Thinking in Common: the Commons

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ABSTRACT

The second ‘Thinking in Common’ panel will focus on the concept of ‘the commons’ with four speakers presenting short interventions on the topic that emerge from their current research. Some of the questions we will be pursuing are: what are the various meanings for the commons and communing and how does this term differently apply to biophysical, social, cultural and knowledge resources? How does the commons open up new ways to think about economy, democracy, ownership and open access? What are the limits and hazards of the commons? What are the connections between the commons, community and co-operation? In what ways are gift or sharing economies open to exploitation? What are the governance models for the commons and do they hollow out the state or demand its reconfiguration?

Could Public Housing Tenant Participation Provide a Basis for Viable Commons?

Alex Baumann

Social housing residents are broadly characterised as flawed citizens, many having ‘failed’ in two key hallmarks of neo-liberal citizenship: private housing and paid work. As such, state sponsored Tenant Participation programs endeavour to ‘responsibilise’ residents; first to get them involved, but ultimately to integrate them into paid work and private housing. As an alternative to this market agenda, my research explored residents’ use of a new participation process where public land use is not positioned in flawed citizenship or dependency but rather in the age-old tradition of land commons (a foundation for productive local collaboration). My research demonstrated that this alternative framing of public tenure has potential to facilitate less dependent and more empowered public resident participation.

The Elephant in the Common Room: Property and Commons as Irreconcilable?

Louise Crabtree

Despite their growing popularity as a framing of theory and practice, commons remain peculiarly circumscribed to systems and spaces—such as community gardens, social enterprises, and virtual spaces—that in the main do not challenge or disrupt dominant property discourses and praxis. Indeed, commons frequently do a lot of fancy footwork around the private property elephant in the room. I am therefore interested in if and how real property law can be made to articulate core attributes of commons, or whether the birth of Western property law through enclosure has left a legacy of incommensurability and irreconciliability.

Discerning the Digital Commons

Liam Magee

The commons is a powerful conceptual anchor for contemporary discussions of the digital. And certain types of digital production and reproduction - open source software, creative commons-licensed media, open standards - have reinvigorated broader debates of the commons and commoning. As a lens for considering the dispersed effects of the digital commons, I revisit briefly a case study of Microsoft’s standardisation of office formats between 2005-2008, where the operationalisation of “openness” and the “commons” formed a discursive tactic between corporate and state actors. It illustrates that at least in the digital sphere, the commons can never be assumed as a benign background against which uncommon, privatised derivatives are established. Instead the very definitions of the commons are rhetorical instruments that delineate territories of collaboration, compromise, competition and conflict.

BIOGRAPHIES

Alex Baumann has lived and worked in a public housing community in the Blue Mountains for the past ten years. Alex has recently submitted his PhD looking at a re-framing of tenant participation in public housing. Where public tenure is characteristically conflated with welfare dependency, Alex is looking at the way that local unpaid collaboration on public land has direct parallels with the widespread economic tradition of commons.

Louise Crabtree is a Senior Research Fellow in the Institute for Culture and Society and the Office of the Pro Vice Chancellor, Engagement & Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership. Her research focuses on participatory research practice and on the interfaces between sustainability, property, democracy and coloniality.

Ann Hill is a Research Project Manager for the ARC Discovery Project ‘Strengthening Economic Resilience in Monsoon Asia’

Liam Magee is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Culture and Society. He researches the relationships between software and geography, with a particular focus on urban sustainability.