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Commons Cultures: Pillars, History, Questions, and Principles
Dave Jacke

Those of us alive in the US today have most likely experienced a culture driven primarily by market forces and state power. The dominance of these cultural forces—and the capturing of one by the other—lies at the heart of the rapidly intensifying planetary destruction we now face. Market and state power dominance is so complete that few of us know of an alternative cultural system that is actually older than either the market or the state. This older system may hold the key to the creation of regenerative cultures: the commons.

The commons is a cultural system category as fundamental as the market and the state, and as fundamentally different from the market and the state as the market and state systems are from each other. Even though commons have been weakened to the point of apparent nonexistence in our times, they have been around in Western society all along (mainly at the margins). I believe commoning is archetypal in our species, and is now re-emerging from the primal ooze of the human subconscious in our hour of need and creativity. We must now reacquaint ourselves with the commons and commoning, so we can understand how commons systems work and increase our chances of making them work well as fast as possible.

What is a Commons? Three Pillars

Commons systems are typically self-organized social and economic structures that help people use and manage what some folks call common pool resources (CPRs) in an equitable and sustainable way. According to the late Professor Elinor Ostrom, a common pool resource is a natural or human-made resource system large enough to make it hard to exclude people from using the resource or withdrawing benefits from it—i.e., it is not suited to individual ownership and control. However, even smaller resource systems where people can be excluded from use can be managed in common, and for the purpose of this article, I will use the term CPR in this broader sense. Classically speaking, commons revolve around physical natural resources: farm fields, woodlands, fisheries, water systems, and so on. But the key thing to remember is that the commons is NOT the resource itself! A commons can only exist when what we might call the “three pillars” of the commons are present: a defined resource, a specified set of people who share that resource, and a clear set of shared agreements on how those people will share that resource.

Commons help groups of free individuals optimize and defend their long-term individual self-interest through realizing their interdependence and consciously designing for their collective self-interest in sharing the CPR. In this way, a commons is like a mycorrhizal association: neither the plant root nor the fungus alone forms a mycorrhiza, only the relationship between the plant and the fungus can be defined as a mycorrhiza. The association benefits the individual self-interest of both the fungus and the plant, and both are better off because of the relationship.

For example, in the early 1970s, the economic viability of the inshore fishery on the Mediterranean coast near Alanya, Turkey was collapsing due to unrestrained harvest. That and competition for the best fishing sites resulted in sometimes-violent conflict between the approximately 100 local fishers. In addition, fishers were overcapitalizing, buying excess equipment to try to increase their declining production, but the risks were also increasing because no one had guaranteed access to the stocks. However, about half the fishers were members of a local fishers’ cooperative, and they began experimenting with various systems to reduce conflicts, production costs, and risks, while guaranteeing a sustainable harvest for each fisher. More than a decade of trial-and-error led to a set of rules that met these goals—without either a government takeover and regulation or privatization and market control. The collectively developed agreements for this fishery included:

- Naming and listing all the usable fishing locations within the inshore fishery, spacing each site so that nets set in one site will not block or interfere with nets or harvest potential in another (defining the resource).
- Preparing a list of eligible (licensed) fishers each September for the coming September to May fishing season, whether co-op members or not (specifying the users of the resource).
- Drawing lots in September assigning each fisher to the named fishing locations (partitioning the resource).
- During the fishing season, fishers rotate through the fishing sites, switching locations daily. From September to January, each fisher moves east one location, and from January to May each fisher moves west one location. This allows fishers to share good and bad sites, and take advantage of the annual fish migration patterns as the season progresses (sharing the resource equitably).
- The list of fishers and fishing locations is endorsed by each fisher and registered with the local gendarme and mayor at the time of the lottery. Monitoring and feedback/enforcement are carried out by the fishers themselves because of the incentives within the system to reduce or eliminate free riders and defectors, but
the local state powers are there as a backup (providing clear agreements, social acknowledgment, and feedback to induce self-regulation).

