



---

<sup>b</sup>  
**UNIVERSITÄT  
BERN**

Faculty of Humanities  
**Institute of Social  
Anthropology**

## **The Commons We Want**

*A Review of Selected Social Anthropology Literature for the XIX Biennial Conference of the International Association for the Study of the Commons in Nairobi, June 19-24, 2023*

### **Subtheme 4: Commons between Colonial Legacies and the Anthropocene**

**by Anna Rapaud and Alexandra Steiner, June 2023**

Supervised by Tobias Haller  
**Institute of Social Anthropology, University of Bern, Switzerland**

## **Introduction**

The colonial era had a significant impact on the global South in terms of communal land use. In colonies, large areas of land were expropriated. In order to justify this procedure, the thesis was spread, for example, that the local population was incapable of managing their land productively. This narrative legitimised the land seizures in favour of the interests of the colonialists, who sought to integrate the areas into the economic space in order to favour Western economic growth. Other false assumptions were also made about these territories and the people living in them, which has become embedded in social views to this day. For example, even today many people would think that in Papua New Guinea people live in an early state of nature (West: 2016). Such assumptions trigger domino effects that have a lasting impact on the ecosystem and the social, cultural coexistence of people. The product of this is social inequality, ecological degradation, loss of local knowledge and practices, exploitation of resources and domination by powerful individuals. We will analyse these elements of colonial legacies in more detail in our essay.

Our aim is to show how colonialists portrayed communal land use, the consequences of this and how the rhetoric is still evident today. The essay should reflect the general point of view of social anthropology. The aim is to provide readers with a guide to the important findings in social anthropology. As students of social anthropology, we mainly refer to research papers from social anthropology in this reading guide. We will give an overview on a sub-theme of the conference, the commons between colonial legacies and the Anthropocene. The essay is divided into central themes and sub-themes with concrete examples of colonial legacies from research reports. In the conclusion, we offer a reference and outlook. As taken from the selected literature in social anthropology, we discuss as historical legacy exploitation of resources, social inequalities, dominance and ecological degradation.

## **Exploitation of resources**

In Europe, our everyday consumption is fuelled by resources that cannot be found on our continent, or not to the extent required to cover our consumption. Precious metals, minerals and stones, timber, fossil fuels, iron, palm oil and rubber are the resources to which many ex-colonial powers owe their wealth. The extensive economic wealth that was built upon these resources was primarily due to slave labour and cheap labour in developing countries, exposing the power imbalance between the colonisers and colonised. Colonialists saw “new” territories as an “unending frontier”, a place with unlimited resources to exploit, thereby ignoring the long-term effects their activities would undoubtedly create (McQuade 2019)

### Terra nullius

Terra nullius is a Latin term that translates to “nobody’s land” or “land belonging to no one.” It is a legal concept describing territory that is deemed unoccupied or uninhabited by a recognized sovereign entity. The term has been used in the past by sovereign entities to justify their colonisation and appropriation of lands, claiming that they are vacant and available for occupation. (Banner 2010).

The concept of terra nullius is closely tied to the doctrine of discovery, a 500-year-old Catholic decree, encouraging forced conversion to Christianity and giving European colonists the right to claim land that was deemed vacant for their nation. In doing so, it gave Christians the right to confiscate and populate the lands of Indigenous Peoples, as they argued that indigenous communities occupied the lands but did not own them by European definitions of ownership. In doing so, they completely disregarded and invalidated their rights, sovereignty and how these communities have cared for the land for centuries (Blakemore 2022). This is the main legal colonial legacy, which remained until today’s time of post colonialism. It consists in an institutional change from local pre-colonial common property institutions embedded into indigenous ontologies (see subtheme 3) to state and private property regimes based on the terra nullius colonial views. This led to the perception that all colonial areas are ‘pure’ nature and not as cultural landscape ecosystems based on previous commons property governance institutions. This is one of the most central colonial legacies enduring which justified long enduring waves of commons grabbing processes (see subthemes 6 and 9, Haller 2019).

