

# Urban Commons: A Reader

**Tine De Moor**

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"In a world where markets and the state have started to reach the limit of their capacities to govern resources in a sustainable way, society is turning increasingly to "joint resource management"; more and more, collective initiatives of "stakeholders", trying to reach their economic and social goals via collective action, are popping up in the developed world. Examples of such initiatives are energy consumers' collectives, car-sharing, and the development of open-source software. Although they may seem rather marginal as yet, these forms of institutionalized collective action are nevertheless gaining momentum. Many of the initiatives use the concept of "the commons" to emphasize that they are indeed sharing a resource. The "Creative Commons initiative" is nowadays the most well-known example of this trend. Yet, few participants actually know the real historical back-ground of the commons."<sup>2</sup>

## An Historical Framework for the Commons

The amount of research developed on the topic of commons and on the motives for cooperation or defection is wide, and engages scholars from different fields, ranging from experimental sociology, psychology and economics. Tine De Moor brings her enriching contribution to the field by applying an historical perspective to the study of the commons, allowing us to go beyond the negative understanding produced by Garret Hardin's "Tragedy of the Commons"<sup>3</sup> and to discover the existence of numerous examples of successful and long lasting commoning experiences in European history. De Moor explains that:

"During the late Middle Ages, European villagers and townsmen alike formed an unprecedented number of alliances with each other. These were not (primarily) based on kinship or blood ties, but on other common characteristics such as occupation. In the urban context, organizations such as guilds of merchants and craftsmen can serve as examples. For the countryside, this was the period when communal land tenure arrangements, or simply 'commons', were increasingly formed and institutionalized"<sup>4</sup>.

While the emergence of different forms of collective action and their institutionalization is not without historical precedents (already in the Roman era merchants and craftsmen formed some guild-like

institutions), the intensity of the new units of collective action makes this movement striking enough to be defined by De Moor a "silent revolution". As she explains, "It was a revolution in as much as this was a movement that started from below, among stakeholders with a common cause, and because it may have had important long-term consequences for the course of European history; it was 'silent' because this movement was primarily based on at first tacit and later explicit written agreements among powerful rulers and demanding subjects, villagers, and townsmen. These agreements were largely formed on a peaceful basis. The silent development of the forms of collective action described here has meant that for a long time the revolution remained unnoticed"<sup>5</sup>.

De Moor claims that, even if silent, the commons revolution and the development of collective action institutions both in the urban and in the rural environment played a fundamental role in shaping the trajectory of the European economy from 1100 to 1800. In the middle of the 18th century things begin to change, and the functioning of common-property arrangements began to be questioned, as it was considered unsuitable to increase land productivity in order to feed a growing population. A privatization and enclosure process was activated, which brought to the substitution of common-based management of resources with private property arrangements. As Professor De Moor explains the new arrangements, rather than benefiting the entire population, worked to the advantage of few wealthy investors, while leaving most of the commoners empty-handed. Furthermore:

"They lost not only a means of income, but also part of their community and the invisible bonds that working together from generation to generation created among community members. Commons had, as will be explained, a primarily economic function, namely, that of sharing the risk of relying on a resource for which the production – and thus the income – was unreliable. Besides this, however, the commoners also found in the common a social welfare system – albeit not for everyone – and a source of social capital"<sup>6</sup>.

## Defining the commons – A three-dimensional concept

Already before Hardin developed his "tragedy of the commons" framework, which strongly contributed to the diffusion of negative view of the commons, commons as governance regimes did not always have positive connotation. Already in the 19th century, commons came to be described more and more often

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> T. De Moor (2015) "The dilemma of the commoners: Understanding the Use of Common Pool Resources in Long-Term Perspective", Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press

<sup>2</sup> T. De Moor (2012) "What Do We Have in Common? A Comparative Framework for Old and New Literature on the Commons" *The International Review of Social History*, Volume 57, Issue 2, pp. 269–290

<sup>3</sup> G. Hardin (1968) "The Tragedy of the Commons" *Science*, 162 (3859): 1243–1248.

