“Tragedy of the commons” as a system-generating civilization problem and methods of overcoming it

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Abstract:

The article examines “the tragedy of the commons” as a system-generating problem of the contemporary civilization that among other things leads to the emergence of manifestations of “the iron law of oligarchy” by Michels in socio-political organizations as principal subjects that form the state government bodies in the countries of western democracy. This, as well as negative development tendencies in nation states, brings about the loss of efficiency of the traditional instrument for tackling “the tragedy of the commons”, i.e., representative democracy that in the information society turns into its opposite as a result of manipulative influence on rank-and-file members of socio-political organizations and voters. “The tragedy of the commons” leads to the aggravation of the major contradiction of the contemporary human civilization, that between the interests of corporations as the most effective economic structures and general social interests. Besides, the main task of state governmental institutions, which consists in the effective protection of social interests and balancing them against the interests of the multitude of corporations, remains unsettled or is settled not in favor of the society due to the fact that these institutions are defenseless to the systematic influence of structures with powerful financial and organizational resources.
The article suggests a concept of replacing representative democracy as a traditional instrument for overcoming the complex of problems spawned by “the tragedy of the commons” in socio-political organizations with direct democracy, or to be more precise, turning general meetings of regional centers and the central body of the organization into subjects capable to act with absolute legitimacy, able to effectively manage, appropriate and distribute the common resource, systematically control leaders elected to representative and executive positions, successfully thwart all attempts at external manipulation. General meetings of the regional centers and the central body of socio-political organizations acquire subjectness on condition of their restructuring, i.e., substitution of variable structure – dynamic network for the hierarchical structure. The former regulates and maintains free of conflicts the interaction of all its members by their cyclic restructuring into little groups of different functional designation according to a certain algorithm that ensures production, coordination and taking of collective decisions by the members from the positions of “equal-to-equal” and their implementation in a complex of temporary hierarchical project, executive and process groups headed by executors in charge.

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Every anniversary of Ukraine’s Independence gives a good motive to think over and analyze the reasons that for two dozen (a couple of hundred or a thousand?) years have been hampering the implementation of the sincere desire of the overwhelming majority of Ukrainians to live in a secure, developed and flourishing country.

Yuliya Mostova’s publication «SOS, or My Gaudy Ukraine» [1], which spawned an all-Ukrainian intellectual discussion concerning ways out of the civilization dead-end for Ukraine, lets us presume that in the given case we deal with a complex of problems whose joint impact intensifies each of them separately. This results in the development of negative destructive processes in the Ukrainian society and state. The components of this complex make up an integral system with a corresponding structure of interrelations and mutual conditionality that in accordance with the systemic approach [2] practically always contains one key system-generating problem and solving this problem usually results in the collapse of the entire system and by domino effect automatically leads to solving most available problems.

From the author’s point of view **in this case such a problem is “the tragedy of the commons”**. We will demonstrate its relation to the entire complex of problems of the human civilization in general and Ukrainian society in particular at the present stage of their historical development as outlined in Yuliya Mostova’s publication, as well as offer an implementable solution for Ukrainian politicians and public activists.

The term “tragedy of the commons” derives from William Forster Lloyd’s essay [3] on population (1833). It was popularized by biology professor of California University Garret Hardin in one of his publications (1968) [4]. “The tragedy of the commons” covers the kind of phenomena related to the conflict between personal interests and social welfare; it can be described as a failure of a large group of people to
effectively manage their common resource of general use. This problem was more clearly formulated for the context of our research theme by American sociologist Mancur Olson in his essay «The Logic of Collective Action» (1965) [5], where he managed to brilliantly prove that it is impossible to achieve collective welfare in large groups of people, unlike in small groups that are capable of acquiring subjectness and purposefully realize the common interests of their members often at the expense of large groups, even entire society. This directly results in «the iron law of oligarchy» (1910) by Robert Michels [6] that consists in the concentration of power and property at the hands of a small subject group, i.e., the managing nucleus of a socio-political organization with the simultaneous passivation and atomization of rank-and-file members, that is to say, of a large group of the members incapable of acquiring subjectness. Besides, this law conditions the negative selection in elite group organizations, primarily in governmental ones, which is intensified by the specific features of representative democracy as a traditional institutional instrument of overcoming the “tragedy of the commons” in all types of organizations in modern developed societies, which was analyzed in detail by Pierre Bourdieu in his work «Delegation and Political Fetishism» (1983) [7].

Representative democracy as an instrument of overcoming the “tragedy of the commons” in the information society turns in its opposite as a result of manipulative management of passivated, deintellectualized and atomized rank-and-file members of socio-political organizations and voting masses, which launches and supports the processes of moral and social degradation of the entire society[8]. These processes are based on another result of the “tragedy of the commons” – the systematic choice [9] of confrontation strategies by the leaders of elite group organizations in their interaction with other elite groups, which is conditioned by the specific features of group dynamics
in self-organizing and organizing structures and metamorphosis [10] of the former into
the latter ones.

