

Common property, forest management and the Indian Himalaya

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This article examines contributions to the literature on common property regimes that govern natural resources. The article also seeks to analyse the relevance of this literature for resource management in the Indian Himalaya. Writings on common property have been instrumental in developing a theoretical justification for decentralisation of environmental policies around the world. Nonetheless, they have been relatively inattentive to issues of power and the larger socio-political context within which most common property regimes are embedded. Research in the Himalayan mountains not only stands to benefit from using theoretical approaches based on studies of common property, but can also enrich the study of common property because of the long history of commons management in the region

In the last twenty years, the literature on common property has grown swiftly, finding stimulus in increasing concerns regarding resource degradation and depletion, and drawing upon developments in game theory, ethnographic writings and critical social analyses. Insights from work on the commons are especially relevant on the Indian context, both because a large proportion of India's poor depend on such resources (Jodha 1986, 1992) and also because a number of South Asianist scholars have made important contributions to this stream of work (Agarwal 1994; CSE 1982, 1985; Gadgil and Guha 1992; Gadgil and Malhotra 1982; Guha 1989; Gupta 1985; Ostrom 1990; Sundar 1997; Wade 1994). This article, in reviewing some of the major themes in the writings on the commons, seeks to assess critically some of the achievements of these writings, especially as they are relevant to the use and management of forest resources in the Indian Himalaya. The continued outpouring of

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research from within the common property paradigm and the vitality of research on mountain ecologies ensures that a review of the literature on these themes can only attempt to strike a moving target. Yet, the very enormity of the work indicates the need for some stocktaking.

The subject of common property has provoked research for a long time, and scholarship from such fields as economic history, human ecology, cultural ecology, resource economics and rural sociology has provided investigations that have had very similar concerns as do the writings that constitute the field of common property today. The trickling literature on common property turned into a flood, beginning from the mid-1980s, especially after the publication in 1986 of the Proceedings of the Conference on Common Property Resources, organised under the auspices of the National Research Council in 1985 (NRC 1986). Many of the scholars whose work was represented in this collection were instrumental in the formation of the International Association for the Study of Common Property in 1989, and in altering some of the earlier perceptions about the commons. Punctuated by important recent works, several of them edited collections (Berkes 1989; Bromley 1992a; McCay and Acheson 1987; NRC 1986; Netting 1981; Ostrom 1990; Peters 1994; Pinkerton 1989; Stevenson 1991; Wade 1994), the literature on common property can lay claim to a quite significant achievement: spreading the awareness that local communities can manage resources effectively, sometimes more effectively than governments or private owners. Drawing upon theoretical insights from writings on property rights and collective action, often using game-theoretical models and statistical techniques to generate insights about resource use in developing countries, scholars of common property have successfully provoked interest in alternative regimes of resource use among scholars and policy-makers alike. Together with writings about indigenous knowledge and peoples, the common property literature has helped erode the perception that rural communities are traditional and inefficient users of resources (Brokensha et al. 1980; Gupta 1992; Warren et al. 1991). In no small measure, the work of common property scholars has led to new policy initiatives in more than fifty countries whose governments claim today to be advancing towards greater involvement of communities in their resource management programmes (FAO 1999). To mention these achievements of the common property literature is not to gloss over some of its weaknesses. Indeed, only by understanding such omissions and occlusions might it be possible to suggest directions for further research.

The next section discusses some of the significant elements in the intellectual and methodological pedigree of the literature on the commons. A greater concern with dwindling renewable resources, and a shared disbelief that local communities are the primary culprits in declining resource bases, motivate much research on the commons. The second section examines the major conclusions and achievements of this literature. The third section shifts the focus, paying critical attention to some weaknesses. These weaknesses, I suggest, result from a rather exclusive focus on the community and, as such, can be explained by the particular objectives of the researchers of the commons. Resource use and management in the Indian Himalaya, especially in relation to forests, is the subject of the fourth section. This section also discusses how the terrain of forest management in the Indian Himalaya presents a splendid opportunity to carry out research that can help address some of the weaknesses in the literature on the commons.

I

Intellectual and methodological precursors

Current writings on the commons are a collaborative enterprise in which cultural anthropologists, students of comparative politics, resource economists, economic historians and social historians have played a highly significant role. The origins of contemporary writings on the commons can be traced to three motivations. The first of these has occurred in response to a raft of scholarship that saw common ownership as the source of inefficiencies and common property as the hallmark of tradition. Perhaps the best-known work that portrayed the commons as inefficient is Garrett Hardin's (1968) flawed analysis of the 'tragedy of the commons' that found wide popular acceptance, and now has been thoroughly repudiated by serious social science scholars.

The substantive motivation of the literature on the commons, no doubt, can be seen as the reaction to the widely held belief that communal ownership of resources is traditional and inefficient. But to counter successfully the belief in the inefficiency of common property, it is necessary: (a) to identify conditions under which collective action to build commons institutions and use resources can take place in relatively small groups of people; and (b) to explore and delineate the importance of different forms of property rights, more generally institutions, on multiple types of renewable resources (forests, fisheries, irrigation and

drinking water, and pastures). These two objectives are precisely the task that scholars of common property have set themselves.

