

Dangers of Commonism, or Ostrom vs. the Commonizers

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Abstract

The community of scholars exploring governance and institutions for the management of an increasing range of resources systems is steadily growing. As long as we were dealing with classical, traditional natural resource governance, the resource units and property regimes were relatively easy to define. In the last two decades new commons and global commons have been added to the research agendas of commons scholars and gained lots of attention in society. The considered resource unit needs to be specified and may not always be subtractable nor the system excludable. The focus is not the appropriation, but rather the joint provision of the resource system. Following this thought, sometimes, commons have been interpreted as social constructions that guarantee the transformation of society towards sustainability and well-being.

From a Bloomington School perspective, we want to critically review this development of the recent radical-normative use of the term “commoning.” After addressing the shifting meaning of “commoning” in the literature, our goal in this paper is to “rescue” “commons” as an analytical concept from normative “commonism.” *Inter alia*, we not only raise concerns but also offer suggestions for structuring empirical observations in the hope of inspiring more constructive discussion.

I. INTRODUCTION

Since Elinor Ostrom published *Governing the Commons* in 1991, cross-disciplinary scholarship on the commons has continued to evolve along several fruitful lines of inquiry. In addition to natural-resource commons of the type Ostrom analyzed, scholars now write about all kinds of “new” or “artefactual” commons, including the knowledge commons, science commons, health-care commons, finance commons, corporate commons, space commons, and social-media commons, to name only a few (Theesfeld, 2021). Much of this work is analytically impressive, following Ostrom’s diagnostic approach to analyzing common-pool resources to generate testable hypotheses about possible institutional solutions, including, but by no means limited to, common-property systems (Sarker and Ostrom, 2018).

As that work has continued, however, another line of scholarship has emerged celebrating commons and commons management as an inherently preferable, politically progressive system of governance (Theesfeld, 2021). Self-described “commonizers” now advocate commons-type management for every kind of collective-action problem, regardless of empirical context. They claim that a large number of common-pool resources (CPRs) should be managed communally by default as an alternative to “capitalist production” (Papadimitropoulos 2021, p. 22). Kostakis and Bauwens (2014, p. 45, 65) presuppose that a “[c]ommons-oriented economy” would involve “non-commodified production and exchange” to create an “ethical economy.” Among the more well-known commonizers, David Bollier and Silke Helfrich (2012, p. xiv) agree that “the commons has a potentially transformative role to play.”

It is a discourse that transcends and remakes the categories of the prevailing political and economic order. It provides us with a new socially constructed order of experience, an elemental political worldview and a persuasive grand narrative. The commons identifies the relationships that should matter and sets forth a different operational logic. It validates new schemes of human relations, production and governance – one might call it ‘commonance,’ or the governance of the commons.

Bollier and Helfrich (Ibid.) conclude that “[t]he commons provides us with the ability to ... constitute a new order.” This kind of normative, arguably utopian, thinking about commons might be called “commonism.” Bollier (2007) practically equates commons with a social entity, when he talks about “a commons that manages a resource (p. 28).”

Bollier and Helfrich (2019; 2012) are forerunners of scholars that treat commons as a model of community governance, as a third force versus markets and states. In particular, “commoning” is understood to emancipate people from a predatory market-state system (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019). As such, commons become the foundation of a new order in which property law and markets become compatible with a larger set of ethical, environmental, and democratic values (Bollier, 2007). These commons theorists extend the notion of commons to a form of society that is superior and better suited to deal with current unsustainable resource use (Euler, 2015a). Euler (2015b), likewise provides an overview of development of commons concepts.

Although, we do not agree in the way how Euler treads the purely natural approach as an equivalent to the Ostrom school (see Section 3), he is right in summarizing the development of this “commoning” approach as radical.

In recent years, the scholarly community has been challenged by new, normative uses of the term “commoning” to signify a better form of society. To stress this, the active “verbal-form” has been chosen. The corresponding way of interpreting the term “commons” is focused on the social dimension, sometimes even disregarding the necessary attributes of a resource as well as other forms of collective action.

