

SPECIAL ISSUE  
**CULTIVATING OUR COMMONS,  
MELDING TWO COMPLEX IDEAS**

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## **Cultivating our Commons, Melding Two Complex Ideas**

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In the last quarter of the XX century, four base themes powerfully emerged regarding the collective feeling and aspirations of peoples: peace, freedom, development, and environment. In the post-WWII, peace has been threatened by the nuclear arms race, which has anyhow assured the peace at world level. On the contrary, peace is shattered at many regional levels, where the superpowers confront each other by furnishing local armies with conventional weapons. The world total number of wars is decreasing, even though peace seems very far to be achieved, especially in Africa and the Middle East. More recently, terrorism appears to be the main menace to peace, at any geographical level.

In the same period, liberty has been more and more sought, after the end of colonial imperialism, the increasing contrast to totalitarian regimes, and the geographical diffusion of democracy, a political regime more respectful of human rights, of women, minorities, and local peoples. Many new independent States have been capable to improve their economies and sustain the basic needs of the poor. Nevertheless, only in the last near five decades environment (at global and local levels) entered the institutional and legal agenda. Today the environment is finally one of the arguments that entered the individual and collective aspirations, at local, regional, and global scale. Respect of nature reached the same rank of importance as other abovementioned concepts such as peace and freedom, which are well rooted in very ancient collective feelings.

The *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future*, redacted in 1987, reports a definition of “sustainable development” coinciding with a largely diffused and very popularized affirmation: «Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. This definition is both beautiful and fluid, namely adaptable to any program regarding the environment as a whole, or development in itself, to industries, institutions, governments, the civil

society, and even private and public projects, hopes, aspirations, at different scales of importance and intensity. The concept is vast and adaptable so that no one can easily take a position against “sustainable development”, yet maintaining a sense of intrinsic ambiguity. Furthermore, the already familiar expression “sustainable development” often appears to have suffered a cultural downsizing in a sort of mantra, good for marketing, and in some way weak before a theoretical critique. Yet, the concept is too important for current and future generations for avoiding deepening. It offers too a multidimensional possibility of study, not to be underrated by scholars of different disciplines dealing with the environment.

Thus, which could be a paradigm capable of getting closer diverse scientific approaches in studying “sustainable development” has been the central point of many scientific meetings among the members of the Section Environment and Territory (E&T), I have the honor to coordinate. Over time, ideas for proposed joint researches have been several, ranging from theoretical to operative ones, and putting in light several topics and approaches. But two words emerged more often than other during the meetings. One is the term *the commons*. The second one is *cultivation*. Over millennia, humans had “cultivated the earth” for improving their life conditions, always producing diverse histories, geographies, and philosophies. For scholars of different disciplines, the problem of studying how social communities are capable of producing territories, transforming the space in places, appeared to be the main point of eventually shared interest. The Section E&T decided to put together all these studies in a publication dedicated to the topic *Commons and Cultivation*, inviting also colleagues coming from other Departments and Universities. The current issue of the International Journal of Anthropology gathers the selected and approved papers on the topic.

The purpose of studying jointly *Commons* and *Cultivation* is per se a challenging goal and it poses the necessity of dealing with different themes that appear to be close even though their vicinity is blurred by a certain ambiguity. This appears to be intrinsic, and not only because very diverse academic disciplines, based on different methodologies, are involved. Both the terms have a practical use, namely in real life, but both of them open problems of theoretical interpretations and do strongly challenge scholars to distinguish the concept of *complexity* from that of *complicatedness*, especially when referring to social and even natural systems. In a complicated system, individual elements can be isolated and studied as such, not finding any relational link among each other. In a complex system, the elements are more or less interrelated, and the core problem is properly that a singular element is intimately relational, and should be correctly studied considering this characteristic. In living and social systems, complexity does increase over time, yet not being fixed. It is also very clear that complexity and culture face reciprocally in a complex manner. In cultivating a commons, humans often produce a complex system of relations, involving private and public decisions, even up to originating the discussion about power and democracy.

In his following paper philosopher Francesco Totaro says: «Moreover, we have to reflect upon the derivation of *cultivare* and *cultus* from the verb *colere*, which means too dwelling an home or a territory and creating a relationship of friendship by care and attention to a person whom we hold dear» (Totaro, in this issue, p. 255), stressing the intrinsic meanings of *taking care* and *creating relation* the word *cultivation* has. I should add the eventual meanings of *increase* and *divide* contained in the same term *cultivation*, even considering the mere act of plowing land for fertilizing and producing more quantities of crops. In a metaphorical sense, cultivation is to be related to the term *culture*, and the subsequent necessity of considering the sense of cultivating the human capacities for increasing them. I can also add the consideration that *culture* derives from Latin *culter*, the knife of the plow capable of vertically cutting the ground, and thus fertilizing the farmland, and designing the shape of agricultural fields. Actually, when our ancestors traced with that knife a groove for founding a new town, they were setting fences and giving sense to borders. They did immediately separate the city from the countryside with a clear signal, and they did divide citizens from farmers or, maybe worse, civilized from savages. The use of the term *cultivation* appears in all its cultural complexity and, if you want, ambiguity. Moreover, when humans should cultivate a common land (a piece of the earth surface), the thing appears in its astonishing complexity, for philosophers as well as for any other specialized scholar, facing the problem of interpreting human behavior and rationality.

