

A Common(s) Language?: The Growing Challenges of Interdisciplinarity in Common Property Studies (Draft)

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I'm guessing that most of us are in the field of Common Property Studies because we're curious. We've noticed social, political, and economic changes and we'd like to work out what's going on. I'm guessing that a lot of us are in the field of Common Property Studies because we noticed that the social, political, and economic changes we are interested in have real effects on real people in real communities, and those changes are not always for the better. I'm guessing that many of us believe that more adequate analysis can lead to more adequate responses to the social, political, and economic changes in communities, and that somehow the differences that we make can be positive differences, that we can somehow contribute beneficially to the lives of those we work with. I'm guessing that many of us are in this field because, quite simply, we care. I believe that the more we care, the more careful it helps to be. Best intentions aren't enough, and compassion and care don't necessarily lead to long-term beneficial consequences. The histories of colonization and empire offer enough lessons in that regard, and I would suggest that many of our discourses and methodologies are likely still tinged with the architectures of empire, oppression, and violence. I think it helps to take that issue seriously, to not deny the historical realities of the ways we tend to think, to not gloss over the horrible histories of much academic work, to not efface the questionables of any so-called development work.

I believe that it helps to always be working for more adequate and representative ways of making sense of our experience, of the 'realities' we encounter. I believe it helps to work towards a greater respect for other people's ways of making sense of their lives, and that includes other academics ways of making sense of theirs. Communities of scholarship such as ours offer us opportunities to do so.

For my first IASCP experience in 1998 I travelled 6,000 miles to present a 20 minute paper. In Vancouver I felt like an initiate, eager to learn the language,

eager to talk the talk. I was not one of you, I felt, but I was eager to become a member of the common property club. I received 5 minutes notice that I had actually only 10 minutes in which to present it. I did what many young, inexperienced academics might do. I rushed it. If there might have been anyone inclined to listen to what I had to say I imagine I spoke too fast to let any of it settle in.

In 2000, in Bloomington, I submitted a written paper in advance, and then decided with two hours to go that I would rather talk about something else. I wanted to present some ideas that were exciting me in my more recent work. Bad idea. I threw together some overheads, drew a cartoon picture of 'Hector the Vector' in a bid to soften the presentation, and once again spoke too fast. This time I was a little more aware that I was not among academic kindreds. I was having a lot of difficulty communicating what I wanted to say because most people simply weren't used to their language, and I wasn't used to theirs. ...

Still, in Bloomington I was excited by work in the field, excited by the increasingly visible interdisciplinarity, excited that Bonnie McCay noted at the plenary that maybe it was time to really start questioning the consequences of the dominant rationalist methodologies of rational choice and bounded rationality. I came away hopeful, and ready to undertake my training as a Jedi of the Commons.

Over the years, as I began to realise that I didn't really want to talk about Irish traditional music as a resource commons, or that I didn't want to talk about the commons as much as I did about enclosure, I began to wonder if I was only going to be welcome in this field if I adhered to the core paradigms of resource management and institutional analysis. I began to wonder if I would only be really admitted to this community of scholarship on other people's terms. I hoped not. ...

In Oaxaca I questioned the notion of the commons. I questioned best intentions. I questioned the central ideas of the field. I made some people angry, and maybe even lost friends. Time will tell. ...

Despite my earlier sense of hope and promise, despite Bonnie McCay's call to open up the theoretical imaginary of the field, it seemed to me that by the time Oaxaca 2004 came around that the issue of interdisciplinarity had not really been explored as much as it might have been.

It was in Oaxaca that I became somewhat aware that there are some things that people really don't talk about all that openly at these conferences. Are these conferences becoming more and more structured by silences and silencing? What sorts of things might we be avoiding talking about that have significant consequences for how we are thinking and what we are doing? As more and more academics from more and more fields enter into the fray, how many elephants are in the room?