Not all commonizers believe that an entirely new political-economic system can be built upon foundations of communal property and shared resources. But they remain staunch advocates of common property over private property, whenever viable. Before he embraced “transformational commoning,” Bollier (2014, p. 14) observed that the commons “is not a panacea or utopia. Commoners often disagree among themselves. There are personality clashes, as well as internal debates about what works best and what’s fair. There can be structural governance problems and external governance interference.” These scholars typically combine diagnostic analysis with normative presuppositions that common-property systems are more egalitarian and democratic than either private or public property systems, which should make them the default preference (See, e.g., Kashwan et al. 2021). Their normative priors sometimes influence their diagnostic analyses as, for example, when they refer to patterns of privatization as “land grabbing” or “dispossession,” even in cases involving free-market exchanges.

There is a long history of advocacy scholarship in law, political science, and other disciplines relating to property systems. There is nothing wrong with it *per se*. Our objection is to the abuse of Elinor Ostrom’s research by advocates for *total* commoning. While Ostrom was a champion of common- or communal-property systems as a sometimes viable, sometimes even preferable alternative to either private or public ownership, she never would have agreed with arguments that that common-property systems should replace *in toto* private- and state-ownership of resources. You don’t have to take our word for it. She said as much in her writings, which will be explored below.

The purpose of this paper is to show not only that commonizers misconstrue Ostrom but that their failure to question their own theories in light of empirical evidence, adduced by Ostrom and others, leaves their theories untethered from reality. To the extent commonizers come across as leftist radicals, they can actually negate the important work Ostrom and others have done to rescue the reputation of common-property systems as viable and sometimes preferable policies for resolving resource-management problems. The next section of the paper addresses precisely what commonizers get wrong about Ostrom – what we call the danger of commonism - and why their reliance on her work is misplaced. Section III focuses on what they get wrong about historical common pool resources and common property solutions.

II. OSTROM v. THE COMMONIZERS

The commonizers are a loose confederation of scholars and political advocates who promote either universal or maximally feasible commoning. Technically, commoning is the process of converting land and resources on it from either individual or state ownership to collective ownership of some group, small or large. In some cases, commoning is possible, and common-property systems can sometimes be sustainable over long periods of time (Ostrom 1991). At the extreme, however, commoning becomes a political movement to create a new political-economic system on the ashes of “neoliberalism” or “late capitalism.” Economically, Commonizers stress resource sharing over competition and conservation over appropriation. Socially and legally, they stress community over individual rights (Papadimitriopoulos, 2021, p. 22). But these are all suppositions of how common-property systems would operate. Some evidence exists for those suppositions, but only from very small scale common-property systems, such as kibbutzim. And even such small-scale examples of democratic and egalitarian common-property systems are few and far between in history.

Commonizers frequently cite Ostrom as the fountainhead of their movement. Bollier (2024, p.4) writes, “Professor Elinor Ostrom, a political scientist at Indiana University, helped rescue the commons from the memory hole to which mainstream economics had consigned it. Over the course of four decades, Ostrom’s extensive empirical fieldwork documented the capacity of communities to manage natural resources sustainably.” Every bit of this is true, but Bollier should have noted that she documented the limitations as well as the “capacity” of communities to manage resources sustainably. Another Commonizer, Perle (2025, p.96), writes fancifully that “Elinor Ostrom proved a strong advocate of joint ownership and responsibility for common-pool resources.” There is simply no basis in Ostrom’s work for concluding that she was a “staunch advocate” of anything, except perhaps individual agency and polycentric governance. The Ostrom school starts from a clear positive view on the potential of commons as a governance regime being potentially equally useful in some settings as other systems that could work quite well like state and market (Sarker & Blomquist, 2018, p.12). Sarker & Blomquist (2018) underscore that Ostrom directed our attention to ways in which users self-govern but she did not reject any other way of preserving or protecting common pool resources. At least one Commonizer, Sauvêtre (), realizes that Ostrom is not a friend in his well-titled article “Forget Ostrom.” In his forthrightly neo-Marxist view, anyone who thinks in terms of property, including common property, has bought into a (neo)liberal lie.