To move successfully towards answering the host of questions that these two goals raise, scholars of commons have usually pursued case studies and compiled ethnographic descriptions of an immense number of communities from around the world. In orienting their studies they have used two somewhat different methodological and theoretical perspectives. One of these uses assumptions and techniques of analysis from what may broadly be called the rational choice approach, chief among them being new institutionalism, property rights and transaction costs frameworks. The other approach possesses a more descriptive orientation, relies far more on ethnographic field methods, and ascribes to historical and socio-cultural factors greater explanatory power.¹

The first trickle of writings from the rational choice perspective on the commons had already begun to appear in the 1950s. Alchian's (1950) analysis of the emergence of organisational forms used evolutionary theory to suggest that more efficient organisations will, over time, displace those that are less efficient. This insight was picked up in much later work belonging to new institutional economics, helping to confirm the belief that common property, being traditional, is less efficient. Gordon's (1954) work on open access resources showed how their economic rents could be dissipated by individuals competing with each other. He analysed fisheries but used a general model that could be extended to other resource types. His use of the phrase 'common-property' to denote an open access regime, however, was used later by Demsetz (1967), and also influenced Hardin's mistaken analysis of pastures (1968).

Beginning from the early 1980s, the orientation of many scholars working on the commons began to change. Dahiman (1980) and McCloskey (1990) wrote on the open field system to show the efficiency of open fields for pasture and scattering for agricultural production.² These systems of cultivation disappeared in England with industrialisation, but the reasons for their disappearance are a complex combination of factors, including political strategies used by sheep-owners to promote enclosures. Similarly, the distinction between common property and open access resources is now well recognised. Recent work on the

¹ Many studies of the commons have consciously utilised elements from both these approaches (Agrawal 1999; Ostrom 1990; Ostrom et al. 1994).

² See Agrawal (1996) for a comparative static analysis of the relative efficacy of community, private and state institutions in helping to manage forest resources in the Indian Himalayas.

commons has often relied extensively on game theory and rational choice analyses, and has focused on the relationship between individual preferences, incentive structures and the aggregation of individual preferences into social outcomes. Much of this work has demonstrated the complex relationship between tenure and resource use, in the process showing the hastiness inherent in positing a straightforward relationship between outcomes and characteristics such as efficiency, equity or sustainability; resources of different types; and property forms such as private, public or common.³ However, a number of concrete achievements have also resulted from highly abstract analyses that rely on quite restrictive assumptions about individuals, states of the world, and incentive structures (see Section II).

Writings sharing a more socio-cultural and descriptive orientation have been available from anthropologists and historians since even before the 1950s. Earlier works often appeared as ethnographies that described entire peoples and their livelihoods, including the extent to which cooperative strategies formed part of the repertoire of survival (Berreman 1972 [1963]; Mead 1961 [1937]; Netting 1981; Turnbull 1961). More recent writings (Buck 1989; Little 1985; McCay and Acheson 1987; McKean 1992; W. Mitchell 1976) have provided detailed accounts of how rural residents around the world use commonly shared renewable resources. These writings had earlier been criticised for not taking sufficient account of history in detailing the lives of their subjects, but we now possess a significant body of work that recognises and shows the dynamic and changing nature of customary tenurial systems, the changes such systems undergo even without external contact, and their relationship with higher levels of authority within the macro-political systems in which they are located.⁴

II Findings and accomplishments of the commons literature

The literature on common property has had a strong theoretical core and practical orientation. Whereas many earlier writings on the environment

³ For empirical work that demonstrates the complexity of tenure among land based resources, see Fortmann and Riddell (1985) and Singh (1986).

⁴ See, for example, Baviskar (1995), Lansing (1991), Leach (1994), Ortner (1989), Peluso (1992), Rigby (1985) and Tsing (1993). Although many of these scholars may not self-identify as writing about common property, their work provides ample evidence on how different groups use resources that are not owned by a single entity, and the changes that use and management patterns register over time.

and its management, after lamenting the loss of natural resources and environmental degradation, pointed to the state or the market as the natural alternatives depending on the ideological persuasion of the analyst (de Alessi 1980; G. Hardin 1978; Heilbroner 1974; Ophuls 1973), common theorists have identified a third alternative that is rooted in the practices of millions of households around the world, but resonates with the theoretical puzzles that also concern scholars of social movements and revolutions, voting and other forms of political participation, collusion and cheating, formation of institutions and their maintenance, cooperation and conflict. Participants in all these situations attempt to solve problems related to collective action. By investigating the conditions under which users of renewable resources cooperate towards efficient management (or fail to do so), the literature on common property has created the grounds on which its findings can resonate with broader concerns in the social sciences.

By locating themselves in the literatures on property rights and collective action, and by using abstract game-theoretic models to represent strategic choice, common theorists have ensured that their contributions resonate with those of scholars who are also interested in using similar models of choice. Thus, the work on common property has been well received by scholars of international relations and institution formation, in part because of their willingness to use such games as the Prisoners' Dilemma, Chicken, Assurance and Coordination.⁵ The literature on the commons has also contributed significantly to discussions of property by emphasising property as a relation among persons with respect to things, rather than being a thing itself, by recognising multiple forms of property because of differences in tenurial systems, and by showing that property is not a single indivisible thing, but a collection of enforceable claims. Common property theorists have also demonstrated that no single form of property can be efficient across historical and social contexts.⁶ Although many of these assertions are fast becoming part of conventional wisdom within academic writing, their acceptance is in large measure a consequence of the vast empirical work conducted by scholars of the commons.

⁵ Ostrom's work on micro-level common property resource management has resonated closely with the work of theorists of international relations such as Robert Keohane, Duncan Snidal and Oran Young. See the papers by these authors in the special issue of the *Journal of theoretical politics*, October 1994.

⁶ See Bromley (1992b), Feeny (1992), McKean (1996), Naughton-Treves and Peterson (1995) and Ostrom (1992b).

