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19th AJEI Workshop

April 3rd-5th 2017 - Goa

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“Commons in South Asia today”

The “Association des Jeunes Etudes Indiennes” (AJEI) is a student organization whose members are young researchers coming from various disciplines of the human and social sciences (from masters degree to postdoctoral level) whose area of research is South Asia. Every year, a research seminar in France and a workshop in India bring students and scholars together in order to discuss the topics and papers presented.

Since 1998 the AJEI organizes an annual workshop in India with the support of international and local partners. This year, we propose a three-day event in Goa to debate the question of the “commons” in contemporary South-Asia. The workshop will be structured around different thematic sessions with the presentations of the works of the participants, a field visit and an open discussion on fieldwork methods. One of the main objective of the event is to give the opportunity to the participants to exchange on their works and their experience, to get feedbacks from senior researchers and to build relationships, reinforcing thus the strong international network of researchers on South Asia.

Call for Papers:

Generally referring to shared resources in which each stakeholder has an equal interest, the term “commons” has come to signify a much broader set of meanings and has been appropriated over recent decades by various interest groups, whether used as a marketing strategy or as a definite political argument against the current commodification and privatization.

Historically, the concept is tied with the evolution of the relations of the modern societies to their environment, especially in terms of resources management. It developed in capitalist theory regarding its early stage coined as “primitive accumulation” consisting in enclosure of common lands in rural Western Europe. The first scholars dwelling on the question mainly tended to justify this process through the “tragedy of the commons”¹ argument, claiming that alleged open access resources were condemned to over exploitation and subsequent deterioration. In contrast to these views, the contemporaneous works on commons are derived from a critical perspective of the private property regime and tend to foster egalitarian, sustainable and grassroots approaches to resource management.² Above these ideological divergences, there is also a methodological distinction regarding social behavior analysis.³ A major breakthrough of this new commons perspective is to go beyond an approach solely centered on property legal arrangements to emphasize the socialized relations to the environment and the nature of social and institutional practices involved in those interactions.

Questioning the “commons” today in South Asia, both in the theoretical and methodological debates, enables to combine environmental, spatial, and social perspectives to deepen our understanding of the evolution of various modes of socialization, management and control over resources in the subcontinent. What characterizes the commons in South Asia? How are they perceived, used, managed, preserved but also coveted and controlled? How to share uses and management of resources in socially stratified societies such as India? What are the implications in terms of governance, conflicts, inequalities? And in which ways the concept of “commons” can contribute to renew the approaches on territorial development? At the crossroads of many issues, the notion of “commons” is worth being revised and re-interrogated, particularly in the South Asian current context marked by growing resources scarcities and increasing number of territorial and identity conflicts. To mention only two of the most recent ones, reference might be made to the river

¹ Hardin, G. 1968. “The Tragedy of the Commons”, *Science* 162. 1243–1248.

² Ostrom, E. 1990. *Governing the Commons. The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge, England. Cambridge University Press.

³ Ostrom E. 1998. “A Behavioral Approach to the Rational Choice Theory of Collective Action”, *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 92, n° 1, p. 1-22.

water sharing conflicts between Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, or between Haryana and Punjab. The ongoing illegal mining projects in forest areas of Jharkhand is another example of tensions brought by this issue. Under the realm of the state development capitalism, natural resources have been growingly linked to a wider community – the nationhood – or to private interests, possibly hampering local dwellers rights. The commons then need to be addressed in terms of social mobilization, looking at the ways the relationships between social groups and resources have been reframed - built and fed by national discourses, as well as legal regulations. Highlighting the question of multiple scales of representation, decision making, and practices at stake, the notion of commons resonates not only with issues related to rights and citizenship⁴, but also to community identities and boundaries.

The workshop aims to bring together students from various disciplines to debate about this highly topical issue, to get a wider understanding of the notion of commons and the ways they are defined, characterized, protected or cornered in South Asia. We propose to contribute to a heuristic vision of commons, with the help of in-depth case studies, which could include spatial, social, cultural, economic and symbolic dimensions in the analysis.

The commons along three axes

The commons in practices and representations: modes of socialization and imaginaries

Recent social studies have seen the growing mobilization of the ‘imaginary’ as a mean of describing the content of people’s collective capacity to conceive their environment. Exploring the commons through the lenses of the imaginaries is a way to enrich the researches on the bonds between representations and practices. Studies of the historicity of the relationships to commons in India for example, from pre-colonial period to present times, would provide the possibility of re-interpreting the contemporary notion of commons. Identifying and analyzing practices, uses and social interactions among local actors over resources can be an exploration of how previous modes of socialization may have been re-adapted, reshaped and re-integrated in local arrangements. A reference to the stakeholder’s agency approach, looking at the capacity of each stakeholder, or group of stakeholders, to compose with new regulations and institutions according to their socio-cultural capital, can provide a relevant framework to study the changes in practices over resources. In the attempt to refine the understanding of commons both in discourses and practices, we invite to study the imaginaries underpinning urban projects or natural resources management schemes, particularly the approaches carried by Indian urban middle classes upon nature such as the bourgeois