Contrary to the arguments of some Commonizers, Elinor Ostrom did not lay the foundation for universal commoning in her 1991 book *Governing the Commons*. To argue that she did lay such a foundation misconstrues her work in two obvious ways. First, it ignores Chapter 5 of *Governing the Commons*, “Analyzing Institutional Failures and Fragilities,” which demonstrates in 35 easy-to-read pages that common or communal-property systems are not always viable or successful. Therefore, they cannot serve as a first-best solution to all common-pool resource problems, regardless of context. *Governing the Commons* even includes Ostrom’s

frequent admonition: “[t]here are no panaceas” (Ostrom 1990, p. 143). For that reason, Ostrom expressly deplored the tendency to glorify the commons, noting that “some analysts have gone overboard and proposed community-based conservation as another cure-all” (Ostrom 2012, p. 133). Berkes (2007, p. 15189) has similarly warned that “community-based conservation as a blueprint solution threatened to become a panacea itself.”

The second mistake Commonizers make in treating Ostrom as a figurehead is that she was not an advocate for common-property systems over private-property and public-property systems. She did not set out to prove, in *Governing the Commons*, that Hardin was wrong to think private property or public property could ever solve CPR problems. Rather, her goal was to remind all of us that private and public property do not exhaust the list of available solutions.

Ostrom was, first and foremost, a diagnostician. She frequently analogized good social science to the practice of medicine, noting that doctors always engage in careful diagnostics before recommending treatments (Poteete, Janssen and Ostrom 2010, p. 233; Ostrom and Cox 2010, p. 457; Basurto, Gelcich and Ostrom 2013, p. 1367). But “commonizers” have been acting more like patent medicine sellers than doctors. When Ostrom traveled throughout the world studying CPR problems in local communities, she would not offer advice, even when asked for it, on what the people there should do to resolve their problems. Rather, she would help them to understand the problem, based on her diagnostic analytical frameworks, so that they could come up with their own answers. This is in strict contrast to most Commonizers, who seem to want to tell everyone that all resources should be owned communally.

III. WHAT COMMONIZERS GET WRONG ABOUT THE HISTORY OF COMMONS

According to the political scientist and radical Commonizer Vangelis Papadimitropoulos:

The commons favor, *in principle*, decentralized self-management over hierarchical management, openness over privacy, cooperation over competition, sustainability over capitalist growth, and equitable distribution of value over profit maximization. The commons are considered to increase flexibility, diffuse knowledge, and reduce waste and transaction costs, thereby reaching higher levels of social innovation, democratic inclusion and environmental sustainability (Papadimitropoulos 2012, p. 22) (emphasis added).

The key words in that quote are “in principle,” which make clear that the assertions are not empirically grounded. At least one of them is, in fact, false. Common ownership does not reduce, but increases, transaction costs. Management decisions requiring the agreement of more individuals, by definition, cannot have lower transaction costs than an individual landowner’s unilateral decision to manage her land in a certain way. All of the other assertions in the quote are purely hypothetical, and many of them are in conflict with what we know about historical commons.

It the “Merry England” histories peddled mainly by Marxist historians, such as Christopher Hill, the village communities of England which practiced common-field agriculture throughout the Middle Ages were autonomous, egalitarian, democratic, happy, healthy, and moral, with plenty of leisure time to enjoy life (see Wall 2014, pp. 64-65; Neeson 1993, pp. 21, 177-181; Hill 1996, p. 28). Hill sounds remarkably similar to today’s Commonizers when he writes:

The commons fostered a way of life away from the market – encouraging thrift and frugality. They offered insurance against destitution, a hidden reserve of wealth, which made regular wage employment unnecessary. They left the commoners with time to spend on things other than work, gave them freedom to reject the drudgery of wage labor, left opportunities for recreation and celebration. And sharing the commons created bond of mutual obligation through exchange or sharing of goods with other commoners (Hill 1996, p. 28).

In reality, by the tenth century at the latest, and by the seventh century in most places, England’s village communities (as well as similar communities in many other places in Europe) were neither autonomous, self-governing, democratic, nor egalitarian. Into the fourteenth century (and later in other places), a majority of English peasants were unfree, owned no land, nor any rights of common. They were tied to the land and owned by manorial lords, abbots, and free villagers. Even free villagers, however, had a hard row to hoe:

Most [peasants] led a precarious existence, working for minimal wages with little employment security. A slump in agriculture might leave them without income or resources, and a long life could simply mean a destitute old age. Even the landholding peasant had a hard existence. His work was demanding; he was burdened by [feudal] services and rents due to his lord; a tenth of his own produce was owed to the parish church; and his diet, clothing, and accommodations were little more than adequate (Coulton 1996, p. 100).

