

**And Never the Twain Shall Meet?  
An Exchange on the Strengths and Weaknesses of Anthropology and Economics in  
Analyzing the Commons<sup>#</sup>**

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**Abstract**

This is our contribution to the project on Conversations between Anthropologists and Economists, focusing on analysis of the Commons. The short note is in the form of a “talk and response” exchange, coming as close to a conversation as it is possible to do on the printed page. This is worth trying because most conversations in print turn out to be separate papers from economists and anthropologists, brought together in a volume. We start by specifying what each of us believes the Commons problem to be, and then, in perhaps a novel reversal, each of us specifies the weaknesses of our discipline and the strengths of the other in analyzing the problem as we have defined it. Finally, we discuss the way forward in light of the exchange.

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## **1. Background**

This is our contribution to the project on Conversations between Anthropologists and Economists, focusing on analysis of the Commons. The short note is in the form of a “talk and response” exchange, coming as close to a conversation as it is possible to do on the printed page. This is worth trying because most conversations in print turn out to be separate papers from economists and anthropologists, brought together in a volume. We start by specifying what each of us believes the Commons problem to be, and then, in perhaps a novel reversal, each of us specifies the weaknesses of our discipline and the strengths of the other in analyzing the problem as we have defined it. Finally, we discuss the way forward in light of the exchange. At every point in the exchange, each gets a chance to respond to the previous argument by the other. The exchanges are relatively short, because of the printed page space constraints that we face, and because (most) normal conversations are not of the form where 25 pages are followed by another 25 pages. We offer this exchange as an experiment in printed conversation between an economist and an anthropologist.

## **2. RK—What is the Commons Problem?**

I see the “Commons Problem” as consisting of two distinct components. First is a key characteristic such that one person’s action impacts negatively another person’s wellbeing (a negative externality, as economists call it). Examples of this can range from the concrete and tangible to the somewhat abstract and intangible: the effects of fishing on replenishment capacity and thus on future fish stocks for others; secondary smoke inhalation; the effects of reducing forest cover on general soil erosion and hence on the productivity of agriculture for everyone; the knock on effects of “bad reputation” of one African country on the investment prospects for other neighboring countries, lack of religious observance on the part of some offending others of the same religion; etc.

Second, a socio-political-economic set of arrangements that organize activity and exchange in a setting with the above key characteristic. One arrangement is to have no arrangement at all. This is the case of “open access” discussed by Hardin in the tragedy of the commons. But, in fact, we see myriad arrangements in what the National Research Council (2002) has called “the drama of the commons” (see also Dietz et. al. 2003). A canonical arrangement is that of “private property”, where complete use and management rights on the resource (be it tangible or intangible) are accorded to individuals (perhaps one, in the case of monopoly). Another arrangement is government ownership and control, where the state, from outside the boundaries of the group in question, imposes and enforces use and management patterns. And then there is common property, where the group itself manages and allocates use and rights. There are, of course, many different arrangements that are possible, and that we see in practice. What is called “private property” itself depends upon a social consensus, or social imposition, to allow a particular pattern of use and management rights, and can be of many different types.

Each arrangement has associated with it a set of processes, perceptions, behaviors and responses which define it. Each arrangement also has associated with it outcomes in

wellbeing (broadly defined) across individuals and groups. As features of the socio-political-economic background outside the system under study change, over time and across space, so do the arrangements, in their design and their outcomes.

An economist's definition of the "Commons Problem" might be the following: Identify the essential features of arrangements which lead to different patterns of wellbeing in outcomes, for given features of the background outside the arrangements being studied. Specifically, what essential features lead to higher wellbeing, and more equitable distribution of that wellbeing, in the population under study? While there will of course be different interpretations of the Commons Problem amongst economists, I feel confident that this formulation captures key features. (A standard graduate text that covers these issues for economists is by Cornes and Sandler, 1996).

