

Confronting Hardin: Trends and Approaches to the Commons in Historiography

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This Article analyses both the role of historiography in Hardin's The Tragedy of the Commons (1968) and his paper's impact on historiographical debates of the last five decades. Concerning the role of historiography in Hardin's argument, the 'tragedy of the commons' itself derived from a pamphlet written by a nineteenth century supporter of English enclosures, who proposed a variant of Malthus' theory. If Hardin inevitably dealt with previous historical interpretations of the commons, the reverberations aroused by his paper have strongly influenced subsequent historical research on this subject. It is possible to group the historiographical production of the last decades concerning the commons into three main lines of research. The first line has developed in the field of economic history and has been influenced by Elinor Ostrom's principles for long-enduring institutions that efficaciously manage commons. The second line has focused on the conflicts caused by exogenous interferences in the management of common land, such as state or market intervention, and their social and environmental consequences. The third line has devoted attention to the role of common lands in the internal dynamics of the local communities and the conflicts over their use at the local level. The conclusion of this Article focuses on the role of Hardin's legacy in the current debate on the global environmental crisis.

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INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to understand the great impact of Hardin's *The Tragedy of the Commons*¹ without being familiar with historical debates concerning common resources; in particular the question of English enclosures. Likewise, it is impossible to comprehend the historical debates on common resources of the last five decades without considering the influence of Hardin's thesis.

The aim of this Article is to employ *The Tragedy of the Commons* as a lens through which we may analyze the different historiographical approaches to this topic – both before and after the paper's publication – their conceptual foundations, and evolutions. Part I is devoted to briefly recalling and contextualizing the main historical references of Hardin's article, in particular the one from which the title itself is derived. Part II focuses on the impact of *The Tragedy of the Commons* on the subsequent historiographical research on this subject. Although the interest devoted by historians to the topic of the commons in the last decades is probably minor as compared to other disciplines (law, economy and anthropology, to name just a few), the range of case studies dealing with common resources, and even those concerning Hardin's arguments, is too broad to present a complete bibliography.² Any attempt in this direction will result in a varied list of works, which differ greatly by topic, chronology and methodology. In this Part, I focus on three main historiographical lines of research on the commons, both in general and with specific reference to Hardin's article, giving an account of their roots, development and theoretical premises. In the Conclusion, I reflect on the legacy of *The Tragedy of the Commons* in the current debate on environmental problems, in history as well as in other disciplines. In particular Hardin's theses are still central (and disputed) in arguments on climate change and, more broadly, in the new field of study concerning the concept of Anthropocene, the proposed geological epoch characterized by human impact on Earth's ecosystem.

1 Garret Hardin, *The Tragedy of the Commons*, 162 SCI. 1243 (1968).

2 For other, up-to-date, approaches, cf. Fabien Locher, *Historicizing Elinor Ostrom: Urban Politics, International Development and Expertise in the U.S. Context (1970-1990)*, 19 THEORETICAL INQUIRIES L. 533 (2018); Alice Ingold, *Commons and Environmental Regulation in History: The Water Commons Beyond Property and Sovereignty*, 19 THEORETICAL INQUIRIES L. 425 (2018).

I. HISTORY IN *THE TRAGEDY*: BETWEEN POPULATION GROWTH AND PROPERTY REGIMES

Two preliminary considerations are needed to better understand Hardin's influence among historians:

First, the historiographical debate on *The Tragedy of the Commons* shares with many other disciplines a polemical approach to Hardin's thesis. In other words, most of the historical studies dealing with the article have confuted part of Hardin's argumentation through an historical contextualization of the common lands, their users and use.

Second, historiography also shares with other disciplines another important aspect, namely the focus on a specific part of the text rather than the entire article, or its core.³ As is well known, the main topic of *The Tragedy of the Commons* concerns the problems related to overpopulation from a global perspective. However, the article is almost unquoted in the subfield of historical demography. Instead, it is widely debated by social, economic and, more recently, environmental historians. In this respect, the most debated part of the article is not the thesis, but the example from which also the title is drawn, one that Hardin derived from a professor of political economy who taught a particular Malthusian variant at Oxford University during the 1830s: William Foster Lloyd.⁴

In the work *Two Lectures on the Checks to Population*, Lloyd depicted a common pasture open to all, where every herdsman tries to add as many cattle as possible, unaware that the cumulative effects of this strategy will result in the ruin of the pasture.⁵ Both Lloyd and Hardin use this story to explain the rational limits of procreative strategies. But, especially in the case of Lloyd, this argument was deeply rooted in another fundamental controversy of his time: the English enclosures, the substitution for open fields and shared use rights over land by enclosed fields and exclusive use rights over land in the English countryside during the modern period.

3 Cf. Tine de Moor, *From Common Pastures to Global Commons: A Historical Perspective on Interdisciplinary Approaches to Commons*, 19 NATURES SCIENCES SOCIÉTÉS 422 (2011) (Fr.).

