

Public goods and commons, some preliminary reflections

Sofia Costanza
University of Roma Tre

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ABSTRACT

Starting from the economic debate about the notion of public and collective goods, the paper tries to illustrate part of the discussion on public goods and the definitions of the commons, in order to provide some insights about this topic, and to give an overview of emerging processes related to facts, theories on governance of the commons, their potential limits and the related policies.

The first part acknowledges that a conception of human beings' nature and related intrinsic motivations is behind each definition of collective goods and each solution to address the free-rider problem. From this standpoint, different definitions of the commons and collective goods imply diverse understandings of democracy and of the role of the State and the market.

Since both the Commons and the public goods share the feature of non-excludability, the next part lingers on the potential outcomes of the strengthening of property rights and the attribution of bundles of rights to common resources, as proposed by several authors.

A second part is dedicated to the idea of the Commons within the threefold (economic, social and environmental) crisis. Nowadays this topic is crucial in Italy and many other countries, since an involvement of communities and civil society is increasing around the issue of the Commons, both as a theoretical and a practical issue. The second part of the work rises two points: (i) that Ostrom's celebrated definition of common pool resources can't contain the manifold experiences related to the commons and their management (and that new reflections on this topic are required); (ii) that actual circumstances and the emphasis on the Commons are pushing for a change in human self-perception and the conception of identity and citizenship potentially leading to *new* social and economic outcomes.

Introduction

"The causation of a particular event tends to be seen as multiple; a series of nested processes generally generates an occurrence. Institutions, physical factors, language, culture and strategic human action all come into play." (Wall 2014: 53)

Every economic concept derives its meaning from the historical, social, cultural and political circumstances in which it grows. The "Commons" can be conceived as a topic historically related to a main "substantive" economic problem involving processes of decision and rule-making associated with use, access, withdrawal and ownership of resources and basically linked with three features: appropriation, groups, and environmental-social externalities.

Due to the high number of issues and fields involved and intertwined with this subject, which connects facts, theories and policies in a complex bundle of perspectives, long before the appraisal of Hardin's "Tragedy of the commons" and Ostrom's studies on Common Pool Resources, many authors tried both to address the problems of the collective goods and the Commons and to define them, swinging between private and public goods. For this reason, this issue developed alongside human history and economic literature as an evolving concept: the Commons is linked with the political and economic themes of resources, their distribution and the externalities of the "economic" processes (and thus of their management by communities and groups; of the role of local, national and international institutions, of the environmental pressures..) spreading the seeds for fruitful interdisciplinary paths of research.

Along this path and in light of the present crisis, the notion of the Commons is still transforming its meanings and understandings beyond the famous definition of common pool resources provided by Ostrom (1994, 2000). As McCarthy (2005) suggested, the Commons is accompanied by requests by social movements and citizens to reconstruct the tissue of society: social bonds, democratic participation and the right to nature and culture, which are threatened by temptations of greed within the market domain.

The aim of this theoretical work is to focus on the definition of the commons and collective goods, in order to collect and to add features to look to these concepts from a renewed

perspective, also in the light of the actual economic, environmental and socio-political crisis. As the title suggests, these are preliminary reflections, and my aim was also to give an overview of issues and problems related to the concept of the Commons, so I hope the reader would not get puzzled by the amount of material and issues intertwined in the next pages.

More explicitly, the paper raises the issue of the absence of a definition of the Commons (par.1) and it investigates some questions shared by the public goods and the Commons, because it wants to evidence the political implications of the issue at stake. In this sense, it can also imperceptibly contribute to a growing debate on the re-definition of public goods (see Sekera, 2014). Like public goods, also the Commons represents a conceptual basis for public collective action, and so their definition is a matter of power.

I decided to investigate this issue starting from the past debates, and so the paper opens with a brief analysis of some perspectives in the history of economic thought, and then it proceeds with some examples from the field in the present context of this triple cris(e)is. I wanted to acknowledge the relevance/worthiness of some experiences of sharing or management of the Commons, in order to link hypothetical definition(s) with existing conceptions and actions by communities. This helps me to evidence that the Commons are an evolving concept and an object of political confrontation.

Like never before, and not paradoxically (see Mirowski and Plehwe, 2009), the neoliberal economic thought has been a flag for state intervention in supporting privatization and *marketization* of nature, work, public goods and the Commons. The enlargement of markets and the compression of social rights had lead to a destruction of social cohesion and democratic capability of the citizenship. This happened also through the diffusion of an *economicistic* ethic that influenced the development of exclusionary economic practices, based on a competitive pattern of *individual interest*. In this sense, a reflection on the definition(s) of the Commons wants also to re-open the debate about the conflict between collective and individual interest (par.2). The concepts and the definition(s) influence the practices and vice versa, and we can see from the history of economic thought how different definitions originate from different presumptions and generate different outcomes, like in the case of the concept of collective goods by Musgrave and Tiebout (par.3).

The concept of the Commons, swinging between private and public goods, stems from the studies on collective goods. The envision of the individual (as consumer or as citizen) so strongly influences their definition(s) and the perspectives (and imaginaries) for their “*governance*”.

In the history of economic thought, this is evident not only in the definition of collective goods by Musgrave and Tiebout (par.3) but also in facing the “problem” of non excludability of public goods and the Commons by several authors (par.4).

For this reason, to investigate “what are” and “how can be defined” the Commons and public goods is to evidence how, beyond a mask of *neutrality* of a monolithic economic *science*, definition(s) can be dissimilar and they can determine big differences in economic and political practices.

The fifth paragraph is thus dedicated to the innovations and perspectives by Ostrom (par.5) and then to the relationship between public goods, private goods and the Commons. The second part of the work (par.6) thus arises two points: (i) that Ostrom’s celebrated definition of common pool resources can’t contain the manifold experiences related to the commons and their management (and that new reflections on this topic are required); (ii) that actual circumstances and the emphasis on the Commons can push for a change in individual self-perception and in

the conception of identity and citizenship, potentially leading to new social and economic outcomes.

1. Public goods and the commons: some premises

There is a wide economic literature about the commons and collective action problems (Olson, 1965; Buchanan, 1965; Hardin, 1968; Ostrom, 1990..) As an issue, the Commons and the collective action problems are basically linked to diverse conceptions of human beings and society. These are indeed the foundations of every economic model and system, because each perspective is born and develops in a specific historical, cultural, social and institutional environment (Jessop, 2010). In short, we might say that the contexts often arise problems and issues that determine experiences and practices to address them. These practices and experiences give meaning to concepts that influence new experiences, re-shaping contexts in an evolutionary circle. In this paper, I will apply this exemplifying scheme to the concept of the Commons.

