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The Tragedy of The Commons

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1 Introduction

What is 'the tragedy of the commons'? Can it be overcome? Discuss, with reference to at least one natural resource.

In his 1968 contribution to *Science*, Garrett Hardin argue for the existence of a class of human problems which can be called 'no technical solution problems,' and within these problems, the specific case of humans inherent propensity towards various freedoms resulting in misuse of finite resources within a finite world (Hardin, 1968; Wall, 2014). A problem with no technical solution can be illustrated by arms races where the most rational behaviour from a purely arms standpoint is to have more than your adversaries; resulting in an ever decreasing national security. Each agent needs to increase the arsenal in order to stay on top, and in doing so—in the case of arms—increase the potential effect of any stand-off. Hardin use the example of tic-tac-toe, in which if both parties play rationally and are fully aware of the rules, no one ever wins. "The only way to win", Hardin argue, "is by giving radical meaning to the word 'win'" (Hardin, 1968, p. 1243). The tragedy of the commons, as Hardin's paper was named, focused on how common areas and resources alongside freedoms—while still in function of rational agents—in aggregate produce unsustainable behaviour from a macro perspective. Hardin in his paper applied this to several aspects of humanity illustrating the grave inconsideration and argue for a limitation on the freedom to breed—as to limit growth of humans having to share the finite resources (Hardin, 1968). As such, Hardin argue for applying the Pareto principle to one of the most innate and biological function of any specie in order to save the viability of any future life on earth. Since, multiple authors has provided further arguments for and against Hardin's tragedy (Wall, 2014; Soroos, 2005; Longo, Clausen & Clark, 2015). Shiva (2016) argue that Hardin's tragedy can be traced back to Thomas Hobbes, and quotes Hobbes in saying that life is a "short, nasty and brutish affair" and further that "man is constantly engaged in a war of all against all". Shiva argue that "this view of humanity as inherently competitive denies the sustainability of the commons" (Shiva, 2016, p. 54). Wall (2014) argue for the concept of concerns towards the commons dating back to Aristotle. Longo, Clausen & Clark (2015) argue for the anthropocene; that "the current historical epoch [...] marks the period in which human activities became the primary driver of global environmental change" and that it becomes "increasingly clear that humans face an existential crisis" (Longo, Clausen & Clark, 2015, pp. 15-16).

In order to explore this concept further, I will focus on the inevitably detrimental act by U.S. President Donald J. Trump in leaving the Paris Climate Accord and on the paradoxical case of Norway; its oil reserves, Sovereign Wealth Fund and its climate and sustainability efforts.

2 Discussion

On June 1st, 2017, President Trump announced that the U.S., in its federal government, would leave the 2015 Paris Climate accord signed by 195 countries. In doing so, the U.S—the world second largest current polluter and history’s largest polluter—entered the company of only two other countries not willing to sign the accord; Nicaragua and Syria. Nicaragua wanted a stronger agreement, and Syria is in the midst of a war and internal crisis. In the words of David Brooks of The New York Times:

Gary Cohn, wrote the following passage in The Wall Street Journal: “The president embarked on his first foreign trip with a cleareyed outlook that the world is not a ‘global community’ but an arena where nations, nongovernmental actors and businesses engage and compete for advantage.”

That sentence is the epitome of the Trump project. It asserts that selfishness is the sole driver of human affairs. It grows out of a worldview that life is a competitive struggle for gain. It implies that cooperative communities are hypocritical covers for the selfish jockeying underneath.

(Brooks, 2017)

President Trump’s actions are the epitome of the tragedy of the commons; the unwillingness and inability to consider the grander scope and consequence of an action. It constitutes a selfish action that is designed to promote short term gains on the back of the regard for his grand children and his grand childrens grand children. Although the extent to which this action is more than just an act of fulfilling symbolic promises made to his voters will not be discussed; we are rather discussing the symbolic effect of one country’s move away from partaking in arguably the most important issue of the sustainability of our specie, all other species on this planet and the planet in itself.

On the case of Norway; Norway discovered large amounts of oil in the North Sea around 1960 and the petroleum since grown to account to a quarter of its GDP. In 1990 Norway set up a sovereign wealth fund—built on the taxation of the output of the operators within its petroleum sector. As of the current writing, the fund now holds more than \$1,200 billion and has an annual return rate of 5.8% before management costs and inflation. Of the return, 2.4% or \$1,73 billion can be funneled into the state budget every year.