### **3. AR— Response, and What is the Commons Problem?**

As an anthropologist of modernity, I understand the "commons problem" as a cultural artifact of a certain community--a small but elite community, defined by shared ways of thinking about political problems rather than by its physical locale. Its members are found inside the bureaucracies and academies of virtually every nation-state, no matter how small, and regardless of state policy on questions of globalization and market capitalism (Ferguson 1990; Dezalay and Garth 2002). The members of this community, whom I will call technocrats, have their internal hierarchies, their politics, their divisions, and their theoretical disagreements, but they also share a great deal—they share certain educational formations, certain disciplinary training, certain institutional affiliations, certain "ways of thinking," "ways of acting in the world". When they disagree, in other words, they do so in a particular vocabulary—with a particular set of models and metaphors—and one of these is The Commons Problem. Following the anthropological understanding that small-scale societies' most important resource is often their common intellectual property (Brown 2003), we might call these technocrats' shared norms, practices, and ideas, including, in this particular case, the models and arguments that make up the "Commons Problem," their common property.

Anthropologists who specialize in the character of knowledge have long been interested in how models represent "underlying realities" and motivate particular behavior for their users (Gudeman and Penn 1982; Geertz 1983; Morrison 1999; Morrison and Morgan 1999). More recently, some science and technology studies scholars have described models as "actants"—as agents of a kind that guide their human "users'" reasoning in particular directions, foreclose certain paths, and even engage in theoretical struggles with their users over outcomes (Pickering 1997). An anthropological response to the Commons Problem therefore would need first to acknowledge the status of the Commons as a model, to think about the cultural resources this particular model draws upon, and then to consider its particular effects.

As the anthropologist of development Arturo Escobar has commented, economic models are grounded in particular late modern Euro-American cultural norms (Escobar 1995: 58-

61). This does not make the Commons Problem “right” or “wrong”; it just makes it particular. The core of the metaphor itself, the ‘archetypal case’ to which this analysis enables us to analogize phenomena as diverse as fisheries and the reputations of African nations, is an early English land use practice, and its subsequent historical demise. The metaphor works in the following way: the economist locates something that can be *analogized* to an old English commons. The analysis draws upon particular cultural resources in order to make universal claims, in other words. But what is interesting from the point of view of the anthropology of technocracy is that such models and metaphors do not seem to come undone by virtue of their use by non-Euro-American technocrats (Riles 2000). Anthropologists surmise that that this is because the process of technical training in economics is at its core a process of acculturation—of learning to accept a set of (Euro-American) cultural norms, of learning to see through this lens and of learning to be skeptical of claims that are not easily reconciled with the Euro-American cultural assumptions embedded in these models. It is this shared normative framework, after all, that makes the technocrats a “community.”<sup>1</sup>

Of course, you may say, the term “commons” is just a metaphor, an abstraction—economists are not really thinking about old English commonses or about the lessons of English history when they analyze present problems in these terms. You are surely right about this. But one of the insights of anthropological work on images and metaphors is that the core of the metaphor, its baseline, what Roy Wagner calls its “ground” (Wagner 1981 (1975)) does a great deal of work. Moreover, it does this work precisely because those who use such metaphors (in this case, economists) are unaware that they are drawing on this image—because its power remains implicit, rather than explicit.

There are many possible anthropological responses to this phenomenon. A first would trace the intellectual, cultural, social and economic history of the specific Euro-American metaphors and norms underpinning the Commons Problem so that they can be better understood as the particular cultural products that they are. I want to highlight only two aspects of the specific historical location of this metaphor: its embeddedness in the historical emergence of Euro-American notions of personhood (autonomous individuality) and its embeddedness in the history of the emergence of modern capitalism.