4 On this link, see Fabien Locher, *Les pâturages de la Guerre froide: Garrett Hardin et la «Tragédie des communs»* [*Cold War Pastures: Garret Hardin and the "Tragedy of the Commons"*], 60 REVUE D'HISTOIRE MODERNE ET CONTEMPORAINE 7 (2013) (Fr.); Peter Linebaugh, *Enclosures from the Bottom Up*, 108 RADICAL HIST. REV. 11 (2010).

5 William F. Lloyd, *Two Lectures on the Checks to Population*, 6 POPULATION & DEV. REV. 473, 479 (1980) (1833).

The enclosure process, its role in the agrarian transition to capitalism and thus in the English industrial revolution, is the subject of one of the most enduring and controversial historiographical debates. Already during the period of the so-called Parliamentary Enclosures (1700-1850), there were conflicting opinions among the contemporaries.

Historian Robert C. Allen has identified two classical lines of interpretation of this process.⁶ The first is the Tory view, with Arthur Young as its main representative and his agronomic works as privileged sources.⁷ According to this perspective, the common property regime was the cause of the infertile condition of the land and the enclosure of the common lands increased agricultural production, in terms of both soil productivity and employed workforce, without any contraction in the workforce demand. Malthusian authors like Lloyd had a central role in this line of thought, since they argued that population growth explained the incongruity between the expectation that agricultural transformation would lead to improvement of employment conditions and the spread of poverty in early nineteenth century England.⁸

The second view is equally well known and influential. The most quoted formulation in this respect is the “so called primitive accumulation,” proposed by Karl Marx a few decades after Young’s works, in the first volume of *Capital*.⁹ For Marx, the most infertile lands were collectively owned to provide an insurance function for the rural population and the enclosure process resulted in increased output of the agricultural sector. However, this growth was achieved at the expense of the rural population, which was largely deprived of the resources necessary to support itself and gradually forced to depend on wage labor to survive (the proletarianization process).

Given the importance of these socioeconomic transformations also outside the British Isles, this debate has deeply influenced the overall historiographical trends as regards common resources.¹⁰ In the last decades, several studies have revised, from different points of view, the relation between the enclosure

6 ROBERT C. ALLEN, *ENCLOSURE AND THE YEOMAN: THE AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOUTH MIDLANDS* 1-21 (1992).

7 ARTHUR YOUNG AND HIS TIMES (Gordon Mingay ed., 1975). *See also* PETER M. JONES, *AGRICULTURAL ENLIGHTENMENT KNOWLEDGE, TECHNOLOGY, AND NATURE, 1750-1840* (2016).

8 KARL POLANYI, *THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION: THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC ORIGINS OF OUR TIME* (1944).

9 KARL MARX, *1 DAS KAPITAL* (Vintage ed., 1976) (1867) (Ger.).

10 CAMPOS CERRADOS, *DEBATES ABIERTOS. ANÁLISIS HISTÓRICO Y PROPIEDAD DE LA TIERRA EN EUROPA (SIGLOS XVI-XIX)* [ENCLOSED FIELDS, OPEN DEBATE. HISTORICAL ANALYSIS AND LAND PROPERTY IN EUROPE (16TH-19TH CENTURIES)] (Rorsa Congost & José Miguel Lana eds., 2007) (Spain).

of common lands and proletarianization of the rural population.¹¹ Another assumption, shared by Marxists and Tories, according to which enclosures resulted in the rapid growth of agricultural production, has been refuted by Robert C. Allen, who demonstrated that eighteenth century enclosures did not cause a significant increase in agricultural output.¹²

In this long-standing debate, *The Tragedy of the Commons* has been seen as a modern version of the Tory view (with a catchy title, to quote Stuart Banner's paper in this issue);¹³ since in Hardin's example the property regime of the pasture is the reason for its deterioration.

In contrast, historians who have directly dealt with Hardin's arguments have tried to present the complex systems related to the management of historical commons, the criteria establishing the group of users (which often do not correspond to an open access system), the rules regulating their exploitation, and the struggles over their control.

The historiographical production of the last decades concerning the commons can be grouped in three main lines of research. The following section is devoted to explaining the main characteristics of these trends and how they have contributed to overcoming an idealized characterization of historical commons like that proposed by Hardin.

II. THE TRAGEDY IN HISTORY: THREE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL TRENDS

The first, and currently prevalent, historiographical trend is the so-called neo-institutional approach, of which the most famous and quoted example is the volume *The Management of Common Land in North West Europe, c.*

11 Compare the different positions in Jane Humphries, *Enclosures, Common Rights, and Women: The Proletarianization of Families in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*, 50 *J. ECON. HIST.* 17 (1990); Janet M. Neeson, *English Enclosures and British Peasants: Current Debates About Rural Social Structure in Britain c.1750-1870*, 41 *JAHRBUCH FÜR WIRTSCHAFTSGESCHICHTE [Y.B. ECON. HIST.]* 17 (2000) (Ger.); Leigh Shaw-Taylor, *Labourers, Cows, Common Rights and Parliamentary Enclosure: The Evidence of Contemporary Comment, c. 1760-1810*, 171 *PAST & PRESENT* 95 (2001); Leigh Shaw-Taylor, *Parliamentary Enclosure and the Emergence of an English Agricultural Proletariat*, 61 *J. ECON. HIST.* 640 (2001).