Do we consider the ecological consequences of holding an international conference? A round trip from London to Bali causes around 10 tonnes of CO₂ to be dumped in the atmosphere. Merely taking the flight to this conference resulted in me contributing my average annual CO₂ emission in one go, equivalent to the CO₂ I from car use for a whole year ... All in all, my visit to this conference is costing me somewhere in the region of one thousand pounds, which is one twenty-sixth of my salary, and an exorbitant amount of money for many of the people who live on this planet. I would estimate that I have spent about £3000 over three IASCP conferences for the purpose of presenting three ten-minute papers and having maybe twenty conversations with colleagues ...

What about the locals who live in the area where the conferences take place? During the Oaxaca conference in 2004 I got to talking with a local woman who was working as a waitress in one of the restaurants. I was only able to do this because I happened to speak Spanish, having studied it at University. Anyway, she outlined the difficult economic situation in Oaxaca, an area long reliant on textiles and shrouded by political unrest. She spoke enthusiastically

about how great it was that the conference was happening, that all these experts were so concerned about her area that they would come to her town to offer their expertise to locals so that the lives of people in Oaxaca would improve. I didn't have the heart to tell her that conferences didn't tend to work like that, or that all of the expertise was just passing through on the way to somewhere else. I couldn't tell her I was pretty much just another rich tourist like all the other tourists, except that I maybe had a better public relations profile ...

What about theory and methodology? I have been present during some conversations at these conferences that open up the dominant paradigms of common property studies to critical interrogation. I have heard people speak, for example, about the drawbacks of positivism, or about the inadequacies of rational choice and bounded rationality epistemologies. But it would seem those conversations don't tend to take place openly, often unfolding in hushed tones, behind closed doors, in corridors, or over a pint in the bar. ...

The Gist of My Spiel

The field of common property studies is becoming something of an interdisciplinary nexus for the analysis of economic, social, and political realities of everyday life around the world. Scholars from all over the place have been attracted by the political and, importantly, ethical impetus and promise of the field. As common property studies becomes home to more and more scholars from an increasing variety of perspectives, I would suggest that it is no longer helpful to assume that scholars of the commons speak a common language of scholarship, if they ever did.

The historical foundations of the field of common property studies lie within new institutional analysis, economics, and political theory. It is from these areas that the methodological orthodoxies of common property studies have emerged (e.g. comparative case study analysis, game theory, decision theory, among others). Epistemological models of rational choice and bounded rationality thus continue to provide the normative centre of the discipline.

In recent years, however, notions of 'the commons' have proved attractive for a variety of scholars either external to the foundation disciplines of common property studies or uncomfortable within them. This has, in turn, led to the introduction or perhaps intrusion of a range of qualitative methodologies and their epistemological counterparts to the field as new people come in to be part of this community of scholarship. As a result, the field is now almost unique among disciplines for the range of epistemological and methodological possibilities that are emerging in the study of discourses and practices of 'the commons'. The transformative potential of this area of study is perhaps greater than it has ever been.

The scholars who are new to this field also come with the best of intentions. Many of us come with the excitement of having found ways of thinking in our own fields that humanize our academic inquiry where once we had found it depeopled and mechanistic; thinking that enlivens academic debate where once we had found it bureaucratic and often blatantly rhetorical; thinking that enrich our understandings of our own relationships, our own experience, and the political possibilities of everyday life, where once we had persisted in the believe that whatever we were studying it didn't require us to include ourselves in the analysis.

With these best intentions comes a range of potential critique with which we seek to do more than criticize, but rather seeks to open up our thinking to a range of ever more transformative and helpful possibilities for our work. One of the interesting developments in the coming years will be whether these new perspectives and critiques are incorporated into new and helpful imaginings within the theoretical and methodological mansions of common property studies.

The so-called "softer" areas of the social and political sciences allow for what I think of as a peopling of the field. Interpretative anthropology and sociology, social and symbolic interactionism, cultural studies, ethnomusicology, folklore studies, and many more allow us, as folklorist Henry Glassie puts it, to "push

beyond things to meanings, and grope through meanings to values. Study must rise to perplex and stand to become part of a critical endeavour. We study others so their humanity will bring our own into awareness, so the future will be better than the past" (*Passing the Time in Ballymenone*, 1995:xiv). Meanings matter, for they guide our experience of power and agency, shape our environments, and contribute forcefully to making our lives what and how they happen to be.

