



# REIMAGINING LEADERSHIP ON THE COMMONS

*Shifting the Paradigm for a More  
Ethical, Equitable, and Just World*

*Edited by*

**DEVIN P. SINGH  
RANDAL JOY THOMPSON  
KATHLEEN A. CURRAN**

**BUILDING  
LEADERSHIP  
BRIDGES**



REIMAGINING LEADERSHIP  
ON THE COMMONS

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Edited by

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*To all the Commoners throughout history who have sought  
a more ethical, equitable and just world.  
May we finally achieve it together.*

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# FOREWORD

MARCO JANSSEN, PAST PRESIDENT OF  
THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR  
THE STUDY OF THE COMMONS

Biologist Garrett [Hardin \(1968\)](#) argued that overuse of commons was inevitable since users would never self-organize. Hardin envisioned a pasture open to all, in which each herder received an individual benefit from adding sheep to graze on the common land and suffered costs only later (and shared with other herders) from overgrazing. Besides private property rights, an intervention such as taxing the use of common resources is the only possible intervention to avoid overharvesting of the commons.

Hardin's judgment has been widely accepted due to its consistency with predictions from noncooperative game theory, the economics of resource use, and well-noted examples of resource collapses. The consequences of this work were significant, especially due to the privatization and nationalization of natural resources in many places around the world, ignoring existing institutional arrangements.

Communal property was equated with the absence of exclusive and effective rights and thus an inability to govern the commons. However, this was not the observation from scholars doing fieldwork on natural resource governance. In the mid-1980s, a group of interdisciplinary scholars who perform field studies began to discover that the empirical evidence was not consistent with conventional theory. In order to understand the diversity of outcomes from individual case studies, there was a need for synthesis. This happened through meetings of the National Research Council, starting in 1983. A large number of case studies were discovered that showed both successes and failures of self-organization of resource users. The resources included local fisheries, irrigation systems, pastures, and forests. This spurt of activities also led in 1989 to the establishment of the International Association for the Study of the Commons (IASC).

Founding IASC President Elinor Ostrom published her 1990 book *Governing the Commons*, in which an initial analysis of the meta-analysis was provided. She proposed eight so-called design principles that co-occur more frequently with successful governance of shared resources. Those design principles include clearly defined boundaries of the resource and eligible resource users, active monitoring and sanctioning, and inclusion of resource users in defining institutional arrangements to govern the commons. In the years since, subsequential studies have confirmed that those proposed design principles remain key to explain successes and failures ([Baggio et al., 2016](#)).

However, with increasing amount of data and comparative analysis of case studies in diverse resource domains, additional social and biophysical factors have been found to be influential. One of those factors for success is leadership ([Gutiérrez, Hilborn, & Defeo, 2011](#)). However, the observation that effective leadership correlates with success is of limited practical value. What defines an effective leader, what enables the presence of effective leadership and how we train effective leaders? The role of leadership is an underexplored topic in the study of governing the commons. Therefore, I am pleased to see this volume of leadership scholars focusing on the commons.

Current scholarship on the commons moved past the original focus on natural resources. The study of self-governance of communities to manage their shared resources has been applied to knowledge and data, health care, urban services, education, the use of Earth's orbit, and many more topics. With the increasing spread of application areas, it becomes important to understand the role of leadership in diverse contexts.

At the time of writing this foreword, the pandemic of COVID-19 is in full swing. Handling the COVID-19 crisis requires governing various types of shared resources, from personal protective equipment and sanitizers, to vaccine development and distribution, health care workers, and hospital beds. The variety of ways countries and states are handling this crisis demonstrates the importance of leadership. The ability of leaders to set examples, provide priorities and coordinate between different stakeholders could make an important difference.

To conclude, leadership study is an important aspect in the study of the commons, and this volume provides an important contribution by bringing together a diverse set of studies on this topic.