On the other hand, political economist, Nobel prize winner Elinor Ostrom in her
Tetiana Montian described historical examples of more or less successful governing of
common resources for the sake of collective welfare of large groups of people in self-
organizing social systems and formulated the principles of their success.

Therefore, the solution of the above described general civilization problem,
i.e., the tragedy of the commons, can be achieved through mass generation of socio-
political, public, business, etc. organization as large subject groups capable of
realizing their interests so as to implement them and effectively govern the
common resources collectively, rationally analyze the environment, generate and
take decisions, as well as execute them coordinating the activity of all its members
and subdivisions.

Besides that, large subject groups should be immune to transformation into a
crowd irrationally governed by charismatic leaders in accordance with the laws of
crowd psychology which is one of the facets of “the tragedy of the commons”. This
immunity can be acquired by systematic standardization of the collective activity of
organization members and its subdivisions, for instance, by means of introducing
specially constructed variable structures [12] and corresponding cooperation algorithms.
Moreover, in Tetiana Montian’s opinion [13] the algorithms of collective production of
decisions concerning the government of the common resource by large groups (for
example, by co-owners of apartment buildings) should be provided for in the Ukrainian
legislation.
However, in Ukraine for many centuries “the tragedy of the common” has been coped with [14] to some extent due to customary law in the framework of viche (direct) democracy and corresponding organizational culture. This generated a powerful positive layer in the historical memory of Ukrainians, in the national habitus that for the last millennium has contradicted the dominant hierarchical structures and corresponding organization structure, which resulted in their slow but irreversible degrading through continuous reproduction of the network self-organization from the bottom characteristic of this layer. **This contradiction is the key system national problem that can be settled through bringing the structure and organization culture of socio-political, business and other Ukrainian organizations into correspondence with the available positive layer of the historical memory of the viche period.**

“The tragedy of the commons” in many respects determines the key tendencies of development of the major organizational subjects of the contemporary civilization, i.e., nation states and corporations (scheme 1).

**Scheme 1. Tendencies of development of nation-states and corporations**
As it is clear from the scheme, nation states stay in descending trends, while corporations (both national and transnational) are in ascending ones. This results in the intensification of drifting of a part of state functions to corporations where the subject of generation and adoption of decisions is the managing nucleus consisting of a small group which in accordance with the “Logic of Collective Action” by Mancur Olson tends to realize its own interests at the expense of general social ones. Obviously it is practically unrealistic and irrational today to try to decrease of the potential of corporations, in particular if we speak of transnational corporations – it is possible only in totalitarian states where absolute power is concentrated in a single pair of hands. This is why it is reasonable to concentrate efforts on overcoming and neutralizing the negative development tendencies of nation states so as to significantly improve their potential. **What we mean is a radical change of the qualities of political parties, local self-government bodies, joint-stock companies, corporate and other organizations by restructuring them with the aim of effectively overcoming “the tragedy of the commons”** – so as to ensure their capability in large groups of all its members to act collectively and effectively govern their common resource, which comprises the symbolic capital or authority for political organizations and various resources for self-government bodies and business. Besides, the presented scheme demonstrates that the major contradiction of the contemporary human civilization is the clash between the interests of corporations as the most effective economic structures and universal social interests in general. Moreover, state governmental institutions are first of all aimed at effectively defending of social interests and balancing them against the interest of corporations and this major task is settled not in favor of the society due to the fact that these institutions are vulnerable to the systemic influence of structures with powerful financial and organizational resources.
If we take, for instance, a pharmaceutical corporation, it is easy to notice the contradiction between its main task as a business structure – to make as much money as possible by selling increasingly more and medicines, which is possible only if the number of sick people or at least those who consider themselves sick increases – and a vital need of the society to have healthy members, which by definition implies the decrease in demand for medications.

If we take into account the organizational possibilities of the owners of such a corporation, it is clear that solving their main task they will influence the government in a variety of ways, for example, by lobbying medication advertising on television or introduction of a new compulsory type of vaccination and so on. At the same time they will comprehensively influence other corporate institutions, such as the entire health care system, stimulating medical staff to prescribe the medication they manufacture,

It is only the state government system consisting of the representatives of political parties or public organization whose members are aware of the real situation and defend true interests of the society that can oppose this tendency. Unfortunately today they are constructed in a way that prevents them from effectively influencing governmental mechanisms. Shortly, in accordance with the “iron law of oligarchy” by Michels, power and property concentrate in managing nuclei, i.e., small groups capable of acquiring and maintaining their subjectness. Accordingly, it can be implied that corporations with their huge resources easily subordinate political organizations that make up governmental bodies and through them implement their interests at the expense of general social ones.

