What We Talk About When We Talk About Property Rights - A Response to Carol M. Rose’s ‘Property as the Keystone Right?’

J. Peter Byrne
Georgetown University Law Center, byrne@law.georgetown.edu

This paper can be downloaded free of charge from:
https://scholarship.law.georgetown.edu/facpub/1571

J. Peter Byrne, What We Talk About When We Talk About Property Rights - A Response to Carol M. Rose’s ‘Property as the Keystone Right?’, 71 Notre Dame L. Rev. 1049 (1996)

This open-access article is brought to you by the Georgetown Law Library. Posted with permission of the author. Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.law.georgetown.edu/facpub

Part of the Property Law and Real Estate Commons
RESPONSES

Property: A Special Right

Laura S. Underkuffer-Freund*

I. INTRODUCTION

In *Property as the Keystone Right?*, Professor Carol Rose examines the claim that the protection of property is an important—indeed, the most important—right conferred by our constitutional order. Although the equality of property rights with other constitutionally protected rights occasionally has been questioned, such instances are far outweighed by instances of rhetorical insistence upon the bedrock nature of individual property rights for our constitutional and democratic order. With the recent collapse of statist economies in other parts of the world, and the attempted transformation of those economies into market-driven, capitalist systems, the American idea of constitutional protection of individual property rights has been exported along with other ideas believed to be fundamental to the creation and maintenance of a liberal democratic order. As one prominent commentator recently wrote, "the right kind of constitution could play an important role in fueling economic development and democratic reform; indeed, under current conditions, it may be indispensable to them." Central to that "right kind of constitution" is the protection of property rights, which "creates the kind of security that is indispensable to genuine citizenship in a democracy."

In her article, Professor Rose questions whether property deserves this exalted place in our constitutional ordering. She examines, with great facility and biting analysis, all of the reasons traditionally advanced for the entrenched place of constitutional protection for individual property rights. The arguments that she examines are familiar, and until we read her critiques they seem obviously—perhaps even tautologically—true. The protection of property is special—the protection of property is "the keystone right"—because it makes individuals independent and, thus, capable of self-government. It provides individual security and, in the process, diffuses political power. It creates and protects material wealth and prosperity, necessary preconditions for social civility, social stability, and the maintenance of democratic governance.

* Professor, Duke University School of Law.
1 Carol M. Rose, *Property as the Keystone Right?,* 71 Notre Dame L. Rev. 929 (1996).
2 Id. at 933.
4 See Rose, *supra* note 1, at 330-33.
6 Id. at 908.
7 See Rose, *supra* note 1 passim.
Professor Rose questions whether any of these arguments truly establishes the right to property as "not simply important but rather the most important right in a liberal constitutional order." Upon examination, many of these arguments are found to contain internal, logical flaws. In addition, the claim that property has primacy because it is foundational, or the "guardian of every other right," fails to explain other constitutional phenomena, such as our apparent need to independently insulate (by constitutional guarantee) other important individual rights from majoritarian trampling. If the security of property accomplishes so much—if it creates wealth, diffuses political power, and so on—why, after property is secured, don't we trust the majoritarian political process to determine the rest?

In the end, Professor Rose concludes that property may have special importance, but in a way not usually argued. Property's specialness may lie in its value as an educative institution. What it takes to maintain a property regime—qualities of cooperation, attentiveness to others, responsibility, and self-reliance—is also what it takes to maintain self-government.

Professor Rose's insight is intriguing. We rarely recognize the human qualities involved in maintaining property regimes, let alone their influence on other social or political behavior. The idea that the importance of property rights in our constitutional scheme may be rooted in the educative function of property regimes is an interesting and novel proposition.

In this essay, I shall agree that the protection of property is a special right. I shall disagree, however, with the conventional conclusion that because of its special nature, property is entitled to particularly rigorous protection. Rather, I shall argue that although the common idea of property may, by its nature, be the most absolute of rights, the institution of property must, by its nature, be the most compromised. The special characteristics of property, which I shall identify, demand this result. They demand that property protection be given a far more complex—and contingent—interpretation than other constitutionally protected rights.

II. THE AMERICAN CONSTITUTIONAL IDEA OF PROPERTY

Property has been described as a "man-made institution which creates and maintains certain relations" among people. It is our conclusion that—to some extent and under particular circumstances—an individual or group has a morally, legally, or otherwise grounded claim to protection from the claims or predations of others.

---

8 Id. at 362.
9 Id. at 333-61.
10 Id. at 362.
11 Id. at 363-65.
12 Although Professor Rose does not directly address the question of protection, her view of property regimes as involving cooperation, responsibility, and attentiveness to others seems to be likewise clearly inconsistent with the conventional view of property rights as involving particularly justified claims of individual protection. See id. at 365. See also Carol M. Rose, Environmental Lessons, 27 Loy. L.A. L. Rev. 1023, 1042-43 (1994) (arguing that individual claims to property protection must be evaluated in a broader social, even aesthetic, context).
The fact that property involves protection does not, of course, determine what the particular nature of that protection will be. Any conception of property must involve choices of: the theoretical basis for the particular rights that are called "property"; the space, or conceptual area of field, to which those rights are applied; the degree of protection that those rights, relative to others, are afforded; and whether those rights, once determined, are fixed or changing in time.14 We can, for instance, construct an understanding of property that involves absolute rights to devise or exclude, which may be applied to land, protected equally, and unchanging in time; or an understanding that involves contingent rights15 to transfer or use, which may be applied to land, protected unequally, and changing in time. The kind of protection that property affords will be the direct result of our answers to these questions.

The common idea of property is simple: "property" describes what we have, and that it cannot be forcibly taken from us.16 It describes all of our possessions and entitlements—rightfully held, at this moment—and our right to shield them from predation. It is essentially concerned with our security against others. It is rooted in the "primitive, instinctive cries ... in the playgroup or playground: 'That's not yours; its mine.'"17

When we move from the play group to the constitutional setting, there is little change in the common idea of property that undergirds our claims. The security provided in this context is that of "legally justified possession and . . . expectation."18 Based upon the (perhaps too familiar) image of Lockean entitlements,19 the constitutional protection of property is seen as a classic example of a "negative"20 or "first-generation"21 right: it is our

---


16 See, e.g., Bruce A. Ackerman, Private Property and the Constitution 97-103 (1977) (describing the layperson's "ordinary understanding" of property).

17 Gray, supra note 15, at 159.


19 See John Locke, Second Treatise of Government § 193, in Two Treatises of Government (Peter Laslett ed., 1988) (3d ed. 1698) (property as that which "without a man's own consent . . . cannot be taken from him."). Elsewhere, I have argued that Locke's understanding of property was in fact much more comprehensive than generally believed: it encompassed a broad range of individual rights, liberties, powers, and immunities, exercised within a collective context of support and restraint. See Underkuffler, supra note 15, at 138-41.

