POLITICAL POSSIBILITIES OF "PLACE-ING" PEOPLE ONTO THE LAND: RE-IMAGINING COMMUNITY, COMMONS, AND NATURE IN MAINE'S NORTH WOODS

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ABSTRACT: *This paper explores the notion of the northern forest of Maine as a commons that provides for and sustains resident communities in myriad ways. But unlike conventional understandings of community and commons that perceive these not only as fixed and bounded entities but as a subject detached from an object, I subscribe to recent theorists' calls for understanding the two as co-constitutive ("one cannot exist without the other"). Essentially, commons are comprised by a community's shared valuing of something (e.g., land) and an interest in its long-term maintenance (Gudeman and Rivera-Gutiérrez, 2002). The northern forest is that something in this particular case. However, in addition to de-essentializing community and commons, one must correspondingly deconstruct nature, for a primary source of resource conflicts in the woods is the dispute over what exactly nature is and should be (i.e., pristine wilderness or a working landscape). In other words, how can the forest's value be shared when the people cannot agree on precisely what the forest is and what gives it value? In describing the woods as a commons, people are effectively inserted onto a landscape that is portrayed as pristine wilderness within the conservationist discourse. Thus, (re)characterizing commons as sets of practices and social interactions inherent to communities becomes an active political strategy that challenges hegemonic views of nature and the exclusionist policies that can potentially ensue.*

INTRODUCTION

In Maine's north woods, a vast expanse of more than 60,000 square kilometers of mostly private forestland that constitutes the largest undeveloped block of land in the U.S. east of the Mississippi, sweeping changes in land ownership and consequent land development and preservation efforts have enlivened a layered debate. Conservation groups are pushing for the permanent protection of treasured natural areas and strengthening of restrictions on high-impact uses of the forest. These environmental interests usually reference the woods' cultural mystique, attributed to the likes of Henry David Thoreau and natural features including Mount Katahdin and the Appalachian Trail's "100 mile wilderness." Meanwhile, many residents of the woods have reacted vociferously against policies that limit or end practices such as hunting and motorized recreation on lands where they have lived, worked, and played for generations. These critics of large-scale conservation efforts draw attention to the region's long history of human settlement, farming, and extensive logging activities, which are often forgotten or disregarded within conservation discourses.

Such user conflicts and fears of tightening land restrictions are situated within a broader social and economic context. The state's populace is geographically divided between those living in the rural towns and unorganized territory of the northern woods versus those in the coastal, urban counties of the south.[1] However, there are also critical cultural and socioeconomic differences. Wide economic inequalities exist between the two areas and the gulf continues to grow, intensified by cultural disparities, such as rural versus urban/suburban living, reliance on the woods for daily material existence (e.g., a productive landscape) versus views of the woods as one's rightful wilderness heritage (e.g., an aesthetic landscape for touristic consumption), and conservative versus liberal politics and values (Hampson, 2006). The region is also undergoing a period of gradual economic transition with the closing of paper mills and the search for new development strategies, such as ecotourism. Those residing in the woods are reeling from steady declines in manufacturing and natural resource-based industries, which experienced a loss of 62,000 jobs between 1970 and 2004 (Acheson, 2005). As a result of these changes, anxieties and feelings of social division that currently dominate characterizations of resource conflicts appear to be increasing.

Finally, historical patterns of land ownership and management and recent shifts in land tenure help further contextualize current conflicts in and around the Maine woods and underscore the potentially serious repercussions for local communities and other stakeholders. As a result of a long and complex history of common land ownership and collective management, local communities have enjoyed relatively permissive access to commercial timberland and other privately owned land for centuries. However, timber companies began divesting their holdings in the 1990s, breaking up large single-owner parcels and creating a diverse assemblage of forestland owners, including "investor-owners" and individual and incorporated environmental interests fighting to protect the land piece by piece. Ninety-five percent of the forest remains privately owned, though shrinking tract sizes and multiple landowners are generating increasing uncertainty surrounding the future of the woods (Jin and Sader, 2006). The director of RESTORE: The North Woods, a conservation organization championing the creation of a Maine Woods National Park, sums up the current state of affairs,

> For a long time we had this big place, over 10 million acres, as big as the whole rest of New England, that people just forgot about. It was a big blank spot on the map, and now everybody's scrapping for it.[…] It's the last big place. Look around the country. I don't know of any other place that's in play like this.[…] we're all trying to figure out what the brave new world will be up there (Clark, 2008, p. 126).

