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Commons – Whose Commons?

- considering conceptual approaches to rural space of production

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ABSTRACT

The article takes its point of departure in current suggestions stating that the idea of ‘commons’ could be a universal and normative guideline for how to organise a part of the interplay between nature and human activity. It is stated, that the concept in contemporary discourses has a widespread spectrum of connotations and is engaged for descriptive, prescriptive, and normative purposes. The content, character and meaning thus depend on context and dimensions in focus; the point is illustrated by means of the historical Danish commons. In a consecutive investigation of implicated concepts from social sciences (‘property rights’ being the starting point) it is similarly stated that implications cannot be determined ex ante. By means of elements from institutional economics and the sociology of space, suggestions for a conceptual framework are presented as basis for more detailed studies at a lower level of abstraction. Returned to Danish farming – but now in its contemporary settings – it is concluded that the framework of commons not adequately can be copied-and-pasted into present context due to the complex interconnectivity where local agriculture have boundless prerequisites and effects.

KEY WORDS: institutional economics, commons, space of production, place

Introduction

The starting and end point is economic dimensions of rural landscape and agriculture as the subsequent productive field. The meaning of ‘landscape’ has evolved to cover territory (including polity) and scenery (Olwig, 1996). A landscape is “... *a historical document containing evidence of a long process of interaction between society and its material environs*” (Olwig, 2002, p.226). In rural landscapes that interaction generally also implies a space of production; in that respect landscape is nexus in the present article. Landscape contains land; land is from an economic point of view a productive factor and as such part of the capital prerequisites for social production. To produce by means of land it is necessary to apply two other productive factors: real capital and labour. But land is not only a productive factor; it is also the container of a crucial part of the natural resources as well as the space in which critical reproductive processes of nature take place; besides, land constitutes social space for human creativity and recreation as well. Thus, landscape contains and implies spaces that both represent crucial visible and non-visible elements of the natural life support systems (systems that we as human beings must handle sustainable to maintain human life (Levin, 2009)). Landscape also represents conflicts of human interests related to scarce productive and reproductive resources which is reflected in contemporary discourses by terms like ‘post-industrial landscape’ and ‘multifunctionality’ (Ling *et al.*, 2007, Taff, 2005, Ferrari & Rambonilaza, 2008). In this connection ‘commons’ has been introduced as a representative of principles that might give cause to sustainable organisation and management of interaction between social activity and nature in the landscape.

The concept of the commons

The concept ‘commons’ has in the last decades entered academic as well as public debate concerning a broad spectrum of problems referring to various biophysical structures like nature, landscape and environment, and besides to social parameters like access, property rights and administration. The current discourse has its starting point in Hardin’s (1968) famous article concerning the ‘tragedy of the commons’ based on analysis that illustrated implications of ineffective pay off and natural degradation (in contemporary terms a social trap), contested by Ostrom (1990) who stated that Hardin’s point did not comply with *general* experience, rephrased by Hardin (1994) as ‘the tragedy of the *unmanaged* commons’, and e.g. rephrased as potential ‘comedy of the commons’ (Rose, 1994). The appertaining academic efforts have led to a remarkable amount of conceptual and contextual suggestions and applications occasionally referred to as ‘new commons’ (Bravo & Moor, 2008). In Danish, the corresponding concept is ‘*fælled*’ which until recently exclusively described a piece of grassland where the tenants in the époque of feudalism were able to make their cattle graze while the concept close to it ‘*fælles*’ has been reserved to describe what is common in the sense of mutual and shared. However, in current international discourses, the major part of the contributions does not refer to common grassland. When citizens e.g. are urged to ‘reclaim the commons’ (Anonymous, 1993, Barnes, 2006) it does not imply that my neighbours and I according to the senders of the imperative should establish common pasture for our cows (of which we have none so ever). It is rather suggestions concerning common access, organisation/administration, and/or mutual ownership of certain assets. Although contemporary discourse is based upon a variety of interesting and important academic findings, and although a comprehensive part of these findings have been acknowledged with the Nobel Prize to the key founding mother of the nuanced part of the discourse, Elinor Ostrom, at the end of the day we are