### Deforestation

Deforestation is a process driven by various factors, notably the need for resources such as timber, rubber and palm oil, agricultural lands and grazing areas for cattle. The countries with the highest deforestation rates are Brazil, India and Indonesia. There is no end in sight, as multinational companies become interested in new territories and resources, and climate change becomes a new factor changing the dynamics of whole ecosystems (Ritchie and Roser 2015).

When analysing the origins of deforestation, it is important to take the role of institutions into consideration: they must be understood in the light of history, including the individual colonial legacies of each country. For example, former French colonies tend to deforest less than former British or Spanish colonies, due to the former context of bad governance by French colonial powers. This suggests that to combat deforestation, we need to untangle the role of colonial origins more carefully. With that information, the role and responsibility of individual institutions will become clearer and an action plan can be elaborated to combat the eradication of forest lands (Marchand 2016).

Using the deforestation of the Amazon as an example, it is important to visualise the link between deforestation and social injustice. The Amazon is home to many indigenous tribes who have been displaced by Bolsonaro’s far-right authoritarianism and neoliberal economics. This violence against Indigenous Peoples is no longer an event, but a structure referred to as a settler-colonial logic of

elimination. This not only destroys their homeland ecosystems but also exploits their labour and knowledge, and dispossesses them of their territories (Urzedo and Chatterjee 2021).

### Water depletion

When talking about water depletion, the multinational company Nestlé instantly comes to mind. They are known for bottling water, in the process depleting local water resources and reselling it for sizable profits. In the city of Vittel, France, Nestlé was using the same aquifer as the French authorities and with time, it became clear that the water was being harvested faster than the natural replenishing rate. To address this problem, the French authorities did not ban Nestlé from using the aquifer, nor did they limit the amount of water they were allowed to extract. Rather, they proposed building a 14-kilometre pipeline to import water to replenish the aquifer. In their bottling factories in Wellington County, Canada, Nestlé produces 3 billion 500-millilitre plastic bottles per year, consuming large amounts of fossil fuels to maintain their production.

Communities in the 21st century are fighting hard to protect their water resources from Nestlé, reminiscent of the battles communities in the global south had to wage to protect their resources from colonial exploitation and land grabbing (Frederick 2020).

### **Social Inequality**

A legacy from the colonial era, there are still structures that contribute to an imbalance of power (West, 2016, Li, 2014). The colonial powers used narratives to frame certain groups. This was done to further their interests. Communities that had communal land access were stigmatized as backward by colonial powers. Various anthropological studies have shown that narratives such as that of pure nature still have effects today that marginalize communities. For groups such as indigenous or local communities, such structures and discourses have implications that affect their environment and their daily lives both directly and indirectly, as the examples below show. One consequence may be the privatisation of land, which may result in social inequalities. There are few winners, the majority are losers. The result may be unemployment growth (Li, 2014). The current structures of the neoliberal market economy and globalisation make these communities particularly vulnerable. However, many anthropologists in social anthropology stress the sovereignty of local communities and explain the risks of the modernization narrative and discuss the specific consequences of this. This illustrates the importance of commons in relation to local practices. Research in the field of social anthropology also serves as a further step towards decolonization by uncovering and defining colonial rhetoric (West, 2016, Li, 2014). In this chapter, exemplary views of anthropological research work show exactly what the underlying structures of power imbalance are and how these are related to the colonial past, or how the colonial past is still present through the so-called colonial framing.

The anthropologist Paige West (2016) has contributed to decolonisation through her fieldwork in Papua New Guinea by showing how the rhetoric of pure nature with humans in the early state of nature has persisted in this country. West points out that Papua New Guinea has a deep-rooted history of trade that was in contact with other regions. Nevertheless, a stereotype of a region cut off from the rest of the world persisted. (West, 2016: 2). She goes on to say that such rhetoric leads to a denial of sovereignty and that the oppression of the people is thus perpetuated in the post-colonial era. The invasion would continue through legal processes and practices related to the accommodation of cultural differences. Further, West speaks of 'savage slotting', where she also refers to the stereotyping of Papua New Guineans as savages. (West, 2016: 28). The roots of these stereotypes are anchored in the 19th century, the age of colonialism. She gives the example of a colleague who asked if she had eaten anyone during her research. Cannibalism, which is part of the imagination of the wild in nature, is repeatedly associated with Papua New Guinea. It is a branding with negative consequences. This is because expropriations are encouraged, whereby people's knowledge and practices are lost, resulting in social and economic disadvantage.

