

Christopher England on The Commons vs. Individual Proprietorship

The presenters on the panel focused on what conditions created sustainable commons in the face of pressure for privatization. Issues of governance took center stage. The facilitator began with a remembrance of the expropriation of communal land in Hawaii by the US government. Caroline Karp then discussed how the International Seabed Authority, an organization established by the United Nations, had effectively kept the profits of deep sea mining in public hands with a leasehold system. In contrast, state and national governments had allowed for extractive activities in their own waters that violated the public interest. Next, Matthew Hoffman discussed a 1999 law in Scotland that funded new, farmer co-ops by buying out large estates. Hoffman argued that, though residents had the option to dispense with the land as private plots, they choose not to do so because the co-ops acted as a type of local government, providing services that the landed nobility had until recently been obligated to perform. John Zinda discussed the disconnect between national Chinese land programs and their local implementation. Finally, Mir Anjum Altaf talked about the sustainability of communally operated irrigation systems in Nepal. Returning to projects that had been studied 40 years prior, he found that 13% had not been maintained. Those that did survive, he argued, had done so not because the projects were simpler or less labor intensive, but because they had a system of rules which were commonly perceived as “fair.” Of all the panelist, Altaf did the most to question the equity of commons – arguing that many cooperatives he encountered were not fair – but ultimately he concluded that those that failed to live up to just norms were not sustainable.

What these papers shared was a sense that communal ownership was deeply intertwined with questions of governance — either in the interaction of cooperatives with larger political units or in their capacity to act as a just actor where the state did not. The nation-state, however, rarely appeared in these narratives as a positive actor. One panelist posited the thesis that cooperatives worked best when its membership was relatively small. However, Carp presented a case wherein an international body was able to organize, if not a cooperative, at least a virtual commons. Placing these case studies of local cooperatives into dialogue with, for example, those of resource nationalization, could be a useful way to highlight important issues regarding governing the commons.