

Essay #2: Is “The Tragedy of the Commons” Still Relevant?

Background

By the time you begin writing this assignment, we will have read and discussed Garrett Hardin’s essay “The Tragedy of the Commons.” Because the essay was written more than 30 years ago, some of the concerns Hardin raises (such as overpopulation) and the examples he uses (such as nuclear disarmament) may seem dated. The *factual claims* he makes, even if they were true at the time, may no longer seem very important. But because of the *inferences* and the usefulness of the central metaphor, Hardin’s article is still widely cited in many different fields; economists, mathematicians, sociologists, philosophers, and political scientists, among others, have all found ways to make use of the essay to discuss many complex issues.

This assignment asks you to do something similar to these professionals: to show your understanding of the article and apply it to at least one example that you think makes it relevant today. *Or* you may choose to explain why you don’t think the article is relevant today.

What to do

In a short (4-5 pages) essay, please summarize the key points from Hardin’s article and explain how they explain (or do not explain) at least one modern conflict (see examples below).

How to do it

Writing the summary

Your summary should explain the following key ideas *in your own words*:

- The tragedy of the commons (consider the meaning of both “tragedy” and “the commons”)
- The claim that there are “no technical solutions” to some problems (why does Hardin feel the need to stress this point?)
- His specific claims about overpopulation (why it is a crisis, why and how it must be regulated as well as how freedom and conscience play a role in regulating “breeding.”)

Though you should focus on using *your own words*, please also use at least two *short* quotations from Hardin’s essay with MLA parenthetical citations. You don’t need a works cited page for this one unless you are using resources other than the course reader.

Applying the Central Concept

To apply Hardin's ideas to your own example, consider any of the following issues (we will work on several of these in class):

pollution of water, air, land
global warming
coastal development
pesticides
traffic (highway safety, traffic jams)
water shortages
food shortages
consumer debt
advertising overload
homework overload
prison overcrowding
school overcrowding (and all related issues)
immigration and borders
vaccines
homelessness and resources
housing costs
energy and alternative energy
hunting and endangered species
SUVs
graffiti
national parks
logging
big box stores
e-mail spam
the world wide web
satellite television

Due dates:

Three copies of rough draft:

Final draft: