

4 Commons and peasant studies: Insights from social anthropology, human geography and agrarian economics

Tobias Haller, Karina Liechti and Stefan Mann

4.1. Introduction

This chapter outlines how research into the Swiss commons integrates approaches studying peasant societies and their management of common-pool resources based on a fusion of the theories from economic and political anthropology, human geography and agrarian economics. These disciplines, and their approaches, are important because our fieldwork brought challenges regarding the angle from which to analyse commons management in a context of politically secured tenure, unlike that in many areas of the world, especially in the global south. This context leads to specific reflections that somehow exclude consideration of the link between the overuse of resources and tenure insecurity, which is often debated in commons studies. In Switzerland, however, we more commonly deal with perceptions of market and state actors in a rapidly changing socio-economic and political environment that has reduced the perceived value of the commons and its related “traditional” products such as dairy, meat and timber. On the one hand, this pressures commoners to rethink their economic strategies, above all the imbalance between costs and gains from the commons. On the other hand, they have to rethink issues related to identity – as they are a minority controlling, using and maintaining a large area of cultural landscape in Switzerland, and it is necessary to address increased societal concerns and demands such as for environmental protection, economic efficiency and social justice. Such important issues are often dealt with based on the notion of rationality, adaptation and resilience, however, we realised that we need to provide different elements of analysis in order to avoid an overly simplistic interpretation of the changes and strategic actions followed by individuals and groups concerned. While we do not contest the principles of bounded rationality in economics, actions are not only influenced by economic values in the monetary sense but also by socio-cultural values. We therefore do not want to underestimate the importance of understanding the multiple local perceptions and meanings ascribed to community and resources and the power positions/relations in which the actors are finding themselves. Such values are not produced in a void, but relate to the identity of individuals and groups and interact with the wider world, as well as broadly changing social values.

4.2. A brief look at peasant studies

Although we do not have the space here to go into the vast literature of peasant studies, we will try to highlight some of the ways that so-called peasant societies are working economically and socially apart from the analysis of evolutionist, culturalist and Marxist reflections. Cancian (1989) provides an overview in which he indicates the different waves of conceptualising economic behaviour of farming communities. There is a range of studies on farming communities in social anthropology, examining communities that are relatively independent of state and market pressures (*ibid.*). Their strategies rely mainly on subsistence production and their adaptation to natural as well as political environmental constellations, leading to a set of specific strategies that are designed to cope with insecurity and political instability. This double coping process has implications for the economic strategies selected by peasants and for the tenure aspect of farming communities and the way agricultural production is shaped in extensive (with high mobility) or intensive (low mobility and high level of sedentary strategies) agrarian production systems. According to the vast and global social anthropological literature, mainly subsistence-oriented farming communities, as well as so-called peasants (farmers integrated in market and state contexts), have a basic strategy in common: they have to balance between the utility of production for subsistence (as well as for state and market) on the one hand, and the drudgery of the workload itself, on the other hand. This insight led the Russian agro-economist Alexander Chayanov in the 1920s to adopt the view of a peculiar peasant economy, which was in contradiction to the Marxist view of Lenin, who perceived peasants as “small capitalists” (Kerbely 1984). Chayanov’s view was based on statistical work on land use among farmers in Russia, and he stated that peasants work just as much land and produce as many crops as will meet the demand for feeding a family, and that producing more than the amount needed to cover these needs would, in economic terms, be irrational, as the drudgery of the work exceeds the utility of subsistence production. This means that peasants stop producing more crops, working more land and using more energy for production when their needs are met and the workload is, *emically* (from the local perspective), perceived as being too high. This is depicted in the simple graph in Figure 4.1, which shows the marginally decreasing curves for the subsistence utility and the increasing curve for the drudgery function. Working more land and producing more *only* make sense, from a peasant-economics point of view, when the family has children and the parents need to work harder to feed them. This imbalance of fewer producers and more consumers in the household levels out as the children grow older and eventually leave their parent’s home. According to Chayanov, there is therefore no accumulation.

