

David Bollier

Activist, writer and policy strategist, co-founder of the Commons Strategies Group

Interview conducted by Martine Antona

MA: *We have 10 questions for you. We'll use this interview for the book, as we'd like to present a range of diverse and shared perspectives. We will share the transcript with you.*

My name is Martine Antona, I'm a researcher from CIRAD. I am an economist, who started working on the commons in 1994 with Jacques Weber. He's a French researcher who created the French Institute for Biodiversity, and he was one of the first people to invite Elinor Ostrom to come to Paris in 1993. He was the chief economist in the French Institute for Marine Research, and thought this kind of approach could enrich knowledge about the management of coastal communities ... So I started working with him on coastal commons. Here in France there is a very well-known commons organisation called the Prud'Hommie, which decides how to organise different kinds of [collective management??] in the Mediterranean. We also started work on another kind of commons – land sharing in rural communes in France, and then helped with the land reform (Gellose) in Madagascar, where the land tenure policy recognised some forms of commons. We're still working on this subject, this kind of reform and recognition of commons. There is some recognition of commons, but they are also threatened by the new policy of payment for ecosystem services, so now there's a struggle because some people want to use commons to recognise collective payments for ecosystem services.

DB: In other words, whether the collective value of a commons has to be monetised in order to be recognised? Oh that fascinating – who's pushing that?

MA: *All the conservation NGOs. In the context of REDD.*

DB: Of course. How fascinating. And how do they propose determining the value of the collective commons?

MA: *Now it's [all about?] opportunity costs. But that's not satisfactory because it's the opportunity cost of people stopping producing something in the forest. There's a huge debate about what the value of this collective activity should be. They are looking at the collective as the sum of the individuals in it. There are some interesting issues in Madagascar and Sigrid [is looking at?] this topic. I started in 1984 when Gellose began, and now she's looking at all the threats to the collective management of the resource, of the commons in Madagascar right now.*

DB: In other words, some of these definitional issues are the key ones, from which everything else will flow.

MA: *So that's my story. After that I led the GREEN team in CIRAD, and then we did this study. You were recommended by Gael Giraud, who told us we should interview you.*

DB: You are aware that I am not a land tenure expert, so I have limitations.

MA: *It's not about land tenure.*

Q1. Can you tell me about your first encounter with the commons? How did you get started in this field?

DB: Well it was quite an indirect process. Let me say that as an American, I'm an unlikely candidate to have discovered the commons. I come out of a Washington advocacy and policy background, having worked with Ralph Nader, the consumer advocate and activist. This was in the 1970s and 1980s when

he and many of my peers in that world were fighting what we might call enclosures of the commons. At the time, we didn't have a vocabulary for that, to talk about the corporate marketisation and privatisation of the airwaves for broadcasting, taxpayer-supported drug research, public lands used for grazing, timber, and water and other shared resources. Those were important experiences for me in the late 1970s and early 1980s. For me, several things came together in the 1990s. I realised that the Democratic Party in the US and liberalism were not going to provide the kind of transformational change needed. The rise of the World Wide Web showed that valuable production could occur outside of both the State and the market. I discovered Professor Elinor Ostrom's work, particularly her 1990 book. And I started working with a number of Washington policy people who were disgusted by the whole political and policy process.

We formed a small institute to study the commons and political and policy discourse. We wanted to go beyond activist campaigning and beyond Ostrom-style scholarship to describe the commons and situate it in the political economy – and come up with appropriate policies for macro-economic and policy concerns.

My work on the commons was especially influenced by working with Europeans, especially Germans and the Heinrich Boell Foundation, after 2008. Silke Helfrich, the director of the Latin American office of the Boell Foundation, hosted a 2006 Latin America-wide conference on the commons and brought scores of people together. By 2009, Helfrich and I and Michel Bawens of the Peer to Peer Foundation created the Commons Strategies Group. With the support of the Boell Foundation, we co-organised two international conferences on the commons, a number of strategy workshops and two books, anthologies. I was able to pursue this internationally, and with Europeans, in ways that I couldn't do in the US.

Q. 2 & 3. Can you tell me about a recent project, policy intervention, advocacy or experience that shows the importance of the commons concept?

