

Interview - Tine de Moor

Written by E-International Relations

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Tine De Moor is an historian whose research focuses on the commons and what she calls 'Institutions for Collective Action'. Her work emphasises long-term and interdisciplinary approaches to history. She currently is Professor at the University of Utrecht in The Netherlands. She co-founded the *International Journal of the Commons* and served as the president-elect of the International Association for the Study of the Commons. In 2015 she published *The Dilemma of the Commoners: Understanding the Use of Common-Pool Resources in Long-Term Perspective*.

What do you consider the most exciting evolutions happening in your field?

Most of my research focuses on social and economic history, but I have always worked very interdisciplinary. At the moment, most of my research is done in collaboration with non-historians: with sociologists, ecologists and economists. Currently, I have two biologists in my team.

I noticed that, especially since the crisis of 2008, there is an increased attention for economic history from other disciplines. At the same time, the fear of reflecting on the present is going away among historians. I'm much in favour of this development, because I believe that history can be very helpful for the present. We need a long-term perspective of the past in order to look ahead of us, and to understand where the future might lead. Particularly in economic history there are a number of very intriguing issues at play right now. In Utrecht we work a lot on issues of inequality, engaging among others with the Piketty debates. What is changing is not just that Piketty happened, but also that people are seeing more ways of reconstructing issues like inequality.

Reflecting on the present also helps historians bridge the sort of logical gap they long had. Now they are recognizing that they need a strong method where they previously did not acknowledge they needed one. This is changing now, especially in economic history, although not necessarily in other fields of history. Nevertheless, I think that future historians need to be very careful not to be overtaken by other methods. We should not rely upon other methods from other disciplines just because we think we do not have our own methods in history. Because there is also a limitation as to how methods from other disciplines can understand change in the longer term. We need to take one step back again and look at the mechanisms, the long term trends that help us to understand changes in society. Econometrics for example can be very useful, but it is not going to allow us to discover the long-term hallmarks of society.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Research for me is looking for a systematic approach, a systematic change when you are talking about historical issues. I felt I missed a systematic approach of change in the world by just looking at the descriptive work of historians. So I was looking for more in-depth analysis. For a long time I looked into sociology and demography because those were issues that interested me, and still do.

The research I am doing now is per definition multidisciplinary. When you work on the commons it is unavoidably interdisciplinary because it touches on so many different things. The commons are not so well-studied in history, because only a few people are actually working on the history of commons. When I was still the editor of the *International Journal of the Commons*, the first article we published was by Elinor Ostrom and Frank van Laerhoven.

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They made a graph of the domains in which the commons were studied and history did not figure very prominently, in contrast to fields like ecology or sociology. As such it was logical that I would end up in a very interdisciplinary environment, and that I could not work without looking at the other disciplines.

What was very encouraging for me was the entire debate on the commons. A debate Elinor Ostrom launched in the 1990's, which revolved around understanding what makes an institution work in the long term, what makes it resilient. All that harbors references to how institutions changed over time, and if you look at the work done by her and many others, it is fantastic work but it is never really the long-term they look at. They look at change over fifty, maybe a hundred years, and that is it. Whereas for me, as an historian, that is peanuts. This is where an historian can contribute to other disciplines, because we understand long-term change. For example for most people who have not studied history it is extremely difficult to put yourself in the place of somebody who is not born and raised in a twentieth century or twenty-first century technological environment. It is very hard to explain to my students that in early-modern times people did not go to the store to buy a pot, since they never threw something away because they could use it again.

So just placing yourself in the distant times is a skill that you get as an historian. Which is quite unique, it is difficult for other disciplines to locate that very long-term perspective, but on the other hand it is very necessary to do that because it is basically the holy grail of co-operation so to speak.

Could you explain what you mean by Institutions for Collective Action, and why are they important?

Let me first start with the term "commons" since I have experienced over the last few years that many people are using that term in many different ways. Some people refer to commons as 'all that we share'. It is very hard to make people understand that when you are talking about commons it is about a combination of three things which makes it a governance regime. It is about collective resources or common pool resources, used and managed by a group that defines its own rules. The institution that defines these rules is absolutely vital as the third aspect for understanding the commons, besides the resources and the users as "separate dimensions" of the commons as a governance regime.

