

The State is a Tragedy of the Commons

Guest post by Michael Suede.

Some of you may already be familiar with the economic law called “the tragedy of the commons,” but for those of you who are not, I shall explain it. The tragedy of the commons refers to a dilemma arising from the situation in which multiple individuals, acting independently and rationally consulting their own self-interest, will ultimately deplete a shared limited resource even when it is clear that it is not in anyone’s long-term interest.

For example: If two cattle farmers share a common plot of land between them, and neither can exclude the other from grazing their cattle on it, both farmers have a natural incentive to graze their cows as much as possible on the common land, thereby destroying it quickly, rather than conserving it for future use.

Another example would be hunting deer on common land. If several hunters share a common hunting ground, and none can exclude the others from hunting there, each hunter has an incentive to shoot as many deer as he can before the stock of deer is depleted by the other hunters.

The clear lesson to be learned from this economic law is that common resources, which everyone has access to, lead to rapid depletion and destruction of those resources as the public attempts to hoard as much as they can before the resources are depleted.

I would argue the tragedy of the commons receives far too little attention as a rational explanation for the cancerous expansion of the State. For what is the State other than people looting each other’s private property in a zero sum game of resource redistribution? The tragedy of the commons gives us a *rational basis* for the consistent and constant expansion of the coercively funded democratic State and why that expansion always leads to the destruction of society.

Alexander Tytler once wrote, “*A democracy cannot exist as a permanent form of government. It can only exist until a majority of voters discover that they can vote themselves largess out of the public treasury.*” I would argue Tytler had the cause and effect inverted in his statement. **Modern democracies are specifically created for the express purpose of establishing common property across an entire State region, so that neighbors may loot each other without fear of reprisal.**

It is important to note that common property is not the same as publicly accessible property. A rancher can regulate the hunting that takes place on his own land. Often ranchers will allow hunters access to their land for a nominal fee and under certain terms.

It is in the rancher's best interest to allow only enough hunting on his property so as not to deplete the stock of wildlife. The rancher can regulate this by varying the rate he charges or the number of people he allows to hunt his land.

While modern democracies claim eminent domain across all of the land, labor, and resources in a given region, the most typical form of private property they assert control over is the trade intermediary that society uses in trade with each other (money). When the money of a society is defined as common property by a State, nearly *everything* in that society necessarily becomes common property, since nearly everything in society has a price.

If each individual actor in a society perceives that his own property (money) is not really his own, but is common property, he will rationally act to hoard as many resources (physical things) for himself, through the political system, as he possibly can before the common pool of resources is depleted. Under common property money, this drive by the public to expand State power becomes instinctive and rational.

When the democratic State has the ability to take as much money as it likes from whomever it chooses, it will necessarily and eventually turn the entirety of society against itself. It will foster, through the public trough, a mad rush for each political interest group to acquire as many resources as they can, as quickly as they can, before other interest groups expropriate those resources. Of course, the largest and most powerful interest groups will always get the biggest slice of the pie.

The tragedy of the commons explicitly shows us that modern democratic States are *always* unsustainable if they are allowed to use violence against the population in order to make the money supply of the population common property.

"Remember, democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide." – John Adams (1814)

These insights give us a clear picture as to what a truly sustainable democratic government must look like:

- A sustainable democratic government must never be allowed to assert control over the money a society chooses to use.
- A sustainable democratic government must never be allowed to take property by force, either through taxation or eminent domain.

Any democratic government that is permitted the use of eminent domain, the forced confiscation of wealth through taxation, or monopoly control over the issuance of currency, will always result in the self-destruction of the given society.

It is interesting to note that the same is not true of other types of State systems. For example, a monarchy may be able to retain a monopoly over the issuance of currency and act as the final arbiter of all disputes, along with violently taxing the public, but because the King is able to prevent the public from “feeding at the public trough,” that nation State may be able to exist for extremely long periods of relative stability.

Of course, I’m not arguing in favor of a monarchy. But it is important to note, since this explains why some monarchies were able to exist in relative stability for long periods of time. The ultimate truth of the matter is that democratic rule does not require a voting booth and necessarily shouldn’t have one. If we make the assumption that no sustainable democratic government can be allowed to wage violence against the innocent in order to expropriate property, then we must consider how such a government is to be funded. If it is to be funded voluntarily, then it is clear that the consumers of that government automatically accomplish public voting when they purchase its services.

What might such a democratic government look like? Austrian Economist Hans-Hermann Hoppe provides us some answers.