

Tragedy of the Urban Commons

Public Lecture by Professor Chris Webster

30 March 2010 (Tuesday), 6:30 pm - 7:45 pm
Ground Floor, Room 07, Main Building
The University of Hong Kong

Chris Webster is Professor of Urban Planning and Development at Cardiff University. He is Head of the School of City and Regional Planning, one of the Europe's largest planning schools. He has degrees in urban planning, computer science, economics and economic geography and is a leading urban theorist, writing and speaking about how cities develop at the boundary of market and government order. He has published over 150 scholarly papers on the idea of spontaneous urban order. Recent books include Webster and Lai (2003) Property Rights, Planning and Markets, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar; Glasze, Webster and Frantz, (2006) Private Cities, London, Routledge; and Wu, Webster, He and Liu, (2010) Urban Poverty in China, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar. Recent funded research includes two UK government funded project on urban property rights and poverty in Chinese cities. He is co-editor of the journal Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design.



“Cities exist because of the benefits of living and working together. If there were no economies of scale in human co-location, the world's population would be spread out evenly across the habitable parts of the globe. Like the honey-pot pasture lands of arid rural regions, however, a tragedy plays out as people, firms and governments cluster together and consume in the present, the scarce urban resources that it would be in all their interest to conserve for later. In this talk, Professor Webster paradoxically identifies two types of tragedy of the urban commons: over fragmentation of land and under-fragmentation. On the one hand, cities are becoming too densely populated, reducing the quantity of private and public space per person. On the other hand, the residual open spaces that fill the gaps between private spaces typically suffer the classical over-consumption and degradation of the open commons. All the more so in the crowded and fiscally challenged cities of the developing world. These issues are examined through the lens of property rights theory and a counter-intuitive conclusion is drawn that parallels another familiar idea in narratives about rural commons: enclosure. There are strong a priori reasons for believing that institutional enclosure of urban public goods such as open spaces and other shared neighbourhoods facilities can reduce both types of tragedy of the urban commons. Assigning clearer property rights over shared facilities through contractualising their supply can make dense cities more sustainable. China, with its legacy of micro-territorial governance may well be leading the way in this fundamental shift in way cities are organised.”

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