This system evolved from local individuals realizing their interdependence, knowing their shared resource, knowing and communicating clearly with each other, negotiating in good faith, making clear conscious agreements, and working out the bugs over time. Clearly, the resource alone does not a commons make. And, one can be sure that this process continues as the resources and the social systems in Alanya change! So clearly, also, there can be no commons without commoning, without a set of active social processes that support the commons system to function in an ongoing manner.

One of the key things to realize here is that neither government regulation nor market-based privatization would likely have generated the elegant system that evolved. Government regulators would have limited access to the knowledge the local fishers had, and such government-managed systems are usually expensive and notoriously subject to overreach, lack of subtlety and blunt tools, legalistic complexity, and opportunities for malfeasance. Privatization would have given all the benefits to a few and depleted the richness of local culture, livelihoods, and self-determination, diminishing the community’s natural, social, and other forms of capital.

However, the local government plays a role in the system because it requires fishers to get a license. It serves as a registrar of the agreement each year, and so can act as a backup enforcer. The market played a role in the system too, through the perverse feedback of overcapitalization at high risk, and the resulting collapse in economic stability and viability. So, the commons does not exist in a vacuum. Yet it can fill a niche that neither the government nor the market can fill as well, and commons may fill other cultural roles better than the market or the state where they have control over a resource.

The system devised in Alanya has good potential for long-term sustainable management of the fishery because its rules reflect the actual structure of the resource and the needs, interests, and input of the fishers. It enjoys a higher level of trust, participation, and legitimacy than either the market or the state could provide. It may also be able to adapt to shifting social and natural landscapes more rapidly and adroitly. Furthermore, this system broadens the political interests that may be required to minimize damage to sea-based resources in the Alanya region from erosion, sedimentation, pollution, and so on. In this way, commons systems can build social ecosystems that might yield unintended benefits to surrounding landscapes and social systems.

So, why aren’t there more constructs like this in our culture? Answering that takes a little bit of history.

**A Taste of Commons History**

Plenty of evidence shows that cultures around the world have engaged in commoning. However, the following very brief discussion will focus on the commons in Europe generally and Britain, in particular, because the European and British literature is relatively more accessible. Their history also strongly influenced events and cultural practices in the US.

In contrast to current global Westernized culture, most of our human ancestors probably lived in commons cultures through most or all of their lives up until the 1700s or 1800s, depending on where they lived. Little or no written history exists from before the Roman Empire in Europe generally and Britain, in particular. Yet, the evidence suggests that commoning was a key part of the Celtic culture of pre-Roman Britain.

Archeological studies support the conclusion that relatively large-scale, long-term coppice management systems in Europe existed long before the arrival of agriculture. For instance, large coastal fish traps or weirs discovered in Ireland and Denmark from 8,000 years ago were made with literally thousands of coppiced poles requiring many acres of land under long-term coppice management. It appears there is no way to know what were the actual social structures associated with these long-ago land management systems. However, it stands to reason that they were managed collectively. The average life spans of the people were short, and the woodland management cycles were relatively long. These large-scale constructions (up to 250 meters long in water 4-5 meters deep at Nekselø Island, Denmark) required many hands and hours of labor to install, and probably needed yearly replacement due to winter storms. The weirs yielded large seasonal harvests of eels and other fish for village-scale storage and consumption. These collectively run systems were extremely unlikely to have been “for-profit” ventures, as money did not yet exist—they were primarily used for tribal or village scale subsistence. The small-scale social systems present were unlikely to be run as “states.” Yet some collective agreements on how to manage the coppice woodlands over the generations and to build and rebuild the weirs must have existed—meaning that they probably had commons cultures in some form. Systems like these, evolving through the Paleolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic, formed the foundations of cultures across Europe, at least, and the Celtic world specifically.

British historian Peter Salway has said that, after the Roman invasion, “the Celtic substratum persisted” in British culture. The succeeding cultures also deposited their strata over the Celtic base: the Vikings, the Anglo-Saxons,
and the Normans. Part of that substratum, still resprouting and holding sway, was shared or “common” use of lands for subsistence needs by the “common” people, without which neither the “commoners” nor the successive ruling classes could survive.