In the paper, I argue that no “one size fits all” definition of the Commons exists, since this concept is evolving over time, enriching itself of multiple meanings on the basis of new experiences and practices.

The Commons is known in particular from the work by Elinor Ostrom, who won the Nobel Prize in economics in 2009 with her work “Governing the commons” published in 1990 with a collection of studies about commons and their management by communities.

These ones occur from the changing context of the threefold crisis and determine different results and understandings of the concept of the Commons: diverse visions of individuals, society, role of the market and state lay in the cultural approaches that shape the definitions of the Commons and that influence practical outcomes. The definition of the Commons provided by Ostrom is related to the “Common pool resources”:

“common-pool resources - CPRs - are natural or human-made facilities (or stocks) that generate flows of usable resource units over time. CPRs share two characteristics: (1) it is costly to develop institutions to exclude potential beneficiaries from them, and (2) the resource units harvested by one individual are not available to others” (Ostrom, Gardner, Walker 1994)

The Digital Library of the Commons provides an alternative definition:

“The commons is a general term for shared resources in which each stakeholder has an equal interest. Studies on the commons include the information commons with issues about public knowledge, the public domain, open science, and the free exchange of ideas - all issues at the core of a direct democracy.” (Digital Library of the Commons)

These two definitions of the Commons and of Common pool resources demonstrate how very different definitions and examples are applied to similar concepts: from the one side the Commons as Common Pool resources are described as non excludable and rival resources, from the other side the Commons are linked to the issue of public domain, information and public knowledge. The theme of the definition of the Commons is important and politically relevant because different visions of the same concept can start from and can critically influence social and political outcomes.

The works by Elinor Ostrom originated from research and studies about collective goods and local government by herself and her husband Vincent. Vincent Ostrom worked on this issue with Robert Warren and Charles Tiebout in 1961, addressing the issue of public good provision by local governments and institutions. So, historically the concept of the Commons by Ostrom

stemmed from the literature on collective and public goods, which are interlinked concepts. As well as the concept of the Commons, also public and collective goods raised one of the main problem of the economic literature - the conflict between private and collective interest – that forces us to look to economics as always rooted in philosophy.

2. The problem of the conflict between collective and private interest: economics is always rooted in philosophy.

Even in 1740, in his *Treatise on Human Nature*, Hume argued that men are led by their own specific interest that often does not extend beyond the strict circle of their nearest friends and acquaintance, even though it is in their own interest to preserve peace in society following the rules of justice (Hume, 1740: bk3, part 2, sect. VII).

“The only difficulty, therefore, is to find out this expedient, by which men cure their natural weakness, and lay themselves under the necessity of observing the laws of justice and equity, notwithstanding their violent propension to prefer contiguous to remote. It is evident such a remedy can never be effectual without correcting this propensity; and as it is impossible to change or correct any thing material in our nature, the utmost we can do is to change our circumstances and situation, and render the observance of the laws of justice our nearest interest, and their violation our most remote” (Hume, 1740, book 3, ch. 2, sect. VII)¹

The issue of public and collective goods in economic literature addresses exactly this (human) problem.

It is clear then that every definition of public and collective goods and the solutions provided to the free-rider problem derive from perspectives about human beings’ nature or ontology, and that different perceptions determine different results.

From this stand, the theme of public goods and collective goods brings economics back to its philosophical roots and in its political dimension. For instance, in Marshall, the issue of collective goods is linked to reflections on the problems of non-coordination between collective and private interests², on the implications for the issue of governance, its dimension, aims and rules³, and this highlights the strong link between economics, facts, theory and policies. As Marshall wrote in his *Principles*:

“What business affairs should be undertaken by society itself acting through its government, imperial or local? Have we, for instance, carried as far as we should the plan of collective ownership and use of open spaces, of works of art, of the means of instruction and amusement,

¹ From this stand, Hume defined the origin of civil government and legislation in the hand of some men to preserve society. Indeed, Hume assumed that men’s “nature” can’t give them any possibility to escape the “law” of individual interest, and that, for these reason government is required. In brief, a number of men are to be assigned to a position to make other people respect the laws of justice and preserve society.

² “(...)What are the proper relations of individual and collective action in a stage of civilization such as ours? How far ought voluntary association in its various forms, old and new, to be left to supply collective action for those purposes for which such action has special advantages?” (Marshall 1890, bk:1; ch.4; p.4-5)

even though they do not totally pertain to the fields of economics (Marshall, 1890, bk.1, ch.4, p.4) : “...Taking it for granted that a more equal distribution of wealth is to be desired, how far would this justify changes in the institutions of property, or limitations of free enterprise even when they would be likely to diminish the aggregate of wealth?(...) How ought the burdens of taxation to be distributed among the different classes of society? Ought we to rest content with the existing forms of division of labour? Is it necessary that large numbers of the people should be exclusively occupied with work that has no elevating character?...”

³ As known, the same occurred in Pigou (1924; Part II, Ch. IX) who addressed the issue of government to regulate the private sector. Also nowadays in a transforming situation, as Quilligan (2012) suggested, the literature on the commons is pushing for a change in perspective of what is value and worth within our current culture, and many efforts are now spent in a recollection of the meaning of commons, in particular within the juridical and political framework.

as well as of those material requisites of a civilized life, the supply of which requires united action, such as gas and water, and railways?" (Marshall 1890, bk:1; ch.4; p.4-5).

These questions received different answers by many economists in history: there is indeed a strong link between the political realm and the field of economics, this last being a source and a result of the social domain and of cultural beliefs (Marshall, 1890; bk.1; ch.2; bk.2; ch.2)⁴.

3. Different definitions, different outcomes: a suggestion from the definition of collective goods by Musgrave and Tiebout

As just outlined, public goods, collective goods and the Commons are interlinked concept, the one springing from the other. The Commons stemmed from the literature on public and collective goods, addressing the free rider problem as well as problems of the externalities and "market failures". Several authors tried to deal with these issues designing systems or mechanisms to solve them⁵ and trying to evaluate the social effects entering the relation between externalities, "appropriability" (Arrow, 1970:1) and exclusion (see Arrow, 1970). From theories on public expenditure and voluntary exchange in public economy (Musgrave, 1939) to theory on club goods (Buchanan, 1965) and local expenditure (Tiebout, 1956), much effort has been spent in tackling the free rider problem. The authors provided solutions based on ideal working rules and institutions via mechanisms of collective competition or cooperation: the different actors (State, community, private sector) and the ways (redistribution, cooperation, competition) through which public goods were to be provided according to the authors, constitute the same pieces of a wider framework in which social and political cultures are confronted. Each solution originated from a conception of human beings' ontology (or nature) and related intrinsic motivations and was rooted in a dialectical vision of market and state as mechanisms to address individual attempts to socialize costs (or minimize private cost) and to privatize benefits in the process of contribution to and consumption of public or collective goods. Similarly, different definitions of the Commons and collective goods imply diverse understandings of democracy and the role of the State.

