

# Introduction: The Growth of the Commons Paradigm and New Directions in the Study of Social Changes\*

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## The Growth of the Commons Paradigm and Six Trends in the Study of the Commons

Sudden spotlight on the commons and the growth of the commons paradigm are closely connected with the structural change of modern society. The changes of socioeconomic conditions on a global scale are also bringing to the fore the issues of sustainability in both urban and rural communities in South Korea. In urban areas, on the one hand, privatization of public space and capitalistic urban development are still ongoing, the struggle against which has become increasingly intensified. In rural communities, on the other, a number of villages are facing issues of decline and even collapse due to gradually decreasing population not to mention the problem of privatization of natural resources. In parallel with such changes in social and economic conditions, there is also a growing realization that the traditional dichotomy of state and market is not actually an alternative to the solution of these problems but rather the cause of them. Against this backdrop, the theory of the commons is growing as an alternative paradigm in both urban and rural communities. The study of the commons in the academic realm, however, has been differentiated under a host of theoretical sources and disciplines, and the realistic grounds of the study differ as well. For the commons paradigm to respond to the demand of the public and the realistic conditions which give prominence to the paradigm itself, scientific practical

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discussions and criticisms should be undertaken while at the same time the variegated theoretical sources must be classified. What is needed as a priority is to classify to understand the various sources of commons study, which can be roughly divided into six trends.

The first trend in the study of the commons was initiated in 1968, when Garret Hardin published his paper *The Tragedy of the Commons*, and introduced the concept of the commons into the scientific realm (Hardin 1968). In his essay, Hardin denied the possibility of voluntary cooperation among individual users of common resources and drew a conclusion that the commons is inevitably destroyed. Also, he proposed a dichotomy between enforcement by the state and privatization of common resources as a solution to avoid the tragedy of the commons. The thesis of the tragedy of the commons, along with the prisoner's dilemma and the logic of collective action, was understood as one of 'social dilemmas' where individual users' rational pursuit of profit is in conflict with public good. Soon, it sparked arguments over the possibility of collective action in the sciences of economy, public administration, and public policies. Hence, establishing theoretical models that enable collective action has become a key challenge of these studies.

Although the second trend can be traced to the anthropological studies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century on the non-European communities, the concept of the commons itself was not the main topic in the studies. Anthropological studies of the commons in a more contemporary sense date back to the research on Swiss rural communities in the 1970's by Robert M. Netting, where he pointed out that local communities prevented destruction of common resources through their democratic decisions. From then until the 1990's, many scholars including James M. Acheson, Bonnie J. McCay, and Fikret Berkes discovered local cases in which communities in many parts of the world have been successfully managing resources, and raised an empirical counterargument against Hardin's model (Bromley et al. 1992; Feeny et al. 1990; McCay and Acheson 1987). These anthropological studies are distinctive in that they assumed the form of the study dealing with the scenes in the southern hemisphere mainly carried out by researchers from the northern hemisphere and connected with the theoretical questions asked in the first trend

Elinor Ostrom brightened the potential of autonomous management of resources by users beyond the dichotomy between the state and the market by combining the theoretical model based on economics and administrative science and her empirical research in anthropology from the new-

institutional perspective (Ostrom 1990; 1994; 2005). In this respect, her work published in 1990 *Governing the Commons: the Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* can be seen as a combination of the two trends of the commons research in the scientific realm. The attempts to reveal the possibility of collective action through the integration of theoretical and empirical research have aroused numerous debates and brought theoretical and methodological development, and have become a mainstream in the study of the commons within the realm of sciences (Ostrom et al. 2002; Bardhan and Ray (eds.) 2008). Ostrom won the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences in 2009, which attested to the value of her research program. And her research has evolved around the scientific theoretical question of 'the possibility of collective action' (Ostrom 2005; Poteete et al. 2010).

The third trend began rather abruptly in the mid 1990's without any relevance to the origins of the scientific realm described above. The deployment of personal computers in the 1980's and the connection amongst the Internet users through the World Wide Web spurred the explosion of the information-commons movement in the mid 1990's. This is when the term commons started to be used to argue against information enclosures which were developing in the cyber space triggered by privatization, commercialization and excessive patent protection. In this particular context, Hardin's thesis was transformed into the Tragedy of the Anti-commons (Heller 1998; Heller and Eisenberg 1998). Moreover, there was a sudden surge in interest and research in and movement for something quite different from traditional commons studied in the academic arena, including the production of knowledge commons by collective intelligence, such as the open access movement about knowledge commons, the development of a file-sharing system, the establishment of open digital libraries, the archives established by scientific communities, and the Wikipedia (Ostrom and Hess 2007). In such a transitional environment, the commons started being used as a popular expression.

