of the commons –from common arable to common woodlandwill hereby play an exemplary role in this, but other regions could be at least as interesting to test the possibilities of cooperation between disciplines.

Over time, and in particular since the middle of the twentieth century, the term 'commons' has been used in many ways. Previously, in the historical documents 'commons' referred to common land, often in the form of pasture, or meadowland. Commons in the historical sense refer to land that was used and managed by several people or households during a certain period, in distinction to land that was used by only one person or household throughout the whole year. The variety of alternative namings in English (e.g., open field, common meadow, common waste) and in other languages (*markegenootschappen*, *meenten* (Dutch), *Genossenschaften* (German) to give just a few examples) has over time led to considerable confusion and has for a long time prevented scientific comparison of the emergence and functioning of commons. In the middle of the twentieth century, the common as a physical phenomenon started to be used repeatedly by scientists from other disciplines to indicate collective property. Though he was not the first to 'conceptualise' the historical commons, Hardin's 'the tragedy of the commons' can be considered as a bench mark in the evolution of the discourse on the commons.

Hardin caused considerable confusion by giving a false account of the historical functioning of the commons. The “common” Hardin described was land whereupon no property rights rested, thus making it very easy for everyone to overuse it. He asks the reader to ‘Picture a pasture open to all’. And then: ‘It is to be expected that each herdsman will try to keep as many cattle as possible on the commons.’ However, the historical common was not at all open to all. On the contrary: all the commons had clear rules about the conditions to become a legitimate user, and on the do’s and don’ts if you had obtained membership. The European villagers started from the early 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards to formalise their cooperation in land usage and management by writing down regulations. These regulations were often highly sophisticated in their design, showing the awareness of the commoners in the dangers that lured in cooperation. They, for example, often used graduated sanctioning systems, not sparing those who didn’t report freeriding either. In trying to prevent the commoners being seduced by the market, it was often prohibited to put cattle on the common summer pasture that had been bought on the early spring cattle market. The common was not a place to fatten up your cattle but it was an essential part of the mixed agricultural system as the manure produced by the cattle was indispensable for the arable land. This connection between the arable land and the common was vital for the pre-industrial agricultural system. As has been shown for several Western European countries the regulations of the European commons matched Lin Ostrom’s famous design principles pretty well. When putting these rules into practice, the commoners showed an often remarkable ability to guard the ecological balance on their common and to adjust to changing social and economic circumstances. In plenty of occasions the number of cattle allowed on the common was restricted to the carrying capacity of the pasture, and if this number was not set in advance, the number of cattle could be regulated by using price mechanisms. Plenty of other examples of rules and practice could show that in their strive for a striking a balance between efficiency and utility the commoners autonomously designed an impressive set of rules they put adequately into practice. This allowed them to keep the ‘tragedy’ well at a distance.

Topics other than natural resources have emerged since the 1990s in the commons debate. Here again, inspiration can be found in a long-term perspective as in the same period of the emergence of commons we also find a sort of knowledge common emerging. Craft and merchant guilds – which Putnam considered to be pivotal in the development of democracy in Northern Italy (Putnam et al. 2003)- were set up to exchange and safeguard knowledge about trade, products and production processes. History here confirms what we find in the experimental anthropological research, that market integration can encourage cooperation, as was also recently shown by amongst others Herbert Gintis and Samuel Bowles. The emergence of commons and guilds happened in a period of increasing market integration: in some regions of Western Europe as much as 60% of the population had been active on the labour market, already during the late middle ages. At the same time historical analysis also suggests other factors that might have played a role in the population’s willingness to cooperate. There are juridical (for example the creation of the concept of *universitas*) and social factors (the particular marriage/family pattern of Western Europe) that also may have played a fundamental role in changing the face of the history of cooperation. 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.

In the future, we –as commons-researchers from various disciplines- should try to close the interdisciplinary gap. Historians have for a long time primarily focussed on the dissolution of the commons, whereby external factors like industrialisation and population growth were considered as the motors of this process. In these stories, the commoners themselves usually play a passive role and are approached as a group, without much attention for the potential influence of the commoners as individuals. Among 19<sup>th</sup> century commons historians, there was also a clear interest for the origins of the commons, but here again the individual motivations to own and use land collectively were largely ignored. And moreover, those motivations, whether individual or group-directed, were in the historical debate not linked to the causes for the dissolution of the commons. More attention should go to what lays in between origin (in Europe, mainly 11-13<sup>th</sup> century) and dissolution (in Europe, mainly 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century): the functioning of the commons, which has been one of the prime concerns of the other social scientists. Social scientists have used concepts as the prisoner's dilemma, free riding, and reciprocity to identify problematic relationships between individual aspirations and group dynamics, and have put less stress on external factors as causes for the malfunctioning or even dissolution of a common. Sociologists and economists generally put the main responsibility for the dissolution of the commons with the individual. This divergence in research traditions shouldn't be a hindrance for more interdisciplinary commons research in the future. The sociological debate on individual responsibility of the commoners can be enriched by linking it to the influence of external factors, which has been at the fore of historians describing the dissolution of the commons and vice versa. A solution to identify the links between the different aspects as discussed by commons-researchers, could be the use of an analytical framework that focuses on the main functions of a common, and the interaction between these functions: the common as a resource, as an institution and as a property regime. The longevity of many commons (several centuries) should be recognised as a sign for institutional flexibility.

Adapting to change and the passing on of values and norms over hundreds of years is not easily done -but, as see in many commons- it can be done. Including the commons of the past would add abundant diachronical evidence of what is now primarily based on contemporary case studies. One of the difficulties of experimental research has long been the difficulty to repeat situations –over several generations- and to take into account reputational mechanisms. Notwithstanding the problematic aspects of historical research (e.g., the lack of oral sources), there is often sufficient written material left to analyse the behaviour of generations of commoners. And we can discover the pitfalls: where the self-governance of the commons was threatened, a tragedy could often not be avoided, as in contemporary examples. This information could help us understand and predict what happens on commons in villages in third-world countries that are facing levels of e.g. market integration similar to the villages in the European past. That past is not another country; they didn't do things all that much differently there. On the contrary.

For Further Reading:

Bowles, S. 2004. *Foundations of Human Sociality. Economic experiments and ethnographic evidence from fifteen small-scale societies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. De Moor, Martina, Leigh Shaw-

Taylor, and Paul Warde, eds. 2002. *The management of common land in north west Europe, c.1500-1850*. CORN Publication Series, 8. Turnhout: Brepols.

De Moor, Tine. 2007. Avoiding tragedies. A Flemish common and its commoners under the pressure of social and economic change during the eighteenth century. *Economic History Review*.

Putnam, Robert D. 1993. *Making democracy work. Civic traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Vivier, Nadine, and Marie-Danielle Demélas. 2003. *Les propriétés collectives face aux attaques libérales (1750-1914). Europe occidentale et Amérique latine*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes.

tine.demoor@let.uu.nl