still dealing with a diffuse and blurred concept due to applications in a very broad variety of contexts where emphasis is put on a similarly broad spectrum of dimensions. The concept is e.g. used to describe and explain technology and social structures in feudal systems (Clark, 1998), it is used to describe the internet plus information and intellectual property rights (Hess & Ostrom, 2007, Lessig, 2003) and also spirituality (McWilliam, 2009), it is used to describe public presence in rural space (Mitchell, 2008), it is used as basis to urge for a movement to roll back market enclosure of common life (Bollier, 2003) and further to describe principle foundations for a renewal of the capitalist system as “*capitalism 3.0*” (Barnes, 2006). In such connections a very broad variety of different dimensions are engaged by different scholars; some e.g. underline the property right dimension (‘common/shared property’), some stress dimensions concerning organisation and administration (‘common coercion’), some draw attention to dimensions related to open access (‘publicness’) while others again delimit focus to interrelations between human actions and nature as aesthetic form and/or as natural life support systems. Hence, the concept is no longer reserved to inclusively refer to the *‘faelled’* but does in contemporary use cover a tremendous variety of connotations where the concept is engaged to underline descriptive, prescriptive as well as normative objectives. As it presumably would be a Sisyphean task to ‘reclaim the commons’ in the sense of rolling it back to recapture its original reference, it is actually necessary to realise that a variety of different meanings are currently embedded. Content, character and meaning of the concept vary depending upon context and supplementary on dimensions in focus; subsequently it is necessary to be careful, specific and explicit in the determination of context and dimensions when the concept and corresponding conceptual frameworks are engaged. Nowadays the concept *per se* is so imprecise that it appears empty and meaningless without such specifications.

The '*fælled*', context and dimensions

The original meaning of the Danish concept '*fælled*' refers to farming in the feudal époque. The appertaining peasant society could be characterised as a system based on centralised property rights concentrated among the landed proprietors plus the crown and the church. However, the system also implied broad user rights for tenants gathered in what could be labelled as a peasant communitarian organisation. User rights implied the right to farm but e.g. also access and hunting. The communal system of agriculture implied that peasants and smallholders (including their families and hired hands) were gathered in village communities with a high degree of local ability to mutually administer local matters; an organisational structure based on rather specific institutions that to a certain degree aimed to ensure that the common good were pursued. Copyholders and smallholders with access to land participated in the village meeting and amongst them a master of guild was elected for a one year period. In the village meetings, the participants agreed upon a broad variety of practical problems concerning common decisions regarding current and long term planned farming practice, disagreements, crimes, domestic problems, etc. This organisational mode should be understood in relation to the general feudal system, including the economic subsystem and the agricultural technology of that time. The economy, especially in the villages, was dominated by barter (Madsen, 2007).

'*Fælled*' was grassland within and around the peasant community, i.e., it was enclosed fields in periods where fallowed and it was outskirts like heath land, wasteland, pasture, meadow, marsh, etc. The '*fælled*' was a crucial factor of agricultural production due to the necessity to make use of pasture for animals especially in the summer. The agricultural usage and social function of the '*fælled*' were subject to a complex and delicate system of administration and regulation based on well-established institutions. The general everyday tasks attached to pasturing and management

of the animals were put in the hands of the local village herdsman while the superintendence was put in hands of a bailiff elected by several villages in unity. And as the '*fælled*' was part of the agricultural production system of the village, decisions concerning usage were taken in the village meeting as part of the general social organisational decision-making and planning system. The village community was to a high degree constituted so that the agricultural production was the concentric anchor point for joint decisions and actions based on plans carried by the village meeting. This fact did also embrace the commons which in turn also implied that the village meeting jointly kept order on the commons; this included supervision to avoid inadequate usage and exhaustion of the land e.g. due to over-grazing. Further, the Danish king stated by law in 1683 that the carrying capacity of the commons should be estimated as a precautionary measure against over-grazing. Accordingly, assessment officers were appointed to carry out the task attached to a more centralised supervision. (Madsen, 2007, Bjørn, 1995, Bjørn, Fonnesbech-Wulff & Frandsen, 2000, Porsmose & Bjørn, 1997, Fritzboøger, 2004)

The brief sketch above should indicate that the '*fælled*' indeed was not an expression of anarchy, not in any sense part of an unregulated system where productive use and aggregated outcome were assigned to atomistic and segregated decisions and it was neither a system based exclusively upon hegemonic power. On the contrary, the system should be characterised as part of a specific and complex institutional arrangement that aimed at maintaining balances between central authority, local and regional authority and the relatively autonomic joint organisation of the villages which also embraced joint supervision and care for the commons. However, this institutional arrangement did not last forever but was transformed into a new one. Powerful actors wanted changes and advocated the need by referring to a notion of the feudal farming system as ineffective. This was a notion that was fostered in England and exported to the continent (Clark, 1998).

