

Primary Source Collection #7: *The Tragedy of the Commons*



Introduction

Included in this source collection are excerpts of Garrett Hardin's 1968 article, "Tragedy of Freedom in a Commons," a well-known essay that draws from an old idea about human nature and the use of space. Hardin was a controversial figure, and fundamentally pessimistic about human nature and the future of the planet. In his article below, he considers "commons," or shared spaces and how people use and interact with them when unrestricted and unmanaged. Discussion questions are provided to help guide your reading.

PRIMARY SOURCES

HARDIN, TRAGEDY OF FREEDOM IN
A COMMONS

Primary Source 1: *Hardin, Tragedy of Freedom in a Commons*



Garrett Hardin

Garrett Hardin was a controversial figure, whose 1968 article, "Tragedy of Freedom in a Commons," has incited animated debates over the five decades since its publication. Over a long career, Hardin researched and taught human ecology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Perhaps his most controversial positions involved his support for "population control" measures such as eugenics and anti-immigration. Hardin also adopted a strong environmentalist position, challenging the logic of the capitalistic growth paradigm in *Living Within Limits*. In his classic essay, "Tragedy of Freedom in a Commons," excerpts of which appear below, he argued that humans are incentivized to abuse and deplete shared space without external intervention or governance. The interdisciplinary essay delves into morality and game theory among other topics, offering a provocative and highly-cited allegory for the challenge of climate change and resource sharing on an overtaxed planet.

Source: Hardin, Garrett. "The Tragedy of the Commons: The Population Problem has no Technical Solution; It Requires a Fundamental Extension in Morality." *Science* 162, no. 3859 (1968): 1243-1248.

Discussion Questions:

- What is the "tragedy of the commons," and how might we apply its lessons to the current situation the planet faces? What solutions does Hardin offer? Which might you add?
- Hardin is fundamentally pessimistic about human nature and the ability of humans to share without direction or oversight. How might one challenge this assessment?
- The third episode focuses primarily on novel and shared spaces, such as cyber space and outer space. Is it possible to apply lessons from how humans have negotiated these new spaces to how we approach timeless spaces, such as lands and seas on Earth? In other words, can we reverse the question we asked in earlier readings in this episode and consider how to govern Earth using what we have learned about governing outer space?

Tragedy of Freedom in a Commons

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.



**Cattle grazing on open public rangeland in
Malheur County, Oregon**

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?" This utility has one negative and one positive component.

1) The positive component is a function of the increment of one animal. Since the herdsman receives all the proceeds from the sale of the additional animal, the positive utility is nearly +1.

2) The negative component is a function of the additional overgrazing created by one more animal. Since, however, the effects of overgrazing are shared by all the herdsmen, the negative utility for any particular decision-making herdsman is only a fraction of -1.

Adding together the component partial utilities, the rational herdsman concludes that the only sensible course for him to pursue is to add another animal to his herd. And another; and another... But this is the conclusion reached by each and every rational herdsman sharing a commons. Therein is the tragedy. Each man is locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit—in a world that is limited. Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons. Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all.

Some would say that this is a platitude. Would that it were! In a sense, it was learned thousands of years ago, but natural selection favors the forces of psychological denial.* The individual benefits as an individual from his ability to deny the truth even though society as a whole, of which he is a part, suffers.

Education can counteract the natural tendency to do the wrong thing, but the inexorable succession of generations requires that the basis for this knowledge be constantly refreshed...



Herd of cattle grazing

*G. Hardin, Ed. *Population, Evolution. and Birth Control* (Freeman, San Francisco, 1964). p. 56. This is the author's original footnote.

Commercial fishing boat on the North Sea

In an approximate way, the logic of commons has been understood for a long time, perhaps since the discovery of agriculture or the invention of private property in real estate. But it is understood mostly only in special cases which are not sufficiently generalized. Even at this late date, cattlemen leasing national land on the western ranges demonstrate no more than an ambivalent understanding, in constantly pressuring federal authorities to increase the head count to the point where overgrazing produces erosion and weed-dominance.