By way of example, contrasting conceptions of the world underlying the notion of collective goods are clearly evident in the comparison between Musgrave and Tiebout, and their respective elaborations of merit and collective goods. Musgrave's "merit goods" were considered as goods whose provision should be guaranteed by national and/or local authorities irrespective of consumers demand and of firms supply. This consideration was mainly based on the conception of individuals as people normally "unable to fully understand all the social and inter-temporal consequences of their choices" (Costanza, Masini, 2013: 9) and then on the task of the government to provide these merit goods, through general taxation. Tiebout's perspective, on the contrary, was focused on "local public goods" (1956), public goods whose provision and consumption could have been better realized through the local dimension. For the former, the solution laid in the provision of "merit goods" by public/collective institutions, for the latter, collective goods should be provided by the community or the local government for the

⁴ "Economics is a study of men as they live and move and think in the ordinary business of life. ...No one can compare and measure accurately against one another even his own mental states at different times: and no one can measure the mental states of another at all except indirectly and conjecturally by their effects. Of course various affections belong to man's higher nature and others to his lower, and are thus different in kind." (A.Marshall 1890; bk.1; ch.1; Introduction)

⁵ (Samuelson 1954; Musgrave 1939, 1957; Strotz 1958; Davis and Whinston 1967; Head and Shoup; 1969; Mishan 1969; Auster and Silver 1973; Marshall 1890; Pigou 1924; Young 1913; Knight 1924; Commons 1931; DeViti de Marco 1936; Musgrave 1939; Hicks 1940; Kuznets 1948; Commons 1950; Meade 1952; Scitovsky 1954; Tiebout 1956; Marschak 1959; Coase 1960; Buchanan and Stubblebin 1962; Demsetz 1964, 1967; Thompson 1968; Mishan 1969; Arrow 1970; Mc Guire 1972, 1974; Deacon and Shapiro 1975)

community, in order to better match individual preferences and create a virtuous path of competition in their provision. Looking at collective goods on a range between public goods and private goods, the characteristic of non excludability of public goods is maintained then more with Musgrave's merit goods, for which these problems had to be solved within the public-political framework, than with collective goods conceived by Tiebout.

The origins of the two are probably related to the historical and cultural contexts from which they stemmed. Tiebout's "A Pure Theory of Local Expenditure" takes a similar perspective to Hayekian "The use of knowledge in society" (1945) (Stansel, 2012) and it developed in a context of faith in market self-regulation, distribution of knowledge and information through decentralized, polycentric self-regulated systems via market mechanisms. In contrary, Musgrave's conception (1957) is rooted in the discourse about the impossibility of spontaneous decentralized solutions by Samuelson (1954) and focused on redistributive issues and cooperation, in the attempt to avoid a "rush to the bottom" of public goods provision due to tax competition among communities or localities (see then Musgrave 1959, 1997).

On the other side, Tiebout's (and then Warren's and Vincent Ostrom's) perspective derived from two hayekian visions of individuals and society: the first as distrust in the inter-subjective dynamics and imbalances among individuals which can be only neutralized by market forces and competition, the second as a belief in human capabilities, since everything has its source in individuals' actions and thoughts, rather than in those of collectivities, leaving no space for the conception of "social phenomena"⁶. On the other side, and similarly to a "second" Hayek, Musgrave started from a vision of the limits of human rationality with individuals as people normally "unable to fully understand all the social and inter-temporal consequences of their choices"(Masini, Costanza 2013), and thus he argued that this justifies state intervention to collectively provide public/merit goods, instead of leaving choices and responsibility for their production upon individuals' shoulders.

4. Public goods and the Commons: sharing non excludability

The definitions of collective goods and the route they should be best delivered thus swing within a range of perspectives. The notion of the Commons constitutes a ground for discussion in a context in which also the debate about the definition of public goods is still open, and indeed several connections exist between the two concepts. Both public goods and the Commons share the feature of non excludability. Deepening this discourse, the notion of public goods by Samuelson (1954) highlighted the relevance of excludability and efficiency as core underlining features to consider. Also today, the consideration of a definition of the Commons, if possible, requires a collective reflection on concepts of exclusion and efficiency, an effort to compare positions about their qualitative meaning, as features leading the economic (social) practices linked to provision, contribution and management of public and collective goods. This point is rational rather than normative, if we follow the logic for that it is impossible to

⁶ This is a real interesting point of perspective about the issue at stake: in fact, even though social phenomena are considered as unexpected outcomes of expected actions, which role do cultural beliefs play within this framework? Even though social phenomena and then cultures are results of individuals' aggregate efforts, from this stand, social phenomena do not exist and individuals are responsible of the disordered outcomes of society, and so a paternalistic approach is required, rather, from the opposite perspective, individuals are able to change society thanks to their own isolated effort, and so a push for competition is required. This elimination of social phenomena, even though motivated by fear of totalitarianism and of Schmitt's conception of democracy, is artificial, because also environment properly influences individuals and shapes individuals' actions (Hodgson 2000, in Wall 2014: 186). This is evident in particular looking at Ostroms' methodological approach(es).

understand a concept, in particular an economic one, outside the context and the problems that determined its definition. The existence of multiple perspectives and experiences related to the Commons won't lead to just one understanding of the Commons. This requires a retrieve of epistemological relativism and of open approaches and curiosity towards the diverse expressions of common management that can give meaning to "the Commons".

On the same line, according June Sekera (2014), "The market-centric definition of public goods underpins the anti-public, 'free market', vocabulary that dominates public discourse, motivating and justifying the marketization of government and governance". The same statement can be applied to the issue of the Commons. Like public goods, also the Commons can represent a conceptual basis for public collective action⁷.

4.1. Different visions, different outcomes: addressing the free-rider problem

As just outlined, the conceptions of individuals in economics determines different ways to address the problem of non excludability of public goods and the Commons. Looking back to the previous literature on public and collective goods, the emphasis on exclusion has been supported by Davis and Whinston (1967), on the path outlined by Buchanan (1965), according to whom "physical exclusion is possible given sufficient flexibility in property law, in almost all imaginable cases, including those in which the interdependence lies in the act of consuming itself" (Buchanan 1965:13). In particular Davis and Whinston (1967) emphasized the idea of market neutrality and the "weight" of market failures related to public goods provision. In particular, the authors underlined the individual loss due to the contribution to public goods, since "for a consumer actually to make a payment would be nothing more or less than an act of pure charity" (Davis and Whinston 1967: 362). In order to address this problem the authors raised two points. The first is the need for a constitution of property rights for every exchange, control and exclusion over the public good or service. The second is the relevance of technological characteristics of the goods or service for the design of a market for these goods, and a vision of law and institutions as technological devices to create conditions for exclusion in order to support a market for public goods (Davis and Whinston 1967: 366). Recalling previous considerations, this vision fits an Hayekian conception of atomized individuals whose efforts require the market as path of competition to neutralize unbalances in power, and a role of law and state in supporting the construction of these markets. This discourse similarly applies to Demsetz's perspective based on the strengthening of contracts and assignation of property rights to address externalities and free-riding behaviors (in particular Demsetz, 1967). Anticipating Hardin's "Tragedy of the Commons", Demsetz forcefully raised the free-rider problem in communal property, arguing that the only solution lays in a strengthening of private property rights.