Because the term commons has been used by many different people in many different contexts, at some point I decided to start using the term "institutions of collective action". Which was not invented by me, but by people like Elinor Ostrom. I also wanted a term that was abstract and neutral in a way that captured the whole spectrum of institutionalised forms of collective action, like in the form of guilds, water-boards and beguinages.

I use the word 'institutionalised' because that makes them different from more contentious forms of collective action, like riots and demonstrations. Those are also a form of collective action but a rather different one. For example: in contentious collective action the more people take part in it the better, and people can stay anonymous. While if you look at institutions of collective action like guilds or the commons, it is very important that people do not stay anonymous, but that they actually know each other. Because the basis of those institutions is reciprocal behaviour, or "wederkerigheid" in Dutch. So they need to know each other to make the group function, and that is also the basis, the reciprocity, upon which they build their self-governance. They agree on certain rules, and those rules can only work if you know that somebody else will do the same. What those institutions of collective action try to solve is a so-called "social dilemma", namely the choice between taking something for your own, individual advantage in the short run versus the choice for the collective benefit in the long run, which will also benefit you.

The difficulty there is that you have to manage this as a group over a very long-term. So imagine you are becoming a member of a cooperative insurance team, then you can say "Ok, I am going to take advantage of my insurance. I am not really sick but I am going to receive some funds out of it." But if everybody does that, the cooperative will fail. You can also say "I am going to contribute to the insurance fund, and in due time, when I need it, I will only take something out. And in the meantime someone else might benefit from my contribution." So there you choose for the collective. Balancing the individual and the collective is a difficulty for institutions of collective action.

The way to achieve this reciprocity between individuals is by including people in the institution, by making them part

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of the institution. There are many examples of this, for instance in guilds, where members were obliged to take part in the meetings in order to make sure that they actually realised why some rules were changed, why they decided to do things one way or the other. If you were not present at them, you could not internalise the rules when it was needed. Institutions of collective action are distinctly different from what we have today in terms of governance regimes. The government for example, where we get a say once in a while about who can represent us but where we do not directly influence the rules as such. Or for instance the market where the rules are designed by individuals and groups of individuals in a top-down fashion.

You see a 'silent revolution' occurring in the low countries during the late middle-ages, when different kind of institutions for collective action emerged. Could you explain your reasoning for this? Are we living through another 'silent revolution' today?

Possibly. However, that article is pretty old already, however, since then I have written another few pieces where I tried to find "waves" of collective action throughout history. The late middle ages and the early modern period represented a first wave of collective action. A second wave of collective action you can find around the turn of the 19th and 20th century, when a lot of new cooperatives were built, especially among farmers like the Boerenleenbank, Rabobank and the Raiffeisen. But you also see many labour unions coming up. I think what we are witnessing today might be a third wave. It is a bit hard to tell where all of this is going. I first published about this third wave in 2013 but it is still going. I have the impression that the things I wrote down are even more relevant now than they were in 2013.

The developments now are really consolidating. Institutions of collective action are very widespread by now. For instance, hundreds of fiber-glass collectives or cooperatives have been found in the Netherlands so that now it is already worth to have a platform of these cooperatives. But also for elderly care you see cooperatives springing up in our country. In other countries, like Italy for example, this development of new institutions for collective action is also going really fast. In Belgium this development is going a bit slower and is starting to take shape right now. So I think we are in a third wave but I am not sure how long it is going to last. I do not think it is very related to the crisis of 2008, because too many factors indicate that it may not be crisis related. But I wonder what happens if the economy gets a boost, maybe we will go back to our old habits then. I am an historian not a futurologist.

You mentioned that the crisis of 2008 did not really affect this third wave of collective action. But what is the significance of the crisis of 2008 for the commons? And, what is the relation between markets and commons? Are they always opposed or is there a more symbiotic relationship?

Definitely not necessarily antagonistic. In terms of economics, commons thrive on the same mechanism of getting efficient critical mass to create a better form of exchange. The difference between the commons and a private company is the way of organisation, as well as a limit to the critical mass that exists in the commons, because you want to make sure that you have control over it. If a common is too large, you lose the power of social control. Whereas on the market of course you want to get a high enough demand in order to make sure that you can gain a higher profit, higher marginal benefits. So there are differences, but I do not think they are antagonistic.

