

## From Tragedy of the Commons to Victory of the Commons: The Role of Education

***"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government."***<sup>1</sup>

These words are, arguably, the most revolutionary political statement ever written. It is important, however, to note that they express an opinion about the nature of humankind, rather than a fact. It remained to be demonstrated by future generations whether they were capable of surviving the transition from the theoretical world of some 18th century philosophers to the operating program of a great nation. Moreover, there can never be a final proof: only the results of an endless succession of tests. From time to time, failure seemed to be the most probable outcome. That possibility is with us today.

The question is whether democracy in America will be sustained by the generation now alive and in charge of the nation's destiny -- or will the sacrifices and accomplishments of those who have preceded us be set aside? Will the central political nucleus of the United States survive the coincidence of stresses present in American society since the very beginning, and the oncoming stresses owing to seismic technological and demographic trends? Or will American democracy take its place in history as one in a succession of failed attempts dating back to ancient Athens?

The outcome depends on whether what we have held in common as a nation is strong enough to sustain us into the future. That kind of outcome is certainly possible, but is it predestined? Can something as precious as democracy be held in common by a community, or in the end will it always be exploited to the point of collapse? That is a question with a long history.

### **The Commons – a classical tragedy**

The **medieval commons** was a collective form of land ownership which set aside property for joint use -- as in, pasture land open for use by all residents who would use it for grazing sheep. This mode of ownership offered advantages for the community as a whole but was vulnerable to overuse. It became a subject of interest for scholars. In 1968, the biologist Garrett Hardin, wrote a highly influential essay -- ***The Tragedy of***

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<sup>1</sup> Jefferson, Thomas, *Declaration of Independence*, Continental Congress, Philadelphia, Signed, July 4, 1776.

**the Commons**<sup>2</sup> -- declaring that the decline of such arrangements was inevitable, because of permanent traits of human behavior. Sooner or later, he wrote, collective management of common resources would give way to control to the private sector and/or government. This was not just an assessment of a specific form of land-management, but a pronouncement about the competence of ordinary people to self-govern. As in all classical tragedies, the character flaws of the central figure in the story ultimately bring about defeat.

### **The Commons – a soluble problem**

Starting with work published in 1990, the political economist and eventual Nobel Laureate Elinor Ostrom, demonstrated through field work and theory that institutions for collective management can evolve and flourish. In other words, that while managing a Commons is difficult, tragedy is not inevitable, and can be avoided through systems design reflecting lessons learned from a careful analysis of hard data.

Although Ostrom's work centered on traditional small-scale agrarian functions of the "Commons", she recognized that her findings could be scaled up for application on even a global scale, to manage public resources sustainably. In the following essay, the proposal is made that Ostrom's work might be extended beyond physical resources to the question of whether such a thing as a **Political Commons** exists, what its functions are in society, and, if these are valuable, then what the implications are for maintaining the nation's most important legacy – democracy itself.

### **The Commons: a systems analytic approach**

Ostrom combined both extensive fact gathering and observation with theory, and arrived at a conclusion different from Hardin. It was her finding that not all examples of commons-type management actually failed, and that there were observable characteristics of both success and failure that could be isolated by systems thinking. She also concluded that successful management might actually require interaction between and with two other primary -- and, therefore, inevitable-- stakeholders: government and the private sector. Ostrom also concluded that this could be a stable relationship, rather than one fated to deteriorate -- and she developed a theoretical model for how such a relationship could be institutionalized. This was her concept of "**polycentric management of the commons**," which married the concept of self-organization to the practicalities of self-governance. In light of the overwhelming evidence of successful common pool management resource systems, Hardin titled a 1994-article "The Tragedy of the Unmanaged Commons." This can be regarded as a major validation of Ostrom's work.

### **Can Ostrom's thinking about the dynamics of a commons be applied more broadly?**

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<sup>2</sup> Hardin, Garrett, "The Tragedy of the Commons," *Science*, 1968.