The fourth and the fifth trends are the use of the commons as a language for the third alternative solution that goes beyond the state and market paradigms and for social innovation and changes. Developed mainly in European context, these trends are combined with different intellectual legacies from various traditions, which can be roughly categorized into two traditions; liberal and reformist. David Bollier in the liberal tradition understands the commons as a template for transformation and, through the commons, finds it possible to go beyond the state-market dichotomy and

achieve social changes more equal and ecologically sustainable (Bollier 2014a). These liberalists including Ostrom and Bollier regard the domain of the commons as an incubator for creative solutions to the issues the state and the market have failed to address (Bollier 2014b). Advocates of liberal tradition postulate the symbiotic domain of the commons where the state and the market co-exist, while reformists including Michel Bauwens argue that autonomous commons-based peer production will gradually substitute capitalism (Bauwens 2005). Stimulated by the Internet zone and the commons movement in modern cities, the trends maintain that it is possible to dissolve the trinity of capitalism-state-nation through creative inventions and transformative social innovation, and pursue open cooperativism with partner states and ethical market in an innovative way (Bauwens and Niaros 2018; P2P Foundation 2015).

The sixth trend, unlike the liberal or reformist traditions, combines the commons as an anti-capitalistic language with more powerful traditions of resistance. One of such traditions is rediscovering commons as the language of resistance against New Enclosure emerging in the debt crisis that swept across many Third World countries in Central and South America and Africa in 1980's and ensuing neo-liberal globalization. In *Midnight Notes 10: The New Enclosure*, published in 1990, a group of researchers who criticized developmentalism and feminists from the Third World defined the Structural Adjustment Programs of the World Bank and the IMF as New Enclosure that destroys the commons and communal mode of life, the very foundation of life for the people in the Third World (Federici 1990; Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen 1999). They even went further to reinterpret anti-neo-liberalist and anti-capitalist movement including the Zapatistas uprising and the Occupy movement as an alternative movement to oppose New Enclosures and create new commons (Caffentzis and Federici 2014; De Angelis and Harvie 2014; De Marcellus 2003; Federici 2011). At this particular point, the commons is redetermined as a language for social movements. In addition, the Autonomia movement represented by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt pays attention to the commons and the common as principles for an alternative political system to substitute the state as an dominant institutional form of modernity, namely the republic of ownership. While regarding natural resources and land as the common at the first level, they see the transformation of labor taking place in contemporary capitalism is converted to a new production process for new main agents, new human beings, putting it at the second level of the common. If capitalist institutional devices block and exploit the production of the common performed by contemporary social

labor, a multitude of individuals emerging as a new main agent in the social revolution will attempt to stop the exploitation of the common through a movement to multiply itself and overthrow capitalism through accumulation of the common by voluntarily increasing cooperation and communication inside the multitude (Hardt and Negri 2004; 2009).

The term commons is under the spotlight as a new political planning while the world is experiencing increasing distrust in the state-market or the power-capital system and growing unrest and discontent with the fact that unconstrained living conditions are faced with crisis through new enclosure emerging in neoliberal globalization. The mainstream scientific studies represented by Ostrom highlight the importance of the commons as a third way beyond the state and market but relativize its potential. In other words, the commons is significant only as a substitute to correct the failure of the state and market, and it doesn't provide any implications on 'reformation' of the state or the market. Unlike these North American traditions, the commons research trend evolving in Europe and the Third World is distinctive in that it seeks innovation or reformation while substituting the state and market and is closely combined with academic research and social movements. We believe that it is against this theoretical backdrop that the concept, theory, and methodology of the commons need to be developed.

## Social Change of Jeju and its Reinterpretation through the Commons and Commoning

The four theses featured in the special edition of *Development and Society* attempt to reinterpret the societal changes occurring in Jeju, South Korea, from the perspective of commoning. Jeju Special Self-Governing Province set an idea of free international city as a vision in the new millennium and has been enforcing an array of policies to achieve economic development by promoting free flow of capital and expanding privatization and capitalization on the commons. As a result, much of Jeju's land has been purchased by the capital from China and mainland Korea, where large resort facilities and accommodations have been built. However, Jeju has still preserved a number of traditional commons enough to be called the Island of Commons. As of 2017, there are still 53 village pasture commons left, warm temperate forest called *gotjawal*, and village wells called *yongcheonsu* in coastal areas. For the first time in Korea, Jeju has applied the concept of 'public water' to the ground water, which is managed by a public corporation. As for the wind

energy project, wind is also perceived to be commonly owned by Jeju people, and a portion of the proceeds is given back to the community. In short, Jeju is the place where the pressure from the state and capital, determined to privatize Jeju's commons through New Enclosures, is plainly at work, but at the same time, it is the scene where the pressure is fiercely conflicted with the civil society's effort to resist the pressure, protect the commons and create new commons.