It is true that for the historical commons we can actually show that they did have to build in regulations in order to prevent the free-rider – who maybe deep-down is in each of us – from taking over at some point. An historical example is that the milk, that came from cows that grazed on the common fields, was forbidden to be sold outside of the village. Quite simply because if people were allowed to do that, they would put more cows on the common field to sell more milk. Which cannot be good for the common because then they would get over-use in the end.

There are also indications that to some extent commons, cooperatives, guilds or other institutions for collective action develop mechanisms which in due time are taken over by the market. For example, the concept of a brand was invented in the guild system. It was a way to make sure that there would be a quality guarantee that could be recognized by the customers, also for customers far away. So the brand is something that has been taken over by the market, but is originally devised within the guild system.

Supermarkets essentially also originated in the cooperative sector, which used the possibilities of their large numbers

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of members in order to provide them with cheap stock of goods. Those are concepts that were first developed within institutions of collective action which were then taken over by the market. So in many ways markets learn from institutions of collective action.

On the other hand I do not think the institutions of collective action we have now are a direct result of the economic crisis. The start of the movement is clearly recognizable quite a few years before the economic crisis in 2008. In the Netherlands for example, the number of new cooperatives started growing rapidly already in 2005.

Cooperatives as a model are often being used in very different sectors, on the one hand in sectors that are very sensitive to economic crisis like care. Care is having a crisis at the moment in the Netherlands because the government is giving it over to the private sector. When the private sector is not flourishing because of the economic crisis then this has a direct impact on care. On the other hand, cooperatives are popping up in sectors like clean energy, solar energy or wind power. This demonstrates it is also happening in sectors that are much less sensitive to the economic crisis.

The emergence of new cooperatives is happening both in countries that suffered a lot from the economic crisis, like Italy or Spain, but also in countries like the Netherlands, which still felt an effect of the economic crisis but where the effects were not as bad as in many Southern-European countries. Germany has a massive development in energy cooperatives, and they are not particularly the worst hit country of the crisis.

I think there is more of a dialectical relationship between the market and institutions of collective action. The market takes over ideas developed by citizens through institutions of collective action and the activities by these institutions on the other hand respond to market failure. Market failure is probably the best explanation for the commons. Especially if you look at sectors like care and infrastructure. If you take a look at the map of fiberglass cooperatives and the map of care cooperatives in the Netherlands, you can see that both are related to each other in the sense that they both appear in regions where the market has difficulties in achieving a sufficient critical mass in terms of demand. In elderly care institutions for instance, you need a certain number of elderly people who want to live in such a care home to ensure that it is profitable for a company. And it is very hard to achieve that critical mass in sparsely populated areas of the Netherlands. The same reasoning applies to fiberglass cooperatives: they emerge where private companies are not willing to provide citizens with fiberglass because the houses are too isolated, so it would not be profitable for a company. It is much more economically interesting to put fiberglass in a city where people are living in apartment blocks.

E-IR is an open access site. How do you see the commons and open access relating to one another? Is open access another form of commons, with similar governance issues, or are there some differences?

Well, actually there is a huge difference. Together with other colleagues, we started an open access journal a few years ago, the *International Journal of the Commons*. This has worked very well and though the topic of the journal is commons, the intention there was not to build a common, in the true sense of the word. We had the intention to provide knowledge as freely as possible through a system that was open and not dependent on a market provider. So not linked to one of the high-profile publishers that ask a lot of money to publish one article. I think the main message of Elinor Ostrom was that the common as a governance structure does not fit everything. For some provisions for goods and services, it is best to rely on the market, for others it is best to rely on open access, a collectivity, or on the government. It depends on the type of resource and what you want to achieve to know what type of governance regime you should choose.

In regards to privatisation of public transport for example, I really think that this particular service should be provided by the state. I also do not think you should govern knowledge, that should be broadly available to all, as a common, because that would mean you cannot access it unless you contribute: reciprocal behaviour. I think you should give people who are interested in any knowledge access to it. That is what we try to achieve with open access. So I do not think we are talking about commons here, but we are talking about open access: a form of freely accessible resources of which the total stock does not diminish if you take a unit from it. That is one of the major differences with for example a pasture that is governed within a common, or a stock of cars governed within a car-sharing system: it is

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typical for common goods that they diminish when people use them. While if I take some of the knowledge provided within open-access journal, the knowledge does not become less. In fact it might become more because I might work on it, I might do something with it, I might make even more knowledge based on what I learned in that journal. So it is a totally different resource we are talking about.

