

COMMONS FORUM *RESPONSE*

Response to: The Name Change; or, What Happened to the “P”?, by Charlotte Hess and Ruth Meinzen-Dick

Widening the Ambit through a Change to Commons

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As a latecomer to the IASC I have not had the benefit of the four years discussion over a name change, but perhaps I have some of the benefits of a fresh perspective. In political economy we constantly engage with the corrosive neoliberal notions of property and privatization, so a shift in emphasis to shared institutions, common property and the commons is very welcome. Now that the IASCP has decided to delete the ‘property’ from their name, comments have been invited.

For me the change is an expansive one, in that it maintains debates on common property but widens the ambit to include what I regard, broadly speaking, as shared institutions. Charlotte and Ruth, in their essay, mention institutions, regimes and management systems, by way of opening the field of debate from ‘common property’ to ‘commons’. While debates over ‘property’ certainly demand contestation, we must recognize that there is to some extent a liberal ‘ownership’ of the concept. In the sphere of colonial relations, for example, indigenous ownership of land was recognized (or not) through certain forms of agricultural technology.

Great arguments over indigenous land rights in my own country Australia are dominated by definitions and redefinitions of custodianship and traditional entitlements. Willing and ignorant disregard persists over land tenure systems which do not contemplate alienation and individuation. These debates affect our former colony and neighbor, Papua New Guinea, and Australian innovations in commodification were even felt in colonial Africa, during various land titling experiments. Importantly, new shared (or public) institutions, such as registered and indefeasible land title, have been created precisely to commodify older shared institutions, such as shared clan lands.

Perhaps this helps make the point about the breadth of shared institutions –they are traditional and contemporary, and they can be used to enhance or destroy other shared institutions. While speaking of shared institutions, we must remember language, culture and those pillars of organized modern society, education and health systems. This may be somewhat broader than was contemplated by many IASC(P) members, whose concerns seem to have focused on traditional systems, agriculture, and environmental and natural resource management systems. Is this a problem? Could it make an already diverse and multidiscipline society just too inchoate? Well certainly, in the developing world, we can see strong connections between environmental management and education, as well as environmental destruction and health. The projects of many large environmental NGOs, including Integrated Conservation and Development projects (ICADs), have failed because they have neither secured community ownership nor effective engagement with the education and health priorities of traditional communities. Here is room for discussion, and some wider understandings.

There is another sense in which it seems more satisfactory to discuss shared institutions than shared property, or even shared resources. ‘Property’ suggests ownership and even a particular form of ownership (liberal: individualized and commodifiable); ‘resources’ remains fairly utilitarian. Perhaps deciding on ‘the commons’ was a way of escaping existential arguments over ‘common resources’?

Property will remain an important focus of those concerned, as Charlotte and Ruth say, at “new captures” in areas such as intellectual property, and the debates over biopiracy, essential medicines and biodiversity. Here again there may well be the need to extend common property debates to recognize other shared institutions, such as indigenous languages (and not just patent offices) as the legitimate repositories of human knowledge. The IASC can nurture such lateral thinking.

To sum up, I would say that a focus on the commons, or shared institutions, is critical in an era of decaying privatization, which has been tried and has failed the needs of vast populations. The IASC, newly named, can continue to be not just an academic talking point, but an important counterbalance to the elevation of private property as a quasi-religious pre-condition for the common good.

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