



Reclaiming the Peri-Urban Anticommons: The Re-Communalization of Peri-Urban Satoyama Woodlands

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ABSTRACT

What can the “commons” add to our understanding of the peri-urban? Likewise, what can peri-urban research offer to an important and expanding discussion on the commons? Through an analysis of former commons turned peri-urban satoyama woodlands, we confirm that these are vital and productive questions. However, answering them requires an escape from the traditional pastures of much of the commons literature. For four decades, Hardin’s metaphor of overuse has helped to enclose the commons within an overly narrow institutional framework. Taking a cue from Olwig (2003), we assert that it is not only the institutional basis for collective action, but also the historic processes and symbolic significance of enclosing/reclaiming the commons that warrants our attention, and promises new insight into struggles to reconfigure peri-urban landscapes.

We make this case through a critical appraisal of an emerging strand of commons theory: “the tragedy of the anticommons” (Heller 1998). Anticommons theorists suggest that excessive property rights can lead to less-than-optimal resource use: an illuminating, but problematic proposition. On one hand, the anticommons alerts us to a potential for underuse that is overlooked in the commons literature, but characteristic of representations of peri-urban landscapes. However, anticommons theory fails to consider the historic and symbolic significance of the commons. These are serious omissions on any grounds, but as we demonstrate, particularly on the grounds of indeterminate and contested peri-urban landscapes.

Our analysis begins with the paradigmatic example of the Parliamentary Enclosures, through which we bring to light the uncanny similarities between contemporary anticommons discourse and Lockean conceptions of waste and inefficiency. This is followed, both historically and in our analysis, by the Commons Preservation Society’s struggle to reclaim peri-urban commons through recourse to common law and discourses of custom. We then draw on a contemporary example of “reclaiming the commons” in suburban New England, where Donahue (1999) outlines the historic and symbolic processes of reclaiming underused forest and agricultural land.

These examples set the stage for an in-depth analysis of efforts to reclaim peri-urban satoyama woodlands. While these woodlands were historically managed as commons to produce fuelwood and green fertilizer, they are, at present, representative of an anticommons tragedy of underuse. Yet satoyama woodlands continue to have great importance as symbols of the historical village and its common spaces. We examine how the planning system has both contributed to an anticommons tragedy and, somewhat problematically, opened a space for local communities to reclaim nearby woodlands. In sum, our research points to a need to both reclaim the commons conceptually and to find common ground upon which to reconstruct peri-urban planning.

KEY WORDS: Satoyama woodlands, commons, anti-commons, peri urban.