theories and methodologies

Neoliberalism, Genre, and "The Tragedy of the Commons"

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IN DECEMBER 1968 THE JOURNAL *SCIENCE* PUBLISHED "THE TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS," A SLENDER TRACT BY THE ECOLOGIST AND GENETIcist Garrett Hardin that became one of the twentieth century's most influential essays. Hardin's thinking resonated in particular with policy makers at the International Monetary Fund, at the World Bank, and at conservative think tanks and kindred neoliberal institutions advocating so-called trickle-down economics, structural adjustment, austerity measures, government shrinkage, and the privatization of resources. Although Hardin's paramount, Malthusian concern was with "overbreeding," his general critique of the commons has had a far more lasting impact. He memorably encapsulated that critique in a parable that represented the commons as unprofitable and unsustainable, inimical to both the collective and the individual good.[1] According to this brief parable, a herdsman faced with the temptations of a common pasture will instinctively overload it with his livestock. As each greed-driven individual strives to maximize the resource for personal gain, the commons collapses to the detriment of all. Together, Hardin's pithy essay title and succinct parable have helped vindicate a neoliberal rescue narrative, whereby privatization through enclosure, dispossession, and resource capture is deemed necessary for averting tragedy.

Hardin's account of the commons has been challenged by political scientists, economists, sociologists, demographers, geographers, environmental historians, and ecologists. But there is a decisive literary component to his argument that also warrants consideration: namely, the way he deploys genre—tragedy and parable—to fortify the sociobiological case he mounts against the commons. For Hardin's crucial move is to pair up genetic and generic forces, creating a muscular tag team pulling for determinism. To change metaphoric registers, in presenting the commons as an innately imminent calamity he uses genre to strip commonage of its complex cultural histories so that it becomes a blank stage for predictable, biologically driven actions and outcomes.

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The process of cultural stripping pertains to our understanding of the neoliberal era's "new enclosures"—a term first articulated by the Midnight Notes Collective in the early 1990s and elaborated on by David Harvey and Ashley Dawson, among others. If, in Harvey's phrase, the new enclosures involve "accumulation by dispossession" (176), we need to probe the role that genre plays in what we might call Hardin's disinheritance plot. A usefully layered term, "plot" draws together notions of narrative, property, and strategic intent—all crucial to the way the parable of the tragic pastoralist has been appropriated by apologists for the new enclosures.

Early in his essay Hardin meditates on William Forster Lloyd's "Two Lectures on the Checks to Population," delivered at Oxford University in 1832 and published the following year. Noting that cattle on the commons were "puny and stunted" compared with those on private lands, Lloyd asks why this is the case (38). His conclusions about human nature, greed, and commonage give Hardin a launching pad for his arguments. But Lloyd, like Hardin after him, doesn't ask textured historical questions. He does not ask, for instance, to what extent the bovine emaciation he observes results from overcrowding on a commons traumatically shrunken by enclosures—by land transfer from public to private hands, most recently through the Enclosure Acts of 1815–20.

While endorsing Lloyd's conclusions, Hardin makes one decisive intellectual addition, superimposing a generic name, "tragedy," on the incremental ruin that both writers deplore. In his judgment, "the inherent logic of the commons remorselessly generates tragedy." Hardin doesn't use the term "tragedy" casually; he is at pains to ground his understanding of the genre in a definition he culls from A. N. Whitehead's 1948 volume *Science and the Modern World*: "The essence of dramatic tragedy is not unhappiness. It resides in the solemnity of the remorseless working of things. . . . This inevitableness of destiny can only be illustrated in terms of human life by incidents which in fact involve unhappiness. For it is only by them that the futility of escape can be made evident in the drama" (qtd. in Hardin, "Tragedy of the Commons" 1244). Through Whitehead, Hardin imports into his arguments a veritable thesaurus entry for determinacy: "ineluctable," "inescapable," "inevitable," "inexorable," "fateful," "remorseless," "preordained," "doomed," "futility of escape" echo through his text. The ensuing portrait of the commons as doom-sealed thus assumes a double force, as the deterministic logics of genre and gene converge.

If, for Hardin, biology, like tragedy, is destiny, what strikes a twenty-first-century reader is how narrow a view he takes of the selfish gene's survival strategies.[2] Throughout his writings, Hardin regards altruism as an insufficient brake on self-interested, survival-driven behavior. Yet by now most sociobiologists accommodate a broader vision of species self-perpetuation, one that acknowledges how altruism—forms of apparent selflessness—may be genetically beneficial, enhancing the prospects of collective survival. Hardin's genetic-generic method fails to acknowledge the evolutionary role that the paradox of selfish selflessness may play.

