

International Journal of the Commons

Vol. 2, no 2 July 2008, pp. 155–161

Publisher: Igitur, Utrecht Publishing & Archiving Services for IASC

URL:<http://www.thecommonsjournal.org>

URN:NBN:NL:UI:10-IJC-08008

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ISSN: 1875-0281

The commons in Europe: from past to future

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Acknowledgements: We would like to thank David Price and Erling Berge for their important support in putting this issue together and the authors and the reviewers of the articles of this issue for their co-operation.

Despite the European long tradition in common property institutions, the social, economic and technological changes occurring since the industrial revolution have seriously challenged the use and management of common-pool resources (CPRs) on the continent (Brakensiek 2000; De Moor et al. 2002; Vivier 2003). Since the middle of the 18th century, commons have received increasing opposition as they were considered as an inefficient way of resource management. Most historical commons had – at least in the northwest of the European continent – been largely eliminated by the end of the 19th century. Elsewhere, the traditional commons for grazing and agriculture have received new functions (as in e.g. England, see Short and Lana for Spain, both in this issue and Berge 2005). Besides, many resources in the European region are still managed in common by user associations or by community institutions. Examples include pastures, forests, irrigation systems, and other natural or man-made resources (e.g. Brown 2006; Casari 2007; Cashore et al. 2007; Gerlak 2004; Mikhaylichenko 2006). A number of new common resources have also been built in the course of the industrial and post-industrial development. They include transpor-

tation and communication infrastructures, public urban areas, leisure areas and several other fundamental resources often studied under the generic label of 'new commons' (e.g. Boisvert 2006; Monstadt 2007; Pennington 2004; Raco and Henderson 2006; Steins and Edwards 1999). Finally, a new fundamental class of goods shows strong CPR characters: the environmental services, which are furnished from the local to the global level by healthy ecosystems exploited within their carrying capacity and presenting adequate levels of biomass and biodiversity (Costanza et al. 1998; Daily 1997). This category groups an enormous number of resources, including those with climate-regulation capabilities that are today challenged by the increasing emission trends due to the present development processes (see IPCC 2007). From this point of view, it is especially relevant that Europe is (at present and at least in the words of its rulers) in the front-line of climate change mitigation initiatives, recognizing the commons nature of the atmosphere and of its regulating processes (e.g. EEA 2007; Stern 2007).

All the above quoted CPRs are still present in Europe and, although politics and the media sometimes consider them as a residue of the past, they are essential for the welfare of humans and every other living being of the continent (and, incidentally, also of the Earth as a whole). Nevertheless, many commons have changed: new functions arose, new users, and new institutional layers emerged to manage them. Even for some very traditional commons, like the alpine pastures, the focus of today's management is no longer only a matter of producing fodder and at the same time keeping the cattle numbers below the carrying capacity of the meadow, but also of a more general concern of landscape and hydro-geologic stability maintenance. Similarly, forests are no longer considered only as a source of timber and other products, but are – on the way to Kyoto targets (EEA 2007) – increasingly regarded as carbon sinks, as water-capture and water-conservation tools, and as leisure areas.

The changing in the meaning of common resources together with the new consciousness regarding their importance show that, also in Europe (and in other economically highly-developed areas), the research on the commons is not only an issue for historians. It represents one of the key issues towards a better understanding for some of the major challenges underlying the politics of EU-countries. Today commons issues include indeed climate change, waste management, water governance, congestion problems on actual and virtual infrastructures, landscape planning and organization, and many other themes that represent a growing area of public debate and policy making.

This volume of the *International Journal of the Commons* (IJC) aims to contribute to a better understanding of the role of common property in developed areas, such as the European Union. The included articles cover the wide range of topics that represents present-day commons issues in the EU. All of the papers were initially presented at the IASCP¹ Europe Regional Meeting, 'Building the

¹ The association name has lost its final 'P' in the meanwhile.

European Commons: from Open Fields to Open Source', held in Brescia, Italy, at the end of March 2006. The seven articles resulting from the selection process represent a fair picture of both the discussions that arose during the meeting and the main research interests of European scholars today.

A first group of the papers included in this issue discuss the evolution of some traditional common resources and the changes in their use and in their governing institutions that occurred through time. José-Miguel Lana Berasain studies the development of the commons in the Ebro basin (Navarra, Spain) in the period from the 15th to the 20th century. Those commons survived many important transformations, especially from the 18th century onwards. However, the author points out that this did not happen without significant modifications. Among others, the notion of community itself changed its meaning: from equilibrium to equity. More specifically, historical commons did not necessarily pursue equity and were focused especially on the attempt to find an equilibrium between human pressures and the provision capabilities of the natural resources, whereas after the Liberal Revolution (18th–19th centuries) the commons became synonymous with equitable uses. The idea of equity represents indeed the core of the renewed vision of the community that emerged in the last century and still dominates today's communitarian worldviews.

Audun Sandberg analyzes the evolution of the institution governing the Sámi grazing rights along with the exploitation rights for other natural resources in Norway. After 250 years of gradual strengthening of both public and private property rights in this area (most of the times at the expense of the Sámi population), a recent process is leading to a partial re-collectivization of pasture areas. However, the process is far from completion.

A second group of papers included in this issue focuses on the new values acquired by traditional commons due to the general social, economic and ecological changes that occurred in the last century. Achim Schlueter discusses the 'tragedy of the anticommons' for Central-European forestry. This is the under-use of the economic values of the forests (and maybe also the production of less ecological values than possible in other situations) due to an excessive fragmentation of property. The author argues that the small scale of European private forestry not only creates little incentives for the owners in the direction of a rational economic utilization of their property, but can also limit alternative uses of the area, e.g. leisure or natural regeneration.