20 The common division of rights into "positive" rights (those that require state action) and "negative" rights (those that protect individuals from state action) is generally traced to Isaiah Berlin, Two Concepts of Liberty, in Four Essays on Liberty 118 (1969) (discussing positive and negative liberty).

21 The categorization of constitutional rights into "first-generation rights" (those that refer to traditional liberal civil and political rights), "second-generation rights" (those that refer to social, cultural, and economic rights), and "third-generation rights" (those that refer to rights such as self-determination, peace, development, and a protected environment) seems to be a part of common parlance in just about all of the world's constitutional systems, other than the United States. See Bertus de Villiers, Social and Economic Rights, in Rights and Constitutionalism: The New South African Legal Order 599, 603 (Dawid van Wyk et. al. eds., 1994) [hereinafter
individual protection against the claims of others, in particular, others operating under the mantle of collective power. Property represents and protects the individual’s autonomous sphere, asserted against the state.\textsuperscript{22} It protects what is ours—our possessions, even our liberty—from majoritarian tyranny. As a South African scholar has written, “The US Constitution is a classic example of a property clause cast in . . . [the liberal] mould, providing constitutional protection . . . [with] life, liberty and property as the parameters of personal freedom and individuality.”\textsuperscript{23}

The depth of our commitment to this idea of property is perhaps most evident when we attempt to convince others of its wisdom. In an article addressed to Eastern European post-communism constitution drafters, Professor Cass Sunstein describes the kind of “[t]ight constitutional protection of property rights” that “provide[s] the preconditions for self-governance” and “serves a number of functions indispensable to economic development.”\textsuperscript{24} “A high degree of stability is necessary to allow people to plan their affairs, to reduce the effects of factional or interest group power in government, to promote investment, and to prevent the political process from breaking down by attempting to resolve enormous, emotionally laden issues about who is entitled to what.”\textsuperscript{25} As Professor Sunstein explains:

Without constitutional protection of property rights, there will be continuous pressure to adjust distributions of property on an ad hoc basis. When a group of people acquires a good deal of money, it will be tempting to tax them heavily. When another group verges on bankruptcy, there will be a temptation to subsidize them. After the fact, these steps may seem fair or even necessary; but if everyone knows that government might respond in this way, there will be a powerful deterrent to the development of a market economy. No citizen—and no international or domestic investor—can be secure of his immunity from the state.

. . . If property rights are insecure—if they are subject to continuous governmental examination—the system will approach equivalence to one in which there are no such rights at all.\textsuperscript{26}

Furthermore, we can understand what this vision is by establishing what it is not. To create appropriate protection, constitution-makers must avoid “setting out very general social aspirations, or . . . imposing positive duties on government”—common features of the constitutions of prior communist regimes.\textsuperscript{27} Aspirations and positive rights are “vaguely defined,
simultaneously involve the interests of numerous people, and depend for their existence on the active management of government institutions.”

Because of their uncertain and largely unenforceable nature, the inclusion of aspirations and duties “tends to weaken the understanding that the document creates protected rights, with real meaning, against the state.” Such “unenforceable rights will in turn tend to destroy the negative rights—freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and so forth—that might otherwise be genuine ones.” They will also muddle the lines between private and public spheres. A constitution, with its prohibitions upon governmental (not private) action, is intended to emphasize and entrench the foundational principle that private actions must be distinguished from, and protected from, public ones.

The idea that the American constitutional scheme involves the protection of negative rights alone has been echoed by many others. Judge Richard Posner, for instance, has argued that the American Constitution “is a charter of negative rather than positive liberties. The men who wrote the Bill of Rights were not concerned that government might do too little for the people but that it might do too much to them.”

This picture of our constitutional scheme might seem to be a bit of an overly simplified or caricatured one. We can dispute it around the edges: constitutional rights, including property rights, are rarely as protected in practice as they are in theory, and even purely negative, “private” rights require state action for enforcement. Furthermore, as Professor Sunstein readily acknowledges, a system of liberal constitutional rights should be “accompanied by other [presumably legislative] social strategies,” and in the West, where regimes of negative rights are well entrenched, “more emphasis on duties [might well] be a good idea.”

There is little doubt, however, that this portrayal of the core of the American constitutional idea of rights—and its protection of property—is

---

28 Id.
29 Id. at 921.
30 Id. at 919-20.
31 Id. at 921-22.
32 Jackson v. City of Joliet, 715 F.2d 1200, 1203-24 (7th Cir. 1983). Proposals to interpret the Fourteenth Amendment “to guarantee the provision of basic services such as education, poor relief, and . . . police protection” would “turn the clause on its head. It would change it from a protection against coercion by state government to a command that the state use its taxing power to coerce some of its citizens to provide services to others.” Id.
33 See Underkuffer-Freund, supra note 14, at 182-90 (discussing the “operative” model of property used in Supreme Court jurisprudence).
34 See Sunstein, supra note 5, at 918-19 (“It is, of course, misleading to think of these as genuinely negative rights. They depend for their existence on governmental institutions willing to recognize, create, and protect them.”).
35 Id. at 917. Such protections should, however, “be created at the level of ordinary legislation, and subject to democratic discussion, rather than placed in the foundational document.” Id. at 920.

Properly understood, the defense of property rights is a defense of programs of redistribution as well. These programs are not designed to produce economic equality—a truly disastrous goal—but instead to bring about at least rough equality of opportunity and, even more important, freedom from desperate conditions, or from circumstances that impede basic human functioning.

Id. at 917 (footnote omitted).
36 Id. at 921; see also id. at 920.
a true one. Although we might agree that, in practice, previous entitlements must occasionally yield to the public good, or what we believed to be entitlements are (after examination) in fact not so, the idea of property as a right, as a bulwark, protecting our entitlements, is deeply rooted in the American soul. By protecting property rights, we believe that we can protect free enterprise, political liberty, and the general right to freedom from tyrannical state power.

III. Property: A Special Right

Property, then, seems much like other individual, "negative" constitutional rights. It defines certain individual interests, deemed necessary for individual security, and protects them from the threat of state coercive power. In this identity and function it is no different from freedom of speech, freedom of religion, due process of law, or other rights.

Property is, of course, both idea and institution: it is both the general idea or concept of property protection, and the separate question of protection afforded to particular persons and their objects of property. When we speak of the "constitutional protection of property," we tend to slur these together. We tend to assume that "property protection," in the constitutional sense, means the idea of property protection as reflected in existing property arrangements.

This dual nature does not, however, distinguish the right to property protection from other constitutional rights. All rights operate in this way. All are ideas—how people envision them—and also are how, as political and social institutions, they are implemented to resolve particular, conflicting claims. Indeed, we might say, a constitution is a pragmatic document: it deals with real people and real protections. The idea of rights protection, apart from its institutional aspects, has little significance. It is only the general or abstract right, as implemented, that has meaning in this context. The fact that the idea of property may be compromised, when implemented, does not distinguish property from other rights. Each constitutionally recognized right is comprised of idea and institution; each is compromised when implemented in particular, institutional form.

