

COMMONS: HISTORY, PRESENT ... AND FUTURE?

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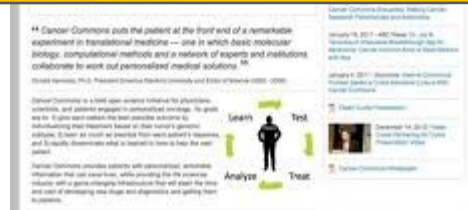
SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC HISTORY RESEARCH GROUP
UTRECHT UNIVERSITY



Canadian
Knowledge
Commons



“Commons” are
everywhere!



Commons?

Refers today to many different things:

- Different types of **resources**: from tangible to virtual
- Different **governance regimes**: club goods, public governance, open access

=> Very wide definition: Wikipedia: “*The **commons** are resources that are owned in common or shared between or among communities populations*”

The screenshot shows the top portion of the 'On the Commons' website. At the top is a blue navigation bar with links: Home, About Us, About the Commons, Tell Your Story, Resource Center, Donate, Contact Us, and Log In. To the right of these links is a search bar with a pink 'SEARCH' button. Below the navigation bar, the page title 'On the Commons' is displayed in a large, light blue font. To the right of the title is a circular logo with three stylized human figures and the text 'We Power'. Below the title, there is a yellow box on the left containing the text 'see also' followed by three bullet points: 'New Book Offers the Gift of Optimism for the Holidays', 'Boston Commons Rising', and 'Give to the Max for the Commons'. To the right of this box is the main heading 'All That We Share - A Field Guide to the Commons' in a large, bold, orange font. Below this heading is a subtitle in a smaller, black font: 'How to Save the Economy, the Environment, the Internet, Democracy, Our Communities, and Everything Else That Belongs to All of Us'. At the bottom left, there is a light blue box with the text 'commons topics'. At the bottom right, there is a 'SHARE' button with social media icons for Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

Home About Us About the Commons Tell Your Story Resource Center Donate Contact Us Log In

SEARCH

On the Commons

 We Power

see also

- [New Book Offers the Gift of Optimism for the Holidays](#)
- [Boston Commons Rising](#)
- [Give to the Max for the Commons](#)

All That We Share - A Field Guide to the Commons

How to Save the Economy, the Environment, the Internet, Democracy, Our Communities, and Everything Else That Belongs to All of Us

commons topics

SHARE

BACK TO THE FUTURE...?

1. What do commons really mean?
2. Where does this meaning come from?
3. How did commons (and similar institutions) evolve over time?



OUTLINE

1. The original commons.
2. Commons and other institutions for collective action in the history of Europe.
3. The disappearance of the commons in the 18th -19th centuries.
4. The bad reputation of the commons in the 19th-20th centuries.
5. Commons strike back! Elinor Ostrom... and beyond?



ONCE UPON A TIME IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE...