Now it is necessary to mention that widely acknowledged contributions in these debate have come from Elinor Ostrom and the Bloomington School, in particular concerning their field studies on how local communities can best deal with the problems of non excludability and free-riding, by creating local formal or informal contracts and jurisdictions⁸.

⁷ See for instance the works by Lobina (2012), Castro (2006)

⁸ Notwithstanding these features, it is important to note that the literature on the commons by Ostrom, also for biographical reasons, is strictly connected with the literature by Buchanan on club goods (1965) and then by Demsetz (1964, 1967) on enforceability of contracts through property rights (Masini, Costanza, 2013). In a sense, this approach is similar to the perception of human beings and rules in society by Hume, for which three main "laws" are needed for the constitution and stability of any society even without any formal government: "stability of possession, translation by consent and the performance of promises" (Hume 1739, book 3, part 2, sect.VIII, p. 277 and in general all part 2 sect. II, VI, VIII). These "laws" are necessary to avoid Hobbesian "state of nature" and to guarantee against

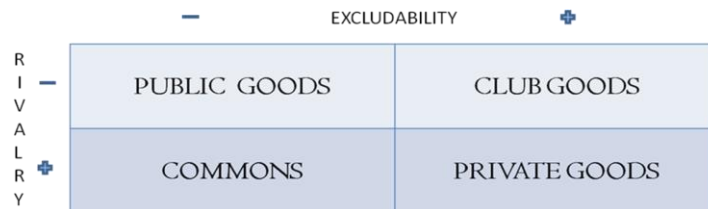
In Ostrom’s vision, individual and collective interests are considered as potentially overlapping, due to the local dimension of the problem, thanks to a direct participation in the creation of working rules, their collective enforcement - also through mutual control -, and the possibility to create local arenas to settle controversies.

In particular, Schlager and Ostrom (1992) focused on the rules as individuals’ “bundles of rights” associated with the access, use, withdrawal, exclusion and alienation of the resource units. This perception insists on a framework designed by the previous authors (Davis and Winston, Demsetz..), through the assignation of rights on resources in order to avoid the tragedy of open access regimes⁹.

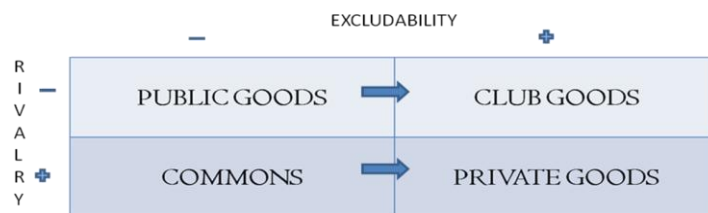
To better articulate this point, let’s look to the definition of the Commons provided by Ostrom as common pool resources. These are

“natural or human-made facilities (or stocks) that generate flows of usable resource units over time. CPRs share two characteristics: (1) it is costly to develop institutions to exclude potential beneficiaries from them, and (2) the resource units harvested by one individual are not available to others” (Ostrom, Gardner, Walker 1994)

The Commons are non excludible and rivalrous.



Assigning property rights, or bundles of rights (for access, use, withdrawal, exclusion, alienation) to individuals seems to solve the problem of management of the commons through these rights, e.g. through the institution of common properties (even though Ostrom (2000) insisted on the definition of the commons as different from common property regimes). So, in many cases, the solution to the problem of rivalry is found in adding the characteristic of excludability to rivalry via assignation of individual rights (for enforceable contracts) on the common. From public goods, non excludable and non rival, treated in the local context as rival by people directly facing the problems of scarcity of such resources, the solution to rivalry in consumption consists in a “privatization” of the common, transforming it in a club or private good.



In complete opposition to some of Ostrom’s conclusion (2012), this idea is based on a vision of individuals as consumers-citizens, instrumentally behaving; a perception of government as an institution needed to support a market of property rights on resources; and of communities acting as isolated competing atoms. Indeed, considering the issue of ownership and property

violent acts of appropriation, via mutual formal or informal agreements. Nevertheless, formalizing these laws in order to assure the preservation of the commons generates a practical problem, since they do not provide a better assurance to the stability and protection of the society if power imbalances are the basis of the same society.

⁹ One of the main arguments provided by Ostrom in response to Hardin’s “*Tragedy of Commons*” (1968) was in fact based on the distinction between common properties and open access regimes. (see Ostrom 2000)

rights, Demsetz saw communal ownership as "a right which can be exercised by all members of the community"(Demsetz, 1967: 354). The idea of community by Demsetz is notably that of groups " oriented to private property" (ibid.). From this perspective, whilst the private owner internalize the externalities of her/his work for the benefits of her/his grandchildren, "acting as a broker whose wealth depend upon how well he takes into account the competing claims of the present and the future" "(Demsetz, 1967: 355), the contrary is held by "commoners". According to Demsetz, for this last category, the incentives to privatize benefits of the common, will result indeed in a socialization of costs without taking into account the effect on future generations and neighbors.

Binding this logic with the objective of preserving resources and the commons, and of designing useful frameworks for their governance, this argument finally supports Tiebout's theory of local expenditure (1956, and Ostrom, Warren and Tiebout 1961), looking at communities as providers and customers of services, managers of their proper resources, organized on the basis of their working rules in autonomous - "feudal" or "corporative" - units. This approach is oriented to group-al ownership and competition, stressing again how theories on the Commons and collective goods have important and even contrasting implications on facts and policies.

5. The concept of the Commons: the innovations by Ostrom and the relationship between the Commons, private and public goods

From what we have just sketched, it is evident that the definition of the Commons is not just an "economic" problem that can be isolated but it concerns and involves the fields of citizenship, society and politics. For this reason, it is important to look at the roots of their conception, also in order to imagine potential outcomes motivated by the understandings of the concept.