<sup>4</sup> T. De Moor (2008), "The silent revolution: a new perspective on the emergence of commons, guilds, and other forms of corporate collective action in Western Europe", *The International Review of Social History*, Volume 53 (Supplement 16, Special Issue on 'The Return of the Guilds'), pp. 175–208

as an “archaic” and “inadequate” system for the management of resources, inevitably leading to over-exploitation.

It was thanks to the essential contribution of Elinor Ostrom<sup>1</sup>, Nobel Prize for Economics in 2009, that the concept gained a more positive undertone and was brought to the attention of a wider audience, and that the concept itself became subject of serious academic work by hundreds of scholars worldwide. Elinor Ostrom contributed to the return to the original features of the concept, broadening it to other types of resources.

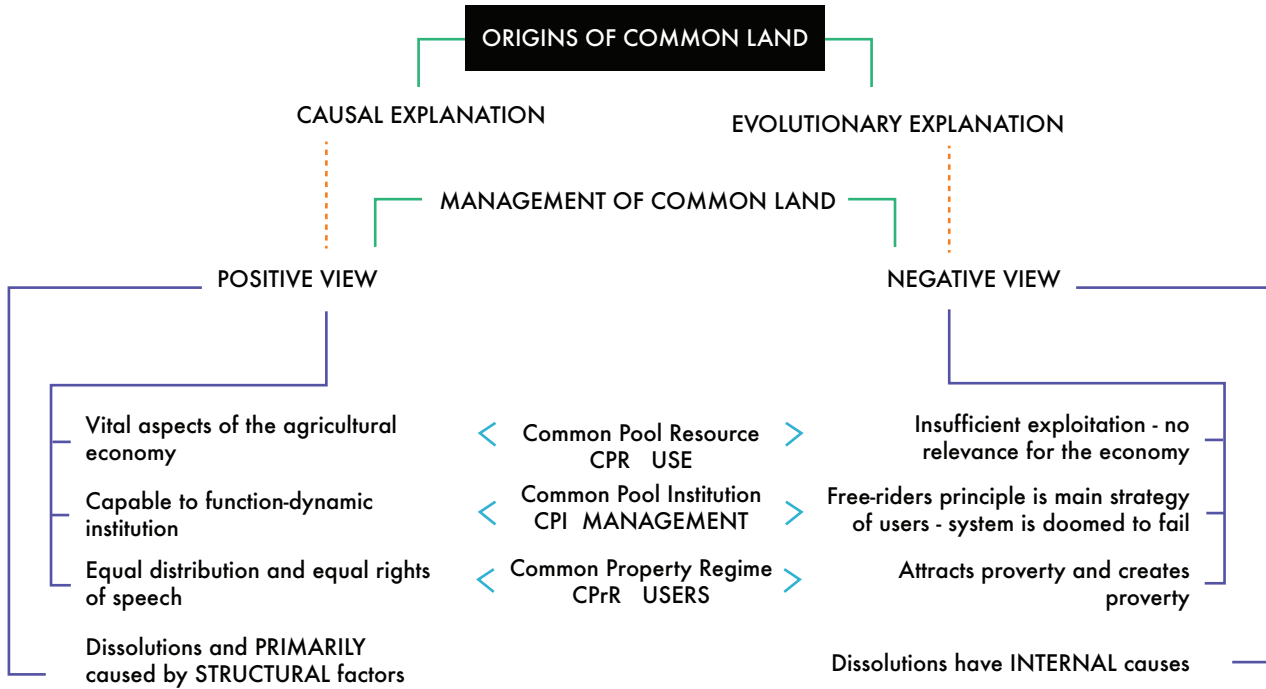


Figure 1. Overview of different opinions on commons, structured horizontally by the different dimensions (CPR, CPI and CPrR), and vertically by the associated positive or negative connotation in the literature. From T. De Moor, 2012 (see footnote n.1).