The particular social history of the enclosure of the English commons, of course, is also the particular history of the development of the modern rational individual (Foucault 1991). The two developments occurred together historically, and hence it is not surprising that one central Euro-American cultural norm at work in the Commons Problem is the assumption that the world is composed of autonomous individuals (Carrier 1997: 2). This is important for the following reason: economic discussions of the differing consequences of alternative institutional arrangements, such as common property or private property, assume the same kind of person as property owner in each situation, and this person is an autonomous individual. The question then becomes, how

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, one could go further and surmise that the very distance between members of this community—the fact that the missionaries in the field must labor far away from the metropole and surrounded by persons who do not share their models—may lead to even more dogged commitment to those models.

would this autonomous individual act differently under different institutional circumstances? Yet this line of questions fails to take into account that the character of personhood is integrally tied to the particular property regime at issue. As Marcel Mauss taught us long ago, autonomous rational individuality is the form of personhood that goes with private property ownership (Mauss 1990). It is no wonder, therefore, that if one assumes a rational and autonomous individual, private property seems like the best institutional arrangement.

Yet it has been a basic insight of anthropology since Mauss that other forms of ownership correlate with other forms of personhood. One of Sir Edmund Leach's lasting contributions was his insight, with respect to Sri Lankan kinship, that relations of property determined the character of kinship and hence that regimes of property could be analytically prior to regimes of personhood (Leach 1961). Likewise, Mauss pointed out that in exchange-based societies, the modern Euro-American opposition of persons and things, in which persons (individuals) are agents who own and act upon things, does not hold. First, things have agency too: the gift has a spirit, an agency, a force, Mauss argues, that compels action by persons as much as persons control things. Second, anthropologists have long argued that in many societies in which property is inalienable, persons and things are less easily distinguished from one another. Mauss gave the example of exchange objects that carry the "spirit" of the person with it as it is exchanged and hence transferred but not alienated. Lest this all sound overly exotic, recent Anglo-American case law concerning property in human embryos, human tissue, human DNA, debates surrounding ownership in human clones, and many more suggest that for modern Euro-Americans also, the boundary between persons and things is becoming increasingly difficult to draw (Strathern 1999).

From this point of view, anthropologists would want to point out that the distinction between common property and individual property at stake in the Commons Problem is overdrawn. One of the canonical insights of the early work of Bronislaw Malinowski was that in societies based on relations of exchange, property could not be understood as *either* individual or collective (Malinowski 1984 (1926)). Of course things were privately owned in those societies, he said, but they were also exchanged upon principles of reciprocity, such that an individual owner could be compelled to give up his property to others as return on a gift. Malinowski therefore proposed the concept of reciprocity as an alternative to either communal or individual property. In many other contexts, anthropologists have shown that lineage relations and affinal relations become the basis for resource sharing—but that because of the nature of the relations at issue, such property does not easily fit, analytically under either "individual" or "common" categories.

So much for personhood. Anthropologists would also want to point out that the particular social history of the enclosure of the English commons is also the particular social history of the development of modern capitalism. Economists of course would say that this is precisely the point: only with the enclosure of the commons can one have modern capitalism. But anthropologists would see the causation running in the other direction: putting aside old England, whose particularities provide the metaphorical

template for all other histories in the Commons Problem, only with the spread of global capitalism do pressures build for enclosure and the transformation of non-private property into private property, anthropologists argue. Examples of privatization that are held to prove the model, anthropologists claim, often fail to take into account the effect of the wider introduction of a market economy on changes in attitudes toward property.

A nice example of this differing understanding, or talking at cross-purposes, concerns economic uses of anthropology in the commons debate. Harold Demsetz' famous article (Demsetz 1967) draws extensively on the work of anthropologist Eleanor Leacock concerning Native American ownership of beaver hunting grounds to make his point about the natural evolution of private property. Yet in order to use Leacock's data to make this point, Demsetz had to ignore Leacock's own central point: In the article Demsetz cites, Leacock had sought to demonstrate the (negative) effects on one indigenous community of its sudden introduction to the periphery of a global market. Leacock's point, then, was not that scarcity produced a need for private property, but that the intrusion of global capitalism produced scarcity (along with other harms). In a similar vein, anthropologists who work in societies undergoing transitions to private property often interpret these changes in a wider context of the introduction of the market economy into the community: the introduction of wage labor, the sale of land to absentee landlords and the resulting conversion of common owners into tenant farmers, the emergence of class differences within the community, the effects of differential treatment of particular regions by the state, resulting for example in differential access to infrastructure, the nature of the natural resources at issue, and whether these implicate the community in wider global forces (common property in farm land is very different from common property in a diamond mine in a war zone). (Spencer 1992)