Hardin's restrictive view of the commons as a sociobiological tragic stage ignores circumstances in which communities have sought to manage shared resources, so that instead of inducing poverty the commons may become, however imperfectly, a hedge against future miseries. In striving to forestall or arrest the putatively innate, downward spiral toward a tragically eroded commons, such communities have frequently developed intergenerational resource safeguards, often adapted over centuries. To say as much is not to sentimentalize stewardship or to suggest that such communities have persisted in states of harmonious equity. It is merely to acknowledge that complex mo-

tives and mechanisms for stewardship exist and that they may buckle beneath historically specific stressors. Adjacent communities, for example, may be thrust into competition for resources overstretched by the arrival of refugees fleeing war or climate chaos or by an advancing private-property regime that whittles down the commons, generating or intensifying competitive desperation.

The omission in Hardin's writing of any acknowledgment of communal stewardship is more than an oversight: it is premised on a categorical mistake, whereby Hardin conflates common property (*res communis*) with unowned resources (*res nullius*). Access to *res communis* is typically managed through institutionalized practices, whereas access to *res nullius* entails little if any governance.[3] But Hardin makes no such discrimination, tethering both to the genre of tragedy.

He reinforces this categorical mistake by enlisting a second genre, parable, which scours the commons of its diverse, complicating cultural histories of governance. If sociobiological tragedy is the subject of Hardin's essay, parable becomes its supplementary method. Parable—a genre that Hardin favored throughout his career—is a succinct, overtly instructive form inimical to historical specificity.[4] Be it Jesus's parable of the prodigal son or Hardin's parable of the profligate pastoralist, the genre typically involves a small, didactic story that performs a large, luminous lesson. The narrative ordinarily entails little more than a stark setting, a brief action, and an unambiguous outcome.

Hardin summons parable to help him characterize—in the fullest, literary sense—the commons. For the tragic ecodrama that purportedly follows from the idea of the commons as property regime demands characters or actors. Closer to the spirit of Samuel Beckett than of William Shakespeare, Hardin's minimalist, inexorable ecodrama involves a solitary actor, a skeletal pastoralist referred to, in the spirit of parable, as "everyman." What do we know about him? Not much: he is a "rational man," he is greedy, and he owns livestock that he grazes on the commons. From those three spare details his tragedy unfolds.

Instead of being steadily disrobed until forced to face his own bare, forked being, Hardin's thespian pastoralist enters the stage of the commons prestripped—culturally buttnaked. He is the man from nowhere, shorn of history and values; he feels no culturally constraining pressures and possesses no allegiances except to his solitary, innate greed. This monadic figure is free-floating and self-seeking, exhibiting no social ties and existing, with regard to land use, outside any evident cultural constraints, taboos, customary decrees, or collectively negotiated compromises. His tragic flaw is unanchored in specifics; his hubris, if we can call it that, is the timeless hubris of a sociobiological avarice. He departs the stage of the commons as rarefied as when he arrived, with one critical difference: both he and the commons are now destroyed by greed. Thus joined, parable (a schematic genre denuded of historical content) and tragedy (a genre marked by inexorability) aid the causal transfer from culture to biology that distinguishes Hardin's method.

Why, we may ask, did Hardin choose a pastoralist (and not, say, a gardener) as his solitary actor? The herdsman in question has wandered onto Hardin's tragic stage from the past and the future: he is a ghost and a premonition. He arrives as a holdover from Lloyd's 1832 lectures—and from the longer, antipastoralist, proenclosure tradition that underpins Lloyd's judgments. But Hardin's herdsman is also a harbinger of an emerging future—of the decolonization that, in 1968, was spreading internationally in force and influence. The herdsman's second, implicitly premonitory role pertains, on the one hand, to overlapping neocolonial attitudes to Third World land tenure and, on the other, to neoliberal economic policies for the capture of resources—of the land itself or of the oil, mineral, timber, and water wealth that it

sustains. In these terms, the pastoralist is a relic, a throwback whose ghostly ancestors frequented preenclosure Europe but who still roams the Third World as an embodiment of a profligacy awaiting market rationalization.

The pastoralist in Hardin's tragic parable may be alone, but he is many: he is the wretched of the earth whose claims on a finite planet have to be averted. Although Hardin expressed alarm at the earth's demographic carrying capacity, he was evidently horrified more by the breeding poor than by the breeding rich, who were wreaking far more devastation through overconsumption and overmilitarization. This double standard, threaded through Hardin's writings, also permeated his private life. Here was an affluent Malthusian professor who had no hesitation in siring four children, thereby exacerbating—in his own terms—an ecological-demographic disaster that he preferred to embody in the figure of a herdsman.

The nomad or herdsman has long served as (to use a pastoralist dead metaphor) a convenient scapegoat to be exorcized in the name of economic rationalization. The commons-dependent, wandering pastoralist can be dismissed as an unanchored, rogue anachronism, someone who, in Lockean terms, refuses to take root in a private-property regime of purported individual (and thereby collective) self-improvement.[5] He is, in the fullest etymological sense, uncultivated. Thus, the pastoralist's mobile presence on the land becomes an embodiment of tragic waste—and an impediment to the appropriative ambitions of capitalist and colonialist private-property regimes.