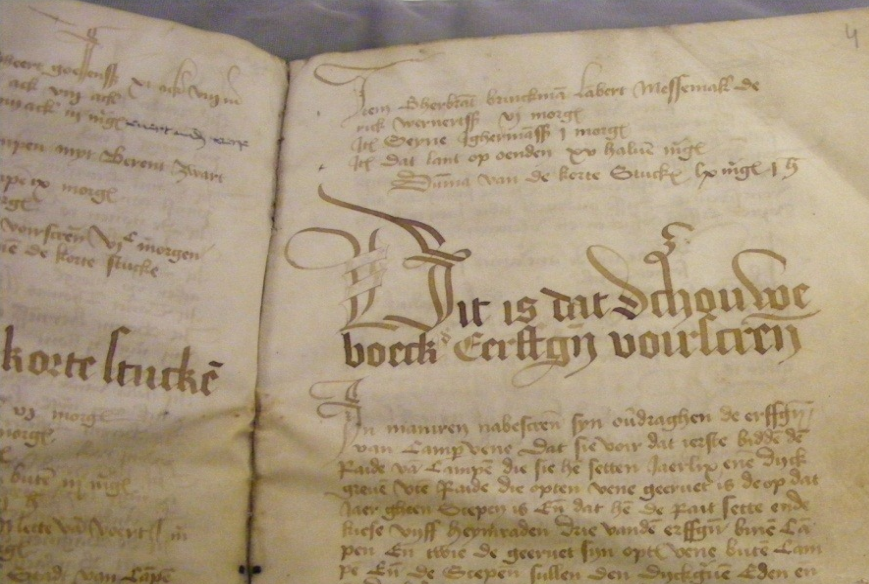
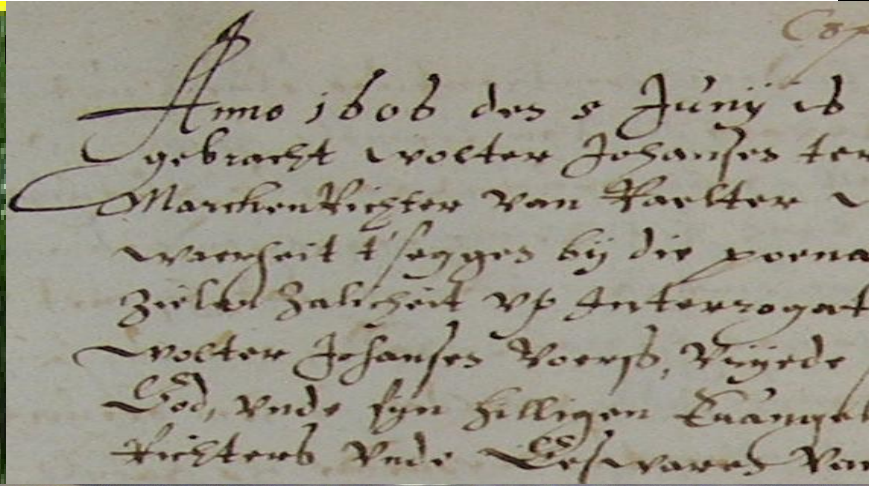
- « **Land that is used and managed in common** »
- Growing **formalization** in Europe from the **12th-13th centuries**
 - In reaction to **demographic pressure**
 - Main aim of **institutionalisation**: checking **overexploitation risks**.



