

“The Tragedy of the Commons Revisited”: The Controversies

While Garrett Hardin's 1968 essay "The Tragedy of the Commons" is a seminal environmental text, bringing into focus the harsh realities of essentially unregulated use of natural resources in our capitalist, utilitarian, market-driven world, pointing out that the main problems are socio-political and moral-ethical and can't be solved by technical fixes, his article also brings up a number of very controversial issues and pushes a number of controversial stands for which Hardin has been soundly chastised, even excoriated, in the years since its publication, by critics on both the left and the right.

For an overview of the controversies, see the Wikipedia article:

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Garrett_Hardin

Among other things, Hardin has been denounced (as noted in the articles linked below) as a neo-Malthusian for his dire predictions of population growth; as a racist and eugenicist for his stands on immigration and population control; and as a doomsayer whose alarmist article is based on a nonhistorical fabulization of his main term, "the commons." Or, as Cory Doctorow puts it: "The 'Tragedy of the Commons' was invented by a white supremacist based on a false history, and it's toxic bullshit."

<https://boingboing.net/2019/03/07/scientific-fraud.html>

On top of all that, he has also been widely criticized for arguing that without either drastic big government intervention or radical privatization of the commons, the tragedy is inevitable, an argument his critics say is flawed in a number of ways. One such criticism notes that he mislabeled his prime example, in that what he really describes is not "the commons" but "open-access regimes." Others note that his argument is based on an outmoded notion of human nature (cf., Desmond Morris, *The Naked Ape*, 1967) that portrays man as an aggressive, self-seeking animal while discounting social and familial pre- and post-natal cooperative aspects of human society.

A related criticism points out that the true commons of post-Roman Europe (from the dark ages and feudal/medieval period through the time of the Reformation and even later in some areas), was a time when the pre-industrial masses or commoners, i.e., "the demos" (from Greek *dēmos/dāmos*, 'shareholder'; cf. the Roman *plebes*), had mutual concern for what we might call public lands, before the lands were privatized and seriously exploited by the big-money interests of the day (in what is known as the "enclosure movement," the real "tragedy of the commons," according to some historians).

The most prominent of these sociological criticisms is that of Elinor Ostrom, a one-time admirer of Hardin's article, whose 1990 book *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, takes him to task for not recognizing effective widespread, essentially grassroots, management of the commons, a critique carried on by the Schumacher Center for New Economics:

<https://centerforneweconomics.org/apply/the-commons-program/what-about-the-tragedy-of-the-commons/>

<https://tierneylab.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/10/15/the-non-tragedy-of-the-commons/>

Or, as Tim Harford says:

"This is not to deny the existence of the tragedy of the commons altogether. Hardin's analysis looks prescient when applied to our habit of pumping carbon dioxide into the atmosphere or overfishing the oceans. But the existence of clear counter-examples should make us hesitate before accepting Hardin's argument that tragedy is unstoppable."

<http://timharford.com/2013/08/do-you-believe-in-sharing/>

Probably the most vehement criticisms of Hardin's work center on his mathematical updating of Malthus in light of mid-century explosive world population growth, his insistence on the need for population control, his forthright statement that "Freedom to breed is intolerable" (positions also expounded by his friends Anne and Paul Ehrlich in their 1967 book *The Population Bomb*, which was also a sensation and drew similarly rancorous complaints, which often suggested that the topic of population control was fascist or Communist or racist and should be strictly off-limits in discussions of environment). In less incitive terms, Hardin's and Ehrlich's mathematics and conclusions, like those of the the Club of Rome's equally-controversial 1972 publication *The Limits to Growth*, were widely criticized by some mainstream economists for being based on a statistical model that projected large-scale disastrous effects based on a relatively small sample of selected environmental conditions using pessimistic assumptions.

On the other hand, Hardin's article has engendered a number of studies that apply his ideas coupled with Ostrom's in nuanced approaches to current problems like climate change:

<https://blog.sciencemuseum.org.uk/tragedy-of-the-commons-updated-to-model-climate-change/>

Fifty years after its publication in *Science* (house organ of the AAAS, the American Association for the Advancement of Science), the magazine commemorated "The Tragedy of the Commons" with an article citing a number of later publications addressing its legacy, including updated scientific extensions of Hardin's work as well as controversies about it:

<https://www.sciencemag.org/site/feature/misc/webfeat/sotp/commons.xhtml>

While Hardin's article continues to be controversial, it is also widely recognized as insightful about environmentally unsound ideological engines deeply embedded in modern civilization. While doomsday predictions about overpopulation have not yet come true (e.g., the Ehrlichs' prediction that widespread famine would occur by the end of the 20thC), the geometric population growth Hardin spoke of is a contemporary reality, and though the geometric growth rate has slowed somewhat, the growth itself continues (from 2bn in 1968 to 7bn now).

Similarly, although cultural awareness, political restrictions and international cooperation in recent years have slowed rates of some forms of toxic pollution, making pollution controls part of the costs of doing business, of production, distribution and consumption (e.g., we're not spewing out as much DDT, Agent Orange, SO₂ or ozone-depleters as we were), toxic pollution like pollution in general continues to grow — e.g., plastics (including nanoplastics and plasticizers), antibiotics, and greenhouse gases. We continue, as Hardin said, "to use the commons as a cesspool."

And again similarly, here closer to home, though we have through a variety of conservation measures managed to slow the rate of growth of the cone of depression in the groundwater under Sierra Vista and Ft. Huachuca, and the rate of population growth in the watershed at large has slowed down recently, both population and cone continue to grow on an apparently inexorable trajectory toward drying up of the San Pedro River, the last free-flowing river in the Southwest.