However, current research on the commons has some limits to explain the dynamism of Jeju society. As appears in the subtitle of Young Sin Jeong's thesis, *From Decommonisation to Re-commonisation: Conceptual Approach for the Study of Social Changes Based on the Theory of Commons*, he is focusing on establishing a concept and methodology to overcome the limits of current study on the commons and to analyze social changes through the commons theory. Jeong understands that two kinds of power are in existence in double movement; the power to privatize common wealth, created through social cooperation in modern capitalist society, through enclosure; and the social power trying to undo the privatized back to the commons. He proposes that analyzing the politics of commons where the two powers collide should be an important task for the study of social changes, stressing the critical role of commons movement. As the case of Seonheul village illustrates, creative and participatory programs of commons movement can help a community carry out and practice autonomous and democratic commoning, eventually transforming the decommonisation process into a re-commonisation one.

Yea-YI Yoon analyzes social movement based on the theory of commons in his thesis *Gangjeong Village 'Jikimis' as Commoners: For a Commons Paradigm-Based Social Movement Theory*. The Defense Ministry of Korea in 2007 decided to build a large-scale naval base in the village of Gangjeong located in the south of Jeju Island. Residents of the village and *jikimis*, referring to a group of citizens voluntarily involved in the struggle against the naval base construction, have been running a movement. Yoon defines *jikimis* who campaign to oppose the naval base in Gangjeong as commoners, and analyzes their activities are a social movement putting commoning into practice. According to him, the rock of Gurumbi, blown up for the construction, was the commons that had been providing various resources for livelihood and a platform of symbolic rituals. Therefore, the earlier anti-movement can be viewed as a struggle to protect the commons. However, the fight of *jikimis* and village residents didn't stop there. Rather, their resistance evolved into practicing new commons: *Jikimis* and residents have established

a producers' cooperative, bookstores, and guest houses to create a new network of solidarity, producing and sharing 'the common' in terms of both life and movement. Lastly, Yoon states that this kind of movement is significant as 'commoning after the loss of existing commons,' and points out that this aspect has not been discussed in current research of commons yet.

Jakyong Kim interprets various pastoral practices formed in pre-modern times as traditional commoning in her paper entitled *Sunureum as a Traditional Commoning in Jeju: Reinterpretation of Jeju's Livestock Culture*. According to her analysis, the stock farming culture in Jeju has been developed in combination with agriculture, in the process of which individuals and farms autonomously established and observed rules and regulations and continued reciprocal distribution of profits from running village pasture commons. People of Jeju have developed a multi-layered network of cooperation in various forms including the livestock farming *gye* (association). These various forms of 'gye' served as media to connect between people and people and between people and nature, through which people have formed the culture of 'sunureum' incorporating aspects of reciprocity, mutual aid, solidarity and cooperation, caring and consideration. In conclusion, Kim argues that Jeju's *sunureum* is a culture of living based on the commons, and raises a question of how to restore the diverse types of traditional commoning practiced in *sunureum* culture to its contemporary form.

In their paper entitled *A Comparative Study on Two Ways of Community Building with Different Commons Ownership Modes: Focusing on the Cases of Gasi-ri and Seonheul 1-ri*, Hyun Choe and Jaesub Lee focus on the differences deriving from the ownership structures, which provides a stable foundation for commoning activities. Gasi-ri and Seonheul 1-ri have been praised for their successful village creation projects: The village pasture commons is owned by a ranch association in the former, and in the latter, the village forest commons is owned by the state and the village has the management right. The authors point out that the former case provides residents with room for equal participation in the village commons, while the latter may cause inequality between association members and nonmembers, leading to destabilizing the management authority: Forming a structure for equal and open participation can continuously recruit residents and guarantee the community's sustainable reproduction through sustainable use of the commons. Such an argument allows for an analysis that stable and sustainable commoning is ensured in an equal and open participation structure and creating such institutional environments can be an important

condition for the contemporary revitalization of commons and commoning.

## Challenges Ahead

The four theses featured in the special edition share similarities in that they reconstitute a variety of social practices carried out around the commons in Jeju from the perspective of commoning. On the other hand, each paper is different, respectively focusing on theoretical and conceptual innovation, commoning as a social movement, reinterpretation of traditional culture through commoning, and institutional conditions of commoning. The new-institutional commons research led by Elinor Ostrom has merits that it is based on relatively clear concepts and methodologies, but it has a disadvantage that it lacks relevance and explanatory power to the various commons movements of reality: As for these papers, although their concepts and theories inevitably contain ambiguous aspects to some extent, it can be said that they are more progressive in respects that they take note of the potentials of the commons movement and advocate reconstitution of the concept and the theory. We expect that social conflicts over production and distribution of natural resources and social space will become more intense, and that a high premium will be placed on the importance which politics and movements of commons play in social theories. As much as an actual society requires politics and movements to strengthen publicness and achieve social innovation, further innovation is required in concepts, theories, and methodologies surrounding the commons and commoning in the realm of social theory.

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