Ostrom derived various principles of CPR-management from its practice and developed that into a theoretical framework for the study of real-life management of commons that existed in simple farming and fishing communities. Indeed, Lee Anne Fennell of the University of Chicago law school wrote about Ostrom's law: a resource arrangement that works in practice, can work in theory. However, she also postulated that her conclusions might be applied on a much larger scale, up to and including much more complicated and extensive arrangements for land-use and fisheries. Ostrom came to believe in the mid-2000s that her work -- initially focused on the local -- had potential to be useful in thinking about resource management on a regional and even a global scale. Her main focus, thought, stayed with the management of common physical resources by processes that originated at grass-roots levels.

### **A political commons?**

Suppose that Ostrom's work can be applied productively to the analysis of a major question in a completely different domain -- politics? Is there such a thing as a Political Commons? This essay postulates the existence of a form of Political Commons that is vital for the well-functioning of democratic governance.

Like any system, a political commons would be a system of pieces and parts so organized as to be in constant interaction with each other. Its design objectives would be to engage people at grass roots level, as stabilizers in an effort to harness government and the private sector into effective governance of public resources for the common good. It may, at first glance, seem odd to speak of regular people as adults in the room of Public Policy. But the records of Big Government and Big Business suggest that a stabilizing factor is wanting, and that it is time to take "the will of the people" and "the wisdom of the people" as serious propositions, rather than the lip-service they have become.

The question is whether Ostrom's analysis can be meaningfully applied to a concept such as a **Political Commons**. Ostrom's analysis is based on her study of a specific, clearly delineated set of samples: small-scale common holdings having to do with farmland, water resources and fisheries -- all geographically limited systems. Her term for this kind of system was **common pool resource (CPR)**. Its components are:

- Resource systems: basically, the inputs that are used by the system to produce useful outputs. For example, how to manage local water supplies needed to sustain a given output of agricultural produce.
- Resource units: an accounting unit for what users extract from the system. For example, tons of fish from protected CPRs.
- Renewable resources: a process in which inputs needed to create the desired output are sustained at the necessary levels.
- Appropriation: The processes by which resources are withdrawn from CPRs to be converted into useful output.
- Appropriator: Any person or entity who can remove output and apply it to a desired purpose.

- Providers: Any person or entity whose function it is to replenish resources so as to maintain an equilibrium with demand.

Essentially, Ostrom created a game around these actors and their relationships. To create the game she had first to characterize the behavior of the players. To describe the behavior of the players, she had to define a model of the players in her "game." Her term for this was "**rational appropriators in complex and uncertain situations.**" Rational behavior is a commodity in very short supply. In her game, Ostrom made clear that rational behavior is limited by real-world factors such as norms of behavior, limitations of situational information, and the opportunistic decisions that any of the players may embark upon to benefit themselves at the expense to others who stick by the rules. And what she was looking for is an understanding of "**variables that are most likely to affect individual choices of strategies.**"

It follows that a first test of the idea of a Political Commons is to see whether one can identify actors and relationships in a Political Commons that are functionally the same as those Ostrom identified in her world of farms and fisheries. For example:

- Output of Political Commons as a system: social consensus, convertible into political action at lower cost in time and money, and with less chance of abrupt reversal.
- Resource systems: basically, the inputs that are used by the system to produce its usable outputs. For example, strong influencers of opinion. "Cronkite effect;" religious leaders; political leaders.
- Resource units: an accounting unit for what users extract from the system. For example, public opinion polls,
- Renewable resources: a process in which inputs needed to create the desired output are sustained at the necessary levels. For example. publicity, spin.
- Appropriation: The processes by which resources are withdrawn to be converted into usable output. Actions that demonstrate effectiveness, deemed to be worth the associated costs.
- Appropriator: Any person or entity who can remove output and apply it to the desired purpose. For example, political leaders. *There is a gradient. Political leaders may draw down on the CPR of a Political Commons because doing so supplies them with ammunition for partisan debate. Within reasonable limits their need is a legitimate cost of the democratic process. Further along the spectrum are the ideologues. They do more damage to the Commons because they are not amenable to compromise and resolution. They will however be open to compromise, although their tendency is to view compromise as a temporary pause. At the far end of the spectrum is what can be termed a category of "rogue appropriators" who spread falsehoods and deliberately corrupt the Commons, whether for power, or profit or both. Their requirements are potentially infinite, because they will consume the substance of the Commons until and unless they destroy it, which may or may not be their objective, but which in the end is their effect.*

