

Collective Action for the Production of Knowledge on the Commons

Norma Georgina Gutiérrez Serrano
Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, CRIM
Leticia Merino Pérez
Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, IIS.

Abstract

This work proposes analyze the field of the knowledge on the commons, first analyzing different ethical and political features present in the process of knowledge production on the governance of common resources; also taking into account the process of conceptual development of the “Common Goods and Collective Action Theory” and the research on the commons, as well as the social relations involved in some of the academic practices in this expanding field. We assume that these features are sense constructions that are constitutive of an academic and social culture corresponding to the field of the commons.

The theoretical understanding of natural and socially created resources, as commons, this is as goods that can be collectively preserved and used for the common benefit, is the result of a particular historical trajectory, which this work proposes to review and highlight. We consider that the academic proposal of the recognition of collective action as a viable option for common resources governance has strong ethical, social and political sense, and also implies social and even environmental responsibility.

The understanding of knowledge as a common good represents an important step forward on the trajectory of the “Commons Perspective”, making the academic activity on itself the object of analytical reflection, promoting the reflection on the different dimensions and experiences involved in research activities and conceptual creation.

We will review the ethical implications of this approach, reviewing the values that sustain the proposal of collaborative academic work, of inter-subjective production of conceptual meaning and of policies based on empirically based understanding of common goods governance.

Keywords

- . The field of knowledge of the commons
- . Production of knowledge
- . Ethical and political feature
- . Collective action

Introduction

The purpose of this work is a review of the ethical and political features that are present in the knowledge field of the commons and in the community-network on which this field is sustained. We assume that these features are sense constructions that are constitutive of an academic and social culture corresponding to the field of the commons.

An intention, when proposing the study of the ethical and political sense of this field, is to contribute to the better understanding of the form and dynamics followed by the contemporary production of knowledge.

This document is based on the following assumptions regarding the commons:

- a) Beyond constituting a paradigm, the commons constitute a field of knowledge.
- b) The field of knowledge of the commons generates, and is supported by, a research culture that both contrasts and debates with traditional paradigms of science. In this debate, the senses of ethics and politics on which it rests are substantial.
- c) The commons are based on an academic community that has the ability to organize itself into a wide social network. Therefore, we identify a double profile configuration, a community-network responsible for the field of the commons.
- d) The commons, as a field, allow the analysis of knowledge production into diverse and complex areas: those highly specialized as concerning contemporary science, in non-formalized academically, socially and commercially environments, as traditional communities may be, and even in highly technologized spheres that are the technological support of virtual communities.

The content of this document is organized in three sections: The commons as a field of knowledge; Constructions of political sense in the field of the commons, and Constructions of ethical sense in the field of the commons.

The commons as a field of knowledge

To start with, we propose to consider on this work that the commons can be conceived as a field of knowledge as they have been able to generate, sustain and generalize an academic and social culture that harmonizes with the dynamics of contemporary research (Gibbons 1998). Culture within which it is particularly important to note that its work has been characterized by a central tendency to interdisciplinary research, and that it has also achieved a transdisciplinary knowledge production.

The characterization of such a culture can be specified with the identification of a number of features, some of them in general terms, and others more specific. Let's start by identifying general characteristic features which, in a traditional sense of academic sphere, allow finding a field of knowledge. The commons:

a) have their own research object: the common resources in different contexts, at different scales; b) have a conceptual *corpus* relevant to their object: governance, collective action, institution and dilemmas, among others; c) are constituted as a theoretical-methodological paradigm: they achieve the construction, reformulation and adaptation of methodologies and tools of inquiry to assist the complexity, enable the intertwining of methodological perspectives, get to transit between scales by expanding the focus of case studies to analytical synthesis of greater scale and complexity; d) have a short track-record in their conformation as a field, but of remarkable constancy, dynamicity and systematicity in their internal dynamics, without showing or sticking to linear constructs of successive stages regarding their own becoming; e) are supported by an extensive specialized and diverse academic community that calls for very different social actors within a network organization; f) as a new field of knowledge, in addition to its inter-and transdisciplinary character, it is remarkable for producing knowledge and generating research on situation (Díaz 2000), referred to particular cases from which far-reaching analytical synthesis are constructed; g) already have subfields or subdivisions internal to the field, one of the most remarkable is the delimitation of the New Commons (Hess 2008).

It is also a field of significant expansion in the international academic sphere that not only is widely recognized but has congregated, in a short time, a considerable number of followers who have been able to join together, as the community-network of the IASC, in more than 30 international and regional events in different hemispheres and latitudes of the planet.