In 1838, just five years after Lloyd's essays advocating enclosure were published, the *Sydney Herald* vindicated, in related terms, British colonial seizure of territory from nomadic Aborigines unredeemed by possessive individualism:

> [The Aborigines] bestowed no labor upon the land and that—and *that only*—it is which gives a right of property to it. . . . Who will assert that this great continent was ever intended by the Creator to remain an un-productive wilderness? . . . The British people found a portion of the globe in a state of waste—they took possession of it; and they had a perfect right to do so, under the Divine authority, by which man was commanded to go forth and people, and till the land. (Muir 139)

The Aborigines are noncultivating and hence can be figured as uncultivated; they are wasteful encroachers whose territories ought to be appropriated by the civilizing forces of possessive enclosure. Although Hardin's antihero is not just a nomad but also, more specifically, a pastoralist, he too can be stigmatized as a squanderous presence on the land, as someone with no motive for respecting limits rather than as, say, someone motivated to move in adaptive response to seasonal plenitude and scarcity.

In Lloyd's time, landlords who accumulated property through enclosure and forced displacement referred to these practices as improvements. In allied terms, neoliberalism's developmental logic tends to treat any commons as an unprofitable wasteland awaiting improvement through free-market liberation. This logic gets played out on a transnational scale—as, for example, in this advertisement placed by the Philippine government in *Fortune* magazine in 1975: "to attract companies like yours, we have felled mountains, razed jungles, filled swamps, moved rivers, relocated towns . . . all to make it easier for you and your business to do business with us" (qtd. in Korten 159). Invisible here are the communities displaced by clearances of the land—people whom the anthropologist Thayer Scudder has called "developmental refugees," those forced into flight by development and barred from once accessible commonage.[6] Common resources like those in the Philippines may not necessarily be a primary source of food, water, and livelihood, but they are often an indispens-

able component in a precarious patchwork of survival strategies. What's invisible, then, is the way a deregulated, environmentally hubristic neoliberal order imposes new enclosures and thereby generates new nomads, desperate people ricocheting between rural and urban impossibility.

By the time Hardin's essay appeared, in 1968, the growth of rich nations was slowing, creating new pressures for global appropriations in a decolonizing world. These circumstances contributed to the appeal of Hardin's antipastoral logic and, with neoliberalism's ascent in the 1970s, helped vindicate economic practices that refused to acknowledge global environmental limits. Neoliberals have aligned themselves with the notion of an innately tragic commons in part because it is consistent with their hostility to shared goods, a hostility inseparable from the neoliberal drive for resource appropriation and for dismantling regulatory oversight, whether by international, nation-state, or local bodies. Neoliberal efforts to institute the "efficiencies" of the "free market" have been coupled, moreover, to efforts to erode the expectation that the state should help safeguard the well-being of citizens at home, not to mention noncitizens abroad. In the neoliberal narrative, welfare systems, public health care, public amenities, taxation, trade unions, public pensions, public education, public transport, social benefits, and the environmental commons are all impediments that need to be privatized, shrunk, or eliminated. In Margaret Thatcher's blunt judgment, "There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families."

Because Hardin's history-stripping tragic parable represents the commons as inherently lawless, neoliberals could use his essay's title to bolster their arguments for the closure of the commons as an absolute good. In these terms, the commons needs to be enclosed—and thereby liberated—for the indissociable double gain of freeing the individual and the market. After all, didn't Hardin speak of "the evils of the commons?" ("Tragedy of the Commons" 1248)? Didn't he insist, in an apparent spirit of neoliberal prescience, that "injustice is preferable to total ruin?" (1247).

However, contra neoliberalism's core tenets, Hardin also argued for an intensified state role in imposing taxes and regulations—in order, he insisted, to prevent corporations from polluting recklessly, privatizing profits while socializing health and environmental costs. He saw unchecked privatization as posing a planetary threat because "our particular concept of private property . . . favors pollution" (1245). Elsewhere, Hardin even contended that the state's regulatory role could be furnished either by socialism or by capitalism (Bajema 199). In lauding Hardin's economic vision, neoliberals suppress the parts of his argument in which he rails against unchecked growth on a finite planet. Such growth, Hardin argued, would turn the earth into a "cesspool" ("Tragedy of the Commons" 1245).

Hardin slowly became aware that his essay's charismatic title encouraged the kind of misapprehension practiced by neoliberals. He returned, again and again—in essays, books, and interviews—to correct what he saw as a pervasive misreading of his argument. In one essay, "The Tragedy of the *Unmanaged* Commons," Hardin conceded that "a managed commons, though it may have other defects, is not automatically subject to the tragic fate of the unmanaged commons" (163). He lamented omitting from the title of his original essay some qualifying adjective like "unmanaged" or "unregulated." Had he shown the foresight to include such a qualifier it would surely have tempered his essay's neoliberal appeal, its afterlife—through brisk allusion—as a neoliberal meme.