Commons theorists, in investigating the impact of different institutional structures on resource management, have made a critical contribution in showing the importance of formal and informal institutions as an influence on human behaviour. They have drawn and built upon the works of other property rights theorists and institutionalists such as Barzel (1989), Bates (1989), Knight (1992), Libecap (1990), North (1990), but have produced additional evidence to show that institutions exert an enormous influence over human actions. Because they have conceptualised institutions deliberately in an abstract manner, as sets of enforceable rules that facilitate and constrain human action, their conclusions about property rights, a subset of institutions, possess significant generalisability. Property rights institutions, conceptualised as sets of rules that define access, use, exclusion, management, monitoring, sanctioning and the arbitration behaviour of users with respect to specific resources (Schlager and Ostrom 1992), are not only highly significant in governing patterns of use, but are also the principal policy mechanism to reorient human actions in regard to these same resources (Alchian and Demsetz 1973; de Alessi 1980; Furubotn and Pejovich 1974).

Many scholars of the commons have also emphasised the political nature of institutions. Institutions come into being as consequences of human actions, and allow specific individuals and groups to reap advantages from altered social circumstances rather than allowing societies as a whole to capture efficiency gains. In this connection, the work of Knight (1992) and Bates (1981, 1989) is especially important in highlighting the influence of politics. Earlier property rights theorists had suggested, using a functionalist evolutionary logic, that over time inefficient institutions are eliminated and efficient institutions survive (Alchian 1950; Barzel 1989; Demsetz 1967; Friedman 1953; North and Thomas 1973). Now, scholars recognise the fact that institutions are not only instrumental in facilitating production but are also critical allocative and political entities. Because institutions change as a result of attempts by specific social actors, institutional change is likely to occur only when actors perceive gains from change, and the emergence of new institutions is a highly political affair (Gibson 1999). Whether new institutions that emerge will also be efficient for a society depends on the extent to which the interests of groups attempting institutional change match those of the larger collectivity.

Rational choice approaches to the study of the commons, by their clear focus on decision-making and institutions, at least have the potential to enrich ethnographic studies of commons use. The most interesting

possibilities of mutual enrichment exist in the analysis of power, and in the study of how political asymmetries across social groups affect their interactions and resource management related outcomes. Ethnographically thick approaches are critical to a better understanding of how power informs and shapes relations among people and collectivities. They are necessary, if not always sufficient, to produce insights about the hidden agendas of different actors and the motivations that might impel action. Rational choice approaches, on the other hand, promise the technical means through which to analyse these relationships more generally.

In terms of empirical research, by producing impressive documentation from around the world on the capacity of communities to manage resources, commons scholars have contributed to a groundswell of altered policy orientation towards local communities. Studies of successful community management of coastal fisheries, forests, pastures, irrigation and ground water,⁷ in conjunction with other writings on people's participation and indigenous knowledge, have encouraged many governments around the world to attempt resource co-management programmes which would legally assign local communities some share in control over and benefits from resources such as wildlife, forests, pastures, irrigation and rural infrastructures (Agrawal and Gibson 2001; Agrawal and Ribot 1999; FAO 1999). Clearly, in many of these cases local communities possess only very limited authority, and gain only small amounts. But the altered policy environment constitutes a substantial change over the situation two decades ago when resource degradation was often viewed as a direct consequence of the destructive and erosive activities of local communities and small peasants (G. Hardin 1968). Increasing the stakes of communities in the management of common pool resources is seen by governments today as an effective policy instrument to manage resources.

Commons scholars have also attempted to intervene in the charged debate on overpopulation and resource degradation by arguing that institutions always mediate the effects of macro-structural and demographic

⁷ The empirical and case literature on commons is far too large to receive even a representative mention in this article. Some of the best sources for this literature are the volumes of collected papers edited by Berkes (1989), Bromley (1992a), McCay and Acheson (1987), NRC (1986), Pinkerton (1989) and Western and Wright (1994). The journal *Human ecology* has been an effective vehicle for research on common property over the last decade-and-a-half. For relatively recent works on irrigation see Ostrom (1992a) and Tang (1992); for fisheries, see Schlager (1990); for ground water, see Blomquist (1992); for rural infrastructure, see Ostrom et al. (1993); for forestry, see Ascher (1995) and Brower (1987); and for pastures, see Agrawal (1999), Galaty and Bonte (1991), Galaty, and Johnson (1990) and Peters (1994).

factors on resource use patterns. As such, the manner and extent of the influence of large demographic and economic changes will always be mediated through local-level institutions. Without attention to the precise ways in which local institutions modulate larger changes, one cannot hope to arrive at useful inferences about the impact of population, market and other economic forces on resource conditions (Agrawal and Yadama 1997).

These modifications in perceptions about the role of institutions have been founded upon solid theoretical and empirical research. This research recognises the role of incentives and interests in shaping human behaviour. As it treats individuals as decision-makers, it recognises Marx's admonition that their decisions take place in conditions that are not of their own choosing, but that humans possess the capacity to sometimes alter their circumstances. Thus a number of writings have undertaken important theoretical development to focus on the commons dilemmas that confront communities of users (Cheung 1970; Ciriacy-Wantrup and Bishop 1975; Dasgupta and Heal 1979; R. Hardin 1982; Oakerson 1992; Ostrom 1986, 1990; Runge 1981, 1984). These writings have helped clarify the nature of resources that are used jointly, how technological or institutional aspects of use can influence resource characteristics, and how the structure of the situations in which resources are utilised affects use and management decisions and use patterns.