Moreover,

“villages were never ... very harmonious places, and there were always divisive elements in their structure. They were held together not by cooperative idealism, but by the need to survive in a harsh environment. The peasant elite played an important role in keeping them together, but like oligarchies everywhere, they maintained that they were defending the common good, while sometimes acting in their own interests (Dyer 1994, p. 424).

A village community “was always a practical and functional organization, not a cozy association of neighbors. Fault lines ran through the village as a social organism” (Ibid., p. 429). As the great social historian (“in the Marxist tradition”) E.P. Thompson (1991, pp. 102-3) noted, “all parties strove to maximize their own advantages. Each encroached on the usages of the others.” It is no accident that trespass was by far the most common legal violation listed in manorial court rolls. It has even been suggested that “[t]he strength of the village lay not in its

organic harmony, but in its success as a coercive organization in containing all quarrels in its midst” (Dyer 1994, p. 21). Such historical village communities sound nothing like Papadimitropoulos’ portrayal. There probably were some autonomous, self-governing, and (relatively) egalitarian small agricultural communities in other places in Europe in the Early Middle Ages, such as Germany or the Netherlands. But few, if any, remained so into the High Middle Ages.

One more very important historical point that is sometimes missed by serious commons scholars as well as by Commonizers is that commons institutions have always been highly diverse, variable, contextual, changeable, and complex. Even within a single English county in the Middle Ages, for example, the phrase “common-field agriculture” described a highly variable set of complex institutions, which evolved over time in various ways. To write about “the commons” the way Commonizers do, as if it is a sum certain of institutions, which have completely well understood effects and consequences, beggars belief. Careful as she was in describing her case studies in *Governing the Commons*, even Elinor Ostrom was unable to account for the many ways in which long-surviving systems changed, in some ways quite dramatically. For example, the Spanish *huertas* she studied, may (or may not) have started as an informal common-property system among peasants, but by the early modern era an urban oligarchy controlled both municipal and rural irrigation systems throughout Valencia, and did not manage them very differently (Albentosa 2015).

IV. A PLEA FOR DIAGNOSIS BEFORE TREATMENT: THE BLOOMINGTON SCHOOL WAY

In previous sections we have demonstrated the remarkably diverse meanings that have been assigned to the term “commons” and related words such as “commoning.” In this section we investigate ways in which the research tradition pioneered by Vincent and Elinor (Lin) Ostrom might best contribute to our effort to rescue this term for empirical analyses, that is to say, by providing a more specific meaning to the various components that we understand to belong to the concept of commons. We are interested to study how those components manifest themselves in particular empirical settings.

Rather than presuming that “commoning” is a mode of shared collective action that deserves a uniquely desirable role to play in public policy, we would much rather investigate the conditions under which a commons might be a more effective and/or more equitable solution for problems of resource use than alternative solutions offered through market or state-based processes. (see also De Moor, 2012; Sarker & Blomquist, 2018). Commoning scholars (commonizers) often designate a subset of collective action solutions as being particularly desirable on normative grounds, thus making them reluctant to rely on market or state-based policy tools. Commoning is a particular mode of collective action focused precisely on the practice of sharing rights and obligations. We want to distance ourselves from the development of the term “commoning” as a uniquely desirable mode of collective action for all efforts to enhance

environmental sustainability, social justice, and human flourishing in general. Commons are complex, diverse, contextualized, and, well, common, but some commons may also be essential to support certain modes of human flourishing. But this is by no means the same as saying that commoning could (or should) become the primary mode of human interaction in all settings.

Our starting point is to assert that a “commons” can be depicted as an action situation as understood within the IAD (Institutional Analysis and Development) framework that plays a central role in the Bloomington School (Ostrom, 2005). However, making this connection clearly requires a bit of a digression on our part.

Hess and Ostrom (2007, p.3) defined commons as “a resource shared by a group of people that is subject to social dilemmas.” In our opinion, this definition stops short, neglecting the rest of the story. Groups subject to social dilemmas naturally respond by constructing (consciously or unconsciously) regularized patterns of behavior that Ostrom (2005, p.3) defined as institutions: “the prescriptions that humans use to organize all forms of repetitive and structured interactions...” Thus, in our opinion, the core definition of the commons should also include at least some aspects of the institutions communities develop to guide their individual and collective responses to the social dilemmas inherent in that commons. In other words, we argue that a commons must be understood as a configuration of material, social/cultural, and institutional components. Exactly which such configurations should be included under the label of a “commons” remains as yet undetermined.

