

Ostrom's 8 Rules of the Commons for Anarchists

The commons are resources self-managed by communities who need and use them. Commons are managed through dialogue, deliberation, and collective decision-making, as well as through mutual aid to meet needs. Commons are neither state property nor capitalist property. Commons can include land, waterways, fields, factories, workshops, instruments/tools, dwellings, recreational facilities, general infrastructure, miscellaneous infrastructure, fruits of re/production, mixes of the above, and beyond. Flourishing commons provide communities and participants with shared means of existence and production as well as access to the fruits thereof in ways that meet the needs of all.

The commons have been under attack by the last several thousand years of class society and the last several hundred years of capitalism. Capitalism developed through multiple means, including continuous privatisation of the commons, enforced through state violence. Despite such systemic violence, pockets of the commons continue to exist through people developing both new and enduring commons as well as through people resisting domination and exploitation. The commons are not only under attack by multiple entangled forms of hierarchy (institutionalised domination) but also under ideological attack through widespread propaganda and belief systems that deem various hierarchies beneficial or inevitable.



Arguments claiming that commons inevitably lead to tragedies of overuse and collective ruin deny the actual history of the commons. Functional commons and related self-managed institutions have existed within many lifeways, including foraging societies, agricultural societies, villages, towns, blocks, neighbourhoods, cities, and mixed-method non-state societies. Such a rich history demonstrates that well-managed commons predictably contribute to well-being and ecological sustainability. Responding to sweeping critiques of the commons, Elinor Ostrom empirically and theoretically demonstrated that participants can well-manage commons when they utilise several good-enough rules and practices.

Many communities and persons have, in their own ways and words, developed rules for managing the commons.

While there are plenty of examples Ostrom looks at that are in harmony with her eight rules for managing the commons as well as a non-hierarchical approach to social organisation, other instances of the commons she looks at are less emancipatory. As Silvia Federici wisely points out, truly emancipatory commons are distinct from quasi-commons that produce commodities and/or are gated against commoners having mutual access. Given the goals of the self-management of each and all, mutual non-domination, well-being for all, and ecological flourishing, Ostrom's core design principles can become more coherent through being remixed with insights from anarchism.

The following adaptation of Ostrom's rules for managing the commons is informed by anarchism as well as an expanded history of the commons within multiple lifeways:

1. Participants know they are part of a group and what the group is about.
2. Agreements for sharing and, at times, rotating labour/work and implementation of decisions, as well as for sharing the fruits thereof. People can co-create abundance where there is more than enough for all or otherwise agree to specific ways of distributing less abundant fruits of re/production according to needs.
3. Direct collective decision-making by participants through deliberation. For self-management of all, there must also be mutual non-domination. By extension, community assemblies related to the commons should utilise direct, participatory, and non-hierarchical forms of democracy.
4. Organisational transparency that allows participants to mutually monitor the commons. This can happen through the process of co-managing and interacting with the commons, collective action, relevant accounting/calculation as needed, and the availability of relevant information to participants.
5. Graduated defence against domination and exploitation such as informal social disapproval, self-defence and defence of others as needed, and recourse to expelling someone from a particular collective (through deliberation, assembly, and due process) in response to the most extreme violations of the commons and freedoms of persons.
6. Good-enough conflict resolution such as people talking directly to each other, mediation to find out how to move forward, dispute resolution to resolve disputes, restorative justice and transformative justice processes for people to repair harm and transform causes thereof, and organisation-wide assembly when the conflict is in regards to organisational form and content.

7. Communities and participants need sufficient autonomy to organise.
8. Community assemblies can co-manage the commons together, with policy-making power held by assemblies and participants directly. This enables self-management and mutual aid within and between communities, as well as inter-communal management of the commons. Community assemblies can utilise mandated and recallable councils and rotating delegates to implement decisions within the bounds of policies made by community assemblies.



The above should be wisely adapted to communities and participants' conditions, needs, and desires. When there are good enough institutions and agreements for collective action, individuals benefit through the flourishing of the commons and mutually contributing to the commons-- blending self-interest with collective interest. Although specifically related to common economics, Ostrom's core design principles and coherent adaptations thereof can be used to reflect upon and develop various kinds of self-managed collectives that have shared practices and goals.

The self-management of each and all on every scale requires the flourishing of the commons and related general assemblies. Developing the commons in the context of a hierarchical society requires both the reconstruction of the commons as well as opposition to domination and exploitation. Such functions can be done through self-managed community assemblies utilising mutual aid and direct action to meet needs and solve social problems. That kind of community organising can happen as a crucial part of a broader social movement ecosystem that includes workplace organising, student organising, and beyond. On the path to a world where the commons flourish, developing the commons can meet the needs of social movement organisations, participants thereof, and the non-ruling class while building the new world in the shell of the old.

Usufruct Collective is a libertarian communist writing collective focused on what a good society consists of and how to get there.

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