However, here we must pause. Is the institution of property, by its fundamental nature, the same as the institutions that embody other rights? In fact, we find that the institution of property is different. Property involves allocation; with regard to property, the giving to one person necessarily denies or takes from another. If we award an individual the right to extract minerals, cut trees, or control land, that same right, and others that it implicates, are necessarily denied to others. Property rights are allocative because they give to some what cannot be given to all: they allocate rights to particular individuals in finite, non-sharable resources.

Indeed, in this characteristic property rights are very different from other rights. When we speak of freedom of conscience, freedom of speech,
due process of law, and so on, we speak, in a sense, of constitutional “public
goods.” There is no additional cost necessarily entailed, to society or to
other individuals, if another person believes freely, or speaks freely, or is
afforded the protection of the laws. The extension and protection of these
rights is, indeed, very “cheap” in societal terms: upon granting one

The protection of property, however, is (in the main) quite different.
It deals with goods of a reverse, or “private” kind. If the enjoyment of a
good by one person is protected, then the enjoyment of that same good by others is denied. The extension of property protection to
one person necessarily and inevitably denies the same right to others.

The constitutional right to property is different—it is special—not because it is
necessarily more fundamental to political liberty, democratic governance,
or other goals, but because it is, by its very nature, the only right that allo-
cates finite, private goods to some and—at the same time—necessarily de-
nies those goods to others.

Property rights are also special because they alone deal with rights
that—at their most basic level—are necessary for the survival of life itself.
Much has been written about what seems to be the deep, primeval need of
living beings to appropriate. As one psychologist has observed, even ani-
mals recognize possessory claims, and in human beings such ideas must be
considered an innate tendency.

One could argue that the addition of rights-holders always involves some additional cost,
in the form of additional societal resources necessary for additional protection. In this limited
sense, of course, all rights recognized by law are “positive” rights which impose burdens upon
others for their protection. See supra text accompanying note 34.

There may, of course, be situations in which the exercise of the right to speak by one
person will infringe another person’s claimed right to silence, or to live in a particular kind of
supportive community—rights sometimes claimed to be part of free speech rights. See, e.g., Alon
Harel, The Boundaries of Justifiable Tolerance: A Liberal Perspective, in TOLERATION: AN ELUSIVE
VIRTUE passim (David Heyd ed., 1996) (discussing situations in which intolerance of the speech or
actions of others is considered by a rights-holder to be a necessary and justified part of the exer-
cise and preservation of her free speech rights). Such “environmental” claims have, however,
rarely been accorded constitutional recognition. In addition, even though the right to free
speech might be envisioned, under some circumstances, to include such claims, there is no neces-
sary and inevitable correlation between the granting of rights to free speech to some and the in-
fringement of the same rights of others.

Cf. Guido Calabresi & A. Douglas Malamed, Property Rules, Liability Rules, and Inalienability:
One View of the Cathedral, 85 Harv. L. Rev. 1089, 1105-10 (1972) (when “property rules” are ap-
plicated to claims of conflicting entitlements, one claim is entirely vindicated, and the other claim is
entirely denied). This preclusive nature of property rules “lies at the core of the notions of
‘ownership’ and ‘property.’” Louis Kaplow & Steven Shavell, Property Rules Versus Liability Rules:

See Gray, supra note 15, at 157-59, 158 n.2 (citing studies).

cites the following observations by James Baldwin:
tion—without some minimal taking of the resources necessary to sustain life—we will die.

In our society of relative affluence, this connection between possessory claims and the essential conditions for survival may well (at least for the majority) be forgotten. But in the many societies where millions struggle for survival on a daily basis, it is not. Any scheme for the super-majoritarian protection of the appropriations by some persons means, correspondingly, the denial of the appropriation of the same goods, resources, and essentials of life by others. In its struggle to interpret the fundamental guarantees of the Indian Constitution, the Indian Supreme Court stated that “[w]e think that the right to life includes the right to live with human dignity and all that goes along with it, namely, the bare necessaries of life such as adequate nutrition, clothing and shelter over the head . . .”45 Recognition of rights to these “bare necessities of life” by some people will, of course, often impinge upon the possessory claims of others; “[but] every act which offends against or impairs human dignity [will] constitute deprivation pro tanto of this right to live and it [will] have to be in accordance with reasonable, fair and just procedure established by law which stands the test of other fundamental rights.”46

Indeed, this “specialness” of property makes it, in a fundamental sense, far more important than other constitutional rights which we so cherish. Freedom of speech, freedom of religion, the assurance of due process of law—all are of little value if the minimal property, necessary for life, is denied. The protection of property in this sense renders it of an a priori nature where human survival and democratic governance are concerned. As a South African commentator has written, “[c]ontemporary experience makes it clear that ‘without at least some modicum of such basic necessities as food, shelter and clothing, the enjoyment of other rights appears highly theoretical.’”47 South Africa, as a developing country, “may find it difficult to convince its millions of squatters and poverty-stricken people that the protection of civil and political rights is of value to them if...
they do not have the material, intellectual, and social ability and circumstances to make use of such rights.\textsuperscript{48}

Here, however, we must pause. It seems that from describing a negative right, or the protection of the individual from collective interference, we have slipped into describing a positive right, or the claim of the individual to certain, bare necessities for survival. Although we might dismiss the latter concern as something really apropos only to developing countries (and, therefore, not to ours), there is a nagging question whether this "positive rights" business has something to do with our recognized (constitutional) right to property protection, as well. Can we dismiss this question so easily? Is this "positive rights connection" just some sort of socialist mumbo jumbo for developing countries, or is it—inevitably—a part of our property schemes, as well?\textsuperscript{5} Does our constitutional right to property, recognized and protected, have some kind of intrinsic link to what we collectively deny—the idea of the imposition of positive individual rights or positive collective duties? Is this another, unwelcome characteristic of the "special right" of property protection?

The distinction between "negative" or first-generation rights, and "positive" or second- or third-generation rights, has been challenged by many in the constitutional context.\textsuperscript{49} Numerous civil and political rights, traditionally deemed "negative" in nature, require positive state action for their exercise. The exercise of political rights or rights to due process requires the creation of a state apparatus, and all negative rights require state expenditures for enforcement. To this limited extent, all rights might be seen as "positive" in nature.\textsuperscript{50}

The right to property protection, however, involves a far more fundamental challenge to our belief that constitutions should not include general social aspirations or impose positive duties upon government. The heart of the objection to the constitutional inclusion of positive rights is the belief that it is necessary to prevent state encroachment upon the rights of individuals, but that it is undesirable to require the state by constitutional fiat (as opposed to later, and changeable, moral or political choice) to acknowledge inequality or to take particular, positive steps toward social or

\textsuperscript{48} De Villiers, \textit{supra} note 21, at 621; \textit{see also} Dion A. Basson, \textit{South Africa's Interim Constitution} at xxvii (1994).