DB: Well, I have encountered many powerful examples in my research on the commons. Usually it's a crisis, hardship or unacceptable pressures that make people want to start a commons. In other instances, people form commons by choice, as on the Internet or digital contexts. Let me talk about a personal story. I've published a dozen books, all with different publishers and my last book, *Patterns of Commoning* (co-edited with Silke Helfrich) was an anthology of essays about dozens of notable commons. We decided that a conventional publisher wasn't going to be helpful to us because they give authors very small royalties, they insist upon owning the copyright, they don't let you use a Creative Commons license so you can post your work on the web, and you don't have control over the marketing. So we decided to publish the book as a commons. We got people who were interested in the commons and ran a private crowdfunding campaign. That raised about two-thirds of the costs of printing the book, and we were able to do a big print run and have complete control over its design and marketing. We sell it through our own website and Amazon, while also posting it on the Web for free. Producing the book and publishing it as a commons-based project proved better than going through a conventional publisher who takes the lion's share of revenues and few of the risks.

That's just a personal story. But I have encountered similar stories of resourcefulness in creating commons. In India, for example, rural women started sharing seeds to grow their food rather than depend upon the market for proprietary GMO seeds that are expensive, non-native and require pesticides. I think many communities come to the commons because they serve their needs better than either the market or government programmes do. They have greater control and greater benefits. And even if it's harder in some ways to execute, commoning gives them dignity and personal satisfaction. It provides important measures of political power and community sovereignty over a

part of their lives. These are some of the general reasons why people sometimes choose the commons.

Q4. What do you see as the main issues in using a commons-based approach? What is at stake in terms of governance – in mobilizing and using commons lands. What do you think about governance, territory, land use or public policy?

In terms of governance:

DB: Well there are benefits and costs. A key benefit, as I mentioned, is the political sovereignty and control that a group of people gains on a long-term basis. Of course, there are some tangible benefits that a person gets through the rights to use a resource. That's an enormous benefit, especially at a time when so many large economic and financial players – companies, hedge funds, investors – are using their power to take control of resources.

Commons help people retain or reclaim resources that morally or traditionally belong to them – forests, fisheries, farmland, wild game, urban spaces, agricultural crops, medicinal plants. In some ways, relying on a commons is a defensive strategy to retain or assert control over a resource. But the stakes are even bigger than that, especially in the context of land, because a community's ownership of land has a lot to do with its culture and identity. That's an enormously important thing to preserve. People often want to create or preserve a commons because they want to maintain a way of life and a cultural identity that may go back centuries.

There are of course complications and difficulties in doing that, especially in today's world. And there are problems with collective action and coordination. The group must devise fair rules that its participants respect. They may have to institutionalise their social practices, secure adequate capital if necessary, and come up with creative 'hacks' on state law to win recognition. There are big stakes in creating a commons. You could say that it's easier to create them when the State or the market is not paying attention, when you have an open space to be creative. But when the State and market are both interested in capturing these resources for their own purposes, it's even harder to create a commons because commoners generally don't have the same power as the State or market. In addition to the internal challenges of forming a self-governing commons and preserving their culture, they may have to fight a global finance system and a hostile State. So the stakes are quite enormous.

Land tenure and territories:

The same dynamics affect land tenure, because management of the resource is wrapped up with governance issues. Who should have legal control? If you see commons as just a resource, you ignore the fact that a commons is primarily a social system. So if governance and control are taken away, the State or market is not just taking away the resource, it is dispossessing a people of their identity and subsistence.

MA: And what about public policies? A public policy body is asking for help with a policy for the commons. What is at stake for you?

DB: Well, there are many levels at which you can talk about the proper role of policy. First of all, one must ask whether a state policy meets people's needs. Does it serve their best interests? Perhaps commoners have the best answer as to whether a policy meets their needs or not. The issue is not just a material issue of having enough food; it's about cultural, spiritual and ecological issues as well. Does the policy serve those interests? To the extent to which policy is an expression of political power or nation-state dominion, it may not really care whether people's needs or desires are being met. Policy may become a proxy or symbol for the authority of the capitalist system or nation-state, which

is jealously interested in asserting its supremacy and authority. So geo-political or economic issues are often elevated above the needs of the people themselves.

Q5. Do you think the nature of commons and the issues they raise have evolved in recent years? And if so, can you analyse how and why they have changed?

DB: The publication of Elinor Ostrom's book *Governing the Commons* in 1990 was a major landmark in thinking about the role of the commons – but even then, it took another decade or more before her work was properly recognised. She didn't win her Nobel Prize in Economics until 2009.

Another major landmark was the development of the World Wide Web in 1994. Throughout the 1990s we saw the growth of free and open source software, and then in the early 2000s the growth of social media, blogs and wikis. All of these tech and cultural innovations created a generational cohort that realised there is an alternative way of thinking about property, markets and the commons. In the digital context, the commons wasn't just an issue for academic research or for traditional rural communities in poorer nations, it became a more generalised paradigm. I think the Internet had a lot to do with popularising the commons as well as giving it an experiential reality. People began to realise, "Oh, so that's a commons too!"