The above-mentioned is referring to general aspects on the commons as a field of knowledge, and now it is interesting to point out specific characteristics of same that provide a particularity to this field.

To begin with, we can say that the object of study, the common goods, has expanded dramatically. In this regard it is possible to identify different dimensions or areas where such expansion can be found: socio-historical, theoretical, socio-technological and cognitive-epistemological. On the one hand, the proposal of the commons has, as a conceptual starting point, the classical theory of Tocqueville, regarding the social organization of the commons, both in the historical reference of the life organization of the European commons and in its link with the proposal of democracy, which is expressed by the political discourse in the constitutional shaping of the United States of America (Bollier 2011). On the other hand, the idea of the common resources found a realization base on the community life of native peoples from various regions of the planet. The traditional forms of organization, political, social and economic, enabled to consolidate the paradigm of the governance of common resources, as opposed to the proposal of what is recognized as *the tragedy of the commons* (Ostrom 2011). A third area corresponds to the technological era in which new forms of telematics or virtual community are supported, and the same extension of the concept as New Commons that refer to different social spheres (Hess 2008).

In a cognitive dimension it can be considered an extension to the possibility of conceiving knowledge and the very same human beings as commons (Bollier 2011). In relation to understanding or proposing knowledge as a common resource, there is a consideration of all intelligible ideas, information and data in whatever form in which they are obtained or expressed (Hess and Ostrom 2011). Epistemologically, knowledge, its production and

circulation, is found in social and community spheres and is not restricted to formalized knowledge, not even limited to knowledge that is codified (Polanyi). Particularly, the commons propose to conceptualize and analyze knowledge as a common resource.

In this last double line or cognitive and epistemological dimension, language is considered as a basic tool for research. Language is conceptualized as a public good and is highlighted as an essential ingredient of the constitution of identities, social structures and association patterns, of community and ways of life. Therefore, language is positioned as a link to ideas, thinking, culture, communication and social coordination (Ostrom, V. 1993, cited in Dragos and Boettke, 93).

In accordance with the above-mentioned, it is highlighted that the commons are a field within the area of social sciences, which as is the case with other fields or disciplines, reconfigures and redefines its object of study (Arellano 2010) and, besides, it does so within a time period and margin of what has been a short trajectory.

On the other hand, the nature of the object of study has allowed, since the beginning, to conduct a research in a wide spectrum of social sectors, most of them linked to natural resources. This has meant a constant transition between social sectors that, with the recent identification of the New Commons, is increasing significantly. A transition that involves a continuous circulation and transmission of knowledge (Ostrom, V. 1982, cited in Dragos and Boettke, 57), continuous mobility of the specialists in the field, language translations not only among academic fields but also between different social sectors, diverse social ties and interactions with different actors. All the aforementioned has been implicated only from the definition of the object of study.

It may be said that the reach showed by the object of study of the commons, gives a considerable strength to the entire field. It turns out to be a relevant object both in social organizations of modernity (in traditional farming communities, fishing or farming, in urban communities, scientific or business and trade associations) and in the context of what other theorists (Beck 2008; Bauman 2003) recognize as late modernity or postmodernity (virtual communities, migratory, scientific and technological networks). The commons succeed in getting involved in forms of social organization, characteristic of both stages.

The broad research spectrum in which the field evolves has led to a strong demand to adapt, readjust, combine and develop methodologies relevant to a wide variety of situations and contexts with which the work is done (Poteete, Janssen and Ostrom 2010). The realization of the collective action and its analysis in the commons has led to determine not only the use but, above all, the analysis of *multiple methods in practice*. The multiplicity also comes from locating, from initial works, the different levels of analysis required and put into play in the research of the commons (Ostrom 2011, 108). We can say that the acknowledgement of this multiplicity and the way to deal with it has implied a continuous review and reflection on the doing.

In this way, the object of study and the manner to approach it, which has required of an analytical construction derived from the continuous self-reflection on the practice itself and on the review and theoretical reconstruction, is a central feature of the field. A meta-analysis work is recognized as fundamental in the research of the commons.

Another particular feature defining this field refers to the role played by the central concepts of the critical apparatus of the commons, within the dynamics the field is maintaining. Common resources, collective action, governance, institution, collaboration, self-management, among others, are both central analytical concepts within the theoretical-methodological *corpus* and the constructs that guide the work shared within the field. That is, members and dynamics of the community-network of the commons sustain, through their action and practice, the concepts mentioned; in fact, they encourage these forms of social organization in the study spheres that are proposed (Bollier 2011; Gosh 2011). When giving value to collective and community actions and recognizing involvement of diverse actors from particular scenes, the field of the commons strengthens the shared practices, interactions and learning; in general, community ties in different social spheres.