[A] liberal state which is characterised by a representative government which is obliged to recognise the rights and freedoms of individuals . . . is merely one important dimension of the [constitutional state] . . . . The dignity of every person demands that he or she shall not merely be free from oppression, but also free from hunger, free from want and free from fear. [This includes] the right to eat, the right to work, the right to shelter, the right to health and the right to education.

\textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{49} See, e.g., de Villiers, \textit{supra} note 21, at 604.

It is theoretically unsound to distinguish between civil and political rights, on the one hand . . . , and social and economic rights . . . , on the other, on the basis that the former constitute only negative . . . rights, while the latter [require] an active state. There are numerous rights in the category of civil and political rights that also require positive state action, such as the right to a fair trial, the right to vote, the right to legal representation, and so on.

\textit{Id.} (footnote omitted).

\textsuperscript{50} See \textit{supra} text accompanying note 34.
economic goals.\textsuperscript{51} Indeed, the first goal is antithetical, in nature, to the second: it is impossible to protect individual rights—in particular, rights to property holdings—if the state is required, in the same breath, to upset these holdings through "protection" of social or economic rights. Although such holdings will (inevitably) be affected by social and economic legislation, the ideological primacy of the protection of individual property must remain clear. Constitutional power must be reserved for the protection of individuals against collective tyranny. The distinction between rights that confer individual protection and those that mandate state intervention must be maintained.\textsuperscript{52}

However, this characterization—while it may be true of many liberal rights—is not true of the right to property protection. If we consider freedom of speech, freedom of religion, due process of law, or other such rights, it is possible to speak of individual protection without state intervention. Because these rights involve public goods,\textsuperscript{53} which any number of individuals can enjoy without any necessary additional cost to or deprivation of others, we can truly speak of the exercise of rights as protected from the state and existing apart from it. But when we speak of the liberal, "Lockean" character of American constitutional rights—when we speak of them as "individual protectionist," "negative" or "first-generational" in character—we cannot, in truth, include property. For property protection involves private goods;\textsuperscript{54} it is, in its essence, the resolution of conflicting claims. If my right to land is upheld, then your claim to that land is denied. If my right to create pollution, congestion, or erosion is upheld, then your claim to be free of those ills is denied. The state, by protecting the acquisitive rights of one person, necessarily and affirmatively denies the conflicting claims and acquisitive goals of others. Because of the inherently interconnected nature of property claims, the state cannot simply be the "watchman" for this right. It cannot protect without intervening. Property rights are, by nature, positive rights, allocative rights.

We find, in short, that property is a different right. It is special in ways that other liberal constitutional rights are not. It involves, at its most basic level, the protection of acquisitive rights—to food, clothing, shelter—that are a priori to all other rights and necessary for life itself. It is, in addition, inherently allocative and state-interventionist in nature. If one person's "right to property" is protected, another's claim, to that same property, is denied.

What do these differences mean in a constitutional context? Is there any special message here for our approach toward constitutional protection of individual property rights?

IV. THE MEANING OF DIFFERENCE

In her article, Professor Rose examines arguments that attempt to establish that property rights are the most important rights in a liberal consti-

\textsuperscript{51} See de Villiers, supra note 21, at 602 (discussing the common "Lockean" constitutional paradigm).

\textsuperscript{52} See supra text accompanying notes 31-32.

\textsuperscript{53} See supra text accompanying notes 39-41.

\textsuperscript{54} See supra text accompanying note 42.
tutional order.\footnote{See Rose, supra note 1, at 333.} Those arguments carry an obvious corollary: that with "most important" status comes "most protected" status, as well.\footnote{See id. at 362.} If private property makes individuals independent and, thus, capable of self-government; if it diffuses political power; if it creates material wealth and prosperity, necessary preconditions for social civility, stability, and the maintenance of democratic governance\footnote{See id. at 333-61.}; then the strongest protection of those rights, in our foundational document, would obviously seem to be justified.

We have found, however, that property as a right is not so simple. Although individual property holdings might serve all of these functions, the underlying idea of the constitutional protection of liberal, negative rights—that the state, as neutral arbiter, must simply be the guardian of these rights—is not possible for property. Property, we found, is a special right. With freedom of speech, freedom of religion, or other such rights, the state can (by and large) do nothing and all can enjoy. It is not so with property. The protection of existing entitlements—the giving to some and the keeping from others—is not a neutral stance. It is a choice—an explicit, collective choice—of who shall enjoy, and who shall not; of who shall survive, and who shall not. With other rights, we seek protection of what we, freely and equally, naturally enjoy; with property, we seek protection of what we have, to the derogation, exclusion, and often injury of others. When a right involves goods critical to life—and when the state's actions, of necessity, allocate those goods to some and keep them from others—this right must be questioned. This nature of property—this "specialness" of property—must make it less protected as a right, not more.

If property is to be less protected, how much less protected should it be? One could, for instance, simply argue that constitutional protection for this right is wrong. By constitutionalizing rights, we attempt to place them beyond the workings of ordinary majoritarian rule. The attempt to place property rights beyond the reach of ordinary democratic power seems to contradict the special need to question, and change, property allocations. It could be argued that property protection—not being, in truth, a negative right, but rather a positive right of state action—is improperly granted constitutional protection; that it should not be placed, by deliberate design, beyond the questionings and revisions of political life and majoritarian control.

Indeed, some modern governmental charters have omitted the protection of property from the list of rights entitled to constitutional protection.\footnote{See, e.g., Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Part I of the Constitution Act, 1982, being Schedule B to the Canada Act 1982 (U.K.), 1982, c.11. For a discussion of the reasons for omission of property from the Canadian Charter, see Alexander Alvaro, Why Property Rights Were Excluded from the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 24 CAN. J. POL. SCI. 309 (1991).} However, this approach—as correct as it may be in other countries—seems scarcely possible in ours. Whatever the institution of property may in fact be, the idea of property is extremely powerful in our lives. As compromised as the institution of property may be, the idea of property remains strong and defiant. What is property, if not security?
What is property, if not protection from “contingencies” that justify takings by others? Property, we find, is the most paradoxical of rights: for just as it is that which must (as an institutional matter) be most questioned, it is also that which (as an abstract idea) is most fundamental to personal feelings of security and control. To remove the protection of property from the list of foundational constitutional rights is unthinkable to us—its idea, its security, is far too deeply rooted.

We must, instead, address what this right, in the constitutional context, should mean. All traditional (liberal) constitutional rights involve the clash between the absoluteness of their statements, as ideas, and the compromises of the institutions which implement them. In this simple characteristic, the right to property protection is certainly not unique. The protection of property is, however—by virtue of its special characteristics—the most paradoxical and extreme of these. It is the idea whose absoluteness we cherish most deeply. It is also the institution which, by reason of the rights that it involves, must be the most questioned and the least protected.

