

Economy

The naturalness of communal life

When you live in a community, you see it as the most natural and spontaneous thing in the world that everything is shared, that everything must strengthen everyone to work... and precisely because of that, it never seems like a big deal, and doesn't seem to have special value. It's "spontaneous" and "normal." But when you go visit the everyday institutions of society—businesses, communities of neighbors, administration—it's hard to find an iota of the things you take for granted, and you wonder if it's really as "natural" as it seemed to you.

But if we think about it a bit, that "naturalness" is quite present in our culture. All languages have a specific word for communal work: in Spanish, using the Asturian word, we call it *andecha*; in Portuguese, *mutirão*; in Euskera [Basque], *auzolan*; in Russian, *toloka*; in Finnish, *talkoot*; in Norwegian, *dugnad*... There are also words for community property: the traditional *procomún* of peasants and brotherhoods of fishers, or *comunal*, as it began to be called in the fifteenth century, is equivalent to the Japanese *iriai* or the English "commons."

That's because the agrarian and hunting commons are the original form of ownership and work, long predating State property and private property... and for the time being, they remain more persistent: common institutions remained vigorous throughout the world even through the Middle Ages, and resisted Modernity with relative strength until the "amortization" of nineteenth-century liberalism forced them to evolve into modern cooperativism. But don't be misled, still today, there are large European regions, like Galicia, where more than 25% of the territory is made up of mountains and common lands. We have always been surrounded by communal property and community values. Our culture kept more than just the formula for us.

If it wasn't enough to observe the survival of large expanses of communal land and herds on all continents, it must be said that in all of our community experience we've never found a single case where problems arise because someone had consumption patterns that endangered common resources. In community life, there are problems and conflicts, but in

our experience, that's not one of them, and if it does happen somewhere, it certainly isn't frequent or relevant.

“The tragedy of the commons” contains a trap. It's a theoretical model created in 1968 by Garrett Hardin, an neo-Malthusian ecologist, a forerunner of what would later be called “degrowth,” obsessed with what he believed to be an “excess of population.” Hardin starts with a definition of the behavior of individuals according to which they would look only at their short-term interests, but would be blind both to the social result (which is to say, the impact their actions would have on the sum of individual results) and on their own total results over time. The model also means that the commons in question is not reproducible (with free software, this isn't applicable, because it doesn't run out if we use it more).

With these initial restrictions, according to which people literally behave as if there was no tomorrow and there were no other people—surprise, surprise!—the result is that the shared resource runs out. The results are implicit in the conditions of the game, and the result is the one that was desired: the “demonstration” that the reality that surrounds us doesn't exist, because it is “irrational.”

This is a very different path from the one followed by the classical economists and Marx himself. They had not used an abstract and self-reinforcing model, but had had to explain and model why commons existed in a good part of the arable lands in Europe and, above all, why the peasants didn't want to privatize them. The history of the nineteenth century in large countries like Russia, Spain, or Italy is the story of governments like that of the Spanish minister Madoz, trying to privatize the commons by force, with little success. It was a drama for the liberals of the times, who thought that without individual property rights, the countryside would never become technological, nor would enough labor flow to the cities to make industry viable. It was a theoretical problem for Marx, who was continually asked by those in Russia what to do with the countless peasant commons there, and whether they could evolve “directly” to an economy of abundance without going through privatization.

But, by 1968, when Hardin writes *The Tragedy of the Commons*, the commons is no longer a political problem. It's simply a settled reality that economic theory could explain easily, without the need to include internal or external regulations, whether with game theory, modeling the commons as Nash equilibria, or even with neoclassical theory, including the way that would make Gary Becker famous, models of long-term rationality.

Only in the Anglo-Saxon world, where the nineteenth-century amortizations were really effective and put an end to common ownership of the land, could Hardin's story come to be “common knowledge,” because by 1968, nobody in the USA or Great Britain had

experience with common lands and shared usage. But in reality, these were part of the everyday geography of millions of inhabitants where the liberal revolution hadn't totally triumphed in its agrarian policies, nor had Soviet or Chinese socialism been imposed—a large area which included, on a continuum, places as disparate as Indochina, Galicia, Mexico, la Araucania [Chile], or South Africa.

However, in 2009, the Swedish Academy gave the Nobel Prize in Economics to a political scientist, Elinor Ostrom, for having “challenged conventional wisdom [*sic*] by demonstrating how local property can be managed by a local commons without regulation by central authority or privatization.” Ostrom soon became a sort of patron saint to all those in universities who were interested in the community experience in general and the commons in particular. The central idea they took from her work is that the management of the commons requires a complex set of norms and equilibria that remain “artificial,” products of a very sophisticated social construct.

This is true, but their political-academic claim is not disinterested: when a social organization is described as “artificial” and “sophisticated,” it is implicitly being argued that it's necessary to have “special,” academic, or “technical” knowledge to make it work. Ostrom thus became an excuse to argue for the guardianship of groups of theoreticians and academics over the social process, with their consequent industry of advanced degrees, courses, and seminars to train “specialists.”

But 2009 was also the first real year of crisis in Europe. Millions of people were left without work. In countries like Greece, Spain or Portugal, thousands and thousands of families lost their houses. Spontaneously, the social network—first, families, and then communities—started to reorganize for survival. Hundreds of small “communes” appeared, houses that were shared between families that had been left without regular income, in which everything that was obtained went into a common fund. Nobody needed to design or certify a sophisticated set of rules. While it was a precarious response to an emergency situation, the “naturalness” of the process is noteworthy. The model was already there, in the cultural inheritance and in the traditions of the working classes.

And that's really the key: the community is, in point of fact, a sophisticated cultural construction. And what's more, so are the traditions of sharing that are profoundly embedded in popular culture. When an egalitarian community is born, when we create a new commons to be shared, we're not starting from zero. We are putting into “production” all that code, all that community rationality that we inherited from the learned reactions and ways of managing common belongings in our families. That's why we experience it as “spontaneous,” why it feels “natural,” and why it appears again and again in such different

environments all over the world. Our “rationality” is definitively not what Hardin and the neo-Malthusian theoreticians of degrowth attributed to us when they presented the irrational destruction of non-renewable resources as a product of our “nature” and not as the result of over-scaled corporations dedicated to looking for rents at all costs.

No, to understand the shared economy, to work together to manage the needs of all in a community economy, we don’t need big treatises, or consultations with university technicians. We just need to go back home.