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Common Property and Power: an Initial Exploration

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable development depends on the maintenance of institutions that can be effective in providing ecologically sound development across generations. Recent research which examines local common property management of natural resources claims that the sustainable use of these resources can be attained without the need of state intervention or privatization. The state and market, however, represent strong and competing social forces in all societies. What is the nature of the internal power relationships that sustain such effective institutions? On what basis can we expect that small local groups will be able to maintain their common control of natural resources? This exploratory paper examines several issues surrounding the concept of power which are vital to our understanding of the ability of common property institutions to provide sustainable use of natural resources.

Introduction

The publication in 1987 of the World Commission on Environment and Development Report Our Common Future have placed issues of the environment and development high on the international agenda. According to Redclift (1989:365), what is most prominent about the Commission's report is that its main focus is "on the causes of, rather than the effects, of environmental degradation." The causes are viewed in the context of "heavily contested" political arguments. The key concept of the Commission's report is sustainable development, which is defined broadly "as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development:43). Though the concept of sustainable development has been prominent in previous work, the Commission's report has sparked new interest in the concept.¹

Achieving sustainable development requires effective institutions that can provide for the ecologically sound development of natural resources across generations. Theoretical arguments about the possibility of devising such effective institutions is marked by wide differences in the expectations of outcomes. Investigations into the common property management of natural resources has been expanding rapidly over the last few years and have been promoted as an efficient and effective means by which to secure the sustainable development of natural resources.^e

An often overlooked area of inquiry in the common property natural resource management literature relate to questions surrounding the sources and legitimacy of community authority exercised in the attainment of the common good. The major contention of this paper is that the possibility of effective local collective action in the sustainable development of natural resources requires an explicit understanding of the relations of power that provide the basis for such activity. While there has been a great deal of confidence in the literature that local natural resource users can build institutional arrangements to manage resources sustainably, there has been less agreement or exploration of the kind of political control necessary for attaining such an outcome.

I begin with an examination of the meaning of common property institutions. I then turn to two broad questions: (1) What are the nature of the internal power relationships that sustain common property institutions? (2) What kind of external power relations lead to the preservation or destruction of local common property institutions? I conclude with brief remarks about the necessity of further research concerning the issue of power and common property institutions.

Common Property Institutions Defined

Within the social sciences there has been a revitalized interest in the study of institutions. Unfortunately, this new interest in institutions has not been matched by the development of a consistent conceptualization of what an "institution" is. More importantly, there has been a wide divergence of analytical approaches to the role institutions play in social, political and

economic life. March and Olson (1984) for instance, have written of a "new institutionalism" which they associate with a new found interest in the understanding of "the place of institutions in politics and the possibilities for a political theory that is attentive to them" (735). Economists and game theorists have also taken a greater interest in institutions. Grabowski (1988) has written about a broad group of economists who have sought to explain institutional change "through the application of modern choice theory based upon an individualistic methodological approach" (p.385). This group has been dubbed the "new institutional economists". Students of international politics have recently pursued an institutional approach to the study of nation-states. A recent collection of articles edited by Caporaso (1989) is illustrative of this trend. Finally, sociologists have sought to understand how social action is structured by institutionalized rules. The theory of structuration as presented by Giddens (1981;1984) demonstrates this new emphasis.

In this section I will briefly review two approaches to the conceptualization of common property institutions as represented in the work of Ostrom (1986a;1986b;1989) and Bromely (1989a; 1989b). These two authors have paid particular attention to the differentiation of common property institutions from other property institutions and have examined the role such institutions can play in the sustainable management of natural resources. My intent is to explore their conceptualizations for what they can tell us about about power and common property institutions.

Ostrom

Elinor Ostrom (1986b:5) utilizes the concept of rules as a referent for the term institution. Institutions or rules are for Ostrom (1986b:6) "the means by which we intervene to change the structure of incentives in situations". Institutions like rules are variable because they are subject to change by humans. Importantly, Ostrom (1986b:6) does not view rules as "directly affecting behavior" but rather as "directly affecting the structure of a situation in which actions are selected". Institutions as rules have prescriptive force that can either forbid or permit a range of actions or forbid or permit specific outcomes or actions. For Ostrom institutions are configurations of rules that create various kinds of human social order or governance. Implicit in Ostrom's analysis is the goal of explaining the range of individual and collective choice in the construction of alternative forms of governance.

Ostrom's interest in institutions and governance is clearly demonstrated in her recent theoretical work concerning "microconstitutional" change in solving what she terms common-pool resource dilemmas (1989). For Ostrom (1989:12), "constitutional choice occurs whenever individuals change the fundamental rules they use to determine who is a member of a political community, what basic rights and duties are conveyed by membership, and how future collective-choice will be made in this community." Microconstitutional change refers to constitutional choice where the group or community making such choice is at the sub-national level. More specifically, Ostrom is interested in explaining how such groups or communities of common-pool resource users develop microconstitutions that are effective in managing

these potentially degradable resources. Ostrom's definition of common-pool resources is of fundamental importance in understanding what she means by a common property institution. There are several related parts to Ostrom's conceptualization.

First, Ostrom (1989:14) defines common-pool resources as "large natural or man-made resources" that are "costly (although not necessarily impossible) to exclude potential beneficiaries from obtaining benefits from their use". Common-pool resources provide "a flow of resource units over time that are subtractive, in the sense that a resource unit harvested by one individual is not fully available to others" and "more than one team of individuals withdraw resource units from the resource" (Ostrom 1989:14-15). The examples of common-pool resources that Ostrom (1989:15) provides are groundwater basins, fishing grounds and bridges.

Second, Ostrom (1986a) differentiates common-pool resources from the "pure" cases of public and private "goods". For Ostrom (1986a), public and private goods are analytically distinguished by the two dimensions: exclusion and jointness of consumption. Pure public goods are associated with high costs of excluding any particular subset of the public from consuming them once offered. Furthermore any individual's consumption of the good does not subtract from another individual's possibility of consuming the same good. Lighthouses and national defense are often given as examples. Pure private goods are exactly the opposite in that the costs of excluding "those who did produce the good" from consuming it are low and consumption of a private good "subtracts that particular item completely from your set of options" (Ostrom 1986a:602). As noted in the definition above, common-pool

resources for Ostrom represent a mixed phenomenon where exclusion is difficult and consumption is subtractive.

Finally, Ostrom (1986a) suggests that these three types of "goods" or "resources" are determinative of the type of institutional arrangement that will be used for its management. Common-pool resources are associated with common-property management, public goods with state management and private goods with market management. Thus, a common property institution is for Ostrom a configuration of rules that control the utilization of a common-pool resource. There are problems with this conceptualization.

First, Ostrom's association of common-pool resources with common-property institutions does not logically follow from her concern with microconstitutional choice. If a community is to be left to choose how it will govern its use of a natural resource, isn't part of what is meant by choice the choice of defining which resources are to be considered private, public or common? For instance, it is conceivable that one community would choose to have the forests that surround it controlled by the state (a public good), another community may choose to sell its forests to an individual (a private good) and finally another community may choose to control the use of the forest as a community (common property). In each of the cases a forest becomes either a private, public, and common-pool resource or good. What determines the forest as one of these three types of resources is not only the nature of the resource itself, but how humans choose to define and enforce the rules about its use.

Ostrom does make the valuable point that there are certain kinds of natural resources which have characteristics that may

make them difficult to utilize in sustainable ways if they are treated as common, public or private resources or goods. The flow of water from a ground water basin is potentially subject to degradation or exhaustion if access to that flow is treated by each individual as a private enforceable right. Nonetheless, there is little analytical usefulness in defining a particular resource a priori as public, common-pool or private when the purpose of analysis is to determine the power of sub-national groups to choose how they will define property rights over a resource.

Finally, it is important to note that institutions do structure the situation in which actions are selected, but it is also true that such structuring limits individual and collective choice. Is it not possible that institutions are so powerful that individuals may not even conceive of alternative institutional forms? A problem at the heart of understanding institutional change is specifying the capacity of individuals or collectivities to both perceive and establish alternative institutional forms. Ostrom (1989:31) recognizes that the sustainable development of a resource may require a "variety of rules to restrict future entry and use of the resource". Ostrom (1989:32) also argues that the capacity of local resource users to set such rules can be aided or hindered by "the enforcement or non-enforcement" of such rules by "surrounding jurisdictions".

What is missng from Ostrom's work is a greater recognition of the often subtle forms of constraints on choice which may impact the capacity of local users to even consider certain institutional alternatives.

