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UNDERSTANDING THE TRAGICOMEDY OF THE NEW COMMONS

Introduction

The paper presents that knowledge, in its various forms, is a Common, alias a shared resource that is subject to social dilemmas, particularly in the digital age when it is distributed in a global way through ICT (becoming a *New Common*, alias a *Common Good of new generation*)¹. The investigation on the connection between Knowledge and ICT is rather recent, but it has been conceptualized starting from the concept of Traditional Commons, a category of goods, generally natural resources (local or global like water, forests, fisheries, wildlife, deep seas, atmosphere, climate, etc.), which the traditional economic theory has defined like those goods which show difficult exclusion, but high subtract ability in consumption among people². For these characteristics of being a resource shared by a group of people (at community's or international level) with no exclusion, Traditional Commons are generally condemned to the "tragedy" (congestion, conflict, overuse, pollution, deterioration, destruction, free riding)³ like in the famous example of the pasture open to all, formulated by Garrett Harding, who gave the name to the

¹ C. Hess, E. Ostrom: *Understanding Knowledge as a Common*. The Mit Press, Cambridge, Mass 2007.

² P.A. Samuelson: *The Pure Theory of Public Expenditure*. "Review of Economics and Statistics" 1954, No. 36, pp. 387-389; M. Olson: *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass 1965; L. Pennacchi: *Pubblico, privato, comune. Lezioni dalla crisi globale*. Ediesse, Roma 2010; L. Pennacchi: *Filosofia dei beni comuni*. Donzelli, Roma 2012; L. Pennacchi, A. Montebugnoli: *Tempo di beni comuni. Studi interdisciplinari*. Ediesse, Roma 2013.

³ E. Ostrom: *Coping with Tragedies of Commons*. "Annual Review of Political Science" 1999, No. 2, pp. 493-535; E. Ostrom, T. Dietz, N. Dolsak, P.C. Stern, S. Stonich, E.U. Weber: *The Drama of the Commons*. National Academy Press, Washington DC 2002.

whole problematic⁴. Also the New Commons (in which we can include many typologies of knowledge, also in digital form) are under the same threats, but some of their specific traits, which render them different from Traditional Commons, make these risks lighter, although the “hyper change” of information and communication technologies which can capture and diffuse on a large scale what was once impregnable and the social networks by whom they are managed, make New Commons vulnerable to pollution and to other risks and in need of preservation.

The “tragedy” of Traditional and New Commons can be avoided through the attribution of alternative property rights regimes (private, public, common) corresponding to three different principles of regulation: market exchange, coercion, reciprocity which guide respectively market, state and civil society. As Elinor Ostrom has shown in many scientific works reciprocity, in presence of specific requisites, is often more efficient than State or market in governing the Commons. Common property (neither private nor public) requests strong collective action, self governing mechanisms, institutional arrangements as well as high degree of social capital (values and norms of reciprocity)⁵. The “design principles”⁶, discovered by Elinor Ostrom, which generally guide the creation of the institutions governing Traditional Commons under a common property regime⁷, can not anyway apply all, automatically and in the same form to the New Commons which require different rules.

⁴ G. Hardin: *The Tragedy of the Commons*. “Science” 1968, No.162, pp. 1243-1248.

⁵ E. Ostrom: *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge University Press, New York 1990; E. Ostrom, R. Gardner, J. Walker: *Rules, Games and Common-Pool Resources*. The University of Michigan Press, 1994; E. Ostrom, J. Walker: *Trust and Reciprocity. Interdisciplinary Lessons from Experimental Research*, Russel and Fundation, New York 2003.

⁶ The “design principles”, which do not in any case constitute a “model” and which are not prescriptive, but represent only those items most frequently found by Elinor Ostrom in the successful cases of community management of common goods, are respectively: 1) the setting of clearly defined boundaries within which a common good and the group of its users can be circumscribed; 2) the adaptability of the rules of use of the commons, stipulated at community’s level, to local needs and to local conditions; 3) the participation of the individuals on which the rules fall to their possible modification; 4) the respect by the external authorities of the right of community’s members to design the rules governing the commons; 5) the creation of a system of monitoring the behavior of users of the commons; 6) the availability of a graduated system of sanctions; 7) the availability of inexpensive mechanisms for conflict resolution; 8) the assembly of all activities of governance of common goods in a single institutional architecture with multiple, but coordinated levels of activities. See E. Ostrom: *Understanding Institutional Diversity*. Princeton University Press, Princeton 2005.

