

THE PASTURE WAS NEVER EMPTY · CHAPTER SIX

A Commons on Monday

Chapter Six of The Pasture Was Never Empty

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THE LICENCE

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Chapter Six of The Pasture Was Never Empty. The whole book, with every chapter, is at business.hautelumiere.life/library/the-pasture-was-never-empty (DOI https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23989523).

A NOTE BEFORE YOU READ

This work is offered for education and leadership development. It is not legal, financial, accounting, investment, medical or psychological advice; take the advice of a qualified professional who knows your circumstances. Companies and events are described from the public record as the author understands it; characterisations are the author's analysis. Examples are illustrative, and no particular outcome is promised to any reader.

ABSTRACT

A pasture has a limit. Every cow added takes grass that another cow cannot eat. That property, which economists call subtractability and which Ostrom treated as a defining feature of a common-pool resource, is why the pasture needs governing at all. Some shared things do not behave like that. A proof, a recipe, a song, a method of irrigation or a piece of software is not used up by being used. One reader's understanding of an idea does not reduce another's. In 2007 Elinor Ostrom and the librarian Charlotte Hess published a collection of essays, Understanding Knowledge as a Commons , that asked what the design principles might mean for resources of this kind. Their answer was careful. Knowledge is not subtractable in the way grass is, but the things that carry it are: the attention of the people who maintain it, the funding of the libraries that hold it, the trust of contributors who might stop contributing. A knowledge commons can be overgrazed too. What is overgrazed is the care.

CHAPTER SIX

A Commons on Monday



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HAUTE LUMIÈRE · THE PASTURE WAS NEVER EMPTY · CHAPTER SIX

The resource that grows when shared

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Some shared things do not behave like that. A proof, a recipe, a song, a method of irrigation or a piece of software is not used up by being used. One reader's understanding of an idea does not reduce another's. In 2007 Elinor Ostrom and the librarian Charlotte Hess published a collection of essays, *Understanding Knowledge as a Commons*, that asked what the design principles might mean for resources of this kind.[42] Their answer was careful. Knowledge is not subtractable in the way grass is, but the things that carry it are: the attention of the people who maintain it, the funding of the libraries that hold it, the trust of contributors who might stop contributing. A knowledge commons can be overgrazed too. What is overgrazed is the care.

Santa Anna's *Ecstatic Economics* makes the same point about the commons in general. Its examples are land trusts, open-source software and community-supported farms, and of all of them it says that they are pro-circulation:

> *they keep shared wealth flowing through communities rather than accumulating in private hands.*[43]

The four chapters before this one traced the principles from their origin, through their critics and the house's living-systems reading, to a working case. This one steps back before the book turns to working ground. The claim is this: the commons is not a special corner of economic life; it is the condition that every other part of economic life depends on, and its principles are the most practical way this house knows of tending that condition. Markets, firms, families and gifts all run on shared things that nobody owns: trust, reputation, attention, a reasonable expectation that others will keep their word. Each of those can be governed well or left open.

The triad underneath

In 1997 Elinor Ostrom gave the presidential address to the American Political Science Association. It was published the next year as "A Behavioral Approach to the Rational Choice Theory of Collective Action".[44] It is the most general thing she wrote, and it explains why the design principles work at all.

Her argument was that the old model of the self-interested individual, the one Hardin's herdsmen obeyed, was not wrong so much as incomplete. Real people bring three things to any shared situation that the model left out: trust, the expectation that others will cooperate; reciprocity, the tendency to return cooperation with cooperation and defection with defection; and reputation, the record of how each person

