

Garrett Hardin's Tragedy of the Commons and Elinor Ostrom's Governing the Commons

The contrast between Garrett Hardin's influential 1968 essay, *The Tragedy of the Commons*, and Elinor Ostrom's Nobel Prize-winning work, *Governing the Commons* (1990), represents one of the most important intellectual shifts in our understanding of shared resources. It is not simply a debate about economics, but about human nature, cooperation, and the institutions that make sustainable societies possible.

Garrett Hardin: The Tragedy of Unmanaged Commons

In his famous 1968 essay, Hardin argued that when a shared resource is open to unrestricted use, rational individuals acting in their own self-interest will eventually overexploit it.

The Parable of the Pasture

Imagine a pasture open to all. Each herder receives the full benefit of adding one more animal while bearing only a fraction of the cost of the resulting overgrazing. Acting rationally, every herder is encouraged to increase the size of the herd.

The outcome is predictable: the pasture is eventually degraded, harming everyone.

Hardin's insight was powerful. Left unmanaged, an open-access commons can indeed collapse.

Hardin's Proposed Solutions

To avoid this outcome, Hardin concluded that commons generally require one of two institutional solutions:

(1) private ownership, or

(2) government regulation (“mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon”).

Elinor Ostrom: Governing the Commons

Beginning with the question Hardin posed—but not accepting his conclusion—Elinor Ostrom spent decades studying how real communities actually manage shared resources.

Rather than relying primarily on theory, she assembled extensive evidence from around the world.

Her conclusion was remarkable:

The tragedy is not inevitable.

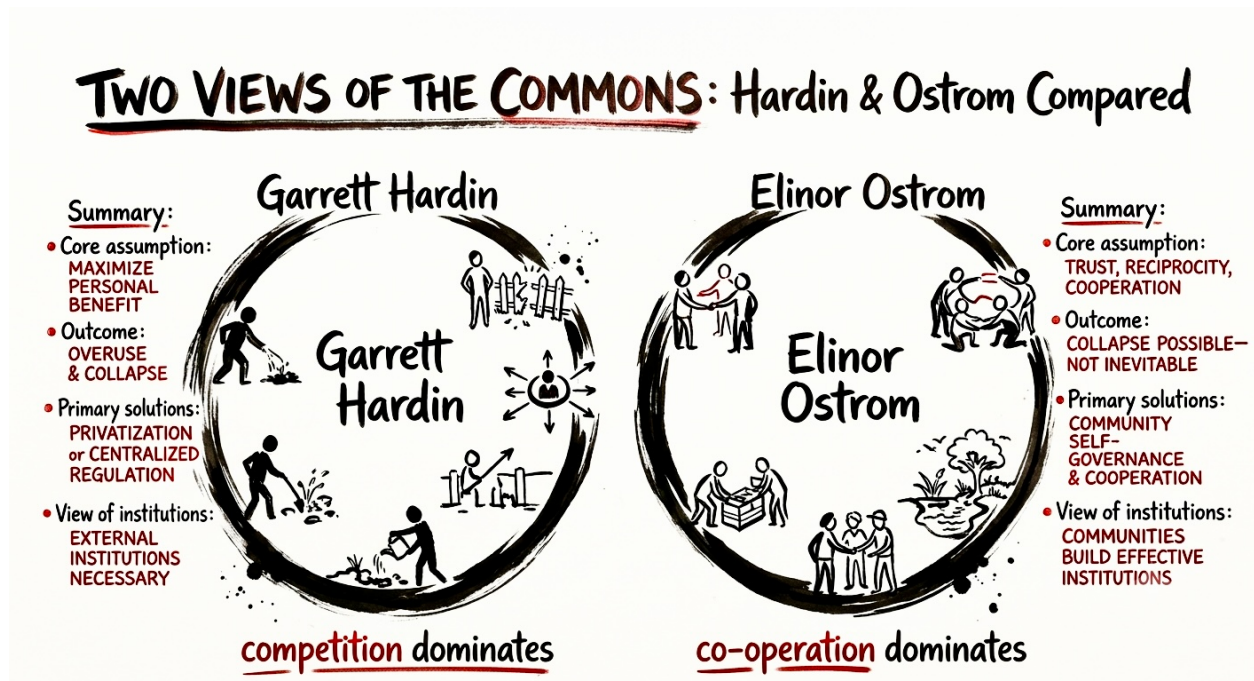
Communities are often capable of creating durable institutions that govern common resources successfully without either privatization or centralized state control.

Among her best-known examples are:

- Swiss alpine communal meadows managed successfully for centuries;
- Spanish irrigation systems with long-standing water-sharing institutions;
- Japanese communal mountain forests;
- Maine lobster fisheries;
- Philippine irrigation associations.

These and many other cases demonstrated that people are capable of developing trust, reciprocity, monitoring, and adaptive rules that allow common resources to remain productive over generations.

Hardin and Ostrom Compared



Ostrom did not argue that every commons succeeds. Rather, she demonstrated that successful commons share identifiable institutional characteristics.

Ostrom's Eight Design Principles

Successful commons typically exhibit:

- (1) Clearly defined boundaries.
- (2) Rules adapted to local ecological and social conditions.
- (3) Collective participation in making and modifying rules.
- (4) Effective monitoring of resource use.
- (5) Graduated sanctions for rule violations.
- (6) Accessible, low-cost conflict-resolution mechanisms.
- (7) Recognition by higher authorities of the community's right to organize.
- (8) Nested layers of governance for larger or more complex commons.

Why Ostrom Matters Today

Ostrom's work transformed the debate.

Hardin largely saw two institutional choices:

- Markets (private property)
- Governments (state regulation)

Ostrom revealed a vital third possibility

—Communities themselves can create enduring institutions that govern shared resources sustainably.

Her work has become increasingly influential in discussions of climate adaptation, watershed management, fisheries, open-source software, Wikipedia, internet governance, digital knowledge commons, and many other forms of shared resources.

For global challenges such as climate change, Ostrom argued that no single institution could solve the problem alone. Instead, she advocated polycentric governance: many interacting institutions operating at local, regional, national, and international scales.

A Larger Lesson

Hardin identified a genuine danger: unmanaged open access can destroy a commons.

Ostrom identified an equally important possibility: human beings are capable of creating institutions of trust, reciprocity, and collective responsibility that prevent such tragedies.

Taken together, their work suggests a richer understanding of human society. Competition and self-interest are real forces, but so are cooperation, learning, and mutual benefit. The future of the commons depends not only on the resources we share, but on our capacity to govern them wisely together.

Hardin correctly identified the danger of unmanaged open access. Ostrom demonstrated that he mistook one possible outcome for an unavoidable law of human society.

Conclusions: Many apparent opposites are not contradictions but incomplete descriptions. Hardin illuminated one side of the dynamics of the commons; Ostrom revealed the complementary side—the remarkable human capacity for self-organization.