

Summer 2003

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The Commons: Our Mission if We Choose to Accept It¹

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One of the foremost theorists of American democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville, once wrote, “In democratic countries, the science of association is the mother science, the progress of all the others depends on the progress of that one. Among the laws that rule human societies, there is one that seems more precise and clearer than all the others. In order that men remain civilized or become so, the art of association must be developed and perfected among them in the same ratio as equality of conditions increases” (Tocqueville, 2000). This statement assigns a centrality to nonprofit organization, voluntary action and third sector activities that should activate, sustain and guide nonprofit professionals, volunteers, donors and others.

Yet questions remain. Is nonprofit activity private or public or both? The best answer is probably something like either, neither and both. Yet undue concentration on this question has somehow relegated all nonprofit activity to the netherworld status of “not for profit” in the United States, as though profit-seeking was somehow the definition of normalcy in human affairs, and “nongovernmental” in much of the rest of the world. These terms with their signature nons and nots actually explain very little of what is. They are as useful as it would be for biologists to classify lettuce as “not an animal” (Lohmann, 1989 [2020]). So third sector organizations are routinely described by what they are not rather than what they are. In this sense, the third sector itself has only the most vague and broadly inclusive boundaries.

One reason for all this negation is that the dichotomy of the private and public is not fully exhaustive, but we really don’t have generally accepted terms for the excluded categor(ies). What is needed is affirmative language that better describes who we are and what we do as well as where we have been and where we are going. Where do we begin such a Herculean task? My proposal is that we concentrate on the word “common,” as in common man or person, common good, commonwealth and commonalities. It is an every-day word that already carries a good share of the burden of desired meanings and intentions.

The term commons points to a set of ideas and practices anchored deep in Anglo-American history, law and culture that offers powerful ways to explain the unique mission and role of nonprofit activity, voluntary action and philanthropy. It offers an approach that highlights the special responsibilities behind the daily work of those in nonprofits and poses a framework within which to approach questions of the value and effectiveness of nonprofit and philanthropic endeavors. We might also think of our endeavor overall as carrying the quote “We the people” forward in our democracy.

¹ An edited and revised version of this essay was published in *The Nonprofit Quarterly*, Summer, 2003. 1-4.

Beyond the incorporation statutes and tax codes that are the sinews of the third sector, commons theory offers a basic set of principles to define the structure and the outcomes of nonprofit activity. The commons can be characterized as exhibiting five distinct attributes, or dimensions. Three of these are definitional, or constitutional:

1. Free or uncoerced participation.
2. Common or shared participation (or mission).
3. Jointly held, or shared resources (or endowment).

Two additional characteristics typically emerge from activity organized on these bases:

4. A sense of mutuality arising from participation.
5. Social relations characterized by justice or fairness.

These dimensions were first framed by Aristotle, who termed the resulting political community *koinonia politike*. These are essential attributes of civil society. At an organizational level, they also defined the ideal type of self-governing nonprofit activity as it is envisioned in law and practice. The first three characteristics are formative of all true or authentic collective ventures, or commons. Voluntary participants (or willing stakeholders), sharing a mission and a common pool of resources are also the minimum ingredients of all nonprofit activity. The latter two characteristics are emergent, arising out of and shaping the shared experience of participants. The trust and networks of social capital, for example, regularly arise directly from the sense of mutuality that comes from such an association with others over a period of time. By-laws, policies and procedures, and program guidelines together spell out a fair and just environments in which those participants can work together successfully.

Modern Thought About The Commons

Commons have been real, physical places as well as metaphors for nonprofit organizations, voluntary action and philanthropy. They have long existed all over England prior to the Enclosure Movement there, and in other parts of Europe and elsewhere in the world, as well in colonial New England and on the open ranges of the early American West. When John Locke and others spoke of a “state of nature” this view typically included forest commons and other lands not yet subdivided into private properties.