The feudal system was transformed and as a part of the transformation, new farming technology was introduced which implied the necessity to make fundamental reconstructions of the institutional arrangement including transformation of the barter economy into a pecuniary economic subsystem. It is here crucial to underline the specific context and subsequent dimensions of the concept of the '*fællid*'. It can only get content, character and meaning in relation to that specific context including specific societal structure, technology and the specific economic subsystem to a high degree bounded to the place.

Key economic concepts related to the commons

Both in current academic discourses and in investigations where more historical perspectives have been engaged, essential elements have – implicitly or explicitly – been obtained from the economic construct. However, to reveal the potential dimensions and perspectives these concepts might offer – and immanently imply – it is necessary as a starting point to investigate their basic content, character and meaning.

Property rights are an often implicit, but nonetheless crucial, institutional prerequisite in economic reasoning. The background is that economic exchange has two preconditions. *First*, the *substantial*: establishment of a relation between buyer and seller imply that the former will receive utility by means of the good to be exchanged and the latter conversely does not need the good but is able to obtain utility due to what he receives in the act of exchange (be it pecuniary, tangible goods, or services). *Second*, the *social* precondition is that the seller is able to achieve right to make certain

decisions concerning the good, including the formal and informal ability to decide whether to divest or not, in combination with means to maintain exclusivity; the latter precondition being crucial due to the fact that in case of non-exclusivity the buyer would not have to enter a relation of exchange. This is where property rights enter the picture; the social surroundings have to ensure mutual recognition of the opportunities of execution of decisive power and exclusivity, where society ensures the necessary opportunities by means of formal and/or informal institutions which in turn are parts of a general social institutional arrangement. (Lundkvist, 2004)

However, property rights are not paramount and do not in the real world necessarily imply unlimited power to the holder of the title to exclude other actors from utilities emanating from the property. This is where *user rights* enter the picture. User rights imply that a finite or infinite number of actors have the right to make use of a good notwithstanding the fact that they do not possess property rights. The farmers e.g. in the Danish feudal system as sketched above did not hold property rights to the land; they were tenants and subsequently held user rights. In the present time one could make an analogy to rent and lease arrangements where the property rights are maintained by the vendor but user rights for a fixed term are transferred to the consumer. User rights/access to private roads can similarly provide an illustration of both historical and contemporary significance. Property rights do not necessarily equal user rights; the relation between the two are set, maintained, and evolved according to a specific institutional arrangement only to be revealed in the specific context.

The distinction between public and private property is in principle inappropriate because exclusivity is embedded in the very concept of 'private' while it simultaneously contains no determination of who should hold the right to exclude – that right can be held by an individual or a group of individuals, even a nation (Lundkvist, 2004). However, the academic use of the term makes it adequate to maintain a distinction where 'private property' refers to individuals and groups

in the economic sphere and ‘public property’ to the political sphere. In other words, *public property* will in this connection imply that the property rights are held by political authorities (in a wide sense) subsequently able to execute decisive power and exclusion in line with Easton’s (1965) concept of authoritative allocation. Defining *private property* (in the sense the concept is typically used) is, however, much more difficult in a positive sense. Several classic as well as contemporary economists have underlined private property as constituted by its individuality but in the real world private property will often imply that several individuals share joint property rights to an asset. Defined negatively – which indeed is more plain – private property is such that cannot be characterised as public which in turn imply that the decisive power related to alienation and exclusivity is not in the hands of public authorities. Private property can thus take many forms and be attached to individuals as well as groups and subsequently the concept does not contain rather much information but should be determined specifically in relation to context. In immediate continuation of the individual foundation of the major part of economics, the mainstream part of the branch tends to neglect various forms of non-public property, i.e. various forms of organising collective/mutual ownership outside the economic and political sphere (Mitchell, 2008) and thus only focus on ownership attached to the market in traditional sense; either as individual property or as shared property by means of capital markets; however, mainstream economic scholars have recently showed increasing attention to the concept ‘club-goods’ (in continuation of Buchanan (1965)), often approached by means of game theory (Scotchmer, 2008).