⁷ Ostrom E.: *Governare i beni collettivi*. Marsilio, Venezia 2006.

And even if the New Commons can manage to remain in a common property regime resisting the tragedy, they are exposed to the continuous threat of commodification and enclosure⁸.

The admirable example of Wikipedia⁹, the Multilanguage Encyclopaedia built through free compilation work, gift of time, of knowledge and of competence by people, with no copyright, characterized by cooperation among individuals, show anyway that New Commons vicissitudes do not always turn in “tragedy”, but also in “comedy”¹⁰ and that human agents are not moved only by individualism and selfishness as the economic mainstream would like to paint them monodimensionally¹¹. So the question of the Commons seems to be more a question of *relationship among people (new relational interpretation)*¹² rather than a question depending only on the *mere technical characteristics* of the common good (not excludeable, but rival in consumption) according to the *classical interpretation* given by traditional economics, which put the accent only *on the relation between common good and its user*¹³. So we can interpret the tragedy of the Commons as the occurrence of a *negative positional externality* in their consumption¹⁴.

⁸ A “Second Enclosure Movement” is in fact feared by Boyle about the intangible common goods which are product of the mind. See J. Boyle: *The Second Enclosure Movement and The Construction of Public Domain*. “Law and Contemporary Problems” 2003, No. 66, pp. 33-74.

⁹ See A. Lih: *La rivoluzione di Wikipedia*. Codice edizioni, Torino 2010 and Burke P.: *Dall’Encyclopédie a Wikipedia*. Il Mulino, Bologna 2013.

¹⁰ The term “comedy” opposed to the “tragedy” of common goods has been invented by McCay, who has studied some experiences of successful management by communities of these resources. See McCay B., Acheson J.M.: *Human Ecology of the Commons*. pp. 1-34. In: *The Question of the Commons*. Ed. B. McCay, J.M. Acheson. University Arizona Press, Tucson 1987 and B. McCay: *Common and Private Concerns*. “Advances in Human Ecology” 1995, No. 4, pp. 89-116.

¹¹ See Montesi C.: *Dare, ricevere, ricambiare: il paradigma del dono come alternativa antropologica ed economica*, pp. 81-107. In: *L’interpretazione dello spirito del dono*. Eds. P. Grasselli, C. Montesi, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2008 and C. Montesi: *The Strange Case of Dr.Jekyll and Mr.Hyde in Economics*, pp. 207-219. In: *L’Entrepreneur face aux Politiques Publiques Européennes*. Eds. C. Martin, R. Tawfiq. PGV/ISLA Campus Lisboa, Lisbon 2012.

¹² See C. Montesi: *I beni comuni al crocevia tra simpatia per il prossimo ed interesse personale*. In: *Tempo di beni comuni. Studi interdisciplinari*. Eds. L. Pennacchi, A. Montebugnoli. Ediesse, Roma 2013.

¹³ In this new view the tragedy happens when, in a situation of marked interdependence between individuals given by the regime of community of the resource, the attempt made by a subject to improve selfishly his position compared to that of an other person, leads to a less efficient (if not catastrophic) result than the one which would have been achieved if all users had cooperated with each other. This is a revival of the typical situation of the prisoner’s dilemma in which the non-cooperation between actors, sacrificed to the blind pursuit of self-interest, far from harmonizing the interests of all at an optimal level, leads on the contrary to a decrease in general happiness.

¹⁴ C. Montesi: *I beni comuni...*, op. cit..

1. An attempt of taxonomy of Common Goods

An attempt to classify the Commons, albeit schematic, can be pursued by referring Common Goods to an unitary framework between global and local dimension, between the macroeconomic and microeconomic level, between nature and culture, taking also notice of all the interdependencies between the various spheres and of the effects, in space and in time, that each sector spreads over the others. If you proceed with this method then the Commons (Traditional and New) can find place in the four quadrants shown in the following figure resulting from the intersection of natural/global, cultural/global, natural/local, cultural/local (Figure 1). This scheme helps us to understand that to solve the concrete problems relating to their governance in a multidimensional and integrated approach, it is necessary to adopt a transdisciplinary perspective based on the paradigm of Ecological Economics in its various strands (thermodynamic¹⁵, institutionalist, bioeconomic) which has integrated Economics with Natural Sciences (Thermodynamics, Chemistry, Biology, Ecology). This paradigm, however, should be further contaminated by a contribution from Humanities and from other Social Sciences due to the innovative interpretation of the Commons in a relational key and not only in the physical-economic key given by Ecological Economics (which is anyway a step forward compared to the purely economic interpretation). This means that Ecological Economics should get engaged to Civil Economy¹⁶, to Common Good Economy¹⁷, to Experimental Economy.