In his provocative 1968 article, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” Garrett Hardin argued that farmers (or shepherds, or any other independent decision-makers) each with unfettered access to a common grazing area would each rationally decide to exploit the shared resource to their maximum individual advantage. The inevitable result would be that, in time, the resource would be exhausted through over grazing to the detriment of all (Hardin, 1968).

Tragedy occurs in Hardin's commons when, to mix our metaphors, the Three Musketeers – whose rallying cry was *All for one and one for all* – declared instead, *All for me and me alone*. Many contemporary adherents of markets as the solution to all problems, and Social Darwinists everywhere find this latter phrase a suitable rallying cry. For the rest of us, it is simply an appallingly anti-social and even in some cases, immoral standard. Any time such a standard is applied to a shared resource, whether it is a nonprofit program, foundation or some other shared resource, the future not only of that resource, but of the mission it embraces, is jeopardized by the autonomous and self-interested choices of individuals.

Hardin's tragedy has found particular resonance in the environmental movement, where it has been applied to raid forests, fishing populations and even global warming. Yet this is a distinctively incomplete view of reality. It is important to note that Hardin's commons become tragic because they lack both a state able to make and enforce nontragic outcomes, and a third sector (or commons) able to enable voluntary, cooperative solutions by agreement. Because a third sector of associations, collaborations and cooperation does not exist in Hardin's model, his self-interested individual farmers, like all self-interested actors, lack the wit, and the means to do what real farmers, shepherds, Musketeers and others almost always do when faced with similar potentially lethal threats to their pooled resource and values: create networks of relations, generate trust and define equitable policies and procedures to allocate, without exhausting, the scarce resources at their command.

The most widespread academic explanation for the emergence of nonprofits would be that they arise because of "failures" of markets or governments – functioning as a kind of ad hoc cleanup brigade for the shortcomings of these more basic institutions. The reality is more fundamental, and more encouraging. Such explanations, while descriptive of a range of very worthwhile current nonprofit activities arising in the wake of neo-liberal politics, actually provide very anemic rationales for the social, political and economic dimensions of the third sector as a whole and over the long run. The curiously restrictive frameworks that have the nonprofit sector as a response systems for the symptoms of government failures and market failures make sense only to those utterly convinced of the exhaustive nature of the public/private dichotomy. For proponents of statism on the one hand, and marketization on the other, the possibility of a third way whose dominant value system might guide the who is simply never admitted.

Yet, the value of this third way, characterized by voluntary participation, shared mission and sharing of resources, is there in plain sight for all who wish to see it. Not only do the potentialities of a powerful and even dominant third sector now exist across the globe, but in a very real sense, collaborative common action precedes government and the market – both historically and logically – and is essential to constituting both. Democratic governments don't form themselves, but are enacted within the nexus of parties, factions, interest groups and other associations and assemblies, in response to the popular mandates of public opinion.

Likewise, the electronic revolution has time and again shown the amazing complexity of creating entirely new product categories for which new markets must be created by nonprofit trade associations formulating standards and performing other tasks that allow the new markets to emerge.

Endowment

To begin to explore further the concept of the commons, consider the term common goods and the third dimension of commons – endowments of shared resources. The endowments of common goods with which many nonprofits work are characterized by resource pools from which large groups and even the entire population benefit in some way, but no one person necessarily feels responsible or can control – the resources that are non-exclusive and available to everyone regardless of the ability to pay. Some such endowments may be material and environmental – for example, clean air and water – and some benefits can be relatively easily quantified.

Other endowments, however, may be more abstract or less clearly beneficial to all – such as the preservation of a common language. On the one hand, there is the “English only” movement that seeks enforcement of a uniform language, and, on the other, the counter efforts which seek to recognize multiple languages as enriching the overall culture and therefore worth including and preserving in public spaces, including documents and institutions.