For example, anthropologists working in the former Soviet bloc have sought to show the consequences of the particular form of market economy now emerging in those societies on the process of transformation from collective to private property ownership. Chris Hann has found that property rights are understood by the Hungarian villagers with whom he has worked as only one set of rights and obligations among others, such as rights to schooling, medical care, the right to respect from other segments of the society, a right to employment, and so on, and they are not overly eager to acquire property rights (Hann 1993: 313). Katherine Verdery provides a further explanation for this phenomenon based on her fieldwork in Transylvania: where property has little economic value, but brings with it a number of liabilities—new responsibilities for environmental pollution, the duty to pay taxes, and much more—people may be much happier to own property communally (Verdery 1999). These anthropologists report that because the emergence of property rights takes place not in a vacuum, but in the historical context of the confiscation of the property of some and then the granting of new property rights to others a generation later, the process of assigning individual ownership in practice often creates conflicting claims, and hence produces more uncertainty rather than less.

A second anthropological response to the Commons Problem would distinguish between ideology and practice in Euro-American societies: it would point out that even in Euro-American societies, property is far more commonly held than this tale of the Fall from

common property would suggest. The vast majority of American real-estate, for example, is held as common property by spouses or family members. And many new forms of property emerging as a result of advances in science—property in embryos, DNA, body parts, and so forth—are frequently treated by the courts as common property (for example, human embryos have been held to be the common property of the individuals whose DNA produced them). Ideas are common property, as are expressions, after a statutory period. Although economists will respond that ideas at least and perhaps expressions are suitably commonly owned because they are public goods—goods whose value does not decrease because they are shared—this is disputed, at least, by those who expend large sums of money lobbying Congress to extend copyright protection beyond the current statutory period.

Just to push the point, we might even experiment with understanding the notion of the Commons Problem itself as a kind of common property, the common property of technocrats: it is not “open access” property since access to the model is limited to those who share a particular kind of training. Once one has acceded to the priesthood, however, one gains a right to share in such ideas and debates. I would be interested in your views as to whether the model is really a pure “public good”—whether its value remains the same regardless of whether or not it is used (inappropriately) by outsiders like myself.

But what is interesting about the Commons Problem as a form of common property is that the proper use of the common property in this case is also the arbiter of who has a right to use the property: inappropriate invocation of the model is a sign that one is not a member of the priesthood and hence has no right to use the model. I have heard economists say that Albert Hirschman is not an economist, for example, although he was trained as an economist, because he does not use economic models in the proper way (and I should say that this would be absolutely true of anthropologists and their common property also!). I suspect that this fact that the kind of use determines the right to use is a much more general condition of many property ownership regimes than the Commons Problem would recognize. That model assumes that rights are more or less absolute: if one owns property, whether individually or communally, that means one has a right to exploit it at will. Yet the Anglo-American law of property certainly does not make this assumption. Property carries with it, as in Eastern Europe, many responsibilities, duties, and liabilities: one has a duty to pay taxes, to obey environmental regulations, zoning rules, to refrain from using one’s land in a way that will inconvenience one’s neighbors, even to allow others access when their rights to free speech so demand. The same is true of property ownership in Fiji, where I conducted fieldwork: who is a clansperson and hence a land-owner (*vanua*) is defined by adherence to protocol, by one’s ability to demonstrate proper behavior, rather than by some pre-ordained scheme of rights (Hocart 1915). The use of the commons becomes, in a sense, also the fence.