¹⁵ N. Georgescu-Roegen: *The Entropy Law and The Economic Process*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass 1971.

¹⁶ See L. Bruni, S. Zamagni: *Economia civile. Efficienza, Equità, Felicità pubblica*. Il Mulino, Bologna 2004; L. Bruni, S. Zamagni: *Dizionario di Economia Civile*. Città Nuova, Roma 2009; P.L. Sacco, S. Zamagni: *Complessità relazionale e comportamento economico*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2002; P.L. Sacco, S. Zamagni: *Teoria economica e relazioni interpersonali*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2006; L. Becchetti: *Oltre l'homo oeconomicus. Felicità, responsabilità, economia delle relazioni*. Città Nuova, Roma 2009; L. Becchetti, L. Bruni, S. Zamagni: *Microeconomia*. il Mulino, Bologna 2010; L. Bruni: *L'ethos del mercato. Un'introduzione ai fondamenti antropologici e relazionali dell'economia*. Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2010.

¹⁷ See S. Zamagni: *L'economia del bene comune*. Città Nuova, Roma 2007; P. Grasselli: *Idee e metodi per il bene comune*. FrancoAngeli, Milano 2009 and P. Grasselli P.: *L'impresa e la sfida del bene comune*. FrancoAngeli, Milano 2011; P. Grasselli, C. Montesi: *Le politiche attive del lavoro nella prospettiva del bene comune*. FrancoAngeli, Milano 2010.

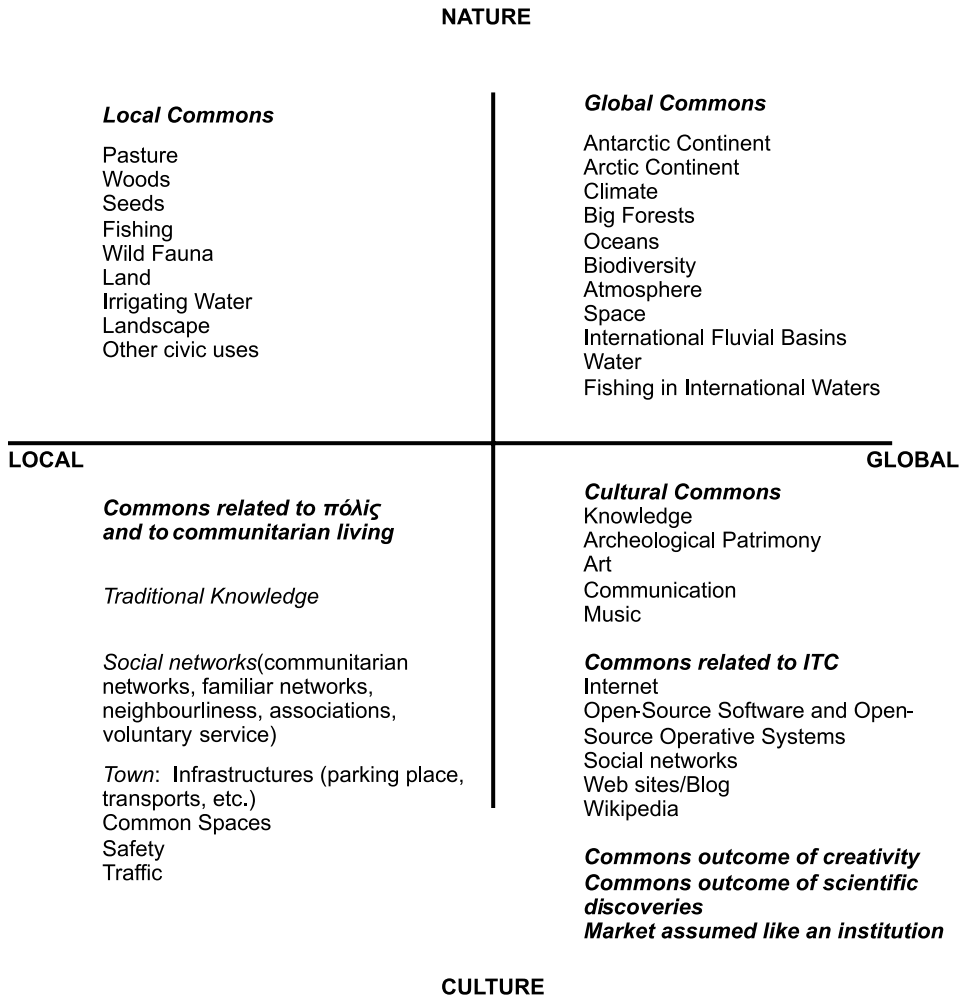


Figure 1. The Map of Common Goods, according to the dimensions nature/culture and global/local