- **Providers:** Any person or entity whose function it is to replenish resources needed to sustain a resource system in equilibrium with demand. Centrists look for discussion, ending in compromise, which they consider to be in the category of a win-win outcome intended to produce a stable solution. Arbitration also fits this category since parties have given up maximalist expectations, in the act of agreeing to the process.

Therefore, one can make a case that a Political Commons fits within the theoretical framework that Ostrom used for her study of agrarian CPRs.

At the very least, it is an attractive idea to look at Ostrom's work as a potential source of fresh insights into what might now be called an ongoing **Tragedy of the Democracies**.

### **What are the desired characteristics of a sustainably managed Political Commons, in the United States?**

1. It identifies and safeguards fundamental values.
2. Its fundamental values work in the presence of dramatically altered circumstances.
3. That the value system and its legal manifestation remain consistent with key societal characteristics: pragmatism; initiative; generosity; compassion, etc.
4. That the system must be anticipatory, rather than purely reactive. For this to happen, such a system needs:
  - a. Foresight capability: a system designed to integrate strategically oriented foresight and policy making.
  - b. Whole-of-system awareness (complexity, adaptive mechanism): a system designed to shorten the lag between awareness, decision, and action.
  - c. A feedback and learning system: a system designed to permit near real-time awareness of the efficacy of policies in fulfilling stated objectives.

A collective management system for a given resource -- whether it is protecting the ability to sustain flocks of sheep or protecting the ability to sustain climate at levels compatible with human progress, or nourishing a Political Commons needed for democratic governance -- is something that does not just happen. It needs to be designed. For this purpose, certain specialized skills must be brought to bear: e.g. a systems designer; an information designer; a fact organizer; and a question-maker; a process manager. In other words, the design of a commons should not simply be what happens to exist: it should be based on an interpretation of what needs to be, in the light of carefully worked out alternative projections of future circumstances.

But such a system also needs to be driven by those in whose name it supposedly serves. The key to successful polycentric management is inescapably political. Maintaining that commons against rogue appropriators is a constant challenge. Citizens need a flow of information and a framework for assessing its implications, in

order to be empowered for this task. Education for citizenship is a process that can be self-organized.

The potential value in applying Ostrom's approach to the idea of a political commons, is that it could then be used to develop ways to reinvigorate the beleaguered middle ground by providing it with a methodology and a system of thinking that would be accessible at grass roots level: capable of expanding the range of workable and politically feasible solutions to major societal problems. The ultimate goal would be to promote better governance in America, from the bottom up, as a way of improving the performance of government and the private sector, which operate from the top down.

Ostrom's work demolished the fatalistic view -- exemplified by Hardin's essay -- of the limits of democratic governance for the sustainable management of physical resources, absent tutelage from government or the private sector. What Ostrom also demonstrated is that sound governance can arise from the people, under specified circumstances. This suggests a tremendously broadened definition: i.e.,

**A Commons is any resource -- including political values -- that is important because it reflects the collective interests of a community, and which is intended to be managed sustainably under a mutually agreed system of stake-holder rules.**

Within the scope of that definition, , one could place at -- one end -- management of medieval land-holdings reserved for common use, and at the other end, sustainable management of a viable political commons.