Indeed, it is the institutional nature of the analysis conducted by common property theorists that makes their work so valuable in recent discussions of the decentralisation of environmental management. Around the world, more than fifty countries have now begun to involve local communities and lower-level decision-making units in protecting and managing the environment (FAO 1999). These new policy trends are based on the recognition that the fiscal capacity of the state to undertake coercive conservation is limited and that communities can often manage their resources better than private actors negotiating through market based exchanges. In many cases, communities are seen also to be characterised by high levels of social capital that permits them to undertake collective tasks far more efficiently in comparison to state bureaucracies, and to do so far more equitably than market based solutions. Indeed, recent work on common property has begun to draw upon the vast literature on social capital (Putnam 1993). Several scholars have begun to examine the extent to which common property institutions are based upon stocks of social capital and whether and how they enhance the networks through which social capital is generated (Katz 2000; Muldavin 2000; Pretty and Ward 2001; Robbins 2000).

III

Weaknesses of the commons literature

Despite their significant achievements, writings on commons suffer from several shortcomings. Some problems can be addressed within the current framework of research, perhaps with minor adjustments in the strategies of research, greater attention to theoretical rigour and/or an expansion of the scope of analysis. Others are less likely to get resolved so easily. In attempting to understand some of the weaknesses of the literature on the commons, one can explore two types of criticisms, each stemming from very different theoretical positions and epistemological concerns. The first accepts the basic assumptions and questions that commons theorists use to proceed with their analyses: How can one best understand different types of institutional arrangements? What are the physical and social characteristics of resources that influence their use and management? And, is it possible to discern systematic regularities in resource use and property regimes that make some forms of property superior to others in governing resource use within given spatio-temporal configurations? These questions, in turn, take certain assumptions about individuals and their social context for granted. Some of these assumptions can be stated concisely: 'Individuals know their interests and these interests define their goals;' 'Individuals calculate costs and benefits to choose between alternatives;' and 'efficiency, equity, and sustainability are worthwhile individual and social goals.' Criticisms flowing from the second approach accept neither these assumptions as the most appropriate, nor, consequently, the questions as the most relevant ones.

If one accepts the basic epistemological and ontological presumptions of the commons literature, four main lines of critique can be identified. The most telling of these are, paradoxically, based on precisely those aspects of the commons discourse that account for its achievements in the advocacy of communal management: the focus on the community, and the use of rigorous methodological tools. Their focus on communities, and the consideration of the larger context only to the extent that outside forces may undermine a community's ability to manage resources, has often prevented commons scholars from investigating the complex relationships of communities to macro-political and social phenomena such as the state and social movements, and politics and differentiation within communities.

In much of the literature on common property, outside forces appear primarily as agents of change. Usually the change they prompt is deleterious.

Whether outside forces are in the form of markets or state interventions, they tend to be viewed as disruptive. In the work of commons scholars, they often unsettle the balance communities can precariously achieve to manage their resources. This view of the commons regimes has two unfortunate consequences. One, it fails to acknowledge the possibility that in many instances the balance that communities might achieve in using their resources might be a product of interactions with the state; a result of enabling policies pursued by the state in earlier periods. Even market exchanges might play an important and constructive role in the constitution and creation of viable resource use patterns.⁸ If communities are ultimately located within the networks of power and exchange relations constituted at least in part by the policies pursued by a state and the economic forces generated by marketplaces, then state and markets are likely to be quite significant influences even in what appears on the surface to be community and community-based resource management. The analytical lesson is apparent. The role of markets and states, even when they seem absent, needs greater attention in analyses of successful communal resource management, rather than being a factor only when local communities are unable to manage their resources. A related point is the need for commons scholars to focus more critically on the relations of communities with markets and states rather than seeing these social phenomena as independent, or somehow in a contradictory relation with each other (but see Peluso 1992).

While markets and states form part of the descriptive and analytical terrain in the work of commons theorists, other social phenomena such as social movements, protests, agrarian unrest and local resistance seldom articulate with community in their account of resource management. Yet, in many areas of the world where studies of commons are undertaken, the presence of these social phenomena is pervasive. Even the theoretical tools that commons theorists have used to analyse community action and management—game theory, collective action theory and institutional analysis—are conducive to the study of these larger protest movements. The studies of commons and social movements, however, seem to proceed according to independent logics where neither the objects of

⁸ Markets are often credited with enlarging the possibilities for sale of products harvested from commonly managed resources. One can at least imagine, however, that they may also facilitate constraints upon harvesting common resources: availability of kerosene can reduce the need for locally produced fuelwood or charcoal; markets in foodgrains might reduce the pressure on agricultural land and consequently reduce the demand for manure and leaf litter from forests; availability of cheap meat from domesticated animals can lead to a decline in the capture and killing of wild animals.

analysis nor the phenomena being investigated seem related to each other in a meaningful manner.

Seeing change as primarily a consequence of external forces implies a second unfortunate narrowing of focus. It leads scholars of commons to appreciate only to a limited extent the independently dynamic nature of the communities that they study.⁹ What Dirks et al. remark about cultural systems might, with some modification and a great deal of truth, apply to the way commons scholars have depicted the communities they study: "The virtual absence of historical investigation in anthropology, until recently, has meant that cultural systems have, indeed, appeared timeless, at least until ruptured by 'culture contact'" (1994: 3). As the work of a number of theorists suggests, communities and their patterns of interactions can be quite stable, but in many cases the apparent stability is an artifact of what Hobsbawm and Ranger have called 'the invention of tradition' (1983).