Woodland management in feudal Norman Britain was built around the subdivision of various rights to woodland resources. The land itself and the soil were owned by the Lord of the Manor, as bestowed by the King in return for fealty (as a result of the history of Roman, Viking, Anglo-Saxon and then Norman conquest and rule). Those who lived on the Lord’s lands—“serfs” (effectively, slaves) and ‘villeins’ (tenants who paid rent to live in their ancestral lands) had customary rights to woodland resources that had been passed down over generations from pre-conquest time immemorial. The landlord owned any “timber”—large diameter logs from trees in the woodlands—but the serfs and villeins had ‘bote’ or rights to use small diameter “wood” for various uses. ‘Hedgebote,’ ‘firebote,’ ‘housebote,’ ‘cartbote,’ and so on meant they could harvest certain amounts of coppiced or pollarded material for hedge making, firewood, or house or cart construction, etc. ‘Estovers of common’ were rights of widows to access small wood for running their house through the year. ‘Estovers of common’ were mostly verbally understood and mutually enforced through community interactions. Occasionally disputes or defectors ended up in court as the state’s court systems developed.

Agricultural fields were also managed as commons during the British Middle Ages through the open field system. In these systems, family-owned but community-managed livestock gleaned and manured farm fields in the fall and winter, and fields were divided up for family crop production during the growing season. Each family would get multiple plots, so that the better and the poorer croplands were shared equally among the families each year. Rotations ensured that each plot of land lay fallow every so often, providing pasture or resting to rebuild soil fertility. All of these arrangements were made through community discussion, negotiation, and agreement among and between the serfs and villeins, and between the serfs and villeins and the landlords. These negotiations were probably aided by longstanding traditions of how things were done in the past. Such traditions likely worked well, or well enough, but also likely inhibited innovation.

In the fenlands of England’s south Lincolnshire, an area called Holland “harboured remnants of a hunter gatherer economy.” These commonly owned and managed fens were considered a wasteland by the elites of the period, which they wanted to drain to create arable crop land with a higher and more monetary value that could be centralized. But Simon Fairlie described the commons there as follows:

Although the main earner was the summer grazing of rich common pastures with dairy cattle, horses and geese, in winter, when large tracts of the commons were inundated, fishing and fowling became an important source of income, and for those with no land to keep beasts on over winter it was probably a main source of income. During the Middle Ages, Holland was well off — its tax assessment per acre was the third highest in the kingdom in 1334 — and this wealth was relatively equitably distributed with "a higher proportion of small farmers and a lower proportion of very wealthy ones". In a pamphlet resisting the drainage schemes proposed in the 1640s, an anonymous author goes on to list the benefits of the fens including: the "serviceable horses", the "great dayeries which afford great store of butter and cheese", the flocks of sheep, the "osier, reed and sedge", and the "many thousand cottagers which live on our fens which must otherwise go a begging."

It would seem that the complexity of human relationships possible in a commons economy can match and perhaps create a resonant complexity in the ecosystems with which the people engage for their livelihoods. Note that the fenlanders did sell the harvests from the commons for monetary gain. But they surely also subsisted largely off those same harvests. Of course, the lords chafed under the common rights system, which limited their ability to do what they wanted with “their” land. For several hundred years after the Norman Conquest of 1066, conflicts erupted as kings and lords attempted to limit the common rights of people who had managed and subsisted from the commons for generations. The serfs and ‘villeins’ fought against the privateers for their common rights, their communities, and their shared ecosystems, over and over and over. Frequently they won, at least in the beginning, though it was often violent. Over the course of the Middle Ages, market systems and culture strengthened, technological innovations continued (yes, even during the Middle Ages), populations slowly shifted to the cities, and wood and timber shortages created increased market demand and prices (and caused a number of European wars). Eventually, coal was discovered, steel was invented, and the merchant class, the landed gentry, and the state system got strong enough, organized enough, and united enough to begin ‘enclosing’ the commons through Parliamentary means. State power was used to privatize common pool resources as a way to support emerging market economies.
In the case of the common fens of Holland, eventually these were enclosed through acts of Parliament in the late 1700s and early 1800s. The fens were drained by Dutch engineers, and the land dried up and shrank, ironically becoming more frequently flooded and largely unusable until technological innovations made possible continuous high-volume pumping of the land, hence farming. The land ended up in fewer larger farms as a result.