It is upon this backdrop of escalating public concern, complex ecological and cultural histories, and uncertain futures that this paper will explore various conceptualizations of common property, community, and nature and reveal how their re-imagining can create new political spaces in which locals can assert claims to the land.

UNDERSTANDING "COMMONS" AND "COMMUNITY"

Scholarly work on common property regimes emerged in the early 1980s and has evolved and expanded over the past few decades, resulting in an extensive body of work. Much of this research has been in direct response to Garrett Hardin's (1968) powerful "tragedy of the commons" theory, which avows the inherent unsustainability of common property regimes. Common property theorists have countered with descriptions of the possibilities of community, arguing in favor of self-organized and locally-based resource management regimes (Ostrom, 1990; McCay and Acheson, 1987). These systems have typically been described as "institutional arrangements for the cooperative (shared, joint, collective) use, management, and sometimes ownership of natural resources" (McKean, 2000, p. 27). Accordingly, commons are best understood as social institutions or relationships that are in constant flux, shifting as uses and users change, rather than a fixed, bounded piece of land shared by an essentialized and set community.

Arrangements of communal rights to resource access and use can take complex and unexpected forms. For example, private and common property are often envisioned as opposites, with privatization usually heralded as the solution to common property problems. However, there is no unidirectional, inevitable progression for the replacement of common property by private property, and these two constructs are not necessarily opposite from one another. McKean (2000) points out that separating the two is misleading for it fails to recognize the fuzziness of the boundaries between and the overlap that can exist. People also tend to confuse the publicness and privateness of three different things—*goods*, *rights*, and *owners* of rights—which often results in a conceptual grouping of all things public or all things private (McKean, 2000). An example of this is the jumbling of rights and owners, namely the assumption that private entities hold exclusive, private rights and public entities hold public rights. Such semantic confusion produces misunderstandings and fails to account for enormous variation, effectively limiting the possible formulations of common property regimes or undermining the effectiveness of existing regimes.

The potential complexity of such systems is illustrated by the common property regime governing Maine's northern forest, wherein the term "commons" will be used to refer to the institutional arrangements regulating the shared use and management of the forestland. This unusual case exemplifies McKean's description of the complexity of such regimes in that the commons exist on private lands historically owned primarily by timber and paper companies. As with other commons, communities have helped create and enforce rules regarding the use of the lands. They have entered into agreements with the private property owners that permit their use of the land for hunting, fishing, motorized recreation, and other activities as long as they steer clear of actively harvested timber areas and respect the landowners' wishes. These agreements range from informal understandings between the two

(e.g., "timber trucks always have the right of way"), to a systematic dispersal of public funds to local clubs whose members work to maintain infrastructure such as trails and bridges, to arrangements formalized through the establishment of management organizations. One such group is North Maine Woods (NMW)[2], which is a forest recreation management organization comprised of landowners, corporations, state agencies, families, and individuals. This group originated in the 1960s as a landowner committee formed to resolve conflicts among logging contractors, and eventually developed into an association, partnership, and finally a non-profit corporation in 1981. As land was added to the now 14,164 square kilometer managed area encompassing 155 townships, interior gates were removed and access became controlled by a uniform set of fees and regulations for all users of the management area. Thus, agreements among landowners, agencies, and users have enabled consistently regulated use and moderately restricted travel throughout the entire area, unhampered by private gates.

There is wide agreement among common property scholars that the various arrangements that have replaced common property regimes have not lived up to their promises, often resulting in ineffective resource management (McKean, 2000; Ostrom, 1990; McCay and Acheson, 1987). This risk appears applicable in the north woods commons, whereby if ownership of the land is transferred to individuals uninterested in maintaining ties with local users or if it is made public and current uses are limited or prohibited, the institutional arrangements governing use might disappear. For example, trails might noticeably deteriorate if local clubs are no longer allocated funds to maintain them. There may also be less incentive for snowmobilers, for example, to minimize ecological destruction by staying on the trails if their close relationship with the landowner is severed. The vastness of the northern forest makes direct control of uses difficult, if not impossible, hence the critical importance of maintaining institutional arrangements that manage multiple uses and provide local incentives.