According to Professor De Moor, dealing with the commons means dealing with a complex reality, which can refer to three different dimensions: the natural resource itself, the property regime linked to it, and even the group of people that is entitled to use the resource. As explained by De Moor:

“The first-mentioned meaning (natural resources) corresponds with what generally falls under the heading of “common-pool resources” (CPR). Elinor Ostrom describes “common-pool resources” as “natural or man-made resources sufficiently large that it is costly to exclude users from obtaining substractable-resource units”;<sup>2</sup> On the basis of this definition and further literature, one assumes that it takes two criteria to define a CPR. Firstly, there are the high costs of the physical exclusion of the natural resource (or excludability) [...] and secondly, there is the issue of the presence of “substractable resource units” (or substractability).<sup>3</sup>

“The property regime of a common is a second dimension. The term common-property regime (CPrR) refers to a property regime “some- where” in between private property and public property.”<sup>4</sup>

“The interaction between the first dimension – commons as natural resources – and the second dimension – the users of the commons – required a certain form of organization. The institution set up to make that organization possible – the common-pool institution (CPI) – can be considered as the third dimension of common land.”<sup>5</sup>

Basically, summarizing the above three dimensions, one can say that when using the term commons we

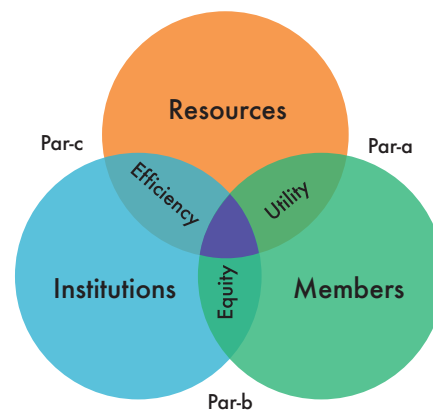
1 E. Ostrom (1990) “Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action” Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press  
 2 E. Ostrom (1990) “Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action” Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, p. 30.  
 3 T. De Moor (2012) “What Do We Have in Common? A Comparative Framework for Old and New Literature on the Commons” Research Institute for History and Culture, Utrecht University  
 4 Ibid.  
 5 Ibid.

should not simply consider the resource, but a complete governance regime whereby a group of people create and/or hold a resource or a service together as a group but can only use the resources as individuals under jointly set conditions, which form the institution related to the common.

According to De Moor, commons can be a resilient, long-living governance regime, even under great societal stress, as long as the parameters at the intersection between the dimensions are taken into account. In the underneath so-called 3D-framework for the resilience study of commons De Moor brings together the three dimensions of which self-governing institutions such as commons consist: **a. the RESOURCES**, **b. the INSTITUTION** (rules, social norms) and **c. the collectivity of MEMBERS** that has rights on the resources and collectively decides on changes of the rules. Behind the framework is the idea is that **resilience of an ICA as an organisation is the result of a continuous search for a balance between these three dimensions, whilst dealing with exogenous changes in demography, politics, and the economy.** Members must be kept content with what they receive in return for their membership, but if this leads to overharvesting of the available resources, this may create a “tragedy”. Rules, therefore, must constantly be adapted to changing circumstances, while resource availability may fluctuate due to environmental and economic factors. The search for resilience by balancing resources, users and institution, will be different from case to case, depending on the local circumstances, and over time. Given the slow changes that characterize institutions in general, but also the delay in visible impacts of long-standing negative or positive natural resource use and management may have, a “longitudinal approach” is essential to understand how such institutions function. She captures the mechanisms that are key to in the search for resilience within any type of self-organising institutions in a number of parameters, that lay at the intersections between the 3 mentioned dimensions: **utility (Par-a)** as an expression of the individual usefulness of the members’ participation in the collectivity; **equity (Par-b)**, as an expression of the involvement of members in decision-making processes; **efficiency (Par-c)** as a way to evaluate the efficiency of the rules for resource management and use.

