

The Socio-Economics of Property

Amitai Etzioni

*Department of Sociology, 714H Gelman Library, 2130 H Street, NW
George Washington University, Washington, DC*

It is suggested that in future work it will be useful to recognize that property exists on two levels: symbolic and real. The concept of scarcity is one important area for examination. Art-like property that can be enjoyed by many people at one time could have the potential to reduce conflict over property. Other questions for future research are noted.

There are those who see property as an attribute of the mind. These scholars argue that the notion that one has control over a particular object is not inherent to the object but is derived from one's attitudes, validated by other people, and supported by one's culture. By looking at a piece of land, a truck or an oil well per se, we typically cannot discern whether the owner is a person, a community, a state; whether it is a poor or a rich person; a legal or illegitimate owner. Instead, a study of symbolic products such as bills of sale or notes in public registries, determine ownership. Those in turn reflect the social philosophy of the particular society. Some societies officially recognize little or no private property (early kibbutzim). Some assume all property to be that of the state which then allows citizens (and often only citizens, not foreigners) to lease the objects, but not to own them outright. Still other societies treat any limitation of private property as an intrusion on individual rights. Property is, thus, said to be very much a matter of orientation rather than of material objects, and must be studied as such. Many papers in this volume are dedicated to advancing this important view of property. Some, by implication, assume that this is all there is.

I suggest that it is productive for intellectual, policy, and scholarly purposes to recognize that property exists on two levels. There is indeed the symbolic, contextual, or orientation-based level just discussed. There is also, however, another level—property that exists outside minds, values, and symbols. It is the “real” object in which various rights are invested, the subject of the orientation, the item that is being contextualized.

Rudmin, F.W. (Ed.), (1991). To have possessions: A handbook on ownership and property. [Special Issue]. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, Vol. 6, No. 6, 465-468.

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It is true that when we encounter an object we might well not be able to determine who has control over the disposition or yield of the object merely by examining it—that is, we cannot tell whose property the object is. Nevertheless, at the same time we are aware that we face an object that is owned by some party or parties. Even if the object is abandoned, e.g. a burning vessel on the high seas, we can know that someone has rights to it, even if we may not be able to determine who the owner is.

I suggest, hence, that it is most productive to examine property as a dual creation, part attitude part object, part in the mind, part “real.” This is exactly what socio-economics attempts to achieve, by drawing on the one hand on the work of psychologists, anthropologists and sociologists, and on the other hand on that of neo-classical economists (Etzioni, 1986).

A fine place to launch this kind of analysis would be the examination of scarcity which marks most if not all properties. On the one hand, scarcity exists because property is part “real” object. It cannot be had by party A *and* by Party B unless they split the property rights. In effect, this means that A owns a piece of it and B owns the other piece of it, but neither owns one and the same item. This exclusionary rule applies only to objects; symbols can be had by millions and still be available to many others. This is evident in those exceptional properties that are mainly symbolic and whose objective layer is rather thin and relatively insignificant, e.g. most works of art (fiction, music, but not paintings). The main value of these properties lies in their symbolic arrangements, not in their object-based carriers. Thus, Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony can be had on cheap pieces of plastic or tapes that people own, but it can be copied again and again, and had by many millions of people, without the owners of a disk or cassette being robbed or otherwise deprived of their property rights. The fact that B enjoys the Ninth Symphony does not diminish A’s consumption of it. This does not hold for most objects—barrels of oil, steel mills, ocean liners, and so on—which can be had only by some to the exclusion of all others. Thus, scarcity highlights the object level of most properties.

Scarcity also accounts for contentiousness. The fact that most properties cannot be made available to all who seek control over them, desire their yield, or wish to bask in the glory of having acquired them, accounts for the complex social arrangements all societies have to determine access to property. The image of a world of abundance in which all have everything that is desired is a mirage that highlights both conditions people cannot approximate and the scarcity they must accommodate and manage.

Theoretically one can significantly reduce the amount of interpersonal and societal contentiousness by shifting the cultural focus from

property at large to art-like property. If more people were more invested in music, novels, poetry, and other works that can be readily copied, there would be less strife over most objects that cannot be so treated. However, for reasons that are far from evident there seem to be sharp limits to the ability to form cultures and orientations that lean heavily in the "art" direction. One might speculate, until studies are conducted, that non-exclusive property does not satisfy the need of identity and the demand for power, and provides neither for self-esteem nor prestige. Homer in a \$2.29 used paperback copy may give just as much inner satisfaction as Homer in a leather-bound early edition. But only the latter—a work of art turned exclusionary—answers some human needs, the needs fulfilled by acquisition of select beach properties, prestigious automobiles, and so on.

In making societal arrangements to cope with the ever present danger of conflict over property rights, the distinction between private and public or communal (that is, shared property is particularly significant. When I ask Americans which is a more serious crime: stealing the car of a neighbor, a corporation, or the government, they typically rank the government car last, i.e. as commanding less standing than that of the others. They treat the government as if it were that of a foreign occupying force rather than an instrument of the community. When I ask the same question in more communitarian countries, from Canada to Sweden and Norway, there is more concern for the government property. Citizens in these countries assume that whatever belongs to the government belongs in part to all members of the community and that the government is entrusted to look out for the common good and the shared future. It should be noted though, that when I phrase the question differently and ask Americans about community property rather than government property, they are more inclined to be concerned. This is one of the least explored areas in this vast subject. We know quite a bit about the legal aspects of private versus public control of property, and the consequences of excessive government control of property. We know much less about people's sensibilities and moral commitments to division of property rights between themselves, other private citizens and the communities that they share. Do they prefer a privately owned toll-road to one owned by their municipality? A privately owned hospital over a publicly owned one? Would they favor privatizing prisons, fire departments and police forces? We also know even less about how people's initial predispositions, which are often influenced by ideology and persuasion, change once they experience a change in ownership of various institutions.

The fact that we are left with these questions should not be held against this rich volume. On the contrary, like much good work it deals with some matters and points to the need to study many others.

REFERENCE

- Etzioni, A. (1986). Socio-economics: A proposal for a new interdisciplinary field.
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