More recently, scholars have criticized common property analyses that are framed within rational choice theory and focused primarily on the institutional arrangements and effects that provide community incentives and guide choices (Ratner and Rivera-Gutiérrez, 2004; see also McCay and Jentoft, 1998). Within this framework, social practices and relations are typically perceived as the consequence of institutional changes rather than the reverse wherein such arrangements are indicators of the practices (Escobar, 2005). Increasingly, research has challenged conventional understandings of commons and community in its examination of the larger political-economic and social context within which common property regimes are formed and continually shaped. Critics argue that community should be viewed not as a fixed grouping of homogenous individuals but as a continually remade "set of shared interests, rooted in judgments of value, and…the networks of social relationships that form around these" (Ratner and Rivera-Gutiérrez, 2004, p. 3). Communities are often organized around activities and can be face-to-face or span state and even national borders. People can be members of multiple communities at any given time, each linked to a different social identity (Gudeman and Rivera-Gutiérrez, 2002). Ratner and Rivera-Gutiérrez (2004) believe that an understanding of community as a collection of individual choices (or individuals with common interests) that operate within a single moral framework fails to seriously consider broader power relationships that can undermine community and commons.

One of the primary features of communities is the making and maintaining of their commons. Gudeman and Rivera-Gutiérrez (2002) assert that many modern economists, political scientists, and some commons scholars, separate subjects from objects, viewing commons as autonomous and objective units that require clearly stated rights of access for proper management. In other words, commons are understood as separate from human communities; they may be a symbol of a particular community, but they are not the community itself. Alternatively, Gudeman and Rivera-Gutiérrez perceive commons as,

> the material thing or knowledge a people have in common, what they share, so that what happens to a commons is not a physical incident, but a social event. Taking away the commons destroys community, and destroying a complex set of relationships demolishes a community. Likewise, denying others access to the commons denies community with them […] The so-called "tragedy of the commons" (Hardin, 1968), that refers to destruction of a resource through unlimited use by individuals, is a tragedy not of a physical commons but of a human community, because of the failure of its members to treat one another as communicants and its transformation to a competitive situation (165).

Thus, "without a commons, there is no community; without a community, there is no commons" (165). Commons are constituted by a shared valuing of *something* and interest in its maintenance, which depends upon the existence of social relationships and also supports the continuation of those relations (Gudeman and Rivera-Gutiérrez, 2002, p. 165; Ratner and Rivera-Gutiérrez, 2004, p. 3). In their struggles to defend common property, people are participating with other community members to protect their social interactions or a "form of life in which [they] achieve 'well-being'" (171), and continually making, changing, and reinforcing communities. The time and effort expended on managing the commons is considered an investment in the community since it reinforces social, political, and economic ties with other community members.

Ratner and Rivera-Gutiérrez (2004) contend that when spaces for social interaction are reduced or eliminated, collective practices disappear, eroding social networks and weakening community (this process is termed "community disembedding"). In making their argument, the authors detailed efforts in a Guatemalan town aimed at "reasserting community" (i.e., community building) through a strengthening of social ties, interactions, and relationships that form around common interests (7). These networks can form even within and among heterogeneous groups of people with diverse characteristics. However, this understanding begs one to ask why local residents and conservationists have failed to join forces in protecting Maine's northern forest commons, an area that both have a shared interest in protecting? Gudeman and Rivera-Gutiérrez (2002) hint at an answer,

> When an association of people turns land or another resource into a commons, *they are not just acting on 'nature' as an object, but changing its context of use and meaning* from being an objective and separate input for the market to being part of a seamless community of people in a place (168; my emphasis).

Thus, I would argue that the perceived lack of shared interest is a result of basic disagreements over what the woods actually *are* (i.e., a pristine wilderness or an inhabited and working landscape). This disconnect effectively obscures the existence of any shared interest because fundamentally different landscapes are valued, thereby blocking the formation of networks of community. Yes, local residents and environmentalists may be members of a broader community that cares about the future of the forests, but they possess different and conflicting ideas about what "nature" is and therefore what uses (and perhaps users) are appropriate (see Robbins, 2006).

