

## Review

*The Commons in an Age of Uncertainty: Decolonizing Nature, Economy, and Society*, by Franklin Obeng-Odoom (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, pp. 264, 2021)

Debates about property rights and the role of the commons have a long history. Franklin Obeng-Odoom provides a summary of this history and the current status of the debate as a basis for ‘rethinking the commons’. He categorises the debate into two camps: (i) *Conventional Wisdom*, which assumes that private property naturally arises over time to enclose and privatise the commons, and which he connects with Garret Hardin’s ‘The tragedy of the commons’ (Hardin, 1968); and (ii) the *Western Left Consensus*, based on Nobel laureate Elinore Ostrom’s work on sustainable commons management (Ostrom, 1990, 2008). He then presents what he calls a *Radical Alternative*, centred on the ‘commoning’ of land.

However, Obeng-Odoom misinterprets both Hardin and Ostrom, or at least attributes to them things they never intended. Hardin’s solution to the tragedy was either private ownership of the commons or state control. He was not a strong advocate for either. But what Hardin was really describing was the tragedy of *open access* commons, not ones with community ownership rights and shared management (Feeny *et al.*, 1990). Ostrom clearly demonstrated that there is a third way. She documented numerous cases of sustainable commons management across a range of cultural and economic contexts. Resources owned in common can be effectively managed through collective institutions that assure cooperative compliance with established rules and agreements. She articulated eight core design principles as guidelines for effective and sustainable commons management, including clearly defined boundaries, collective choice arrangements, and group monitoring and sanctions (Atkins *et al.*, 2019).

Obeng-Odoom correctly faults *Conventional Wisdom* for an overemphasis on privatisation as the solution to open access. But his *Radical Alternative* is exactly what the Ostrom approach

to commons management would support and endorse. He recommends that all land be held in common. This entails removing private property rights to land. But the successful commons management systems that Ostrom documented do just that. They consider land and resources to be community owned and monitored commons, requiring community developed rules and norms to operate. To work they require the participation and justice that Obeng-Odoom says is missing from the Ostrom approach.

By far the most valuable parts of the book are Obeng-Odoom’s discussion of Henry George and his land tax. As Obeng-Odoom points out, George gravitated toward a community ‘stewardship’ conception of the commons, specifically land, versus private ‘ownership’. He advocated a land value tax along with removal of other taxes and showed how this would improve both productivity and fairness.

But the discourse has moved on a bit from ‘land’ to a broader conception of ‘natural capital’, encompassing all the parts of the world (including land) that are the ‘free gifts of nature’, and ‘ecosystem services’, which are the broad range of benefits that humans enjoy from functioning ecosystems. These terms are never mentioned by Obeng-Odoom.

The basic idea behind common property regimes for land (or natural capital more broadly) is that assets created by nature or by the whole society should belong to everyone, including future generations. This idea has a long history in environmental discourse (Bromley, 1992; Barnes, 2006; Bollier, 2007). A recent manifestation is the idea of granting legal rights to natural systems. For example, New Zealand’s Whanganui River and India’s Ganges River were recently granted the legal rights of ‘personhood’, and Ecuador’s Constitution now grants nature the ‘right of integral respect’ (Tanasescu, 2017). These initiatives are quite consistent with Obeng-Odoom’s *Radical Alternative* but are never mentioned.

The limiting factors to creating a sustainable and desirable world in today’s Anthropocene epoch are natural and social capital. These assets



are not rival and excludable goods, and are not well allocated by conventional markets. However, they provide arguably the majority of support to sustainable human wellbeing (Costanza *et al.*, 1997, 2014). We need institutions that are better able to manage and steward these assets and which are consistent with Ostrom's design principles discussed above. Recent examples include common asset trusts (CATs) based on the integration of the public trust doctrine and community property rights. In essence, a CAT is a collection of agreements and polycentrically governed institutions in support of a shared purpose – sustainable management of common assets, including the atmosphere, the oceans and terrestrial ecosystems (Barnes *et al.*, 2008; Farley *et al.*, 2015; Canning *et al.*, 2021; Costanza *et al.*, 2021).