12 ROBERT C. ALLEN, *ENCLOSURE AND THE YEOMAN: THE AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOUTH MIDLANDS* (1992).

13 Stuart Banner, *The Banality of the Commons: Efficiency Arguments Against Common Ownership Before Hardin*, 19 *THEORETICAL INQUIRIES L.* 395 (2018).

1500-1850.¹⁴ In the introduction, the editors proposed a kind of manifesto of this new approach. First, there was a strong comparative aim (eight case studies from six different countries of northwestern Europe were analyzed). Moreover, the volume sought to overturn Hardin's idea that commons were open access lands, the exploitation of which was permitted to all the inhabitants of a specific area. In contrast, historical analysis proved that these resources were the exclusive prerogative of a small and well-defined number of users, and their exploitation was regulated by strict rules. The aim of the volume was to analyze these rules and the institutions that guaranteed sustainable management of common lands.

The volume adopted a theoretical framework that had been proposed by the political scientist Elinor Ostrom in her celebrated book *Governing the Commons*.¹⁵ Ostrom's approach confuted the tragedy of the commons concept, trying to understand which factors have allowed some small communities to successfully manage their common resources for very long periods of time.

Following the principles identified by Ostrom, the authors proposed to analyze the commons in a historical perspective by focusing on three core themes: (1) the natural resources collectively used, their typology (woods, pastures, fields), their utilization, and the criteria for their environmental and economic sustainability; (2) the group of actors who could use these resources, the rules designating them (ownership of land or animals, hereditary norms, etc.), and the principles that established the dynamics of exclusion or integration in these groups (which did not correspond to all the residents of an area, but to a limited consortium — a crucial point to overturning Hardin's model); and (3) the institutional dimension of the former two aspects combined: the local institutions whose main task was the management of common resources, their level of formalization, the officials they appointed and the procedures they followed, and their degree of legitimization and autonomy from state or feudal powers.

Methodologically, this approach has developed mainly in the field of economic history and has crystallized around Ostrom's neo-institutional principles. The analysis was conducted over a long period (usually several centuries) with the aim of testing the resilience of these institutions in the

14 THE MANAGEMENT OF COMMON LAND IN NORTH WEST EUROPE, c. 1500-1850 (Tine De Moor, Leigh Shaw-Taylor & Paul Warde eds., 2002). See also Tine De Moor, *What Do We Have in Common? A Comparative Framework for Old and New Literature on the Commons*, 57 INT'L REV. SOC. HIST. 269 (2012).

15 ELINOR OSTROM, *GOVERNING THE COMMONS: THE EVOLUTION OF INSTITUTIONS FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION* (1990).

face of the changing judicial, political, economic and social context in which they operated.

In the wake of the great success of Ostrom's theories, this approach established itself also in historiography. The preferred area of analysis has continued to be northern Europe;¹⁶ although recently other countries, like Italy and Spain, have been studied.¹⁷ The spread of this approach has been fostered by the creation of an international network (International Association for the Study of the Commons) and a journal ("International Journal of the Commons"), in order to promote a multidisciplinary dialogue on this topic.¹⁸

A second historiographical trend in confronting *The Tragedy of the Commons* has mainly developed in the field of social history and, lately, environmental history. Such studies do not have a shared methodology like those inspired by Ostrom's theoretical framework; they investigate the topic under different approaches and in a variety of contexts and scales. However, they do share one important element; namely, the focus of the analysis is on the conflicts related to the use, control and appropriation of common resources, and their social and environmental consequences.¹⁹

A good starting point for exploring this trend is the work of English historian and activist Edward Palmer Thompson, especially in two of his last writings: the book *Whigs and Hunters* and the collection of essays *Customs in Common*.²⁰ Thompson was one of the first social historians to take an interest

16 See, e.g., TINE DE MOOR, *THE DILEMMA OF THE COMMONERS: UNDERSTANDING THE USE OF COMMON-POOL RESOURCES IN LONG-TERM PERSPECTIVE* (2015).