Before this disconnect is explored further in the next section, it is worthwhile to return to the earlier discussion of common property regimes in Maine's north woods, newly equipped with this alternative perspective of commons. Long before the incorporation of NMW, there existed a complex history of common land ownership in Maine.[3] By the year 1820 when the state split from Massachusetts and achieved independence, more than half of the state's land (roughly 40,470 square kilometers) had been sold or granted; by 1878 the remaining land had been sold. Oftentimes, two or three people would jointly purchase townships as common, undivided areas (i.e., an individual may have owned 15% of a township's every tree, road, and so forth). Starting around the turn of the century, families increasingly began to sell their holdings to industrial landowners, while each succeeding generation of heirs divided remaining ownerships into even smaller shares. Consequently, the current ownership of much of the state's forestland represents a diverse combination of private individual, private industrial, and public ownership and interests. This complex tenure configuration is a primary reason for organizations like NMW, which attempt to simplify management of the commons via a uniform set of regulations. Thus, interestingly this particular institutional arrangement grew out of a long history of social practices, rather than vice versa.

PLACE-BASED POLITICS AND RETHINKING THE LAND

Gudeman, Ratner, and Rivera-Gutiérrez's conceptualizations of *community* and *commons* de-essentialize the terms and challenge basic understandings; yet they fail to do the same for *nature* by accepting it as pre-given. However, I believe efforts to re-imagine community, commons, and nature are closely related and can be located within a broader project of place-based politics. In line with more critical common property theorists, proponents of a place-based politics reject a modernist, detached view of humans and things, and instead "attempt to bring back a contextualized and situated notion of human practice" (Escobar, 2001, p. 167). Place is defined as "the experience of, and from, a particular location with some sense of boundaries, grounds, and links to everyday practices," all of which are constructed (152). Boundaries are flexible and exist only in relation to

practices. This understanding of place, which reiterates earlier re-imaginings of community and commons, opens up spaces for political mobilization by marginalized groups that are engaged in place-based struggles (Escobar, 2001).

One such struggle is the fight by north woods communities to retain the right to practice multiple uses of the forest commons amidst shifting land ownership. Local fears about losing this access are clearly well-founded as evidenced by the words and actions of Roxanne Quimby, an avid environmentalist who has acquired and preserved thousands of square kilometers of woods over the past few years. She explains,

> What has happened over the years is that there were very few landowners and they had a very permissive policy toward land use as long as you stayed out of the way of logging operation. So people had this unrestricted access. So now that the ownership is changing, it's becoming quite clear that this is private property. And as a private property owner I don't have to let anybody on it. [That] is becoming the alternative to public land (Barringer, 2006).

Thus, facing a lack of public park lands, which are generally perceived as offering greater resource protection and stricter management policies, conservation interests are purchasing lots and creating a *new kind* of private ownership, one that restricts high impact uses and "open, unregulated" access to the woods. Environmental interests are not necessarily advancing a "tragedy of the commons" representation, whereby the woods would be seriously endangered if open access were to continue with such uses permitted. But operating according to eco-centric principles, there is an effort underway to effectively "take back" the woods and implement management strategies that will enable the forest to "recover" from centuries of large-scale commercial activities. In addition to these private conservation purchases, the state is expanding public park lands and environmentalists are attempting to establish a Maine Woods National Park. Quimby believes, "A park takes away the whole issue of ownership. It's off the table; we all own it and we all share it. It's so democratic" (Clark, 2008, p. 128). But there is a widespread belief that by designating the lands as public, local access will become constrained since many uses will likely be prohibited. In other words, the notion of "public" is viewed as problematic and restrictive, potentially privileging some users over others.[4]