Perhaps it is because commons scholars focus primarily on the effectiveness of communities in managing resources that issues of dis-sent and differentiation within the community receive rather limited attention. Certainly, the analytical structure of investigation and the theoretical foundations of the commons literature do not preclude attention to internal differences within the community.¹⁰ Further, issues of heterogeneity among users are often the subject of theoretical investigation among scholars of commons. Yet, an unintended consequence of focusing on the achievements of communities in managing resources successfully has been to highlight commonly managed resources as having an equitable nature. Thus, Jodha's influential studies of the commons in the South Asian context depict common property as channelling proportionately greater benefits to poor residents of the village (1986, 1992). Somanathan's study of the forest councils in the Kumaon shows them as being highly effective in

benefiting village communities as a whole (1990).¹¹ It must, however, be admitted that recent scholarship has begun to take internal differentiation within communities seriously and has presented interesting analyses of the differing interests and actions of social groups within what is often seen as a community (Gibson and Stuart 1995; Moore 1998b; Neumann 1995; Peluso 1995; Rangan 1995; Rocheleau and Ross 1995). Despite some attention to political struggles and issues of equity within the community, one oversight is the failure of commons scholars to pay adequate attention to the influence of gender on resource use and management. Since livelihood tasks are differentiated by gender in many subsistence oriented societies, it is reasonable to ask how gender roles in these societies influence the utilisation of and control over common resources. For the most part, however, the mainstream of commons scholars has paid only scant attention to gender in their analyses. An immense literature on gender in development and resource management is simply crying out for attention from students of the commons.¹²

Recognition of the multiple ways in which communities managing resources are linked with and depend upon market forces, other social actors/phenomena, and political actors comprising the state would tend to blur the boundaries between communities and other social aggregations. This might, in part, explain why commons scholars have tended not to investigate the relations of communities with external groups. But it has also meant that the literature on the commons has continued to remain fascinated with a small number of different forms of property rights institutions—most commonly, private, communal and public, but at times including open access, corporations and cooperatives as other possible forms of property.¹³ In seeing forms of property as being comprised by a small number of categories, scholars

¹¹ Presentation of community resource management as being equitable by commons scholars has, perhaps, inadvertently been aided by the studies belonging to a moral economy perspective where communities, owing to norms of generalised reciprocity, try to ensure that all members get at least a minimum level of subsistence. For a discussion of the 'moral economy' see Scott (1976) and Thompson (1971). See also Polanyi's discussion of premarket and market economies (1957).

¹² Among the more careful analyses of gender and property relations in the context of the broad conceptual formation of environment/development are works by scholars such as Agarwal (1997, 1998), Jewett (2000) and Locke (1999).

¹³ Thus, even as he argues for a more nuanced understanding of property regimes, Bromley tends to suggest that the relevant comparison is among private, state and common property (1992b: 4).

⁹ In thinking about how local communities can alter the rules of the games that guide their interactions, however, Ostrom's work has attempted, even within a game-theoretic paradigm, to address the issue of change initiated within a community (1990: 15-18).

¹⁰ In Oakerson's (1992) framework, which is perhaps the most widely used single tool to frame case studies on the commons (having been used both in the edited volume by NRC [1986] as well as Bromley's [1992a] volume), inequalities are associated far more closely with outcomes than with decision-making arrangements or patterns of interactions. The model, clearly, does not preclude a consideration of inequalities, but neither does it pay special attention to them.

of common property tend to inadvertently restrict the potential of their own institutional analysis.¹⁴

In addition, a methodological criticism can also be advanced.¹⁵ Scholars of commons generally focus on single communities when conducting empirical work. But their conclusions with respect to these communities become harder to generalise without comparative work across resource types, historical periods and spatial locations, or without taking the effects of these variations into account. There are very few studies of the commons that have attempted systematically to draw conclusions on the basis of variations across cases. One of the reasons Elinor Ostrom's *Governing the commons* has found an appreciative readership is precisely that it uses cases differing on a number of dimensions to make inferences about when community management of resources might be successful.¹⁶

These criticisms, it can persuasively be argued, do not apply to all writings within the commons literature. Several of the questions raised here have been voiced by theorists of the commons themselves. Further, because there are disciplinary, theoretical and methodological differences among those working on the commons, the above criticisms

¹⁴ The focus on state, market and community can also potentially lead to a blurring of the analytical distinction between actors and rules, especially, but sometimes also between resource characteristics. A number of theorists of the commons have emphasised the need to consider actors, rules and resource characteristics as separate analytic categories, but the very term 'common property resources', as commons scholars recognise, refers simultaneously to a regime of rules, and a type of resource. Since the term 'common management' is really a metaphorical synonym for an immense range of patterns of use and control, and types of outcomes, it might make sense to use the term more in its metaphorical rather than in an analytical sense. The same can be argued in the cases of private and state (public) management of resources (Ostrom, personal communication).

¹⁵ A second possible criticism that I do not discuss is as old as the hoary debate between formalists and substantivists. Attempts by commons scholars to use formal methods of analysis can be criticised on the grounds that such strategies are highly reductionist and do not take into account contextual variables that might be relevant in influencing resource management outcomes, or to and of themselves. While the criticism might well apply to specific pieces of research, it does not apply to the literature on the commons as a whole, since many of its practitioners are anthropologists and other scholars who are specifically concerned to present a wealth of materials on the context in which communities use their resources.

¹⁶ Wade's study of common management of pasture and irrigation in south Indian villages forms another instance of comparative case work but within a single area (1994 [1988]). A more recent extensive comparative work is Baland and Platteau (1996). For the most part, commons scholars have used edited volumes containing essays on multiple cases and resource types. The strategy, however, is not as successful in permitting careful comparative analysis.

should be treated more as statements of general tendencies rather than as literally applicable to all work on the commons.