17 For Italy, see Marco Casari, *Emergence of Endogenous Legal Institutions: Property Rights and Community Governance in the Italian Alps*, 67 J. ECON. HIST. 191 (2007); LA GESTIONE DELLE RISORSE COLLETTIVE, ITALIA SETTENTRIONALE, SECOLI XII-XVIII [THE MANAGEMENT OF COMMON RESOURCES, NORTHERN ITALY, 12TH-18TH CENTURIES] (Guido Alfani & Riccardo Rao eds., 2011) (It.). For Spain, see José Miguel Lana, *From Equilibrium to Equity: The Survival of the Commons in the Ebro Basin: Navarra from the 15th to the 20th Centuries*, 2 INT'L J. COMMONS 162 (2008); José Miguel Lana & Iñaki Iriarte-Goñi, *The Social Embeddedness of Common Property Rights in Navarra (Spain), Sixteenth to Twentieth Centuries*, in CONTEXTS OF PROPERTY IN EUROPE: THE SOCIAL EMBEDDEDNESS OF PROPERTY RIGHTS IN LAND IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE 83 (Rosa Congost & Rui Santos eds., 2010); José Serrano Alvarez, *When the Enemy is the State: Common Lands Management in Northwest Spain (1850-1936)*, 8 INT'L J. COMMONS 107 (2014).

18 Frank van Laerhoven & Elinor Ostrom, *Traditions and Trends in the Study of the Commons*, 1 INT'L J. COMMONS 3 (2007).

19 DEREK WALL, *THE COMMONS IN HISTORY: CULTURE, CONFLICT, AND ECOLOGY* (2014).

20 EDWARD PALMER THOMPSON, *WHIGS AND HUNTERS: THE ORIGIN OF THE BLACK ACT* (1975); EDWARD PALMER THOMPSON, *CUSTOMS IN COMMON* (1993).

on the environmental dimension of social transformations.²¹ In particular, a central issue in Thompson's thought was sustainability, which he did not conceive as a parameter or an objective, as in the neo-institutional studies, but as a conflictual and constantly renegotiated process.

In other words, conflict dynamics are not an anomaly in relation to common resources, but are essential to defining their management and exploitation.²² This results in the privileging of judicial sources and a focus on situations of struggle or controversy, through which it is possible to underscore the different and frequently contrary interests involved in the use of common resources. This conflict-based perspective on common resources and common rights has been revised and embraced in different fields of environmental studies (environmental history, anthropology, political ecology).²³

The focus of these studies has been mainly on the struggles related to external intervention in the management of common resources, such as the privatization of common lands (like English enclosure),²⁴ but also the growing presence of state authorities in the local and customary management of common woodlands, particularly in colonial territories of the Global South. For instance, Ramachandra Guha and Nancy L. Peluso have studied the resistance of local populations to colonial authorities' attempts to prevent the customary and collective use of forests (in India and Indonesia, respectively), and they have found the roots of recent environmental activism in those events.²⁵ Their studies framed the struggles related to the access to and distribution of common resources as environmental conflicts, regardless of the environmental ideologies of the communities involved.²⁶

21 Stephen Mosley, *Common Ground: Integrating Social and Environmental History*, 39 J. SOC. HIST. 915 (2006).

22 "Disputes over common right in such contexts were not exceptional. They were normal." THOMPSON, CUSTOMS IN COMMON, *supra* note 20, at 104.

23 Marco Armiero, *Seeing Like a Protester: Nature, Power, and Environmental Struggles*, 13 LEFT HIST. 59 (2008); JOAN MARTINEZ ALIER, THE ENVIRONMENTALISM OF THE POOR: A STUDY OF ECOLOGICAL CONFLICTS AND VALUATION (2002). *See also* Craig Johnson's definition of 'Entitlement School' in Craig Johnson, *Uncommon Ground: The 'Poverty of History' in Common Property Discourse*, 35 DEV. & CHANGE 407 (2004).

24 JANET M. NEESON, COMMONERS: COMMON RIGHT, ENCLOSURE AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN ENGLAND, 1700-1820 (1993).

25 RAMACHANDRA GUHA, THE UNQUIET WOODS: ECOLOGICAL CHANGE AND PEASANT RESISTANCE IN THE HIMALAYA (1990); NANCY L. PELUSO, RICH FORESTS, POOR PEOPLE: RESOURCE CONTROL AND RESISTANCE IN JAVA (1992).

26 RAMACHANDRA GUHA & JOAN MARTINEZ-ALIER, VARIETIES OF ENVIRONMENTALISM: ESSAYS NORTH AND SOUTH (1997).

Similar struggles were sparked by the implementation of conservation politics in the nineteenth century United States. Karl Jacoby has shown how the creation of the first national parks resulted in widespread violations of, and several protests against, the restrictions imposed by the new parks, by people or communities living within or close to them. For Jacoby, paraphrasing Thompson, these customary actions could be seen as a form of moral ecology: “This moral ecology evolved in counterpoint to the elite discourse about conservation, a folk tradition that often critiqued official conservation policies, occasionally borrowed from them, and at other times even influenced them. Most of all, though, this moral ecology offers a vision of nature ‘from the bottom up,’ one that frequently demonstrates a strikingly different sense of what nature is and how it should be used.”²⁷

During the 1990s, with the spread of environmental history as a separate discipline into Europe, the previous research traditions on the common resources were combined with this new attention to environmental problems.²⁸ In Spain, for instance, a special issue of the journal of the Spanish Contemporaneity History Association (“Ayer”) on history and ecology, published in 1993, identified in the relationship between the property regime of lands and the modalities of their preservation, with specific reference to *The Tragedy of the Commons*, a key issue for Spanish environmental history.²⁹

In addition to the studies already mentioned on non-European countries³⁰, the growing presence of state administration in common woodlands management has been an important field of study for European environmental historians.³¹

27 KARL JACOBY, CRIMES AGAINST NATURE: SQUATTERS, POACHERS, THIEVES, AND THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF AMERICAN CONSERVATION 4 (2001).