At the same time as Norway is capitalizing heavily on pumping up non-renewable natural resources from the ground, which then ends up further toxicating the environment, it fronts many green initiatives including a goal of delegalization of the sale of fossil burning vehicles by 2025. Yet, the state of Norway seems willingly unaware of the hypocrisy of affording to be green—by being black. In regards to the tragedy of the commons and pollution Hardin argue that it is the same problem as was stated initially, but in reverse; the problem lies in adding to the commons rather than removing something from it. In the case of non-renewable resources, this then means that it causes double the harm to the global society's commons. Since Hardin's contribution in 1968, the consequences of his paper has only increased in scope and in terms of irreversibility. Society's understanding of sustainability and the detrimental effects of certain chemicals has gained mainstream traction, but the consequences has also been heavily contested by people not being willing to accept largely irrefutable data.

But can the tragedy of the commons be overcome? In regards to the case examples, the tragedy of the commons is interwoven in the very fabric of the global market, of national states, their sovereignty and their power. It immediately feels rather futile when we consider that a consensus on the damning evidence of the consequences of climate change was available as early as the 1980s, and we consider the denial and opposition that still occurs (Washington & Cook, 2011). From misrepresentations, to cherry-picking and to conspiracy theories; people are unwilling to accept the consensus position of mainstream science (Ibid.). The tragedy of the commons of course covers a plenitude of commons arms races, but this paper will primarily discuss the aspect of non-renewables, its emissions and the efforts to curb both. To overcome the tragedy of the commons, we need to discuss the radical changes necessary. And while the 2015 Paris Climate Accord and others like it do show a willingness to fight the particular issue of climate change, it only accounts to the willingness of nation states, and only the willingness limit emissions when there is financial gain in doing so. Which can explain how curbing emissions have gained more traction as alternatives become more viable. This is the epitome of the paradoxical and hypocritical case of Norway, and it is President Trump's rationale in that the accord hurt American business interests (although that reasoning is riddled with flaws (Brooks, 2017)). Whereas Hardin argued for a limitation on breeding—and arguing for it to be instated as soon as possible, yet we know it hasn't happened—I will try to argue for other avenues.

2.1 The commons that should not be commons

From the one perspective, we can argue that the tragedy of the commons is the result of relaxed regulations, freedoms and an over-reliance on the rationality of man, and by extent society, organizations and nation states. Given how we can argue for the irrationality of these, it seems conceivable to argue that more regulations for how commons are managed would help solve the problem. However, we are arguing for a paradox in that we play to the rationality of someone

we deem irrational. At the other perspective, we can also argue that the tragedy of the commons is the result of inefficient regulatory practice; if access to, and the amount of output of were distributed on a sufficitarian or egalitarian principle we would be able to contain the tragedy—as Hardin also argued.

But not all resources and commons should be readily accessible and self-managed—nor are they. Hardin in his original paper highlights the example of the housing market as one among many markets that are managed with the intention of preserving the inherent value of the market in itself and the limitations on the freedoms are largely considered necessary due to the realization of this fact. As a converse example Hardin discuss national parks and argue that the value of a national park is in the solitude of being where no one else are, but a national park is inherently free for all, and so as population grow more people will visit the national parks and at some point it will no longer have a value; there won't be solitude.

Limiting access to certain commons, e.g. breeding new life, is difficult also due to social norms more than anything else. For less controversial markets to limit we can go back to the case of non-renewable natural resources such as oil and gas. The effort to find and extract oil, gas and other forms of stored carbon is not controversial in the sense that curbing access would limit an inherent freedom. There are competing interests, but beyond the financial aspect and the world's current reliance on non-renewable resources, there is no good argument for the extraction, alas it is possible to limit the access and promote a transition and the current state is solely a selfish one by the current habitants of the planet. There are though success stories when it comes to limiting access to commons on the basis of the greater good and the sustainability of earth and humankind; namely the limitation of the use of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) following the Vienna convention and the Montreal protocol in 1985 and 1987 respectively and the regulation on the use of elements such as lead (Fuel Quality in Australia, n.d). When it comes to the climate and society's current frictionless ride down the slippery slope towards an inhabitable planet, the Paris Climate Accord of 2015, ratified by largely every country in the world, provided a solid step towards the the global and parallel understanding required to disarm the arms race that is dismantling of global pollution and the investment in green efforts.