All in all, in this process elites monopolized the rights to land. Commoners shorn of their common rights without compensation became landless peasants, truly poor because they now lacked the resources for subsistence. Their way of life and culture were destroyed. This drove more people from the country to the cities, in search of work so they could “earn a living” at low wages. Hence began the Industrial Revolution, built on the destruction of common rights and commons culture. After hundreds of years of self-defense, the ‘villains’ lost the privatization war and became the ‘villains’ we think of as evil people today—because the victors write the history. Sound familiar?

It should sound familiar, because the same pattern of privatization and enclosure has continued for hundreds more years, and now spans the globe. Commons tend to represent storages of natural and social capital built and maintained by generations of human and non-human effort. Privateers tend to lust after such capital, and invent ways to gain control over it and appropriate it for their own profit. When market forces capture the levers of state power, privateers extinguish common rights for private gain at community expense. When state power captures market forces, corruption ensues, and common rights tend to be extinguished for private gain or for governmental taxation or power mongering or both, again at community expense. Were it not for access to cheap fossil energy, privatization might not have gone so far out of whack. But we did gain access to cheap fossil energy, and privatized power and market logic are now very far out of whack on a scale never before possible.

Behind the scenes of all this history lie the internal cultural dynamics behind the loss of commoning behavior and worldviews. Market forces have so captured the mindset of Western culture that few really know how to cooperate anymore, or communicate, or generate power-with rather than exert power-over. For many of us, the experience of commoning as a strongly relevant cultural element in our lives was lost generations ago, and we cannot even begin to envision something in our future with which we have little or no experience. Our sense of what it means to be human, of what our lives are for, what the world is for, and what is our place in the world are far different from the senses of those who live in commons cultures. We have lost much and have much to recover and reinvent. These internal losses should give us pause.

The cultural amnesia and blind spots created by the eclipse and traumatic destruction of commoning leaves us vulnerable to both honest misunderstandings as well as cynical manipulations, sometimes in combination. Given that amnesia, we are also liable not to recognize the downsides of the commons. In addition, projecting or carrying the limiting and largely unconscious worldviews of dominant Western market-state culture into commons culture can easily lead us down rosy paths into thorny dead ends if we are not mindful. Market culture has even changed the words we use—with “resource” and “capital” used to mean our kin and relations in community. Clear, integrated thinking and disciplined use of terminology will help us avoid the most frequent pitfalls.

The Tragedy of the Free-For-All

The first misapprehension virtually always discussed in recent commons literature is the phrase “The Tragedy of the Commons” popularized by Garret Hardin’s 1968 essay of the same name. Hardin’s essay had an enormous influence on economic theory, educational content, and popular understanding. I had college professors use this essay and this phrase to justify state power and market-based solutions for many problems where they were perhaps not the optimum direction. I have even recently seen this meme used in the press to shoot down potential strategies for our future. The main tragedy involved, however, is the depth and breadth of misunderstanding this essay caused, because the fundamental ideas in the parable upon which the essay is founded are bogus.

The parable in question is based upon a pamphlet written by William Forster Lloyd in 1883. As Hardin says: “The tragedy of the commons develops in this way. Picture a pasture open to all. It is to be expected that each herdsman will try to keep as many cattle as possible on the commons. Such an arrangement may work reasonably satisfactorily for centuries because tribal wars, poaching, and disease keep the numbers of both man and beast well below the carrying capacity of the land. Finally, however, comes the day of reckoning, that is, the day when the long-desired goal of social stability becomes a reality. At this point, the inherent logic of the commons remorselessly generates tragedy.”