28 *Alla ricerca della storia ambientale [Looking for Environmental History]*, 5 CONTEMPORANEA 131 (Marco Armiero ed., 2002) (It.); Verena Winiwarter et al., *Environmental History in Europe from 1994 to 2004: Enthusiasm and Consolidation*, 10 ENV'T & HIST. 501 (2004).

29 Joan Martínez Alier, *Temas de historia económico-ecológica*, [*Topics for an Economic-Ecologic History*] 11 AYER [SPANISH CONTEMPORANEITY HIST. ASS'N] 19 (1993). For similar considerations in Italian historiography, see ALBERTO CARACCILO, L'AMBIENTE COME STORIA: SONDAGGI E PROPOSTE DI STORIOGRAFIA DELL'AMBIENTE [ENVIRONMENT AS HISTORY: INQUIRIES AND PROPOSALS FOR AN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORIOGRAPHY] (1988) (It.).

30 Cf. *supra* notes 25-27.

31 But not the only one: for instance, see the works on common use of water resources. Cf. Marco Armiero, *Enclosing the Sea: Remaking Work and Leisure Spaces on the Naples Waterfront, 1870–1900*, 109 RADICAL HIST. REV. 13 (2011); STEFANIA BARCA, ENCLOSING WATER. NATURE AND POLITICAL ECONOMY IN A MEDITERRANEAN VALLEY 1796-1916 (2010); Alice Ingold, *Les sociétés d'irrigation: bien commun*

One reason for this is that the development of scientific forestry in Europe, between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was strictly related to the idea of sustainability.³² Nowadays, this notion is widely used in the public and academic debates on environmental problems, including the tragedy of the commons. In the eighteenth century, however, the concept of sustainable yield referred originally to exploitation of forest resources.³³ Indeed, as a consequence of a widespread concern about wood shortage, silviculture (especially the German school) developed a method of forest regulation based on a geometrical model with the aim of obtaining the maximum timber revenue without compromising the future productivity of woodlands.³⁴

In the last decades, several studies have outlined the social and environmental costs of the adoption of this method, inspired by criteria of economic sustainability, in many European countries. Indeed, the new forestry regulations led to the criminalization of the customary practices adopted by local communities in their woods, which foresters considered harmful to the reproduction of commercial timber, arousing resentment that often resulted in dramatic forest riots.³⁵ Moreover, for some scholars, this model of industrial

et action collective [Irrigation Groups: Common Goods and Collective Action], 50 ENTREPRISES ET HISTOIRE 19 (2008) (Fr.).

- 32 Richard Hölzl, *Historicizing Sustainability: German Scientific Forestry in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, 19 SCI. AS CULTURE 431 (2010); Paul Warde, *The Invention of Sustainability*, 8 MOD. INTELL. HIST. 153 (2011).
- 33 Cf. Joachim Radkau, *Germany as a Focus of European "Particularities" in Environmental History*, in GERMANY'S NATURE: CULTURAL LANDSCAPES AND ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY 17 (Thomas Lekan & Thomas Zeller eds., 2005); Donald Woster, *The Shaky Ground of Sustainable Development*, in THE WEALTH OF NATURE: ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY AND THE ECOLOGICAL IMAGINATION, 142 (1993).
- 34 Paul Warde, *Fear of Wood Shortage and the Reality of the Woodland in Europe, c. 1450–1850*, 62 HIST. WORKSHOP J. 29 (2006); JOACHIM RADKAU, *WOOD: A HISTORY* (2012); Henry Lowood, *The Calculating Forester: Quantification, Cameral Science, and the Emergence of Scientific Forestry Management in Germany*, in THE QUANTIFYING SPIRIT IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY 313 (Tore Frängsmyr, John Lewis Heilbron & Robin E. Rider eds., 1991); S. RAVI RAJAN, *MODERNIZING NATURE FORESTRY AND IMPERIAL ECO-DEVELOPMENT 1800–1950* (2006).
- 35 Richard Hölzl, *Forests in Conflict: Rural Populations and the Advent of Modern Forestry in Pre-industrial Germany, 1760-1860*, in COMMON GROUND: INTEGRATING THE SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL IN HISTORY 198 (Genevieve Massard-Guilbaud & Stephen Mosley eds., 2011); KIEKO MATTESON, *FORESTS IN REVOLUTIONARY FRANCE: CONSERVATION, COMMUNITY, AND CONFLICT 1669–1848* (2015); RENATO SANSA, *L'ORO VERDE. I BOSCHI NELLO STATO PONTIFICIO TRA XVIII E XIX SECOLO* [THE GREEN GOLD. THE WOODS OF THE STATE OF THE CHURCH BETWEEN THE 18TH AND 19TH CENTURIES] (2003) (It.).