That is the cultural specificity of the model. What of its effects? A third anthropological response to the Commons Problem would focus ethnographically on the practice of economic knowledge-making in order to understand how metaphors from areas of social life outside of economics (such as the commons) come to play such an important role in

economic arguments, but also in order to understand the subject position of the technocrat: how does he or she deploy, transpose, consume, and redirect such models? To what purpose? How does she imagine the world in which she must act, the pressures she labors under? How do metaphors and models such as The Commons Problem come to play into this self-understanding? This work is just beginning to be done in anthropology. I want to highlight only two here: its effects for agency, and its ability to cross domains.

Agency: Recently the sociologist Michel Callon has argued that the kind of rational thinking presumed by economic knowledge (and the Commons Problem would be one example), what Callon terms “calculating agency,” is actually an *effect* of the proliferation of economic knowledge itself (Callon 1998). In what is essentially a restatement of the central assumption of the Commons Problem, Callon argues that values must be “calculable” in order for a market to come into existence, and hence most social institutions favored by economists such as private property rights are ways of making values calculable and of turning people into “calculating agents.” The externalities to which you refer are, in Callon’s vocabulary, instances of people failing to act as calculating agents.

So far, we have only a difference of vocabulary, I think. But the key insight of Callon’s work concerns his treatment of economic knowledge itself, and not simply the institutions such as private property rights economists analyze, as ways of making values calculable and persons calculating. Contrary to the view of economic models as mere descriptions of the world, Callon has argued that these models shape actors’ thinking, such that the models turn them into “calculating agents” for whom the assumptions of the Commons Problem hold. Where sociologists usually attack economists for thinking about the market in overly abstract terms, Callon argues that it is precisely this act of engaging in economic abstraction that fosters “calculability.” Economic markets are embedded not just in culture or society (as economic sociologist has aimed to show), he has argued, therefore, but in economic knowledge itself. From this point of view, we can see the effects of the global spreading of models such as the Commons Problem—and not simply the private property regimes that the Commons Problem would seem to advocate—as a step in the global production of rational, calculating agents, agents suited for private property ownership, that is, agents less prone to producing “externalities”.

The second effect of this metaphor that interests me is nicely exemplified in your initial usage of it. In the passage above, you deploy the model to cross domains—to move from very “local” fishing practices to very “global” questions of geopolitics, and from agriculture, to economics, to international relations. That is its power. The anthropologist Roy Wagner has argued that this capacity for “spreading out” (Wagner 1986) is a fundamental feature of metaphor. Metaphor “works,” Wagner argues, by moving from domain to domain, from one scale to another, without losing its form, and hence it “relates” domains as it crosses them. In other words, only because economics uses metaphors in this way is it able to cross so many domains, to come to have such global and general applicability.

#### **4. RK—Response, and The Weakness of Economics and the Strength of Anthropology**

First of all, a technical answer to your specific question, “as to whether the model really is a ‘public good’—whether value remains the same regardless of whether or not it is used (inappropriately) by outsiders like myself.” In economics the term “public good” is a technical term. A “pure” public good (by good is meant commodity) satisfies the twin requirements of “non-rivalry” (consumption by one does not reduce the amount) available for consumption by another) and “non-excludability” (within the relevant defined universe of discourse, no one can be excluded from consuming the good). The examples economist have range from an uncongested national park with free entry, to knowledge that is made universally available. I don’t suppose they ever thought of the canonical economic model (or the specific commons model) as a public good in this sense. The technical answer to your question depends on how exactly you define the commodity in question. If the commodity in question is the use of the canonical model in the prescribed manner, then definitionally the question of “misuse” does not arise, since if it were to be misused it would not be the same commodity.

But enough of these economic technicalities. It is indeed an unusual turn—for an economist—to look at the commons problem, and at economists (actually, technocrats) themselves, as objects of anthropological enquiry. Anthropologists are well used to such reflexive exercises, economists are not. Discussions of method and methodology leave most economists queasy—among the younger bloods it is a common enough jibe that those who can, do; those who cannot, do methodology. Indeed, this lack of curiosity about the nature of their method is, in my view, the strength of economists as well as their weakness. It is a strength for all the reasons you lay out. The easy transference of the core metaphor across domains is at root the power of the economic method. But its consistent application, with variations to be sure, but always within the given overall frame, is built on a certain lack of self-criticism.