This model was much contested in the Soviet Union, and Chayanov’s sad fate was to be put in detention for his empirical views and statistics. By the end of the 1960s, however, scholars such as Kerbely (1984) and Shanin (1973/74) had translated and further developed the model to also be applicable to studies

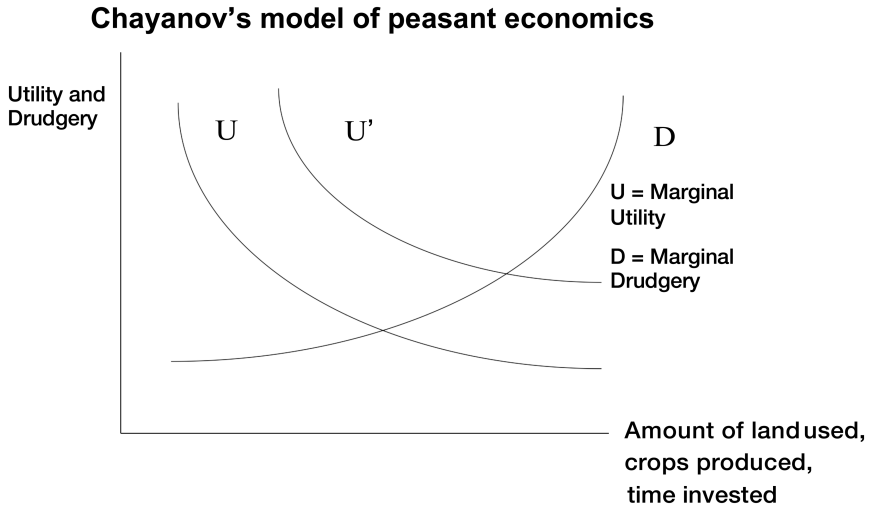


Figure 4.1 Chayanov's model of peasant economics. Source: Haller (2001), based on Chayanov in Kerbley (1984).

of peasants in market and state economies. It included new ideas and new insights into what peasants were working for, including risk reduction (mini-max strategies), adaptation to the market and state actors and their demands. Chayanov's model provides a basis for further reflection, as it is a first attempt to show the rationality of sufficiency strategies, and sufficiency is an important aspect of the governance of common-property institutions.

4.3. Commons studies and new institutional economics

When dealing with the interrelationship between private and common property and land-related common-pool resources (CPRs), the Nobel Prize-winning work *Governing the Commons* (1990) by Elinor Ostrom deserves in-depth discussion. In this approach, which is part of what is called New Institutionalism (NI) (see Haller 2007, 2010), she elaborates on her notion of design principles for locally established long-enduring institutions (rules and regulations) for the management of CPRs such as pastures and forests. These principles for robust institutions are summarised in Table 4.1.

Ostrom's work is mostly based on case studies from social anthropology and human geography, of which Robert Netting's (1981) work on the management of pastoral commons is a cornerstone. These studies show that common property institutions can reduce transaction costs for collective actions

Table 4.1 Design principles derived from studies of long-enduring institutions for governing sustainable resources

1	<p>Clearly defined boundaries The boundaries of the resource system (e.g. groundwater basin or forest) and the individuals or households with rights to harvest resource products are clearly defined.</p>
2	<p>Proportional equivalence between benefits and costs Rules specifying the number of resource products that a user is allocated are related to local conditions and to rules requiring labour, materials, and/or monetary input.</p>
3	<p>Collective-choice arrangements Most individuals affected by harvesting and protection rules are included in the group, who can modify these rules.</p>
4	<p>Monitoring Monitors, who actively audit physical conditions and user behaviour, are at least partially accountable to the users and/or are the users themselves.</p>
5	<p>Graduated sanctions Users who violate rules are likely to receive graduated sanctions (depending on the seriousness and context of the offense) from other users, from officials accountable to these users, or from both.</p>
6	<p>Conflict-resolution mechanisms Users and their officials have rapid access to low-cost, local arenas to resolve conflict between users, or between users and officials.</p>
7	<p>Minimal recognition of rights to organise The rights of users to devise their own institutions are not challenged by external governmental authorities, and users have long-term tenure rights to the resource.</p>
8	<p>For resources that are parts of larger systems Nested enterprises Appropriation, provision, monitoring, enforcement, conflict resolution and governance activities are organised in multiple layers of nested enterprises.</p>

