

BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS / REZENSIONEN

BALANCING THE COMMONS IN SWITZERLAND

Institutional Transformations and Sustainable Innovations

*Haller, Tobias, Karina Liechti, Martin Stuber, François-Xavier Viallon, and Rahel Wunderli, eds.
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The title of the book “Balancing the Commons in Switzerland: Institutional Transformations and Sustainable Innovations” refers to anthropologist Robert Netting’s (1981) book “Balancing on an Alp”. Netting’s work, in turn, provided a foundational case study for Elinor Ostrom’s Nobel prize-winning book “Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action” (1990). The present volume’s authors hold that Switzerland provides a heuristic “Swiss commons lab” that could teach more general lessons about commons; Switzerland has had numerous and extensive commons since the Middle Ages, some of which have survived up to the present, and this has not been only because the Swiss civil code recognizes common property rights. The book itself, an outcome of a comparative, multi-case research project carried out between 2017 and 2020, is seeking to add historical depth to the study of commons, by exploring how commons organizations evolve in changing economic and political contexts. It is a salutary contribution to the commons studies that at times are overshadowed by wishful thinking about the revolutionary potential of communal governance.

In chapter one, the introduction delimits the book’s a focus on traditional commons, i. e., tangible common-pool resources such as forests and Alpine meadows, which, despite their wide diversity and numerous local names, the authors propose to call “commoners’ organizations”. The remainder of the volume is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on the notion of commons from different disciplinary traditions, whereas the second part describes five case studies in detail.

The second chapter, written by Martin Stuber and Rahel Wunderli, lays out a historians’ account of Swiss commons that can be placed on two different, imperfectly overlapping trajectories: the institutional development of the commons and their economic development in relation to three energy ages. The institutional development the authors divide into four periods: development (1250–1500), consolidation (1500–1850), transformation (1850–1950), and adaptation (1950–present). Commons emerged from the 1250s as part of diverse neighbourhood associations, then, in the 19th century, as a response to spreading civic rights, they transformed into more restrictive, mostly hereditary property-owning collective organizations as different from municipalities of residents, and finally, from the 20th century, they have been adapting to gradual transfer of competences to municipalities and the state. Whereas, the long-term economic development of commons authors divide into three energy

ages: the agrarian society, the industrial society, and the consumption society which have gradually decreased the relative value of agricultural and forestry goods and increased the value of their ecological services compensated through various subsidies.

Chapter three, written by political scientists François-Xavier Viallon and Stéphane Nahath, tries to answer how the commons meet the state. It argues that the Swiss state is increasingly codifying the ownership, use and rights of natural resources, which redesigns property by potentially allocating use rights to non-owners. They argue that in such context, there are four possible interaction effects between the state and commoners' organizations when it comes to managing natural resources: (1) translation, where commoners' organization successfully translate state policies, (2) infusion, where the state learns from commoners' expertise, (3) complementarity, where both institutions use their resources to achieve common goals, and (4) resilience, where strong commoners' organizations resist state policy when they disagree with it.

In chapter four, Tobias Haller, Karina Liechti, and Stefan Mann combine a dizzying number of theoretical approaches from social anthropology, human geography, agrarian economics, but also new institutionalism and political ecology to propose a model for studying the long-term institutional evolution of commoners' organizations that they call "New Institutional Political Ecology". Their model seeks to integrate not only external change factors, such as social and physical environment, population, and technology that determine the market environment and relative prices with which commons need to grapple, but also institutions, bargaining power, and ideologies that create new legitimation discourses, distributional effects and social, political, and economic behaviour. In other words, this model, which remains somewhat fuzzy, reminds us that commons evolve in complex environments with multiple sources of change and adaptation strategies.

While all the disciplinary approaches discussed in chapter two to four point to the lack of attention paid to power struggles and historical, political, and socio-economic changes in existing commons studies, the subsequent presentation of multiple approaches leaves the reader with a sense of pick-and-choose among a variety of theoretical lenses for understanding the emergence, evolution, and success of commons. Fortunately, the second part of the book gives more meat to the theoretical considerations presented in the first part through detailed case studies. The case studies have been chosen to diversify not only cantonal governance regimes but also size, resource base, and differing proximity to urbanized areas to learn more from the "Swiss commons lab" through comparison.

What do all the case studies taken together tell us about commons more generally? First, they show that legal recognition of common property rights is useful but insufficient to ensure the long-term institutional robustness of commons. Modern, industrialized development has decreased the relative value of agricultural and forestry goods and increased the relative value of labour, making it economically very difficult to perpetuate commoners' organizations. This has led to the polarization of land use: use of agricultural lands in more favourable areas has further intensified, whereas harder-to-access places have been abandoned for reforestation. Moreover, those Swiss commoners' organizations which have had the possibility to diversify sources of income by investing in hydropower and tourist infra-

structures or selling constructible land, can cross-subsidize loss-making activities, while others have to rely on discourses that praise cultural landscape ecosystem services and traditional identity provided by commons to valorize their work.

And yet, economic resilience has more impact than discourses on commons' bargaining power vis-à-vis the canton and municipality as well as their capacity to attract young people to their organizations. Moreover, all Swiss commoners' organizations recognize that they could not continue their work if they did not receive state subsidies for agricultural production and various ecosystem services that partially compensate for the loss of economic value of agricultural and forestry goods, but also add workload for management that is not fully compensated by these subsidies. Finally, to cope with this, Swiss commoners' organizations create new synergies and mutualize certain services to reach economies of scale.

The book convincingly shows that Elinor Ostrom's eight design principles for the robustness of commoners' organizations do not suffice to either describe the adaptation strategies of the Swiss commons or ensure their long-term survival. However, much of the book's historical and ethnographic data remains underutilized, as it could be used for a further theoretical reflection on what are commons and what is their emancipatory potential.

For example, the long-term historical perspective clearly shows that the commons is an imperfect and evolving form of governance: at times commoners' organizations were identical with the state, but as they focused on the governance of finite ecological and economic resources, eventually they became an exclusive organization with high entry costs. If clear boundaries and participation rules are indispensable for robust commons (Ostrom's first design principle), exclusiveness creates legitimacy threats that can undermine the commons. To nuance better in a comparative perspective how organizations that are smaller than the state can become more democratic and/or legitimate, it would have been useful to draw on the notion of the "bundle of rights" (cf. Schlager and Ostrom 1992) and show which resources (pastures, timber, profit, ecosystem services, beautiful landscapes, affordable housing, etc.) are available to different groups of people, and what are the rights and duties of these groups.

Also, the book insinuates that environmental sustainability is not (only) a question about common property vs private property; the main culprit for ecological degradation is macro-economic forces that either lead to overexploitation or abandonment of natural resources. If Swiss commons do good for the environment, they largely do so in cooperation with the Swiss state: first, the state is drawing increasingly demanding policies to protect natural resources, and second, it provides subsidies that partially compensate for increased labour costs linked with ecological preservation. This shows that although environmental stewardship is valued normatively, it has no intrinsic economic value and needs to be covered through subsidies, otherwise robust commoners' organizations might not be enough for guaranteeing environmental sustainability.

In short, although the book's details and overabundance of local terms make it at times a tedious read, it covers fundamental research that makes a critical contribution to commons studies. It addresses major shortcomings from which the majority of commons studies suffer: The authors show how commons as an institution evolve over time and interact with changing market and policy environments. This is a reminder that commons are not only about

collective action but also about the governance of collectively-owned resources that have esteemed value. This value, however, is not determined only internally but also through normative institutions and the evolution of prices. An incapacity to safeguard and redefine this value might lead to the disappearance of a commoners' organization.

Reference

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