

Social Atrophy, Social Infrastructure, and the Commons

Dr. Sarah Stein Lubrano



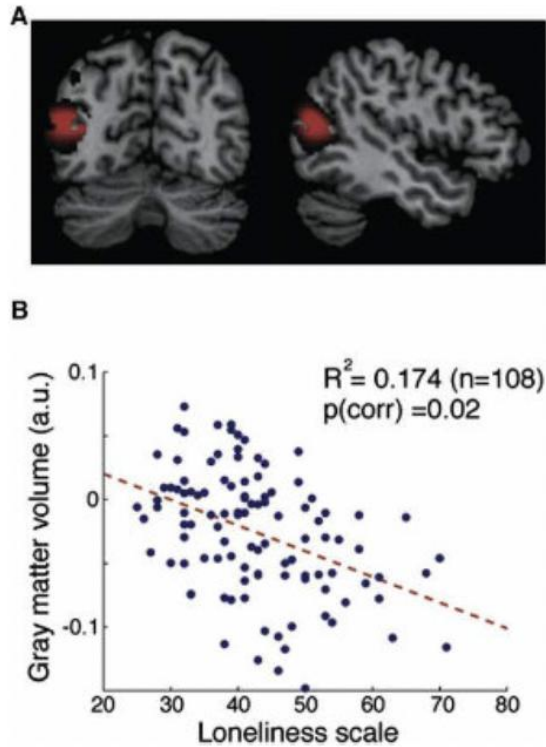


Figure 1. Gray Matter Volume Correlated with Loneliness Scale



Functional magnetic resonance imaging of the human brain reveals some of the regions associated with the default network — a collection of neural centers that are most active when we think about other people.

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John Graner, Terrence Oakes, Louis French and Gerard Riedy

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“loneliness
”

Social Atrophy - we can measure it beyond the brain

- all groups radically reduced face-to-face socialization time in the last few decades
- Men have reduced hours of face-to-face socializing by 30 per cent
- unmarried people by 35 per cent
- teenagers by 45 per cent
- people's number of friends has dropped
- One in eight Americans say they have no close friends!
- Lonely people die sooner-worse for you than cigarettes
- And our brains aren't the only things that are shrinking...two other things have long been in decline also

Social Capital

- ‘the structure and quality of social relationships, from which individuals, social groups and the society may benefit.’
- See work of : Glenn Cartman Lowry, Robert Putnam
- “Social relationships have value.”
- The *Bowling Alone* problem - varied possible explanations



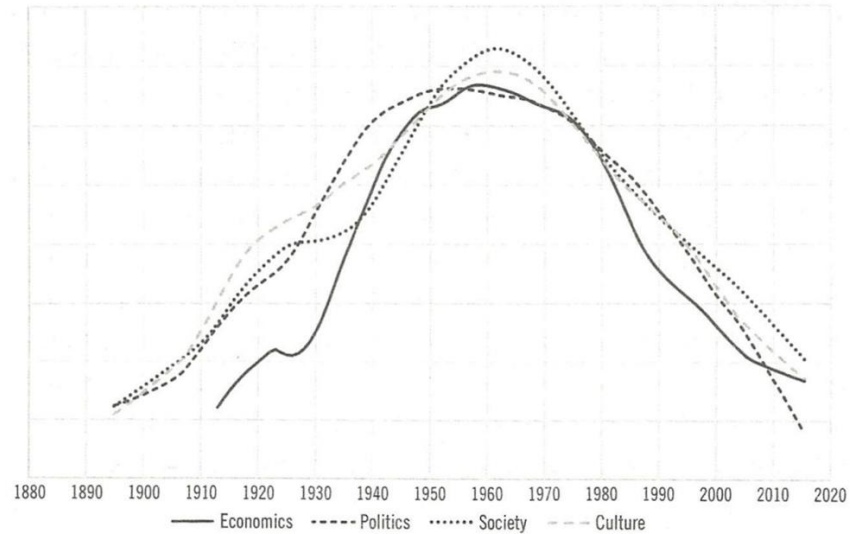
Social Infrastructure

‘the crucial organisations, places and spaces that enable communities to create social connections—to form and sustain relationships that help them to thrive.’

