Kinship and Commons: the Bedouins’ Experience

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Abstract

The chapter argues that the gradual transformation of traditional nomadic societies into modern urban societies reflects a major change in human social evolution. It has weakened the ability of kinship relations to serve as a social incentive to support sustainable common property regimes and fostered the modern urban tragedy of the commons. The scholarly debate between Hardin and Ostrom on the most effective form of regulation of common property is actually an effort both to identify and to influence the path of human evolution. The chapter illuminates this debate by analyzing both theories of social evolution and examining closely the urbanization processes undergone by Bedouin society in Israel. It highlights the link between strong tribal kinship relations and sustainable management of the commons, showing how the weakening of blood ties reduces the incentive to cooperate. It raises the question whether societies in which kinship ties have become less powerful can still produce strong enough incentives for collaboration.

Keywords: commons, social evolution, kinship, tribal law, sedentarization, land, Bedouins, Israel, Ostrom, Hardin