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Bromley

Following Commons (1961: 71), Bromley (1989a) defines institutions as "collective action in restraint, liberation, and expansion of individual action". Bromley (1989a:35-80) has argued that institutions fall in two primary categories: conventions and entitlements. Conventions are defined as "social institutions that arise to coordinate behaviors derived from shared preferences over outcomes but indifference over means" (Bromley, 1989a: 43). Entitlements or rule-based institutions differ in that they "arise to regularize behaviors in the face of discordant preferences over either social ends or means" (Bromley, 1989a:43). Bromley's conceptualization of entitlement-type institutions is very similar to Ostrom's. Bromley's approach to conceptualizing institutions have several consequences as they relate to an understanding of power and common property institutions.

First, institutions both restrain and enable individual action. In common property institutions "group members (the "owners") have a right to exclude non-members, and non-members have a duty to abide by exclusion" (Bromley, 1989a:205). Exclusion from membership in the controlling group, means that non-members are unable to participate in determining "the rights and duties with respect to use rates and maintenance of the thing owned"(Bromley, 1989a:205). Thus if a group of villagers exercise common property rights to the agricultural land resources of a village, non-members must be blocked from pursuing activities that interfere with the villagers rights to the utilization of those land resources. That blockage could result from a sense of duty to abide by that exclusion on the part of

outsiders or from the capacity of the group to use its collective power to prevent such interference. Nonetheless, the loss of exclusionary power on the part of group members often spells the demise of a common property institution.

Second, institutions have what Bromley (1989a:57) refers to as a "normative content". According to Bromley, all social institutions result in a certain distribution of benefits and cost and therefor the social welfare consequences of an institutional form requires assessment. Bromley (1989b) has proposed that institutional change has important welfare consequences depending on the source of the change. Bromley (1989b) identifies five possible sources of institutional change: (1) those induced by changes in relative prices within the larger economy; (2) the existence of new technological opportunities which permit the possible capture of new income streams; (3) those induced by change in collective attitudes about income shares across segments of the population; (4) those induced by change in collective attitudes about the nature of goods that should be provided for consumption; and (5) those changes where particular economic agents are able to secure institutional arrangements that benefit themselves (rent-seeking).

While the first two sources are familiar to many institutional economists, the last three are often unexamined. That efficient institutional change can occur as the result of collective activity to improve the distribution of income or to open new kinds of goods to the consumption possibilities of consumers in a society force greater attention to normative issues. Certainly the possibility that institutional change may

only serve the interests of particular economic agents requires normative justification.

Third, if there are multiple sources of institutional change then there is no necessary reason to expect that common property institutions result in an equitable distribution of the benefits or costs that the institution creates. For instance McKean (1986:568) in a historical study of common property institutions in Japan has written that participants "were deeply concerned with some notion of fairness" but that "fairness was not synonymous with equality in material possessions". In general the case study literature provides contrary evidence and claims as to the egalitarian nature of common property institutions (see Wade, 1988 and Berkes 1989).

Finally, it is difficult to know whether common property institutions are institutions of convention or entitlement. If common property institutions were of the convention variety there would be little concern with the means by which behavior is constrained and enabled. Which side of the road one drives on is generally immaterial as long as their is an assured expectation that most everyone agrees on one side or the other. Acceptance of the convention is usually assured because of the overriding concern with the importance of the outcome: coordination of traffic. A problem of categorization arises with common property institutions because it is often difficult to identify to what extent behavior is constrained and expanded out of shared and dominant preferences for the achievement of the ultimate goals of the institution. It may even be difficult to know what the ultimate ends of the group forming a common property institution are. Are common property institutions formed out of dominant and

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shared preferences for the sustainable development of natural resources? Could they also be formed out of strong collective preferences for the maintenance of group solidarity, identity and minimization of social conflict? Do these motivations conflict?

For example, a village undertaking common property management of its agriculture land resources may utilize a technology of swidden field cultivation that appears to provide for the sustainable use of those resources. Is the technology utilised the result of a collective choice reflecting the dominant and shared preferences of all members of the village? If a common property institution falls within the entitlement category then the collective choice to use swidden technology is a matter of continually debate and re-evaluation. On the other hand, agricultural practices may be more a matter of convention with no collective evaluation of the means by which ends are pursued. Furthermore, swidden technology may serve other collective ends such as minimizing disputes over agricultural land resources.