Creates social capital, protects against or repairs social atrophy



FIGURE 1.1: ECONOMIC, POLITICAL, SOCIAL, AND CULTURAL TRENDS, 1895–2015



The trends illustrated above represent a compendium of scores of different measures of phenomenon in four key areas: economics, politics, society, and culture. We ask, has America been moving towards greater or lesser economic equality, greater or lesser comity in politics, greater or lesser cohesion in social life and greater or lesser altruism in cultural values.

Our social world is shrinking, and with it our number and quality of relationships, and our brains.

Social capital, social trust, social infrastructure are all declining. This leads to social atrophy.

This is probably overdetermined, but causes include the shrinking of social spaces, atomisation, income inequality, and more.

This problem of social atrophy in the broad sense cannot be captured in any one discipline. There is a need to “triangulate.”

Something here needs to be protected, expanded-what is it and how can we theorise it?

A commons?

What is a commons?

Originally, the idea that the land held by public institutions is owned by all of us, together.

Extended to include, in modern times, not only the air, water, etc. but also things like infrastructure, even information and data.

Like infrastructure, which sometimes works best when its public and becomes efficient otherwise, many things work best as a commons. Imagine everyone having to graze their animals in a single tiny patch... or trying to divide up a river...

(And arguably some things don't work that well as commons, e.g. tragedy of the commons).

Social capital, social infrastructure, and social life fit many criteria for a successfully managed commons

- **Can only be generated collectively in the first place**
- **Can't be easily divided or loses value when divided**
- **Possibility of hyperabundance**
- **High importance to each user**
- **Manageable size, level of knowledge and stability of the resource**
- **There are individual incentives to collectively maintain it**
- **It is easy or possible to coordinate care of the thing (opposite of the prisoner's dilemma)**

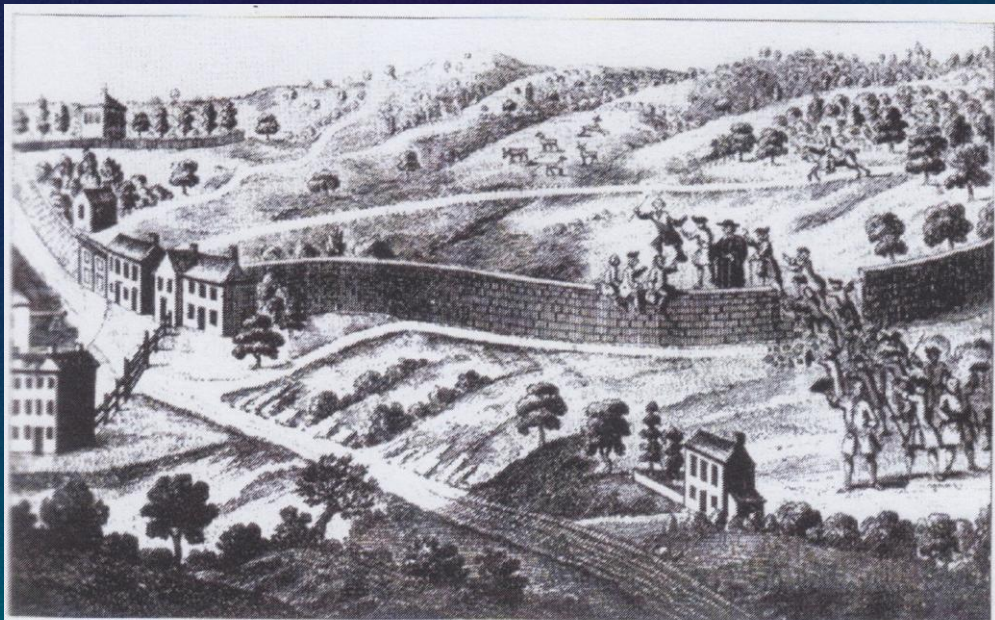
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Elinor Ostrom's criteria for resources compatible with the commons

