

SABINE NUSS

A paternoster lift is an elevator consisting of a series of linked doorless compartments moving continuously on an endless belt.

We are moving upward in one such compartment inside the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, to the office of Sabine Nuss. She's a political scientist who wrote a book about how the Open Source movement can be understood through the eyes of Karl Marx, and she knows all the debates that relate to public goods. So we meet Sabine to ask her about Nobel Prize laureate Elinor Ostrom, whose ideas on the use of resources and commons are so politically relevant, and why there still is a catch.

Elinor Ostrom was awarded the 2009 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for her work on the practice of shared resources, or commons. Sabine, what is the main aspect of her theory?

Elinor Ostrom is an environmental economist, which means that she asks how the exploitation and overharvesting of natural resources can be prevented. In her understanding, this can include different things, such as fishing grounds, pastures for animals to graze, but also irrigation systems.

So she looked at different forms of resources, both in a theoretical as well as in a practical way by going into the field and study how commons have worked in history in different countries, and sometimes still do work the same way as they used to. Sometimes she refers to practices that date thousands of years back. For example, how in different eras animals were herded, and how villages arranged among their communities that the meadows would not be overgrazed.

Ostrom however doesn't stop at her historical analysis. Her point is, that we could solve our current resource issues if we apply rules based on the model of the commons. In one of your articles you are critical whether this could really work, as our current problems are rooted in our economic system.

I think that this practice of commons can still work today and it sometimes does happen, as for example with fishing quotas that are put into place to avoid overfishing.

However, compared with Ostrom's historic examples, environmental destruction is inherent in today's form of economy, due to the principle of the maximization of profits.

There is a reason why Elinor Ostrom researches these practices of the commons, why they used to work so well over the centuries and why in today's societies ecological destruction is as extensive as it has never been before.

What she doesn't recognize however is that in this principle of profit, that natural resources constantly become subject to renegotiation.