5.1 The Commons by Ostrom: methodology, conceptions of individuals and systems of governance in transition

To cope with this impasse we need to recall some further contributions by Ostrom and the Bloomington School, and to add some considerations about the relationship between public goods and the Commons.

Three interconnected innovations from Ostrom's works and the studies by the Bloomington School can be highlighted. These are related to methodology, conceptions of individual agents, and systems of governance.

(I) Methodology

Ostrom and the Bloomington school always conducted their research "back and forth from theory to practice", via field studies, in an attempt to deal with complexity and to overtake strict disciplinary dichotomies. Researchers took methods and assumptions from the different approaches of Public Choice, Institutional and Behavioral economics, field research on local public economies, local government, anthropology and ecology. This interdisciplinary contamination between political sciences and economics (Ostrom, 2012) was one important aspect in Ostrom, highlighting the importance of the political, cultural and social dimensions of the economy(/ies). It is also true that these methodological conceptions are rooted in methodological individualism and echo the Hayekian conception of knowledge and information as dispersed within the society, with a focus on field research about individual behaviors in social dilemma situations. Also, they maintain a distinction between theoretical and practical parts of economic science, as for Menger (Cubeddu, Vannucci, 1993), observing outcomes of individuals' actions and related cultures supporting their actions, without aiming to provide recipes for policy intervention.

(II) Conceptions of individuals

Ostrom's results challenged the strict assumption of *homo oeconomicus*, deepening in the description and study of behaviors in complex situation observed on the ground.

These "discoveries", associated with Herbert Simons' model of individual bounded rationality and studies in neurosciences and economics (Kahneman) determined changes of patterns in the field of economics. The shift from *homo oeconomicus* to patterns of *homo reciprocans* (Fehr and Gächter, 1998), *homo ecologicus* (Becker 2006), *homo politicus* (Faber et al., 2002) ..., united to a catalogue of studies about communities' capacities to craft working rules and institutions by Ostrom (1990), have severe implications in the political and economic domains.

The first implication is the recognition of the capacity of the civil society to define working rules and institutions for the management of common resources, many times with greater results and "efficiency" than using market mechanisms or state intervention. The second is the clear acknowledgement of the complexity of societies, systems and institutions that need to be addressed overtaking the temptation to give systematical and universalistic solutions in policies, approaches and theories.

(III) Systems of governance

These stances imply theories of governance beyond government, based on polycentricity and coordination, rather than on direct State intervention, opening paths of research both in economic and political fields. Ostrom referred to two main widening perspectives: the Social-Ecological System (SES) framework¹⁰ (Ostrom, 2007) and systems of polycentric governance¹¹ (Ostrom, 2009). The first is a useful framework designed to organize systems of governance of nested, concentric systems of resources for their sustainability. The pattern of the Social ecological system includes arenas to address instances from the bottom to the top, and vice versa, potentially it includes subsidiarity, and it gives a prominent role to multiple levels of government. The second is composed of a net of entities, decentralized and coordinated and is more anarchic, competitive and potentially de-structured¹² (Aligika and Tarko, 2012; 2013: 2). These models recall both Robbins' constitutional federalism (Masini, 2012) and what Samuel Bowles (2009) named as "the Capitalistic Utopia of decentralized coordination" (see also Alchian and Demsetz, 1972: 777)¹³. The issue at stake here is the "choice" concerning a range

¹⁰ According to Anderies, Janssen and Ostrom (2004):

"A SES is an ecological system intricately linked with and affected by one or more social systems. An ecological system can loosely be defined as an interdependent system of organisms or biological units. "Social" simply means "tending to form cooperative and interdependent relationships with others of one's kind" (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary 2004). Broadly speaking, social systems can be thought of as interdependent systems of organisms. Thus, both social and ecological systems contain units that interact interdependently and each may contain interactive subsystems as well. We use the term "SES" to refer to the subset of social systems in which some of the interdependent relationships among humans are mediated through interactions with biophysical and non-human biological units. A simple example is when one fisher's activities change the outcomes of another fisher's activities through the interacting biophysical and non-human biological units that constitute the dynamic, living fish stock. Furthermore, we restrict our attention to those SESs where the cooperative aspect of social systems is key, i.e., where individuals have intentionally invested resources in some type of physical or institutional infrastructure to cope with diverse internal and external disturbances. When social and ecological systems are so linked, the overall SES is a complex, adaptive system involving multiple subsystems, as well as being embedded in multiple larger systems."

¹¹ This last point is strictly connected with the previous literature by Vincent Ostrom, Tiebout, Warren (1956) Buchanan (1965) and Michael Polanyi, see Aligika and Tarko (2012).

¹² According to the analysis by Aligika and Tarko (2012) about polycentric governance and the relation between Michael Polanyi's works and the Ostroms, the combination of four main features can lead to at least to 288 different kinds of polycentric governance (Aligika and Tarko, 2012: 257)

¹³ "The mark of a capitalistic society is that resources are owned and allocated by such non governmental organization as firms, households, and markets. Resource owners increase productivity through cooperative specialization and this lead to the demand for economic organizations which facilitate cooperation." (Alchian, A. A., and Demsetz, H., 1972: 777).

of different kinds of governance related to different cultures and practices, underlining the importance of the reflection about the definition(s) of the commons in economics and perceptions about individuals as human beings.

5.2 *The definition of the Commons in relation to public and private goods*

It is worth concluding this part considering others three perspectives from which the commons can be conceived. The first deals with the fact that, according to Ostrom (2000), the commons must be distinguished from the system of resources that generates them. For example, an irrigation system or a basin managed by a local community within a village is a common, whilst the wider water system is not (Ostrom, 2000). Similarly, the Mediterranean sea is a resource system generating stocks of fish – units of resources. As fishermen compete for the limited stock of fish, they define working rules and institutions for accessing and withdrawing the resources. According to Ostrom, rivalry is embedded in the commons.

Notwithstanding this point, if we consider the same sample in a wider perspective - fish in oceans and seas as systems of resources, theoretically non excludable and non rival -, then we should speak about resource systems as global public goods and not as commons. But in fact, this resource (or system of resources) is necessary for human survival on earth, for the stability of ecosystems, and rivalry in consumption exists and agreements and institutions are required at global level, to allow the global community to collectively manage resources¹⁴. From this perspective, the systems of resources – fish, oceans, seas – can be conceived as global commons.

We can also refer to public goods and the commons as social rights and merit goods. At least in countries identified as “social-democracies”, public goods in normative terms are considered as Musgrave’s merit goods, whose provision should be guaranteed by the “State-community” for all the “State-community” (not only for citizens but for all residents within state boundaries) irrespective of consumers’ demand and of firms’ supply. Education, health care, television frequencies, the quality of environment and air, the protection of historical-artistic patrimony, culture, are – at least should be - sustained and provided by the State for the whole citizenship. Similarly, but without taking into consideration the important issue of redistribution, a community, who guarantees these rights via collective action at a local level, offers public goods paid by the community members.