But in a more specialised sense, a whole subculture of activists, irregulars, project leaders and some academics has arisen to study the commons in different, more practice-driven ways than the Ostrom scholars, going beyond social science scholarship. I would say the past seven years have seen an enormous growth in the commons as a cultural paradigm. Much of this stems from the Boell Foundation conferences in 2010 and 2013, which each brought together over 200 people from 30 or more countries. Those events helped develop working relationships, shared discourse and social recognition and validation of the whole commons paradigm.

There have been many new books published, too. The past five or six years have been especially powerful. Over the past two years I've been just astonished at what's been happening, independently and spontaneously – festivals of the commons in various European countries, legal scholarship and activism, books and workshops, a francophone network of commoners, the rise of a 'city as a commons' movement, and many innovative projects dealing with alternative currencies, self-organised social services, and so on. People are looking to the commons these days as a way to name activities that otherwise didn't have a name or a recognised logic or ethic. Commons were not seen as connected thematically, philosophically or culturally to such activities as creative place-making, digital co-operatives, community-managed forests and urban spaces, and so forth. The commons now makes visible social practices that were not previously visible.

Q6. You told me that land tenure is not your focus of interest. This question is about land tenure. Is it convenient and pertinent to analyse land tenure practices in terms of commons?

DB: Absolutely, because commons are arguably the predominant, more durable and most ecological form of land tenure and usage. A land tenure expert in Africa, Liz Alden Wily, with whom I have had a number of conversations, writes that 156 of the 196 modern states are agrarian. That is, their economies remain land-based. Their assets cover two-thirds of the world's land area, and meet the needs of 80% of the global population. Three billion rural people are directly dependent on commons. That's 42% of the world's population. Most acquire land through community membership, and depend on this for protection of their land and resource interests. The sheer scale of land ownership makes it hugely important, not only to people's livelihoods but to ecological stewardship and climate. So even though the modern world might like to consider land tenure issues as some pre-modern

concern that is of little interest or consequence, it needs to re-think this conclusion. Land tenure has enormous importance for the planet's ecosystems and people.

Q7. And what kind of elements or mode of action could be useful to capture the commons in land tenure practices?

DB: Well, there are a lot of questions in that one question. One is how members of the local community, commoners, can protect their commons. That's a big issue in itself, but that issue is wrapped up in a larger issue of State and global economic systems that tend to be either sceptical or hostile to the commons. So there is a bigger set of issues than simply managing the commons. One must consider how the State, corporations, investors and international institutions treat the commons. It's important to have a commons-friendly policy environment that supports commoning as a legitimate and effective alternative.

That's still a battle to be won. I know that Elinor Ostrom spent many of her last years before her death doing precisely that. She tried to use her pre-eminence as a Nobel Prize Laureate to call attention to commons as a serious alternative governance system. However, we generally see trade treaties and macro-economic policies undermining the commons. How can we affirmatively support commons through global policies? We need to have that discussion.

MA: *You didn't say elaboration of the rules by the commoners.*

DB: I did at first. You're right, internal governance is the first challenge that needs to be focused on and improved. But that issue cannot be effectively pursued if these external factors – the power of the State and the market, and law and policy – aren't also dealt with simultaneously.

Q8. Do you think it is also interesting or consistent to have a typology or classification of the commons? And if so, according to what criteria and for what purpose?

DB: I think that taxonomies as traditionally developed are too rigid and universal in how they are applied. So much of the character of any commons is contextual, situational, subjective and cultural, and these contingent factors can't be easily put into an objective schema. So I'm a bit sceptical about taxonomies. I might even say I'm sceptical about the IAD taxonomy [Institutional Analysis and Development] because it attempts to universalise something that intuitively I believe can't be universalised, at least in the standard ways. That said, I do think there are some important recurrent principles that one can see in commons. They tend to manifest in different ways according to the particular local circumstances of each commons. I like to use the idea of *patterns* to describe these recurrent principles, using the idea of 'pattern languages' developed by Christopher Alexander. My colleague Silke Helfrich and I used this idea in our book *Patterns of Commoning*. We wanted to develop a framework for understanding commons that is somewhere between a rigid universal grid and a chaotic, eclectic set of individual case studies. I think one can see clusters or patterns of recurrent behaviour that could be used in a very loose way. You want to allow for local variation and honour such contingent differences without trying to distort the phenomena you're observing by applying overly rigid taxonomies. That's my complicated feeling about this issue.