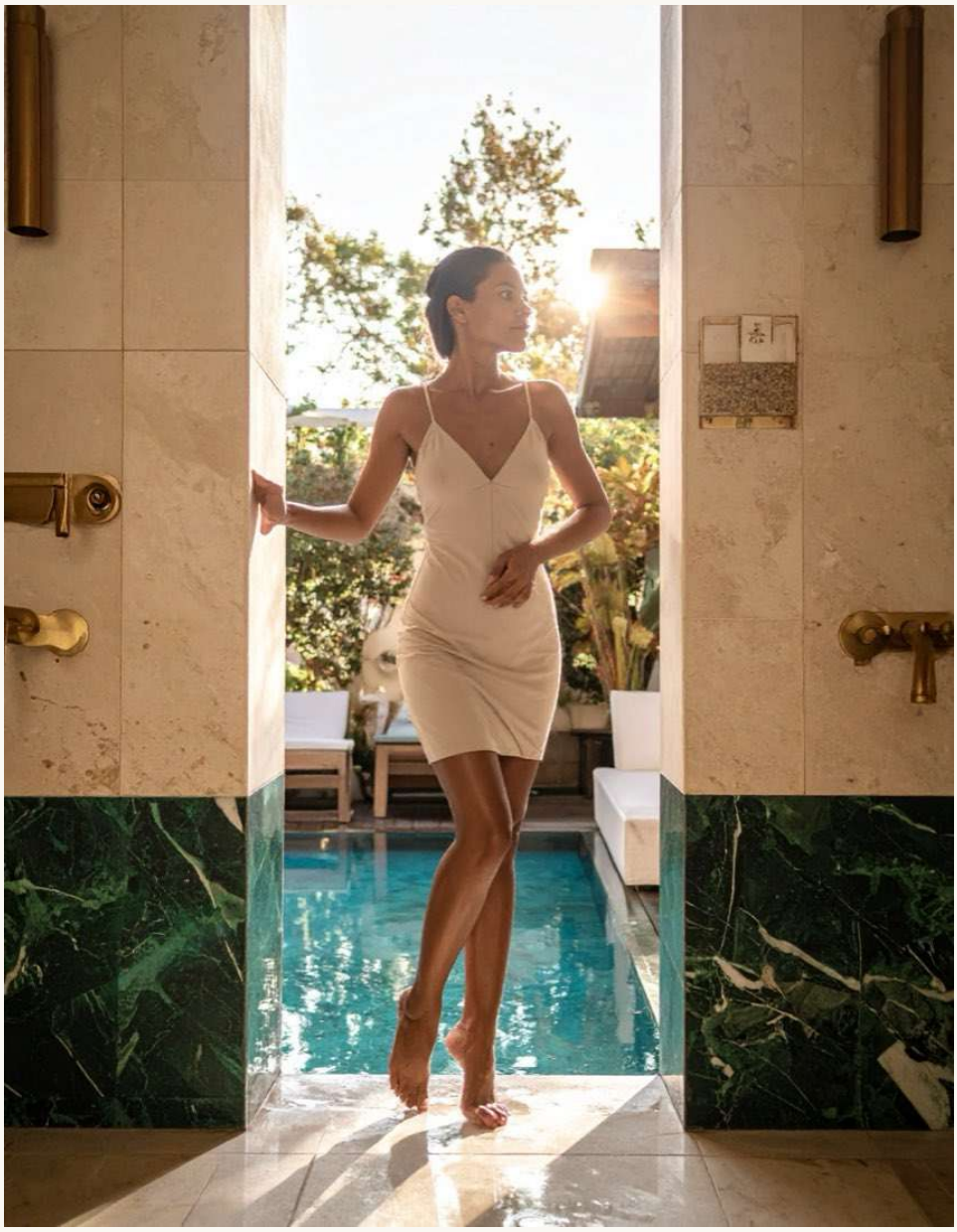
has behaved before. The three reinforce each other. Where people can see each other's behaviour and talk about it, reputations form; good reputations make trust reasonable; trust makes reciprocity safe; and reciprocity builds the reputations up again. Where people cannot see or talk, the loop never starts, and the self-interested model describes them well.

The design principles, in this light, are a way of starting and protecting that loop. Monitoring makes behaviour visible, so that reputations can form. Conflict resolution keeps a single bad exchange from destroying a reputation that took years to build. Graduated sanctions let reciprocity respond to defection without ending the relationship. Collective choice lets the group revise its expectations as it learns.

Santa Anna's book draws the consequence for every economic structure that keeps trust at its centre:

> *The commons, the cooperative, the community currency, the CSA — all are structures that make economic relationship primary and market transaction secondary.*[45]

That is the joining point with the sibling volume on markets embedded in society, which reads Karl Polanyi's argument that markets have always depended on social arrangements they did not create, and with the volume on gift and reciprocity, which takes up the experimental evidence on reciprocity that Ostrom's address drew on. A market is a remarkable instrument for setting prices among strangers. It does not, by itself, make strangers trustworthy. Something else does that work first, and that something is, in Ostrom's sense, a commons.



The commons inside the firm

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The commons inside the firm

Most organisations are full of commons that are not called by that name, and the inventory in Chapter 2 was a way of finding them. What changes when a leader begins to see them?

