

Book Review

Lee Cronk and Beth L. Leech. 2012. *Meeting at Grand Central: Understanding the Social and Evolutionary Roots of Cooperation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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Understanding cooperation and collective action represents a fundamental issue for commons research (see, for instance, the recent conference on *Design and Dynamics of Institutions for Collective Action*: www.collective-action.info/conference-design-dynamics-icas). IJC readers will hence appreciate Cronk and Leech volume, which nicely systematizes our knowledge about factors affecting cooperation using an interdisciplinary approach based on the findings of both the social and the natural sciences. Starting with a broad definition of cooperation, encompassing both collective action and coordination problems, the authors rigorously analyze the biological, psychological, cultural and institutional roots of cooperation, showing how all these elements should be taken into account if we really want to understand why and when people cooperate (or fail to do so).

The fact that commons research significantly contributed to our understanding of human cooperation is clearly recognized in the volume, which presents a number of well known commons examples, from water management in Arizona and Valencia, to rice crops in Bali. At a deeper level, the approach taken by Cronk and Leech presents some important similarities with the interdisciplinary and multi-methodological approach characterizing the commons community (e.g. Poteete et al. 2010). Social and natural sciences all have something to say about cooperation and their explanations are often more complementary than conflicting. However, scientists in the different fields themselves face a coordination problem: how to collaborate despite their use of different languages and methods. Moreover, to collaborate they will have to build mutually consistent explanations, going beyond narrow perspectives and reciprocal suspicion, e.g. regarding “scientific imperialism”, an argument that social scientists often bring forward when

biologists or other life science scholars advance possible explanations for human behaviour.

Recognizing the complexity (in a technical meaning) of social relations does not only mean that different disciplines have their own place and right in the study of the subject, but also that interaction among them is needed to reach mutually consistent explanations of the observed regularities. Better understanding how cooperation emerges from the behaviour of interacting individuals represents a crucial endeavour that can only benefit from a multifaceted approach, just as Lin Ostrom taught us for decades. I am hence confident that IJC readers, independent of their disciplinary background, will not only enjoy the reading, but also find it useful for their work and research.

Literature cited

Poteete, A.R., M.A. Janssen, and E. Ostrom. 2010. Working together: collective action, the commons, and multiple methods in practice. Princeton: Princeton University Press.