

Beyond Regulation and Privatization: Critically Evaluating and Responding to the Tragedy of the Commons

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Project Background

To those involved in environmental management and protection, and accustomed to the accompanying polemic prescriptions, the language of the tragedy of the commons is all too familiar. The premise is straightforward: when a limited resource is available for communal use, rational and self interested individuals will collectively use the resource beyond what it can sustainably support, leading to its eventual and tragic decimation. This pervasive metaphor offers a bifurcated response, with each proposed alternative informing major streams of thought in response to environmental concerns. Yet the wealth of theory and dialogue that has been informed by the metaphor of the tragedy of the commons may refer back to an inaccurate or incomplete premise, rendering the resulting solutions and prescriptions partial or unnecessarily restricted in scope or nature. Through an analysis of each the assumptions and the implications of the tragedy of the commons, a more nuanced and holistic perspective of the nature of environmental issues and possible solutions to them may be developed.

Traditional Prescriptions for Preventing the Tragedy

The proposal of the inevitable ruin of a shared, open-access, limited resource was brought to prominence by ecologist philosopher Garrett Hardin. Hardin, in response to the ruin predicted when costs are diffuse but benefits, concentrated, proposed two pathways: regulation and privatization. Regulation seeks to set limits on use through coercive force, such that no individual user over-appropriates. Privatization seeks to allot ownership of the resource, eliminating the “commonality” of the commons, and internalizing incentives for sustainable use. Yet both methods, when employed in real-world commons problems, have faced limited success.

Beyond Regulation and Privatization

In light of its limits, the Nobel Prize winning work of political economist Elinor Ostrom rejects this binary view of solutions to the tragedy of the commons. While useful and illustrative for some cases, the tragedy of the commons is a metaphor, fraught with certain assumptions about the workings of both natural and social systems. She proposes a model of collective self-governance in the management of common-pool resources, that more holistically accounts for the communicative and communal nature of the human person, in addition to self-interest.

Ostrom’s model of collective self-governance to manage and sustain common-pool resources is not a panacea. It, like regulation and privatization, has limits. However, it offers an alternative to the polarizing binary of regulation and privatization in pursuing environmentally and socially preferable outcomes, one which recognizes the limits of the metaphor of the tragedy of the commons. Moving beyond regulation and privatization, it paves a pathways forward towards nuanced solutions that take a more holistic view of human persons and society to propose relevant, dignified, and enduring responses to environmental concerns.

The full document and sources (in Spanish) can be found at shorturl.at/EJZ56