silviculture, in which tree species were selected according to economic criteria, caused a progressive decline of biodiversity and the creation of artificial and unstable landscapes.³⁶

The studies of the second historiographical trend have focused mainly on intermodal conflicts over common lands; namely conflicts between different modalities of resource exploitation (i.e., state forestry and customary practices).³⁷ Other studies have likewise analyzed this topic under a conflict-based approach, but from a different point of view, focusing on the role of common lands in the internal dynamics of rural communities and the conflicts over their use at the local level. This is the approach of some Italian microhistorians, who have identified common resources as a vantage point from which to analyze the fragmentation that characterized rural societies during the ancient regime.³⁸

To do so, they have stressed the importance of a topographical scale to underscore local practices of “activation” and “production” of common resources since, for them, natural resources should be regarded as socially constructed.³⁹ These processes may be highlighted by analyzing sources produced in situations of conflict or controversy, which reveals the muddle of overlapping rights pertaining to lands⁴⁰ and the strategies through which local actors constantly redefined the access to and the use of common resources.⁴¹

Some scholars have developed these paths in dialogue with site studies, such as archaeology, ethnobotany and, in particular, the historical ecology approach established by Oliver Rackham with his works on the English

36 Mauro Agnoletti, *Man, Forestry, and Forest Landscapes: Trends and Perspectives in the Evolution of Forestry and Woodland History Research*, 157 SCHWEIZERISCHE ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR FORSTWESEN [SWISS FORESTRY SOC.] 384 (2006); JAMES C. SCOTT, *SEEING LIKE A STATE: HOW CERTAIN SCHEMES TO IMPROVE THE HUMAN CONDITION HAVE FAILED* (1998).

37 On the differences between intramodal and intermodal conflicts, see Manuel González de Molina et al., *Peasant Protest as Environmental Protest: Some Cases from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Century*, 4 GLOBAL ENV'T 48 (2009).

38 *Risorse collettive [Collective Resources]*, 37 QUADERNI STORICI (Osvaldo Raggio & Diego Moreno eds., 1992) (It.).

39 Diego Moreno, *Activation Practices: History of Environmental Resources, and Conservation*, in NATURE KNOWLEDGE: ETHNOSCIENCE, COGNITION AND UTILITY 386 (Glauco Sanga & Gherardo Ortalli eds., 2003).

40 See Marc Bloch, *La lutte pour l'individualisme agraire dans la France du XVIII^e siècle [The Struggle for Agrarian Individualism in 18th Century France]*, 7 ANNALES D'HISTOIRE ÉCONOMIQUE ET SOCIALE 329 (1930) (Fr.).

41 Angelo Torre & Vittorio Tigrino, *Beni comuni e località: una prospettiva storica [Commons and Locality: an Historical Perspective]*, 41 RAGION PRATICA 333 (2013) (It.).

woodlands and countryside.⁴² The combination of these different sources (archival documentation and sedimentary evidences) and methodological perspectives has allowed a critical reconsideration of some historical assumptions regarding the common lands and their use; for example, the improper dichotomy between cultivated and uncultivated land, or the central role of multiple agro-sylvo-pastoral land use systems of common lands in the integrated mountain economies of the preindustrial period.⁴³

Other scholars, whilst adopting a microscale analysis (but not with a topographical connotation), have devoted more attention to the comparison with anthropology, reviewing another well-known topic frequently associated with the commons: community. For instance, those who have focused on the role of common lands in the social and economic structures of the Alpine communities of the early modern period have shown the central role played by the institutions and the rules regulating the use of common woodlands and common pastures in influencing family organization and inheritance practices, thereby ensuring a homeostatic function in the relationship between population and natural resources. Therefore, the Alpine commons could even represent a possible answer to Hardin's concerns about the ecological limits of procreative strategies.⁴⁴

These brief considerations show the range of ways in which historians have faced the commons and their presumed tragedy in the last decades. Starting with the confutation of Hardin's arguments through historical contextualization of common lands, their users and use, historians have developed different

42 OLIVER RACKHAM, *ANCIENT WOODLAND: ITS HISTORY, VEGETATION, AND USES IN ENGLAND* (1980); OLIVER RACKHAM, *HISTORY OF THE COUNTRYSIDE* (1986).

43 Alice Ingold, *Writing Nature. The New Social History? From Social Question to Environmental Question*, 66 *ANNALES. HISTOIRE, SCIENCES SOCIALES* 11 (2011), https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_ANNA_661_0011--writing-on-nature-from-social-history.html; Angelo Torre, *Un "tournant spatial" en histoire? [A "Spatial Turn" in History? Landscapes, Visions, Resources]* 63 *ANNALES. HISTOIRE, SCIENCES SOCIALES* 1127 (2008) (Fr.).