Better management of the commons at all scales (including land) is critical. *Conventional Wisdom* and privatisation are certainly not the answer. A 'commoning' of land and a Georgist land tax as Obeng-Odoom recommends could certainly contribute. But the problem is bigger than that, and stewardship of our common assets at all scales is needed urgently.

ROBERT COSTANZA

*Crawford School of Public Policy, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT, Australia*

#### REFERENCES

- Atkins, P.W., Wilson, D.S. and Hayes, S.C. (2019), *Prosocial: Using Evolutionary Science to Build Productive, Equitable, and Collaborative Groups*. New Harbinger Publications, Oakland, CA.
- Barnes, P. (2006), *Capitalism 3.0: A Guide to Reclaiming the Commons*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco, CA.
- Barnes, P., Costanza, R., Hawken, P., Orr, D., Ostrom, E., Umana, A. and Young, O. (2008), 'Creating an Earth Atmospheric Trust', *Science*, **319**, 724.
- Bollier, D. (2007), 'The Growth of the Commons Paradigm', in Hess, C. and Ostrom, E. (eds), *Understanding Knowledge as a Commons: From Theory to Practice*. Cambridge, MA; London, England: The MIT Press, 27–40.
- Bromley, D.W. (1992), 'The Commons, Common Property, and Environmental Policy', *Environmental and Resource Economics*, **2**, 1–17.
- Canning, A.D., Jarvis, D., Costanza, R., Hasan, S., Smart, J.C.R., Finisdore, J., Lovelock, C., Greenhalgh, S., Marr, H., Beck, M., Stephenson, K., Gillies, C., Wilson, P. and Waltham, N. (2021), 'Financial Incentives for Wetland Restoration: Beyond Markets to Common Asset Trusts', *One Earth*, **4**, 937–950.
- Costanza, R., Atkins, P.W., Hernandez-Blanco, M. and Kubiszewski, I. (2021), 'Common asset trusts to effectively steward natural capital and ecosystem services at multiple scales', *Journal of Environmental Management*, **280**, 111801.
- Costanza, R., d'Arge, R., de Groot, R., Farber, S., Grasso, M., Hannon, B., Naeem, S., Limburg, K., Paruelo, J., O'Neill, R.V., Raskin, R., Sutton, P. and van den Belt, M. (1997), 'The Value of the World's Ecosystem Services and Natural Capital', *Nature*, **387**, 253–260.
- Costanza, R., de Groot, R., Sutton, P.C., van der Ploeg, S., Anderson, S., Kubiszewski, I., Farber, S. and Turner, R.K. (2014), 'Changes in the Global Value of Ecosystem Services', *Global Environmental Change*, **26**, 152–158.
- Farley, J., Costanza, R., Flomenhoft, G. and Kirk, D. (2015), 'The Vermont Common Assets Trust: An Institution for Sustainable, Just and Efficient Resource Allocation', *Ecological Economics*, **109**, 71–79.
- Feeny, D., Berkes, F., McCay, B.J. and Acheson, J.M. (1990), 'The Tragedy of the Commons: Twenty-two Years Later', *Human Ecology*, **18**, 1–19.
- Hardin, G. (1968), 'The Tragedy of the Commons', *Science*, **162**, 1243–1248.
- Ostrom, E. (1990), *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.
- Ostrom, E. (2008), 'Institutions and the Environment', *Economic Affairs*, **28**, 24–31.
- Tanasescu, M. (2017), 'When a River is a Person: From Ecuador to New Zealand, Nature Gets its Day in Court', *The Conversation*, **19**. <https://theconversation.com/when-a-river-is-a-person-from-ecuador-to-new-zealand-nature-gets-its-day-in-court-79278>