The distinction between public and private goods and tasks are tricky too due to the fact that it is difficult to distinctly decide what should be public and what should be private. In standard economics, *public goods* are such that would not (or not adequately or in sufficient quantities) be provided if provision was left to private producers because at the bottom line it would be unprofitable for private actors to produce them (Musgrave, 1969, Buchanan & Musgrave, 1999,

Samuelson, 1973). Subsequently *private goods* are those provided by agents participating in regular markets.

A way to consider the latter distinction more explicitly to nature and landscape could be by way of Roman law. Here property was divided into four different categories. *Res publica* implied that property rights were held by government to benefit the public. *Res communes* characterised goods (such as air and light) where it is impossible to claim and maintain exclusivity. *Res nullius* covered goods like e.g. fish where no one had claimed property rights but once a person or group of persons had taken such goods into possession they were considered *res private* like any good (except *res publica*) to which property rights were attached (Buck, 2003). From these four categories it is possible to extract two crucial dimensions: *exclusivity* and *subtractability*.

‘Exclusivity’ is, as stated above, necessary to meaningfully establish property rights – it will give no meaning for me to claim property rights over a good if it is impossible or very costly relatively to the value of the good to exclude others from utilisation. The second crucial dimension, ‘subtractability’, refers to the degree in which my use of the good subtracts the utility left to others to enjoy. Based on these two dimensions it is suggested that *common pool resources* should be defined as “... *subtractable resources managed under a property regime in which a legally defined user pool cannot be efficiently excluded from the resource domain*” (Buck, 2003, p.5).

With the reference to Roman Law and the cited definition of ‘common pool resources’ we are moving out of the mere abstract considerations attached to pure economics. ‘Property regime’ and ‘legal definition’ necessarily refer to social institutions indeed not exclusively attached to the economic/market domain. On the contrary we are dealing with concepts that presume rules of the game prior to inclusion of the market. Some have to create the rules, some to administer them and make records, some to empower the actors to conduct according to the rules, some to judge in

case of dispute and violation, etc. In other words, institutions like government, public administration, cadastre, judicial system, etc. are presumed.

The economic concepts applied in social context

From the abstract economic concepts above, it is impossible to deduce real world links and implications. While economics due to its evolutionary history has its origin in the market as a social institution, it subsequently tends to treat other allocation institutions exogenously or even totally neglect their existence or inevitable function; further, contemporary mainstream economics can be characterised as being of asocial and ahistorical nature (Milonakis & Fine, 2009) based on *ceteris paribus* restrictions which does not realistically comply to a world where context matters. However, the brief review above already indicates that more specific considerations concerning institutional arrangements are necessary; and moreover it is necessary not to delimit considerations exclusively to those imbedded in the marketplace.

Nonetheless, the key economic concepts and their theoretical framework represent important deductive and axiomatic considerations related to market economies. When implemented in the real world, the concepts represent institutions concerned with how to make the economy work, based on which conditions (including interrelations to and interplay with politics and civil society). Institutions are not exogenously given, they are socially established and they evolve. This is also the case concerning the institution of property rights and its subsequent implementation e.g. in relation to cadastre (Stubkjaer, 1992, Silva & Stubkjaer, 2002).

When we study property rights at a lower level of abstraction it is necessary to investigate their extent at least related to the degree of subsequent exclusivity, delimitation of proprietors' room for manoeuvre, and frames – as well as demand – for management. These points can be illustrated by means of a comparative study where hunting was the object of research. Based on a law passed in 1964, the French government has forced farmers to make over their hunting right to a local association where every farmer should be enrolled as a member. The main purpose of the association is to manage the stock of game. As compensation, the farmers receive the right to shoot on all land covered by the association. In Portugal, however, the *res nullius* principle from Roman law has been in charge which implies a separation of the ownership to land and the ownership to a part of the potential yield, *in casu* game that is seen as non-property until captured and hereafter as property belonging to the hunter. Still, government demand annual exploitation and management plans provided by a common organisation for a delimited geographical area and to be approved by the governmental hunting agency each year. In Denmark the right to the yield consisting of game belongs to the landowner who can keep the hunt for himself or lease it to other hunters; in other words, hunting is thus commercial but restricted by governmental regulation especially consisting of hunting periods based on national population inventory schemes (Carolino *et al.*, Forthcoming).