Source: Ostrom (1990: 56f.)

that make sustainable use of the commons possible, and contradict the view that common property must lead to the overuse of CPRs as described in Hardin's famous polemic called *The Tragedy of the Commons* (see Ostrom 1990). Ostrom further extended her approach to an Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework (Ostrom 2005) in order to explain institutional diversity. However, this approach has been criticised, particularly by social anthropologists, for not addressing different levels of interactions such as historical and external economic, as well as political changes and power relations between actors. Such features, in our view, need to be incorporated in order to explain why institutions change and which actors with which power relationships drive that change (see Haller 2013; Olivier de Sardan 2013; Cleaver 2003).

Drawing on this critique, the theoretical framework of the New Institutionalism approach in economic anthropology (Ensminger 1992; Haller

2010, 2013) incorporates issues of change and power relations. Here, institutional change is linked to external factors (i.e. the natural, political and economic environment, demographic and technological factors), which can change relative prices (valuation of resources or areas related to others). In addition, institutional change has an impact on, and is shaped by, internal factors, which in turn influence the actors using the commons. These internal factors include elements such as an actor's bargaining power and ideologies. The latter consists of the discourses and narratives used by actors to justify the selection of specific institutions for the management of common pool resources. Such discourses and narratives include, for example, favouring values of modern neo-liberal economics opting for private property, versus communal or participatory approaches opting for common property providing ecological services. Such ideological processes, as well as differences in the bargaining power of actors – which can be strengthened or weakened by ideologies – have an important impact on the way actors perceive, organise, select and craft institutions (see Figure 4.2). This power-sensitive New Institutionalism approach also offers an analytical framework to explain institutional and organisational challenges, choices and practices and related coping and adaptation strategies dealing with the multiple challenges that Swiss commoners organisations are facing.

Swiss studies show how actors have reorganised and differentiated their use of common and private properties in alpine areas under changing economic and political conditions. Baur, Liechti and Binder (2014), for instance, conclude that the increasing size of farms means that farmers are reducing their use and maintenance of common property. At the same time, those individuals who use a resource intensively and benefit most from it also have the greatest interest in maintaining resource productivity in the long term, and thus apply and enforce pro-social behaviour. Baur and Binder (2013) also show that constitutional flexibility allows the governance system to adapt its structure

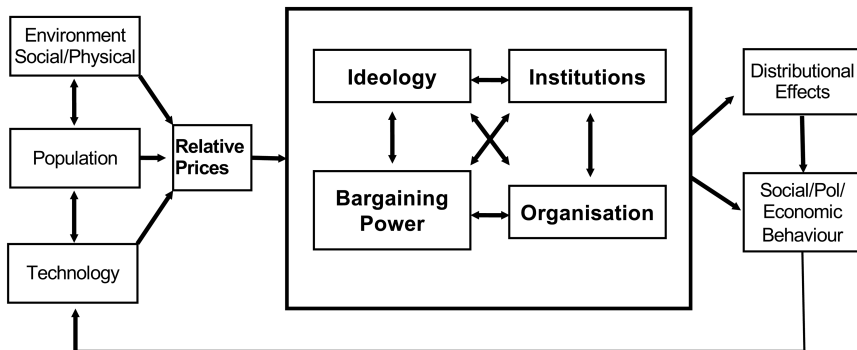


Figure 4.2 Modelling institutional change. Source: Ensminger (1992: 10), revised in Haller (2013).