### **A third political force: independents.**

In all of these applications, there are three dynamics: the power - hunger of politics; the economic greed of capitalism; and the fundamental needs of the people. Managing them successfully over an extended period of time is extremely difficult, requiring systems for making politically brokered trade-offs among parties with conflicting interests. Our two-party system has seized up over some of the most important of these issues. To deal with these stalemates, we do not need a third political party. We do need a moderating, third political force. That force resides among political independents. Independents shift the political balance depending on their collective assessment of the gap between societal needs and institutional performance. **Independents are a force capable of dynamically balancing the three forces -- public opinion, capital, and governmental -- that determine where the system as a whole goes. But independents themselves need a common frame of reference: not a party platform, which would soon transform into doctrine, but a common method for thinking about complex issues. That approach will not necessarily lead to consensus, since that is not its objective. It would, instead, promote greater awareness of the implications of choices of action, and the possibility for variations that be the basis for ultimate consensus.**

## Training for independence

**Independents are a way to dynamically balance the three forces that determine where the system as a whole goes.** The Round Table process supports independent thought: it promotes awareness of complex reality, and it can be used to search for paths forward that are not accessible to true- believers on either side of our polarized debates, who cancel each other out. It is a form of education for citizenship. Civic education should be regarded as a life skill, taught at graduated levels, with one or more rites of passage to the status of adulthood -- ideally timed to the acquisition of the right to vote, to enter into contracts, etc. In authoritarian systems education of the young is calibrated to instill beliefs that cannot be assailed by exposure to fact. Central among these beliefs is the subordination of the individual to the state, and hence to its leaders, by force if necessary -- but much preferably (from the authoritarian point of view) as a matter of unshakable belief. The same applies in the case of theocratic systems. Obedience = Happiness. In democratic systems, the central belief is the autonomy of the individual -- in matters of conscience, opinion, speech, and action -- save for where trade-offs between personal and societal needs must be found. This means that education for civic life in a democracy needs to focus on developing not only specific attitudes, but specific qualities of thought.

## What are those distinguishing characteristics?

- Distrust of authority.
- An egalitarian attitude.
- A strong sense of personal agency: to take the initiative individually or spontaneously in self-organized groups.
- Jealous protection of certain specific rights, to the point of using violence to resist a perceived threat to those rights.
- A strong emphasis on the exercise of personal liberty as opposed to acceptance of external restraints, imposed in the name of social obligation.
- A taste for fantastical thinking, in which personal belief supersedes fact as a test of validity for an assertion. Not "I think, therefore I am," but "I believe, therefore it is so."
- Skepticism to official information, even when totally sincere -- gullibility to false information in proportion to mendacity -- the bigger the lie, the better the response.

These are the "Don't Tread on Me" qualities that "turned British subjects into the citizens of a Republic." The same qualities exist in our time, but have become a fracture in the American political system, in a face-off between two opposing concepts of what the rights of Americans really are. The American Revolution occurred when dialog over these differences broke down between the colonies and the British; the Civil War occurred when dialog broke down between the North and the South; a breakdown in communication among Americans is now well advanced and very dangerous, as we have just seen demonstrated on January 6th. I believe that civic education for

Americans -- in addition to basic information about how government operates -- needs a component that helps individual Americans recognize falsehood, and immunizes them against the spread of rigid, doctrinal thinking.

### **Values for 21<sup>st</sup> century discourse**

What is especially needed is a code of conduct for civic discourse, suited to modern conditions. For example:

- Value another's freedom of thought as you value your own.
- Search out your own biases
- Identify complex systems as the context for understanding events and their consequences.
- Remain alert to the needs of the future, as well as to the needs of your own time.
- Always remember that error is the permanent lot of humans.
- Do not surrender responsibility for ethical and moral decisions to algorithms.