Independent from one another two of us have argued (McGinnis 2019; Carceller & Theesfeld, 2021) that a commons might be defined as a holistic compound composed of resources, rules, and people. Any real-world instance of a “commons” involves at least three primary components: resources (tangible, intangible, or both), a group of people seeking to use or otherwise enjoy those resources, and the strategies, norms, rules, and shared understandings which specify who is permitted to do what with those resources, when, where, and how (Cole, forthcoming). But that does not go far enough to capture the full diversity exhibited by real-world examples. In particular, it does not provide enough foundation for analysts to dig deeper into the subtle and intricate patterns interweaving these basic components in particular instances. With this manuscript we not only want to summarize the diverse range of potential commons, but to begin building a foundation for concepts and analytical tools that should deepen our understanding of the sources and consequences of that variation.

In her influential efforts to analyze institutions in general and in specific settings, Elinor Ostrom spent a great deal of effort working with collaborators to develop, fine-tune, and implement the IAD framework to study the origins, operation, and consequences of institutions, considered broadly. The core component of the IAD framework is the action situation. In the remainder of this paper we outline a line of argument that explicitly connects these terms: that is, we argue that it is analytically useful to explicitly depict a commons as a type of action situation.

Before going to our argument in detail, we first address this underlying question: How does depicting a commons as an action situation help us in terms of empirical analysis? We postulate the following consequences of making this connection, each of which has important implications for effective modes of empirical analysis. We then discuss some of these implications in more detail.

1. No commons is just a resource, nor just a community of users, nor just a management regime; instead, each commons is all three at once. Similarly, action situations are defined by the material, social, and institutional conditions which constitute the context in which they exist.
2. Each commons is complex, because each of its material, social, and institutional components has their own internal divisions and enduring tensions. As a compound of all three of its components, a commons has some degree of coherence, yet it retains an irreducible level of complexity, as does any action situation.
3. Commons come in many forms, since different configurations of material, social, and institutional factors may warrant the label of commons. Of course, not all such configurations are commons, but the remarkable range of specific forms of commons cannot be denied.
4. A commons is not a static entity, but is instead an ever-changing nexus of dynamic drivers and tensions. Action situations similarly manifest action, not stasis.
5. No action situation exists in isolation; instead, all action situations are located within networks of adjacent action situations (McGinnis 2011), no commons can exist in total isolation, because its material, social, and institutional components have to have been determined by dynamics operating within other action situations linked to that commons.

Depicting commons as an action situation has the advantage of offering a clearly defined list, namely, the “working components” of an action situation (analogous to the “rules of a game” in game models) from which action situations are constructed (see especially Ostrom 2005). As we detail below, each of these working components can be arranged along a dimension that measures the extent to which that factor or that process manifests itself in ways which require individuals to act “in common” vs. doing so separately by individuals within the relevant group. This gives us the opportunity to distinguish the ways in which any specific commons can be understood as being more less common in its nature or realization, with respect to each of its foundational attributes.

Above we discussed the concept of commons not as a static thing but rather as a process through which communities work together to resolve some social dilemmas, which may affect

different subgroups differently but are yet commonly understood to be all connected through the resources shared by members of a given group. In the remainder of this paper, we consider how many different forms such processes of commoning might take in different settings.

For instance, construction, use, management, and maintenance of a commons may involve a wide range of activities, including

- a) specification of criteria for continued membership in the relevant community and in its recognized subgroups,
- b) development and maintenance of technologies for the extraction of resource units from a shared pool of resources, possibly including differential access of different subgroups to the use of these technologies,
- c) setting limits on the time, place, and intensity of extraction and ultimate use to which extracted units may be put,
- d) setting requirements for user contributions to these infrastructural concerns or, if needed, to regular replenishment of the resources in that system,
- e) participation in all management and governance activities, including rule-making, monitoring, sanctioning, dispute resolution, and revision of existing rules, including transfer of any of these rights and responsibilities to other parties

Each of these activities might serve as the focus of an action in its own right, but for our purposes this list should serve to demonstrate a one-to-one connection between a commons and the standard understanding of an IAD action situation, Table 1 illustrates how that might be done.

