CHAPTER 3

A Commoners' Climate Movement

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Highlights The commoning approach to climate action collectively claims, creates and stewards the net-zero infrastructure. Commoning invites people to participate in the transition, to have a *stake*, not just a say, and shape their response.

Keywords Climate change · Commons · Ostrom · Community

COLLECTIVE ACTION ON CLIMATE

The climate transition is already under way, under the banner of ‘net zero’—the aspiration to completely reduce (or offset) anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions. The oil industry is in crisis whilst the renewables industry speeds ahead (IEA, 2020), agriculture faces transition,

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whilst the car industry rapidly electrifies. These transitions and governmental action are welcome and necessary, but this top-down approach is still not generating effective measures fast enough to keep us within the level of global heating scientists deem ‘safe’ (UNEP, 2020).

These transitions largely exclude citizens, are not designed to avoid locking in existing inequalities and risk backlash over distributional consequences of climate transitions. All that could narrow the already tight political space in which elected representatives, governments and corporations operate (Willis, 2020). Many initiatives for citizens’ engagement in climate policy measures have been launched (Capstick et al., 2020; Howarth et al., 2020). However, they have not been effectively connected to policymaking and they tend to treat people as individual agents/voters rather than as members of collective movements for change. We argue that many climate solutions are based on outdated models both of ‘human nature’ and of management of collective action problems. This constrains the ‘possibility space’ for action by overlooking the ‘third pillar’ of civil society—cooperative community-based action.

Our chapter draws from Elinor Ostrom’s scholarship on managing commons (Ostrom, 1990) and a wider literature review, and our reflections as practitioners in the domains of community energy, agriculture and transport.

COMMONS AND COMMONING: WHAT ARE THEY?

Common land for grazing and woodland use is probably the most readily recognised form of commoning—ancient practices of managing shared access (though not necessarily via shared ownership). In the UK, legally defined ‘common land’ has declined from around 30% in the 1600s to 3% now (Shrubsole, 2019). In 2006, the UK Commons Act attempted to ensure that commons were owned *and* managed collectively, with new mechanisms for registering commons and to establish collective local governance mechanisms. In Scotland, where the ‘Clearances’ of common land took place through the nineteenth century, there are efforts to remedy this with legislation (the Land Reform Act 2003) and the subsequent movement for community land buy-outs, such as the 5,200 acres of Langholm Moor bought by the community.

Although Indigenous communities have legal ownership of just 10% of the world’s land, they steward half of all collectively managed land. Their focus on community management protects large tracts of land from to

land grabs, exploitation, deforestation and development, worsening the climate and biodiversity crises (Common Ground, 2016).

There is a wide array of models for collective self-governance of common resources available in the UK and globally in 2020. Here, we refer to 'Commoning' broadly as *collective self-governance of any common good resources by their co-producers and users*—an approach which is not just about the ownership model but about shared use, collective governance and sustainable stewardship over the long term. People who participate in these processes are 'commoners', and in their continuous evolution of rules and relationships to each other and the world around them, they demonstrate a richer capacity to collaborate than classic economics ascribes to people (Ostrom, 1990).

LOCKING OUT THE COMMONERS

Current approaches to climate change have inherited from the economic systems responsible for the crisis an outdated view of humans and a discredited understanding of collective action problems. The outdated view of persons as John Stuart Mill's *Homo Economicus*—individualistic, rational, self-interested maximisers—sees people as depleting the shared environment and collective resources because the individual benefits of extraction are higher than the costs, which are shared and may be displaced in time and space. Climate change solutions are therefore designed on the basis of government needing to adjust the market, to cost the externalities for rational individual choices (carbon trading and taxes, grants), rather than based on a deeper understanding of people as *HumanKind* (Bregman, 2020)—capable of altruism and collaboration. The outdated and incorrect understanding of shared resources, as *inevitably* misused—the so-called 'tragedy of the commons' (Hardin, 1968)—justifies a top-down, government-controlled approach.

Ostrom pointed out that climate policy has been constructed on the basis of this outdated theory of collective action, which is wrongly pessimistic about people's capacity for self-governance and overcoming of collective action problems (Ostrom, 2010). Ostrom won the 2009 Nobel Prize for Economics for discrediting the 'tragedy of the commons' framing of unsustainable resource use and showing, with detailed evidence that, *contra* Hardin, there are and have been many groups across cultures and socio-ecological conditions that successfully self-organise to manage common resources sustainably. The implicit model of the human, here, is

based on reciprocity, shared interests and values (see, for example, Wright, 2000; Bregman, 2020).