Another work that deals with the emerging social inequality that has its roots in colonialism is that of Tania Li, an anthropologist who conducted several years of field research in the Indonesian highlands and mountains. In this work, there are examples of how narratives from colonial times stigmatised communal land use and how accumulative capitalism changed people's livelihoods. Li shows the impact this has today on the Lauje, the people she researched. Although modern land use was not forced on the people, they chose to use it to improve their livelihoods because they were still dependent on market conditions. Therefore, in the 1990s, they started to individually cultivate crops such as cocoa. Due to the longevity of cocoa trees, plantations became property. However, this opened the door to social injustice in the region. The result was that families with more capital or more labour claimed more and more property, putting others at a disadvantage and causing them to lose their land and become impoverished.

## **Dominance**

In a socio-anthropological context, domination can be defined as a form of social power and control exercised by individuals, groups, or institutions over others. It involves the ability to influence and shape the behaviours, decisions, and opportunities of others, often using authority, coercion, or manipulation. Domination can manifest in various forms, such as economic, political, cultural, or interpersonal domination. It is typically characterised by unequal power relations, where dominant individuals or groups hold greater privilege, resources, and access to social and material benefits, while subordinated individuals or groups experience limitations, marginalisation, and subjugation. Domination is often analysed in the context of social structures and systems of inequality, highlighting the ways in which power is distributed, maintained, and challenged within societies.

How does power imbalance manifest itself? The power imbalance is manifested by the fact that the control of common goods rests on a few. These are usually the state, companies, or individual private persons (Borras, Matias and McKeon, 2013). Also, investors from abroad often acquire local land. All this is at the expense of local communities who cannot maintain their control over land and become independent. Furthermore, such communities and states in the Global South are often dependent on aid from other countries, foreign investors, and NGOs, which leads to a further chain of dependency and prevents independent development. According to Borras et al. (2013), such power imbalances were present in the past, but are now occurring on a much greater scale. They see the reason for this in the shift in economic/political orientations because land appropriation today takes place across borders, namely «by ever greater flows of capital, goods and ideas across borders, and these flows occur through axes of power that are far more polycentric than the North – South imperialist tradition» (Borras et al. 2013: 2). Land expropriation is thus localised in capitalism. (Borras et al. Al. , 2013, Brockington and Larson, 2017).

#### Direct and indirect rule

A colonial legacy that is not often talked about is the systemic change created by colonial powers in the territories they occupied. When arriving in foreign territory, they not only imported their belief system but also their governing system: the most common effect was the political centralization of territories that either previously had no central government or the domination and/or take-over of local government structures.

Due to a lack of knowledge and an oversimplified and racist understanding of local cultures and Indigenous Peoples, there was a notion supported by colonial powers that Africa could be ruled in a single-minded, unified manner. This disregarded different cultures, religions and languages across the continent and was quickly unsupported by the evidence.

Differences have been observed between the English and French colonial rule, notably that British colonies were based on common law, allowing for less state intervention and thus control than the French legal system.

This proves that the most effective indirect rule is characterised by more tension between old and new elites and that the integration of new politics proved more difficult. It is also characterised by the difficulty in implementing policy outside of the capital city, and often had no other means than coercion for pursuing policy (UZH).

#### Economic and Financial dominance

It is a well-known fact that colonial powers have greatly profited from colonialism, gaining unlimited access to resources, access to cheap labour and expanding their trade routes. Economies boomed and states GDP increased drastically at the expense of other nations, impoverishing them in the process.