We are confident that Lin Ostrom would consider the action situation to be a workable representation of a commons of any kind. Thus, we propose preliminary steps towards a more generalized interpretation of the potential usefulness of treating commons as action situations.

In Tables 1 through 4 we illustrate how action situations and other conceptual tools of “Ostromian institutional analysis” can help us understand the diversity of commoning found in different configurations of material, social, and institutional components. We must also emphasize the caveat that this paper reports very preliminary results. These tables are based on our preliminary categorization of a continuum of commons, following closely the idea of the action situation incorporated in the IAD framework. As is the case for any action situations, commons have been constructed by its working components, that each in itself show a continuum of potentials for higher or lower levels of commoning.

Each row in Table 1 refers to one of the seven “working components” that Elinor Ostrom took to provide the internal structure of any action situation. In short, to define an action situation we need to (1) define the boundaries of its reach in terms of resources, people and institutions under consideration and ultimately affected by its outcome, (2) the resources, choices, information, and incentives that collectively define the “position” (or social role) that each participant brings to this deliberation, and (3) the internal “aggregation” rules which determine how individual actions are aggregated into final outcomes. For each row we suggest

4 or 5 different ways in which those assignment tasks could be completed, and arrange those options in a rough sequence running from joint collective action on the left to options on the right in which such determinations are made by individuals acting alone or through more impersonal or transactional exchanges.

Select any one option from each of these seven rows and together they constitute a different configuration of these action situations working components. Clearly, not all of the large number of possible combinations could reasonably be called a commons. For example, the entries in right-hand column, taken together in combination, would form an action situation that would seem best suited to a market setting. Conversely, combine all the entries on the left and you would have, we suggest, something very similar to the idyllic “commoning” advocated by some of the radical commonizers cited earlier in this paper. In effect, this mode of commoning would require all community members to be active participants in all aspects of that particular configuration of action situations components.

But here’s our question: Could some commons consist of mixed combinations in which some aspects of that commons are manifested in low levels of commoning while others are higher? Also, could some commons allow for some of these working components to occur in more personal, bilateral exchanges, or small-group meetings? For example, could a few community members work together as a team or a committee to make some decisions for the group as a whole? Might that still be a commons? We think so, especially since the availability of nested teams assigned specific tasks is stipulated as one of Ostrom’s design principles. How about settings in which infrastructure construction and maintenance is done collectively, by all able-bodied members of the community, but most extractions of resource units are done by individuals or family households rather than by everyone at once? Might that still be a commons?

Ostrom’s original list of design principles was, primarily, directed towards settings with relatively low levels of technology needed for extraction, replenishment, or supportive infrastructures, so the role of experts was relatively low. Actor positions tended to be defined by family size or other social relationships, rather than educational levels per se. Individuals faced strong social pressures through familial ties, which made social sanctions (especially if graduated in form and allowing for later forgiveness for minor transgressions) an effective deterrent to rampant rule violations. Control over outcomes was rarely fully egalitarian, but most of her cases lacked any dominant actor controlling all access to resources. The resource system was vulnerable to overuse given existing community size and technology, especially in conditions of population growth, in-migration, or intrusion of external corporations. Information was pretty widely shared, and yet some aspects of personal or family use of extracted resources was likely to remain personal.

We don’t think all the cases in Ostrom’s CPR data set could be contained within any single cell in our Table 1, but our impression is that her design principles allow for the possibility of many different combinations of levels of commoning at various intermediate levels. And we suggest that intermediate mixtures might serve as the basis for the comparative case analyses

needed to identify analogous design principles for these mixed cases. That is, we'd expect different design principles to be needed to enhance the sustainability of different types of commons likely to be found in different settings.

In Table 2 we move from inside an action situation to consider the broader material, social, and institutional settings from which the details of a particular action situation have been selected. Here a different mode of analysis might be considered. Over time, communities adjust the institutions under which they operate to better fit the reality of their physical conditions in ways that seem fair based on community values. This suggests that the extent of commoning found in the different entries in the bottom row might be seen as dependent variables, each more or less effective (or desirable?) for application to each of the 25 possible combinations of pairs of entries in the resource and community rows as independent variables. Each of the very different kinds of "commons" suggested in the entries in the bottom row might end up being relevant (or feasible?) for only a few of the possible combinations of resource/community settings.