to problems such as decreasing bargaining power. As an example, the creation of an additional governing level, such as a pasture users' association, has allowed farmers to govern the agricultural affairs of the corporation without the involvement of tourism entrepreneurs. Research into the governance of water channel irrigation systems in the Valais has produced evidence of a diversity of commons institutions and practices – from “traditional” cooperative to diversified hybrid and public models – that are still present nowadays (Schweizer et al. 2014). The authors show that the challenge of today's water channel management lies in the increasing heterogeneity of resource users, which makes them more vulnerable to conflict than the former homogeneous groups. While small and less complex systems could be managed in a relatively stable manner, today's institutional resource regimes cannot be operated exclusively by users and without public policies and contributions. Tiefenbach (2013) notes the importance of the social dimension in collective bodies in a rapidly changing socio-economic and political environment: by always returning and working together on the alp, a relationship is created within a community and with a particular landscape.

In a comparative study on the use of common pastures in two alpine villages in the canton of Grisons, Landolt and Haller (2015) similarly focussed on this heterogeneity of commoners' organisations by using the Ensminger–Haller framework. In one village, conflict arose when the cooperative work needed to maintain common pastures was neglected. This failure of collective action resulted from farmers' groups with lower bargaining power and with a poor reputation within the municipality (the ideology of the commoners' organisations being backward-oriented and a narrative of bad management of the commons). In the other village, farmers have enough bargaining power to challenge the interests of other users. Coupled with the capacity to self-organise, be innovative and devise new institutions to cope with market and political changes, these farmers can assert themselves better than their colleagues in the first village (Landolt and Haller 2015) and are also able to devise new bottom-up-driven institutions. This case study also illustrates the constitutionality approach (developing a sense of ownership in the institution-building process) that is researched in other global contexts (Haller 2016). The most common issue in this latter research is the way institutions could or could not endure massive economic and political changes and shocks – and therefore performed different degrees of resilience. The Swiss cases show that commoners' organisations have to adapt to societal and economic change on the one hand, and that on the other hand, they show that the decentralised political system also allows local collective entities to craft their own institutions.

While social anthropological and human geography studies focus on issues of self-organisation, institutional adaptation and innovation by also including an emic perception, agrarian economics looks at economic resilience as an indicator of the sustainability of institutions and related forms of economic organisation. Together with law, theology and ethics, economics is one of the few normative branches of science, and its utilitarian focus on profits, private

property and private economic organisation and their added value has provoked the critique of being a “reductionist” science (Diaw 2005; Katzenstein 2009), but has also enabled a distinction between successful and failed strategies. From this viewpoint, the most visible advantage of CPRs is that they can easily exploit economies of scale. The profitable agriculture in East Germany that still relies greatly on cooperative institutions (Wolz et al. 2009) is a case in point. In Switzerland, Lips et al. (2008) were able to show that cooperative farms (usually a merger between two or three family farms) are usually more successful than family farms due to scale effects.

Newer economic literature, including Powell (1990), does not, however, focus on economic performance alone, and only on common property compared to private property institutions, but highlights the fact that cooperation as a form of organisation in different systems plays a role in economic performance (see also Mann 2011). Related economic literature (see summary in *ibid.*) focuses on the degree of interaction between these property systems in the long term, on robust cases. This is of central interest and needs to be related to forms of organisation and success and failure in the market. Janssen and Ostrom (2006) mention “governments, communal groups, cooperatives, voluntary associations, and private individuals or firms” as possible organisational forms for governing common pool resources. Not all of these organisational forms are equally well suited to studying the governance of CPRs from an economic viewpoint, taking economic efficiency into account. In this economic context, the focus of research has shifted from hierarchical firms to acknowledge the fact that commoners’ organisations have emerged as a setting that is emphasising the commonality and equality of their members. It is therefore useful to first concentrate on the literature about commoners’ organisations when studying CPR use from an economic perspective.

