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Contemporary Perspectives on the Commons
(SOC 344.01 Studies in Comparative Historical Sociology)

There has been a surge of academic and activist interest in varieties of collective management of natural and cultural resources known as "The Commons" in recent years in the face of the crisis-prone market system, tarnished state management models and relentless deterioration of bio-ecological conditions: The commons as the defense of nature, as model of self-management, as sharing of goods, as formation of communities... Was/is the withering of the commons during industrialization processes or contemporary neoliberalism inevitable? Should existing commons be defended/regenerated?

There is now also a fresh round of fighting taking place upon the digital terrain created by the maturation of "informational capitalism" and the concomitant "network society": Between the Intellectual Property regime with its patents and copyrights on the one hand and the movements for Free Software, Creative Commons, Open Access Publishing and similar on the other. Is the production and distribution of digital artifacts best achieved by the mechanism of intellectual property, or can commons-based models present a viable alternative? Can unauthorized sharing, also known as "piracy" be defended with a straight face? What property regime should govern the training data and outputs of Generative Artificial Intelligence?

We will start by reading the empirical and philosophical debate on the commons as tragedy and as hope through the opening salvo against the commons by Hardin and the response of his Nobel Prize winning opponent, Ostrom. We will then discover what has actually been happening to the commons in the historical perspectives of Marx and Polanyi and extend the analysis to the world of today with Harvey and Federici.

Following an introduction to the sociology of science via Merton, the new possibilities for forming social relations in the information economy era will be presented as a background to the discussion on the digital commons through the optimistic analysis provided by Castells, along with a pessimistic warning message delivered by Illich. We will explore practices of commons-based digital production in multiple fields as presented by scholars such as Bollier, Boyle, Lessig and others. We will discuss the ethics, goals and achievements of activists native to social movements advocating a digital commons in the fields of software, publishing, Artificial Intelligence, and selected internet collectives/communities, in the context of the tension between morality and legality.

Learning outcomes aimed for are the ability to employ insights gained from comparative historical sociology and political economy frameworks regarding the commons in understanding contemporary conditions. Students are encouraged to develop familiarity and informed opinions on current social movements and questions relevant to knowledge producers of today and tomorrow – such as likely themselves. The readings are kept as short as viable, focusing on key texts. Students are expected to read them and be provoked to thinking. The aim is to conduct a discussion-led course where we unearth the relevant interesting questions and answers from different viewpoints collectively. Furthermore, the instructor will introduce and explain certain key concepts and arguments that are referred to in the readings via lecture. It is therefore important to attend classes, as this is how the course will function with no previous requirements while keeping reading lengths to a minimum.

Requirements: Midterm Exam (40%), Final Paper (50%), Class Participation (10%)

Week 1

June 24 (Introduction)

June 25

- "The Tragedy of the Commons" (1968), Garrett Hardin.

Week 2

June 30

- Analyzing Long-Enduring, Self-Organized, and Self-Governed CPRs (Governing the Commons, pp. 58-102) (1990), Elinor Ostrom.

July 1

- Analyzing Institutional Failures and Fragilities (Governing the Commons, pp. 143-181) (1990), Elinor Ostrom.
- "The Tragedy of the Unmanaged Commons" (1994), Garrett Hardin.

July 2

- The Expropriation of the Agricultural Population from the Land (Capital Vol. 1, pp. 877-895) (1867), Karl Marx.
- Habitation versus Improvement (The Great Transformation, pp. 35-44) (1944), Karl Polanyi.

Week 3

July 7

- "The Russian Peasant Commune After the Reforms of the 1860s" (1985), Boris Mironov.
- Excerpts from Karl Marx on Social Relations in Russia (1881 Marx-Zasulich Correspondence, 1882 Preface to the Communist Manifesto)

July 8

- Witch Hunts, Enclosures, and the Demise of Communal Property Relations (Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women, pp. 15-23) (2018), Silvia Federici.
- Feminism and the Politics of the Commons in an Era of Primitive Accumulation (Re-Enchanting The World, pp. 102-115) (2019), Silvia Federici.

July 9

- Accumulation by Dispossession (The New Imperialism, pp. 143-152, 162-169) (2003), David Harvey.

Week 4

July 14

- "The Comedy of the Commons" (pp. 711-723, 739-749, 766-771) (1986), Carol Rose.
- "Thinking About the Commons" (2020), Carol Rose.

July 16 (Midterm Exam)

Week 5

July 21

- The Normative Structure of Science (The Sociology of Science, pp. 267-278) (1942), Robert Merton.

July 22

- Excerpts from The Rise of the Network Society (1996), Manuel Castells. Technology, Society, and Historical Change (pp. 5-13); Informationalism, Capitalism, Statism: Modes of Development and Modes of Production (pp. 13-18); The Information Technology Revolution (pp. 28-33); The Information Technology Paradigm (pp. 69-76)
- "Silence is a Commons" (1983), Ivan Illich.

July 23

- The Second Enclosure Movement (The Public Domain, pp. 42-53) (2008), James Boyle.
- "The Tragedy of the Anticommons, a Concise Introduction and Lexicon" (2013), Michael Heller.

Week 6

July 28

- Excerpts from Against Intellectual Monopoly (1996), Michele Boldrin and David Levine. Introduction (pp. 1-11); The Devil in Disney (pp. 97-105); Simultaneous Discovery (pp. 202-208); The Pharmaceutical Industry Today (pp. 225-234)
- "An Open Letter" (2020), Daniel O'Day.

- "Alternative Pricing Models for Remdesivir and Other Potential Treatments for COVID-19" (2020), Melanie Whittington, Jonathan Campbell.

July 29

- The Rentiers of the Intangible (How Silicon Valley Unleashed Techno-Feudalism, pp. 92-105) (2024), Cedric Durand.
- Us, Now (Free Culture, pp. 276-286) (2004), Lawrence Lessig.
- The Growth of the Commons Paradigm (Understanding Knowledge as a Commons, ed. Charlotte Hess and Elinor Ostrom, pp. 27-40) (2007), David Bollier.

July 30

- "Open Letter To Hobbyists" (1976), Bill Gates.
- Excerpts from The Success of Open Source (2004), Steven Weber. Property and the Problem of Software (pp. 1-19); What is Open Source and How Does It Work? (pp. 54-93)

Week 7

August 4

- Internet Sharing Economies (Remix, pp. 155-162) (2008), Lawrence Lessig.
- Creative Commons Licenses, creativecommons.org
- Wikipedia: Five Pillars, [Wikipedia.org](https://wikipedia.org)

August 5

- Excerpts from Open Access (2012), Peter Suber. What Is Open Access? (pp. 1-27); Motivation (pp. 29-48); Economics (pp. 133-147)

August 6

- Cloud Capital (Techno-Feudalism, pp. 58-84) (2023), Yanis Varoufakis.
- The Techno-feudal Hypothesis (How Silicon Valley Unleashed Techno-Feudalism, pp. 106-133) (2024), Cedric Durand.

Week 8

August 11

- "Copyright and AI Part 2: Copyrightability" (2025), U.S. Copyright Office.
- "Mapping the Impact of Share Alike/Copyleft Licensing on Machine Learning and Generative AI" (2024), Kacper Szkalej, Martin Senftleben.

August 12

- "Guerilla Open Access Manifesto" (2008), Aaron Swartz.
- "In Solidarity with Library Genesis and Sci-Hub" (2015), Custodians Online.
- "What Is Enlightenment" (1784), Immanuel Kant.
- "Civil Disobedience" (1849), Henry Thoreau.