Collective self-governance of common resources can in some circumstances be superior to top-down government—in the case of carbon, community forestry management sequesters more carbon than the government-run equivalent schemes (Chhatre & Agarawal, 2009).

CARBON MYOPIA: STATES SEE SYMPTOMS, COMMONERS SEE CAUSES

The effects of our model of abstraction, extraction, over-consumption and disposal are resulting in various ecosystem boundaries being threatened. There is mass biodiversity loss; soil degradation threatens farming collapse (FAO, 2020); microplastic pollution is ubiquitous (Cox et al., 2019); and air pollution is one of the leading causes of death worldwide (WHO, 2019). Excess carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases, a by-product of this system of production and consumption, are a proxy for broader ecological devastation.

From the perspective of states and international bodies, the challenge of catastrophic ecosystem degradation has been reduced to a single measurable chemical, carbon dioxide, and the workings of a complex of nested problems reduced to a complicated system of accounting for this proxy. Managing for a single proxy, when the situation is far more complex, can create further problems. For example, in 2001, the UK government encouraged the sale of diesel fuel cars to reduce carbon intensity of UK transport. This singular focus—or carbon myopia—unintentionally intensified toxic air pollution.

The carbon-accounting view of climate change has been helpful in interpreting the science, to guide the parameters, and focus minds. The carbon focus does not guarantee a system of stewardship that remains within other ecological boundaries, let alone addresses inequality (Eisenstein, 2018).

POSSIBILITY SPACE

Recognising people in their full complexity and involving communities alongside markets and state increase the available range of possibilities for tackling environmental degradation. For example, community-based wind turbine schemes are able to secure community support where other

forms of energy developments are blocked (Baxter et al., 2020). Local context, investment scale and local distribution of benefits to participating members reflect some of Ostrom's design principles for successful commons: Ostrom showed that when people are involved in common-pool resource decisions, they are more willing to accept consequences that might otherwise be seen as unacceptable 'sacrifices' (Ostrom, 1990).

In commoning, the one-dimensional picture of the human associated with neoliberal political economy is replaced by the more complex model Ostrom described. When people are directly involved in managing resources which they co-produce and use, the solutions that emerge benefit from the community's local knowledge. Management of common-pool resources on the basis of the design principles proposed by Ostrom (1990) secures the *stock* of resources and the *flow* of benefits required, and also generates *social trust* among the stakeholders. One commons will satisfy many needs of many stakeholders, resulting in solutions that improve local circumstances, but also propagate benefits into the environments they are nested in.

HOW DO WE 'COMMON' THE CLIMATE?

It is clear that a stable climate, an ecosystem in balance, is a common good. However, the *atmosphere* is not a suitable candidate for management as a commons. According to Ostrom's design principles, the atmosphere would require clear group boundaries, but the atmosphere is nebulous and affects all humans, indeed all living beings.

Whilst the climate *symptom* of excess emissions needs urgent action, the commons approach focuses on the *cause*: the distorted relationships of people to planetary resources, assets and environments. The commoning approach is to collectively claim, create and steward the infrastructure of a net-zero world.

LAND USE

Land use needs to be transformed in the coming decades—addressing deforestation, increasing tree planting, reducing agriculture impacts and restoring peatlands (CCC, 2020). Farmers face huge amounts of risk and uncertainty, which will only increase as the impacts of climate and other environmental crises grow. Community-managed or community-owned

farms share the risks as well as the benefits with the farmers and shareholders sometimes provide labour as well. Community land trusts are created when communities come together to purchase land (or it is gifted) to develop and steward it for the benefit of the community over the long term. This may include community farms, or it could be to create housing developments rented at affordable rates or to create other community enterprises such as shared workplaces. A community land trust, as with community development trusts, is an institution collectively managed as well as owned, with benefits legally defined and safeguarded in perpetuity.

Creating land and other local assets in collective, local stewardship yields many benefits, direct and indirect (Capital Economics, 2020). Community land trusts have rapidly grown in the UK, mostly as a way to provide affordable housing but also to preserve local assets facing decline, such as pubs, post offices and shops. There are nearly 300 such land trusts, half of which have been established in the last 2 years alone. The developments are designed with the community's close involvement and permission, and freed from the pure profit motive, sustainability and affordability take priority. As the UK meets the shortage of housing whilst addressing climate change, community land trusts are a positive way to make transitions towards sustainability.