2. Wikipedia as a typical example of New Common

Wikipedia is an Encyclopedia on-line created in 2001 that allows, in contrast to other Encyclopedias such as Encyclopedia Britannica or Microsoft Encarta, free access to the whole patrimony of human knowledge. So Wikipedia is a good related to ICT, is intangible, has no well-defined boundaries, is based on common creation, ownership and sharing at universal level. This is why it can be considered

a New Commons. Wikipedia has spread over many countries in 271 different languages reflecting, in its structural characteristics, the cultural peculiarities of each nation. Many of these national versions have considerable dimensions: the English Wikipedia has more than three million items, Italian, French, Polish more than 500.000. The advantages compared to traditional Encyclopedias, besides the lower cost of implementation, are the fact that Wikipedia is free (everybody can contribute to it in the way he wants and when he wants), open (access is not dependent on the ability to pay), up-to-date (never becomes obsolete and can also categorize the most recent events in real time), social (it relies on the active and free participation of people), decentralized (knowledge is not created only by elite of experts with top-down processes, but also by non-experts through peer production similar to some models of collective intelligence which are widespread distributed also in the animal world: see the case of ants, termites, wasps). Today Wikipedia is counted among the ten most visited websites in the world, surpassed only by Google, Yahoo and Microsoft, but these last ones are all multi-billion dollar profit companies with thousands of employees, while Wikipedia is a nonprofit foundation that in 2008 had an assets only of 4 million dollars and a few employees involved in fund-raising. The common property is expressed in the fact that his license is free (copyleft instead of copyright). This emerges in four fundamental freedoms: freedom to copy what is inside Wikipedia, freedom to change what is found there, freedom to redistribute, freedom to redistribute modified versions of its contents.

3. Distinctive features of Wikipedia: peer production based on ethics

Like all Common Goods Wikipedia is characterized by strong collective action: it is infact based on the wiki concept, formulated in 1995 by Ward Cunningham, according to which anyone can contribute to freely create and edit a website (open-edition). Wikipedia is therefore a relational good. At least 25 editions have more than 100.000 items as an evidence of a rather active exercise of participation by people in many countries. Wikipedia is a social innovation more than a technological innovation, even if the evolution of its infrastructure, always marked by sharing of discoveries and improvements in time, has also had an important role because it has decreed the massive participation of people. Since it is based on social interaction, Wikipedia is also characterized by the possibility of continuous improvement of its items, under the banner of “piranha effect”. The items originally are born stubs, to suffer afterwards an hectic assault and have an expo-

mental growth in terms of quantity and quality in a short time. The amendments made by someone inspire others to do better, creating a ripple effect on the whole community, increasing people capabilities, fostering learning processes (to fill in an item requires research, critical thinking and to familiarize themselves with the legislation on copyright and free license). At the base of this successful experience of New Common management, there is a strong social capital, alias trust relationships among people and deep respect in terms of non-aggression of the newcomers. So the vision of man which springs out from Wikipedia is not that of the “homo hominis lupus”, but it is a positive anthropology. This vision has the advantage of encouraging people to make themselves useful rather than inhibit their action through the placing of barriers to entry or through the request of permissions for access due to negative assumption on human nature. In Wikipedia there is also a large degree of intrinsic motivation (the compilation work is in fact done voluntarily, freely and often anonymously and not because it is paid). Indeed, the work is done more willingly because there is an awareness that no one is getting rich at the expense of some other person. The reasons to get involved are several: to contribute to a large enterprise, which is to create an Encyclopedia which will remain a common heritage of all humanity and which is read every day by millions of people; to give vent to passions in various fields of knowledge; to find social fulfillment (no individual activity in Wikipedia remains isolated from those of others; items are often accompanied by a page in which there is a discussion forum, people can meet outside in the real world). There are also some rewarding mechanisms (not economic incentive, but prizes in honour) such as the award of stars (barnstar) which indicate the most excellent items and which incite people to the best practises. Gift within Wikipedia assumes the form of a gift of time, knowledge, technology skills and is a gift made in the name of generalized reciprocity (an anonymous gift to strangers far in time and in space).