First, while neo-classical theory focuses on individually achieved profit as the most important indicator of the success of an enterprise, left-wing social scientists repeatedly emphasise the “distributional conflict” (Capaldo 2007) or “conflictual relationship” (Ortu 2008) between profits and wages. For most forest cooperatives, the ability to pay acceptable wages is an indicator of success, while the situation is more complex for cooperative alpine summer pastures. Alpine corporations receive part of their turnover from sales of cheese and another part from reimbursements from the farmers who send their cows to the pasture and are often members of the corporation. They also receive some subsidies from the state (so-called “direct payments for summering”). Wages have to be paid to the alpine herder and cheese maker for care and production. The utility is therefore different than, for example, that for forestry. It is interesting to see that the older literature on success indicators of forest, fisheries and agricultural cooperatives, such as standard textbooks, usually refer to profit as the central indicator (Bergen et al. 2013), while an alpine pasture calculation has to be made in a different way, balancing more between care as a service and the production of milk and cheese (Theuvsen and Franz 2007; Henriksen et al. 2012). Second, other approaches

define success differently, looking at emic perceptions of the members, such as their satisfaction (Poggie et al. 1988; Amini and Ramezani 2008; Zarafshani et al. 2010) in line with social anthropological approaches. A third line of thought sees the longevity of commoners' organisations – which is in line with Ostrom's notion of robustness – as the most important factor (Barton et al. 2011; Hertz 2011), and a fourth approach focuses on the sustainable use of CPRs (Dietz et al. 2003). These four different approaches (monetary, including issues of differentiated care/production/share economy/psychological, historic and environmental), which look at success as related to profit of cooperatives, can therefore be differentiated; however, they do not look at power relations.

4.4. Combining New Institutionalism with political geography, economics and ecology

As outlined in the previous chapter, Ostrom's approach, as well as economic approaches, largely neglect power on all levels. While the New Institutionalism approach focuses on bargaining power and is further ahead than other more normative approaches in economics (see Williamson 1987) in this respect, it still lacks a more nuanced consideration of power relations between actors on several scales. Critical political branches in economics, geography, social anthropology and ecology focus on power relations and their effects on the way ideology shapes discourses and narratives regarding what nature is and how the results of human–nature interaction shall be interpreted (see Haller 2019a). It is thus an issue of the perception of nature and the way this is rendered hegemonic in order to devise and influence the selection of institutional arrangements (see the Ensminger model) that is of interest. As older studies in this field in contexts in the global south show, natural science disciplines frequently labelled, and still label, areas inhabited by humans for centuries as “pure nature” without any human influence (see Fairhead and Leach 1996; Neumann 1998; Brockington et al. 2008; Haller and Galvin 2011; Haller 2010). They explain that it was not recognised that many so-called natural areas were in fact cultural landscape ecosystems with a distinct biodiversity that had been shaped and maintained for centuries on the basis of common property institutions (see Haller 2019a, 2019b). Based on such misinterpretations, in many part of the global south and partly also the north, common property has been transformed into state and private property and through these transformations, not only have property rights been removed from local communities – often with negative impacts – but also the capacity to adapt rules and regulations for sustainable management and the enhancement of resilience within the local group (see Haller 2010; Haller et al. 2019; Geiger et al. 2019).

In Switzerland, contrary to most regions in the global south, commoners' organisations have to a large extent remained in control of their property and thus have a higher level of bargaining power (although increasingly contested, as we will see in this book), as they enjoy the basic right of being state