So far, we have advanced in the delimitation of the commons as a field of knowledge, without pretending to have exhausted the point; now we shall address issues of central significance in this document.

Constructions of the political sense in the field of the commons

As stated earlier, we believe that the commons constitute a field of knowledge that encourages a socio-academic culture, which is sustained and, in turn, supported on the construction of certain political and ethical meanings and senses within the field.

It is possible to consider that a historical construction of the political sense of the commons had as a starting point the conception of political and social organization of the commons or European commune, and it was intertwined with the political conception of democracy and freedom that supports the political discourse of the U. S. legality (Bollier 2011, 33) on which the conformation of the United States of America is settled. But beyond this founding idea that has, undoubtedly, guided the field through its trajectory, we can determine the fact that in the early research work there was a heavy debate with theoretical and methodological models that question the possibility that individuals are organized around the management of common resources. Within these models, that one referring to “*the rational choice*” based on the conception of individuals as mere economic optimizers unrelated, in all cases, to the common good (Merino 2011, 33), or that model widely discussed within the commons on the “tragedy of the commons” sustained by Hardin (1968) or that of the logic of collective action by Olson (1965), (Hardin and Olson, cited in Ostrom 2011).

All these models face the opposition of empirical studies and its corresponding theoretical reflection, for more than four decades, on the possibilities of self-organization of the communities around the management of common resources; there is also opposition in the debate and the discussion held, which questioned or limited the explanatory possibilities of models promoting prescriptive policies for resource management coming from the governmental sphere or mainly from a private interest, models derived from external analysis that have achieved a strong impact on the international economic policy. From there, in the debate theoretically and politically argued, there is a construction of meaning, which gives political and academic sense to the commons paradigm from its original

definition as a paradigm until its current status as a field of study and knowledge production.

It is also possible to find, in the dynamics of the present time, this type of construction of political sense within the commons proposal. Its validity in an era of boom and expansion of the globalized economy model, and also at this time, characterizes a period of international crisis being experienced by this model. While market economy tries to invade all areas of human life and at multiple scales (Beck 2008), the field of commons has succeeded in positioning an alternative discourse, which questions the pertinence of the universal privatization of the common goods, a discourse through which *a series of forces beyond the market can provide us an organized cooperation of groups* (Zarukhán 2011).

Then, the commons are the protagonists in a strong economic and political tension: while the theorists and advocates of the globalized economy put emphasis on free market, privatization of resources and competition, the paradigm of the common goods is focused on collective actions that enable to share and collaborate in accessing and managing common resources, such as public and community social goods.

The concrete proposal about establishing norms and rules that allow a widespread access to knowledge and, along with this, empower humans and assure recognition of those who create knowledge in various ways, implies collective action, involves resource mobilization and promotes policies that face, or at least oppose attitudes that encourage privatization policies as a central or unique way of economic development. This can be considered one of the greatest political and economic tensions within which the field of the commons is developed.

Political and academic tensions have also been implicated in the field's path: while studies of the economics of innovation and social studies of science and technology emphasize their interest in technological innovations, their externalities and internalities, within value chains, and are also interested in the network organization of the private consortia and its link to innovation systems. The conceptualization of the commons has a different route, which deals with self-regulatory agreements that generate governance and puts emphasis on the role of cooperation and community institutions.

Also in the academic sphere, it is possible to highlight a position that differs from and is positioned in a circuit different from that of the classical science and/or research, one that was characterized by Robert Merton and that prevails in highly structured areas of scientific knowledge production. The commons recognize and give value to those not formalized spaces that allow entering into agreements, generate an institutional character, in unstructured environments, as opposed to those market environments that are considered structured.

From this ability to deal with structured and unstructured environments, it is possible to consider, if we may, and as a political and academic stance of the commons, not to appeal to a single theoretical and methodological explanatory model, not to limit to just one homogenizing theory, but to rely on a series of theories, not pretending that a single *focal system is right to every question*, nor pretending that a number of variables of a particular level is always involved to any research question (Poteete, Janssen and Ostrom 2010).

It still remains to be noted the possibility that the field has to carry out sense constructions in the socio-political mobilization. The commons have also been considered as a movement, able to attract social activists focused or interested in diverse socio-political dilemmas, who are strongly mobilized all around the world (Dyer-Witthford, cited in Hess 2008, 3). A civil movement that is expressed in virtual communities also can be found, through various websites, as has been pointed out by Hess since 2008. Even more, through the IASC, there is an invitation to action, a call for signing causes in defense of environmental resources, specific actions that strengthen the character of social movement expressed by the field.