However, in their fight to retain *usufruct*, local users of the woods have attempted to gain traction by emphasizing the history of humans on the landscape and the close connections between the woods and communities. This reconstruction of nature is comparable to place-based struggles in rural Scotland, as explored in the work of Fiona Mackenzie (2006a; 2006b) who examines the constitutive processes of community, land or territory, and nature within the context of recent land tenure shifts. Locating her argument within poststructural political ecology and social construction of nature theory, Mackenzie asserts that community resistance is not simply a reaction to (past and potential future) land dispossession, but is rather about reclaiming the locality and place-based identity based on alternative ways of imagining human history and relations with nature (2006b, p. 580). She focuses on everyday practices of the North Harris Trust on Scotland's Isle of Harris to show how "collective identity is produced or 'performed' in relation to a 'doing' or 'becoming' of the land" (581). As with other forms of property, land is not 'a static, pre-given entity, but depends on a continual, active 'doing'" (Mackenzie, 2006b, p. 581). Much like Gudeman and Rivera-Gutiérrez's description of community and commons, community and land are co-produced through these principles and practices.

However, Mackenzie builds upon this shared foundation by examining the *meanings* of the land, arguing that meanings of place are also contingent and produced through community practices. Her research is specifically concerned with how "nature" is understood and negotiated within new political spaces (2006a; 2006b). Conservationist discourses normalize a particular way of seeing nature, usually empty of people, and mask how this can authorize certain actors and actions while prohibiting others. Such views are part of what has been termed an American "wilderness ethic," which has been foundational to many conservation ideologies and activities both at home and abroad. This ethic establishes a dualism between nature and humans, asserting that any human intervention in nature constitutes harm, no matter the intentions (Proctor, 1995).

Those who view nature as a social production and construction counter that "The dream of an unworked natural landscape is very much the fantasy of people who have never themselves had to work the land to make a living—urban folk… Only people whose relationship to the land was already alienated could hold up wilderness as a model for human life in nature" (Cronon, 1995, p. 80). Inhabitants of rural areas are generally familiar enough with the hard work required by country living

to view wilderness, or unworked land, as a less than ideal environment, whereas "elite urban tourists and wealthy sportsmen projected their leisure-time frontier fantasies onto the American landscape and so created wilderness in their own image" (Cronon, 1995, p. 77). Nature can thus become "complicit in the 'itineraries of silencing' of people's ongoing claims" to land (Mackenzie, 2006a, p. 380). In rethinking the land, the North Harris Trust has worked to recast nature, considering local interests and collective rights alongside potentially contradicting conservationist discourses of wild spaces and wilderness protection. Nature is itself a site of struggle, a "means through which power and resistance are exercised [and] the differential geographies of place are created" (Mackenzie, 2006a, p. 385). By exposing historical uses of the land and the processes of co-constitution of commons and community, rural land crofters have countered and perhaps prevented the erasure of people from the land. Land was thus "re-visioned" through the "materiality, discourse and practice of collective rights [which contribute] to current debates about the political possibilities of place" (Mackenzie, 2006a, p. 384).

Escobar (2001) provides an additional example of the strategic re-imagining of place in his case study of activist communities in the biodiversity hotspot region of the Columbian Pacific, which crafted their own definition of biodiversity to mean "territory plus culture" (161). This characterization views the Pacific rainforest region as both an ecological and cultural unit that is constructed through the everyday practices of the resident communities, and envisions the area in terms of "life corridors" or "modes of articulation between socio-cultural forms of use and the natural environment" (161). Defined as thus, the space becomes multidimensional, used to meet communities' ecological, economic, and cultural needs. This "eco-cultural logic" further connects people to the land by linking the struggle for land with the struggle for autonomy. A number of other factors connected with the loss of territory also begin to emerge, such as the loss of production practices and traditional values and identity.

Residents of Maine's northern forest region are producing new narratives of local stewardship that similarly redefine the state's forested region as a space "laboriously constructed through the daily cultural and economic practices of the communities" (2001, p. 161). Such strategies problematize conservationist discourses of national wilderness heritage through assertions of tradition and community subsistence, opening up new political possibilities for local residents and supporting their

struggle for the retention of access and use. These claims stem from a local utilitarian land ethic that brings to light the long history of humans shaping and working the land, highlighting multiple and specific practices, activities, and relations. This disrupts the notion of wilderness as "original state" and the human/nature dualism that positions nature apart from everyday social practices (Mackenzie, 2006a, p. 389). Certain practices, such as timber harvesting, snowmobiling, and hunting, signify a reconstitution of nature. By building a history of such activities, the forests are revealed as bound up in human activities that stretch back in time (Mackenzie 2006a). Nature recast thus becomes a means for resisting power and suggests the "co-creation, or co-performance, of land and nature, bound together in complicated ways" (Mackenzie, 2006a, p. 391) rather than a primitive wilderness. They also give the land a value that stands in contrast to its worth as a wilderness retreat. Within a conservationist discourse, certain uses are deemed unacceptable and practices are restricted, which serves to create a wilderness the discourse claims has always existed. Thus preserving access and the right to particular uses works to actively define nature as worked and lived on land—it constitutes a making of place.