Christopher Short studies the new values and the extended range of economic functions that have acquired the commons across England and Wales. Besides being a source of wealth for residents, the commons provide a crucial link between nature and society due to their increased role in the conservation of nature, landscape and heritage values. However, those new functions enlarge the range of the stakeholders, that often extends well beyond the holders of the traditional use-rights on the common lands. This causes an institutional problem, since many new stakeholders are often excluded from the institutions that govern the commons, while the action of public authorities aimed to preserve the her-

itage often fail to recognize the multiple-use and complex nature of those resources.

Jean-David Gerber and colleagues examine the role that CPR institutions play in the implementation of Swiss resource management policies. What is especially relevant for commons scholars is that, also in a highly developed country like Switzerland, the natural resource management schemes involving the commons institutions are at least as efficient (if not more) than the ones involving only public agents or private actors. This is mainly due to the capacity of CPR institution to valorize the local knowledge and to mobilize the local actors interested in using and conserving the resource(s). Moreover, commons institutions are not stuck in the past and often adapt well to the changes occurring in the external social, political and economic environment.

The paper by Jouni Paavola analyzes the global commons and their governing institutions by offering solutions to bridge the conceptual gap existing between the (many) works on local CPRs and the (few) ones on global commons. He proposes a model of institutional design of governance solutions able to facilitate the institutional analysis at the global level. The model is subsequently employed in the analysis of the emerging governance framework for the control of greenhouse gas emissions, an institution that, at present, looks still incomplete in important aspects and leaves hence ample space for ungoverned appropriation actions.

Finally, Marco Janssen and colleagues present experimental research exploring the effects of endogenous rule change on commons management. This study employs an innovative experimental environment that allows the subjects to move on a virtual spatial commons and to determine their behavior in real-time. Their main finding is that many subjects (about half of the studied groups) are willing to invest in order to change the rules affecting the resource from an open-access situation to private property. Moreover, when this opportunity is removed and the open-access situation restored, the groups that succeeded in creating property rights return to the same level of overharvesting like the ones that missed the institutional transformation opportunity.

In order to reach a fair picture of the status of CPR-research in Europe, the discussion about what is missing is perhaps as important as presenting the articles included in this issue. The first type of missing research in this issue is related to fishery. While this reflects a similar lack of the Brescia-meeting, the basic question is why there is currently only a limited interest among European CPR scholars in fisheries. European fisheries are – with a few exceptions such as the North Atlantic Herring (ICES 2008 advice for Icelandic Spring Spawning Herring) and the Northern Cod (ICES 2008 advice for North Atlantic Cod) – in a bad condition and, as the ‘common fisheries policy’ is one of the (few) areas where a significant amount of power is allocated to the EU, this really configures like a ‘tragedy of the public property’ going on in our region. Our opinion is, hence, that European fisheries *need* more research based on the CPR

framework in order to reach a better understanding of what is wrong in the EU policy.

The second type of commons that is missing in this volume is formed by the new commons (in opposition to the new functions of the traditional commons largely discussed above). Given the vast number of CPRs resulting from the urban development and from the other transformations involving public areas that followed the industrial revolution (e.g. roads, parking places, public parks and other leisure areas, waste disposal facilities, etc.), this is not good news for the commons community. Moreover, this is a field where a number of institutional transformations occurred in recent times and where new institutional schemes are still under development (e.g. road pricing, new forms of waste levies, etc.). The public authorities are usually deeply involved in those transformations, leaving often little space for endogenous institutional development. However, recent research shows that a deep involvement of local communities in the process represents a fundamental asset for rapid and effective achievement of the aims behind the institutional change (e.g. Dobson 2007; Dobson and Bell 2006; Saward 2000); a fact that opens large spaces to fruitful analyses based on the CPR framework. However, despite a few interesting studies (e.g. Pennington 2004; Raco and Henderson 2006), the commons community is still largely oriented towards different resources. Our hope is that the interest for urban commons will grow in the continent in the near future.

The third missing group is formed by the studies focusing on Eastern Europe. A fair number of papers covering the commons in post-socialist countries were presented in Brescia, but none of them is included in this issue. It is difficult to make hypotheses about the reasons leading to this outcome. It is possible that the Eastern Europe researchers were still partially isolated from the rest of the community. However, this is probably only a part of the story. We can only hope that many papers covering the interesting themes characterizing this region will be presented in the future IASC conferences (starting from the Cheltenham 2008 global meeting) and will be subsequently published by the IJC.

To summarize, CPR research looks well alive on the old continent. The traditional European commons that have survived the liberalization wave of the 19th century have since faced a number of challenges, but still maintain some of their traditional significance and, especially, new important uses have been found for them in terms of provision of ecological, leisure and natural services. The papers in this issue show that CPR-scholars have been able to build a credible picture both of the present status of those traditional resources and of their new role in the present socio-economic European environment. However, the focus of the research often remains on traditional resources and it largely ignores the many new commons that have been created during the last two centuries of economic development and urbanization. We think that, without abandoning the former issues, the commons framework is well suited also to face themes like infrastructure congestion, traffic regulation schemes, urban pollution control, waste management, and the many others deriving from the inter-

play of millions of people on the complex commons formed by the roads, the parks, the cities, and even the skies above our countries and our Earth.

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