The specialness of property demands that we adopt a more complex and, thus, more meaningful approach to the constitutional interpretation of this right. I suggest two important principles:

1. Property must be explicitly recognized as both idea and institution; and the role of both idea and institution must be acknowledged in the interpretation of this right.

Property is both idea and institution; it is both how people envision it—"that is, what concept[ion] they have of it"—and how it is implemented, as a political and social institution, to resolve particular conflicts in society. Property, as an American constitutional idea, is a bulwark surrounding the sphere of individual liberty. It is an absolute and inalienable right, which provides a bedrock of protection. Property, as an institution is, of course, wholly (and necessarily) different. It is the resolution of conflicting claims and conflicting desires for acquisition. In this process, some will win and others will lose; it is not possible, by property’s inherent nature, to protect the claims and security of all.

Explicit recognition of this dual nature of property would accomplish several important goals. First, the misconception that we are required, by constitutional fiat, to protect property rights fixed in time and unchanging thereafter would cease. Although the idea of property as protection would continue to inform and constrain our consideration of this right, deviation from this idea in practice would no longer be seen as an “obvious” violation of “unquestioned” property rights. Rather, it would be seen for what it is: the inevitable adjustment and compromise of conflicting claims necessary for the maintenance of the social and political institution of property.

2. Social aspirations and social goals must be seen as inherent parts of the interpretation of this right.

The interpretation of particular constitutional rights in light of social aspirations and social goals is a common approach in many of the world’s constitutional systems. In India, for instance, the Supreme Court has devel-

59 Macpherson, supra note 13, at 1.
60 See supra text accompanying note 37.
oped an interpretative approach which evaluates particular constitutional rights in light of broader goals of social and political justice, substantive equality, and human dignity.61 This has been called a “purposive” approach to constitutional rights.62 In Germany, the Federal Constitutional Court has repeatedly stated that the fundamental individual rights guaranteed by the country’s Basic Law (Grundgesetz) establish an “objective order of values” for the interpretation of rights.63 This “objective value order” has as its center the “free development of the human personality and its dignity in the social community.”64

Our approach to many constitutional rights is, in fact, quite similar. We routinely speak, for instance, of the purposes of free speech, the goals of equal protection, and the justice afforded by due process of law. In so doing, we recognize that these rights, although “individual” in nature, must be understood and informed “not only [by] what kind of society [we have] but also [by] the one which it ought to be.”65

The exemption of property rights from this approach is striking. Although consideration of the “purposes” of free speech is a routine part of our constitutional lexicon, there is no similar routine discussion of the “purposes” of property. Indeed, consideration of social aspirations or goals seems to be distinctly inconsistent with our view of this right. The purpose of property is protection from the state; how, then, can collective aspirations or collective goals be a part of the interpretation of this right?

Indeed, it is precisely because we believe in the primacy of the idea of property protection that we have resisted the practice—common in other Western constitutional systems—of including social and economic rights in

---


62 Davis et al., supra note 61, at 63. The adoption of this approach has been vigorously advocated for interpretative questions under the new South African Constitution. Commentators have urged “a purposive approach [under] which the adjudicating court attempts to develop a theory as to the nature of the fundamental principles contained in a Bill of Rights, which in turn makes the most sense of the purpose of a Bill of Rights within the context of a society proclaiming democratic aspirations.” Id. at 123; see also DU PLESSIS & CORDE'r, supra note 21, at 62.

63 See 7 BVerfGE 198, 205 (1958). Property rights are, for instance, to be interpreted in a manner which balances individual and social interests, with the common good as the basic, referential, and only limiting principle. See BVerfG, July 14, 1981, JZ 1981, 828, 829; 52 BVerfGE 1, 29 (1979); 25 BVerfGE 112, 118 (1969); see also van der Walt, supra note 23, at 471.

64 7 BVerfGE 198, 205 (1958). The core of German constitutionalism has been described in the following terms:

The Basic Law . . . reflects a conscious ordering of individual freedoms and public interests. It resounds with the language of human freedom, but a freedom restrained by certain political values, community norms, and ethical principles. Its image of man is of a person rooted in and defined by a certain kind of human community. Yet in the German constitutionalist view the person is also a transcendent being far more important than any collectivity. Thus, there is a sense in which the Basic Law is both contractarian and communitarian [in nature].


65 Davis et al., supra note 61, at 3.
our foundational document. The purpose of the Constitution, in the words of Justice Rehnquist, is "to protect the people from the State, not to ensure that the State protect[s] them from each other." Consideration of collective goals is best left to the political process.

This conventional view, however, ignores the essential and special nature of this right. Property rights are, by nature, social rights; they embody how we, as a society, have chosen to reward the claims of some people to finite and critical goods, and to deny the claims to the same goods by others. Try as we might to separate this right from choice, conflict, and vexing social questions, it cannot be done. To say that what should be done cannot be considered, is to say that what we have done and will do must be unthinking, ignorant, and blind. Why do we reward this claim, and not that one? What is our purpose in protecting the acquisitive activities of one person and denying protection for those of another? To deny the relevance of such questions to the interpretation of this right is to treat the most contextualized right without mention of context, the most conflicted right without mention of conflict.

André van der Walt has argued that the new South African Constitution "should provide basic protection for private property rights within a theoretical and constitutional framework which incorporates both individual and social interests." For instance, land "is a special, vital, and limited resource, the use and exploitation of which have serious social implications for all." "[S]ocial, environmental, physical, and other" factors must shape the fundamental nature of all constitutionally protected rights. The "outdated perception of property as an exclusive and unlimited private right" which the state should not touch must be rejected.

Property rights are not, in fact, private interests which the state neutrally abides. Property rights are collective, enforced, even violent decisions about who shall enjoy the privileges and resources of this society. Questions about the kind of society that we are, and the kind of society that we wish to become, must be inherent parts of the interpretation of this right.

66 These include the right to free primary education (Constitution of Ireland); the right to work and protection of workers (Constitution of the Netherlands and Constitution of Greece); the right to health services (Constitution of Greece and Constitution of Portugal); and the right to protection of the environment (Constitution of Greece). De Villiers, supra note 21, at 613.
68 Id.
69 As Joseph Singer has written:

   If 'property is a set of social relations among human beings,' the legal definition of those relations confers—or withholds—power over others. The grant of a property right to one person leaves others vulnerable to the will of the owner. Conversely, the refusal to grant a property right leaves the claimant vulnerable to the will of others . . . .