The illustration from the field of hunting underlines that property rights do not imply any specificity in at least two fields: management and initial allocation. *First*, as e.g. stated in relation to another field, groundwater resources “... *the relevant question for economists is not whether to manage the groundwater resource, but how to manage it; the meaningful point of comparison is not between central control and no control, but rather between central control and other forms of groundwater management*” (Provencher & Burt, 1994, p.876). And, one can add it should now appear as evident that resources can be managed adequately without the use of private property rights or centralised regulation (Eldridge, 2009, Manning, 2008, Agrawal, 2003). *Second*,

private property rights regimes require initial distribution of the stock (e.g. land) to which property rights are attached and schemes concerning how flow/yield are allocated and how rights and obligations attached should be distributed. Furthermore, both management and schemes concerning flow and yield must evolve depending on social, economic, and technological development to avoid potential damage to ecosystems (Dietz *et al.*, 2003); it is obvious to add, that such schemes in general should deal with externalities. Management and schemes simultaneously have to comply with social arrangements that in turn have to evolve according to context as well as to current public perceptions to ensure general public acceptance.

Finally, the illustration also underlines the necessity to specify the concepts of ‘public goods’ and ‘public access’. Kaul *et al.* (1999) have in general terms contested the mainstream economic interpretation of the concept of ‘public goods’. *First*, it is not given which goods are public and which private; the distinction has to be an outcome based on political choice. *Second* public goods are not necessarily useful to everyone or anyone and it is neither certain that all social segments might make use of it. *Third*, a public good is not necessarily provided by the state (Conceição *et al.*, 2003, Kaul & Conceição, 2006). Further, government can have property rights to private goods, produce them and bring them to the market; hence, government can act as any economic agent as well as invite private agents to procure public goods. Establishing property rights does neither imply any specific degree of *inclusion/exclusion* or “*publicness*” (Mitchell, 2008, Baland & Platteau, 1996) according to access or according to user rights (including rights to claim output/goods originated from capital such as land).

Societal fields

Economics is about allocation but allocation is not exclusively decided at the marketplace. As indicated in the preceding considerations, allocation of goods and rights is a result of complex decisions and actions based on various manifestations of social action. This complex was an important field of research for the institutional economist J.R. Commons (1862-1945) based on his studies of contemporary US society. The subsequent theoretical corpus is build upon three main factors: scarcity, conflict of interests and collective action. He envisages property rights as key to conflict of interests, because property rights distribute access to and command over scarce resources but also point at collective action as the basis for holding the conflicts of interests in check. Thus, J.R. Commons substituted the invisible hand of Adam Smith (1723-1790) with the visible hand of common-law courts (Chavance, 2009). Collective action and institutional structure “... *mould and shape individual thought and action*” (Milonakis & Fine, 2009, p.177) and hence create a delicate balance between individual and shared interest as well as stability and evolution. ‘*Collective action*’ can be unorganised (custom) or organised (going concern). In his further investigations, J.R. Commons stresses that individuals belong to several different organisations and he divides them into three main categories: economic, political and cultural (Chavance, 2009).

The insights from J.R. Commons apply to the present context that collective actions establish and evolve societies, that collective actions can be custom or going concern and finally that collective actions simultaneously take places in different fields. In other words, as social actors we are participants in various manifestations of collective action performed at different social arenas or fields, cf. Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992). These fields might be classified as 1) the economic, 2) the political, and 3) the field of civil society where each is based on a specific rationality and the function of each field depends on specific mechanisms.

The various fields thus offer different opportunities based on different rules of the game. And moreover, the specific rules of the game – and so specific opportunities offered social actors in the social fields – rest on context, i.e. the specific institutional setup in the specific time and space. The diversity also implies that the fields contain different systems to allocate matter, value, power and esteem among the social actors. At the *economic field* the actors organise production and reproduction as producers and consumers, employers and employees. At this field businesses and households are typical organisational units. At the *political field* the actors organise decisions and administration of common and public social interests. Constituency, decision-making institutions and public administration are thus typical organisational units. At the *field of civil society* families, neighbourhood, and associations are the typical, organisational units. When considered as allocation systems, none of the social fields are from a formal point of view perfect but bounded by their different rationalities and context. However, in unity they are able to balance the total social system, cf. Hernes (1978, 1985).