In the literature on common property institutions several authors claim that natural resource mismanagement is not caused by common property institutional arrangements (Runge, 1984a; 1984b; 1985; 1986; 1987; Wade:1988a; 1988b; 1987). Yet few ask whether natural resource preservation was, is and will likely continue to be the primary or only goal of those who form and maintain common property institutions. If common property institutions are indeed entitlement institutions the contestation over means and ends continues. If this is true then theoretically there need be no reason to expect that the existence of a common property institution by itself results in the sustainable use of natural resources. The difficulty is to explain why common

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Yes

property institutions sometimes provide for sustainable natural resource use and why sometimes they may not. An important key to such an explanation may be a more careful exploration of power relationships both internal and external to common property institutions.

Power Within Common Property Institutions

The meaning of power is a highly debated issue within social science literature. This contestation over the meaning of power reflects the importance of the concept to many of the theoretical approaches to the subject. In this paper *I* will not attempt to summarize the social science literature regarding theoretical approaches to power.³ Instead, I will examine a recent analysis provided by Wade (1988) of common property management of natural resources in South Indian villages. This analysis will serve as an illustrative real world case through which theoretical arguments about power can be more fully presented. Wade's work is particularly useful in this regard in that his study pays particular attention to internal power relationships.

In *Village Republics*. Robert Wade is interested in explaining why only some villages in a region of South India have collectively acted to provide common property institutions to manage water supplies for crop irrigation, to protect crops from straying village livestock and to provide for the grazing and folding of livestock on post-harvest stubble. Wade calls these collectively active villages "corporate exceptions" and claims they sustain a previously unreported and sophisticated "public realm" (1988:5). Though the villages Wade (1988:134) studied are in "an area small enough for technology, tastes and general

social norms to be constant", large variations in collective action management of the natural resources of irrigation water and grazing land are evident. Wade sets as his major empirical task the explanation of this variation. Wade's (1988) study however is more than an empirical examination of what determines the occurrence or nonoccurrence of local collective action. Wade also provides a theoretical argument that attempts to refute the previous efforts of theorists he labels collective action pessimists.

Two primary representatives of the collective action pessimists with whom Wade (1988) takes issue are Hardin (1968) and Olson (1971). From Wade's (1988:16) perspective Olson's "celebrated theorem" that "unless there is coercion or some other special device to make individuals act in their common interest, rational, self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interests" (Olson, 1971:2) is misconceived. Equally disputed by Wade is Hardin's contention that if people are in a situation "where they could mutually benefit if all adopted a rule of restrained use of a common resource, they will not do so in the absence of an external enforcer of agreements" (1988:16). While disputes over these statements have generated an immense literature, Wade's disagreements are enlightening particularly as they relate to his understanding of power relationships.⁵ The key to Wade's criticism of collective action pessimists lies with the importance of free-riding as a dominant strategy of individuals taking part in collective activity.

To be a free-rider refers to a tendency of individuals to collect the benefits of others efforts in collective activity without bearing any or at least an equal share of the costs such

effort requires. According to Wade (1988), collective action pessimists are too simplistic in their assessment that rational self-interested behavior necessarily leads an individual to attempt to free-ride given the absence of any coercive restraint (selective punishment or inducement) to do otherwise. Wade (1988) believes that this simple deduction is due to two assumptions of collective action pessimists: (1) participants in collective action groups decide their strategies for action (free-ride or not) in ignorance of each other's choices; and (2) each participant chooses a strategy for action only once and cannot adjust his/her strategy as the group continues to strive for a collective goal. Instead Wade (1988) offers the following interpretation:

" the rational individual must calculate the consequences of his own attempt to free ride (cheat or defect) on the extent of free riding by others in the group. If his own free riding is noticed and if others retaliate by themselves attempting to free ride, there may be no public good to free ride upon, in which case free riding is not a rational strategy even for self-interested individuals. "Cooperate first and defect if the other defects" is a more rational strategy. But if there are many players even this may not be rational, for the consequences of mass retaliatory defection may be to stop provision of the public good. Here the players have an incentive to respond to signs of noncooperation by cooperating to increase each other's incentive to cooperate, through exhortation and stiffer penalties for noncooperation." (p. 203)

Thus selective inducements or punishments are not needed to account for the emergence of collective activity. Individuals can rationally choose a cooperative strategy of action provided that the collective good to be provided is of such high benefit to the individuals involved that it would be irrational for most to free ride and so long as any future tendency toward free-riding is

checked by "exhortation" and "**stiffer** penalties for noncooperation". There are three major problems with this argument.

