

Hybridize the Commons: The example of the Polynesian lagoons

The theme of the Commons is subject to political, ideological and religious instrumentalization. This is especially the case for intangible Commons, in particular as they refer to the theme of individual property. However, the physical Commons, in the sense of the Common Pool Resources as defined by Elinor Ostrom (*Governing the Commons*, 1990), are not spared. It is likely that the efforts to exploit them which they are subject to today would have surprised Mrs. Ostrom herself. **We are particularly focusing here on an intentionally anti-State conception of the Common, which we call the “radical” Common.** The Common thereby conceived is opposed to the technocratic approaches of administrations and would completely substitute them with decentralized decision-making processes. These processes are based on the knowledge and know-how of communities of users. In this vision of things, they are not only opposed to the technicians of the central or local administration, but also to militants from civil society who intend to ground their operations on a scientific base. **This post aims to refute this interpretation of the notion of Common Pool or physical Common which is, in our opinion, ill-founded, and show the extent to which it could be counterproductive.** We use the example of the Polynesian lagoons and conclude by recommending, in contrast to this radicalization of the Commons, “hybridizing” them.

The Polynesian lagoon as an increasingly important Common

Each atoll constitutes a specific case and we must avoid generalizations. However, it can be said that the more the lagoons are accessible and well-served, the more they are subject to strong anthropogenic pressure. This pressure may be due to a number of different actors (even if they are not all on the same atoll at the same time): spear fishermen or surface fishermen, farmers, fish farms, pearl farms, scuba diving clubs, various tourist service providers (excursions, boat trips), luxury hotels or small guest houses... **The lagoon is a complex physical Common, as in most cases it is multi-stakeholder. Paradoxically, each of these actors is often unaware of the environmental status of the lagoon, whereas the very sustainability of their activity depends on it.**

Pollution (caused by solid or liquid waste, for example) scares tourists away, but also the underwater fauna, which is precisely one of the main attractions of the lagoon. The overuse of water by fish farms or pearl farms can cause a depletion of its nutritional quality or algae blooms which jeopardize the farms. All actors should show solidarity in the management of the environment in general and of water quality in particular. This management is a delicate issue, as in certain cases it would require limiting production or visits (which each category of actors is *a priori* reluctant to do, their first reflex being to seek to optimize incomes from their activity), while the regulatory authorities are absent or have partial powers.

ID4D tag: **Commons**, Natural resources, Waste, Asia, World
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In our opinion, the concept of the Common is especially suited to the case of lagoons, even if, as we have said, they are complex Commons as they are multi-stakeholder. **In most of the cases we have been given to study, the mere fact of establishing the idea of a Common would already constitute real progress in terms of raising awareness of the environmental cause and promoting it. This above all involves developing awareness among all the stakeholders and coordinated management practices.**

Radical Common Pool and hybrid Common Pool

The radical conception of Commons excludes any participation or representation of local authorities from the game. But by doing so, it condemns the Commons to being confined to objects to preserve natural resources with minimal operating costs and especially without investment needs. A Common cannot even receive subsidies when it does not have legal personality. It cannot have access to borrowing without own income. **This is the limit of the radical Common: refusing any coordination with local authorities, which do benefit from subsidies and can borrow, means ignoring financing issues.** Yet most environmental subjects require sometimes heavy investments: we could simply mention here the issue of the gradual salinization of freshwater lens in the islands, or the issue – a nagging question in the Pacific – of waste collection, treatment and disposal.

Conversely, the hybrid Common Pool, which we are promoting here, seeks to reconcile the participatory approach and the idea of a Common with the intervention of local and central authorities. This conception of the Common Pool endorses the most common cases: local users' groups or associations are faced with their non-solvency and need to call on the local authority to finance concrete actions.

Beyond simply preserving resources – an objective in itself commendable, but insufficient in view of the scale of the challenges –, we believe that it is necessary to **broaden the subject of the management of the Commons to its coordination with environmental governance.**

In terms of law, much can be done to make the notion of the Common more operational. In different parts of the world, natural spaces have been given legal personality. To remain in the Polynesian cultural area, we can mention the recent cases of the Te Urewera National Park and Whanganui River in New Zealand. Lagoons which particularly suffer from anthropogenic pressure would be subject to this type of legal treatment, the first stage in attributing an operational dimension to the notion of Common.

The following stages in this path towards the operability of the Common Pool would be the stages of capacity building in contracting authority and the stage of borrowing capacity, and consequently access to sustainable resources. Finally, the issue of taxation arises, which directly results from the latter subject: taxation in general and environmental taxation in particular.

Conclusion

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As we see, all these issues refer to scales and levels of intervention which are matters of governance at local and central level. It involves coordinating the notion of Common – with all the potential it brings to communities – with the standard tools, particularly the legal, financial and fiscal tools, of the other levels of governance. **In this respect, the radical Common is a dead end. The hybrid Common would appear to be the pragmatic formula which allows the notion of Common to be fully operationalized.**