accepted co-owners of forests, pastures and agricultural land. They are able to receive state support (in the form of subsidies or direct payments), based on the notion that they are the custodians of natural resources and cultural landscapes that are not only valuable economically for agriculture or forestry but also for ecosystem and landscape services such as biodiversity, hazard protection or leisure. Nevertheless, the commoners' position is still contested: on the one hand, there is a demand for more state control over the management of "nature" to be found in the land owned by commoners; on the other hand, there is a request for more neoliberal solutions and self-responsibility. Interlinked with these two claims are the narratives about "Swissness" and the related symbolic meaning of local and "traditional" production, but also diverse views of the function and allocation of state subsidies for agriculture and forestry. Thus, many commoners' organisations find themselves between diverse interest groups, which do not necessarily recognise all the services they are providing for society. They are also challenged by the notions of common property systems being old-fashioned or socially unjust. The political ecology approach looks specifically at such contested narratives and asks who has the power to define rational and sustainable use, and which policies of good management and governance in resource management are suitable. Here we follow an approach combining New Institutionalism and Political Ecology, which also has been proposed for commons analysis in the global south (Haller 2019a). This combined New Institutional Political Ecology (NIPE) model is an extension of the model in Figure 4.2 and helps to analyse the transformation from an agrarian society to an industrial and post-industrial one, with a reduction in the value of common-pool resources related to pasture and forest areas and their products compared to the value of labour and an increased valuation of environmental or landscape services. This transformation process has led to societal change in alpine and other remote rural areas and also to a series of new state regulations and support systems that the commoners' organisations have to balance. They have to deal with actors who have greater bargaining power and can influence such transformation processes while trying to maintain common property and the governance system that is the backbone when striving for sustainability. Thus, the question has to be asked how transformation processes in actual contexts affect the vulnerability and resilience of these commoner's organisations.

4.5. Resilience, path dependency and transformational change

Local forms of common property organisations have managed common-pool resources in Switzerland for a long time and by doing this have significantly shaped cultural landscapes. Despite societal and environmental changes over the centuries, such systems are still widespread in Switzerland. Studying resilience can thus be a valid approach for analysis and understanding when investigating the reasons behind such developments. Resilience in our context is

understood as the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganise while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure and feedback, and therefore identity (Folke 2016; based on Walker et al. 2004; Folke et al. 2010). This means that such local organisations were able to adapt and transform themselves in a way that kept their basic structures and way of acting. This, however, does not exclude transformations involving shifts in perception and meaning, social network configurations, patterns of interactions among actors including leadership and political and power relations, and associated organisational and institutional arrangements (Folke et al. 2010: 5; with reference to Folke et al. 2009; Huitema and Meijerink 2009; Smith and Stirling 2010). Such shifts and new arrangements – as will be shown – were the focus of our research and the corresponding results. Congruently with Wilson (2017: 6–7) we thus consider resilience as both an outcome, especially when linked to the improved adaptive capacity of communities, and a process linked to the dynamic changes over time associated with community learning and the willingness of communities to take responsibility and control of their development pathways. The impact of these pathways cannot be overestimated. In Switzerland’s agriculture, CPR mostly emerged related to forests and alpine grazing lands. Actors involved in such commoners’ organisations may in some cases have a preference for individual farming, but it is extremely difficult to transform common alpine summering farms into several private ones. Conversely, recent attempts to strengthen cooperative organisations in lowland agriculture, most visible in the form of community-supported agriculture (Roque et al. 2008) or urban farming (Knapp et al. 2016), have faced obstacles and moved slowly.

Despite their ability to adapt and transform themselves, collective systems as institutional forms were always, and still are, under both external and internal pressure. This raises questions – among others – about how commoners’ organisations, but also the remaining direct users, deal with the pressure for legitimacy or the potential loss of bargaining power in negotiations. It is therefore important in debates on resilience and on transformational change that there is reflection on power-driven changes and the ability of less or more powerful actors to adapt. In our research, such factors become particularly important when dealing with connections between commoners’ organisations and the diverse political levels, but also when focusing on the inside, the internal corporation power relations: in a collective system, there are power asymmetries, even if they might be less than in private property systems, in which the most powerful are more able than others to shape the rules of the game. An institutional and political-ecological analysis reflects these processes and their impact on commons and their resilience. Social-ecological resilience would then mean, under a political ecology and New Institutionalism perspective, that the more powerful do not have the ability to override the interests of the other, less powerful actors and that also less powerful actors have a level of bargaining power so that their views and aspirations cannot be overridden.