Those of us who come from the more humanistic social and political sciences enter into this field with more than a little trepidation. For us, the securities of rational choice and bounded rationality remain open to question, along with the methodologies that have been built upon them. From the challenges of social constructionism (e.g. Berger and Luckmann, 1966), to Marcus and Fischer's (1986) so-called "crisis of representation" in anthropology, from critiques of foundationalist reason (e.g. Flax, 1993) to Linda Tuhiwai Smith's indigenous studies project of the "decolonization of methodology" (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999), many of us work to invite people to celebrate and privilege the particularisms of circumstance and social context, to respect for the messinesses of human interaction, social psychology, and everyday life, and to counter the dynamics of force, coercion, violence, domination, and oppression wherever we may find them, not least of all within ourselves.

But none of these critiques have yet played any significant part of theoretical discussion in common property studies, and I believe that common property studies as a discipline or interdiscipline is the poorer for it. It doesn't have to be this way, and I would love to see more open discussion about the increasing potential for theoretical and methodological diversity in this field. If you are not familiar with these fields, I invite you to read around a little and see if there is anything there that sparks your interest or challenges your heart.

Most of us are academics. Theory is our business. When I say theory I mean 'thinking about my/your/our thinking'. We're professional thinkers, and if we're not thinking about our own thinking, if we're not taking the consequences of

our own thinking seriously, if we're not continually challenging ourselves in our own thinking, questioning the ideas we take for granted, questioning the ideas we are most impassioned to defend, then I think we're not doing our job. How might we be participating in the dynamics that we seek to critique?

Return to Oaxaca

This paper in part follows on from my presentation at the Oaxaca conference. In that paper I addressed some of the ways in which my attempts to use resource management models of common property theory left me at a bit of a loss in my research. I found myself being drawn away, again and again, from the experiences of the people I was working with, drawn away from their ways of making sense of the world. I also found myself analytically disempowered, unable to explain many of the aspects of the social situations and expansionary social dynamics that I encountered.

In my Oaxaca paper I explained how it was that I had turned from models of "the commons" to a model of "enclosure" in a bid to come to less partial and more adequate analyses of expansion and commodification. In this way I also hoped to come to more reflective and reflexive understandings of whatever "the commons" might mean for different people, and particularly for me. I presented a very brief overview of a new theory of commodification that brought me to what might be received as a somewhat counterintuitive understanding. My research has led me to think that many of the social situations we often characterize positively as environments of common property may also be characterized as environments of enclosure. I further suggested that our emphasis on resources, common property, and the commons might be seriously misleading, and that we might be better served focusing on the relational implications of enclosure.

In the first response to my Oaxaca paper a respondent characterized what I presented as an "assault on the Commons". This is understandable, but my work does not constitute an "assault on the commons", if by that is meant an assault on those people who labour with good intentions on behalf of what

they think of as “commons” within contexts of community. I, too, seek to make a helpful difference in this world, and I celebrate the energies of those who seek to do the same.

My work is, however, a critique of discourses of the commons, a critique of how we may make sense of our work by speaking in terms of “commons”. Declaring a situation a “commons” doesn’t explain anything, it simply calls for explanation - the declaration is not outside that which requires explanation. My position is that it would help if we were more careful about the ways in which we make sense of our work, the ways in which we frame our actions, the ways in which we conceive of our epistemologies precisely *because of* our good intentions. I think it helps to remain vigilant of the possibility that through common property studies many of us may be ushering in another damaging wave of discourses and practices of ‘development’, repackaged in disciplines that haven’t really been touched by critiques of development discourses. I’m not saying it’s a fact or a truth – you get to work it out for yourself, but I can say that I am personally very wary of the potential for methodological colonization that, for me, remains implicit in many of the epistemologies and methodologies of political theory, institutional economics, game theory, and collective action theory.