Joseph William Singer, Sovereignty and Property, 86 Nw. U. L. Rev. 1, 41(1991)(quoting Felix S. Cohen, Dialogue on Private Property, 9 Rutgers L. Rev. 357, 365 (1954)); see also Michelman, supra note 18, at 1395 ("[P]rivate power is power no less constituted by public law than is governmental power itself, specifically, if ironically, the very law that secures private property against encroachment.").
70 Van der Walt, supra note 23, at 489.
71 Id.
72 Id.
73 Id.
V. Conclusion

The traditional reasons advanced in support of the constitutional protection of property rights are familiar. The protection of property, it is argued, facilitates the accumulation of wealth and the achievement of prosperity. Individual citizens, who share in this wealth, achieve material—and political—security and independence. All of these are, in turn, necessary preconditions for social civility, social stability, and the maintenance of democratic governance.

As Professor Rose concludes, all of these arguments about property's functions are undoubtedly (at least to some extent) true. Property is, indeed, "special" in its performance of these functions. However, it is special in other ways as well. By involving critical, finite, and unshareable resources, property rights are of both individual and collective importance. Furthermore, they are, by nature, positive rights, allocative rights. The state, by protecting the property rights of one person, necessarily denies those of others. The classical liberal model of individual rights—where the state is "hands off" and all can enjoy—simply does not, and cannot, describe this right.

The idea of absolute individual property protection and the security that it brings has pervasive and enduring power in our lives. To deny that human acquisitive desires exist would be as futile as to deny the dog his bone. However, this absolute, unyielding idea of property—as vital as it is—must not solely govern our understanding of this right. We all must care about who shall eat and who shall not. We all must care about what our landscape will be. Social needs, goals, and aspirations must be integral parts of the contours of this special constitutional right. Learning to understand this truth—by those of us hardened, by rhetoric and belief, into the rigid mold of liberal rights—is perhaps (to borrow from Professor Rose) the deepest, educative task of property.

74 See Rose, supra note 1 passim.
What We Talk About When We Talk About Property Rights—A Response to Carol Rose’s Property as the Keystone Right?

J. Peter Byrne*

Carol Rose offers an exhilarating survey of persistent arguments for property being the "keystone right." She is interested primarily in the historic provenances of the arguments and their affinities with contemporary concerns about property rights in both recently communist and advanced capitalist states. Professor Rose does not so much critique each argument as ponder its attractiveness, giving some objections to each and noting the surprising twists each argument may take. All this is quite engrossing, and the reader comes away with an enhanced sense that when we talk about property rights, we talk about basic questions of political value and constitutional ordering.

But fancy property talk may glitter at such an altitude of rhetorical abstraction that an anxious reader may long for precise definition and more plodding elaboration. Professor Rose never specifies what she means by a property "right." In some places she refers to property as a constitutional right, but elsewhere she seems to focus more generally on how common law or private law rights support a free market economy and political liberty. Although the latter proposition hardly seems controversial after the fall of Soviet communism, Professor Rose illuminates the connections between private rights and liberty, as well as the paradoxes of the relationship. However, these two issues should not be conflated. While a free market economy requires a usable system of private property, it does not require constitutional property rights exempt from legislative change or regulation.

In this Response, I want to consider what we should require of an argument that purports to show that property should be a constitutional right. First, I distinguish common law property rights from acknowledged constitutional rights, and discuss the treatment of eminent domain under the Takings Clause of the Fifth Amendment. I also contend here that government respect for property constitutes part of the rule of law protected by the Due Process Clause. I then argue that it is very difficult to establish that the Constitution also protects against legislative revisions of property rights, which is the core of the regulatory takings doctrine. My conclusion is that property rights are not constitutional rights.

* Professor of Law, Georgetown University Law Center. I thank Robin West and Mitt Regan for comments on a draft and Megan Carr for her research assistance.

1 Carol M. Rose, Property as the Keystone Right?, 71 Notre Dame L. Rev. 329 (1996).
Property, of course, means that specific people have rights in specific resources that the law will protect against claims or interference by other people. The law sets out the owner's specific rights, their commencement and extent, and the procedures for conveyance. Moreover, the law will support and facilitate the property holdings that it recognizes and sanction those who interfere with them without legal warrant. It is appropriate to speak of these legal entitlements to resources as rights, because they impose correlative legal duties on all entities under the jurisdiction of the law that creates the rights, including the government itself. Property rights are essentially in rem. One may generally praise such a system of private property both for promoting efficient economic development and for giving owners a sphere of autonomous management, even as one simultaneously struggles with external social costs, inequal distribution of wealth, or the moral ambiguity of acquisitiveness.

But private law property rights do not resemble constitutional rights, strong rights, that simple legislation may not rework. The essence of a constitutional right in our system is that a statute passed in substantive contravention of such a right is void, or may be declared so by a court. Such a right guarantees the ability of individuals to take protected action, even when a majority of their fellow citizens, acting through their legislatures, believe, even sensibly, that society would be better off if such behavior would cease. Thus, a state statute outlawing Roman Catholicism would be declared unconstitutional, regardless of the enacting legislature's sincere belief that society would be better off without Catholics. The rights of religious freedom so protected are positive rights, in that they have authoritatively been protected by the First Amendment. They may also be natural rights, in that one may make persuasive arguments that morally a state must not infringe on religious liberty.

In what sense is it coherent to speak of property as a strong right, one receiving or deserving constitutional protection, in the same way that we speak of the free exercise of religion? The Fifth Amendment does require, and arguments of political theory do support, the proposition that when the government appropriates private property it must pay the owner just compensation. Can the just compensation principle provide the basis for a significant constitutional property right? While the Takings Clause does embody a property right, the right is both narrow and thin. (It plays neither an explicit nor significant role in Professor Rose's article.) The compensation right is narrow because it affords protection against a class of government actions, expropriations, that are occasional and would be infrequent even without the right. It is thin because it does not deny the government the power to appropriate, but only conditions the exercise of that power upon the payment of compensation. Other constitutional rights, of course, unconditionally limit the government's power and

---

breaches may be remedied by injunction. Indeed, as others have noticed, it seems more accurate to say that the owner has not so much a property right as a compensation right.

It is exceedingly difficult to move persuasively from the compensation right for expropriations to some broader, coherent property right. One familiar problem is that property is an institution designed to mediate claims among competing claimants (usually private) for resources; constitutional rights, by contrast, such as the free exercise of religion, are intentionally designed to mediate between a private party and the State. The active involvement of the State is necessary to define and enforce property interests among claimants, while the State need not, and in most instances may not, mediate conflicts among private entities concerning constitutional norms. If the Miami Herald refuses to print a story, or a Christian sect splinters, the constitutional norm precludes the State from settling the dispute; but if a landlord evicts a tenant, or one landowner saws a limb off his neighbor’s tree, the rights and duties of the parties are those established by property law and enforceable by the courts. It seems odd to speak of a “private” realm of property beyond the influence of the State, given that the State both defines and enforces the parties’ rights, but some such idea must underlie the claim that property is a constitutional right. As discussed below, proponents of constitutional property rights need to identify a prepolitical, moral basis for a constitutional property right.