4.6. The ‘Swiss commons lab’ and constitutionality: conditions for resource institution building from below

In the context of debates on resilience and vulnerability we will reintroduce the notions of economic rationality and of bargaining power to cope with external changes. As Landolt and Haller (2015) show in their case studies in the Swiss canton of Grisons, commoners’ organisations may face narratives of over- or underuse and of maladaptions, and it is not recognised that these organisations face multiple and very different local situations and challenges. At the same time, the right of communal property is guaranteed, which is different than in many other regions in the world. Consequently, Switzerland can be seen as a laboratory for the sustainable management of common-pool resources in this respect. In our case studies we will show how different strategies of local commoners’ organisations are often on different scales, depending on their bargaining power vis à vis the market and the state. In order to create room for manoeuvring in economics and identity and to consolidate internally, strategies that create diversification, enhance resilience socially and economically, and reduce vulnerability are of interest. We thus focus on the economic, political and social strategies of commoners’ organisations such as corporations (*Korporationen*) and civic communities (*Bürgergemeinden*, *bourgeoisies*, *patriziati*) regarding how they deal with changes of relative prizes. Furthermore, we are interested in understanding how they were able to build new institutions reflecting the old ownership of land and land-related commons while facing high costs. This refers to Chayanov’s model, but in another sense: it is not the intersection of utility and drudgery that we need to look at, but we hypothesise that the model needs to be adapted to look at the positive *identity utility* commoners have in still maintaining the cultural landscape under the conditions of economic drudgery, high work load and high costs, which are not all compensated by subsidies and market prices. We argue that if the financial drudgery is too high, the challenge for commoners to maintain commonly owned forests and pastures may also become too high. If the *identity utility* is still high at the same time, then new institution building from below is possible.

Lessons from case studies in the global south (Zambia, Mali, Bolivia and Indonesia) on how new bottom-up institutions were developed and their comparison, led to an approach called “constitutionality”. This approach looks at successful bottom-up institution-building processes in which all local actors have a sense of ownership in the institution-building process for new forms of common property governance such as fisheries, pasture and forest management (see Haller 2016; Haller et al. 2018, 2019). The authors showed that the following six conditions helped to create new institutions from below: (1) local problem definition, (2) processes that mitigate power differences, (3) already existing institutional setting among local actors, (4) facilitating external agents in enabling a fair platform for discussions, (5) innovative local strategies and social learning, as well as combining old and new strategies, and last but not least, (6) acceptance of these local institutions by the state. Constitutionality

takes place if all local actors feel included in the institution-building process and this is exactly what is often lacking: for example, women's work in the context of common property management is, as we argue, often ignored (see also Haller et al. 2019 for African cases).

The ability in different environmental and social contexts to adapt or create new institutions varies. Case studies by Landolt (2019), Head-König (2013, 2019) and Baur and Binder (2013) show differences and different abilities in being able to craft new institutional settings from the bottom up. They show that commoners' organisations are balancing with (Leerschlag) market and state and also highlight the important role of commoners' identity and their rationality. These issues are important in understanding how Switzerland – where communal tenure rights are respected – is providing a kind of a laboratory in adapting and changing institutions that have to face the above-mentioned balance. The studies conducted for our research focus on the variety of “solutions” in this ‘Swiss commons lab’ and the way the local bargaining power of corporations in relation to municipalities, cantons and the Swiss confederation affects these processes of institution building. We also focus on the question of how differences between and within commoners' organisations, their identity and their local knowledge, shape strategies in the ‘Swiss commons lab’. Finally, we will also look at factors that increase the vulnerability and enhance the resilience of commoners' organisations in crafting new local institutions for the maintenance of cultural landscape ecosystems in Switzerland.

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