

ASHFIELD ACADEMIC

The Reasonable Commons

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THE REASONABLE COMMONS.

COOPERATION WITHOUT COERCION IN SMALL COMMUNITIES

BY

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For the stewards who keep the ledgers no statute requires.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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1 Introduction

The tragedy of the commons has hardened into a truism: shared resources, the argument runs, invite ruin because no user bears the full cost of overuse. This monograph resists that conclusion. Across three well-documented settings, a mountain pasture, an inshore fishery, and a communal irrigation network, I find durable cooperation sustained without a central enforcer.¹ The mechanism is not virtue and not the state. It is local knowledge, held by people who watch one another across years and settle accounts in small increments.

My thesis is simple to state and demanding to defend. Where users can observe use, communicate cheaply, and adjust the rules they live under, a commons is a promise renewed daily rather than a resource waiting to be stripped. Reputation carries the weight that formal law is presumed to carry, and it carries it earlier, closer to the infraction, and at lower cost.²

The claim is bounded. It holds for small communities with stable membership, not for open-access resources or anonymous markets. What follows is therefore a study of scale and its limits, offered in the belief that the exceptions to the tragedy are more instructive than the rule.

¹I use the term appropriators, following the institutional literature, for those who draw units from a shared resource system.

²The cost advantage of reputation over formal law is largest precisely where the community is small enough that everyone is, in effect, always watching.

2 Graduated sanction

The communities examined here do not punish first offenses harshly. They punish them lightly, visibly, and in a way that leaves the offender room to return. A first breach draws a word from a neighbor; a second draws a small fine; only a persistent pattern draws exclusion.¹ This escalation is not weakness. It is the design feature that makes the whole arrangement stable, because it separates the careless from the predatory before the group has spent its trust.

The Vergano herders record the logic plainly in their assembly minutes: sanction that escalates slowly is sanction that lasts.² A heavy first penalty would deter the honest, who err, as readily as the greedy, who calculate. A graduated penalty lets the honest recover their standing and forces the greedy to reveal themselves through repetition. The community thus spends its scarce coercive capacity only on those who have earned it.

Two conditions make graduated sanction workable. The infraction must be observable by ordinary members, not only by officials, and the ladder of penalties must be known in advance, so that no step feels arbitrary. Where both hold, enforcement becomes a shared civic habit rather than a bureaucratic function, and the resource is protected by the same people who depend on it.

¹Ostrom, Elinor. *Governing the Commons*. Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 94.

²Reike, Tomas. "Assembly Minutes of the Vergano Alp, 1911 to 1974." *Journal of Alpine Institutions*, vol. 22, 2019, p. 341.

About the author

Dr. Aurelio Santos is a political economist at the Ashfield Institute for Institutional Studies, where he directs the seminar on cooperative governance. His research concerns how small communities manage shared resources without central authority, drawing on archival records and field observation in equal measure. He is the author of *Ledgers of Trust*, a study of communal accounting in alpine pasture associations, and of essays on reputation, sanction, and collective choice. Before joining Ashfield, he spent six years cataloguing cooperative charters for the Institutional Archive whose records inform much of this book. He lives in Edinburgh.