

Call for Papers

(Un)doing the Commons

SOCIOLOGY DEPARTMENT

SHIV NADAR UNIVERSITY, INDIA

27-28 FEBRUARY 2020

Concept Note:

This conference will advocate a move to explore the commons as a process that involves constantly emerging spatio-temporal dynamics generative of modes of identification, place making, and belonging. We foreground this form of an engagement by questioning or (un)doing certain themes underlying the dominant conceptualizations of the commons in social theory.

As with “community,” the “commons” as a conceptual category, rather than lived experiences, evolved in a specific manner in India with the colonial encounter. In the mid to late nineteenth century, Henry Sumner Maine characterized village communities in India as organized on communal land-holding patterns and representative self-government. For Maine, these institutions were the earliest phase of an evolutionary process whose end-point was parliamentary democracy in England. We unyoke conceptions of the commons from their scholarly location in evolutionary ideologies, German romanticism, Victorian society and politics, the compulsions of colonial rule, and anthropocentrism. In doing so, we view social life around, in and through the commons as produced from the historical circulation of peoples, species, ecological and cultural objects; as politically fraught, hybrid networks; as institutional formations that multiple actors are constantly re-shaping, re-conceptualizing, and re-articulating.

The ideas underlying the Robinson Crusoe myth (the atomized, industrious, investing individual, capable of dominating nature, and subjugating those seen as lacking civilization in the name of friendship) have been used by liberal theorists to justify slavery, colonialism and enclosing the commons. We ask that if Robinson Crusoe exemplifies one particular understanding of homo economicus, then what subject position, conceptions of the social, and human non-human interaction animate homo communis. Indeed debates around “The Tragedy of the Commons” and “Governing the Commons” center on the problematic of whether people recognize that the interests of the individual

are congruent with those of the community and that this recognition has the potential to displace individual utility-maximizing behaviour. Yet, we seek to push this line of thought by challenging the agentic role of the human in making community and how utility is understood. Is our only way of relating to the world embodied in varied understandings of its possibilities of commodification that then constitute the commons. Or are other iterations possible that grant an account of the more-than-human world.

Following the diverse ways in which scholars have conceptualized the commons (knowledge commons, digital commons, urban commons, to name a few) we propose an (un)doing of the commons; an undoing from the traditional lineage of intellectual discourse on the commons; an undoing from readings that ground the human as central in any conceptualization of the commons; an undoing from understandings that are lodged in the public-private divide and advocate a move to unravel varied understandings of how engaged research can foretell new means of doing the commons, as a processual rendering.

Themes:

Sovereignty and Resource: If Anthropocene thinkers position the planet in a state of crisis which can only be overcome by human enterprise, the biosphere is being re-cast to ratify the triumph of human beings over the natural world. This is compounded by the fact that climate science is still at the helm of understanding what kind of a future will result from the processes encoded in the Anthropocene. In conversation with science and technology studies, we expand the notion of commons as governed by unregulated logics of sovereignty to question not only the very idea of sovereignty but how such notions are unfolding into an unknown and scientifically fraught future.

Custom: How do customs emerge from communally held values? The tenuousness of shared values is evident from the ways in which authority figures must do the constant work of reiterating these values during dispute-resolution, rituals, and festivals. In everyday life, different actors draw on an archive of stories to assure people that their concerns, emotions, and affects are in alignment with others. What conditions hinder such processes, leading to transformations of the customary, and how does this lead to individuation and alienation?

Storytelling and Narratability: The philosopher Adriana Cavarero, following Hannah Arendt, states that individualist thought “flattens out the uniqueness of the individual” replacing it with doctrines that favor equivalence between individuals (Kottman 2000 ix). For Cavarero each of us is “narratable by the other,” (ix) in other words we are dependent on shared stories of others for the narration of our unique life-story. The question, then, is no longer about whether individual interests align with others, but rather how shared stories have the potential of simultaneously becoming the edifice on which the commons are built and from which the uniqueness of the individual emerges.

Ownership dynamics: Going beyond the juxtaposition of the private-versus-communal property debates, we draw on the growing understanding of the plurality of ownership dynamics and how commons and the private are significantly co-constitutive and interdependent. With the increasing privatization of publics, different actors struggle to define the commons in terms of global imaginings of local community-based sovereignty, for example with the category “indigenous ways of life.” Such categories are sometimes in tension with the creative ways in which people align themselves to others.

Details:

This two-day conference aims to bring together researchers invested in multi-disciplinary research on themes of the commons, customs and transforming ecologies. We especially encourage early career scholars who engage in social and cultural anthropology to apply.

The Department of Sociology, Shiv Nadar University will cover all local logistical and hospitality costs of selected participants.

Abstract submission deadline: **30th November (word limit: 500 words)**

Final conference paper deadline: **15th February**

Submissions must be emailed to undoingthecommons@gmail.com and should have the conference title in the subject head and the name, designation, affiliation, title of paper and abstract in the body of the email. Please also mention under which of the four proposed themes given above your paper fits best.

For any clarifications, please email undoingthecommons@gmail.com