As a rational being, each herdsman seeks to maximize his gain. Explicitly or implicitly, more or less consciously, he asks, “What is the utility to me of adding one more animal to my herd?”
Of course, the parable says, the utility to the lone herdsman of adding another animal to the pasture is positive, because he [sic] derives benefit from doing so. Meanwhile, the pasture becomes overgrazed because every “rational” herdsman makes the same choice, and things remorselessly lead to a path of mutually assured pastoral destruction. Hence the tragedy.

The first and primary problem here is that the setup described by Hardin and Lloyd is not a commons! Commons consist of a defined resource, a specified set of people sharing the resource, and a set of agreements between those people about how to share that resource. The parable is missing two of the three key ingredients to qualify. “A pasture open to all” is technically known as a free-for-all, not a commons.

Secondly, a group of “rational” herdsman could be presumed to communicate with each other if they are paying any attention at all and know each other and the landscape even a bit. The herdsmen in the parable might be rational, but they could also be described as ignorant, greedy, self-centered, and socially and ecologically inept if not socially and ecologically bankrupt. In addition, the parable assumes that every man is a narrowly self-interested profit-maximizing machine—*Homo economicus*. That certainly reflects aspects of our shared humanity, and an aspect magnified and celebrated by our culture, but we are more than that, and better than that. Okay, so hundreds of years of thieving, trauma-inducing, emotionally crippling, and rampantly individualistic culture could be seen as leading men, in particular (under the influence of toxified masculinity), to behave in such a way, but still… rational? Sorry, but no. So, please, let’s dispense with this “Tragedy of the Commons” bullshit.

Yet, the tragedy persists in our real world. Why? Because healthy boundaries around the “common wealth” inhibit exploiting those common reserves of capital. So, market-dominated Western culture tends to either transform the common wealth into a free-for-all in pursuit of private gain, or asserts state control—which theoretically can work for the common good in a genuinely democratic system, but does so only crudely if it does so at all. However, these systems tend to serve the guardians of market or state power, not the rest of us. Sadly, the “innovative” solutions these days are some combination of market and state, rather than something truly different. But a combined market-state solution is really not so different from one or the other as a solo act. It is only a question of who is serving whom.

Commoning offers a truly different solution from market and/or state solutions, but the power structures of Western culture are not served by commoning. Institutional powers aren’t likely to set commons systems up for us. We have to do it for ourselves with our friends and neighbors. We will also have to defend the commons that still exist the way the villeins did for hundreds of years until the 1700 and 1800s. And, those of us who benefit from the market and state systems may have to give up at least some of our privileges so we can share in community with others. We need, in other words, to recognize that our self-interest lies within shared community interests.

**Conflations, Confusions, and Examples**

Given the cultural amnesia and the Tragedy of the Commons meme, people often get confused about the actual character of the commons because they conflate the commons with other structures and ideas. Let’s focus on two or three here.

The first and most frequent confusion and conflation in commoning is thinking that the common pool resource is itself a commons. People often talk about Earth’s atmosphere and oceans as commons when they are, in fact, common pool resources. There is no way in which they are a commons, because the participatory structures needed for all of us to use them sustainably—to self-organize around agreeing on rules for how to use them—do not exist. Again: a commons is a social and economic structure built around a resource, not the resource itself.

Secondly, as I engage more deeply as a relative neophyte with designing social ecosystems, I find that my language and understanding are shallow or fuzzy. I don’t have the words to articulate the realities I want to describe and create, or the understandings to make relevant meaning from the words people use to describe different social and economic structures. I see this in other people, too. This is one reason the concept of the commons is so useful: it helps delineate parts of this territory, and opens windows and doors into this confusing landscape. However, when we gain a new insight or understanding, we often start projecting that insight or understanding onto everything. The new frame can become the only frame we use for a while. While that natural process helps us get to know the new frame and test its limits, it also blinds us to other doors and windows we might use more productively. Not every collective effort is or should be a commons. In addition, acts of sharing and cooperation do not automatically create a commons. Many kinds of collective efforts and structures can exist that are not commons, or are only marginally so. We must beware of having the commons hammer make everything look like a commons nail. There are other tools in our social ecosystem design toolbox that we need to learn how and when to use.