MARKE RAALTERWOOLD, OVERRIJSEL, NETHERLANDS.
 BEFORE 1445 - 1859

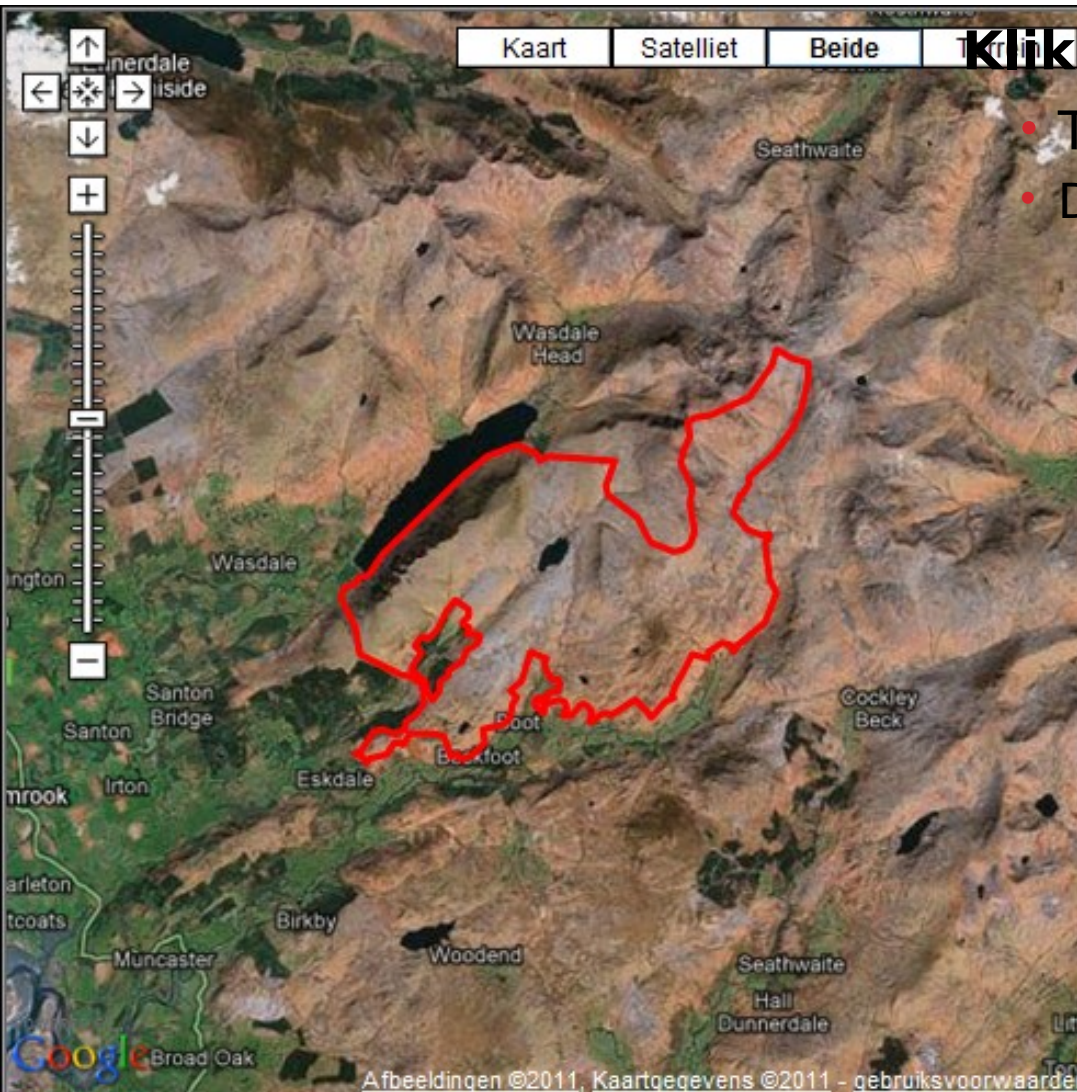
Klik om de modelstijlen te bewerke

- Tweede niveau
- Derde niveau
 - Vierde niveau
 - Vijfde niveau



ESKDALE COMMONS, CUMBRIA, ENGLAND.

MIDDLE AGES - C. 1859



Gemene and Loweiden (Near Bruges, Belgium): 14th century-today

Common rights:
pastureland



Klik om de modelstijlen te bewerken

- Tweede niveau
- Derde niveau
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Commons: just one historical form of an institution for collective action

- Commons: one example among a set of similar institutions.
- From Middle Ages: **cooperation among individuals** to solve their common problems
- Cooperation outside the family or the clan
- Weakness of alternative institutions:
 - State: fragmentation in small power units.
 - Market: emerging and unreliable

A '**silent revolution**' in Western Europe?



INSTITUTIONS FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION (ICAs)