I want to illustrate the weakness of the economic method in addressing the Commons Problem, in economists’ terms, by reference to what happened after Hardin’s (1968) famous tragedy of the commons thesis gained ground. The basic analytics of Hardin’s argument are easy for economists to grasp and model. Consider a resource such as a fishery, being exploited by identical individuals. Each individual overexploits since no account is taken of the effect of each catch on restocking potential and hence on the future catch for all. One way to control the damage is to enforce catch limits on each individual (this may involve excluding some individuals from fishing altogether). Another is to give all the fishing rights to one individual. Yet another is to divide up the fishery into individual property rights—this should work in principle because now each individual bears the cost of his or her own overfishing. Following on from this generic and deductive argument, if it can further be argued that creating large number of individual fishing rights is not physically feasible (certainly the fish will not be respecters of any surface property rights drawn up), and if giving all the fishing rights to one person is not politically feasible, then the only solution left to the problem of overfishing is to enforce catch limits. Or timber cutting limits in a forest. Or pollution limits for industry.

All economists will recognize the above as a classic economic line of thinking. What are the problems with it? Several. First, it does not take into account heterogeneity in the population—the issue of distribution of wellbeing is thus sidestepped, the focus is kept on “the size of the pie”. Second, it sees private property and state intervention as “manna from heaven”, an abstract entity that comes into being, unconnected to the social system actually existing. Third and most important, it sees no middle ground between private property and state intervention, where the community impacted by the resource or commons in question develops its own methods and techniques.

The first is a common charge levied at economists. Economists themselves differ on this. Some give a large weight to distributional issues, others do not. But there does seem to be a deep rooted desire not so much to ignore distribution but to separate out issues of distribution (how the pie is divided) from issues of efficiency (the size of the pie), despite mounting theory and evidence that it is not really possible to do this satisfactorily (see Kanbur, 2002).

The second issue above is also a common critique of the economic mode of thinking. An inadequate account of private property, or of the state, can lead to erroneous analysis, predictions and prescriptions. Widespread nationalization of forests was carried out in the wake of Hardin’s tragedy of the commons thesis. This is an interesting contrast to what one might have expected from the “private property regimes that the Commons Problem would seem to advocate” (as you characterize it). But no matter. The nationalization has now generally been recognized to be a disaster. The state was not an abstract disinterested entity, whose sole function was to “internalize the externality” as in the basic economic model. In fact, it turned out to be the agent of wealthy interest groups who proceeded to strip the forests and compounded overexploitation of forests.

Indeed, in bringing in the state, in exercising its rights of eminent domain, existing arrangements for managing forests were destroyed. They were there, despite the fact that economic analysis did not see them or found it too difficult to model them. This leads to the third issue. Modeling these arrangements in the framework of methodological individualism, where explanations of patterns are ultimately sought in the realm of individual behavior and responses, has led to a large game theoretic literature. But I think it would be fair to say that there is a deep dissatisfaction among economists about where we are. The initial euphoria after the insights of twenty, thirty or forty years ago has now faded. It seems clear that a thoroughgoing rational actor approach cannot explain the complex patterns of norms, rules, sanctions and behaviors we observe, in the commons or elsewhere. The best we can do is to come up with multiple equilibria, without a satisfactory theory of why some equilibria emerge at some times and not others.

I like to think that an anthropological perspective might have prevented some of the disasters of forest nationalization. The anthropological method would have looked for, and found, the myriad arrangements that exist between pure private property and state ownership. Indeed, the renaissance among economists in the study of common property resources in the 1980s and 1990s relies heavily for motivation and empirical

grounding on case study materials developed by anthropological field study. Such recognition of ground level complexities might have tempered the policy prescriptions of the 1970s.

