

Democracy Is A Tragedy Of The Commons

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1 Tragedy Of The Commons

A tragedy of the commons exists when there are individual incentives to act against the collective interest.

Peeing in a swimming pool is a good example of a tragedy of the commons. If you pee in a swimming pool, the pee quickly disperses through the water. If you are the only one peeing in the pool, it has little effect on you. If a hundred other people use the pool and many of them pee in the water, the water quality is degraded so that all swimmers are affected. The urine interacts with the chlorine to produce noxious chemicals that irritate skin, eyes and mucous membranes.

Everyone would prefer to swim in clean water, and would be willing to not pee in the water in exchange for this benefit. However, there is no incentive to not pee in the water. The cost of an individual peeing in the water is shared by everyone. The benefit (the convenience) goes to the individual alone. Thus, each individual has an incentive to pee in the water. So, everyone pees in the water, and everyone suffers from degraded water quality.

The tragedy of the commons explains why collectivism fails. In the tragedy of the commons, the effects of individual actions are collectivized. They are aggregated first, and then distributed to the collective. As a consequence, individuals act in ways that are collectively harmful.

See Game Theory and Society.

2 The Power Of Voting Is Small

Democracy is a type of collectivism. In a democracy, individual votes are aggregated to produce a collective result: an elected government or social policy. Each individual vote has little impact on the outcome, and the results are distributed to individuals regardless of how they vote, just as everyone swims in the same water regardless of whether they pee in it.

Suppose there is a referendum on a social choice with two options: A and B. Option A would cost every member of society \$10,000. Option B would have no effect on anyone. How much is your vote worth? That depends on the probability that your vote will change the outcome of the election. It is impossible to say what the probability is, but it is typically very small. Let's say there is a one in a million chance that your vote will change the outcome. In that case, the expected utility of voting for B versus A is one penny.

It is generally not worth voting, if your intention is to change the outcome of an election.

3 Voters Don't Make Good Choices

In fact, you might actually prefer to vote for A instead of B for psychological reasons. In this example, if there is a perceived payoff that exceeds one penny to you, such as maintaining ideological consistency, you might prefer to vote against your interests. This can happen on a large scale, so that the population as a whole votes for something that is harmful to everyone. In fact, this happens very often.

To make matters worse, political beliefs have not been selected to generate good social decisions. Since an individual's vote has almost no effect on society, why would the individual's brain acquire the knowledge necessary to make a good choice? If he votes for a bad candidate or a bad policy, he pays the same cost as those who voted against the candidate or policy. So, there is no incentive to acquire the knowledge necessary to make a good choice. The brain economizes its efforts. It isn't easy to understand how society works on a large scale, and that knowledge has no practical use for ordinary people. So, ordinary people lack the ability to make good social choices.

4 Political Views Function As Social Signaling

The ordinary person's political views have a different function: social signaling. People use political views as a signal to others. They organize into political tribes based on shared ideologies. People conform to the political views of those around them. This has nothing to do with making good social decisions. It is a game played by selfish individuals to advance their own perceived interests, on a small scale.

Political views have a number of social functions for the individual. They are used to fit into a group and signal group identity. They are a means of seeking approval and status. They are used to justify individual actions and excuse individual failure.

5 Politicians Deceive The Public

For politicians to deceive the public, the public must also be engaged in deception. Politicians intuitively understand that the public are fakers, liars, and hypocrites. Instead of promoting practical

solutions to social problems, politicians promote memes that people can use for social signaling. The politician is the bringer of hope and change, and you can get that printed on a bumper sticker or a t-shirt. In the game of politics, everyone is deceiving everyone, including themselves.

6 Conclusion

Because individuals do not directly pay the costs of their political decisions, most people use political ideologies as social-signaling devices, and then vote based on those ideologies.

That is why democracy is a tragedy of the commons.