The second set of criticisms, however, applies more widely to much of the research on the commons. Recent developments in social theory, especially in the shape of contributions from Foucault and other post-structuralists, have provided the grounds for some trenchant critiques of the scholarship on common property. Influenced by themes in the works of recent scholarship on resistance and subalternity,¹⁷ new criticisms question the notion of an autonomous subject, problematise the construction of development, progress and modernisation as inevitable or desirable, focus on how subgroups within local communities resist and subvert the goals of development practitioners, and assert the need to examine the interstitial and pervasive influences of power in the discursive strategies that stand for development and conservation. Thus, Goldman (1997) directly questions the politics of scholars working on common property regimes. Such questioning can be found as well in works that treat development as discursive practice (Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1994 [1990]), focus on how concepts such as the state are the product of discursive practices (T. Mitchell 1991a [1988], 1991b), or look at the literature on conservation as being unavoidably implicated in relations of power (Vandergest 1996).

Perhaps the most striking note of critique has been struck through the observation that commons theorists, especially those who use rational choice assumptions, have paid relatively little attention to issues of power and resistance in their research, and have, thereby, failed to examine the effects of some of their basic assumptions regarding the desirability of development, conservation and efficiency. By not examining the internally differentiated nature of the communities they study, commons scholars, it may be suggested, have assumed that all members of these communities

¹⁷ See the exchange of views among Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell and Nancy Fraser (1995); the volume edited by Butler and Scott (1992); and Fraser (1989) for provocative insights from feminist theorists on the notion of the subject; and Fish (1989), Gates (1986) and Said (1979) for some of the themes upon which current deconstructions of the commons and development discourse are based. An introduction to Subaltern Studies is perhaps best pursued through the volume edited by Guha and Spivak (1988). See also the recent discussion in *American historical review* (Cooper 1994; Mallon 1994; Prakash 1994), and Sivaramakrishnan (1995). For a critical introduction to Foucault, see especially the essays on governmentality and discourse in Burchell et al. (1991), the review of Foucault's work edited by Hoy (1986), and the assessment of Foucault by Dreyfus and Rabinow (1983), especially Foucault's essay in the volume on the subject and power. An accessible introduction to Foucault's thought is also available in his interviews (C. Gordon 1980).

progress (Goldman 1997) can become compelling only when it marshals greater evidence in support of this proposition. While Escobar and Ferguson have shown how development experts and officials often ignore 'failures' and the impact of such failures on increased capacities of governments, the same critique cannot easily be levelled against commons scholars whose very research focus is aimed at valorising communities at the expense of governments and market institutions alike. To the extent that strengthening communities works against the centralisation of state power, the privatisation of resources and the increasing influence of markets, the literature on the commons actively undermines discourses on modernisation and teleological assumptions regarding progress.

Commons scholars, however, do need to attend better to how power, domination and resistance unfold within communities. Appreciating that there are groups and actors endowed with asymmetrical access to power and resources within a community is to take note of the enormous literature that in recent years has focused in resistance, domination and the subaltern. These writings, sparked by the 'Subaltern School' of historians and the works of James Scott (1985) and Michael Adas (1981) in Southeast Asia, began to gain scholarly attention at about the same time as the work on common property (Colburn 1989). Despite the shared focus of both groups of scholars on those who are marginal and the obvious relevance of the work on resistance to the enterprise of commons scholars, the different theoretical preoccupations have prevented much exchange of ideas.

A greater focus on power within communities can help strengthen considerably the force of writings on commons property. On the one hand, such a shift in focus would facilitate a better understanding of how power and status are related to access and use of resources; on the other, it would complement the exclusive focus of common property theorists on institutions and rules with a greater attention to power and process. Ultimately, we must realise that power is not just what planning and management attempt to exclude, but that power and politics imbue the process of management thoroughly and unavoidably. Management is not just about providing technical solutions to objective problems of development and environmental conservation. Rather, these problems are themselves politically generated, and without attention to the politics that inheres in them it would be impossible to produce ways of addressing poverty, underdevelopment and environmental degradation.

are similarly receptive to ideas of development and efficient resource management, progress and modernisation. But the processes of development and modernisation and attempts to make the use and management of commons more efficient can end up benefiting primarily those who are already privileged, and increasing state capacities to control and intervene in local affairs. By focusing on how common resources can be more efficiently managed, scholars of commons become enmeshed in the same logic of greater productivity that advocates of privatisation talk about (Goldman 1997). This critique of the commons borrows extensively from Foucault's arguments about biopower and biopolitics, effectively deployed by such authors as T. Mitchell (1991a [1988]) to critique colonisation and modernisation in Egypt, by Escobar (1995) to problematise development, and by Ferguson (1994 [1990]) to question development projects initiated by agencies like the World Bank.

Foucault's arguments about biopower point to technologies that developed in Europe in the 18th century to permit increasing control over the economic processes whereby populations of human beings could be adjusted to available resources (1990 [1978]: 138ff). Viewing biopower as the ensemble of regulatory disciplines and techniques for 'subjugation of bodies and the control of populations' (ibid.: 140), Foucault suggests that the emergence of demography and the evaluation of the relationship between resources and inhabitants was critical to the ability to control populations. The state, according to Foucault, might have been important in ensuring the maintenance of production relations, but techniques of biopower operate at every level of the social body and have 'brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life' (ibid.: 143).