The first change is in what counts as an asset. Santa Anna's book describes what was lost when common land was enclosed: when shared resources become private property, it says, the

> *relational web of mutual obligation that governed their use is severed.*[46]

The same thing happens inside firms on a smaller scale. When a shared practice, the senior engineer who answers everyone's questions, the open calendar, the informal agreement that nobody books the large room for a two-person call, is replaced by a policy or a charge-back system, the arrangement may become more efficient on paper and lose the web of obligation that made it work. Sometimes the replacement is right. Often it is made without anyone noticing that a commons was there.

The second change is in what counts as governance. In most firms, governance means the board and the reporting line. Ostrom's principles describe a different layer: the arrangements by which people who share something look after it without being told to. Chapter 3 showed the evidence that outside rules can crowd those arrangements out. A leader who has seen this asks, before adding a policy, whether a commons is already doing the work.

Two smaller commons deserve a leader's attention because they are overgrazed in almost every firm. The first is documentation: the shared record of how things work, which everyone draws on and almost nobody maintains. It behaves exactly as Hess and Ostrom described a knowledge commons. The knowledge is not used up by reading; the care that keeps it current is used up by everyone who reads without writing. Principle 2B is the remedy, and it can be small: whoever relies on a page to finish a task leaves it a little more accurate than they found it. The second is the attention of the few people everyone asks. A senior colleague who answers forty questions a week is a common-pool resource with a hard limit, and the usual governance is none at all. A boundary (office hours), a sense loop (a count of questions, visible to the team) and a door (a junior colleague learning to answer the commonest ones) will usually do more than any reorganisation.

The third change is in what counts as fairness. Principle 2B, proportion between what each person contributes and what each receives, is the commons version of a question every firm faces about its people: how should the gains from shared work be shared? That question has its own long history, from the Scanlon plans of the 1930s onward, and it is the subject of a sibling volume. Employee ownership, which gives the people who share the work a say in the rules as well as a share of the result, is principle 3 applied to the firm itself, and it is the subject of another. Santa Anna's book insists on the structural reading of that second idea:

> *This distribution is not ideological ("power to the people" as slogan) but structural (specific governance mechanisms that ensure broad participation in economic decision-making).*[45]

What a good outside authority does

Principle 7 asks outside authorities to recognise a group's right to organise. It is worth saying what a good outside authority actually does, because most readers of this book are someone's outside authority: a government above a fishery, a head office above its divisions, a parent above siblings sharing a room.

It does four things, and the evidence in this book supports each. It protects the boundary from people outside who would ignore it, as the state did when it recognised Valencia's tribunal. It makes good information available, the monitoring that Dietz, Ostrom and Stern argued is hardest to provide at large scale. It provides a place where disputes can be settled when the local arena cannot settle them. And it steps back from the methods while holding to the outcomes, so that the group's own norms are not crowded out.

None of this is passive. A gardener does not grow the plant but does a great deal to make growing possible. Santa Anna's book, in its own list of what the commons needs from those above it, puts the first duty plainly: commons governance needs protection from enclosure.



Scarcity as a design choice

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Scarcity as a design choice

The deepest claim in Santa Anna's reading of Ostrom is about scarcity itself. His book opens by naming what it calls the dominant metaphysics of modern economics:

> *there is not enough, there will never be enough, and the fundamental economic problem is the allocation of scarce resources among competing wants.*[47]

Read carefully, the book's quarrel is not with the fact that resources are finite. The pasture has a limit; so does the meeting calendar. It is with where the *experience* of scarcity comes from. An open-access pasture is scarce for everyone, all the time, because each herdsman must race the others for the grass. The same pasture, governed by Törbel's winter rule, can feed the same number of cows year after year, and nobody needs to race. The grass is no more plentiful. The scarcity has been designed out of the arrangement.

That is the joining point with the sibling volume on scarcity and abundance, which reads Keynes's 1930 essay on the economic possibilities for his grandchildren and the modern economy of intangible assets, and with the volume on ecological economics, which places every economy inside the limits of the biosphere. Ostrom's work sits between them. It accepts the limits, and it shows that the experience of living inside them depends heavily on how the people who share them have agreed to behave.



Monday

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Monday

A book that ends its first half in admiration has not done its work. The second half is working ground, and it begins on a Monday.

For a leader, the first week is short. Run the Commons Inventory with two colleagues and find the eight shared things. Choose the one open resource whose overuse costs the most and describe it as the audit asks. Score it, read the combinations, choose two moves. Hold a fifteen-minute review with the people who share it and ask what they would change; those are the most important fifteen minutes of the week, and

the ones most leaders skip. Draw the Loop Map and find the dotted arrow that would complete the most loops. Chapter 8 turns that week into thirteen, with roles and decisions for each.