For example, how do we account for the people in communities who really don’t like what we do or the ways we do what we do? What can we learn from them? I’m sure they’re there if we were to look. I’m sure I’m not the only one who has ever come across cynicism or at least skepticism with regard to the crusading endeavours of much well-intentioned academic work. I think it would help to seek those people out and listen to what they have to say. Not for the purpose of converting them to our cause, but for the purpose of listening. We really don’t have to be doing what we do, and even if there are people out there who disagree with our whole project, maybe they have opinions that we would do well to listen to, and maybe even respect. What might we be losing by not listening to their stories, by not listening to how they feel about what we do?

The same respondent to my paper also noted that there is, as such, no homogenous 'theory of the commons' to critique, and further offered that focusing on enclosure rather than the commons is a profoundly disempowering strategy, emphasising victimization rather than positive activity at a community level. I will readily admit that there is no consensus on a 'theory of the commons'. My Oaxaca paper never suggested that there was. What I did suggest is that the orthodox, dominant architectures of theories (plural) of the commons tend to revolve around conceptualizations of resource management. That's about as close to a truism as I am ever going to get. Resource management is at the heart of the IASCP mission statement, which you can find on the IASCP website:

The International Association for the Study of Common Property (IASCP), founded in 1989, is a nonprofit Association devoted to understanding and improving institutions for the management of environmental resources that are (or could be) held or used collectively by communities in developing or developed countries (<http://www.iascp.org>).

My central point of the dominance of "resource management" discourses in this field can hardly be evaded. Discourses of the commons are primarily discourses of resource management, particularly within Common Property Studies. To speak of "the Commons" is often (most often here) to speak of resources. If you are interested in a developed version of this critique in relation to notions of the "information commons" I will have copies available at the conference or you can consult my website at <http://www.beyondthecommons.com>. ("Enclosure Without and Within the "Information Commons", 2005).

As for framing the concept of the commons in the position of the victim, if I were to take enclosure as the intruding privatization of common resources, or as external encroachments and intrusions into community life, then, yes, to focus on enclosure, as the opposite of the commons, would be to place undue weight on the victimization of the commons. Indeed, historically this is what has tended to happen where enclosure is concerned. However, this is not what I mean by enclosure. The effects of enclosure, for me, can be traced

back to dispositional dynamics, and particular characters of interpersonal relationship. For me, enclosure is not the opposite of anything, as I do not recognise binary oppositions as an adequate way to make sense of experience (although I do acknowledge that the deployment of binary oppositions can have very powerful consequences for our understandings of experience). If you are interested in more of what I mean when I talk about enclosure you can visit <http://www.beyondthecommons.com> or read the other paper I have brought with me. Although not discussed here, my understanding of enclosure is based in a broader social theory of hope and gentleness, a social theory in which I aim to come to more adequate understandings of agency, and the possibilities for positive social transformation. My theory of enclosure is not about victimization. Rather, it is through the identification and explanation of the dynamics that I refer to as enclosure that I think we might come to more adequate understandings of the possibilities for empowerment in our lives. My critique of “the commons” and resource management is anything but the normalization of oppressive dynamics and victimization.

In my work, then, I want to talk less of resources and more of people, what’s important to them and how that changes, how their attitudes change, what subtle plays of meanings and influences operate in their lives, and the character of their relationships. I’m interested in “the power of small emotions” as the filmmaker John Cassavetes put it, the feelings of encroachment, the anger of resistance, the anxieties of exclusion, the fear of displacement, the depression of feeling like you don’t matter, the joys of love, and the intensities of belonging and rejection.

I don’t find that discourses of resource management help me much in this regard. Neither do rationalistic assumptions about incentives, cost-benefit analysis, or collective action. Such paradigms won’t get me where I want to go, even though I am still concerned with social and political situations similar to those studied by many of you who remain focused on resource management. Like many of you, I am still looking for family resemblances in

social and political dynamics between situations in my attempts to make more helpful sense of the kinds of things that are happening in people's lives.