There are some types of knowledge that you can, based on a societal choice, limit and restrict access to. For example expert knowledge can be restricted by developing patents. But that is a choice you make as a society, if you want people or companies to develop an idea and get profits out of it you can put a patent on it. But it can also be very beneficial not to do that, and that is what you see today in workshops where people share their designs for 3D-printing. Sharing your knowledge can also be very beneficial for yourself and people can actually gain money out of it. So if resources can be freely available for others without doing harm to the resource, I cannot see why we should not allow everyone to access it. And that is why I believe in open access journals.

How can the present benefit from historical research? Is history just a laboratory for the present?

I think there are different ways to look upon it. We historians are looking for mechanisms that have influenced the course of history, over time. Some would say that it is impossible to do history as a science, but I do think it can be done in that way. To look at it as a science you need to search for recurrence, you look at systematic change, you look at patterns basically. That is also why I -some say it is brave, some people say it is nonsense - am willing to see patterns, recurring patterns. I am willing to compare what I see happening today with historical patterns.

I am not saying that what we are witnessing today is exactly the same as what happened in the past. Look at for example communication technology which in some cases enables cooperation but on the other hand might also harm it. So technology makes a very big difference for institutions of collective action compared to the past. But I do think that the bottom line of why people cooperate, what they expect to get out of that cooperation, and how they organize themselves as a group, has not changed over time. So there are real lessons of cooperation in history, and that it is also crucial in explaining why people are doing these things again now, which is related to commercialisation and market failure and so on. On that level they are very similar to movements in the past.

But what makes it interesting, is that if you have a lot of variation you also have more opportunity of explanation of relationships. If you look at phenomena that are basically similar, but there is lots of variation, you can identify a number of variables that help explain the variation. In this way it is possible to understand why things are happening, and if you know why things happened in the past, it might help to understand present developments.

Maybe I am too optimistic about this. Maarten van Rossem, a well-known historian in the Netherlands, said that there is no recurrence in history and that everything is individual and new, and there are no cycles. I think it is nice that you are a storyteller but stories are not why I study history. I study history to understand specific phenomena. It is an approach and I can imagine other people wanting to do other things, but storytelling alone for me is not fine. You should become a genealogist if you think it is.

The final question: what is your advice for young academics or researchers?

Yesterday I actually met someone at the supermarket, a person from Colombia who is studying engineering who was just starting his PhD and I said: "do not forget to enjoy". One of the things a lot of young scholars, and I mean people who are moving to a PhD, forget is that they only get four years of their whole career to dive into something very deep. You never get this chance after your PhD again, and I never realized this opportunity until after it was gone. That I should have enjoyed it more. Really: enjoy it and realize it is an opportunity for very deep thinking so to speak.

And for historians, or for scholars in general, it is extremely important, today more than ever in the past, to engage with society. It is something you are not rewarded for by your university, at least if you work at university you do not get credits for it. You get credit for publications, and teaching and being the chair of your department. Being someone who is actively engaged in societal debate is only accounted for if it also appears in the press. But reaching out to the general public via lectures and intense debate is for me an important part of my job, even if it does not really help my

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academic career forward. But it makes my job worthwhile; the people in the audience remind me of why my research is important. It sometimes takes a while to convince yourself of why it is important, but if you take your work as an academic serious, I think you have to be honest and ask yourself that question every morning.

When I was doing my PhD, even some of my colleagues, historians, had no idea what commons were about. And now it is very much alive, not just as a research topic but also in society at large. Definitely something has been changing and I happen to be in the middle of it, which is great. My worries about the importance of my research in the initial years of my PhD-research, are now overtaken by worries that too little time is left to do more research on this topic. So my advice would be: follow what you think you should do, but always keep questioning yourself about the societal relevance of your research. And be creative. Besides societal relevance, creativity, searching for another perspective on societal matters and thinking out-of-the-box are what drive me as a researcher. In science people use the word innovation, but creativity goes beyond that by building more explicitly on existing knowledge. A truly creative mind is capable of connecting the dots, and does not “simply” come up with new ideas, but also brings “old” –and sometimes totally distinct- ideas together so that new insights emerge, and also comes up with alternative methods to study what we think we already know.

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This interview was conducted by Tom Cassauwers. Tom is an Associate Features Editor at E-IR.