Foucault's arguments are based on social and political developments in 18th and 19th century Europe, but recent writers on development and conservation have sought to extend the import of his argument by pointing to how development and efficient management of resources are also reliant on the same technologies of biopower that Foucault highlighted: demographic statistics, resource use patterns, evaluation of relations between resources and populations (carrying capacity), and so forth. Commons scholars, because they are substantially invested in the same broad enterprise of investigating how resources can be more efficiently managed, can be viewed as being subject to the critique that Foucault advances. The observation that commons scholars are unreflexive about how their research valorises the objectives of modernisation, efficiency and

IV

Potential contributions from the context of forest management in the Indian Himalayas

As scholars have realised that, despite their majesty and grandeur, the Himalayan mountains may be ecologically fragile owing to geological, biophysical as well as human causes, the focus of writings on the Himalaya has shifted to examining how environmental changes in the region can potentially destabilise existing human-resource relationships, and how the environment can be influenced. One of the most significant set of writings has tended to assess the role of local populations in forest use, conservation and exploitation. This section focuses primarily on community forest use and management in the Uttar Pradesh hills in India (Uttarakhand), but uses existing research on other parts of the Himalaya to situate this region in a comparative perspective.

Recent work on the Himalaya underlines nothing as much as the fact that our knowledge about the Himalaya is limited and uncertain. Scholars such as Bajracharya (1983), Carson (1985), Hamilton (1987), Hofer (1993), Ives and Messerli (1989), Mahat et al. (1986a, 1986b, 1987a, 1987b) and Thompson et al. (1986) among others have contested the various aspects of the 'Theory on Himalayan environmental degradation'. They have pointed to woefully inadequate and contradictory empirical data sources on biophysical and socio-economic processes in the mountains. Their arguments cast doubt on assertions that blame subsistence activities of smallholders for environmental degradation. They question the relationship between deforestation and surface erosion in the upper regions of the Himalayan mountains, and flooding and sediment deposition in the lower reaches of the Himalayan rivers. In the wake of this comprehensive interrogation of accepted dogmas about forest management in the mountains, several new research issues have emerged. They bear a close complementary relationship with writings on common property.

The most important of these, perhaps, is the significant reorientation of research on forest use in the Himalaya to take into account the interests and activities of local populations. Although early ethnographers have provided many studies of local systems of resource management (Berreman 1972; Hitchcock 1966; Nitzberg 1970), an explicit focus on communities and user group forestry has emerged in the past two decades reflecting the perception that without extensive involvement and empowerment of Himalayan villagers, successful forest management is

If existing institutions are the expression of past political alignments, attention to current political relationships within communities can help us gain a better understanding of how existing institutions are being contested, and what the shape of future institutions might be. Institutional arrangements for allocating resources are best viewed as an expression of what the idealised status quo would be like. Actual human behaviour, even in the context of well-enforced institutional rules, is unlikely to conform precisely to institutional contours. Perfect enforcement is far too costly ever to be achieved. When resources devoted to enforcement of institutions are limited, resource use patterns are far more likely to diverge from what the rules specify. Attention to power and micro-politics within communities is therefore critical to understanding how resources are used and managed (Agrawal 1994a, 1999; Gibson 1999; Moore 1998a, 1998b, 1999).

But it is not just the need to explicate better the relationship between property and politics that would be served by greater attention to processes of domination and resistance. The question possesses significant inherent theoretical and practical merit, as subaltern scholars and writers on everyday protest have argued. Attention to strategies followed by subaltern actors in relation to resource use is critical in beginning to understand how attempts at control and regulation are always challenged by those who are subjected to control. Issues of agency, the mutually productive relationship between domination and resistance, and the creation of hegemonic institutional arrangements can be understood only with greater attention to micro-politics. Such a shift in focus can also help address the criticism that scholars of common property have, hitherto, ignored how rural residents can shape attempts by outside agents such as the state or aid agencies to intervene in their lives and modify existing patterns of resource use.

In this context, the micro-foundational focus of common property scholars on human agents can find productive complementarity with those who insist on the transformative capacities of subordinated groups. If intentions and independent actions are critical in reformulating and renegotiating the terrain of resource management imposed by the state (or as it obtains historically), the attempt by commons scholars to understand the strategies whereby village residents craft new institutions to manage local resources may prove to be instrumental in creating new insights about the attempts by these same villagers to reorient development and state interventions.

likely to remain a chimera.¹⁸ The long history of local forest management in the Indian Middle Himalaya, and the active involvement of villagers in forest use and management owing to the critical role of forests in subsistence (Agrawal and Yadama 1997; Ballabh and Singh 1988; Guha 1989; Somanathan 1991), provide the basic precondition for using insights from the commons literature to research forest management in the mountains—thousands of semi-autonomous village forest councils (*van panchayats*) help manage large areas of forests collectively for the village community in Kumaon and Garhwal.

Research in these *van panchayats* has explored some of the basic thrusts of the common property literature already. Agrawal and Yadama (1997), Ballabh and Singh (1988) and Somanathan (1991) have investigated the extent to which the *panchayats*, and communal management more generally, might be efficient in helping villagers manage forest resources. But research on community forest management in the hills can also help answer more fruitfully some of the problems faced by commons scholars. Because hill villagers have the right to many of the rules for managing their forests, historical studies of their evolving institutional arrangements can help illuminate how internal dynamics of village communities lead to significant shifts in patterns of resource use. Further, statistical and comparative studies of the forest *panchayats* can help address criticisms that suggest that the commons literature has tended to focus primarily on single cases. Indeed, the emergence of a large literature on local management of forests in the Lesser and Middle Himalaya in Pakistan, Nepal and India now permits detailed and rigorous comparative studies of local collective management of forests as well.¹⁹