4. The requirements of Wikipedia items and the original guide lines for their authors

There are three basic requirements, which are complementary to each other, necessary to create Wikipedia items: Neutral Point of View; Testability (Verifiability); No Original Research. The original guidelines of conduct for the authors in creating the items, in order not to discourage participation, have been the following at the very beginning of Wikipedia:

1. Try to be bold in the creation, in the changes and in the corrections of items (although sometimes this indication may trigger conflicts).
2. Do not worry about the editing rules, if you become demoralized by them, ignore them.
3. Presume, until proven otherwise, the good faith of the other compilers; think that they are trying to cooperate with you and that they are not working to cause any damage; avoid accusing others of vandalism in absence of evidence.
4. If something does not satisfy you, then fix it yourself (sofixit).

5. The possible tragedies of Wikipedia and the adoptable remedies

Although the vast majority of people who works in Wikipedia is friendly, the fact of being a Common Good, even if of new generation, raises however the risk of some tragedies which can be avoided or contained by self-governing mechanisms and rules arranged at community's level.

5.1. Pollution of the items

The antidote to this tragedy is transparency and control:

1. Everything can be inspected by the community at any time through the “watch list” in which everybody chooses his favorite items to be monitored; through voluntary groups, called “patrols of the latest changes” that detect and correct errors introduced by unnecessary or incorrect changes or that remove obscene words inserted; through “software robots” that remove errors or perform some operations (formatting, punctuation) in an automatic mode.
2. Is always available a history of all changes made to each item and each version is saved and is recoverable at any time.
3. There are specific figures, like administrators (sysop), who can block, temporarily or indefinitely, all the activities of vandals; who can delete inappropriate items; who can protect items from spam or from self-promotion or from occult advertising (these administrators are democratically elected through a vote procedure which takes place in a separate page of Wikipedia).
4. In some versions of Wikipedia, as the German one, exists the possibility to certify the items whose contents meet stringent quality standards with respect to various criteria, under the brand of “sighted versions”.

5.2. Edit Wars

The antidote to this tragedy consists in the intervention of an administrator who protects the item from the continuous succession of changes/restore in the hope that disputes will soon subside. If this does not happen, comes to force a rule according to which you can not operate more than three reversals of a single item within a period of 24 hours. The punishment at administrator's disposal is to block the activity for 24 hours of the person who has violated this rule, even if the offender can still create "phantom loads" (sock puppets) and continue in war (though these sock puppets can be unmasked by the "check-users", reliable persons who can control the identity of the users, being able to access information relating to private IP addresses of Wikipedians). Often disputes, once cooled the atmosphere, are resolved through a democratic vote which takes place in an appropriate forum.

Battles between inclusionists (items may concern any subject as long as based on facts and verifiable) and deletionists (items must concern only what is valid to enter the Pantheon of human knowledge and what is verifiable).

The antidote to this tragedy consists of a reasoned expression of opinions which takes place in a special page called "Votes for Deletion". The results of the argumentative discussion are considered by the person responsible for the final decision, who is a Wikipedia administrator. In this way the mechanism of stiff voting is by-passed to avoid the risk of manipulation.

Provocations made by troublemakers (phenomenon of trolling), people who devote themselves to controversial issues or sensitive questions in order to arouse divisions and sow discord.

The antidote to this tragedy is to ignore the provocations resisting the temptation to respond, or apply filters that make invisible to the rest of the community the messages sent by trolls to the system (through killfile), or to invoke a moderator's help.

5.3. Defamation of living personages

The antidote to this tragedy is to deny the possibility of creating new items to anonymous users and the cancellation of controversial information concerning living persons, the sources of which are non-existent or unreliable.

6. The future challenges of Wikipedia

Wikipedia has passed undamaged through all the tragedies illustrated till now, but the challenges are not finished yet.