CLEAN ENERGY COMMONS

Renewable energy will be a dominant feature of the energy landscape, as well as of the landscape itself. Community energy systems are a commons managed in line with Ostrom's design principles (Melville et al., 2017, 2018). Community energy organisations raise funds locally from shareholder members for local renewable energy projects. Local knowledge and relationships make the development of the projects possible. Typically, they offer returns to shareholders as well as amassing community funds for improving localities in consultation with members. Community energy projects generate social, environmental and economic benefits for diverse stakeholders (Armstrong, 2015; Melville et al., 2017; Robinson & Stephen, 2020). For example, schools and community centres benefit from discounted electricity rates. In addition, many community energy organisations allocate funds to support fuel poverty through advice lines or installing energy efficiency measures (Armstrong, 2015).

Whilst generation capacity is currently not massive at around 500 MW, there are 286 community energy organisations in England alone, and

this is growing despite a hostile policy context (Community Energy England, 2020). Many of these projects are in urban areas, using rooftops. The size of projects appears to be growing too as the sector matures and the technology costs drop—a project in Devon plans to install a distributed 1GW of electricity. This is not, as Ostrom would emphasise, a panacea. Commons models for community energy need careful design and governance to avoid exacerbating problems of mistrust, exclusion and inequality (ibid.). However, the evidence indicates great scope for policies that treat sustainable energy systems as commons and harness the capabilities of citizens and local communities alongside the private sector and national state (Webb et al., 2021).

A CLIMATE COMMONS NARRATIVE

The prevailing top-down climate policy narrative is not translating high public concern into the urgently needed political mandate for greater action. This narrative implies that an overwhelming, abstract and distant issue is being resolved at a central level by politicians and bureaucrats (Marshall, 2015). People receive the message of the urgency only to be told it is being managed by governments or only to be urged to make individual behavioural changes, which can feel tokenistic (Marshall, 2015), or simply to campaign or vote or deliberate about changes to be implemented by experts.

Climate narratives are falling into the trap of communicating climate as a single issue, rather than presenting it as the symptom of the deeper and bigger problem of unsustainable resource use that needs to be addressed. The narrative that we are separate from nature—which serves as a ‘free’ resource which we must manage, even when sustainably, for our use—is fuelling the destruction of the natural world (see, for example, White, 1967; Plumwood, 2001). It is not even true to the realities of our biology and ecological situatedness (Haraway, 2016)—we live in socio-ecological interdependence with a multitude of species from gut microbes to the pollinators who provide our food. Commoning approaches recognise our interdependence—with each other and with the land. (The origin of ‘common land’ in Gaelic, actually meant ‘people together as one with the land’ [Menzies, 2014].)

Commoning invites people to participate in the transition, to have a *stake*, not just a say, and to shape their own neighbourhood’s response. It is a creative invitation to exercise more agency even than the ‘citizen

control' over planning that Sherry Arnstein (1969) called for. This space of action—the local, community level—produces tangible, meaningful results and multiple benefits (Kaye, 2020). This in turn can then create a political mandate for further change, whilst increasing local resilience.

The commoning narrative acknowledges that the climate crisis is a big problem, but invites people to address it jointly, not in isolation, and at multiple scales, not just top-down. It breaks the problem down and invites bottom-up community action, and multi-level partnerships. It is clear there will be upheavals in our patterns of production and consumption, but commoning calls for people to be active in bringing about the change rather than simply be the beneficiaries or unfortunate losers from it.

This sense of control and agency has been shown to be important factors in determining mental and physical health, community empowerment and social cohesion. By empowering communities to develop greater altruism and social support will help ensure communities are not just surviving but thriving as we mitigate and navigate climate disruption.

One challenge will be to ensure commoning doesn't create 'lifeboatism'—shoring up my community resilience whilst other communities face growing crises. Increasingly, though, there are options for self-organising groups to provide and procure from others, strengthening demand for each other's services. Can we one day connect with other commoners to procure goods from a community-owned manufacturer, with materials from miners' co-ops, powered by community energy and insured by a cooperative underwriter? Bringing this vision into climate spaces might help prevent the perpetuation of existing inequalities as we build the new green economies. In order to meet the climate crisis, we need to rapidly engage all of society; commoning might be the way we do this.

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