- **Commons. Guilds. Waterboards.** Different functions

- But a **similar governance structure:**

INSTITUTIONS FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION

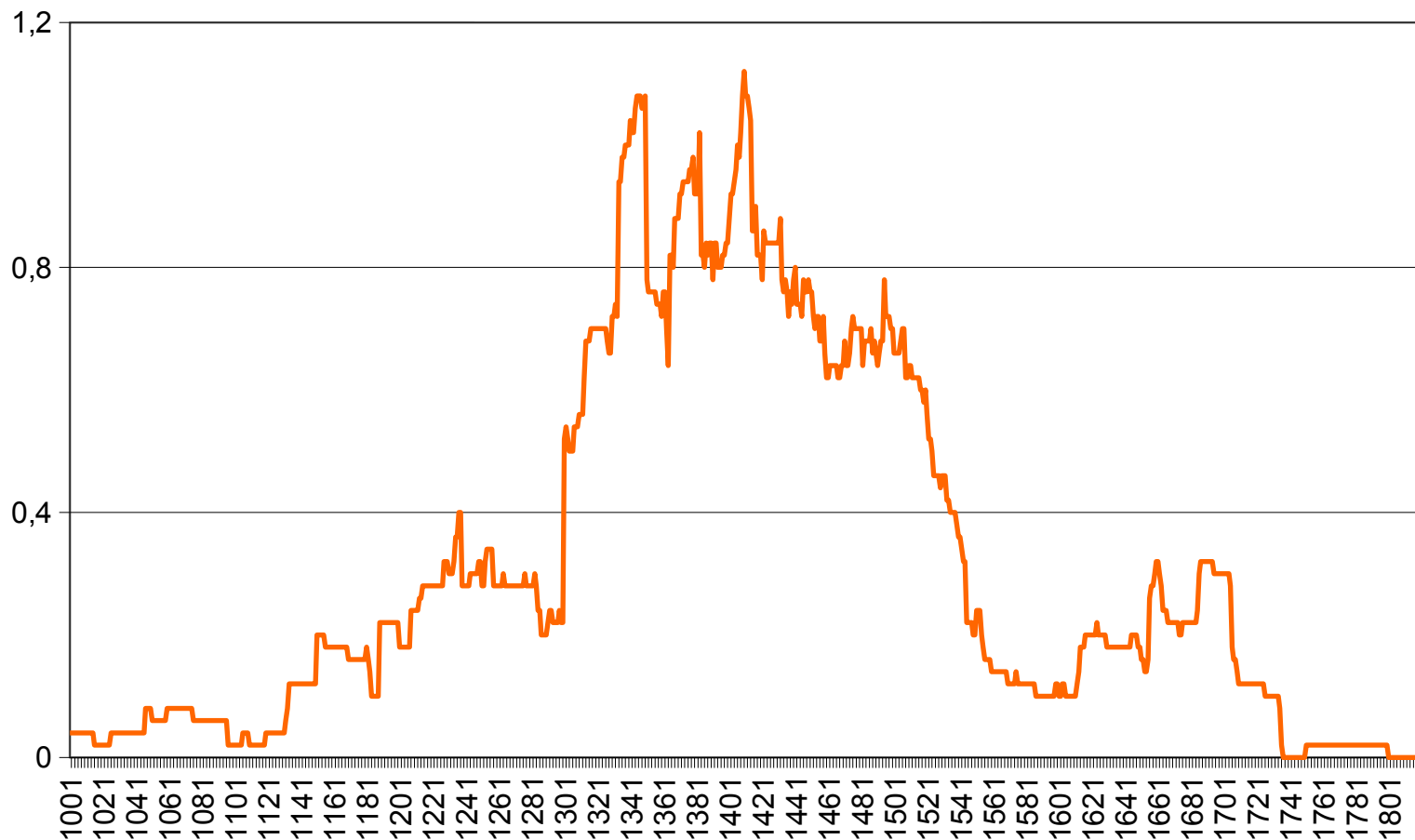
- **Main features:**

- Bottom-up formation
- Minimal interference by higher authorities
- Exclusive membership
- Self-governance
- Trust and social pressure
- Persistence over time of institutional framework



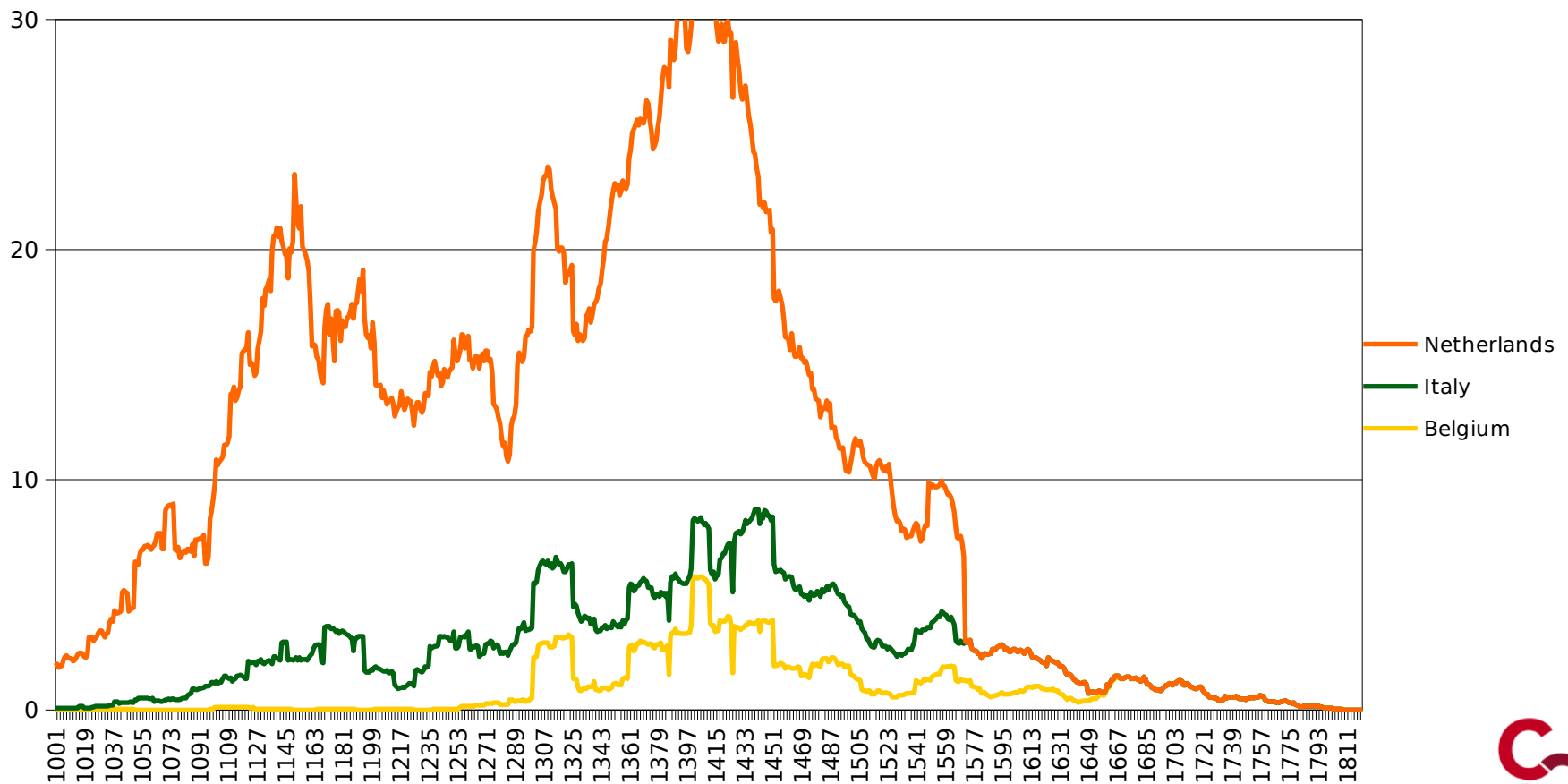
Number of Established Commons Per Year in the Netherlands (1000-1820)