So what is the difference between public goods and the commons? The difference seems to lay on the actor providing the goods, and the territory and citizenship consuming or preserving them¹⁵.

From this perspective, commons are public goods provided at a local level – in this sense rival - by the community on the basis of shared rules among its members.

It is now worth taking into account the relationship between the production of private goods and the commons: considering a private good, e.g. bread, does not prevent us looking the resources upon which bread production depends (land, water, seeds, clean air) as commons. In a way, this moves the definition of the commons, closer to that of merit and essential goods, leading us also to an “economics of non-market goods and resources¹⁶” (Bateman, 2014), and thus to the second part of this paper.

¹⁴ Examples of them are roundtables and international agreements on issue like fishery control, environmental issues, that indeed often lack the involvement of direct interested communities subjected to the outcomes of political decisions.

¹⁵ For instance, according to Grazzini (2012) an objective as well as a subjective notion of commons exists. The latter is submitted to the existence of the community, whilst the former is related to intrinsic features.

¹⁶ “such as those provided by the environment or via public expenditure. This broad category includes a diversity of goods ranging from recreation in open-access wilderness areas to health and safety improvements and across

Even though these perspectives are oriented towards the *practical part* of economic science and could be accused of normativity (for their focus on what “should be” than on what “will be” as in the critique by Auster and Silver (1973)), it’s worth remembering that each perspective has a philosophy and a set of values at its basis. The same critique in fact could be applied to Davis and Whinston (1967) who, following a path linked with Hayek and Mont Pélerin Society’s conception of the State sustaining the market (Mirowski and Plehwe, 2009), claimed that law should be used as a tool to support markets for public goods, if excludability was impossible through the use of technological devices.

5.3 The importance of now

If the Commons derives from public goods, the way the Commons are managed can determine mainly two situations: a) an appropriation of the Commons by a community, irrespective of the wider context in which the Commons is placed, or b) a process of transformation of individual identity, due to a perception of the Commons as something set in a wider context, shared with wider concentric communities. In the second case, the management requires attention to the effects and results of its access, use and withdrawal and involves a political and social process. Through sharing and commoning, the Commons ask for a shift of the idea of citizenship, through an increase in participation. The concept of the Commons can be a lever for the transformation of culture(s), an essential dimension of economics and a benchmark for new practices.

Here, the perception of individuals can help us to make a step further.

First of all, exiting the pattern of the homo oeconomicus and dealing with complexity and the refuse of systematic solutions, means that choices are left on individuals’ shoulders, who take the responsibility for the social effects of their actions. This opens space for the definition of the commons always enriched by new experiences and economic practices.

If some of these experiences conceive the commons as non-market goods, public or merit goods, it follows that commons are related with collective actions and re-appropriation of the power of decision making by individuals, in an attempt to reconstruct meaning(s) of institutions via practices of sharing, agreement and conflict¹⁷.

Moreover, “Individuals often must make choices based on incomplete knowledge of all possible alternatives and their likely outcomes” (Ostrom 2012: 59). The assumptions of bounded rationality and imperfect knowledge mean that also in the democratic processes, incomplete information and “stochastic errors” should be considered, with a consequent refusal to find “optimal solutions” on the curve of contracts, and a need to orient policies towards *fruitful* “long, time consuming, *inefficient* processes” (Ostrom 1990: 31). The decisional efficiency, at least at local levels, may destroy in fact spectra of perspectives that sometimes are central for a good functioning of governance and of economy (Bowles and Gintis, 2004). From this stand, an evolutionary focus on intentions and individuals’ self-perception as a simple reflection and not as a normative assertion may be worthwhile.

If today the Commons are conceived as a third way between the state and the market, public and private goods, it is possible to envisage them as a category of reconciliation of two main substantive factors of economy: work and land; efforts of society and the environment; culture and nature, from which the spiritual and material survival of mankind depends. If “economy”

resources as different as the global climate system, the ozone layer and clean water. These are the goods and resources which determine so much of the quality of life and upon which the sustainable continuance not only of the market system but life itself depends.” Source: <http://www.springer.com/series/5919>

¹⁷ From this position *methodological individualism* and *methodological collectivism* seem not “unreconcilable modes of perceiving social phenomena and the data from which human knowledge proceeds”(Cubeddu, Vannucci1993: 91).

(*oikonomia*) means the management of household affairs, the Commons requires the government of a common house by interconnected and interdependent individuals who should insist on perceiving themselves as sharing or being the same.

This consideration links the field of economics with political practices and cultural reflections underlining the importance of considering the individual, social and environmental aspects of the economy in the current context of social and environmental crisis that is requiring a change of patterns, and that may bring to individuals a “new” self-perception. The question is: can the Commons and the practice of commoning propel a change in individuals’ self-perception? And can this issue lead to a re-thinking on what public goods are and on the forms of governance applied to them?

In this sense, the second part of the paper is dedicated to a perception of commons and collective action in light of the threefold crisis.

6. Which lessons from the commons within the crisis?

“The words we use and the ideas with which we work are most fundamental part of human reality. How we communicate with one another, think, act and do whatever we seek to achieve is shaped by the ambiguities of language. What we presume to be true is expressed and mediated through the conventions of language and the experiences that human beings share in talking with, relating to. And working with one another. The exigencies of language and culture apply to what people profess as knowledge, what they do, and how they relate to one another in whatever they manage to achieve.” (Ostrom V. 1997:8 in Wall 2014: 55)

The spread of the economic crisis has opened a window of opportunities for a collective reflection about the dynamics of increasing complexity and interconnections. In turn, this leads to a transformation of paradigms and perceptions, especially regarding the economic crisis as an epiphenomenon of environmental, social and political challenges. In this context, the theme of the commons and collective action is gaining momentum. Discussing the definition(s) of the commons, brought us to consider how basic economic concepts are the result of human thought, history and cultures and are subjected to changes in perspectives. The way economic concepts are defined have some effects into reality, since concepts can influence practices that help shaping contexts, and vice versa.

In particular, some historical factors have already played a role in the definitions of public and private goods briefly analyzed in this paper¹⁸.

