

## Property matters

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Despite its recent interest in markets and economics as well as its longstanding focus on things and materials, STS has so far largely neglected property as an object of its research. When property is brought up, it is usually in the form of property *rights* which, in turn, are mostly understood as intellectual property. But what about the property matters itself? Are they, like John Locke's acorn, just patiently waiting to be appropriated, leaving everything to lawyers, courts, and legislatures? Or do they also get a say in if, how, and under what conditions they will enter into a property relationship?

The property debate has long revolved around the question of commons vs. private property, asking more or less explicitly which of them is more beneficial to communities and society. What gets overlooked in this discourse is that neither are given: while a pair of shoes is hard to collectivize, the privatization of air seems absurd even to the advocates of private property. The narrow focus on private vs. collective also fails to account for all the forms of property matters that do not neatly fall into one or the other category: is a research paper, for example, a private or a public good (Callon 1994)?

Above all other disciplines, anthropology (Hann 1998) has acknowledged and explored the importance of property, but overwhelmingly for relations between humans and humans. The anthropological discourse on property, despite being the most fruitful so far, still suffers from the emphasis on rights, the focus on property in land, and putting owners center stage. Few authors have acknowledged the work that goes into creating and sustaining property, and even less have done so explicitly. For Latour (1990), metal weights that make keys return to their rightful owner are just a side note illustrating the general association of humans and nonhumans. Zelizer (1998) vividly describes the attempts of housewives to make money theirs by earmarking, but does not extend the problem beyond currencies.

And yet, property objects? things? matters? remain irritating and stimulating for thinking about the circulation of goods and people. If the instantaneous transaction that Callon (1998) deems so crucial

for markets is understood as the simultaneous disentangling and reentangling of property, this raises the question of how the partners in transaction can make something change hands that just a moment ago was tied to a person by the power of a hundred laws. If in Papua New Guinea and elsewhere the alienation of personal belongings cannot happen without a transformation of their owner (West 2006), then how can other people be so calm about selling, buying, and reselling things as if they were completely accidental to themselves as a person – and yet insist that private property is the cornerstone of free societies?

Investigating property is by no means trivial: undoing the mundaneness (Woolgar & Neylandt 2013) of everyday property practices requires attentiveness, curiosity, and luck – but in turn tells us a lot about the inventiveness of owners and the creativity of property. Not taking the lofty language of patents and property laws for granted, but instead questioning their use, reach, and effectiveness for the governance of things promises new insights off the beaten tracks of property theory.

This panel gathers contributions that closely engage with the nature of property objects and the societies, economies, and institutions they summon. Understanding property in a broad sense – from locked bikes to sins to kidneys – it asks what it takes for these things to work as property. Apart from laws and rules, which technologies demarcate, identify, move, and hold property in place? How much work does appropriation and, conversely, alienation of property take? And how does the division of labor between owners and property bring both into being?

### **Literature cited**

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