- The size of resource system – a moderate territorial size is most conducive to self-organization.
- The productivity of system – self-organization is less likely to work if a resource is either over abundant or already exhausted.
- The predictability of system dynamics – for example, some fishery systems approach mathematical chaos, making self-organization infeasible.
- Resource unit mobility – self-organization becomes more difficult with mobile rather than stationary units, e.g., in a river versus a lake.
- The number of users, – transaction costs can be higher with larger groups, but such groups can also mobilize more resources. The net effect depends on other variables and on the tasks undertaken.
- Leadership – high skills and an established track record amongst leaders aids self-organization.
- Norms **and social capital** – in terms of shared moral and ethical standards.
- Knowledge of the socio-ecological system – more if better.
- The importance of resource to users – where the resources is vital, self-organization becomes easier.
- Collective choice rules – which can lower transaction costs.

- **Ostrom's work spends a lot of time trying to solve/address/disprove the problem of "the tragedy of the commons"**
- **But the original problem of much of the commons was the "enclosure of the commons" by the ruling class**
- **This may be the more important problem to solve when it comes to social spaces**

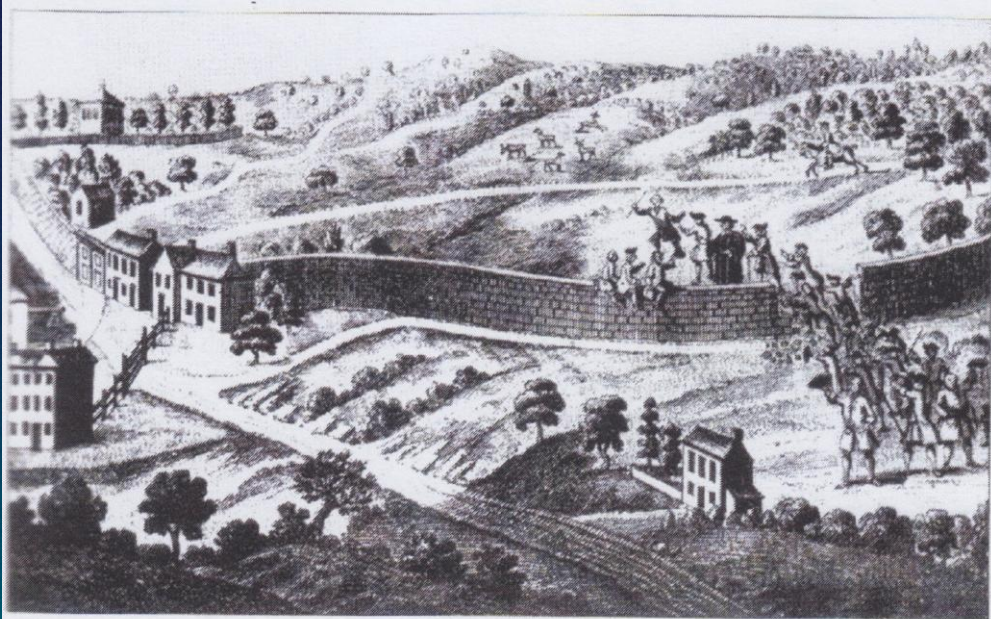
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Depiction of May 16th, 1751, when a group of local residents climbed over the wall into Richmond Park to carry out the traditional 'Beating the bounds' ceremony—an annual walk around the borders of a parish. Pastense, "[Today in London's anti-enclosure history, 1751: a crowd force entry into Richmond Park](#)," May 16, 2019.