If we consider examples and the following categorization provided by Adams and Mc Cornick (1987: 194):

¹⁸ The first example is the role played by technological factors (the invention of electronic devices) for the attribution of rights on TV frequencies for private companies in the Minasian – Samuelson debate. See Minasian, (1964)Journal of Law and Economics, Vol.7, Oct, pp.71-80

		Exclusion	
		Feasible	Non-Feasible
Consumption	Rival	1 Private Goods	2 Common Property Resources
	Congestible	5 Club Goods	6 Non-Marketable Impurely Public Goods
	Non-Rival	3 Marketable Public Goods	4 Non-Marketable Public Goods

and then consider the technological capabilities of our recent times, a question is raised immediately: in light of actual technological gains, do non-marketable public goods still exist? What does prevent typical examples of pure public goods like water, air, sky, forests and space to be marketed¹⁹? If it is not because of the technological chain, on what does their “non-marketability” rely?

If the answer provided to this question is “law”, the next step is to question which elements at are the foundations of the laws, their legitimacy and enforcement, turning the discourse to its political, cultural and social dimension.

From this perspective, something seems to have changed overtime, and today we can try to insert some endogenous variables affecting this discourse, related to technological and socio-structural changes, leading to potentially renewed conceptions of state, public goods, global public goods, the Commons and citizenship. Some external conditions have in fact changed and shaped the transformations of society and individuals, and thus the quote from Hume can provide some interesting new insights:

“Though government be an invention very advantageous, and even in some circumstances absolutely necessary to mankind; it is not necessary in all circumstances, nor is it impossible for men to preserve society for some time, without having recourse to such an invention. Men, it is true, are always much inclined to prefer present interest to distant and remote; nor is it easy for them to resist the temptation of any advantage, that they may immediately enjoy, in apprehension of an evil that lies at a distance from them” (Hume 1740, book 3, ch. 2, sect. VIII)

But which institution can best solve this problem? Are institutions key factors within this discussion? Like the solution of government for public goods and public interest to protect against individual attempts to free-ride, the commons addresses the same problem. Since, according to Hume, it is not possible to change human nature, maybe some external conditions or circumstances may help in observing that “laws of justice are our nearest interest, and their violation our most remote”. It is from this perspective that, according to the historical analysis by Laborda Péman and De Moor (2012), institutions for collective action grew. Indeed, as the authors (2012) pointed out, different factors such as environmental pressures and political fragmentation connected with population growth, urbanization and market development, had lead to the earlier formalization and spread of the Commons and of institutions for collective

¹⁹ Jane Sekera distinguishes Public goods from Natural goods in a recent article on the definition of Public goods, published on July 9th, 2014.

action during the late middle ages in Western Europe, in particular thanks to economies of scale, abatement of transaction and information costs and risk sharing.

6.1 The concept of the Commons in light of a threefold crisis

As already underlined by Elster (2000), crises provide opportunities for new “constitutions” and in this perspective, “resolution of crisis often involves agreements among contending - and often previously warring - groups of citizens that end hostilities and create new agreements about governance” (Weingast, 2005: 97). Moreover, as suggested by Jessop (2010: 346) “A significant moment in the development of economic imaginaries is the emergence of crises affecting economic identities and performance. Crises often create profound cognitive and strategic disorientation and trigger proliferation in interpretations and proposed solutions.” Nowadays, the growing interdependence, the climate change and others interrelated factors of social and economic instability are leaving breaches for social quests for autonomy and self-organization in different fields, raising several questions about the possibility and efficacy of self-organization and coordination for managing global and local public goods as commons. On the other hand, these global pressures are increasing a general consciousness of the relationship between individual and social well-being, and of the importance of global public goods, local commons and associated problems as a lever for public collective action.

Recalling the previous observations on externalities and property rights by Demsetz (1967)²⁰, it is now worth adding an historical perspective on this issue. As just argued, social interdependencies are now clearly involved in everyday life due to a stronger net of social and economic relationships, motivated by a shift in technological chain, via the spread of Information and Communication Technologies, and by environmental pressures (OECD). In this context externalities have increasing aggregate impacts and constitute a central problem rather than isolated – exclusive phenomena (Masini 2011: 65). From this stand, a transformation in the conception of property rights associated to common resources might change to achieve a greater internalization of social costs related to a wider community.

Indeed, the division and alienation of resources and lands through property rights made with the aim to preserve them has already demonstrated its inconsistency. Examples of land grabbing, forest disruption, aquifer pollution and soil erosion linked with private ownership of these areas are already sadly evident, and sometimes constitute outcomes of reciprocal agreements between markets and governments, which take no account of social and environmental needs (see D'Alisa, G., Burgalassi, et al., 2010; Koopman, 2012; La Francesca, 2013). In this situation, as McCarthy (2005) suggested, requests by social movements and citizens come together to reconstruct social bonds, democratic participation and the right to nature and culture, threatened by temptations of greed within the market domain²¹.

So, the discourse about the commons is tightly connected to the definition of rules of collective management of resources not-based on property rights but on shared representations and objectives, a point on which I will return below. Even though, as outlined in Arrow's paradox, an efficient, wholly satisfactory outcome is not possible to reach via democracy, it is also true that the privatization of territories, on which communities' lives depends, determine the non internalization of any social and environmental cost for a community. Nowadays, this is a main argument against “markets” greed, but unfortunately the same discourse may apply to governments' interventions, as they continue to try to sell public land and patrimony to private

²⁰ “a primary function of property rights is that of guiding incentives to achieve a greater internalization of externalities. Every cost and benefit associated with social interdependencies is a potential externality.” (Demsetz 1967: 348)

²¹ See D'Alisa, G., Burgalassi, et al., 2010; Koopman, 2012; La Francesca, 2013; GRAIN, Martinez-Alier, J., Temper, L., et al. (2014); Zimmerer, K. S. (1993); Armiero, M., & D'Alisa, G. (2012); Di Costanzo, G., & Ferraro, S. (2013)

investors. As suggested by Aligika and Tarko (2013) by trying to create “public value” a community engages in a collective action in which an input (of resources, ideas, energy and time) is transformed into an output of public relevance, according to some shared basic values and normative criteria within the community. This is not a theoretical discourse since now the core question appears immediately, explaining why commons are so relevant in public debates today: who makes the rules?

Insights by Hume offer once more a point of reflection:

“There is no quality in human nature, which causes more fatal errors in our conduct, than that which leads us to prefer whatever is present to the distant and remote, and makes us desire objects more according to their situation than their intrinsic value. *Two neighbours may agree to drain a meadow, which they possess in common; because it is easy for them to know each others mind; and each must perceive, that the immediate consequence of his failing in his part, is, the abandoning the whole project.* But it is very difficult, and indeed impossible, that a thousand persons should agree in any such action; it being difficult for them to concert so complicated a design, and still more difficult for them to execute it; while each seeks a pretext to free himself of the trouble and expence, and would lay the whole burden on others. Political society easily remedies both these inconveniences.(...) by the care of *government, which, though composed of men subject to all human infirmities, becomes, by one of the finest and most subtle inventions imaginable, a composition, which is, in some measure, exempted from all these infirmities*” (Hume 1740: bk.3 sect.VII , *On the Origins of Government* italic emphasis mine)

Even though as Hume suggested governments are established for these reason, from a certain point of view, present times show things differently. As just suggested, globalization (ICT development) and environmental pressures constitute two main factors of change, but other important factors are occurring too.

