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A Comparison of Two Different Theoretical Approaches To Commons

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The following table was developed as a way of distinguishing the commons theory approach of the Ostrom Workshop at Indiana University from the evolving commons theory of voluntary action of Lohmann (1992; 2015). This document is intended as a Free Cultural Work: This means the freedom to use the work and enjoy the benefits of using it; the freedom to study the work and to apply knowledge acquired from it; the freedom to make and redistribute copies, in whole or in part, of the information or expression; and the freedom to make changes and improvements, and to distribute derivative works. (See creativecommons.org for further information).



Theoretical Dimension	Ostrom Commons (1990; 2007)	Lohmann Commons (1992)	Lohmann New Commons (2015)
Initial Problem	Environmental resource depletion; overharvesting	Character of voluntary action	Voluntary action and democracy in Society
Approach to collectivity	Collective choice	Collective action	Collective action
Theoretical approach	Formal theory	Substantive theory	Substantive theory
Definition of Commons (1)	A commons is a singular resource that can be depleted but is not exclusive (e.g., water and grass). The term	Commons are characterized by: 1) Uncoerced action 2) Shared Purposes	Common goods association is characterized by: 1) Uncoerced action

	commons informally refers to public goods, common pool resources, or any area with uncertain property rights.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3) Shared Resources 4) Fellow-feeling 5) Indigenous sense of justice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2) Mission (Shared purposes) 3) Common pooled resources (CPR)
Definition of Commons (2)	Aggregations of resources for collective allocation	Social institutions; associations, assemblies, informal and formal organizations	
Definition of Commons (3)	Aggregations of resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Natural commons 2) Aggregations of human actors with resources. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Human-mediated natural commons b) Social commons 	
Process	Resource units are extracted (appropriated) from a common pool and the resulting products may be used by the appropriator for consumption, used as input in some production function, or exchanged with other actors.	<p>Critique: This process is characteristic of only some types of commons (e.g. agricultural commons) in which the CPR is a joint effort of “private” appropriators.</p> <p>In another type of commons, such appropriation for consumption, production or exchange by individuals or groups does not occur. These economic functions are controlled by the collective choices of the group or association of appropriators (or governors)</p> <p>As they evolve, common goods associations develop:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Social Capital (<i>philia</i>) 2) Their own distinct Moral Order (<i>diaconia</i>) 	
Appropriation Externality	One actor’s use of a resource can affect availability of resource to other users	<p>Critique: This condition is inconsistent with the non-rivalrous condition of public goods, and points toward a separate, third category a.k.a. common goods that meet either, but not both specifications of public goods.</p>	
Common goods	The term common goods in conventional political and economic theory is a synonym for public goods.	<p>There are at least two intermediate categories logically “between” the pure types of public goods (non-rivalrous and non-exclusive) and private (rivalrous and exclusive) goods: These can be labeled: club goods that are non-rivalrous but</p>	

		exclusive. Community goods are rivalrous but non-exclusive.	
	Instrumentalist, utilitarian, rationalist means-ends dichotomy: Means = resources Ends = goods Rules mediate relations of means and ends through decisions (aka rational choices).	Critique: There is an ends-means ambiguity in this approach between public goods and common-pool resources (See Figure below) Does the formal theory of commons apply to only one or both? Does formal commons theory apply to the entire top row of the Figure below (E.g., to political states and private associations) or only the top right?	Substantive commons theory of voluntary action applies to “the space between” public and private: the diagonals (lower left and upper right) of the Figure below.
Rent dissipation	Occurs when actors in a common pool resource extract higher levels of resources than would be taken under the net maximum level (or optimum for the group as a whole).		
Assignment problems	Arise whenever appropriators face a variety of “appropriation spots” that are differentiated in productive yield.		
Technological externality	Consequences of unequal access to appropriation technologies of differing levels of effectiveness		
Infrastructure	Provision of infrastructure may improve availability of		