It is easier to discern what is and is not a commons when we talk extremes, but there is much gray area, too. Clearly a large corporate enterprise is not a commons: though it is a collective effort, it orients towards market-based exploitation of resources and “value-creation” for its private shareholders. Similarly: I am a member of a local storefront food co-op where I sometimes shop. This collectively owned for-profit business probably should not be
regarded as a commons, given its for-profit purpose, even though it has other community-oriented bottom lines as well. The co-op does not focus on sharing a common pool resource among a defined group of people. It has members who shop there, but is also open to the public for shopping. One could think of the co-op itself as a resource shared in common by certain people using certain agreements, but I think this stretches things too far.

Generally speaking, a commons is a not-for-profit structure. Even if, as in the case of the Alanya fishery or the fenlands of South Lincolnshire, the commoners sell the products harvested through the commons, the commons itself is a non-profit system. By partitioning the fishery, for example, the commons structure also limits the amount of fish any one fisher can sell. A group of people sharing and monitoring the resource will inhibit resource-destroying overharvesting. This keeps profit seeking within sustainable bounds, where the profits from fairly shared resources benefit local small business, families, and the community while respecting the limits and needs of the ecosystem. In Alanya, then, the commons is a not-for-profit system that may tie into a market system, but without an endlessly profit-maximizing goal.

Generally, it seems that historically commons were structures for subsistence—not for serving markets. With that in mind, a community garden seems a likely candidate as a commons, as does a community canning facility or a tool sharing co-op. On another level, we could consider community land trusts (CLTs) as commons systems. Here all of the land is held in common by a not-for-profit corporation. Each leaseholder gets a long-term lease on a small portion of the whole acreage and can use the undivided areas of the land as agreed by all. Each leaseholder owns the improvements on their leasehold (the house, well, driveway, gardens, etc.), which they can sell when they want. Individual speculative gain on the community’s portion of the land value is prevented by the common ownership, and individual speculative gain on privately owned assets on leaseholds is limited in any real estate transaction by agreement in the lease. This keeps the housing more affordable over the long run. In a CLT, generally, 1/3 of the Board of Directors must be members of the local community, and 1/3 must be members of other community land trusts, and the last 1/3 are leaseholders in that CLT. That keeps the local CLT honest and prevents individual speculative gain on community assets.

I once helped form and lived on what I call an enclave land trust, where the leaseholders were the only members of the board, but the structure was otherwise the same as a CLT. Each of us had a 99-year lease on a small portion of a 98-acre parcel of land, but the rest of the acreage was held in common. We formed a State of New Hampshire non-profit corporation to own the land, but did not register as a federal 501(c)3 non-profit, because the plan was to have the income always equal the expenses, so no taxes would ever be owed. We had a defined resource (98 acres of land); we had a defined group of people (the leaseholders); and we had fairly extensive documentation about the mutually agreed upon use and management of the leaseholds, and much looser workings out of use and management of the rest of the land on an as needed basis. The main resource benefits we shared in this commons system were the house sites upon which we built our lives, and the remaining rocky, wet, mostly inaccessible acreage where we walked, harvested water, some maple sap, and some wood, and gave the wildlife room to roam.

On the other hand, one could look at a conservation land trust, holding several to many tracts of land in perpetuity for conservation purposes, as a commons. But if the land is open to all of the public to use, does it meet the basic criteria of the three pillars laid out above? There are concrete natural resources present, and there are usually clear agreements about how they will be used and managed, but the lack of a defined set of people using the resource and deciding upon its use makes this one fuzzier.