Hardin was not alone in trying to complicate the crude causal link between the commons and tragedy that his essay title established. Scholars from a dozen disciplines have sought to rein in his runaway phrase.

Many have done so by attempting to ascribe to the commons a different relation to genre. We see this in the outpouring of books, essays, chapters, and blog postings with titles like "The Comedy of the Commons," "The Myth of the Tragedy of the Commons," "No Tragedy on the Commons," "The Tragedy of the Tragedy of the Commons," *Commons without Tragedy*, "The Non-tragedy of the Commons," "The Tragedy of the Capitalist Commons," "The Tragedy of the Anticommons," and "The Tragedy of the Private."[7]

No one has done more for the concerted effort to decouple tragedy from the commons than the Indiana University political scientist Elinor Ostrom. In 2009 Ostrom received the Nobel Prize in economics for her persistent, detailed research into the variable and sometimes favorable outcomes of culturally specific efforts to manage common resources. However, no arguments that the later, somewhat rueful Hardin, or Ostrom, or Hardin's interdisciplinary critics have mounted can fully undo the tenacious public power that "the tragedy of the commons" continues to exert—five small words that draw together into a reductive, conveniently portable phrase a set of formulaic assumptions about generic, genetic, economic, and environmental logics.

That said, neoliberalism's Achilles' heel is the crisis of futurity, as Mary Louise Pratt has noted. If access to resources becomes radically, explosively uneven; if people increasingly feel they are inhabiting futureless states (in both senses of the phrase); if the many sense that they are being asked to bear more and more communized costs while the few privatize and monopolize more and more resources, hoarding profits, social movements will arise demanding a different distributive politics of the commons, in all its forms. When people feel reduced (in Rebecca Solnit's phrase) to "non-occupants" of society, such discounted casualties—such resource outcasts—will have every incentive to make common cause against neoliberalism's disinheritance plot. In this regard, the 99% or Occupy movements that have spread across the world's wealthier nations are playing catch-up with movements in the global South—from the Cochabamba uprisings in response to the privatization of water to the Maldivians' protests drawing attention to the global warming that threatens to submerge their island nation. In such scenarios, the predatory threat arrives in the form not of the greedy, unattached pastoralist but of unregulated, voracious emissaries who have no respect for limits and no sustainable, inclusive vision of what it means, long-term, to belong.

Notes

1. Hardin's explicit ambition was to persuade humanity to "abandon the commons in breeding" ("Tragedy of the Commons" 1248). Over the course of his long career, nothing exercised Hardin more than what he called "overbreeding"—what Paul Ehrlich, three years after "The Tragedy of the Commons" was published, called "the population bomb." Hardin rails against one particular liberty enshrined in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights—namely, the freedom to choose family size, which he regarded as incompatible with the planet's limited carrying capacity ("Tragedy of the Commons" 1246). It is ironic, then, that a thinker vehemently opposed to unregulated growth would become a hero of a neoliberalism that advocates growth at any cost—including unsustainable environmental practices and a widening, destabilizing chasm between überrich and ultrapoor. Politically, Hardin was an unusual hybrid. He was anti-immigrant, condemned affirmative action as racist, and argued that the welfare state and foreign aid both underwrote reckless, unsustainable procreation. Yet he was also an atheist who scorned creationists and was a founding member of Planned Parenthood. He campaigned assiduously for birth control and easier access to abortion, personally setting up networks that put Mexican women who desired to terminate their pregnancies in touch with willing doctors. Hardin didn't merely advocate family planning, he advocated coercive family planning as a necessary "modification" of human rights.

2. Richard Dawkins coined the term "selfish gene" in his eponymous book, published eight years after Hardin's essay "The Tragedy of the Commons." I use the term here because it best conveys Hardin's commitment to a variant of Darwinism predicated on inexorable, selfish competition.

3. The most lucid exposition of this point appears in Ciriacy-Wantrup and Bishop, "Common Property."

4. Apart from "The Tragedy of the Commons," Hardin's most famous—and typically controversial—parable appears in his essay "Commentary: Living on a Lifeboat," in which he deploys the genre to conclude that food aid to Ethiopian famine victims would be unethical because it would exacerbate global overpopulation.

5. Dawson offers a wide-ranging account of the contemporary persistence of variants of this Lockean logic.

6. Qtd. in Leslie 156. For a fuller account of these concerns, see Nixon, *Slow Violence* 150–75.

7. Rose; Angus; Cox; Bliss; Andelson; Tierney; De Angelis; Heller; James.

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