Thus collective action, governance, institutional character and other categories that have been ingrained with a clear political meaning, have endorsed, in turn, the construction of political sense of collective action within the field.

Constructions of the ethical sense in the field of the commons

Identify the features of political sense in the field of the commons, implies to make reference to the ethical sphere, to certain values that are also sustained and promoted within the action and practice of research on the commons as a paradigm, a social movement and a field.

It is possible to interpret that, in the proposal of the commons, paying attention to the issue of governance, self-regulation of the communities and collective action, has a strong base on the ethical principle or value of recognition. A recognition of the other not only as an object-subject of study, but a recognition of his worth as an individual-collectivity, organized, communitarian an/or socially responsible for his management, use and access to common resources.

Recognition has come to be understood as the basis of cooperation and acceptance between human beings. From a dialogic conception, *recognition is considered as a doing, absolutely reciprocal, the duplicate movement of two consciousnesses* as Carlos Gutiérrez has said, taking up again Hegel (Gutiérrez 2008, 24). It is a self-recognition that is realized in recognizing the other and vice versa.

In this way, a cooperation that is fundamentally based on confidence can be found in managing and governing common resources (Poteete, Janssen and Ostrom 2010, 226), but also a cooperation that is possible by recognizing the other's ability and commitment, and the likelihood of having reciprocal relations with the other. That is, an *ideal reciprocal relation between subjects, in which each sees the other both as its equal and also as separate from it. It is estimated that this relation is constitutive for subjectivity. One becomes an individual subject only by virtue of recognizing, and being recognized by, another subject* (Fraser 2006, 20).

This consideration of recognition and reciprocity can be found both in the study of the commons, as a component present in the collective action related to governance of the common goods, and as an internal exercise, in the commons, as a field of knowledge. The publishing of the work titled *Working Together. Collective action, the commons, and multiple methods in practice* by Amy Poteete, Marco Janssen and Elinor Ostrom, 2010,

consists of the analysis of diverse and varied research works conducted in different regions of the hemisphere.

In the classical conceptualization of ethics, as a branch of philosophy, realization or definition of the same was established in relation to the other, in the relation and in consideration of the coeval. The limit of ethics, the effect and scope of the affectation of the ethical action, was found in the lifetime of the individual, from his relation with the others. In the decade of the 60's, Hans Jonas published the work: *The Principle of Responsibility: essay of an ethics for the technological civilization* (Jonas 1995). This work is a demarcation in the field of ethics. The author considers social responsibility as the new principle on which ethical behavior is built. A responsibility that not only takes place between individuals that coexist, but transcends to future generations and takes into consideration non-human entities, such as nature resources and the very existence of the planet. The social responsibility postulated by Jonas is determining a task in ethics for both the present and the future of human existence, and the nature in which this existence is realized (Jonas 1995).

The research works of the commons show these two orientations. They have had a relevant trajectory regarding the management and governance of the common goods that enable their preservation and guarantee their access. The commons have also developed a socio-academic and political argumentation about the relevance of ensuring, for future generations, such access, use and ways of sharing resources for generations to come (Hess 2008, 3). The argumentation of this stance stems from the consideration and analysis of social, environmental, economic and political problems that, essentially, make reference to dilemmas on the access to different kinds of resources, so responsibility and commitment have to do with individuals, groups, communities, but also come from specific conditions expressed in dilemmas and social problems, in general terms.

It is possible to consider or interpret that in the field of the common goods, ethical attitudes are mainly supported by collective action, which promotes collaboration, joint work, responsibility, recognition and trust, and particularly with these latter, respect for the organizations coming from different types of communities.

Closing remarks

In this work we have supported the conception of the commons as a field of knowledge because it produces and promotes its own socio-academic culture. In addition, we consider that this culture entails changes in scientific codes and research, and changes in attitudes, constructions of political and ethical sense, specific in the trajectory of the commons.

From our point of view, this culture is distinctive, among other things, for consisting of a series of symbolic creations, vivid and dynamic, which allow it to involve or locate itself in a pertinent way both in scenarios and communities, traditional and modern, and in those of a globalized society that are identified as post-modern, whether these are social and community, scientific, technological, productive, cultural, in attendance or virtual form.

We are also proposing to understand that, from the characterization of such cultural constructions of sense, as well as from the relevance and scope of its object of study, the common goods, it is possible to have access to a better level of understanding on the ability

the commons have to transit through the study between traditional communities and those communities built by the contemporary high technology environment, a challenge that is identified for disciplinary fields such as that of anthropology (Arellano 2012).

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