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Studying the commons, governing common-pool resource outcomes: Some concluding thoughts



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ABSTRACT

The study of common-pool resources has benefited immensely from the contributions of Elinor Ostrom. Continuing advances in the field will require that scholars of commons use the insights in her work. But they must also (1) make conceptual and theoretical advances in terms of differentiating the social and ecological outcomes related to commons governance, (2) deploy more sophisticated analytical methods to make sense of different outcomes and patterns of relationships among outcomes, and (3) create better, globally representative, hierarchically organized datasets on the commons. Efforts to build better theories and develop a more rigorous understanding of outcomes are also necessary to keep in view the needs of poor, marginal populations that depend on the commons globally.

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1. Introduction

Over the past half century the study and analysis of common-pool resources and their institutionalized governance has come a long way. Contemporary writings on the commons find inspiration in a deep-rooted tradition of work on the subject as also in more analytical models of collective action (Johnson, 2004; Laerhoven and Ostrom, 2007). Detailed historical studies of empirical examples of the commons and their governance are perhaps best exemplified by the work on the English Common Field System (Brown, 2006; Dahlman, 1980; McCloskey, 1972). But there are equally long-enduring commons in other parts of the world that demonstrate the possibility of sustainable communal management of natural renewable resources (Jodha, 1986).

Analytical descriptions of the enduring social puzzle that the commons exemplify have found substantial attention even when they were misspecified in some essential ways (Hardin, 1968). Political–economic arguments about the conditions under which failing commons can function better have

become classics (Berkes, 1989; Gordon, 1954; Wade, 1989). Elinor Ostrom's "Governing the Commons" (1990) is the focal point of much work on the theme of communally managed natural resources. It is also the foremost example of such writings and is responsible in no small measure for her receiving the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2009.

One reason the study of the commons has found lasting attention among social scientists, ecologists, and researchers interested in social–ecological systems alike is the points of tangency between the sustainable governance of the commons and long-standing social dilemmas. The mobilization and persistence of collective action (Olson, 1961; Tarrow, 1994; Tilly, 1978), the institutionalization of self-restraint to promote the public good (Fischbacher et al., 2001), and the efficient and equitable marshaling of scarce resources (Deutsch, 1975) are concerns that have motivated a wide range of social analyses since the very beginnings of the social sciences. Another reason that the study of commons finds persistent interest is the tractability of the subject to many different ways of understanding and explaining outcomes: from the qualitative to the statistical for those who are

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Table 1 – Building on Ostrom’s contributions to the analysis of collective action on the commons.

	Origins of collective action	Maintenance of collective action
Further development of ideas in Ostrom’s research	Araral Lejano and de Castro	Andersson et al. Araral Gruby and Basurto
Directing attention to new phenomena and concepts	Howlett and Giest Lejano and de Castro	Howlett and Giest Gruby and Basurto Mansbridge Lee et al.

inductively inclined, as also from the evolutionary to the utility-maximizing modeling approaches for those who are deductively inclined. The easy application of these approaches and their different combinations make the study of commons appealing to the disciplines and sub-disciplines where the epistemic foundations of these approaches are prevalent.

The studies represented in this volume of research papers and essays are reflective of a diversity of approaches to understanding the commons. Whether using case oriented, statistical, game-theoretic, evolutionary, or modeling-based analyses, these studies extend in various ways the paths in Ostrom’s many papers and book. Their richness and the range of issues they address are useful for a range of conclusions related to the commons.

One useful way to think about the contributions collected in this special issue is through the familiar distinction between origins vs. the maintenance and persistence of collective action to manage resources sustainably. Within this basic distinction, these contributions can be further examined in terms of the empirical focus of their work – whether they direct attention toward phenomena and factors upon which Ostrom’s work had dwelt to a substantial degree, or whether they focus on ideas and issues that are substantive additions to the strands in Ostrom’s writings. A focus on these two dimensions permits a two-way classification elaborated in the table below (Table 1). The contributions to this special issue are located in the cells of this table, several appearing more than once based on the extent to which they are relevant to the distinctions represented by each cell.

My placement of these contributions in the specific cells of the table does not capture all that they do. They are evidently also delving in other areas and developing other themes. The particular way in which I frame their content should be viewed more as an analytical device to bring out some of the key challenges that continuing scholarship on the commons needs to address as the field matures and as its analyses become more sophisticated.

2. Origins of collective action on the commons

It would be no exaggeration to advance the claim that the central concern motivating much of the conceptual and theoretical architecture that Ostrom developed was her interest in identifying the conditions that prompt self-interested

individuals to work toward common ends. Drawing on rational choice, game theoretic, economic, psychological, and evolutionary arguments, Ostrom identified trust, reciprocity, and communication as three key building blocks of collective action (Ostrom, 1998): The eight design principles of *Governing the Commons* (1990) and the SES framework that she developed in her more recent contribution in *Science* (2011) are essentially elaborations of the factors whose presence is associated with greater trust, development of reciprocity, and face-to-face communication. Without trust and reciprocity, sustained collective action is not possible – whether on the commons or in other settings. Communication, even when it occurs only in the form of cheap talk, increases the likelihood of collective action. One might even say that communication through gestures, language, and writing is a basic feature of being human and existing socially (Newell and Simon, 1972).

Araral’s paper (2014) attempts to reassess the contributions of Ostrom to the study of common as also those of a large number of other commons researchers. Based on a review of the different aspects of these writings, he directs attention to three different “generations” in the research on commons. According to him, the first focused on market/privatization and state/regulation as the solution to the problem of overexploitation of collectively owned resources; the second sought to identify the conditions under which collectively owned resources are successfully managed, and the third is currently in the process of emerging, with a set of research questions he identifies as being of fundamental importance. These research questions cover a range of issues: can Ostrom’s arguments be extended to larger-scale commons (Keohane and Ostrom, 1994)? To what extent are the design principles generalizable beyond her cases (Agrawal, 2001; Cox et al., 2010)? Are well-managed commons not an instance of privatization of renewable resources (McKean, 2000)? Can privatization and incorporation of private incentives to act environmentally responsibly be an effective solution to the problem of overused commons (Anderson and Leal, 1991; Cashore, 2002)? These and other important questions have been a staple of work on the commons and on renewable resource governance, but addressing them better will require methodological innovation, better data, and indeed, greater theoretical sophistication – themes to which this conclusion will return.

Lejano and de Castro (2014) may be viewed as confirming some of Ostrom’s insights at a general level in their focus on

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