2.2 The borders that should not be borders

Until now, in this paper, we have considered the agents within the commons to be siloed of each other. Every agent is acting under their own volition and the act and benefit of one does not in itself worsen the situation for any other agent—but neither does it in itself benefit any other agent. We should therefore consider how any one action could benefit more than one agent.

In its essence I am arguing that if the problem is the rationality of selfishness, we should consider to what extent we can remove selfishness from the table. Though evolution and from the moment of the first human settlement, humans have benefitted from organizing in groups; from sharing the effort of hunting, caretaking and everything in between. As we grew towards modernity, the complexity of sharing resources also grew. Industrialization, urbanization and capitalism all have caught most everyone in a large and complex web of interests and competing interests; of selfishness. We have grown into standing our siloed ground.

In terms of the tragedy of the commons and how we can overcome it, we should then consider sufficitarian principles on an international level; to untangle the web and to diminish the inequality the web has caused. The first and most obvious resistance, was there political interest to do so, would come from the private sector being deprived of the ability to produce as they would please and to the price at which they would please. Proponents of free markets—and the resolve of the free market—would, and have, argued that the market (Washington & Cook, 2011). When we look at the earth in the grander scale, that of the astrophysicist Carl Sagan’s “pale blue dot; a very small stage in [the] vast cosmic arena” that is our galaxy and the universe, we are tiny—and our borders, wars and fences do not make any sense (CarlSaganPortal, 2009).

2.3 The state of scarcity

It has now gone nearly 50 years since Hardin’s paper and the article by Wiesner & York (1964) that predate it, and as mentioned a number of times; we are not as close to a solution as one would hope. As in the eyes of Brooks (2017); we allow for selfishness to be the sole driver; the rationality of the one rather than the collective. Within the paper from 1968 lies a dark view on both live and non-live resources. Whereas live resources can be sustained in that they can be regenerated as long as it is done in a sustainable manner; not depriving it from its ability to regenerate, the same is not the case with non-live and non-renewable resources such as fossils. Non-renewable resources in the form of fossil fuels is not only on a clear, albeit long, path to being used up, but using these fuels also stand to introduce an unsustainable amount of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere and thus doubling the damage. It does not help that the oil and gas industry is lucrative and has very large global operators and thus are good at lobbying their interests—nor that most heavy trade transport operations are relying upon just this industry to provide their fuels and that few viable alternatives exist for long and heavy hauls.

In order to avoid ruining the environment, eating up all of the non-renewable resources and making species go extinct, all we need to do is to stop this unsustainable behaviour. We would necessarily not have to do anything other than stop. Stop using non-renewable resources when and where it isn’t necessary, stop eating and destroying plants and animals at a pace at which reproduction cannot keep up and stop spewing out environmentally detrimental chemicals

whenever we can avoid it. The practicalities of stopping is obviously not as easy as the mere formulated thought of the action—which we will come back to in the next section. How scarce a resource is depends on how much we use in regards to how much we have. “Scarcity”, Classen (2009) argue, “arises out of the unavoidable opposition of endless wants and limited means to satisfy these wants” (Classen, 2009, p. 1).

2.4 The state of society

In terms of society as a whole, the concern ultimately lies with the distribution of a good. As I discussed in the last section, we can not merely rely on the rationality of humans and as such we need to distribute access to, and the output of the commons in a way that best serves society as a whole. From the perspective of the internals of nation states, these kinds of problems are handled very differently. Which brings us back to the context of Norway and the Scandinavian countries and their strong standings as social and welfare states. Norway has a growing set of services that its populations has come to expect, and the quality of those services. The country already has a very high tax rate and to raise it even more as the transition away from fossil fuels becomes real will most likely not be popular among constituents as not doing so will likely entail reduction in welfare services. As such, the country take the shortcut of ignoring the hypocrisy of subsidizing green behaviour with money earned by contributing to climate change, pollution and the tragedy of the commons. It uses its large amounts of resources to buy out carbon shares from less wealthy countries in order to delay the internal efforts necessary to transition away for as long as it is economically viable.