A first step to approach a real world determination of balance in and among social fields is possible by means of the ideal type concepts of *Liberal Market Economies* (LME) and *Coordinated Market Economies* (CME) (Katzenstein, 1985, Hall & Soskice, 2001). When this framework is connected to the concepts of social fields, it will become clear that the specific balance reveals how authority and social tasks are divided among them. In LME's the balance tends to give high priority to the market and less to the political field; i.e., let the market take care of most current tasks and leave to the political field primarily to provide overall frames for the market and to supply frames and services that help the market function properly, e.g. minimise transactions costs (Williamson, 1994) and compensate for diseconomies like negative external effects (Coase, 1960). In CME's the balance is different while the division of tasks between the three fields is more even and flexible. Thus, by means of determining the balance between the fields and the

subsequently division of authority and social tasks it is possible to provide the foundation to decide the ideal typical institutional arrangement of a society.

However, the LME/CME dichotomy is only a first step heuristic tool. An even more detailed specification is necessary to explain and understand *how* and *why* social authority and social tasks are carried out in a specific social context. Such considerations will reveal important variations in time as well as variations amongst economies that fall into one of the two ideal types, LME/CME (Elsner & Hanappi, 2008, Hancké *et al.*, 2007). The specific division of tasks and authority is the basis for determination of the specific institutional arrangement of a given society and thus basis for determination of how landscapes are perceived (Carrier & West, 2009, Barry & Smith, 2008), administered, and regulated both as biophysical units and social constructions, how property and user rights are distributed and actions for individuals and groups are bounded, etc. In other words, the specific institutional arrangement concerning balance and division of tasks and authority amongst the societal fields is a foundation for contextual meaning, content in, and relations between, the standard economic concepts. The specific context of the Danish historical '*fælled*', and thus the balance between the division of authority and tasks between societal fields of that time, is a prerequisite to explain and understand how and why that specific common good functioned. Correspondingly context is a prerequisite to explain and understand the various supplementary real world examples presented above.

Institutions – guidelines in the fields

The societal fields are related and interrelated and are functioning on the basis of a certain rationality embedded in institutions as parts of an institutional arrangement. Based on the widely accepted definition offered by North (1990), institutions can be defined as:

“Institutions are the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction. In consequence they structure incentives in human exchange, whether political, social, or economic. Institutional change shapes the way societies evolve through time and hence is the key to understanding historical change”. (North, 1990, p.3)

Thus, institutions can be perceived as mutually accepted guidelines for human action. They contain information about what is seen as adequate and appropriate interpretation of, and responses to, the surroundings, – social, mental and biophysical. They subsequently contain information about what specific rationality a certain group (nation, social class, community, association, family, etc.) of humans has established their relations upon. It follows then that there are various sets of institutions (e.g. in a nation) coexisting with various subsets (e.g. various local regions and communities) that are interconnected and to a certain degree compatible and complementary but not identical.

This picture of institutions also complies with the various societal fields introduced above. These fields contain various sets of institutions not necessarily identical but to a certain degree compatible and often to a very high degree complementary. Institutions in – and hence embedded rationality of – civil society will typically differ from those in economic and political

fields. That is one key *raison d'être* for the variety of social fields; they can supplement and substitute each other giving basis for various actions and reactions based upon different rationalities. When for instance the outcome based on the mechanisms of markets is undesirable and/or perceived as inadequate (e.g. distribution of income or damage to nature and environment), actions in the political field can compensate (e.g. by means of the tax-system compensate families left in income squeeze and by means of regulation minimise or compensate pollution) or civil society might compensate (e.g. help from neighbours and charity organisations, or nature restoration initiated by nature conservation societies).

In general, the construction of human relations implies that productive and reproductive activities take place in the various fields; which activities that take place where and how, is guided by means of institutions.

Context revisited – the concept of space

In the preceding contemplations context is crucial to establish specific content, character and meaning of social concepts and problems. In general, context is a matter of *when* and *where*. 'When' refers to determination of concepts and problems in historical time and 'where' refers to determination of position in space.

Space is conceptually used in a very broad spectrum of contexts (Kitchin *et al.*, 2004, Crang & Thrift, 2000). Thinking concerning the concept of space might well be seen as an expression of our general human and analytical need to be able to place anything somewhere where we are able to make delimitations and subsequently by way of placement obtain the insight that

provide meaning to things. ‘Things’ are thus matter and processes and subsequently both tangible and intangible; following this line, spaces have to be distinguished as physical in some connections and as imaginary in others. The origin of the concept has been empirico-physical implying space considered as outside humans and thus something absolute and objective “... *space and place are often regarded as synonymous with terms including region, area and landscape*” (Kitchin *et al.*, 2004, p.3). In recent decades this perception has been contested and space has become ‘the everywhere of modern thought’ (Holloway *et al.*, 2003) and occurs as starting point for many intellectual disputes. However, – just as pointed out concerning the concept of commons – content, character and meaning are depending upon context (so we are also depending upon context of context) and clarification of the specific dimensions thus have to be considered.