For the members of a self-organizing institution like a common or a cooperative it is vital to keep all individuals willing to act in a reciprocal way. This in turn will depend on the degree to which they experience their involvement in the collective as “useful” and “equitable”, which are two factors highly influenced by exogenous changes. For example: when the supply of resources is shrinking due to e.g. climate conditions or when membership is growing, a change in the distribution of the collective good might be necessary to avoid overharvesting of the resources. A potentially reduced share – and thus diminished **utility (Para-a)** – of the collective good for each individual member, may lead to (part of the) members starting to freeride (i.e., contribute less or extract more than one’s share), or even petitioning for dissolution of the collective. Similarly, membership

growth may also affect group cohesion and internal power balances as larger groups may make it harder to involve all members in the decision making process. An increasing group of members may have a positive influence on the total amount of capital available within a common, but may have a negative effect on the social control as large groups make it harder to recognize members of the group. In social science literature, it has been described that cooperative behavior is promoted if the other people can observe one’s personal choice behavior, and that this ‘social-control’ mechanism may be responsible for the fact that people are more willing to work hard under conditions of high visibility than in more anonymous settings. A lack of balance between the group of active users of commons (those harvesting resources, or performing labour or administrative tasks on the commons...) and passive users (those who merely became members because they had the right to do so) may lead to a change in governance and eventually also the dissolution of the common. For example, changes in the level of active membership (members who actively use the resources or fulfil tasks for the common) versus passive membership (members who registered as members but do not participate) may be used as an indicator for the utility-parameter, helping us to understand why certain governance decisions in the institutional design may have been made [14]. On the other hand, inclusion of all stakeholders in the decision making process may make the need to create costly and complex sanctioning mechanism superfluous.



Intersections between 3 dimensions provide 3 parameters (par-a-b-c)

Resilience: balance between 3 dimensions

Such lesser involvement in decision making processes might be perceived as a decrease in **equity (Para-b)**, which in turn may lead to less responsible behaviour and mutual control of individual behaviour, and freeriding. In these cases, an institutional response – i.e. a change of the rules -- would be required to avoid overharvesting, with a decrease in **efficiency (Para-c)** of the resource management. These examples of ways in which the interplay between resources, members and institution

might lead to problems within an ICA, demonstrate that achieving resilience is the result of a difficult and continuous balancing act (25). The study of resilience in this context thus demands that we do look at the evolution of all three dimensions AND at their constant interaction.

### Contemporary Commons – A Paradigm Shift

Today we are observing a resurgence of the commons, therefore it becomes particularly important to realize that the notion of commons has evolved through time, and in its contemporary form has come to hold a much broader meaning. As De Moor explains:

“Commons (or “goods used and managed in common”) are found in past as well as in the present. The original “historical” use of the notion “commons” was, however, limited to the “territorial” type: it meant land used in common to produce hay, wood, or peat, to provide pasture for the cattle of the local population, and to supply other natural resources for construction and housekeeping. [...] Outside the historical context, the term “commons” is being increasingly used, too, not just for the tangible physical forms of institutions at least similar the historical commons, but also for less tangible (or even virtual) forms of goods being shared among large groups of people. The term “commons” has also been “stretched” substantially, by applying it to resources which remain open-access goods, such as the oceans or clean air, despite a growing tendency to restrict access to them by establishing private property rights (e.g. the tradable “emission rights” which are part of the Kyoto Protocol).”<sup>1</sup>

A partial explanation of today’s commons development is to be found in the historical changing context, which over the past few years has seen more and more examples of citizens uniting in collectivities to provide goods that until now were considered public. As Professor De Moor explains:

“In many cases privatization has not yielded the preferred and promised results: the market did not always bring about high-quality, affordable, and diversified offerings, as competition functions only when there is sufficient demand”.