44 Cf. *REFRAMING THE HISTORY OF FAMILY AND KINSHIP: FROM THE ALPS TOWARDS EUROPE* (Dionigi Albera, Luigi Lorenzetti & Jon Mathieu eds., 2016); LUIGI LORENZETTI & RAUL MERZARIO, *IL FUOCO ACCESO: FAMIGLIE E MIGRAZIONI ALPINE NELL'ITALIA D'ETÀ MODERNA [THE BURNING FIRE: FAMILIES AND MIGRATIONS IN THE ITALIAN ALPS DURING THE MODERN PERIOD]* (2005) (It.); Claudio Lorenzin, *La Valle del Lumiei. Comunità, risorse forestali e mercanti tra Sei e Settecento [The Lumiei Valley. Communities, Forest Resources and Merchants between the 17th and 18th Centuries]*, in *COMUNITÀ E QUESTIONI DI CONFINI IN ITALIA SETTENTRIONALE (XVI-XIX SEC.) [COMMUNITIES AND BORDERS IN NORTHERN ITALY (16TH-19TH CENTURIES)]* 128 (Mauro Ambrosoli & Furio Bianco eds., 2007) (It.).

trends. The neo-institutional approach has focused mainly on the organizational dimension of the commons, namely the institutions in charge of the management and exploitation of common resources. This has resulted in a tendency to favor the institutional documentation produced by these organizations (statutes, codes, internal regulations) and in chronologies that correspond to those of the institutions studied.⁴⁵

The historical traditions focused on conflictual dynamics have paid attention to phases less analyzed by neo-institutional historiography, in particular one in which the common use of resources ceased to be recognized at an official level; however, the formal overthrow of customary agrarian regimes often did not entail the cessation of traditional activities, but their criminalization. Moreover, these historical traditions, especially the microanalytical one, have focused mainly on local practices, reexamining the available sources to demonstrate how the everyday use of common resources differed, often profoundly, from official regulations and exhortative documentation.

Nevertheless, these different traditions share important affinities. David Soto Fernández has outlined the similarities between the neo-institutional and environmental approaches in analyzing the sustainability of commons.⁴⁶ More broadly, all these tendencies have contributed to overturning idealized interpretations of common lands and their use by local communities, both negative (like Hardin's) and "bucolic," which is the other side of the coin of Hardin's model. Under this idealized interpretation, communities were described as egalitarian, culturally cohesive, and conservative, exhibiting substantial passivity towards external transformations. Studies of the last decades have demonstrated the complex role played by common resources in the local context, the ongoing transformations of their use, and the agency of local actors in these changes.⁴⁷

III. CONCLUSION: THE PASTURE IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

After this evaluation of historical trends as regards common resources and their relation to Hardin's arguments, I want to conclude with a possible alternative reading of *The Tragedy of the Commons* in historical perspective. Thanks to the

45 Tine de Moor et al., *Ruling the Commons: Introducing a New Methodology for the Analysis of Historical Commons*, 10 INT'L J. COMMONS 529 (2016).

46 David Soto Fernández, *Community, Institutions and Environment in Conflicts Over Commons in Galitia, Northwest Spain (18th – 20th Centuries)*, 1 INT'L J. STRIKES & SOC. CONFLICTS 58 (2014).

47 Giacomo Bonan, *Beni comuni. Alcuni percorsi storiografici [Commons: A Few Historiographical Paths]*, 96 PASSATO E PRESENTE 97 (2015) (It.).

works so far mentioned, we have a better understanding of the complexity of common resources and their use in the past. Likewise, we know that Hardin's common pasture does not match any real common pasture: the open access system he describes does not match the various regulatory systems limiting the access to common lands, and the actions of his "rational" herdsmen do not match the actions of persons and communities entitled to use common lands.

However, we also know that, in *The Tragedy of the Commons*, the pasture paradigm has a metaphorical meaning to explain the dynamics of population growth and its consequences in terms of ecological footprint. If we agree on this level of abstraction, Hardin's article can be analyzed in the light of the new Anthropocene debate, in history as well as in other disciplines.⁴⁸

The Anthropocene is the new geological epoch, supplementing the Holocene, proposed by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000. For them, mankind has become a major telluric force, capable of changing the functioning of the Earth system for the next millennia. Some of these human-driven changes to environment may trigger uncontrollable consequences already in the near future: this is the case of climate change caused by greenhouse gases emitted by human activities into the atmosphere.⁴⁹

The mainstream narrative of the Anthropocene has many similarities to the tragedy of the commons, starting from the focus on the link between population growth and environmental problems. The rapid world population growth of the last two centuries (in particular since the middle of the twentieth century) has been frequently considered the leading factor in explaining carbon dioxide concentrations in the atmosphere and environmental degradation in general. The term Anthropocene itself emphasizes the central role of the entire species (i.e., the *anthropos*) as the main geological agent.⁵⁰