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## PREFACE

The year 2020 turned out to be a year of shocks, a global pandemic, the exposure of dysfunctional social, economic, and political systems, protest, riots, extreme climate disasters, and toxic leadership. The pandemic became the defining symbol of a country in crisis. With one fourth of the coronavirus cases and deaths in the world and the virus out of control, journalists queried whether the United States was a failed state (Packer, 2020), whether the revolution was already underway (Spang, 2020), or whether coronavirus killed the revolution (Hamid, 2020). The public murder of African American George Floyd by a Minnesota police officer added to the chaos just as the world was reeling from the pandemic. The grief of losing loved ones to the virus combined with the economic recession and the uncertainty of the future ignited righteous anger and grief flamed by his murder and opened to the world the entrenched and vicious racist underpinning of American society. Fury and the determination to change the broken system spilled into the streets of cities around the world. “Black Lives Matter” became the cry that signified that the people had suffered enough. And just when it seemed like nothing more could go wrong, the presidential election threatened to undermine the foundations of democracy as the groundless cries of fraud and election stealing echoed throughout the country while the President attempted to overturn the election results through scores of baseless lawsuits and a final standoff in Congress. His false claims and inflammatory narrative resulted in the President’s insurrectionists shattering their way into the Capitol building in a revolutionary attempt to take over the government, in the “Worst Revolution Ever” (Flanagan, 2020).

Articles appeared during the year that highlighted the dire predictions of doomsayers such as Peter Turchin whose mathematical model predicted that 2020 would be a rough year followed by five or even 10 even rougher years (Wood, 2020). As he told Grame Wood, “the problems are deep and structural – not the type that the tedious process of democracy can fix in



time to forestall mayhem” (Wood, 2020, para. 5). Based on the assumption that there are too many elites in the United States and not enough positions for all of them to hold, Turchin’s model predicts that competition between elites will ensue and some of them will turn against the others and support the masses whose standard of living has declined because of the growing inequality. As Turchin wrote, the masses will

*accept the overtures of the counter-elites and start oiling the axles of their tumbrels. [People’s] lives grow worse, and the few who try to pull themselves onto the elite lifeboat are pushed back into the water by those already aboard. (Wood, 2020, para. 9).*

Government hand-outs to quell the unrest and suffering will run out, security will increase as people protest and strike, and finally state insolvency will trigger social disintegration, Turchin concluded.

Well-known leadership gurus responded to the crisis and to the signs of impending doom in dramatically different ways. Margaret Wheatley, for example, who made her name with her 1994 book *Leadership and the New Science*, agreed that it was too late to rectify past mistakes and that collapse was inevitable. She pointed to authors such as William Ophuls (2012) who identified the historical signs of the end of civilizations and paralleled these with what was happening in the U.S. Ophuls (2012) highlighted the biophysical limits reached by ecological exhaustion, exponential growth, expedited entropy, and excessive complexity combined with human error manifested in moral decay and practical failure as signs of collapse. “A civilization declines,” Ophuls contended, “when it has exhausted its physical and moral capital” (2012, p. 65). Such was the state of the Western world, he concluded, and a “stupendous” global collapse lays on the near horizon.

*We must salvage as much as possible, Ophuls wrote. Human survival will require a fundamental change in the ethos of civilization – to wit, the deliberate renunciation of greatness in favor of simplicity, frugality, and fraternity. (2012, p. 70)*

Wheatley has devoted herself to empowering “warriors of the human spirit” who are called into dying civilizations to stand for what is good in humankind and to help where help is needed during the chaos of collapse. Warriors are to enter when fear pervades the people and wait for opportunities to help

rather than to construct their own life course and intentions. Being a warrior requires intensive inner work of being a present, mindful, and calm spirit in a world of chaos capable of offering compassion and care to those suffering the terrors of civilizational collapse.

Other high-profile leadership gurus, such as MIT's Otto Scharmer took the opposite stance during the pandemic. He organized global communities of hope, using the crisis to help create a more sustainable, equitable, and healthy world. Scharmer's GAIA journey united over 10,000 people around the world in an online "impromptu global infrastructure for sensemaking, for leaning into our current moment of disruption and letting this moment move us toward civilizational renewal" (Pendle, 2020, para. 4). Through the practice of presencing, community members opened their minds, hearts, and wills and allowed the future to reveal itself through a process of social emergence and the economics of creation until what arose crystallized, prototyped, embodied, and then performed. Members continue to meet and implement personal, group, and community projects that emerged from the presencing process.