The Historic Enclosure of the Commons (and resistance to it)

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Depiction of May 16th, 1751, when a group of local residents climbed over the wall into Richmond Park to carry out the traditional 'Beating the bounds' ceremony—an annual walk around the borders of a parish. Pastense, "Today in London's anti-enclosure history, 1751: a crowd force entry into Richmond Park," May 16, 2019.

Enclosure

Compare to

- POPS (privately-owned public spaces)
- Shrinking public spaces (well documented shrinking of green spaces in UK, for example)
- hostile architecture
- closing of pubs and other commercial but affordable social infrastructures

Trend of people moving away from urban centers due to inability to afford otherwise/lack of jobs

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Governments are not always one's ally when it comes to the commons....

- the long history of governments shutting down coffee shops, because these were seen as places where people would gather to overthrow the government or more generally criticise the government.
- Putnam's approach may not work...



This matters doubly, because social infrastructure is political

- it is often the kind of “third space” (Ray Oldenburg) that allows for a certain kind of democratic life.
- People in third spaces are, at least in theory, equals; they can say what they like, they can mix freely and, for the most part, anyone is allowed. Without such places, human beings are often stuck in their hierarchical and/or exclusive ways of relating to one another.

The Negative Spiral Problem of Infrastructure (similar, but not the same, to the problem of the “tragedy of the commons!”)

- **“you wind up building a playset in your own backyard, one that you pay for yourself; there, your children can play, but they can’t gain exposure to the kinds of social challenges that are the unique provenance of interactions between strangers. Meanwhile, your neighbors are also building playsets ... the need for yard space ... is suddenly greater. The average house size starts to metastasize; the market for housing grows more expensive, squeezing out low-wage earners.” (Sheila Liming)**
- **‘Third spaces exist to span the divide between rich and poor, between the backyard playset class and the playing-in-the-street class, and to make the experience of being around different kinds of people feel habitual, meaning both more likely and less threatening.’ (Sheila Liming)**

There is also a (legal!) argument that we need to be free to assemble not just to state our political views but to take action in small ways and more generally organise.

Legal theorist Stanley Ingber: “To the Court...people may associate to advocate certain behavior but may not associate to take action to implement the ideas advocated. Psychology has long recognized, however, that requiring behavior inconsistent with belief creates tension within an individual. That tension is often resolved by altering the belief system to make it consistent with the compelled conduct. This theory of cognitive dissonance recognizes an inalienable connection between action and belief. The Court’s attempt to separate them accords with the myth of individual autonomy discussed earlier.”

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We are not free to think, (nor likely to speak freely) if we are not free to act in alignment with new possible beliefs.

“In addition to ecological change, new perspectives and values may be nurtured in a society that encourages, or at least permits, the development of new interests and experiences. Consequently, the status quo bias of the marketplace [of ideas] can probably be neutralized only by protecting a greater liberty of action-allowing people to choose among lifestyles offering differing roles and relationships – rather than merely supporting the freedom of speech.”

This fits with the criteria for ability to rethink political views that is outlined in my forthcoming book: we need sites of diverse sociality as equals, and opportunities for action.

(Sidenote: our most important social infrastructure probably can't be online)

Why?

- **Online spaces rarely change people's real-world behaviour**
- **Online spaces do not meet many of the criteria for “social contact theory”, [not contract theory] which predicts when interactions with others will break through prejudice. For example, in online spaces we rarely have shared goals or form longform friendships**
- **Of course there are exceptions...**
- **We also don't own platforms right now and they are optimised for profit**

Key Questions:

- **What legal structures could preserve or help extend social infrastructure, build social capital in an egalitarian or democratic way, protect democratic life at its roots, and reverse social atrophy?**
- **If the government and legal system will not support these goals, what other mechanisms do we have?**

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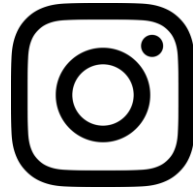
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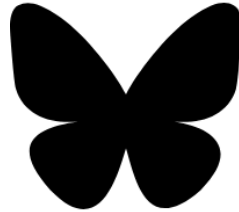
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