For a household, the first week is shorter still. Choose one shared resource, usually the joint account, sometimes the car or the evenings. Agree a fifteen-minute look at it together on the same day each week, and write the first rung of a response to overuse as a question rather than a reproach. Chapter 11 takes it further.

Neither plan needs new software, a consultant or a budget. Each needs about four hours in the first week and fifteen minutes a week after that. That is the economy of a commons: the governing is cheap when it is done often and early, and expensive only when it has been left undone.

Where it lasted, somebody was standing at the gate in the evening, talking with the neighbours about the grass. The rest of this book is about how to be that person on a Monday.

The Tool: The One-Page Commons Charter

A single page that any group can write in an hour: a team, several teams, a household, a volunteer board, a group of friends who share a house. It gathers the first five chapters into one document that the users write, sign and change. Use the resource you have worked through in the earlier tools, or start fresh.

THE COMMONS CHARTER OF (the group) FOR (the resource) Written on by (everyone who draws on the resource). Next review: .

1 · What we share. The resource, described in one sentence: What it includes and does not include (the resource's boundary): How fast it replenishes, and how we can see its condition:

2 · Who shares it. The people or teams who may draw on it: How someone new joins (the door): How someone leaves, and what they take with them:

3 · How we take, and how we give back. Each person's or team's share, or the rule for taking: What each contributes to keeping the resource in good order, in proportion to what they take: What changes in a hard season (a lean month, a drought, a crunch):

4 · How we change these rules. Who may propose a change: everyone who signs below. How a change is agreed (consent, majority, or another rule we choose): Where changes are recorded:

5 · How we see. What we watch about the resource's condition: What we watch about how it is used: Who watches, and to whom they report (it must be to us): How often we look together, and when (our Thursday):

6 · When someone overuses it. Our ladder, from Chapter 5, in brief: Rung 1 (a private word, by a peer): Rung 2 (named at our regular meeting): Rung 3 (a repair the person proposes): Rung 4 (a temporary limit, with an end date): Rung 5 (a review by all of us, with a route back): These rungs apply to every one of us, including whoever leads.

7 · When we disagree. Where disputes are heard (our regular meeting, or another named place): How quickly a dispute is heard after it is raised: Who decides if the two parties cannot agree, and who stands aside because they are involved:

8 · What sits above us. The outside authority whose limits we work within (head office, board, landlord, bank, parent): The outcome they set: The methods we keep for ourselves: What we pass up to them, and how:

9 · What we will notice in a month if this is working. One observation, not a feeling:

Signed:

Put it where the resource is used. Read it aloud at the first review. Change it the first time it stops fitting. A charter nobody has amended in a year is either perfect or forgotten, and it is rarely perfect.

A note on method

The plans and time estimates under "Monday" are this book's recommendation, not the finding of any study.

A NOTE FROM THE HOUSE

Most organisations are full of commons not called by that name: the shared hour, the common file, the expertise everybody draws on and nobody tends. A commons governed well is a gain waiting to be counted. Luminous Prosperity Inc. does this work inside organisations as a gainshare, paid as a share of the gain it helps find.

REQUEST A CONVERSATION

References

1. Hess, C., & Ostrom, E. (Eds.). (2007). *Understanding knowledge as a commons: From theory to practice*. MIT Press. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/6980.001.0001. Crossref lists the record's issue date as 2006; the printed edition carries 2007. An edited collection; it frames questions and cases rather than testing outcomes.
2. Santa Anna, A. *Ecstatic Economics*. Developmental Canon, Luminous Prosperity Inc., 2026, "The Revived Commons: Collective Stewardship of Shared Wealth."
3. Ostrom, E. (1998). A behavioral approach to the rational choice theory of collective action: Presidential address, American Political Science Association, 1997. *American Political Science Review*, 92(1), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.2307/2585925. A theoretical synthesis of experimental and field evidence; the triad is her proposal, supported by the studies she reviews rather than by a single test.
4. Santa Anna, *Ecstatic Economics*, the closing section of "Practical Applications," on the pattern shared by every alternative it surveys.
5. Santa Anna, *Ecstatic Economics*, "The Commons Renaissance: Shared Stewardship of Shared Wealth."
6. Santa Anna, *Ecstatic Economics*, chapter 1, on the metaphysics of scarcity it calls "the wound at the root." Emphasis in the original removed.

A Commons on Monday

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