For example, while conservation groups such as the Sierra Club and RESTORE: The North Woods advance their understanding of the forests as a unique wilderness area central to our national heritage, community-based organizations are constructing counter environmental and social histories. RESTORE's website[5] reads, "Vision to Reality: The Maine Woods wilderness of the mid-1800s made such a deep impression on Henry David Thoreau that he envisioned it becoming a 'national preserve.' Today…we have a second chance to realize Thoreau's vision by creating a new Maine Woods National Park and Preserve, [which would] truly be the 'Yellowstone of the East'" and "Preserving these wildlands is a gift to future generations of Maine and the nation." Meanwhile, local groups and individuals are countering this with their own rhetoric that reinserts people onto the land. The North Maine Woods website[6] describes the forest as a "spirit," explaining, "Past and present; people and nature meet here. Men and women who make their living from the woods and those who relax here love this area. And through North Maine Woods, they work together to see that while they take forest products, fish, wildlife, and pleasure from this great region, they take nothing that will make it any less in the future than it is today." But under the subsequent header, "WHAT NMW IS NOT" they write "The region is not a wilderness. There are over 3,000 miles of permanently maintained roads and

several thousand miles of temporary, unmaintained roads. In most areas two generations of timber have been cut and the current harvesting operations you may see mark the third time the trees in this giant tree farm have been cropped." This brings to mind Noel Castree's (2004) essay discussing worldwide indigenous struggles to "reverse long histories and geographies of dispossession" (136), in which he stresses the "messiness" of a politics of place, which resists easy binaries and essentialisms. Like indigenous communities the world over, northern forest community members are "struggling for differential geographies: that is, the right to make their own places, rather than have them made for them" (136).

In conclusion, understanding the northern forest as a commons reveals practices, social relationships, and formal, as well as informal, institutional arrangements that effectively govern the use of these multifunctional and productive spaces. While one might assume that the forestlands are currently open to unregulated and destructive uses—a representation that buttresses conservationists' calls for the proper management and protection of an ecologically valuable area—characterizing the woods as a commons inserts responsible, conscientious, even conservation-minded humans into the picture. The close working relationships community members have built with the private industrial landowners and state natural resource agencies over the past few decades brings this to light.

Operating as a commons, the woods are "a shared base of material, social, and spiritual sustenance for communities" (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. 167). Despite the recent downsizing of the forest products industry, the woods continue to provide in other crucial ways. Not only did they help build and sustain the local economy by generating timber jobs for many area residents, they are also utilized for subsistence hunting, fishing, small-scale timber harvesting, and recreation. They contribute to the local economy by drawing people north to snowmobile, hunt, and engage in other nature-based tourism. Based on critical understandings of community and commons, we can begin to imagine how a loss of the forest commons can potentially weaken the social relations and networks that constitute community. Thus, the loss of land is culturally and politically complex and understandably connected to other fears of loss and change that can deeply impact ways of life. There is room, however, for resident communities to continue to explore the political possibilities of place by linking understandings of the woods to everyday practices and social relationships, effectively reworking the

meaning not just of nature, but of community and commons as well.

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1. The term "unorganized territory" refers to an area in Maine with no local, incorporated municipal government, covering 37,636 square kilometers and containing approximately 32,000 residents.
2. http://www.northmainewoods.org/
3. This history was obtained from the North Maine Woods website in the section titled *History of the North Maine Woods*, http://www.northmainewoods.org/history.html.
4. Neumann (1998) and Ranger (1999) have advanced similar arguments regarding the designation of National Parks in Tanzania and Zimbabwe, respectively.
5. http://www.restore.org
6. http://www.northmainewoods.org/whatisnmw.html

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