Others have preferred visual imaginations of a positive future that we build after the increasing chaos and possibly collapse. Social critic Naomi Klein's 2020 video *A Message from the Future II: The Years of Repair* boosts the subtitle: *If We Stop Talking About What Winning Looks Like, Isn't It the Same as Giving Up?* (The Intercept, 2020). Her video – a follow up to the award-winning video "A Message from the Future with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez," which painted a future in which people in the United States pulled together to launch the decade of the "Green New Deal" (The Intercept, 2019) – projects society into the probable future. The animated video paints the second pandemic of COVID in 2023, climate catastrophes, and the final realization that untamed economic growth equals sickness and death. Intensely struggling and fed up with dinosaur politicians, the people start protesting and striking, realizing that the only way forward is to build new systems. The people rebuild society starting with fundamentals such as local food, health, and education systems, while recognizing the importance of maintaining more-than-human systems. They return land to indigenous groups and form local collectives that are prepared for disasters and capable of ensuring that everyone has enough to meet their basic needs (See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2m8YACFJIMg>).

The people, that is, build "a commons-centric society," self-organized, self-governed, founded on community and care, and functioning outside

the state and the private sector. Indeed, talk of the commons and a possible commons-centric society has become widespread in recent times. The pandemic highlighted the importance of the commons more than ever. Social organizations and groups stepped up to provide commodities and services to their local communities, illustrating the need to organize locally in order to take the provision of our basic needs into our own hands when the state and private sector fail us. In querying whether coronavirus would mean the end of neoliberalism, social critic Jeremy Lent (2020) posited that “this rediscovery of the value of community has the potential to be the most important factor of all in shaping the trajectory of the next era” (para. 33). The pandemic made it clear why people in crises historically have joined in commons in various parts of the world to stave off disaster. The crisis drove home the necessity for communities themselves to develop commons to provide the necessities of life, including food, water, shelter, medical care, among others.

We initiated this volume long before the pandemic shattered our normalcy. Yet, the pandemic and the revelation of crumbling systems made this book more significant than we initially imagined. People of the world may have to look more at local community commons to provide for our own survival as governments increasingly fail to adequately care for their people and the private sector cares only about their high-paid elite. Our intention in editing this book was to highlight the importance of the commons as well as to explore what leading on the commons looks like, since leadership on the commons has not been a focus of study by commons scholars and activists. Indeed, leadership is missing in most of the accounts of the commons by well-known scholars and activists such as Nobel-prize winning, now deceased Elinor Ostrom, David Bollier, Silke Helfrich, Massimo DeAngelis, Michel Bauwens, and others. Many of them have written that leadership will not be required in the future and that governance is all that will be needed. We disagree. We believe that the commons require some form of leadership and that it is important to reimagine leadership on this ancient, yet recently rediscovered form of organizing and acting in community.

Consequently, we published a call for proposals and received a large number of submissions from which we selected 17. We believe we have succeeded in selecting those that provide both theoretical arguments for and practical examples of particular approaches to leading on the commons. Authors hail from the United States, Great Britain, Brazil, Chile, New Zealand, Nigeria, Rwanda, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Slovenia. We have

titled the volume *Reimagining Leadership on the Commons: Shifting the Paradigm for a More Ethical, Equitable, and Just World* because the authors have presented approaches to leadership that challenge the underlying paradigm of the self-maximizing economic man. They have based their leadership on a far more communal, open relational paradigm based on care, compassion, and responsibility toward others and toward the more-than-human.

By the time this book is published in late 2021, the U.S. will have a vaccine against COVID-19, a new administration will be in power, but climate change will still be worsening and the vitriolic partisanship that is tearing the country apart will still be raging. Hopefully, that will not be the time of another global disaster. In any case, we hope that the leadership approaches proposed by the authors will prove useful whatever the future presents, and that leadership on the commons can provide the world a path toward a more ethical, equitable, and just world – the kind of world we all yearn for. That possibility may be in our own hands to create. Studying the commons and leadership on the commons give us some hope, for as Kirwan, Dawney, and Brigstock (2016) wrote:

*The idea of the commons offers a romance, and through this romance, a way forward, a way to think out of the despondent political narratives of ecological destruction, polarization and dispossession, and a counter-narrative to that of the inevitable and uncontrollable force of neoliberalism. Above all else, it offers a glimmer of possibility that change can occur incrementally, and that small acts matter. (pp. 3–4)*

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