

## Book Review

Wall, Derek. 2014. *The Commons in History. Culture, Conflict, and Ecology*.  
Harvard, MA: The MIT Press.

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With the publication of Derek Wall's *The Commons in History. Culture, Conflict and Ecology*, the MIT Press launches its new series *History for a Sustainable Future*, an initiative that, cliché as it may sound, should be greatly welcomed by any person with a genuine concern in how to effectively deal with our bleak environmental prospects. As Michael Egan, the series editor, states in the Foreword, a “deep appreciation of the past” is required if we aim at addressing current environmental challenges beyond the somehow restrictive lens that models in the social sciences frequently impose on us. Attention both to the broader context and long-run developments, the approach of the historian par excellence, seem then to constitute the starting point of Wall's very legitimate endeavor. A rigorous historian approaching the book may however become soon puzzled – especially if academic. Detailed historical evidence supporting Wall's claims, not to mention original data, is blatantly absent. The same occurs with regard to claims themselves: his theoretical framework, where hypotheses to approach empirical developments could have been explicitly formulated, remains vague and dispersed, with the bibliography contenting itself just with the most well-known works. Even a clear and coherent structure, usually indicative of a well developed argumentative thread, is missing. In this sense, the grave historian and/or scientist may soon feel discouraged by the reading of *The Commons in History*, being left in his armchair wondering uneasily what is exactly Wall's contribution to current debates on the commons. Fortunately, as our cheerful Elinor Ostrom taught us, we are not all grave, fussy scientists – or, more often, we act as that just on a part-time basis. From this more relaxed perspective, Derek Wall's book does constitute a skillful, concise and well-digestible personal synthesis of the current state of the art in the commons studies, with a distinctive focus on how culture

and power – that is why the book’s title – have influenced both commons and our understanding of them over time.

The core of Wall’s synthesis is the idea of common’s “*multiple personalities*”. Nicely building upon the notion of legal pluralism and institutional diversity many of us are keen of, he makes the case for an open, interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of the commons. Evidently, his starting point brings him closer to Elinor Ostrom than to the long tradition of scholars skeptic about the possibilities of collective resource management (Hardin or Olson but also Aristotle or von Mises). In this sense, his reminder about the metaphorical nature of Hardin’s thought experiment and the opposition between open-unregulated and closed-regulated commons (a distinction he takes from Yochai Benkler’s *The Wealth of Networks*) still remains a fortunate commonplace. The review of how communal arrangements have been regarded throughout history pushes Wall’s narrative, however, far beyond the realms of institutional economics – and here is where the book deploys its most interesting dimension. Taking anthropology on board leads Wall to stress the role played by more informal customs (rituals, festivities, folk practices) in disciplining commoners’ behavior across regions and over time. More importantly, anthropologists’ work provides him the necessary perspective to unveil the cultural assumptions frequently lying behind the analysis of the commons. According to Wall, the stringent assumption of economic rationality together with methodological individualism, even in their friendlier rationally-bounded [e.g., Herbert A. Simon (1990)] and neo-institutionalist costumes [e.g., Douglass North (1990) or Elinor Ostrom (1990) herself], unavoidably lead scholars to an oversimplification of commons analyses. Institutional change does not necessarily respond to cost-benefit analysis; more importantly, the mere survival of an institution over long periods of time does not necessarily make it socially efficient – see the work by the Cambridge historian Sheilagh Ogilvie (2007) for a compelling case on this point. Although Wall’s treatment of the economic approach frequently remains too shallow (he seems to ignore that, in its simplest definition, economic rationality just means the existence of coherence between internal preferences and observed behavior, and that the utility function of an individual may well contain as argument others’ utility), he undoubtedly has a point on this. The ideas of Karl Polanyi (e.g. 1968), Marcel Mauss or James C. Scott, with their emphasis on the embeddedness of economic institutions in the wider societal configuration and the subsequent existence of alternative modes of exchange, such as reciprocity and redistribution, are then suggested as a valid counterbalance to the narrow economic view. In a further step, emphasis on the conflictual character of the commons – from the revolts of English commoners and the Anabaptist uprising to enclosures in the New World – allows Wall to elaborate on the postulates of more radical approaches – those starting with Rousseau but heavily revolving around the Marxist tradition. In this sense, Wall’s analysis is, however, smart enough as to confront egalitarian, paradise-like visions of the commons with what seems to have been a much less idealistic historical reality: commons were unavoidably linked to exclusion (of

non-members) and frequently also to internal stratification and hierarchy (among members).

In face of the limitations of market-based environmentalism and state regulation, the future, concludes Wall in a rather unsophisticated final chapter, should provide many opportunities for “common-based solutions” not only in the environmental realm *strictu sensu* but also in terms of consumption and production (from car-pooling to the Wikipedia), both at the local and the global level. In his opinion, the development of a plural, interdisciplinary research agenda that goes beyond reductionist approaches to encompass the many dimensions of the commons represents, therefore, a pressing task. Eventually, and despite its sometimes exaggerated rhetoric – “a sustainable future might require a reindigenization of society” (!) he writes in p. 134 – we all should welcome Wall’s book as a gentle manifesto to initiate a task we are much in need for.

### Literature cited

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