Both movements are protecting their respective endowments. Just as importantly, both movements engage people in open, public dialogue on the issue to get diverse points of view heard. Commons theory poses the distinct possibility that if proponents of diverse views continue to associate, listen to and understand one another, eventually they will develop either the social capital (trust and networks) to work out their differences or the frameworks of rules and policies for the just and equitable treatment of their different positions.

Problems may enter the picture when one point of view is well resourced (specifically, more money) than another. And it is particularly in such circumstances that the importance of this sector lifting other voices into public dialogue becomes so important. The language that designates us as the “independent sector” flows from this. Connected to the concerns about independence is the concept of a “voluntary sector.” The less dependent we are on donations, volunteers and independent resource pools, and the more we are dependent on institutional resources, particularly those tied to the markets or government, the more we may be directed by those who have control over those resources.

To make this issue current at this particular time, the question of balanced and sustained dialogue becomes ever more important as the ownership of media outlets narrows as a result of the recent diluting of FCC regulations prohibiting monopolies. In this case, the common endowment – basic to democracy – is access to information that flows from a variety of points of view. This makes the airwaves of great importance to this sector. Even more importantly, the Internet has proven to

be an increasingly important resource for the free flow of ideas throughout the world.

Legacy and Stewardship

The possibility of relinquishing endowments – to which we should all have reasonable access – is everywhere in our lives. When the museums of Iraq were raided recently, large pieces of that country’s millenniums-old cultural heritage were irretrievably lost. This constituted loss of a legacy that cannot be passed along to future generations. But such private looting may constitute a lesser threat than the public looting of the coffers of commonly held resources that is also now occurring. The current tendency to access resource endowments in the public domain for private inurement through the processes of privatizing and reregulating such things as water quality, broadcast frequencies and public utilities has all the potentials outlined in Hardin’s tragedy.

Each one of these resource pools is a legacy that we could pass along to future generations – whether they are badly handled or well-handled in the present. In a democratic society, we act as individual stewards of such legacies, but we have to act collectively to ensure that the principles we wish to see enacted are heard and acted upon. This requires association and assembly; that is the core job of this sector.

The Sector’s Self-Renewable Endowment

One particular resource pool important in all organizational contexts is the collective knowledge and experience base sometimes called *human capital* or the “know-how” of people in an organization – and the *social capital* or “know-who” of relationships, trust and networks. Each one of these categories of resources has no intrinsic meaning by itself. Their only increased significance in the commons is in relation to other aspirational components of Aristotle’s model” uncoerced participation, sharing of purposes and resources, mutuality and perhaps most critically, commitment to insuring justice.

The issue of justice is one of the first to be sacrificed in free market activity and – as some of the other articles in this issue point out – in government, when its legal stewardship becomes overly influenced by the political pressures of a small, dominant group. We cannot afford to have justice lost as a core purpose of this sector. Self-interest alone should motivate us to retain it since it increases our capacity exponentially.

When people who are concerned about what is the right or just thing to be done in a given situation gather together in committees, groups, associations, and assemblies, they don’t just use the common resource pools available to them for their own benefit. Something else rather amazing often happens: the very act of voluntarily associating with others has powerful effects on the participants, binding them into a cohesive group and committing them to one another – and to their own shared sense of a greater good. Participants in all types of voluntary action come to

identify with one another over time and develop this sense of mutuality. This trait is sometimes also termed *solidarity*, or *brotherhood* or *sisterhood*, and in theology, *communion*. This communion among people who are together seeking a common good is often imbued with a higher meaning that implies a deep sacred spirit is present and felt in the commons.

In a culture of individualism and the current misplaced believe in the omnipotence of markets, those of us committed to the independent sector and problem solving through the commons need to remind ourselves and others at every opportunity that the actual experience of mutuality is one that on single individual or organization can create. Commons only occur when people do things together that none of them can be alone. Tocqueville's highlighting of the importance of the science of association points out the continuing importance of knowledge of the commons of how to successfully combine in associations, apart from family and friends and outside the government and markets We hold this knowledge in common and lose it only at our peril.

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