Likewise, the oceans of the world continue to suffer from the survival of the philosophy of the commons. Maritime nations still respond automatically to the shibboleth of the "freedom of the seas." Professing to believe in "the inexhaustible resources of the oceans," they bring species after species of fish and whales closer to extinction.**

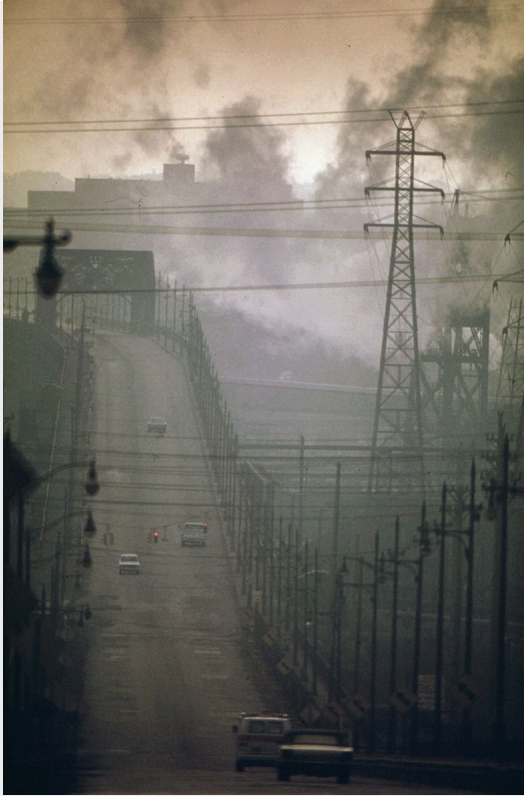
The National Parks present another instance of the working out of the tragedy of the commons. At present, they are open to all, without limit. The parks themselves are limited in extent—there is only one Yosemite Valley—whereas population seems to grow without limit. The values that visitors seek the parks are steadily eroded. Plainly, we must soon cease to treat the parks as commons or they will be of no value anyone.



What shall we do? We have several options. We might sell them off as private property. We might keep them as public property, but allocate the right enter them. The allocation might be on the basis of wealth, by the use of an auction system. It might be on the basis merit, as defined by some agreed-upon standards. It might be by lottery. Or it might be on a first-come, first-served basis, administered to long queues. These, I think, are all the reasonable possibilities. They are all objectionable. But we must choose—or acquiesce in the destruction of the commons that we call our National Parks.

People visiting near Glacier Point, Yosemite National Park

** S. McVay, Sci. Amer. 216 (No. 8), 13 (1966). This is the author's original footnote.



**Factory pollution over Clark Avenue Bridge
in Cleveland, Ohio, 1973**

Pollution

In a reverse way, the tragedy of the commons reappears in problems of pollution. Here it is not a question of taking something out of the commons, but of putting something in—sewage, or chemical, radioactive, and heat wastes into water; noxious and dangerous fumes into the air, and distracting and unpleasant advertising signs into the line of sight. The calculations of utility are much the same as before. The rational man finds that his share of the cost of the wastes he discharges into the commons is less than the cost of purifying his wastes before releasing them. Since this is true for everyone, we are locked into a system of "fouling our own nest," so long as we behave only as independent, rational, free-enterprises.

The tragedy of the commons as a food basket is averted by private property, or something formally like it. But the air and waters surrounding us cannot readily be fenced, and so the tragedy of the commons as a cesspool must be prevented by different means, by coercive laws or taxing devices that make it cheaper for the polluter to treat his pollutants than to discharge them untreated. We have not progressed as far with the solution of this problem as we have with the first. Indeed, our particular concept of private property, which deters us from exhausting the positive resources of the earth, favors pollution. The owner of a factory on the bank of a stream—whose property extends to the middle of the stream, often has difficulty seeing why it is not his natural right to muddy the waters flowing past his door. The law, always behind the times, requires elaborate stitching and fitting to adapt it to this newly perceived aspect of the commons.

The pollution problem is a consequence of population. It did not much matter how a lonely American frontiersman disposed of his waste. "Flowing water purifies itself every 10 miles," my grandfather used to say, and the myth was near enough to the truth when he was a boy, for there were not too many people. But as population became denser, the natural chemical and biological recycling processes became overloaded, calling for a redefinition of property rights.

How To Legislate Temperance?

...Prohibition is easy to legislate (though not necessarily to enforce); but how do we legislate temperance? Experience indicates that it can be accomplished best through the mediation of administrative law. We limit possibilities unnecessarily if we suppose that the sentiment of *Quis custodiet* denies us the use of administrative law.[†] We should rather retain the phrase as a perpetual reminder of fearful dangers we cannot avoid. The great challenge facing us now is to invent the corrective feedbacks that are needed to keep custodians honest. We must find ways to legitimate the needed authority of both the custodians and the corrective feedbacks.

[†] *Quis custodiet* comes from the Latin phrase "*Quis custodiet Ipsos custodes,*" or "who watches the watchers?"

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