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The Tragedy of the Commons as the Tragedy of the Private Sphere – Arendt’s Remarks on an Aristotelian Idea

The term, *tragedy of the commons* refers to situations when self-interested agents tend to sacrifice the long-term goals of their communities for the sake of their own benefits whereby, on the long run, they end up harming themselves as well. While the utterance itself was coined by ecologist Garrett Hardin in 1968 in order to call attention to the dangers of unlimited population growth within limited natural resources, the idea goes back to Aristotle’s Book II of the *Politics*, where the Philosopher claimed that the more people share a certain property in common (κοινόν), the less they tend to care (ἥκιστα γὰρ ἐπιμελείας) of it (Aristotle 2008, 57). This empirical remark was presumably intended as a criticism of Book 5 of Plato’s *Republic*, where the abolition of private property (and the supposed benefits thereof) were first outlined. In order to reconcile the two tenets, some medieval commentators held that while the Platonic view could be applied to the prelapsarian state of human nature („*in statu innocentiae omnia communia erant*” – as San Bernardino da Siena phrased it in the 15th century), after the fall, when people had become vile and greedy, the Aristotelian framework was much more appropriate in terms of interpreting ordinary human actions (Senensis, 1745, 182). We cannot be sure whether by Aristotelian influence or not, but almost three centuries later David Hume also came to the conclusion that human nature had such a harmful quality, due to which „each seeks a pretext to free himself of the trouble and expense, and [lays] the whole burden on others”, as a result of which they all end up worse off (Hume 2009, 808-809).

But it was only the 20th century, which saw the widespread application of the concept in both philosophy and social sciences (with Elinor Ostrom's Nobel-prize winning account being only one of them). Hannah Arendt, for instance, drew a crucial distinction between family and society on the basis of ownership, since the former, as she said, „had been identified with a privately owned piece of the world, its property”, and the latter a „collectively owned, piece of property”, but later added that „collective ownership, strictly speaking, is a contradiction in terms” (Arendt 1958, 256). Although the term, *tragedy of the commons* never turns up in Arendt's texts, one can easily observe considerable similarities between the underlying ideas behind such remarks and the implications of the concept itself. However, apart from scarce scholarship on the field (e.g. Grandia 2007; Martin 2013), Arendt's relationship to this Aristotelian idea remains understudied to this day. The aim of my proposed talk is, hence, to highlight its stakes in the author's thinking including how her concepts like „world alienation” were fashioned by it.