If property rights are legal means of allocating interests in resources among private entities, what special requirement does a constitutional right of property place upon the state? One interesting possibility is that the State must permit or provide a functioning system of private property. Such a right to enjoy private property would support many of the values Professor Rose identifies, such as relative prosperity and enhanced autonomy. But it would be hard to find such a general right to private property in the Constitution; unlike other countries’ constitutions, such as the German Basic Law, ours contains no fundamental commitment to maintaining private property. Of course, our Constitution assumes an extensive private realm, and divides government power in order to lessen pressures on private interests, but it relies on the political process and popular sentiment to perpetuate private property. Such reliance has not been in vain: There probably has not been a time in the twentieth century when American public opinion contained a stronger consensus for perpetuation of private property. In any event, recognition of a constitutional duty on the State to promote the system of private property could be construed to impose a duty on the government to support each citizen’s opportunity to acquire property, a proposition perhaps attractive in itself, but not at all what the proponents of property rights have in mind.

6 Principles of federalism highlight this anomaly in constitutional analysis. The Supreme Court has stated repeatedly that property rights are not created by the Federal Constitution but by other positive law, usually state law. See, e.g., Ruckelshaus v. Monsanto Co., 467 U.S. 986, 1001 (1984). Thus, many regulatory takings cases involve federal constitutional review, under vague constitutional standards, of state revisions of state property laws.
In the current property rights debate in the United States, the claim for a broad constitutional property right involves advocacy of a robust regulatory takings doctrine. This judicial gloss on the Takings Clause maintains that the mere regulation of property use, without appropriation, occupation, or use by the government, may require compensation. Although the scope of the protection that this doctrine offers to private property owners is intensely debated, most commentators accept the propriety of subjecting some class of property use regulations to constitutional review. An analogy is drawn between the government appropriating some piece of an owner's property and reducing its value through new regulation of uses.

But an anomaly quickly surfaces. Regulatory takings occur when land use regulation reduces the sphere of landowner's rights for the benefit of other private entities, neighbors or the public generally. Thus, the claim is that the Constitution restrains the very exercise of defining legal interests which is essential to the State's creation or maintenance of property rights. What the owner challenges under the regulatory takings doctrine is not the character or site of the state's undertaking, but the direction of its consequences. All accept that the State must define property rights, but when the shape of property interests is revised, even through established means of lawmaking, those whose interests are reduced may claim compensation.

Thus, it is not private property as a system that the regulatory takings doctrine protects, but rather the current distribution of benefits. For example, many states in recent years have made certain reversionary interests, such as the possibility of reverter, freely alienable, even though they were inalienable at common law. But if experience with such conveyances led a modern state legislature to reverse itself and make the possibility of reverter again inalienable, the holder of such an interest could make a colorable regulatory takings claim. The analysis is similar when new environmental regulations prohibit the owner of land from filling wetlands that she could previously fill: The law that created the owner's right of possession and use now has been revised to exclude a particular use. Both claims sound in regulatory takings, although whether either would be successful would depend on the decision-maker's interpretation of the doctrine. Note that neither claim quarrels with the role of the State in providing the property rule (where else could it come from?), but rather with the fact that revision causes loss to an individual owner.

The structure of a regulatory takings claim differs significantly from a true expropriation claim. Under the explicit constitutional prohibition against uncompensated expropriation, the baseline principle is that the State, as an entity needing resources, must respect private property just as private entities must. Because property rights are in rem, they bind all competitors for resources, including the State. Presumptively, none may

---

7 The goal of safeguarding the existing distribution of benefits is explicit in the work of the most thoughtful advocates of regulatory takings. Richard A. Epstein, Takings: Private Property and the Power of Eminent Domain (1985); see also Robert Nozick, Anarchy, State, and Utopia (1974). But the point has often been lost, sometimes intentionally, in the debate about property rights.


gain access to an owner's resources without her consent. This baseline anti-expropriation principle seems to be a corollary to the fundamental constitutional idea that the State is under law—that it does not enjoy the prerogative of extra-legal power—rather than a specifically directed statement concerning property rights alone. The State may not deprive me of my liberty outside established legal procedures any more than it may private individuals.

The Takings Clause also expands the power of the State to appropriate my property above the baseline: The State may compel an owner to convey his resource so long as the State pays the owner an amount comparable to what a private entity would have paid in a consensual sale of the resource. This special power of government, explicitly confirmed by the Takings Clause, plainly is justified by the concern that the government's acquisition of site-specific resources should not be frustrated by familiar barriers to efficient market exchange, such as the private owner's situational monopoly. But the exceptional power to expropriate upon compensation should not obscure, and might be thought to confirm, the baseline norm that the government is bound by its property rules, just as private parties are bound.

Perhaps it was some appreciation of this baseline norm that led Arthur Lee to call property "the guardian of every other right." Respect for property rules is the canary in the pit, the foremost indicia of a State's willingness to accept that it is bound by law generally. If the State can be trusted to respect my lawful property rights, it can be trusted to respect my life and liberty. This, of course, is the central meaning of the Due Process Clause: The State cannot invade the private interest of any person except through the pathways of the law. It is my modest suggestion that all Professor Rose's arguments for property being the "keystone right" (except the first, to which I will come) are accounted for by placing respect for property under the broad umbrella of the rule of law which shelters all private interests.

But nothing in the baseline principle that the government is bound by property law supports the regulatory takings doctrine. That government must respect laws does not forbid the revision of laws. And it is the revision of laws shrinking the domain of existing property owners that is the central point of current debate about constitutional property rights. Having clarified the nature of this kind of constitutional property right, I want to address more directly arguments that it does or should exist.

II

This Response is not an appropriate place for extensive argument about the regulatory takings doctrine. My limited purpose is to suggest the implausibility of such a constitutional property right being the "keystone
right.” In the previous section, I argued that this supposed right does not protect property as such, but only the benefits conferred by the existing system of property rules. If my characterization is appropriate, a right against regulatory takings has little to do with the political benefits of private property that Professor Rose describes. However, some theorists have argued for this right on the first ground that Rose identifies: that rights against reduction in the scope of property rights precede, and thus bind, government. Thus, in order to complete my argument that the property rights Rose celebrates and critiques are not constitutional rights, I will contend that arguments for a prepolitical regulatory takings right are unpersuasive.