### **A way out of stalemate: foresight**

Foresight is a system for using imagination and analysis in tandem to create and study a taxonomy of possible futures. It is an amalgam of theories, including complexity theory, systems theory, management theory, political theory -- grounded on a foundation of facts, used as a base for the study of the future, and the alternative consequences that can flow both from random events, and policy. It is therefore an antidote to magical thinking that substitutes delusions for facts. Foresight does not eliminate disagreement, but channels it into forms that are subject to reasoned discourse, and to the ultimate arbitration by facts.

In today's chaotic circumstances, we have to pray that sound leadership will slow the ongoing hardening of ideologies into a fatal hardening of hearts. In the longer range, however, we may, if we are lucky and the damage is not beyond repair -- have an opportunity to reconstruct a more stable system with centrists at its core and independents as counterweights to extremism. Education for citizenship can and should be designed to prepare students to think in these terms: to learn to be mindful of what may be coming our way; to apply different methods for seeing more deeply into the consequences of actions, the better to guide choices among them.

The work of Elinor Ostrom was a rigorous demonstration that local assets needed to promote the security and well-being of communities, can be sustainably managed by grass roots rules developed and managed at grass roots levels, operating in concert with the private sector, with government, and with local politicians (in office or not). Her observations represent a defense of democratic theory. They are scale-able from the local to the global. They can manage complex systems. BUT, in a world where government and business draw upon the best intellectual talent money can buy, it is



necessary to even the odds by upgrading the education of “We the people,” through training and practice at every level of maturation -- to treat education for citizenship as a life-long responsibility process. How can that be done?

### **Education for citizenship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.**

America is very close to becoming the “House divided against itself” that cannot stand. Education is the only tool that has a chance to change this over the longer term, but it is patently clear that education for citizenship is – in its present form -- a failed system. How else to explain the extreme credulousness of such large numbers of Americans? That failure, however, is an opportunity to think anew about methods that could serve us better in the longer-term future. The key to this kind of reform is not to be found in rote indoctrination on the basis of ideology, but in training for critical analysis, as a common feature of the educational experience of Americans, from youth to maturity.\_

There are, in principle, many specific approaches for accomplishing this (here, cite the RBF and subsequent Ohio State work). However, the outcomes of these approaches should all feature training in certain key elements of “smart” citizenship:

- Data “Hygiene”: Since we can teach young people about safe-sex, or about the safe use of power tools in the shop, or about safe food preparation, or about the safe use of credit cards, or about the safe operation of a motor vehicle, or about the safe use of fire arms, it should be possible to teach them about the safe use of “unsupported facts” -- how to spot lies that can harm and even kill them.
- Futurity: Since we repeat to young people ad nauseum that they are the future of the country, we should be able to teach them to think systematically about possible futures that may flow from present decisions.\_
- Systems: Since younger people are the first cohorts to master all sorts of games – all of which are systems – it should be possible to teach them how to search for the presence of systems as the underlying rules of organization of every human activity.
- Complexity: Since the rearing of young people requires them to become aware that the world is not simple, and that it is full of surprises, it should be possible to teach them to beware of “linear” versions of cause and effect.
- Civic ethics/ values: Since young people are naturally more sensitive to inequities, iniquities, and injustices, it should be possible to train them to recognize these things when they are disguised as perquisites of social class.
- Awareness of the American past: Since young people can, eventually, recognize the fallibility of their parents without ceasing to value them, then it should be possible for them to learn about the gap between America’s proclaimed ideals and America’s shortcomings and sins, without ceasing to value the nation.\_
- Government/governance: Since young people can learn the minutia of games and fads that amuse them, it should be possible for them to learn the basic details about how our political system operates.\_But for that they will need to have skin in the game, in the form of modes of participation.\_

### **What is to be done?**

Americans live lives that are intimately related to events occurring within progressively larger systems – ultimately, at regional, international, and global levels. The capacity to understand these relationships must be developed in stages. What those stages are, and precisely how to reach them as matters of pedagogy would benefit from a networked discussion among educators themselves. If not, they will be determined by parochial interests, ideologues, and political opportunists. To their liking, and in their interests, but not the nation's.

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