Fifty-year Simple Moving Average



Number of Established Craft Guilds Per Year in NW Europe (1000-1820)

Twenty-year Simple Moving Average



FROM 18TH CENTURY ONWARDS...

- The **'individual'**: central unit in society [Enlightenment]
 - The **market**: free interaction of self-interested individuals as the best formula for progress.
 - The **liberal nation state**:
 - Removal of any constraints on individual freedom and property
 - Exclusive decision power about society's institutional framework
- **Commons, guilds, etc.:** obstacles for progress.

Between 1750-1850:

- **Abolishment of commons and guilds** all over Europe.
- Enforcement of **private property rights**.



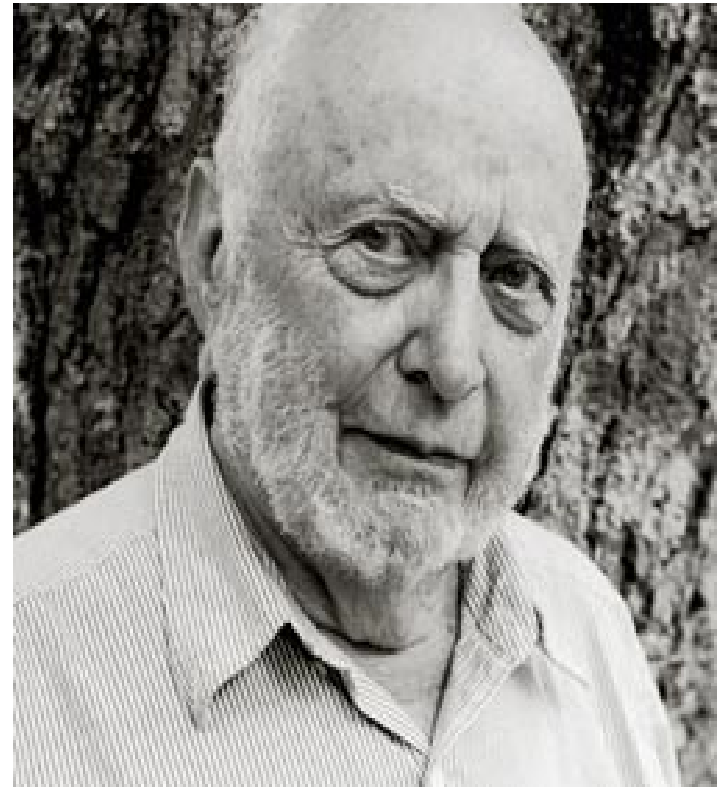
Guilds, commons... Such a bad thing!