Furthermore: “It has become apparent that numerous social welfare provisions are becoming less accessible, either because they are increasingly becoming unaffordable in the often privatized form or because the government ‘retreats’ and no longer considers these services its responsibility. In many cases this ‘decline of the welfare state’ has resulted in a transfer of trust and responsibilities to a private partner, perhaps through a public-private partnership (PPP), but often at a high cost. Privatization of public goods and services limits accessibility for those who are not capable or willing to pay for such goods and services. In response, people are increasingly banding together to provide services that the government has left to the whims of the market economy, as the latter cannot always live up to the expectations to provide goods and services for the

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

promised competitive prices, nor can it do so wherever these goods and services are needed, particularly in less- populated areas where demand is lower than elsewhere.”<sup>2</sup>

What we are observing here is a “paradigm shift”, that is bringing the commons to the center of the political and economic debate on how to manage scarce resources while also answering to the needs expressed by and ever-growing population. It is particularly important to note that this new wave of commoning is taking place in a completely new context, where communities are not isolated and almost self-sufficient groups, but instead act in a highly connected global world. This necessarily implies a series of characteristics that distinguish contemporary commons from their traditional counterparts.

Professor De Moor explains that:

“Contemporary consumer and producer collectives are aimed at overcoming problems similar to the institutions for collective action in the medieval and early modern period, but there cases this ‘decline of the welfare state’ has resulted in a transfer of trust and responsibilities to a private partner, perhaps through a public-private partnership (PPP), but often at a high cost. Privatization of public goods and services limits accessibility for those who are not capable or willing to pay for such goods and services. In response, people are increasingly banding together to provide services that the government has left to the whims of the market economy, as the latter cannot always live up to the expectations to provide goods and services for the promised competitive prices, nor can it do so wherever these goods and services are needed, particularly in less- populated areas where demand is lower than elsewhere.”

“An important difference between the two is that institutions for collective action in the past offered solutions to both economic and social – and to some extent, such as with the commons, even ecological – problems, whereas the goals of the con- temporary citizens’ cooperatives are usually focused on solving a single issue, such as producing renewable energy or providing qualitative care.”

“In today society services are subdivided in separate organizations; this has certain advantages, but also disadvantages for collectives. Nowadays, if people misbehave in one domain, it does not necessarily affect other parts of their life directly. As previously described, reciprocity ensures that people are more willing to yield to the collective’s norms, and when a system encompasses multiple parts of a person’s life, this effect becomes cumulative. In the past, institutions for collective action were able to combine social and economic goals, and have a complementary system of monitoring and sanctioning. Present-day civil cooperatives cannot implement a similar arrangement.”

<sup>2</sup> Another difference links up to this: the historical  
 2 T. De Moor (2015) “The dilemma of the commoners: Understanding the Use of Common Pool Resources in Long-Term Perspective”, Cambridge University Press.

examples considered future generations in their own workings. Commoners aimed for a sustainable use of their common resources by restricting them to the member-households' real needs."

"A further important difference between past and present is the mutual interaction of contemporary collectives with market and state. This interaction with the market occurs in two forms, first by collective consumption [...] and secondly through collective production."<sup>3</sup>

Observing such a complex context, in which different actors are at play but too often fail to work together, it becomes evident that we need to find new models for future co-operation. The government plays a fundamental role in stimulating and managing this transformation, and, as explained by De Moor, it will necessarily have to face two major problems which characterize the current situation: "First of all, how to organize the provision of services that were previously considered public in a way that access to them remain feasible for all layers of society, not just those who can afford to "buy" these goods in the market; and secondly, how to ensure that this is done in a resilient, durable way, so that what is created today can also be enjoyed by future generations"<sup>4</sup>.

To develop the collaborative ecosystem needed to deal with these and with many other pressing issues, the government needs to adopt a new paradigm and to contribute to the development of institutional diversity. This can be done "by breaking the predominance of state and market in fulfilling public services, by allowing more organizational forms and stimulating institutions, thereby allowing society to become more adaptable"<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> T. De Moor (2014) "Co-operating for the future: inspiration from the European past to develop public-collective partnerships and inter-generational co-operatives", in "Protecting future generations through commons", Trends in social cohesion series, 26, eds. Saki Baily, Gilda Farrell, and Ugo Mattei, 81-104. Strasbourg Cedex: Council of Europe Publishing.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.