The three core components in Table 2 are (1) resources, (2) a group or community of people, and (3) the rules which both legitimate and limit the ways in which those people may make use of those resources. Each of these three components is itself composed of smaller parts. Any one resource system may encompass multiple types of resource units which may be used in different ways by different subgroups within the broader community which shares "access" to that system, and the rules that apply to different potential uses by different user groups include stipulations relating to a wide range of activities.

Tables 3 and 4 suggest other potential lines of analysis, although we're not at all sure what kind of empirical analysis might be needed to pursue those leads. Rows in Table 3, for example, define an eclectic set of "generic" governance tasks that could end up involving more or less "commoning" in their implementation. Perhaps combinations of entries from these roles might be connected to the basic logic of how commons modes of governance might best fit the five modes of varying commoning in governance listed in Table 2.

Property rights, of various kinds, play essential roles in all modes of governance, and Table 4 suggests preliminary thoughts concerning the levels of commoning that might be expressed by rights holders of different bundles or rights, as suggested in the work of Schlager and Ostrom. As noted above, access and resource extraction could be limited to groups acting together, or as part of some ritual, or more privately, with varying levels of observability by others. Actual use might tend to be more private, but that's not necessarily the cases. Again, alienation may or may not require approval from multiple actors, and rules may be set by the community as a whole or by specialized officials, or even by external authorities with little or no ties to the local community itself. It remains unclear to us which of these possible combinations should be treated as if they were forms of common property.

We suggest that this exercise helped sharpen our collective understanding of how much “commoning” is needed to sustain different configurations of the material, social, and institutional details of the diverse forms of commons available for our use.

V. SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

We conclude with an acknowledgment that simply making the claim that a commons can be depicted as an action situation does not, by itself, give us much in the way of analytical power to address their complexities. As Ostrom made clear in many of her writings, the IAD is simply a framework, and institutional analysts applying this framework must be able to draw upon other analytical tools from theories or models relevant to the policy setting at hand. Still, a simple realization of this connection may help commons scholars realize that they will need to consider models of all the kinds of processes that go into energizing any action situation.

As argued above, some aspects of the operation of the specific processes within the action situation(s) of a resource commons may serve to reinforce the extent to which those experiences are shared in common or remain unique to each resource user as an individual, or as a member of a particular subgroup of the broader community. We hypothesize that resource commons that more typically reinforce the sense of “commoning” experienced by users, rather than undermining any remaining sense of shared rights and responsibilities, will be more likely to remain sustainable over the long haul.

We aim to continue our work to develop in more detail analytical processes, based on a core theoretical consideration of the Ostrom school, that intends to rescue the analytical strength of the term commons. This should help insure that our own normative priors do not influence our practical diagnostic analysis.

“Not everything is a commons, but tons of different commons are out there”.

BIBLIOGRAPHY (not attached)

Table 1. Levels of Commoning Within an Action Situation’s Working Components

<i>AS Working Components</i>	<i>“High”</i>		<i>“Intermediate/Mixed”</i>		<i>“Low”</i>
<i>Membership (Boundary)</i>	Equal access to resources & tech for all	Equal access to resource system, but not to tech	Wide, specified variation in access across subgroups	Open only to members in good standing	Full membership rights transferrable to anyone
<i>Position Eligibilities</i>	Any member may hold any position	Expertise required for some positions, but training open to all subgroups	Sensitive positions restricted to members of special subgroups		Positions can be bought, sold or inherited
<i>Choice Availability</i>	Group must act as a whole, with consensus	Menu of choices determined by rights & responsibilities for official position-holders	Range of legitimate actions limited by subgroup, even for officials		Range of choice is de facto determined by wealth
<i>Control (Aggregation)</i>	Egalitarian - all members have equal influence	Influence varies by subgroup resources	Experts dominate details of policy outcomes	Wealthy & well-connected subgroups dominate outcomes	Outcomes determined by owner or dominant actor
<i>Scope of Feasible Outcomes</i>	System behavior holistic and very resilient	System operation can trigger threshold effects	System performance effectively decomposable into modules		External effects of resource uses low, compensated, or ignored
<i>Primary Costs/Benefits</i>	Wide concern with well-being of others & system	Wide concern for (some) others, but not for system status	Concern for others focused narrowly on similar groups		Most actors focus solely on personal self-interest
<i>Information Transparency</i>	Relevant information is widely shared	Rules require sharing of some information	Position holders protect and use information strategically	Insider information often used for personal profit	Most useful information is costly, secret, and protected

