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Review: Protecting the Commons: A Framework for Resource Management in the Americas

By J. Burger et al.

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Charles Sturt University, Australia

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J. Burger, E. Ostrom, R. B. Norgaard, D. Policansky, & B. D. Goldstein.
Protecting the Commons: A Framework for Resource Management in the Americas. Washington, DC: Island Press, 2001. 360 pp. ISBN 1-55963-738-2 (paperback). US\$30.00

When Garratt Hardin published *The Tragedy of the Commons* in 1968, it was, at first, perceived as a seminal statement of probably the central problem in environmental management. Further consideration showed that he had treated the troublesome issues of environmental management far too simplistically and his basic argument soon proved to be false. However, his work did lead to two truly valuable outcomes.

The first is that he managed to penetrate the screen of complacent self-satisfaction that had pervaded the thinking of many public land managers. His book was one of what has become a plethora of critique and re-thinking of the assumptions underlying land management practice. The second was that he offered a new paradigm for thinking about common property as a phenomenon. This current book demonstrates the extent to which this paradigm has served to generate an immense amount of research and consideration.

This book sets out on a very commendable path of endeavoring to review and assess the contemporary place of the commons paradigm. Some of its greatest value probably lies in the extent to which it demonstrates the applicability of the paradigm to the analysis of global (and other non-local) issues and to innovative applications such as issues of regional health and of medical services. After two useful introductory presentations, four essays discuss examples of the traditional application of the paradigm to local land resource issues. The next four essays deal with similar issues, but on a regional level, then three move to global issues of the atmosphere, the impact of world pollutants upon the Arctic region and medical care as a commons. Two further essays each examine emerging aspects of the politics and methodology that may lead in due course to greater effectiveness.

This book has, not surprisingly, been put together by a group of "true believers" and so provides an excellent picture of the analytical strengths of the paradigm. One gains an immediate sense of optimism about and

enthusiasm for the paradigm, even though some limitations and constraints are recognized. I can only commend it as an excellent overview of the current state-of-art in use of the paradigm and hence a very important book. Reading this book stimulated me and led me to question some aspects of the commons idea.

The essay on medical care regrettably demonstrates the continuing simplism to which the paradigm has all too frequently been subjected. Discussing medical care from the experience of major and highly developed Western countries while neglecting both the influence of some of the major power brokers within the health services arena and the world-wide economic interdependence of health resources is doomed to provide only a partial and hence misleading analysis. So, even the underlying simplicity of Hardin's thinking still tends to survive. Like any other paradigm, the notion of the commons carries its own failings and shortcomings. Nowhere does this book endeavor to assess the commons idea vis-à-vis other potential paradigms of analysis.

While reading, I was impressed by the number of both passing and major references to relationships between scientists and decision-makers. By contrast, there appears to be little recognition of the growing commitment to involve consumers (and other victims of public decision-making) in the decision-making and management processes of society. Programs of community participation and the development of collaborative management regimes are becoming increasingly widespread. So although the commons paradigm has made a great contribution to analysis and understanding, its practitioners are currently showing symptoms of marginalizing themselves from contemporary decision processes.

This volume also generally assumes the validity of thinking about property regimes in terms of the classic division into open, communal, state, and private. While this was always flawed (ignoring, for instance, the major role of state-owned capitalist enterprise) it is now subject to much greater stress under the new liberalist hegemony. Again, new strategies (for example, the Integrated Conservation and Development Projects) are emerging and attempting to build co-operation between different regimes.

Having raised these questions, albeit briefly, it is only just that I should provide some indication of my own direction of thinking and inquiry. As briefly noted above, I have some doubts about the continuing viability of the commons paradigm-in Kuhnian terms, too many anomalies are emerging. One component of this problem is the extent to which practitioners have focused upon finding answers rather than clarifying questions. By comparison I find considerable promise in the *still-emerging* sustainability paradigm, with its

broader focus, its propensity for raising and identifying questions, and its general commitment to a genuine integration of economic, environmental, and social dimensions of any issue. I am certainly well aware that the sustainability idea has also been subject to simplism and to excessive rhetorical claims. I find it a truly promising direction for integration of the very wide-ranging dimensions of current world problems.

Again, I find this an excellent book-it has not only informed me, but challenged me to think further about my own perceptions, concepts and values.

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