

**PHD THESIS SUMMARY:**  
**Sharing in Common:**  
**A Republican Defence of Group Ownership**

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Everywhere in the world, people make use of group ownership institutions. These institutions allow them to share forests, windmills, water basins, stores, meadows, and countless other resources they rely on to meet their daily needs. You would not know that from reading the philosophical literature on property, however. There, the focus is almost invariably on defining, defending, or criticizing individual ownership (see on this Olsen 2019). This leaves undertheorized three important questions: what is group ownership? Is it a valuable institution? And can it be preferable to other forms of ownership? These are the questions I have addressed in my dissertation.

I argue that group ownership is the position of authority, held by a group, to decide how an object may be used, within limits set by law (chapter 2). This authority extends both internally, over the members of the group, and externally, over outsiders. In the particular conception of group ownership that I defend, the relevant group is private and its authority is democratically organized. An example would be of farmers sharing an irrigation system to water their land. Their rights to use this irrigation system are then designed, authorized, and subject to change by their democratic decisions. This is different from various legal forms of co-ownership where the co-owners' individual rights are pre-determined by law. Such rights are ultimately reducible to individual property, while my conception of group ownership is not.

This institution is valuable when and because it empowers people. Or, to use the technical language I develop in my dissertation: group ownership is valuable when it realizes people's *basic non-domination* (chapter 4). Domination, I argue, consists of the structurally enabled and structurally unequal ability of an agent to shape another agent's option set on an arbitrary basis, meaning in ways that the subjected agent cannot control (Pettit 1997; Gädeke 2020). The opposite of domination is people's secure

enjoyment of equal control over the relationships they are in, or *non-domination*. You enjoy the more limited ideal of *basic non-domination* when, firstly, you have *basic capabilities*, meaning capabilities you minimally require to withstand arbitrary power. Without, for instance, the capabilities to secure adequate nourishment, shelter, and reliable information, you can become problematically dependent on another agent, or vulnerable to their manipulation. Secondly, basic non-domination requires that people are in control of decisions that affect their basic capabilities, again to avoid making them problematically dependent on another agent.

From this ideal of basic non-domination, I derive two criteria that ownership institutions must meet according to republicanism (chapter 5). The *basic capability criterion* states that ownership institutions must help people to use resources to attain their basic capabilities. The *control criterion* holds that ownership institutions must place the people who rely on resources for their basic capabilities, in control of how these resources are used. These criteria constitute a comparative framework for the normative analysis of different ownership institutions. Group ownership is justified over other ownership institutions when, for instance, a shared irrigation system allows more farmers to access enough water to live off their land (thus securing various basic capabilities), while also ensuring that all farmers are equally in control over decisions that affect their access to water.

By analyzing common property regimes (CPRs) in natural and agricultural resources, I show the conditions under which group ownership institutions can meet both criteria. CPRs meet the basic capability criterion because they enable people to use resources to secure their livelihood (chapter 6). This may be surprising, in light of the influential myth that sharing is unproductive or leads to a ‘tragedy of the commons’ (Hardin 1968; see also Demsetz 1967). Empirical evidence shows, however, that people can use shared natural resources in a productive way *if* they can collectively set the rules on how these resources may be used themselves (Ostrom 1990; Cox, Arnold, and Tomás 2010). This is exactly what happens under group ownership. In my dissertation, I clarify the conditions under which CPRs can help more persons attain their basic capabilities than the alternatives of individual and public ownership. I furthermore argue that arguments against sharing are often based on speculation and have historically even been grounded in the self-interest of people who stood to gain from a privileging of individual over group ownership (see on this Ciriacy-Wantrup and Bishop 1975).

To meet the control criterion, CPRs must be internally democratic and regulated externally by a series of nested democratic communities, all of which ensure that people are in control of the decisions that affect their basic capabilities (chapter 7). Moreover, rules about inclusion and exclusion from group membership may not be determined solely by groups themselves, and separately, but must be subject to general rules which are determined by democratic deliberation and decision in a wider community. Nor may such rules track discriminatory norms, as this would reproduce rather than counter domination.

While the main focus is on CPRs in natural and agricultural resources, I show how the lessons learned can be extended to other organizations based on group ownership, including knowledge commons, energy cooperatives, insurance mutuals, and worker cooperatives. In all cases, theoretical speculation predicts that people cannot cooperate to meet their needs, while empirical evidence shows the contrary to be the case (Madison, Frischmann, and Strandburg 2010; Vriens and De Moor 2020; Dow 2003). It seems that democratic decision-making is instrumental for this achievement, while also being of intrinsic importance for people's empowerment. Interestingly, group ownership structures have allowed these citizens to directly act to secure their basic non-domination, rather than being consigned to petitioning their government to do this for them.

My dissertation aims to contribute to political philosophy in three main ways. First, I hope that my conceptualization of group ownership will spur more research from many normative perspectives on what makes this institution valuable. In addition, my taxonomy of justifications of property (chapter 3), and my systematic republican framework for the comparative evaluation of ownership institutions (chapter 5) can facilitate research on all types of ownership. The most important contribution of my dissertation, however, is the normative defense of group ownership. Everywhere in the world, people use group ownership institutions to meet their needs in a democratic way. Thus, they take control of their lives together and as equals. It is time that their sharing practices gain the recognition they deserve, and that their value is defended.

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