

## Call for proposals

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### International conference

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### **“The environmental commons: communities, practices and institutions. Historical approaches, France and the French colonial empire, 17th-20th centuries”**

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Paris, 14-15 November 2016

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Organiser: Fabien Locher

Event supported by ANR project [GOVENPRO](#)

**Environmental commons** are forms of organisation by which communities govern their environments and resources via forms of collective ownership: pastures and forests, wetlands and moorland, watercourses and irrigated systems, fields and gardens, fisheries, intertidal zones, material and fuel deposits, etc. These systems are managed by their rights holders and often combine fully common property with collective use rights.

Researchers have long taken an interest in them. The focus has been on the communal lands of European rural communities and the enclosures that have tended to replace them in the modern period (Thompson 1991, Neeson 1993, Vivier 1998). The reason is the importance of a process that is described as being a historical condition for capitalism to flourish. This historical research has achieved major advances for our understanding of environmental commons, of which communal lands are a particular instance. More recently, emphasis has been on the productive and community rationality underpinning the uses of these lands, within a comparative approach (Congost and Santos 2010, Beaur *et al.* 2013).

In the last twenty or so years, a multidisciplinary community has formed internationally for the study of commons as institutions governing tangible and intangible resources. Elinor Ostrom is the leading figure of this movement of economists, anthropologists, political scientists and historians working within an approach heavily influenced by the theoretical frameworks of political science (Ostrom 1990). They have stressed the systems of rules underpinning commons and making them effective and sustainable. When applied to environmental commons, these works disprove the so-called “tragedy of the commons” thought to demonstrate the incompatibility of common ownership and ecological sustainability (Hardin 1968).

This approach has aroused great interest among historians, who have increasingly adopted it in analysing environmental commons and their long-term trajectories (De Moor 2015). It is an important contribution to historical analysis in two ways. First, by shifting focus towards the actual functioning of commons: their rules for use, monitoring and sanction, and their links to the physical and ecological reality of environments. Here it is the permanence rather than the dissolution of commons that is the core of the investigation. Second, by promoting a general theoretical framework allowing spatial and temporal comparisons on a large scale.

We now benefit from all these contributions. But recent developments have also raised a number of analytical limitations that restrict our historical understanding of environmental commons. First, focusing on commons' internal anatomy sometimes leads to underestimate the role that complex interactions between communities, states, political and commercial actors plays in their emergence, development and functioning. Second, the insistence on the success, durability and effectiveness of commons has created a situation in which little is known, except for the enclosures, of cases of dislocation, failure or loss of influence of these forms of collective organisation. Third, analysis are sometimes underpinned by a romantic vision of the commons that overestimates the extent of their social harmony and the ecologically adaptive nature of their ways of operating. Fourth, conversely, there is a lack of empirical studies of the forms of *environmental reflexivity* that may have shaped their resource governance practices. In other words, the commoners' vision of the economy of nature, the impact of humans on ecosystems, the temporal dynamics of socio-ecological interactions.

**This conference, devoted to the history of environmental commons in France and its colonial empire from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has three main objectives.**

1. Bring together and enable dialogue between researchers working on this topic, internationally, using a variety of analytical frameworks. Research by historians of rural, economic, political and environmental history; legal historians; anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists engaged in the historical study of their subjects.
2. Seek to identify and overcome the analytical limitations of our historical understanding of environmental commons, as provisionally and non-exhaustively sketched out above.
3. Contribute to the development of the emerging research (e.g., Greer 2012) on the historical trajectories of the commons in France's colonial empire.

This choice of a wide but circumscribed field for analysis (France and its colonial empire) reflects our desire to (1) privilege above structural comparisons an analysis of the actual historical processes by which environmental commons developed against a background increasingly marked in Metropolitan France by the action of central government; (2) extend our knowledge of the history of these social forms in the various contexts of the French Empire, paying particular attention to : (1) circulation between these contexts and between them and Metropolitan France (2) both to the colonists' commons ***and to indigenous commons under colonialism.***

Proposals are welcome that develop comparative and/or connected historical approaches on this basis.

**Issues addressed in the conference will include *but are not confined to*—**

\* ***Commons as institutions:*** structure and development of the groups of rights holders; rules for use, monitoring and sanction; institutional dynamics; the oral and written in the operation of the commons

\****Commons and environment:*** socio-ecological adaptation and co-evolution; sustainable and destructive use of resources; environmental reflexivity and commons; commons

and awareness/perception of time-scales; ecological effects of enclosures; “conservation enclosures”

**\*Commons and Empire:** commons of the colonizers and/or colonised (origin; dislocation; adaptation; interaction; hybridisation); French law, Colonial law and non-Western law (e.g., Islamic law) in their relations with the commons

**\*Commons and risks:** commons as mechanisms for mitigating ecological, social and economic risks; or indeed as factors of vulnerability

**\*Commons and poverty:** survival mechanisms, criteria of justice, moral economy and popular protest

**\*Commons and (in)equalities:** internal stratification and reduction/expansion of the groups of rights holders; resource grabbing; those excluded from the commons and the criteria for their exclusion (poor, foreign, aboriginal, racial categorization)

**\*Commons and violence:** commons as mechanisms for minimising intra- and inter-community conflict and violence; violence in the operation of the commons; violence and resistance to enclosures

**\*Commons and knowledge:** historical theories, doctrines and arguments concerning commons

**\*Commons and law:** commons in courts; commons as jurisdictions; legal knowledge, theories and techniques concerning commons

**\*Commons and states:** interactions, co-evolution; direct or indirect government supervision; enclosures; commons and taxation; protection by central governments and central government control *via* commons

**\*Commons and municipal government:** comparative history

**\*Commons and markets:** producing for oneself, producing for the market; commons, monetization and market *ethos*

**\*Interaction between commons:** borders; cooperation; conflict; circulation of people, resources, production and ways of operating

**\*Commons and non-written sources:** oral history; visual history; archaeological sources

**The conference will be held on 14 and 15 November 2016 at EHESS, 190-198 Avenue de France, 75013 Paris, France.**

Working languages will be English and French, each speaker in his/her own language.

**Proposed papers (in French or English) should be submitted by email to [conference.history.common@gmail.com](mailto:conference.history.common@gmail.com) by 1 July 2016 at the latest.**

Each proposal must include the speaker's last name, first name and email address; a curriculum vitae of no more than one side of A4; a title and proposed text of no more than 600 words. Selected speakers will have their travel and accommodation costs covered.

Replies to proposals will be sent out by 15 July 2016.

## References

- Béaur G. et al. (13) (dir), *Property Rights, Land Markets and Economic Growth in the European Countryside (13<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> Centuries)*, Brepols, 2013
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- De Moor T. (05), *The Dilemma of the Commoners: Understanding the Use of Common Pool Resources in Long-Term Perspective*, Cambridge UP, 2005
- Greer A. (12), « Commons and Enclosure in the Colonization of North America », *American Historical Review*, 117, 2012, pp. 365-86
- Hardin G. (68), « The Tragedy of the Commons », *Science*, 162, 1968, pp. 1243-1248
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