First, circumstances may drive some people to seek mutually beneficial arrangements, but it does not necessarily follow that the arrangements provided reflect the interests of all who may later be subject to what is arranged on their behalf. For instance, ecological variables related to high risk of crop loss may provide the basis for individuals to rationally and voluntarily choose to cooperate. The size of the net benefits to be gained by collectively acting may become the essential determinant of whether collective action takes place. However, once a group begins to cooperate by establishing rules and institutions (the corporate village), the "need for some coercion to back up agreements" necessarily follows (Wade, 1988:209).

Wade (1988:209) continues:

"At the constitutional level people can voluntarily negotiate a set of rules of restrained access or financial contributions, their incentive to do so being the prospective net collective benefit. At the action level, most of the compliance with the rules must also be voluntary, not the result of a calculus of evasion and punishment. But the rules must be backed by a system of punishment, the existence of which helps to assure any one person that if he follows the rules he will not be suckered, and which at times of crisis can directly deter"

However not all members of a local community may have negotiated the set of rules which nonetheless all are subject to obey. This is an empirical question and one that would require careful historical examination of the microconstitutional process of these sub-national communities.

Wade openly admits that the controlling institution (village council) of at least one of the collectively active villages he

studied is controlled by the landed with a "power elite of perhaps 60 to 90 households out of 575, from which come the active participants in decision-making" (1988:190). Thus it would be appropriate to claim that the those with land collectively act to provide collective goods for themselves, but it is quite inappropriate to claim that such activity necessarily provides a public good. Wade (1988: 108) argues that "the lot of the landless would certainly not be improved if the village had none of these corporate institutions", yet he offers no evidence that this is true (by for instance examining landless income in corporate and noncorporate villages). More importantly, he offers no evidence that the landless or non-elite ever exercised a role in the establishment the formative "constitutional" rules of the village.

Second, Wade underestimates the importance of the concentration of power and wealth in a community that may have significant consequences for the possibility of local common property institutions to preserve natural resources. For instance, what is the significance of the differences between a village politically and economically dominated by one or two families which provides no collective goods, one dominated by three or four families providing some collective goods and one dominated by a substantial minority of the village families providing many collective goods? Whether or not ecological factors provide some motivation for collective activity it does not necessarily follow that it is the primary motivation. Wade (1988) seems to be arguing that when the elite structure of a village represents a "substantial" minority of the village

families it is more authoritative or legitimate because it better represents the "public" good. In what way are the collective solutions of an elite minority of families any less the "imposed" solutions of local power?

Finally both Wade (1988) and the collective action pessimists share a common premise that an understanding of collective action must be firmly grounded on explanations that start with the individual as the primary unit of analysis. In short, their approach is methodologically individualist. Such a common approach may mean that despite their real differences in explaining why collective action occurs and is sustained, these analysts may share a common conceptualization of political power which is itself open to question.

For instance, collective action theorists assert the need for someone or some mechanism (whether inside or outside) the group to exercise power over the individuals contemplating collective action for such action to occur at all. Wade (1988) and other collective action optimists argue that individually perceived mutual benefit can motivate collective action, but its continuance is still dependent ultimately on someone or some mechanism for the exercise of power over individuals who may wish to free-ride. In both cases power is conceptualized in behavioral terms, without any notions of power as a structural concept. These alternative notions of power are concerned with viewing power as capacity. Here the concern is with developing "interpretative models" which explain "social structures which shape human action and distribute the capacities to act among social agents". (Issac, 1987:75) Why in Wade's (1988) study does

common property management only occur in villages where the structure of power is elitist? Is such a structure of authority a necessary condition of collective activity? In a companion paper to his book, Wade (1987:230) suggests one answer:

"corporate organizations, to be effective, should be based on existing structures of authority. In practice, this means that the council will be dominated by the local elite, which is a disturbing conclusion for democrats and egalitarians. But rules made by the majority of villagers would carry little legitimacy in the eyes of the powerful."