As has been said many times before, paradigms work to reveal some things, and conceal others (see e.g., Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta, eds. 2000). The main point of my Oaxaca paper was that not only do I feel that resource management discourses are unhelpful for what interests me, but that allowing them to remain central to my work is to perpetuate and intensify the very commodifying and enclosing dynamics that I seek to counteract. I realise that making that statement involves me in the position that language shapes us as we shape language, but yes, I hold that position, and I believe that words matter, if only because they are often symptomatic of the degree of respect or lack of respect that we have for people, emotions, and the character of our relationships. While acknowledging that resource management can be a crucial concern, I am interested in those aspects of life that tend to be a lot more subtle than resource management. If I were continue to use that very narrow window for making sense of people's lives, including my own, I believe my research wouldn't be as helpful as I would like it to be. If I were to assume that resource management was a good framework to impose upon a situation before I even got there, the helpfulness of my research would, I believe, be diminished many times over.

To summarise my Oaxaca paper: I think it helps to be more careful about the power of our paradigms. I think it helps to consider the extent to which we may sometimes depopulate our theoretical work, draining it of life and emotion, when it's the life and emotion that may well transform our research into what we always may have wished it to be – appropriate to context, situationally sensitive, theoretically helpful, and personally respectful. I think it helps to consider what impoverishment may result from, quite simply, focusing on things more than on environments of relationship that extend beyond the economic or the resource-political. I think it helps to be more humble in our theoretical work, less inclined to tell others that the ways we think are automatically better than their own or universally applicable. I think it helps to remember that as academics we often speak with privileged voices and from

privileged positions. For many people, what we say matters more because we are professional thinkers. That's a big responsibility, and it often comes with relatively little accountability. I think we can do better than we're doing.

The Gift of Difference

It is possible to think differently, and a number of us in this field do. But we want to have dialogues with people, we want to find out how perspectives other than our own might be helpful and illuminating for us, and how our own areas of study, our explicit peopling of the academic terrain, might be helpful for others. I'm looking at a sea of academic riches and there's a lot of learning and listening to be done.

If you are a game theorist or a bounded rationalist or an institutional economist within common property studies it might be tempting to think you are speaking within a community of consensus. But please, be ready for us to contradict each other – we contain multitudes! A number of us think differently, not sharing your fundamental assumptions about what knowledge is or how it is achieved. A number of us do not share your faith in some of the basic principles of empirical science or positivist method. There is difference here, and that's okay. Not only is it okay, but it's positively healthy, and one of the great things about this field. Our challenge is to communicate with each other in ways that make sense, in ways that help us all. That's not going to happen if we wear the masks of methodology like army uniforms.

I think it's really important to face up to the theoretical diversity in the field. And I'm not just talking about theories-about-resources. A glance at the range of theoretical categories in the Digital Library of the Commons would suggest that theories-about-resources is all we have to choose from in common property studies. The point is, though, that there is a greater theoretical diversity already in this field than is reflected in the literature or in the classifications. I'm talking about the closet indigenous studies scholars, interpretative anthropologists, feminists, symbolic interactionists, Foucauldians, poststructuralists, anarchists, postmodernists, and more that

are in this field, working within this community of scholarship. I'm talking about those people who have attended IASCP conferences, came, saw, listened, and went home disappointed and disillusioned that there was no place for their understandings here. I'm talking about environmental studies and development studies scholars I know who won't touch this field with a barge pole because they think it's sewn-up by political theorists and institutional analysts, leaving little or no room for other voices or other theoretical perspectives, least of all critical voices.

So yes, I think it's really important to face up to the growing theoretical diversity of this field. I don't know if anybody else has felt this way at these conferences, but I know that I have simply felt uncomfortable a lot of the time in discussions, having so many problems with the whole framing of discussions that I didn't know how to speak up without feeling like I was disrupting the production schedule. There is sometimes a powerful peer pressure that results from the subtle dominance of unquestioned discourses in any field. Vigilance helps, however, if we are to keep the conversations open and fluid, the questions bright and sparkly.