The main issues that Wikipedia will face in the future will be:

1. To solve the problem of the lack of homogeneity of the items and of their internal consistency (items reflect, in quantity and quality, the passions of their compilers: the items dedicated to the most popular singers are, for example, more detailed than those dedicated to more serious topics).
2. To improve further the quality of the items. This aim could once again re-propose the dilemma of the hierarchization of knowledge production by giving more responsibility to the editors (experts) than to the authors (common people).
3. To restore sociability. The growth of Wikipedia size has in fact loosened the bonds of sociality once carried out through mailing lists, chat rooms or physical encounters between people and this has led to a balkanization of the community in many sub-communities that develop around their own centers of interest (with the risk of monopolization of certain items) or around the exercise of certain functions within the organization (with the risk of corporativism).
4. To simplify the organization. The growth of Wikipedia size has spawned guide lines making them less effective; has bureaucratized the functioning through the introduction of new organisms to settle conflicts (mediation group and arbitration group); has caused the recourse to a greater extent of the mechanisms of vote more than discussion; has complicated the selection procedures of the directors by giving them greater authority.
5. To improve fund-raising, given that present donations are not sufficient for a long-term financial sustainability of Wikipedia foundation and given that the alternative of the introduction of advertising banner should be discarded since a schism has already occurred in the recent past in Spanish Wikipedia when this hypothesis was ventilated.

If Wikipedia will survive all these critical turning-points, it will constitute, for its structural characteristics (free participation, peer production, cooperation among people based on reciprocity), the full triumph of all the principles of French Revolution (*liberté, égalité, fraternité*), which had already been celebrated in the *Encyclopédie* of Jean le Rond d'Alambert and Denis Diderot, a whole collection of the ideas of Illuminism. *Fraternité* principle has been, among the three, the more forgotten principle and the less practised in economic and political field,

but with Wikipedia it can come back to fashion to indicate us the new direction to go.

Conclusion

The paper on the Tragi-Comedy of Wikipedia has shown the innovative paths which are now beaten to reach the actual level of collective knowledge. From d'Alambert's and Diderot's *Encyclopédie* (1751-1766) to Wikipedia (2001) knowledge building has been characterized by several innovative processes: technologization, globalization, democratization, assertion of common property which coexist with some of the surviving opposite tendencies of the past centuries going from Gutemberg to d'Alambert (knowledge's secularization, nationalization, professionalization, specialization; knowledge as a public good; knowledge as a private good). The social, cultural, political history of knowledge is very complex and can be understood only in a transdisciplinary way like the concept of Common Good to which Wikipedia belongs in its more advanced version (the New Commons). Wikipedia is very different from traditional Encyclopedias because it is on-line; it is wider in diffusion and contents; it is multilanguage; it is open access; is created and managed by peer, anonymous and gratuitous production through strong collective action, self governing mechanisms, institutional arrangements; is subject to continuous review (a sign of social reflectiveness on social practises). Because of all these characteristics Wikipedia is not totally immune from vandalism (which should be anyway read in a relational key) and from the limits due to an "acritical cult of amateur" in knowledge building, though Wikipedia shows us that knowledge can also spring out from dialogue and from pacific ricomposition of intellectual conflicts and a from more democratic process in spite of the policemen of the intellectual frontiers, represented by the academic world and the experts, which have been for a long time too zealous guardians of the boundaries of their domain.

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Summary

Dealing with the topic of Common Goods, the paper has considered the *socio-logic* which acts (locally and globally) in the dimension of *culture*, but which makes also incursions into the sphere of nature (both globally and local). This new perspective can have positive effects in various ways on the theme of Common Goods:

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- to broaden the categories of Common Goods which from natural/environmental resources (described as *survival common goods* because they are fundamental to life at local and global level) expand to encompass the *New Commons* (alias *social commons* which show different characteristics);
 - to explain the issue of the tragedy of the Commons in a different way: not induced by the intrinsic characteristics of the good (non-excludability, but rivalry in consumption) as the traditional economic theory supposes, but provoked by the non-cooperative relations between men as an economic theory, which would place itself innovatively in a *relational* perspective, could assume, changing its statute towards an interdisciplinary approach; in this conceptual frame Wikipedia becomes an happy example of the *comedy* of Common Goods based on cooperation among people aimed to an ethical production of knowledge carried out through decentralized coordination;
 - to single out, among the New Commons, different tipologies of Common Goods related to culture, to ICT, to human creativity, to scientific discoveries;
 - to collocate, among the New Commons related to ICT, Wikipedia, a new Encyclopedia *on-line*, whose creation and maintenance disavow economic mainstream which describe people only as individualistic, selfish and possessive persons, even if is not totally immune from some tragedies which are still in ambush, but easily controllable;
 - to show the distinctive traits of Wikipedia: being a free and a peer production of knowledge based on ethics with its guide lines and norms chosen by people, one of the possible way of governing the Commons, like Elinor Ostrom has pointed out, which carries out the *full* triumph of *all* the principles of French Revolution (*liberté, égalité, fraternité*).

Keywords: New Commons, Common Goods, Wikipedia