But why is it that the legitimacy of the powerful is so critical to collective action? If the weak and powerless do not remain silent in both words and action would collective activity be possible? According to Hoffman (1988:123), every enduring social relationship implies an "inseparable unity of authority and power" and what makes the exercise of power more legitimate is the degree to which the relations of power in a given social structure involve more authority than power. What has not been clearly demonstrated is whether common property institutions are possible under conditions where the relations of power are characterized by greater authoritative control. In other words, do common property institutions exist where control is both democratic and where the costs and benefits of the institution are distributed on a more egalitarian basis?

Power External to Common Property Institutions

Many of the authors who support common property institutions as a means to the sustainable use of natural resources argue that the state and private property are often important sources of the demise of common property institutions. For instance, Ciriacy-

Wantrup and Bishop (1975:718) argue that the most important interference with societies exercising common property management of natural resources "has been contact with the market economy and other aspects of western culture". Bromley and Cernea (1989) also argues that the demise of common property institutions are the result of competing institutional arrangements. According to Bromley and Cernea (1989:18), the breakdown of common property institutions may occur because of "spreading privatization" which limits the compliance of co-owners to the common property arrangements of natural resource use. Individuals lured into private market arrangements by the possibilities of private gain abandon common property institutions. Furthermore Bromley and Cernea (1989:18-19) argue that if the modern state "disregards the interests of those segments of the population largely dependent upon common property resources-- then external threats to common property will not receive the same governmental response as would a threat to private property". Wade (1987:232) elevates this argument to a basic criteria of successful common property management: "the less the state can or wishes to undermine locally based authorities and the less it can enforce private property-rights, the better the chances of success."

What capacity does the state have to undermine local authorities and why would the state not wish to exercise that capacity? Do states promote private property institutions at the expense of common property institutions? Current research efforts have demonstrated that common property management of natural resources is a far more prevalent form of institutional control of resources than had previously been recognized. However there

is less recognition and understanding of the external conditions which lead to the decline or expansion of local common property institutions across time. Here I examine the topic of state sovereignty which provides some understanding of this issue. }

State Sovereignty and Common Property

One argument that may imply the decline of local common property institutions is that a state in an anarchic world of competing and hostile states can ill afford to relinquish sovereignty. One of the classic definitions of the state is that it is a "system of order" which "claims binding authority, not only over the members of the state, the citizens, most of whom have obtained membership by birth, but to a very large extent, over all action taking place in the area of its jurisdiction" (Weber, 1947:156). The existence of common property control of natural resources may represent an important diminution of state sovereignty which in turn places the state in a weaker position vis-a-vis other states where such diminution is less prevalent. } Wow

yes

Migdal (1987:22) has taken up such a theme arguing that the state is driven toward social predominance which "involves the successful subordination of people's own inclinations of social behavior sought by other social organizations in favor of the behavior prescribed by state rules". As we have seen, common property management of natural resources requires some degree of autonomy by sub-national groups to establish the rules over resource use and access. Is there an inherent conflict between a state seeking societal predominance and the interests of common property managers? I offer three perspectives on this question. |

First, conflict is not inevitable if common property and state managers arrange some mutually satisfactory limits to each others claims of authority over natural resources. If states and private property holders divide authority over many aspects of the use of natural resources, it certainly seems possible that such authority could be divided between common property holders and the state. More importantly, if common property management of natural resources is more likely to result in the sustainable use of resources, theoretically it would seem to be in the state's interest to promote such institutional forms of natural resource management. An empirical examination of such an argument could be undertaken in a comparative study of cases where the state promoted common property management of natural resources with cases where it did not. Yes

Second, the conflict may not really be between the state and common property managers. There are many theories of the state which argue that the state "consistently acts to guarantee the interests of capital" (Elkin, 1985: 5). If such consistent action is assured then a strong case could be made that common property institutions will not remain viable against the combined power of these promoters of private property institutions. One could argue that the reason that most common property institutions are in developing societies is because neither private property institutions or the states which supposedly promote them have reached a high level of predominance in these societies. To test such an argument one would need first to demonstrate the consistency of state action in the promotion of private property interests. In addition, one would have to account for the existence of common property institutions that manage natural

resources in modern capitalist states. For instance, Acheson (1987) demonstrates the common property management of lobster in the United States. Is this merely one minor exception to a more general tendency of the state dominated by capitalist interests to supplant local common property management of natural resources?