Meanwhile corporations in Jamshid Gharajedaghi’s classification [15] belong to the uniminded social systems (just like a human organism) that have their own purpose. Given the inherent vulnerability and unstable structure of open systems, this purpose is
survival. For this end biological beings have to grow and for that they need to exploit the environment in their interests which helps them to achieve positive metabolism. That is to say the measure of their success is growth, the only and the major indicator of effectiveness, while profit is just a means to that end. **The specific feature of uniminded systems consists in the fact that their parts have no choice and develop a corresponding response to events in their environment only in a predefined way, which makes up the basis of the invasion mechanisms of the subdivisions of transnational corporations into the body of nation states.** The activity of the system is entirely controlled by one mind that performs the organizing function on the basis of information received from a number of sensors through communication network by giving instructions that make corresponding parts of the system act. If parts of the body suddenly get an opportunity to choose, the main problem that will arise will be a conflict among them and a chance to settle it. They are usually settled on the basis of paternalism characteristic of such systems and actively cultivated by their managing nucleus.

The measure of success for corporations, i.e., their growth, results in their intraspecific competition that at times becomes confrontational leading to cold and hot wars and to takeover of weaker corporations by stronger ones and as a result to systematic monopolization of all the spheres of vital activity of the society. The inevitability of monopolization under conditions of domination of uniminded systems in small groups – corporations can be confirmed by the research results [16] of Swiss mathematician James Glatterfelder concerning concentration of 80% of the world property in the hands of only 737 shareholders which includes an even smaller group of approximately 150 key shareholders that together control 40% of property of global corporations.
Scheme 2 represents the concept of overcoming “the tragedy of the commons” and derivative problems in socio-political organizations which after their restructuring into variable structures will acquire the necessary super-system qualities for creation of able to function, effective and independent of any external management governmental bodies in nation-states, which will balance the geo-political weight of the latter, prevent them from losing their potential and tackle other derivative civilization problems of the contemporary society.

Scheme 2. Statement of the issue of governing Ukraine as the common resource of the Ukrainian people and method of settling it

Thus, Ukraine is a common resource of the Ukrainian people which is managed, appropriated and distributed by legitimate government bodies. At the same time, according to the Constitution of Ukraine, the government here is formed by political parties that by their nature and in accordance with their statutes come to be the common resource for all of their members. This resource may be represented as symbolic capital
[17] - their authority that can potentially be converted into power or resource (financial) capital. It is clear that all the benefits from such conversion go to the internal subject (the managing nucleus that comprises a small group of leaders of the socio-political organization with rigid hierarchical structure), who according to the principles of representative democracy gets the authority to take key decisions on its behalf, or an external subject capable of influencing it. To describe this subject we can use Elinor Ostrom’s term core beneficiary or appropriator of the common resource who after the conversion of the symbolic capital into other forms can use them to achieve his own targets he is aware of, which as a rule significantly diverge from those laid out in policy documents of the organization.

The suggested concept implies substitution of representative democracy as an instrument of overcoming “the tragedy of the commons” in existing socio-political organizations for direct democracy, i.e., transformation of general meetings of regional centers and the central body of the organization into capable to act subjects with absolute legitimacy, able to efficiently govern, appropriate and distribute the common resource, systematically control leaders appointed and elected to representative and executive positions, and effectively thwart any attempts at external manipulation.

General meetings of the regional centers and central body of socio-political organizations acquire subjectness on condition of their restructuring, i.e., substitution of variable structure – dynamic network [12] for the hierarchical structure. The former regulates and maintains free of conflicts the interaction of all its members by their cyclic restructuring into little groups of different functional designation according to a certain algorithm that ensures production, coordination and taking of collective decisions by the members from the positions of “equal-to-equal” and their implementation in a complex
of temporary hierarchical project, executive and process groups headed by executors in charge.

This will result in a stable increase in the number of members of the managing nuclei of socio-political organizations and transformation of small groups into large ones capable of quantitative growth without losing their qualities, as well as in development of self-education and self-improvement skills. Managing nuclei of this type of socio-political organizations in Jamshid Gharaedhagi’s classification [15] are defined as multiminded systems of a social model aimed primarily at coordinating the interests of its members and movement in the approved direction: “a multiminded social model system... is a voluntary association of purposeful members who themselves manifest a choice of both ends and means.” Besides it is worth pointing out that with the development of such an organization the number of members of its managing nucleus will systematically grow until it encompasses all of its members. Practically the managing nucleus will expand to the range of the entire organization, which being a large group will overcome “the tragedy of the commons” by instruments of direct democracy.

References