Relatively recent changes in government policies on forest management in the mountains, certainly in India (Sanwal 1989), but also in Nepal, Bhutan and Pakistan, create the possibility of comparative research that would examine the effect of macro-level institutional changes on

micro-level institutions, forest use practices and forest conditions. In the context of the Uttar Pradesh hills, the forest department and *panchayat* regulations have altered substantially in recent years, and valuable resources for research are available in the form of data on such policy changes, their impact on village forest councils as reflected in records of council meetings maintained at the village level, annual reports on the forest *panchayats* and their productivity, and reports on the activities of the forest department and the state of the forests it manages. Investigations of the relationship between micro-level community institutions and macro-level state initiatives will help address a persistent criticism of the commons literature—that it has tended to remain focused on the community at the cost of a better understanding of the ways in which the community is located in a network of social relations which the state shapes to a great extent. But the Kumaon and Garhwal region also constitute an important arena for commons scholars to examine another aspect of the relations between broader social forces and institutional arrangements. Research on ecological movements in the Uttarakhanda (Berreman 1989; Guha 1989; Jain 1984; Rangan 1993, 2001; Shiva and Bandopadhyay 1989; Weber 1989), and the movement for the separate province of Uttaranchal (Mawdsley 1997, 1998, 1999), demonstrate the pervasive ubiquity of social movements in the region. Indeed, as Agrawal and Yadama (1997) and Agrawal (2001) point out, the birth of commons institutions such as the forest councils of Kumaon and Garhwal thus presents a tremendous opportunity to examine the relationship between community institutions and social movements. Such research can significantly advance our knowledge about how institutions and social movements connect with each other to facilitate continuing collective action.

As far as the situation in the Indian Himalaya forming a significant opportunity to investigate internal differences within communities is concerned, two points might be in order. First, a number of authors have pointed to relatively low hierarchical and class differences in Garhwal and Kumaon (Guha 1989; Pant 1935; Sanwal 1976). This might seem to imply that the opportunity to study class and caste differentiation in the Indian Himalaya is limited. This, however, should not be taken to mean that asymmetries in resources and power play a more limited role in the hills. As Foucault asserts, 'A society without power relations can only be an abstraction' (1983: 222–23). Although the forces that shape how individuals and groups relate to each other vary depending on history and context, there is no escaping the grip of power. What attenuated caste

¹⁸ Indeed, some research already suggests that villagers, in the face of increasing scarcity, are likely to take matters into their own hands and plant trees without much external stimulus (A.S. Carter and Gilmore 1989; E.J. Carter 1992; Griffin 1988; Hofer 1993; Virgo and Subba 1994). Such research that examines the conditions under which villagers would plant new trees is extremely important for defining the limits of deterioration of the quality of publicly used forest lands.

¹⁹ See Cernea (1981, 1985), Dani et al. (1987) and Dove and Rao (1986) for some studies of local forest management from Pakistan. For Nepal, see Brower (1990), Chhetri and Pandey (1992), Exo (1990), Meiz (1990) and Zurick (1990). An annotated bibliography on common forest management from Messerschmidt (1993) is a useful source as well. The review by Arnold and Stewart (1991) ties together some of the important themes in the pre-1990 work on common property in India.

and class differences in the hills imply is not the absence of power, but simply that its influence may assume subtler forms.

Examples might make the point clearer. Where caste and class explicitly enter social status, and a community is highly polarised along these dimensions, power might be exercised more in the sense of brute force.²⁰ Where these differences are less obvious, the exercise of power might take place through far subtler means—seemingly equitable strategies that, nonetheless, are biased against those who are socially or economically disadvantaged. Auctions of products from the commons to the highest bidder or high levels of monetary fines as punishment for breaking institutional rules related to commons are two possible examples. The first rule would inevitably lead to richer residents of the village cornering the bulk of benefits from the commons, since poorer members of the community are unlikely to be able to bid even close to the value of the benefits from the entire commons (Agrawal 1994b). The second rule would punish those individuals disproportionately who possess limited private resources, and are therefore forced to resort to harvesting from the commons more often.

Second, despite the fact that power is not polarised along some obvious dimensions in the hill society, the presence of thousands of *van panchayats* in Uttarakhand presents a highly variegated institutional landscape of power whose investigation could help uncover the relationships between societal power and how it congeals along nodes constituted by institutional arrangements. In this sense, the very multiplicity of institutions would assist the investigations of power and politics, as long as one keeps in mind the admonition that 'the analysis of power relations within a society cannot be reduced to the study of a series of institutions, not even to the study of all those institutions which would merit the name "political"' (Foucault 1983: 224).

In this context, the relationship between gender roles and power would form an illuminating area of analysis. While gender roles are quite different in the hill subsistence and production economy, and one can expect these differences to significantly affect forest use and management, women's activities regarding harvesting, use and management of forests need greater documentation and elaboration. The increasing attention to women's work in the hills, therefore, can

²⁰ See Lukes' thoughtful review of three different views of power (1974). Lukes (1986) provides a useful collection of writings on power. Contemporary efforts to theorise power, especially its more diffused and subtle manifestations, must consider Foucault's interventions.

contribute to filling one of the important lacunae in the scholarship on the commons—the importance of gender in common property management (see Agarwal 1986, 1994; Byers and Sainju 1994; Hewitt 1989; Saksena et al. 1995).

V

Conclusions

This article has reviewed the literature on common property by examining its origins, major themes and weaknesses. Scholarship on common property has an old vintage, but it has exploded since the mid-1980s. It has been crucial in establishing the role of community versus market or state in resource management. Some of the chief weaknesses of the literature relate to its relative neglect of the social and political relationships within which local communities are located, and of the internal politics that characterise all communities.

One of the objectives of this review has been to examine the extent to which forest management in the Indian Himalaya provides research agendas that can help address some of the weaknesses in the commons discourse. The study concludes that the Middle and Lower Himalayas constitute a fertile source of potentially new insights regarding internal differentiation within communities, the relationship between the state and other sites of political authority, the interactions between power and institutions, and how social movements are related to institutions of resource management.

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