In the international context the problem and the potential pathways for any sort of resolution is somewhat different. Whereas the internals of nation states arguably has better incentive structures for cross-constituent agreements, the international sphere moves slower, crosses larger cultural borders and is inherently more complex. Lobbyists, corporations and other interest organizations has a say and powers beyond what most constituents and groups of constituents are capable of. The tragedy is thus more or less mutually agreed upon, but the rational view of corporations’ *raison d’être* argue for their financial concerns to be elevated above ethics and sustainability. Just as in the case of the tobacco producer Philip Morris, oil companies was long aware of the detrimental climate effects of their business before taking a more morally sensible stance on the issue—just on the basis that it hurts their own inherent interests (Oreskes & Conway, 2012). It is hard to claim that it is not financial sense in such a deceit, but it a despicably selfish and immoral act. For the oil industry, this is true both in terms of the earlier fight on lead and the later fight on carbon dioxide levels (Halderen et. al, 2016; Ogunseita, 2016; Markowitz, 1985). While far from perfect, there is a stronger focus on sustainability, renewable resources and zero emission strategies than when Hardin wrote his paper. After the signing of the Paris climate accord, there seemed to be a larger consensus on the veracity of, and the importance to combat climate change. The election

of Pres. Trump in the U.S. has again thrown in the absurdly irrational thought of pulling out of the recently affirmed accord—on the basis of the nation’s corporate interests. And in doing so, holds no concerns for the longevity of the planet and all of its species. He is not the only one to hold such a position, as we have touched on earlier in terms of denial, but there is arguably no one with a greater impact on the direction of the efforts.

If there is one concern that will hold us back from overcoming the tragedy, it is surely the greed of society and its individual agents. To again quote Carl Sagan and the pale blue dot that the planet is; “Think about the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors, so that in gloriant triumph, they could be the momentary master of a fraction of the dot[. Think about] our imagined self-importance; the illusion that we have some privileged position in the universe” (CarlSaganPortal, 2009). To the same point, I would argue to the illusion from the states heads of some—if not many—corners of this planet that they will ever be allowed to neglect their respective responsibility in acting to stabilize the climate of the planet, rather than to continue to pollute it when the alternatives are there.

2.5 Conclusion

So in a cliché summation; the current state is immoral and unsustainable. Though it is arguably rational on the micro level, it falls well outside of the interests of society and the planet on the macro level and thus largely irrational behaviour. I have through this paper tried to establish four different contexts and lenses at which to view the issue; how not all commons should be commons, how borders stand in the way of resource sharing, how inconsiderate use of finite resources hurt our existence and how the international aspect of societies and nation states plays into any efforts towards a resolution. From common sense and the two case examples discussed it is truly evident that Hardin, the ones before him and the ones after him all had a point. For all the contexts and lenses, the rationality of the individual cripples society’s sense of sustaining itself. Hardin’s tragedy of the commons underpins the dark trend towards unsustainability through neglect, egocentrism and bureaucracy. Any attempt to overcome it would disturb any sense of a free market and capitalistic principles and would entail overcoming international, national and local laws and norms. It would curtail freedoms normatively regarded as innate and inherent. But at the same time, it has to be done. The dark trend has most turned all black and we are rapidly moving towards the point of not return—if we are even still so lucky as to not have passed it yet. From what I have argued, the tragedy of the commons can still be overcome. It can be overcome in the same way that the—albeit imperfect—Montreal protocol showed a path to overcome the detrimental effect of CFCs in the atmosphere; by putting the better empirical foundation of science ahead of the freedoms of individuals and ahead of the freedoms of organizations. Ultimately also ahead of the freedoms of nation states—which is the most difficult; to curtail freedoms of nation states curtails sovereignty. Since the start of modern life, industrialization and urbanization,

we have been on a steady path of decline in sustainability—as Hardin and others have argued. Our rational selfishness is dragging us towards a point of no return. In order to avoid it and to overcome it we ought to limit the scope of selfishness for individuals, companies, states and any other agents by purely arguing on the basis of the rationality of the collective for issues that stand in the way of not only individual and collective humans, but also every other specie.

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