An anthropological perspective might also have tempered a naïve belief in the benevolent state. Anthropologists seem to look instinctively for power relations in any social arrangement, and are always looking for the powerful to subvert arrangements to their end. Of course, the pendulum in policy economics has swung the other way from the 1970s. Some economists themselves reacted to the neutral role given to the state in policy analysis and argued that, since the state is indeed a battle ground for interest groups, the best strategy is to take the state out of production and to return as much as possible to private property rights. Economists are divided on this issue, but I believe anthropologists bring their nose for power relations again to this story—they are now warning that “private property” is only so because these rights are guaranteed by the state, and the power issues that were present in state ownership will not disappear simply with formal transference of ownership to private property.

### **5. AR—The Weakness of Anthropology and the Strength of Economics**

First, in thinking about economists as “part of” the state, as you describe it in the previous section, I want to acknowledge the many ways that anthropology is also complicitous in the processes we are discussing here. To begin with, economic anthropology has always taken the economic paradigm largely at face value. More recently, a few anthropologists, eager perhaps to have a voice in political and legal debates over property, have even begun to use the language of “the commons problem” as an analytical frame for their own work (Brown 2003). But even those anthropologists who persist in deploying economic models derived from Marxist theory think about their subject in ways that are far more similar to economic knowledge than they might wish to admit. Marxist models of economy share all of the aesthetic attributes of neo-classical economic models and certainly are just as hegemonic in their assumptions about the character of personhood, or in their unwillingness to recognize actual social practices that those models cannot easily anticipate.

More importantly, anthropology is complicitous in another sense: Anthropology as a discipline also has its paradigmatic models—its well fenced common property—and these models share a great deal with “the commons problem” in the assumptions they make. I am thinking in particular of the key anthropological concepts of “society,” and “culture.” These concepts share a great deal aesthetically with economic models: they entertain a fundamental difference between theory and data, such that as “theory” models are assumed to be both universally applicable but locally variable.

Moreover, as Escobar has commented, these particular models articulate in important ways with economic models—they have long been imagined as another part of a whole: “Anthropologists have been complicit with the rationalization of modern economics, to the extent that they have contributed to naturalizing the constructs of economy, politics, religion, kinship, and the like as the fundamental building blocks of all societies. The

existence of these domains as presocial and universal must be rejected. Instead, ‘we must ask what symbolic and social processes make these domains appear self-evident and perhaps even ‘natural’ fields of activity in any society.’ (Escobar 1995: 61, quoting Yanagisako and Collier, 1989) And indeed, students of colonialism have pointed to the articulation between the models of economics and the models of anthropology as a crucial nexus of colonial knowledge and power. In other words, both anthropology and economics are products of a particular late modern Euro-American world view. As Marilyn Strathern puts it, “part of the economist’s job is that of description. ...Certainly Euro-Americans are constantly invited to understand the world of description against the ‘real world’ it precipitates. The economists’ position is thus part of—and central to—a more general Euro-American project: to describe the societies in which we live. ...[the economist’s] description transforms its dimensions into calculable measurements.” (Strathern 2002: 262-63)

But putting this issue aside, anthropology has a peculiar weakness. I am thinking here of anthropologists’ disciplinary urge to “critique” economic models, to expose their contingency or cultural specificity, and to demonstrate again and again that “realities on the ground” are far more “complex” than such models would suggest. First, this urge can often become as reductive, as mechanical, as deaf to local conditions as any set of economic assumptions. But even more interesting to me is the quite obvious empirical fact that such critiques always seem to *fail*. We need further investigation of the conditions in which critiques can be heard and incorporated and the conditions in which they cannot. In this case, there seem to be multiple causes, some due to the particular character of economic knowledge, and some to the particular character of anthropological knowledge.