However, current conceptions seem to reach a complex and nuanced consideration that is able to include absolute dimensions too. One can for instance state that landscape is *at* place *in* a place. It is imperative to remember that landscape consists of soil, rocks, vegetation, and biological creatures but as soon as we employ concepts like ‘commons’ to the place it is also turned into a social construction. The place is thus a social construction of human relations and human reconstruction of biophysical structures.

The concept of space involves both material and immaterial dimensions and hence implications of physical delimitation or boundaries attached to a specific substance or activity. Thus, we can initially distinguish two different categories of demarcation: boundaries in biophysical sense (e.g. watersheds) and delimitations induced by human cognition cf. (Smith, 1995). In the first sense space can objectively be revealed (e.g. by means of GIS), but in the second, boundaries must be negotiated and hence potentially be object for continuous renegotiation. Castells (2000, 2002) provides a valuable and adequate contribution in the context of the present discussion of landscape, nature and social interaction. Castells has suggested distinctions between ‘*space of place*’ and

‘*space of flows*’ especially meant for his investigations of new economy in the information age.

Castells is thus preoccupied with networks, how they are organised and the actors are located. In the present context it seems adequate to set ‘space of place’ as the area that geographically can be demarcated in absolute terms while ‘space of flows’ should consist of two types of spaces: one type for material flows and another for immaterial flows, the first subgroup being tangibles (i.e. matter and in the social form e.g. commodities and pollution) and the latter being intangibles (in the social form e.g. information, ideas, and financial capital). Hence, space is simultaneously tangible and intangible.

Context, institutions and landscape

The peasant farmers around the Danish ‘*fælled*’ were part of an institutional arrangement and they were employing a certain technology. This in turn affected the rural landscape (Fritzbøger, 2004, Bruun & Fritzbøger, 1999, Hjorth *et al.*, 2002) and gave it a specific appearance. In the feudal setting of Rural Denmark, social interplay as well as human interplay with natural life support systems was to a high degree attached to the local place. These processes did not involve distant time-space relations in either aspect. In that regard, space of flows and space of place was very closely intertwined.

The transformation away from the feudal mode of production implied a new institutional arrangement where individual property rights became more essential while importance of user rights and collective action conversely diminished; further, new technology was introduced once again. The overall implications could be observed in the landscape as new and altered artefacts in consequence of the abandonment of peasant village communities and subsequent relocation of

farms and increasing enclosure where the *'fælled'* as common pasture and organisational principle gradually disappeared. The transformation hence affected societal fields too and untied the past intertwining of spaces of flows and space of place.

A new transformation followed from around 1880. New institutional arrangements and technological shifts could be observed along with new business strategies focusing on animal production and international marketing of processed food (Bjørn, 1982). Co-operatives were introduced as a new mode of collective action based on deliberative competences acquired in continuation of the specific Danish Enlightenment project, and with traces back to institutions from the village communities (Ingemann, 2002). Similarly, rural actors and their intellectual supporters founded private organisations (parcel out associations) to provide farmland for smallholders with lack of sufficient land to provide for themselves and their families according to the productive and reproductive conditions of that time (Skrubbeltrang, 1952, Ingemann, 1997). Again, transformation could be traced in specific landscapes as well as societal fields and spaces of flows.

Ensuing transformations and changes occurred during history till present times; among important milestones are industrial farming technology and at the latest supplementary and substitute organic technology. Transformations and changes can be tracked in the landscape. This is also the case regarding societal fields where agro-industrial and agro-political complexes evolved (Ingemann, 2002, 1999). The industrial farming technology implied that global flows became crucial and constituting prerequisites for modern agriculture; production evolved to create a 'new space of production' by utilising and combining a broad variety of places and flows. Although institutional arrangements have changed, memories are present and it is possible to reveal a trajectory with specific genetic origin in the feudal peasant system – or even before. Institutions have evolved and been adapted according to changing contexts but in line with – and according to – the origin, experiences acquired, and subsequent changes in social and natural settings. When, for

example, organic farming was institutionalised in Denmark 1987, the organic farmers did what Danish farmers have done for more than a century: they called upon government and activated the specific mix of actions in the fields of economy, politics, and civil society (Ingemann, 2006). In consequence, organic farmers obtained governmental certification and subsidy schemes as their conventional colleagues did more than 100 years earlier. Danish organic farmers' ability to manifest collective action and to connect to contemporary spatial flows in their trials to establish businesses, is one of the important factors behind the relatively high market share of organic food in Denmark (Kjeldsen & Ingemann, 2009, 2006)