You're right, one of the criticisms I would have for some Ostrom scholarship is that it is so disaggregated and based on individual case studies that it can be hard to draw generalised principles from them. Ostrom of course had her own eight design principles. Some people expand them in different ways. That's extremely useful, but it's also limited because they are rather broad principles, and not typically focused on intersubjective or cultural factors, or on the political economy. So I agree

there is a need for more coherent generalised understandings without distorting the phenomena that are being studied – how does successful commoning occur?

Q9. Do you think there is an interest in mobilizing French co-operation support for land tenure commons in the South?

DB: I can't judge that, but I would hope so because I think it's consistent with the mission of French development strategists and their interests in social equity and empowerment, stemming urban migration and addressing climate change. I think that commons-based land tenure systems would help people on the ground and indirectly support commoning initiatives in France. In other words, experiences of commoning in the global South could be helpful for French people in their own commons initiatives: a new kind of South/North cooperation and solidarity.

MA: *How can they do that, at what level can they do this? How would this connect with collective action – on the ground or ...?*

DB: Would it be policy driven? I'd hate to say that such a collaboration would be driven by one thing or another. Everything is so integrated. While it's obvious that many African land uses would be radically different from those in France, if only because of their different cultures and histories, I like to think we can learn from foreign experiences with the commons paradigm more generally. I realise that this conclusion is speculative; that's because so many commons are exercises in co-learning. And co-learning means opening yourself up to unexpected outcomes and alternative perspectives that you didn't initially think had anything to offer you.

This is a different approach to development from bringing in experts who have gone to the best universities and telling people that the experts will tell them how to do things. Commoning is different mindset – a co-learning exercise that can happen at all levels, not just at an intellectual level, but at an emotional and cultural level too. Those are important lessons as well, because ways of knowing are not just intellectual; they engage the whole embodied person and community.

Q8. What do you see as the main threats and opportunities for French co-operation investment in the commons?

DB: There are opportunities to develop some effective paradigms for more ecologically-minded governance, with obvious ramifications for climate change. There will be positive effects on social stability and cultural identity, and in preventing famines, urban migration and social dislocation in affected countries. So I think there are enormous opportunities. But because the commons represents a different development strategy, there will be political opposition. Many people regard commons as a challenge to the dominant financial and economic models for building global capitalism. The commons, by offering diverse, localised and historically unique alternatives, challenges the strategy of commodification and the price system as the universal template for 'progress'.

But to the extent that the status quo is not sustainable – ecologically, economically or culturally -- there is a need for a credible alternative pathway. That's what makes the commons attractive. I might add that the commons is not just a unified blueprint with a universal set of answers; it's a social process for discovering these answers collectively. Precisely because it's a process that is co-implemented, everyone is focused on fairness, equity and ecological sustainability from the very start. And that's more likely to yield a stable future than an alien model that is imposed from the outside and is thus more likely to resented.

So yes, there are constraints in developing commons strategies. But I consider them short-term challenges *en route* to a better place that we all need to go to in any case. In the alternative – maintaining the status quo – are we really willing to use political coercion, and perhaps military force and social and environmental suffering, which the current path puts us on? Or should we take a risk on some of the mid-term and long-term commons-based strategies that could arguably be more socially and politically effective?

MA: Last question – are there any particular works, references, bibliographies or people that you think should be included in this research?

In terms of land tenure, and more broadly, I have great respect for Etienne Le Roy, and I'm sure he's in touch with people that would be of interest to you. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization is an excellent source of expertise here as well. The Ostrom-founded network, the International Association for the Study of the Commons, also has many wonderful scholars you can speak to about all sorts of commons issues.

The US Community Land Trust movement, cities with Urban Land Trusts for affordable housing, and the Agrarian Trust are all worth engaging with too. The Agrarian trust helps deal with the inter-generational transfer of land to help young farmers. Personally, I work with the Schumacher Center for a New Economics in the US, which has been very involved in land and agriculture issues. It initiated the first community land trust and has helped incubate community-supported agriculture as a new model.

Indigenous peoples and participants in the group *La Via Campesina* have a lot to contribute as well, based on their first-hand experiences and on-the-ground knowledge. I would be remiss if I didn't also add Selke Helfrich, my German friend and colleague. She has such an extensive European and international background, and can speak on land tenure issue and many other commons issues.

MA: Thank you very much. I'm very pleased that this collective work with the LTDC not only has a scholarly focus but also draws on the experiences of people who are involved with the commons.