In recent years, especially after economic crisis of 2007, states have increasingly behaved more as economic than as political actors with no interest in balancing markets’ rules, as an effect of a “cultural dismantling” of the framework of welfare state, and within a change of perspective on individual’s merits and faults in a competitive system dominated by “markets’ neutrality”. Italy²², as well as others EU “peripheral” States, forced by constraining pressures of competitive financial markets and expectations on interest rates in the EU framework, is proceeding following a “neoliberal agenda” with initial rescue responses directed at the financial sector, policies of “austerity” through cuts in public expenditure, increased fiscal pressure, privatizations and a final sell of public assets and heritage. Moreover, “generous discretionary powers have been given to the executive, or its nominates to solve the crisis” (Jessop 2010: 348). Tensions between the European-national and local-municipal levels of government increased with the insertion of stronger norms of control on public spending, and also through constitutional modifications (i.e. for art.81 of the Italian Constitution) by Parliament, in a rush of top-down interventions justified by national Italian policy-makers as a necessary answer to Europe. Inserting this point into the theoretical pattern described above, States are decreasing production of public goods and services, (or) increasing social costs

²² According to Becker and Jäger (2011 : 6-9) “The north-east of Italy formed part of the German-centred productive system as well (Mazzocchi 2010: 261). Parts of the Italian economy were rather export-oriented. Nonetheless, economic development in Italy was characterized by low productivity increases, very low economic growth and partial downgrading in the international division of labour (Barucci/Pierobon 2010: 34 ff.). Financialization was rather weak and the banking industry followed a conservative model” (...) “The problem of inflated financial assets and structural over-indebtedness of a part of the banking sector and private debtors was not tackled. The appearance of normal activity was sustained but the financing of productive activities came under pressure (Toporowski 2010a: 31). The re-regulation of the financial sector was restricted to minor changes. By and large, the status quo remained unchanged (Redak/Weber 2010, Troost 2011).(…) Contrary to this focus on the financial sector, the activation of the productive sector was of secondary importance.”

(taxes) for their (lower) production, allowing these goods to be distributed and provided by the private sector²³. The result of these policies is a misalignment of state and public interest whose concurrence normally legitimates the institution(s). In spite of this situation, several communities of citizens have begun to organize themselves to provide at least a part of essential “public” goods and services through citizens’ work and via collective action. In many territories, and in many urban areas, public goods *de iure* – from parks and fields to closed buildings and theaters – which have been treated *de facto* as open access regimes, abandoned, wasted, or sold to private investors, became what Ostrom (2000) called *commons “de facto”*, re-taken, re-shaped and managed by communities for social purposes on the basis of local knowledge and know-how, to provide services and solutions to local needs and problems.

This way, natural commons like basins and fisheries whose management via collective action requires shared representations, formal and informal norms, rules and institutions to solve conflicts related to scarcity and to potential attempts to free ride on the resource, are not different from urban common spaces potentially managed by communities to provide collective goods and services in a time of scarcity and pressure due to an economic crisis, (both through mechanisms of conflict and mediation with local and national institutions).

Examples of urban commons managed by communities are now manifold in Italy (in particular in Rome, Naples, Pisa, Bologna) Greece (e.g. Embros Theatre in Athens,) and other States, and studies in economic literature about this topic are growing (Tumminelli O’Brien, 2012; Foster, 2011; Lee, Webster, 2006).

Now another step is necessary, as it was for the consideration of a Social-ecological system in the conceptual framework of polycentric governance previously cited. Not from any illusion, but from a perspective on theories as versions of the world (Goodman, 1978²⁴), if individuals build meanings by experience and perceptions of reality, the commons are now assuming a different significance. The outcome of these experiments can’t be constrained in the definition of common pool resources provided by Ostrom²⁵.

Tentative concluding remarks

Like public goods, also the Commons and its definition is a ground of political confrontation. Like public goods, also the Commons arises problems of non excludability and free-riding. The different solutions proposed to these problems are the outcomes of specific beliefs and perspectives about human beings’ nature, capabilities and about democracy and the role of market and state. Ostrom started her studies about common pool resources discovering several characteristics of human behavior which give birth to different outcomes in the management of the Commons.

Nowadays, and in light of the threefold crisis, the concept of the Commons is transforming its meaning, also because of changing circumstances and environment (growth of information and communication technologies, environmental pressures, cuts in spending for essential public services due to austerity measures in many European countries) that are pushing for community self-organization around the management of common resources. In light of these new experiments and social efforts, the definition of the Commons and common pool resources

²³ In contrast with a conception of public good and merit goods designed by Alfred Marshall and then Richard Musgrave.

²⁴ in Flick 2009:97

²⁵ “common-pool resources (CPRs) are natural or human-made facilities (or stocks) that generate flows of usable resource units over time. CPRs share two characteristics: (1) it is costly to develop institutions to exclude potential beneficiaries from them, and (2) the resource units harvested by one individual are not available to others” (Ostrom, Gardner, Walker 1994)

provided by Ostrom cannot contain the multiple experiences linked to this concept. Through the Commons and related political participation, individuals and communities are now re-embedding government and market within a common sense of society, through an evolutionary conception of identity. These communities have their own working rules, but they are not isolated atoms in the social domain nor clubs supposedly because of the two endogenous (and interrelated) factors in this change of perception on the commons: globalization and the environmental crisis. Both of these factors are in fact related to the ontology and perception of identity, the former as a major potential connection with other ideas, human beings and perspectives, the latter as a common problem whose solution requires an effort of coordination and a share of objectives and representations, via a long, “inefficient” process (Ostrom, 1990:31) of collective action and risk sharing. If the commons should be perceived as public goods, potentially rival, in charge of concentric and increasingly wider communities (to tackle and discuss problems of externalities and develop common working rules), then commons reshapes social organizations and the perceptions of identity, providing a shift in the conception of citizenship²⁶ through the recognition of inter-subjective, interconnected, stratified, overlapping identities that seem to characterize the individual in present times. On this path, individuals’ perception of identity is evolving as connected with others’ identities, efforts and history(ies) in complex frameworks. This suggests a similar shift in the perception of individual property, as both a basis and a burden toward a sharing of common interdependencies, wealth and risks. A reflection and deepening of identity and self-perception by individuals and acknowledgment of human interdependence can be an interesting input to address the consequent emerging issue of conflicting ethics.

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²⁶ On this issue see Dalton (2008)

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