Although it is obvious to recover genetic traces of former institutions in contemporary actions and reactions, major differences occur too. When comparing the Danish peasant farmer in the feudal époque with the contemporary industrial pig producer, differences seem overwhelming. The institutional arrangements are radically altered; the meaning as well as implications of space is radically different too. The peasants acted in a place where the organisational and power-related interrelations (as well as flows) to a very high degree were clear and transparent and for the major part attached to the place. The contemporary industrial farmer is a pawn in an inscrutable agro-industrial and agro-political complex (going concerns) that reaches far outside the place occupied for his agricultural production: fodder being imported as soy-beans from South America and tapioca from South East Asia, fertilisers and chemicals from a huge amount of places, etc. and subsequently external effects, besides financial relations around the globe. To establish the contemporary spaces of flows in which the industrial farmer consciously and unconsciously takes part, will implicate a careful and detailed track-and-trace investigation of great extent. Contemporary spaces of flows in which the industrial farmer takes part, indicate that he indirectly occupies and affects spaces of places not known to him and without specific incentives to care.

When rural landscape of the era of the '*fælled*' is compared to contemporary rural landscape in the attempt to investigate meaning and potentiality of the concept of commons, two points strike the eye. *First*, in the former era the space of production was almost totally delimited to the place. That unambiguousness is in the contemporary context superseded by a space of production consisting of a complex network of places linked by means of ambiguous flows. *Second*, in the former era the unambiguous space of production and the community coincided; i.e. collective action in the fields of economy, politics, and civil society was unified and attached to the place. In contemporary context this attachment to the place and convergence of actions in the societal fields are superseded by hyper complexity and diffusion. Thus, the contemporary rural landscape in Denmark is no longer just a reflection of the *place* of production and local community but of a complex *space* of production in a global economic system. However, Danish farmers have not lost their institutionalised ability to engage in collective action but contemporary actions have assumed new dimensions due to altered context where the hegemony of place has disappeared. As the meaning and function of the '*fælled*' where attached to the place, it seems inadequate – and even impossible – to reinstate principles of commons in that sense. Collective action might be necessary to meet contemporary challenges attached to the productive and reproductive interplay between man and nature but it should subsequently be in dimensions compatible to present context.

Conclusions

There is a link between sustainability in the biophysical and social sense. Biophysical sustainability implies that the social institutions are able to address the biophysical challenges in a sustainable way and to manage these challenges, institutional sustainability is a prerequisite. However, this

claim does not imply institutional rigidity; on the contrary, it implies the necessity of institutional evolutionary capacity and deliberative competences among the social actors. When biophysical conditions change (e.g. in reaction to human social actions), social institutions have to change too in response if both the biophysical as well as the social systems are to be sustained.

The brief sketch of the '*fælled*' compared to the framework presented in the present article suggest that interrelations between the societal fields are decisive in determination of how ownership, property rights, user rights, regulation, administration, etc., are distributed. The interrelations across the fields establish various forms of connections and interdependence that results in certain institutional arrangements that in turn determine various rules of the games; this also includes rules of the game concerning interplay with biophysical structures and thus basis for determining the degree of sustainability as well as appearance of rural landscape.

From a social point of view the '*fælled*' was indeed not an expression of anarchy, it was not in any sense part of an unregulated system where productive usage and aggregated outcome were assigned to atomistic and segregated decisions and it was neither a system based exclusively upon hegemonic power. On the contrary, the system should be characterised as part of a specific and complex institutional arrangement that aimed at maintaining balances between central authority, local and regional authority and the relatively autonomic joint organisation of the villages which also embraced joint supervision and care for the commons, i.e. space of production. However, this point does certainly not imply that we are able to copy and paste such a kind of institutional arrangement to the present and hence neither to restore rural landscape as it appeared in the era of the '*fælled*'.

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