Persistence of negative views on commons and guilds among contemporary scholars.

Both social scientists...

Economics Nobel Prize, 1990:
Douglass North.

Private property rights explain economic development



Guilds, commons... Such a bad thing!

And also others...

Garret Hardin.

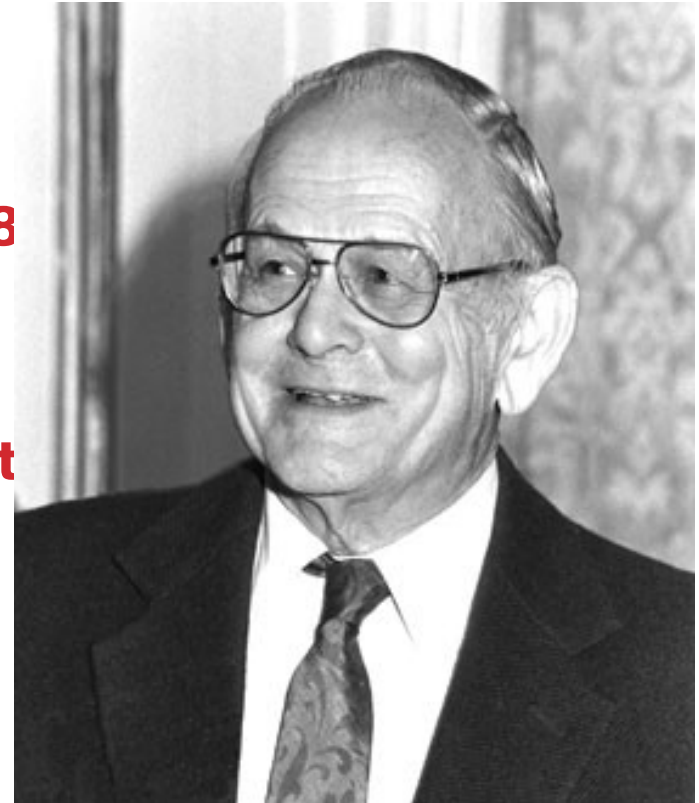
'The tragedy of the commons', 1968

Parallel with a **common:**

Unavoidable outcome: **resource depletion**

Main solution: State or market.

No user-based approaches



The commons strike back: Elinor Ostrom's work

'Governing the Commons', 1990.

Main idea: under certain conditions, communities may use the resources in a sustainable way so...

Markets or states are not always needed.

Cooperation among individuals may be an effective and efficient way of organizing economic activities





ELINOR OSTROM

2009 Nobel Laureate
in Economic Sciences

Nobel medal © © The Nobel Foundation





The International Association for the Study of the Commons

The leading professional association dedicated to the commons

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Impact Stories

The International Association for the Study of the Commons (IASC) has brought together an impressive array of evidence from around the world that communities are able to manage common property resources effectively and sustainably. But there is more to IASC than just great ideas, theory, and even cutting-edge research: we also have impact on the ground.

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n that they were dissolved. As such it

11 - 14 April 2012

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Commons: an Alternative for the market?

- Commons are primarily meant for self-subsistence
 - Threat of commercialisation: “as a rational being, each herdsman seeks to maximize his gain” (Hardin, 1968)
- > Can market development go together with development of institutions for collective action??**
- Market stimulates need for regulation of rights
 - Market pressure helps to identify what commons are intended for: Self-sufficiency
 - Collective action as a *modus vivendi* in stabilizing developing markets?



Commons or do-it-yourself-governance: alternative for the state?

- **Essential features of governance model of the commons:**
 - Participation of stakeholders in decision making processes
 - Identifiability of those with rights
 - Bottom-up formation
 - Self-governance

Via:

- Right to vote in meetings (linked to household)
- Obligation to attend meetings
- Election of representatives
- Rotation of responsibilities (incl. the annoying ones)
- Intensive social control
- Sanctions for malefactors (often graduated fines)
- Liability of those who shirk responsibility



What can we learn from commons-research?

- **Self-governance can work, can be effective and efficient**
 - **Effectiveness of management by immediate stakeholders**
 - > **“those who use the land, know the land best.”**
 - **Recognition by authorities is essential**
 - **Collective resource management can deal with market pressure**
- > BUT: no one-size-fits-all solution!**
- local conditions vary
 - value of resources also influences type of institutions
 - technology and local conditions matter and deserve attention