Fossil fuels have been a central element in development history because they provided a mobile, cheap and incredibly efficient source of energy, making them hard for developing countries to ignore. This shows how tightly linked fossil fuels, and their CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and a country's development status are. Southern nations insisted that countries have a right to development and that that need should be prioritised. The U.S. rejected this statement during the Bush administration, reflecting the general concern among wealthy nations that they might be held responsible, financially, and legally, for ensuring the continued development of poorer nations (Greiner 2021).

A current example of a nation exerting economic and financial dominance in developing countries is China with its infamous Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

During the last decade the nation has emerged as the developing world's bank of choice, generously funding global infrastructure projects. Now, it is evolving into the world's largest debt collector, hassling Pakistan, Zambia or Suriname for repayment, and if they are unable to do so, seizing control of various infrastructure, such as ports in Sri Lanka.

China has overtaken both the IMF and the World Bank as a creditor, partly because their loans have less political conditions attached to it (Lu 2023).

### Brain drain

In colonial times, settlers imported their entire way of life: they brought their religion, their culture, their language, their education system, and their way of building infrastructure to the new territories they occupied. They built schools with expatriate scholars, hospitals with expatriate doctors and western medicine, wanting to eradicate local systems. Their aim was to create a society with the same high standards as at home, which functioned well until the age of colonisation came to an end and nations gradually gained their independence.

With independence came the end of dependency on colonists who no longer provided medical teachers and equipment, nor the funds for research. Political independent movements were prioritised, and new leaders proved to be easily influenced or even corrupt, taking priority over the health of the population. Highly trained doctors found they could no longer practise their professions to the high standard that they were accustomed to during colonialism. Regressive health policies, poor funding and insufficient salaries or trained staff gradually led to a phenomenon called brain drain, where trained professionals emigrated to western countries, often even their ex-colonist (Arnold 2011).

### **Ecological degradation**

The capitalist model, which is rather opposed to the system of commons, nationalizes many resources, or restricts them to private/entrepreneurs or private owners (Li, 2014). Through the expropriation of resources in the colonial era, the pursuit of maximizing profit led to an over-exploitation and

overloading of resources, which can lead to ecological degradation (Leme da Silva et al. 2023). Even today, due to the privatisation of land and the neoliberal market economy, balanced land use is neglected. Instead, monoproplantations are grown for profit maximization and local practices go underneath (Leme da Silva et. al. 2023). Two researchers have written a paper on sustainability. In it, they examine the role of nature conservation organisations. At the same time, they provide approaches on how the subject of social anthropology should position itself in this regard. Although there is increasing criticism of NGOs, they appeal for the values of NGOs. But they also say that it is important to work closely with indigenous and local communities that have different knowledge systems. Notions of land access may differ from those of conservationists. These should also be considered, although they may be difficult to understand. The researchers refer to the non-separation of nature and culture, with some communities influenced by the spiritual and the natural.

However, there are still colonial discourses that justify this. For example, countries in the global South are still seen as backward or the ability to constructively use land is denied. This also includes the role of nature conservationists. These must also be looked at critically, as many resources are taken from local communities in the name of environmental protection and managed by conservationists who in turn receive money from abroad. In addition, views on biodiversity conservation often originate in the West and ignore the interests of local populations. (Brockington and Larsen, 2017, Haller 2019).

### **Conclusion:**

Some sources are already a bit older, and the situation has certainly changed over the years. Nevertheless, the sources give a clear picture of how colonialism left structures and narratives that still exist in the 21st century. They have a negative economic, ecological and social impact on some groups of people. These are particularly local populations in the Global South, who were colonized by Western states and previously had their own traditional ways of life. Under dependence, they were suppressed or stigmatized. Due to Western epistemology dominance, life changed drastically. There is a vulnerability to local epistemology and practices since many societies administered their land locally before colonization. Prior to colonization, many societies administered their lands communally. This practice was considered backward by governments and colonial powers. However, privatization and nationalization as a narrative of modernization brought social imbalances. The reading aid shows these aspects using specific ethnographic examples from anthropologists. It should give an overview of what anthropologists have done in recent years and what discourses are being conducted. In this way, the works contribute to the process of decolonization. They stress local sovereignty and land access views. Municipal land administration is part of this since many had such a connection before colonization.