Table 2. Levels of Commoning in the Resources, Communities, and Institutions of a Commons

<i>Dimensions</i>	“High”	“Intermediate/Mixed”			“Low”
<i>Divisibility of Resource System into Resource Units</i>	Holistic system impossible to divide	Extraction of discrete units complex, technical	Extraction has significant spill-over throughout ecosystem	Extraction and exchange easy, and has minimal spill-over effect	Easy to extract and exchange resource units and market products
<i>Community Structure and Relationship to Resources</i>	Homogeneous, across multiple dimensions	Subgroups vary in traditional dependence on this resource for livelihood and/or identity	Subgroups deeply divided by class and social status	Access to resource and tech used to extract it varies by education or wealth	Many are unmoored from traditional roles and behave as rational actors
<i>Institutional Mode of Commons Governance</i>	All-inclusive commoning experience	Certain realms (religious, political, etc.) emphasize commoning	Commons as refuge or safety net for disadvantaged groups	Professional or Occupational co-ops (farmer, producer, consumer, etc.)	Privately owned and operated commons (philanthropy, patrons, etc.)

Table 3. Levels of Commoning in Generic Governance Tasks

<i>Tasks</i>	<i>“High”</i>	<i>“Intermediate/Mixed”</i>		<i>“Low”</i>	
Making Important Collective Decisions	Full direct participation of all members required for any major changes	Changes made by selected representatives require later approval	Changes made by representatives don’t require later approval	Rules set by outside entities, if legitimacy accepted by community	Rules set by outside entities not selected by community members
Defining Community & Subgroup Membership	Common understanding of shared standards for group identities	Rules for subgroup membership can be changed by consensus	Membership rules can be changed by legitimate procedures	Individuals can move to new subgroups, but may not be fully accepted	Individuals can freely self-define their own identity
Assignment to Positions	Appointments made by community consensus	Officials are elected or selected by procedures	A few top officials select lower position holders	Officials imposed by outside entities	Individuals may buy or seize official positions
Implementation & Management	Done communally to the fullest extent possible	Particular activities assigned to local teams	Co-management with agents of outside entity	Management hired out to third parties by contract	Managed by public officials w/o local input
Monitoring (of Others and of Outcomes)	All members closely monitor everyone	Monitoring activities assigned to local teams	Co-monitoring with agents of outside entity	Outside monitors are accountable to community	Public agents monitor w/o local input or oversight
Dispute Resolution	General meeting to resolve major disputes	Judgements from Respected Leader or Council	Mediators Emphasize Community Values in Resolution	Formal trials or other professional legal procedures	Arbiters or Private Parties Resolve Disputes without transparency

Table 4. Levels of Commoning in Expression of Different Bundles of Rights

<i>Bundles of Rights</i>	<i>“High”</i>	<i>“Intermediate/Mixed”</i>		<i>“Low”</i>	
Access to Resource System	Access must be communal, not by individuals	Most access done jointly, but not all of it	Individuals can access, but actions closely monitored	Individual access often hidden from other observers	Individual access seen as a personal right
Extraction of Resource Units	Extraction must be done communally, not alone	Some extraction done jointly, but not all of it	Private extraction allowed under careful supervision	Much extraction is not subject to observation	Extraction seen as a matter of privacy
Use of Resource Units	Typically used only during communal rituals	Private use is restricted by taboos or norms	Private use remains subject to observation	Most private use is not directly observed	Private use should not be observed by others
Transfer of Rights & Alienation	Requires communal decision and approval	Transfers can occur only to certain groups	Individual transfers subject to public approval	Only limited rights can be transferred	Individual owners can fully alienate rights
Rule-Making (Access, Extraction, Use, Provision, Transfer)	Full direct participation of all members required for any major changes	Changes made by selected representatives require later approval	Changes made by representatives don’t require later approval	Rules set by outside entities, if legitimacy accepted by community	Rules set by outside entities not selected by community members