⁴ Amin, A., Howell, P. (éd.). 2016. *Releasing the commons: rethinking the futures of the commons*. London. Routledge studies in human geography, 61.

environmentalism⁵ which tends to turn commons into commodity through the appropriation of socio-natural spaces by specific groups of the population. Besides, in the study of practices of commons, the immaterial goods such as music, culture, knowledge or the Internet should not be overlooked, and we encourage contributors to put forward work that discusses the virtual or collective interest of goods as new concepts and forms of commons, without forgetting to specify in which ways the object of research can come under the designation of a common.

Governing the commons: characterization, domination and power relationships

Considering the commons as a self-organized and self-governed resources, its analysis shows the wide diversity of institutional arrangements built up by communities, arising not strictly from market, neither from the State, and not relying on direct regulations by central authorities: it is rather a rich combination of both public and private tools⁶. Drawing on this, the notion of common does not conform to the simple negation of property, nor to the return of free use or open access⁷ but reshapes the concept of property itself. Commons can be considered as a set of bundle of rights⁴ covering a large range of rights of use, held by various stakeholders who can themselves hold different types of rights of access, of extraction, of management, of exclusion and/or of alienation. Analyzing the governance of commons requires an interest in organizational forms, often complex, of relationships to what differentiates and hierarchies the right of each individual⁵. How are the commons governed? By whom? The role of the public or the community management organizations should also be put in perspective: what importance is given to the commons in the public agenda? Also, is there a preferred scale to the application of commons? Finally, the question of governance of commons couldn't be fully addressed without a characterization of the modes of participation. Commons and participation both allow new forms of dialogues between heterogeneous stakeholders, generally driven by one or several individuals (facilitator, mediator). On the other hand, one should not miss to refer to the forms of political expression, to power (re)distribution processes and to the democratic grades from indirect elections to direct and committed citizen mobilization.

⁵ Baviskar A. 2011. "Cows, Cars and Cycle-rickshaws: Bourgeois Environmentalism and the Battle for Delhi's Streets" in Baviskar A. and Ray R. (ed.), *Elite and Everyman: The Cultural Politics of the Indian Middle Classes*, New Delhi: Routledge, 391-418.

⁶ Ostrom, E. 1990. *Governing the Commons. The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge, England. Cambridge University Press ; Weinstein, 2013. Comment comprendre les « communs » : Elinor Ostrom, la propriété et la nouvelle économie institutionnelle. In *Capitalisme, institutions, pouvoirs*. vol. 14 n°2

⁷ Charbonnier, Festa, 2016. Biens communs, beni comuni. In *Tracés*. Hors série n°16

Fighting over the commons: conflicts, inequalities and resistance

Privatization and commodification of commons has often led to violent confrontations, as in the cases of forced displacement of populations for the sake of economic development. Approaching commons from the angle of conflicts and confrontations permit to identify the divergent interests, the complex social interactions between stakeholders and the power relationships built on commons. In the context of monopoly over natural and territorial resources maintained by an elite while others are kept in marginalized positions, the struggle for the commons has become, beyond the immediate need of survival, an act of resistance to dominant ideology. The study of conflicts of interests over commons in the South Asian context through the analysis of the emergent forms of social protests or established resistance movements will contribute to the exploration of these struggles. The geopolitical and social causes of conflicts are the two prominent themes that have emerged over the last decades, covering various aspects as such class, gender, ethnicity, creed and allied social factor. Contributions with a focus on the question of (re)definition of boundaries, entering in the field of contemporary border studies and reflecting the causes and the implications of conflicts will be also given a special attention. Finally, understanding the nature of conflicts between groups, communities, individuals, the State and the private sector over the commons requires a multidisciplinary approach reflecting the complexities and interrelatedness of social issues and impacts.

These descriptions of axes are only indicative and paper proposals can fit into one or more axes or pertain more generally to the theme of the workshop.

Propositions of contribution:

To submit a proposition of contribution, you should first send an abstract (500 to 1 000 words), in English, before **January 10th 2017** to the following address: ateliers.ajei2017@gmail.com. After deliberation by the Organizing Committee, a **notification of acceptance** will be send to the author by **January 20th 2017**. In case of acceptance, **the full text (about 10 000 words) will be requested in English** before **March 10th 2017**. Each presentation will be done in English, will last about 20 minutes, and will be discussed by a specialist. Please include with your proposal: your last name, your first name, your disciplinary field, your level study, your institution(s) of affiliation and your research topic.

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