

TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONERS

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Abstract: We are accelerating from “Tragedy of the Commons” to a state of “Tragedy of the Commoners”, as we progress, we are putting the heavy burdens of environmental impacts on the common people. There is a need to come up with shared values to allow all the players to work together sensibly to turn this tragedy around for our future generations.

Keywords: Sustainability, shared values, tragedy of the commons, commoners.

Introduction

We are accelerating from the “Tragedy of the Commons” to a state of “Tragedy of the Commoners” because as we progress, we are leaving a heavy environmental impact on the common people to bear. There is a need to come up with shared values to allow all the players to work together sensibly to turn this “tragedy” around for our future generation.

As I revisited Professor Garrett Hardin’s seminal paper published in *Science* in December 1968, it spurred me to contemplate on a similar quandary that I like to call the “Tragedy of the Commoners”. Hardin’s paper asserts that the population problem lacks a simple technical solution and necessitates a shift in our moral compass. It concludes with the notion that ending the tragedy of the commons hinges on restraining the freedom to breed. Hardin’s work extensively explores the challenges and difficulties associated with common resources, populations, and shared management (Hardin, 1968).

For many, the population has always been viewed as a primary source of stress on the environment, the commons. This perspective aligns with the way we often think about our constrained resources, the issues of scarcity, and the difficult choices we face in our quest for to preserve well-being. To me, it is not the numbers that matter. If we were to look around, almost everything around us is geared to unlimitedness. In advertisements and social media, there are endless encouragements to consume resources. In a world faced with climate change, there is

no slowing down. In a place where sustainable development is supposed to be the helm, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and dominance seem to play the whole game.

I think we failed, not because of population growth, but rather a *mismanagement* of scarce resources. The limited resources that we have were not optimised to meet needs but rather abused to meet certain people’s needs only. Thus, the tragedies of the commoners, as ordinary people, have to bear the brunt of environmental problems.

Drawing from research conducted by my students, collaborators and many other studies, it is evident that “all human activities” had adverse impacts on the environment. However, almost all our efforts are channelled towards addressing those activities and not the players (humans). Humans and their activities are like a double-edged sword and yet we tend to focus on coming up with strategies and technologies for the activities only.

All in all, our progress in addressing common resource challenges remains frustratingly sluggish. While the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) are commendable in their aim to address various activities, they often overlook the central “players” in this complex scenario: Us, humans. We fall short of making humanity more humane towards one another and our environment. In our relentless focus on development, we have inadvertently lost sight of both the “future” and “ourselves”.

Common people have borne the consequences of polluted waterways, deteriorating air quality and other adverse impacts. While technology often appears as a solution, it can sometimes introduce new problems. Take plastic, for example, once hailed as a technological marvel but later condemned for its environmental hazards. What many fail to realise is that the issue lies not with the material itself but with its improper disposal and again, mismanagement by humans.

As previously mentioned, we have long neglected the human aspect in this equation, driving greater consumption, exacerbating climate change, degrading clean water and air, and accelerating the alarming rate of species extinction (Nijhuis, 2021).

In my view, a re-examination of our values and a reorientation towards the future are essential. We must confront our mistakes, identify where we have gone wrong and commit ourselves to building a better “home” for both current and future generations by asserting our common values and not ascribing “values” to the environment.

To go forward, the realms of science and technology can only take us so far; the responsibility is on us to acknowledge our own limitations. We are entrusted with the responsibility of safeguarding the world we inhabit and bequeathing a better one to our children. To achieve this, one crucial aspect is to foster a culture of shared values, not limited to the younger generation but encompassing all members of society.

Shared values for reasonable love and concern for one another and for mutual sustainable development. Mutual in a sense that ultimately it will benefit both human beings and the environment that we are in. There should be no more free rides, and it is essential to commit a concerted effort towards the problems. It boils down to how to get people to work together (and interestingly, this seems to be the 17th goal in the SDG). People often band together to seek safety in times of danger, as seen in the COVID-19 pandemic. Does this mean we endorse the use

of fear? Not at all. What we propose is fostering a sense of “reasonable love”, a sensible way of sharing and dealing with each other. It should be about nurturing a principled, committed, rational, caring attitude towards one another, and the environment that motivates us to collaborate in building a better world (Vun, 2015) and the sequence must be to each other first, then, the environment.

American political scientist Professor Elinor Ostrom’s works on the concept of collective action and the management of common resources have been cited numerous times to show that the governance of common resources is possible through a set of principles outlined by the authors (Poteete *et al.*, 2010). Personally, we find that such ideas are just fantastic as it allows all players to work together to achieve something mutual. In Malaysia, we have a term for this collective effort called *gotong-royong*. It signifies the collaboration between individuals working closely together to share a common burden, fostering a strong sense of togetherness in the process. This embodies a form of “reasonable love” that we can encourage and promote.

I also recall former United Nations secretary-general, Kofi Annan’s reassertion of universal shared values in his speech in December 2003. 20 years later, the issues around us have blurred the vision to create a value-driven world (Annan, 2003). As Annan has stated clearly that there is a need to find within us the will to *live* by the values we proclaim—in our private lives, in our local and national societies, and in the world. As we walk the talk, we can surely turn this tragedy of the commoners around.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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