**Eight Key Principles**

We can perhaps find more robust guidance for how to create, identify, assess, design, and manage successful commons systems from the eight “Design Principles for Successful Commons” developed by the late Elinor Ostrom, co-winner of the 2009 Nobel Prize in economics. Ostrom set forth these principles in her landmark book, *Governing the Commons*:

1. **Clearly defined boundaries**: Individuals or households who have rights to withdraw resource units from the Common Pool Resource (CPR) must be clearly defined, as must the boundaries of the CPR itself. [Note: These individuals or households are called “appropriators” below.]  
2. **Congruence between appropriation and provision rules and local conditions**: Appropriation rules restricting time, place, technology, and/or quantity of resource units are related to local conditions and to provision rules requiring labor, material, and/or money.
3. **Collective-choice arrangements**: Most individuals affected by the operational rules can participate in modifying the operational rules.
4. **Monitoring**: Monitors, who actively audit CPR conditions and appropriator behavior, are accountable to the appropriators or are the appropriators.
5. **Graduated sanctions**: Appropriators who violate operational rules are likely to be assessed graduated sanctions (depending on the seriousness and context of the offense) by other appropriators, by officials accountable to these appropriators, or both.

6. **Conflict-resolution mechanisms**: Appropriators and their officials have rapid access to low-cost local arenas to resolve conflicts among appropriators or between appropriators and officials.

7. **Minimal recognition of rights to organize**: The rights of appropriators to devise their own institutions are not challenged by external governmental authorities.

For CRPs that are parts of larger systems:

8. **Nested enterprises**: Appropriation, provision, monitoring, enforcement, conflict resolution, and governance activities are organized in multiple layers of nested enterprises.

Obviously, one can design a collective resource management system that expresses some of the above principles but not others. That doesn’t mean that system is good or bad, but it will have consequences for how that social ecosystem behaves. As we create these systems, apply these principles, and watch how the systems work to sustain communities and resources over time, we will learn what works and what does not, and what works best in a given situation.

Implicit in Ostrom’s eight principles is the idea that the purpose of the commons is to allow individuals or households to withdraw “resource units” from the CPR in accordance with the terms they agree upon with their fellow commoners. This idea arises from the physical natural resources around which commons have historically arisen. Part of the difficulty now is that commons frameworks have been used in the modern era to describe and create a variety of “resource communities”—in cities, cyberspace, social associations, and other circumstances—quite unlike the physical and natural resources shared in early human cultures. Wikipedia, LibreOffice software, and any number of other digital systems have been described as commons. Creative Commons licensing is another well-known example. Various Open Education platforms have also been created that may fit reasonably well into the commons frame (for discussion of these and other examples, see *Patterns of Commoning*, edited by David Bollier and Silke Helfrich, available as a book or free online at patternsofcommoning.org). For me, this blows things wide open, as I am not very familiar with these various new commons, and have not yet taken the time to dive into them enough to assess how well I believe they fit the commons model. I would hope that the three pillars and eight principles would apply reasonably readily to these new environments, or that Ostrom’s principles can be clearly translated to such worlds.

Perhaps we should stop worrying too much about whether a system is or is not a commons? This question frames the situation in black-and-white terms, which is rarely how the world works. There will always be fuzzy lines because every commons is and will be a unique and evolving creation, with unique and evolving histories, personalities, cultures, traditions, resources, contexts, and so on. But we can begin to ask: What resources are shared within this system, by whom, and how are they sharing them?

Going beyond the commons as a “thing,” if we think of the commons as a frame of reference, then we might start asking, *How is or is not a given system a commons?* The commons as a frame of reference offers more flexibility in designing new social systems. It also acknowledges that we are unlikely to go from 0 to 60 miles per hour on commons re-creation: we need to go through cultural successional processes to develop full-fledged commons cultures appropriate for our times and contexts. However, the commons-as-frame viewpoint also leaves the situation more open to conflation with non-commons, and thus to confusion. Nonetheless, the most we can ask for is that we remain mindful, that we design our systems and use our terms with care and deliberation.

For me, and probably for many other people, it will be easiest to begin to enter and gain facility with the worldview of commoning through concrete resources like water, soil, woodlands, and so on. This makes sense! As permaculturists, nature teaches us the principles by which she and we operate through working and playing with and in the landscape. But we then must graduate to applying those same principles and design processes in all the spheres of human culture. The concept of the commons and commoning can help us gain that facility in some of the places where our social structures directly meet the land. When we get good at that, we will better know how to play improvisational “culture design jazz” in the more abstract realms of our society, our economy, and our inner realms.

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