First, on the economic side, anthropologists’ attempts to set the factual record straight continually bump up against the fact that the factual details are just not that important in the world of theoretical modeling. James Carrier notes that economists use models “in the technical sense of a simplification of a more complex whole that aids prediction and thus is not concerned with what Weber calls interpretive understanding.” However, in public debate, he argues, “the model is assumed to have a clear interpretive element, as a strong link is asserted or assumed between the model and the real world of what motivates people and how they think about what they do.” (Carrier 1997" 15). The result is that it is very difficult to critique the model with empirical data, since economists can always respond that it is only a tool to think with, and not a description of the world. And yet implicitly at other moments the model comes to be taken as a representation of the world and even a normative description of the way forward. At these moments, what does not fit the model gets relegated to the realm of the exception—these “distortions” or “complexities” do not challenge the validity of the model in the abstract.

Yet another cause is the character of anthropology and anthropologists. Chapman and Buckley, two anthropologically trained economists, sound an appropriately wry note of caution to anthropologists:

One might readily conclude from all this, at least from within social anthropology, that transaction cost economics in the 1990s—scientific, rationalist, positivist, aspiring to determinate explanations, imposing observer categories, measuring and predicting, following an agenda written in the 1940s—was simply a hopelessly outmoded form of discourse, against which all the necessary argument had already been made. The great army of workers in the field, however... do not seem to have noticed that the rug has been pulled from under them. If anthropologists are kings of the castle, it is a castle most other people have never heard of. Perhaps you need to spend some time entirely outside social anthropology in order to be convinced of the truth of this (Chapman and Buckley 1997).

## **6. AR—The Way Forward**

It is appealing and even somewhat fashionable now to say that the solution is to democratize the field of knowledge producers—to include NGOs, villagers, farmers, anthropologists, and others in the process of economic model-making. But my fieldwork among NGO activists-turned-technocrats leads me have some doubts. Quite simply, what makes a technocrat a technocrat is the knowledge he or she uses. My fear is that to bring economics’ “others” into the sphere of economic knowledge making is simply to turn these others into technocrats as well.

Would it be possible instead to seek other metaphors derived from non-Euro-American contexts around which to organize economic debate? For example what if instead of The Commons Problem, we had The Reciprocity Problem, or The Kinship Problem? How would the questions look different when inflected through non-Euro-American metaphors? This suggestion admittedly sounds quixotic, but perhaps no more so than the notion of democratizing economic debates did a generation ago.

We also need much more nuanced understandings of the actual uses of models like The Commons Problem in national academies, state bureaucracies, think tanks, corporations and social movements. Would it be possible for economists and anthropologists instead to have a more sustained, hopeful, and honest dialogue about the nature of technocratic knowledge—anthropological or economic (Riles 2004)? What I have in mind is a dialogue in which anthropologists would temper their naïve political critiques in order to understand economists and economic knowledge with the kind of seriousness and subtlety with which they would understand any other community on the one hand, while economists would also rethink their practices, in a more self-reflexive way, as a product of their own institutional cultures. Perhaps it is not too much to hope that such a project would yield new theoretical insights for economics and anthropology alike.

## **7. RK—The Way Forward**

My worry is that debates at a very general level on method may not get very far. They will certainly not engage the economists. For this, I believe that starting specific will be the key to moving forward. One possibility is to start with a specific policy

problem currently under discussion—low enrollment of girls in schools, high infant mortality rates, domestic violence, etc—and have a dialogue on analysis of these issues, and especially on assessments of candidate policy interventions actively being discussed.

However, at the same time, as your contribution to this conversation has shown, focusing on specific and concrete issues, if it is too specific and too concrete, will lead to disagreements whose roots lie in more general perspectives and frameworks. Or rather, economists should not fear more general methodological concerns being raised in a dialogue on a specific issue. They will certainly need to be trained away from their knee jerk reaction to dismiss such general discussion as a distraction from the specific policy question.

Ultimately, I feel that “the Commons Problem” is too general, too emblematic, to advance dialogue. How about economists and anthropologists joining a debate on how to increase girls’ school enrollment rates? Or is this also going to turn into a debate on the virtues or otherwise of economic theories of rational choice?

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