Seeking Common Ground (not shared technical language): Live and Let Research

For me, the field of Common Property Studies is one of the most exciting that I have encountered. Normally academics get the luxury of only engaging with competing and conflicting methodologies and epistemologies in textual form, safely bound within books. In many cases, I'm sure, we afford ourselves the extra luxury of simply bypassing those people we disagree with by leaving their work on the library shelves where we found it, or by not citing their work. At IASCP conferences, though, we get an opportunity to engage with competing and conflicting methodologies and epistemologies by meeting actual people. What a radical thought. But this is more likely to be a good thing if we take care to foster an attitude and an atmosphere in which people feel comfortable acknowledging difference, or feel comfortable making their diverse contributions known.

My position isn't a prescriptive one; people do what they do, say what they say, and they get to work it out for themselves. I acknowledge there are many ways to talk about "the commons," and that they involve increasing rhetorical and emotive power. I acknowledge that people train in disciplines where resource management perspectives are often doctrine and rule, ground for authority and legitimation for action. I also acknowledge that there may be times when an emphasis on resource management may be very helpful, and when methodologies that emerge from resource management analysis may also be very helpful. As I said before, I still have a lot to learn about resource management, it's just that I think we can also move beyond resource management paradigms in order to grasp some broader social and political issues that tend to remain silenced by such approaches.

I personally do not think that the dominant concepts, theories, and methodologies here are appropriate for all contexts or analytical questions in thinking about "the commons", or, more to the point in my work, for adequate analysis of the politics and dynamics of "enclosure". And, for the foreseeable future, I choose not to base my analysis of social, political, and economic changes on the concept of "the commons" or on models of resource management.

But I do invite you to consider why you use those frameworks, if you do. Where does that thinking come from? How is it that you happen to think this way and not some other ways? What assumptions about human nature and interaction are built into such thinking? Are you comfortable thinking about the complexities of your own life in those terms? Are other people? Have you considered that there might be other ways to think about all this? Do you still expect me to use resource management theory here even though I have been explicit about not wanting to use it? Do you judge my position as a failure to embrace this field properly?

Many would automatically consider a variety of conflicting epistemologies in an academic field to be methodologically unworkable. However, I would like to

suggest that it may be possible to flout academic convention and adopt a working assumption that certain methodologies might be helpful for some analytic tasks and inappropriate for others, providing claims to universality are suspended. In this paper I was going to present a tentative typology of methodological approaches in common property studies. I was hoping this typology would go some way towards the cause of more helpful and dialogic analysis of social, political, and economic change within commons regimes, within the communities in which such regimes operate, and within the communities of common property scholarship. I continue to work on that project, but I feel that the epistemological principles upon which I base such a project are best left for a more extended exposition in written form. I'm happy to continue that thread of thought with anyone in conversation.

One of things I would have suggested with such a typology is that "resource management" epistemologies and methodologies are more likely to be helpful for the purposes of description rather than explanation. Where description is presumed to substitute for explanation we get ourselves into very unhelpful water, making it very likely that we might get swept away with the currents of good intentions. When it comes to talking about the politics of social change, or about the consequences of our participation in social change, or about the possibilities of long-term transformation in the face of unhelpful social change, "resource management" thinking doesn't tend to help much.

I don't know. I hold out hope that there is a grounding of resonances to work from here, one that emerges from a respect for the human, emotional realities of everyday life. In this field I am reminded very forcefully that academic work is always and primarily an issue of relationship, and always and primarily an issue of relationship among people who come from very different positions. The potential heightened visibility of this at these conferences makes this field rare, as academic fields go. I believe it also makes the work of those in Common Property Studies all the more important. This nexus of academic approaches is a wonderful opportunity for interdisciplinary engagement, a wonderful opportunity for people to dare to talk across methodologies, to dare to critique each other without our methodologies and epistemologies

hardening into ideological positions. I believe that the field of common property studies can yet serve as an exemplar of interdisciplinarity. Maybe there can be no common language, but maybe yet a common attitude, in the cause of socially, politically, and ecologically transformative scholarship.