## References:

Arnold Peter Chester 2011: Why the ex-colonial medical brain drain? *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 104, 351-354

Banner Stuart 2010: Why Terra Nullius? Anthropology and Property Law in Eastern Australia. Cambridge University Press. *Law and History Review*. 23, 95-131

Blakemore Erin 2022: This 500-year-old Catholic decree encouraged colonization. Will the pope revoke it? *National Geographic* (22.07.22.)

<Doctrine of Discovery: How the 500-year-old Catholic decree encouraged colonization (nationalgeographic.com)> (10.06.23.)

Frederick Franklin 2020: Nestlé: Multinationals as the New Colonial Powers. A Tale of Many Cities. CounterCurrents.org (10.01.20.)

<Nestlé: Multinationals As The New Colonial Powers. A Tale Of Many Cities| Countercurrents> (08.06.23.)

Greiner Patrick Trent 2021: How colonialism's legacy makes it harder for countries to escape poverty and fossil fuels today. *The Conversation* (28.06.21.)

<How colonialism's legacy makes it harder for countries to escape poverty and fossil fuels today (theconversation.com)> (06.06.23.)

Haller, T. (2019). The Different Meanings of Land in the Age of Neoliberalism: Theoretical Reflections on Commons and Resilience Grabbing from a Social Anthropological Perspective. *Land*, 8(7), 104.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/land8070104>

Larsen, Peter B. and Dan Brockington 2019: The Anthropology of Conservation NGOs: Rethinking the Boundaries. 53 (4): 789.

Leme da Silva, Andrea, et. al. 2023: Environmental Policy Reform and Water Grabbing in an Agricultural Frontier in the Brazilian Cerrado. *IDS Bulletin* 54 (1): 89-101.

Lu Christina 2023: China's Checkbook Diplomacy Has Bounced (China can make friends or break legs. It can't do both). *Foreign Policy Magazine* (21.02.23.)

<China's Belt and Road Has Turned It Into Debt Collector (foreignpolicy.com)> (05.06.23.)

- Marchand Sébastien 2015: The colonial origins of deforestation: an institutional analysis. *Environment and Development Economics*. Cambridge University Press. 21, 318-349
- Matulis, Matias, Nora McKeon and Saturnino Borrás Jr. 2013: *Land Grabbing and Global Governance: Critical Perspectives*. London: Routledge.
- Murray Li, Tania 2014: *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*. Durham London: *Duke University Press*.
- McQuade Joseph 2019: Earth Day: Colonialism's role in the overexploitation of natural resources. *The Conversation* (18.04.19.)  
<Earth Day: Colonialism's role in the overexploitation of natural resources (theconversation.com)> (13.06.23.)
- Ritchie Hannah and Roser Max 2015: Deforestation and Forest Loss. *Our World in Data*.  
<Deforestation and Forest Loss - Our World in Data> (09.06.23.)
- The Indigenous Foundation. The Doctrine of Discovery and Terra Nullius  
<The Doctrine of Discovery and Terra Nullius — The Indigenous Foundation> (11.06.23.)
- Urzedo Danilo and Chatterjee Praticchi 2021: The Colonial Reproduction of Deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon: Violence Against Indigenous Peoples for Land Development. *Journal of Genocide Research*. Taylor&Francis Online. 23, 302-324
- University of Zurich. Home. Colonial Transformation Dataset. The Impact of Colonialism. The Political Impact of Colonialism  
<The Political Impact of Colonialism | World Development | UZH> (07.06.23.)
- West, Paige 2014: *Dispossession and the Environment: Rhetoric and Inequality in Papua New Guinea*. New York: *Columbia University Press*.
- Webb Christopher 2015: Land's end: capitalist relations on an indigenous frontier, by Tania Murray Li, *Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue canadienne d'études du développement*, 36:2, 259-261.