	resource and/or productivity of appropriation (includes construction and maintenance activities).		
Tragedy of the Commons	In an open access CPR with no governance arrangements, appropriators will tend to over-exploit the resource and may destroy it entirely.	Any association or assembly with shared resources may be susceptible to a tragedy of over-exploitation (e.g., by ‘free riders’) at any time. Leadership and governance are hedges against over-exploitation; not guaranteed preventatives.	
Drama of the Commons	Struggle or conflicts in commons, holding out the possibilities of positive or negative outcomes. A preferable term to <i>tragedy</i> of the commons, which assumes only negative outcomes.	The drama of the commons is one facet of the many dramas of democratic living	
Model of humanity	<i>Homo economicus</i> The model of human changes depending on the action situation. Ostrom’s commons is built on Behavioral Rational Choice: a second generation of rational choice theory that incorporates effects of visual and verbal cues, norms of reciprocity and fairness, and willingness to sanction rule violators	<i>Zoon politicon</i>	
Origins of commons theory	The ahistoricism of the ‘specious present’.	Prehistorical forms of voluntary action and gift exchange coterminous with family and may predate trade and political state.	
		Athenian Greeks originated philanthropy in ‘civic friendship’; developed pioneering knowledge commons.	
		Roman law recognized trusts, ‘foundations’, associations and patronis/clientele (patron-client relations)	
		Arab civilization	

		Medieval European knowledge commons functioned within hierarchical society based on patron-client relations.
		Indigenous associations of common-field agriculture from the British Isles to Japan operated largely outside the political state.
		Enclosure movements, modernization, et.al. -> rights of association, assembly and expression
Principia media	Interaction based on rules created by users.	Communicative interaction
Key concept	Common resource pools (CRPs)	New Commons evolved gradually in legal rights of association, assembly, and expression.
Treatment of self-interest	Herbert Simon's bounded rationality: Individuals seek goals but do so under constraints of limited cognitive and information-processing capability, incomplete information, and the subtle influences of cultural predispositions and beliefs. ^[1] _{SEP}	Tocqueville's "Self-interest, properly understood": 'Proper understanding' of self-interest requires not only Simon's 'satisficing' and Lindblom's 'muddling through' but also Hayek's 'spontaneous order' and a standard of rationality as consistency.
Social Philosophy	Fallible human beings are able to construct institutions to govern themselves and their actions. Once created these institutions are human artifacts, which can be altered.	Pragmatism; social constructionism
Key Freedoms	Individuals are free and able to craft institutions. Local public economies are established to govern the good/service/resource needs	Association, assembly, religion & speech

	to reflect the attributes of good/service/resource. These institutions are nested and create polycentric governance systems.	
Definition of Public	Dewey (1927) a group, of any size, that is affected by some substantive problem or issue	Critique: Also accept the Deweyian approach to public(s) – plural - but also recognize it produces a notion of ‘publicness’ that is radically divergent from and incommensurable with the economic model of publicness as non-exclusive and non-rivalrous ends.
Rationality	Rules crafted by adaptable learners	Language-mediated social action
Goods	Goods defined by subtractability and exclusion (public, private, CPR, toll)	Sectors defined not by ownership but by types of normative goods sought: Public, Club, Community and Private Goods.
Multi-disciplinarity	Economics, political science, anthropology, sociology, law, psychology	Sociology, social work, law, history & language-mediated social sciences
Units of Exchange	Finite resource units (e.g., water, fish, radiowaves) consumed in rule environments that either lead to depletion or sustainability	Tripartite exchange Patron-agent-client/beneficiary
Sectors	Two: Private and public	Four: Public (governmental), Market (business), Commons (association and assembly) and Intimate Sphere (household and families)
Economics	Behavioral economics	Social economy

Types of Goods

	Subtractability (a.k.a. Rivalry)		
		<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>
Exclusion	<i>Difficult</i>	Public Goods Useful knowledge Sunsets	Common-pool Resources Libraries Irrigation systems
	<i>Easy</i>	Club Goods Journal Subscriptions Daycare centers	Private Goods Personal computers Donuts

Source. Ostrom and Hess (2007; adapted from Ostrom & Ostrom, 1977).