Elinor Ostrom, Garrett Hardin, and the Politics of Population

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ABSTRACT
The paper examines and compares the political content of arguments regarding population by Elinor Ostrom and Garrett Hardin.

Elinor Ostrom, a professor of political science at Indiana University, was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in October 2011. She died last week on the morning of June 12, 2012. Throughout her career, Dr. Ostrom was interested in common-pool resources and how these resources were managed. Her conclusions questioned the widely held belief that resource management can only occur under the auspices of either “the state” or “the market.”

She was the first, and only, woman to win the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Science, an award she shared with Oliver E. Williamson of the University of California at Berkeley in 2009. The two were recognized for their work analyzing how people can create rules to manage shared resources such as fisheries and forests. According to the Nobel committee, Dr. Ostrom demonstrated how common property could be successfully managed by groups using it.

On the day of her death, she published a widely syndicated essay on the website Project Syndicate called "Green for the Grassroots." In it she argued, as she had her entire academic career, for a multi-scalar approach to natural resource management that avoided the dogma of state authority or the alchemy of the free market. She argued against efforts toward a binding international climate agreement at the United Nations Rio+20 Summit. “Inaction in Rio would be disastrous,” she admitted, “but a single international agreement would be a grave mistake. We cannot rely on singular global policies to solve the problem of managing our common resources: the oceans, atmosphere, forests, waterways, and rich diversity of life that combine to create the right conditions for life, including seven billion humans, to thrive.”

Ostrom’s 2009 selection by the Nobel committee was a surprise to many, but it wasn’t because her work was out of the mainstream. Her work figures prominently in research by geographers, political scientists, economists, and legal scholars on common property resource management. Her research and writing on common property placed her on the fringe of economic orthodoxy, but her conclusions...
found purchase within that establishment. While she argued that the commons could be managed collectively, she focused on the importance of scale and institutional form, and never excluded the possibility that markets could best organize the distribution of scarce resources. Despite this, when the Nobel committee awarded Ostrom the prize, a number of economists noted that since her entire body of work was one long, sustained attack on the Malthusian ecologist Garrett Hardin, the award amounted to a clear rebuke of Hardin’s infamous “Tragedy of the Commons” thesis.

Hardin on Population

Writing in 1968, Hardin argued that all common-pool resources are always and everywhere doomed to overuse. Hardin’s idea, not uncommon then or now, was that when there are no property owners, there is no justice. Without owners, all common pool forests would be overcut, all rivers, lakes and oceans overfished, and all pastures overgrazed. “Freedom in a commons,” he wrote, “brings ruin to all.” This is how Hardin’s thesis is usually understood, and why some believe Ostrom’s work was a direct rebuke. But this is only partly true.

It’s true that both Ostrom and Hardin were critical of market solutions. For Hardin the solution to the imagined problem of resource exhaustion of common pool resources had nothing to do with the principles that neoclassical economists held dear to their hearts. He was not in favor of the construction of more durable private property arrangements. He had no faith in the free market. While resource exhaustion could be resolved, he believed, through the construction of private property, “the air and waters surrounding us,” he admitted, “cannot be so easily fenced.” Like Ostrom in Rio, Hardin would have been a Cassandra in Kyoto.

Hardin was not convinced that private property was a silver bullet and, like John Locke, believed that the state was a necessary evil. But unlike Ostrom, Hardin was an unrepentant Malthusian, convinced that overpopulation was at the root of every problem. The “concept of private property, which deters us from exhausting the positive resources of the earth, favors pollution,” he wrote. And pollution, according to Hardin, was “a consequence of population.” For Hardin the solution to what he called the “tragedy of the commons” had nothing to do with Ostrom’s favorite issues: scale and institutional forms of governance for natural resources. Hardin’s “glum thesis,” as E.P. Thompson called the “Tragedy of the Commons,” had nothing whatsoever do with nature or natural resources. Unlike Ostrom, Hardin wasn’t writing about forests or oceans or pastures when he used the word “commons,” he was talking about population.

The commons Hardin had in mind when he wrote his famous essay was what he called “a commons in breeding.” And the poor, in Hardin’s strange logic, abused that commons. Public policy, he believed, valorized “overbreeding as a policy to secure its own aggrandizement.” His “solution” to “overpopulation” was to coerce the poor to “breed” less. “Mutual coercion mutually agreed upon,” as he put it. And note the language here. He avoids the word “reproduction,” instead using the word “breeding”; the same language early twentieth century eugenicists used when trying to convince authorities to sterilize poor people.

But Hardin didn’t want to sterilize the poor. He wanted to drown them.
In a 1974 Psychology Today essay ridiculously titled “Lifeboat Ethics: the Case Against Helping the Poor,” Hardin advanced a cruel codicil to his original Tragedy thesis. In it he equated the earth to a lifeboat. The rich float about comfortably while the poor flail desperately in the open sea. This is the situation we find ourselves in, he argued: too few resources to support too many people. For Hardin the question was not Why are the rich comfortable and the poor suffering?, but instead he asked, Who among the poor should we let into our lifeboat? His answer? None. There are more poor in the water than we can save. We can’t save them all so we shouldn’t save any. This ugly hypothetical was what he called his “harsh ethics”. And “the harsh ethics of the lifeboat,” Hardin went on to explain, “becomes even harsher when we consider the reproductive differences between the rich nations and the poor nations. The people inside the lifeboats are doubling in numbers every 87 years; those swimming around outside are doubling, on the average, every 35 years, more than twice as fast as the rich. And since the world’s resources are dwindling, the difference in prosperity between the rich and the poor can only increase.”

It’s a mean-spirited article and in it Hardin makes all kinds of despicable arguments. The privileges of wealth and the origins of poverty go unexamined so that he can come out against food programs for the poor because their poverty is their fault and besides bringing “food to the people, hasten(s) the exhaustion of the environment.” Population control “the crude way,” is the only answer he argues. Let the poor die and soon “The overpopulated poor countries would decrease in numbers, while the rich countries that had room for more people would increase.” In a similar essay the same year he argued for genocide in Ethiopia as a solution to the problem of famine.

It should go without saying that Hardin would do poorly in an introductory critical thinking course. His lifeboat analogy is ridiculous. What was the disaster that sent people into the water in the first place, scrambling for lifeboats? How is it that only the poor find themselves in the water, while the rich luxuriate about in comfortable boats, congratulating themselves on their ethical behavior while millions of people sink to their deaths?

And he’s not strong at social science methodology either. Hardin was under the delusion that the population growth ratios of his lifetime were somehow timeless and bound to continue on into the future. That they weren’t did not deter him.

In his 1999 book The Ostrich Factor: Our Population Myopia, his last before he died in a suicide pact with his elderly wife in 2003, he argued once again for coercive population controls, this time suggesting that sterilization programs target those with “unqualified reproductive rights.”

The question, of course, is who gets to decide whose reproductive rights are legitimate and whose are unqualified? As the geographer David Harvey argued in the same year that Hardin wrote his “Lifeboat Ethics” article, “whenever a theory of overpopulation seizes hold in a society dominated by an elite, then the non-elite invariably experience some form of political, economic, and social repression.”