Third, there has been a great deal of debate in political science about the relative autonomy of the state as an institution capable of action independent of the preferences of classes, groups or individuals which comprise the society over which it claims sovereignty (Evans et al, 1985; Mann, 1904). If such autonomy is sufficient, the state may be a viable source for protection of common property institutions. In this case the state could act as a protector of alternative institutional forms and the promoter of none. Here the empirical problem would be to demonstrate the autonomy and neutrality of the state in assuring the existence of alternative institutional forms of control of natural resources.

The importance of the above perspectives are not that they provide an exhaustive list of alternative approaches for understanding the power of the state or private property institutions to diminish the viability of local common property institutions. Rather, the important point is that researchers can not take it for granted that proposals to maintain or promote local common property management of natural resources will easily be supported by politicians, bureaucrats and private entrepreneurs. While Regier et al. (1989) are correct when they argue that community-based resource management is often viewed as "unconventional", the political implications are far greater. If

common property management, implies the necessity of a greater decentralization of political power to communities, then such decentralization may be viewed as threatening to those who benefit most from the current distribution of power.

Concluding Remarks

The underlying logic of many arguments about the viability of systems of common property management of natural resources stem from a premise that the state tends to use its coercive power either to promote private property control of natural resources or to gain control of the natural resource itself. As Bruyn (1987:5) has noted, we tend to be provided with only two choices: capitalism or state socialism. No small part of the effort of those promoting common property institutions has been to convince the leaders of states and international development agencies that neither of these two options are inevitable. More importantly, the presumed inevitability of private or state control of natural resources may imply the inevitability of their non-sustainable use. If such is the case, it is vitally important to keep exploring the necessary conditions whereby the potential of the competing or coordinated power of the state and private property institutions can give way to institutions of common property. The current existence of local collective action in the management of common property resources tells us little about the likelihood of the survival of this form of institutional arrangement in the future.

A second important research question is a normative one: should all common property institutions survive? On economic efficiency and sustainable resource use grounds the case for the

survivability, if not promotion, of this institutional form is compelling. However if Wade (1988) is correct in his assessment of the necessity for political elitism and lack of equity in the distribution of benefits in common property institutions, the normative case for such institutions is certainly dampened. Ostrom (1986:612) has argued that some, but not all, common property arrangements survive with "extraordinary powers" that "coerce membership and contributions for collective actions... even when most members do not evaluate them as performing efficiently or equitably". We are then left with the problem of differentiating coercive from voluntary common property management. Which of these two kinds of common property management are more pervasive? How can we be assured that that the voluntary type will survive and the coercive type will be extinguished? These are not easy questions to answer, but their difficulty does not mean that they can be ignored.

All social institutions create different kinds of social order, but all kinds of order are not normatively equivalent. Institutional analysis is difficult because it requires what Macpherson (1978:11) calls "justificatory theories", that is, a concern with what institutions "are doing and what they ought to be doing". The problems of power both internal and external to common property institutions will not go away and will remain a critical part of necessary normative assessments.

Footnotes

1. See Tisdell (1988) for a recent review. Redclift (1989;1987), Milbrath (1989) and De La Court (1990) provide other sources.
2. See National Academy of Sciences (1986), Uphoff (1986), McCay and Acheson (1987), and Berkes (1989) for a collection of general papers and case studies.
3. A recent review is provided by Clegg (1989).
4. The idea of the corporate village is not new and has been utilized by cultural anthropologists for quite some time. Perhaps the classic article is by Wolf (1957). Wolf (1986) has recently updated his earlier discussions of the corporate village. Sheridan (1988) provides a critical review of Wolf's most recent discussion.
5. Wade's critique of Olson's (1971) and Hardin's (1968) work is one of many. Most of the common property resource management theorists are in more or less disagreement with Hardin (1968) and Olson (1971). Runge (1984a, 1984b, 1986) is perhaps the best representative of the views of these critics. Matthew Crenson (1987) provides an additional review of the many arguments surrounding Olson's and Hardin's work.
6. As noted above, Ostrom (1989) makes an important point that constitutions do not need to be understood as a formal document representing "rules about making rules" for an entire nation-state. Rules about making rules can be made and changed by small groups of local-level users of resources.

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