If there is an obvious correlation between population growth and greenhouse gas emissions, this cannot be a sufficient explanation for climate change: between 1820 and 2010 population increased by a factor of 6.6, CO emissions by a factor of 654.8. As Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg have argued, this

48 See Carol M. Rose, *Commons and Cognition*, 19 THEORETICAL INQUIRIES L. 587 (2018).

49 Paul Crutzen & Eugene Stoermer, *The 'Anthropocene'*, 41 IGBP NEWSL. 12 (2000).

50 Paul Crutzen, *Geology of Mankind – The Anthropocene*, 415 NATURE 23 (2002); Will Steffen et al., *The Anthropocene. Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?*, 36 AMBIO 614 (2007); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History: Four Theses*, 35 CRITICAL INQUIRY 197 (2009).

explanation might be satisfactory for polar bears, birds and other species seeking to understand who is destroying their habitats.⁵¹

This universal ‘we’ obscures differentiated environmental responsibilities and does not take into account the historical dynamics characterized by social and economic inequalities whereby specific groups have promoted – and frequently imposed – the fossil economy and thus the basis of the present environmental crisis.⁵² To point out the inherent risks of unhistorical representation of environmental problems and to unfold how this ‘we’ is far less uniform than it may appear, it is possible to recall another controversial metaphor proposed by Hardin, that of the “Lifeboat Ethics.”

In an article published in 1974, Hardin again used the common pasture paradigm to oppose the then popular environmentalist metaphor of Spaceship Earth: “Environmentalists use the metaphor of the earth as a ‘spaceship’ in trying to persuade countries, industries and people to stop wasting and polluting our natural resources. Since we all share life on this planet, they argue, no single person or institution has the right to destroy, waste, or use more than a fair share of its resources. But does everyone on earth have an equal right to an equal share of its resources? The spaceship metaphor can be dangerous when used by misguided idealists to justify suicidal policies for sharing our resources through uncontrolled immigration and foreign aid. In their enthusiastic but unrealistic generosity, they confuse the ethics of a spaceship with those of a lifeboat.”⁵³

Neglecting the historical roots of the contemporary socioecological asymmetries (“we must begin the journey to tomorrow from the point where we are today”), Hardin depicted the world as a sea with a few lifeboats (the rich nations) surrounded by the drowning poor. To him, securing these boats entails preventing new boarding. This parable, in its inhumanity, clearly emphasizes the correlation between social and environmental inequalities.⁵⁴ Moreover, it underlies the contemporary strategies that Christian Parenti called the “politics of the armed lifeboat,” which implies responding to global

51 Andreas Malm & Alf Hornborg, *The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative*, 1 ANTHROPOCENE REV. 62 (2014).

52 ANDREAS MALM, FOSSIL CAPITAL: THE RISE OF STEAM POWER AND THE ROOTS OF GLOBAL WARMING (2015).

53 Garrett Hardin, *Lifeboat Ethics: The Case Against Helping the Poor*, 8 PSYCHOL. TODAY 34 (1974). On this, see SABINE HÖHLER, SPACESHIP EARTH IN THE ENVIRONMENTAL AGE, 1960–1990 (2014).

54 Marco Armiero, *Sabotaging the Anthropocene; or, In Praise of Mutiny*, in FUTURE REMAINS A CABINET OF CURIOSITIES FOR THE ANTHROPOCENE 129 (Gregg Mitman, Marco Armiero & Robert S. Emmett eds., 2018).

warming with militarized borders, aggressive anti-immigrant policing and open-ended counterinsurgency.⁵⁵

Hence, some arguments put forward by Hardin are still present in the current Anthropocene debate. Such arguments are indicative of a broader approach to environmental problems with strong intellectual and political traditions, which have in Hardin's thesis one of the most effective rhetorical tools.⁵⁶ Similarly to what has been done for the pasture paradigm, an historical approach may allow us to deconstruct and problematize such reductionist and unhistorical narratives, exploring the heterogeneous and frequently contrary processes that have accompanied our path into the Anthropocene, and showing the historical causes and social implications of the present environmental crisis.⁵⁷

55 CHRISTIAN PARENTI, *TROPIC OF CHAOS: CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE NEW GEOGRAPHY OF VIOLENCE* (2012); AMITAV GHOSH, *THE GREAT DERANGEMENT: CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE UNTHINKABLE* 143-144 (2016).

56 Rob Nixon, *Neoliberalism, Genre, and "The Tragedy of the Commons,"* 127 *PUBLICATIONS MOD. LANGUAGE ASS'N* 593 (2012).

57 CHRISTOPHE BONNEUIL & JEAN-BAPTISTE FRESSOZ, *THE SHOCK OF THE ANTHROPOCENE. THE EARTH, HISTORY AND US* (2016).