Admitting I was able to say something about *cultivation*, I will now try to deal with the other term on the floor: *the commons*. Today, in the cultural debate, the term *commons* is usually related to the *tragedy of the commons*, as exposed by Garrett Hardin in 1968, and even to the idea of necessary governance, after Elinor Ostrom's *Governing the Commons* issued in 1990. In a famous paper Hardin exposed his ideas, creating a very new research field, but confounding the idea of *commons* with that of its *governance regime*; in her equally famous book, Ostrom transformed the brilliant (but not exhaustive) idea of *tragedy* in that of *governance*. Today, all of us know that the tragedy is thinking that privatization of land will actually resolve the overexploitation of natural resources. And that the tragedy is also thinking that governing natural resources under the public domain will actually assure their best use and conservation. A vast political and economic literature put in light a double failure: that of the market and that of policy. Thus, stressing a singular point of view, or a simplified proxy of reality, is not sufficient for debating the problem of how governing the commons. It is necessary to consider the whole context individual rational choices are immersed in; namely the specific context within which outcomes depend on the actions of many interacting resource users. It is very clear that the problem is that of *collective action*, the very problematic concern of any society and government, over time and space.

Notoriously, Thomas Hobbes resolved the problem giving all the power of choice to the Leviathan. Today, problems of collective action are discussed as social dilemmas and social traps, suggested by game theory, considering democracy instead of the absolute

central power of the Leviathan. The core result of the scientific debate among scholars is quite clear. Individual selfish separate agents will always adopt strategies leading to a Nash equilibrium that provides less individual utility than what would be obtainable with a cooperative strategy. The point is that real world not always corresponds to the model of the cooperative social behavior envisaged as leading to the optimum state by theory. There are many facts regarding real people's behavior that theory put out of the mode as *ceteris paribus* which, contrarily, are fundamental determinants and should be investigated and deepened. Their deepening over time and space can help to amend both theory and policymaking. The scientific investigation is still ongoing, involving very diverse academic disciplines in a hard work. The importance of Elinor Ostrom's position is she clearly understood the necessity of studying real-world commons organization, in order to interpret how real-people resolve the conditions that produce the tragedy. Ostrom found that not always real-people chose the worst solution and the Hardin's findings were imperfect.

All the contributors to this issue of the International Journal of Anthropology dedicated to *Commons and Cultivations* are well aware of the huge dimension of the still ongoing scientific debate on *the commons* and the philosophical relevance of the term *cultivation*. Properly, their works are to be considered as a passionate pace in the direction of enhancing scientific knowledge on these complex topics. I will anticipate how they treated the topic as follows.

Simone Betti in the paper *Cultivating urban landscapes: horticulture*, treated relations between agriculture and society, in the changing scenario of contemporary Europe and presenting a case study of urban horticulture in the Italian Marche region. Francesca Boldrer in the paper *Communis omnium parens: Mother Earth and agriculture in Latin treatises from Cato to Varro and Columella* dealt with the theme in the ancient world, especially among the Romans. Edoardo Bressan in the paper *The Government of Commons in Alpine History. The Case of Brescia* presented a case study on the history of the Alps examining the government of the commons from the early modern period to the nineteenth century. Valentina Carella in her paper *The life we have in common. A phenomenological account for cultivation as a paradigm for a new ecological culture* shows how, during the last decades, philosophy has reconsidered the traditional understanding of man-nature relationship inherited from modernity. Gian Luigi Corinto in his paper *Cultivation as Taking Care of Plant Diversity and Global Commons: Nikolai Ivanovich Vavilov's Legacy* argues that biodiversity and agrobiodiversity should be managed at the global level, profiting of natural geographical plant variability, assumed as a fundamental scientific idea at the dawn of the 1900s by Soviet scientist Nikolai Vavilov. Carla Danani in her paper *Cultivation as Relation: Rethinking Culture* investigated the complex range and overlap of meanings of cultivation, and of to cultivate, starting from their roots in the Latin language. Catia Eliana Gentilucci in the paper *Social farming and the economic civil vocation in Italy* showed how social farming can be a model for civil economics, an ancient and still debated topic among scholars of social sciences. Francesco

Musotti's paper was dedicated to *Collective Property Rights and Land Use: Features and Timeliness of the thought of Achille Loria*, showing that the alternative prevalence of competition over cooperation, in different epochs and regions of the world, allows us to explain the characteristics of agricultural institutions in a systematic way, according to a *spiral law*.

In his paper I have already quoted, *Cultivation, generation and production*, Francesco Totaro says cultivating is actually a composition of production and generation, whereby generation can be made easier and completed by production, on condition that production itself does not arrive to an absolute denial of generation.

The papers collected in the present issue of the Journal contributed in addressing the topic with sound scientific contents, even because they accepted the double challenge of treating a culturally complex theme and comparing their cultural positions with scholars of very different disciplines. Finally, the studies on *Commons and Cultivation* put in light, by introducing theoretical ideas or illustrating empirical case studies, that for a sustainable use of natural resources (namely the whole Earth), a return to cooperation is indispensable, not yet imposing collective property rights, but designing a democratic governance of natural resources. This is certainly a Utopia, but it appears to be indispensable.