It is understandable why proponents of a constitutional property right would want to claim that a prepolitical entitlement justifies it. First, the positive case for the legitimacy of a right against regulatory takings is extremely weak. The text of the Takings Clause, the history of its adoption, the first 135 years of judicial interpretation, and modern regulatory takings decisions neither establish coherent doctrine or identify an appealing moral basis for such a right. I have made this legal argument elsewhere and will not pursue it here.\textsuperscript{12}

Second, as Professor Rose points out, standard utilitarian arguments for property rights justify reconfiguration of entitlement whenever net social benefits can be achieved by doing so. While utilitarian concerns direct decisionmakers to weigh the costs of transition from one property rule to another, including the cost of discouraging socially beneficial reliance on the stability of property rights generally, they do not counsel either against making beneficial changes or for paying compensation to losers unless doing so retards social welfare. As Bentham insisted, the assessments of when reform will make a people better off as a whole should be conducted by the legislature.\textsuperscript{13}

Proponents will sometimes seek to avoid this conclusion by arguing that defects in the legislative process require constitutional precommitment to compensation for regulatory losses. There are many weaknesses in this claim,\textsuperscript{14} but one is directly relevant here. If losses from new restrictions on property use are presumptively unjust or inefficient because government either is avaricious for aggrandizement or susceptible to the influence of those who are, then the existing rules of permitted uses, which also are the product of a fully human lawmaking process, must also be unjust or inefficient. This is obviously so when the old rule is the product of legislation, as many property rights are. If existing property rules similarly are suspect because of systematic bias or influence, there is no reason to believe that changes in property rules are more likely to harm the public welfare than perpetuation of the old rules, which may, through mistake or corruption, favor the present owner.


\textsuperscript{13} See Rose, \textit{supra} note 1, at 330.

\textsuperscript{14} See Byrne, \textit{supra} note 12, at 125-28.
One response to this problem is to privilege common law rules against legislation, as in *Lucas v. South Carolina Coastal Council*,15 where the Court finds that judge-made nuisance law justifies drastically reducing an owner's use rights but legislation does not. Similarly, Richard Epstein employs an idealized common law as the baseline for constitution property rights.16 But the limitations of judicial lawmaking are so evident, the common law itself changes so dynamically, and so many bad common law rules have been amended beneficially by legislation, that a systematic preference for judge-made law over legislation does not bear scrutiny. Moreover, it ignores the fact, which Professor Rose highlights, that modern private property regimes were introduced into most European states by legislation.17

Faced with these difficulties, proponents of a constitutional property right may be driven to argue that property rights precede government in some binding sense. Professor Rose presents the priority argument as her first argument for property being the keystone right, relating it to the natural rights theory of Locke and to modern studies of informal common property regimes.18 She notes that the persuasiveness of the priority argument, so far as it is an argument about actual experience, is undercut by the fact that modern property law, from the *Allgemeines Landrecht fur die Preussischen Staaten* (1794) to the latest revision of copyright law, has developed largely by statutes in which conscious policy decisions have been made. Many of these statutes displaced long-established laws and customs concerning ownership and trade, and imposed great losses on various segments of the old order. Professor Rose might have extended her insight to include the early common law courts of England which displaced customary and manorial rights with rational rules that confirmed the power of the crown. Thinkers of all stripes often have confused the established order with the natural order.

Given, then, that neither arguments of policy nor of historic practice can establish constitutional use rights, what moral priority should be afforded property rights? Natural rights theorists have tried to provide a moral basis for pre-political property rights that bind the government. Several theorists have offered variations of a social contract theory, beginning with a state of nature in which individuals obtained some moral claim to possess some resources, found their rights insecure, and instituted government for the limited purpose of securing their property. While such a story may serve useful heuristic purposes, it cannot be taken seriously as a basis for modern constitutional claims.

First, the arguments fall flat to the extent that they suppose some actual or virtual social compact through which the State promises not to re-

---

16 See infra notes 24-28 and accompanying text.
17 Rose, supra note 1, at 335. It is probably also worth remembering that the United Kingdom thoroughly revised its property law by statute in 1925.
18 In debunking the priority argument, I do not wish to be understood to take issue with studies of common property management regimes that have grown up outside of the formal legal order. Such studies mayvaluably provide insights into the diversity of property arrangements that may satisfy distinct communities. But the fact that such customs ought to be respected should not foreclose the state from displacing them in any particular case with different rules, especially where the custom does not serve the interests of the wider community.
strict property rights. To the extent that we can identify a real agreement (such as a constitution), we have no need of a myth of social contract. And the idea that there ever was universal consent to the institution of private property at some time or place is fanciful, as has been recognized since the seventeenth century. Yet without "everyone's agreement . . . rights have not been alienated in the establishment of private property, but rather abrogated or violated." Tacit consent, as by entering into civil society, might seem an attractive alternative, as it did to Locke, but runs into daunting doubts about who may be presumed to have agreed to what. Rawls, for one, has shown how careful attention to the position of rational people who do not know what place they will find in society plausibly can produce a redistributive social contract. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine people agreeing in a state of nature that every owner may use his property in ways that representative lawmakers rationally believe will injure the community's welfare. In any event, as Jeremy Waldron points out, arguments of consent of any sort provide no defense in principle against reformulation of property interests "except for the highly contestable claim that, as a matter of fact, those arrangements were not the ones entered into."

If attempts to ground property rights in consent are fraught with difficulties, it is harder still to base a natural right on some unilateral act by an individual. Merely appropriating a thing, of course, does not give one a right to retain it. Locke offered a famous and complicated solution concerning mixing the labor of his own body, which each owns as a matter of right, with resources already owned in common with others. The meaning and merit of this argument have been debated for three hundred years; however, given its insistence on the right of every person to appropriate what he needs to survive, and its reliance on tacit consent to translate a moral into a political right, Locke's solution cannot provide a basis for a modern constitutional right restricting revision of property interests.

Richard Epstein has sought to avoid the weaknesses of the natural rights argument, while extracting from it a strong prohibition against regulatory takings. He posits a Hobbesian state of nature with fierce competition for resources, without any common ownership of resources or any moral entitlement to subsistence. Rather, he argues by analogy to the common law first possession principle that resources in nature were unowned until appropriated by an individual. He then argues that government was formed by an explicit agreement among property owners strictly prohibit-

19 Such a fatuous claim to consent is advanced in Lucas, where the Court seeks to justify the regulatory takings doctrine on the basis of "the historical compact recorded in the Takings Clause." Lucas, 505 U.S. at 1028. The Court offers no argument that such a compact actually was made nor what the terms of any tacit agreement might be, other than the result reached in the case.

20 Jeremy Waldron, The Right to Private Property 151 (1986). Waldron attributes this point to Robert Filmer, whom Locke sought to answer in propounding his property theory.


22 Id. at 153.


24 See Epstein, supra note 7.

25 Id. at 11. Epstein's reasoning resembles the court's opinion in the famous first year law student case of Pierson v. Post, 3 Cai. R. 175 (N.Y. 1805).
ing the State from shrinking natural property rights, but recognizes that actual consent can never be shown and that tacit consent leaves open the terms of the compact. Epstein then offers the regulatory takings right as the solution, because it provides

an explicit and rigorous theory of forced exchanges between the sovereign and the individual so that whenever any portion of property is taken from him, he must receive from the state (that is, from the persons who take it) some equivalent or greater benefit as part of the same transaction.

It is difficult to know what to make of this; it has the character of a rabbit out of a hat. Epstein wants to ground a constitutional property right in the natural rights tradition, but he rejects its most appealing moral elements. He seems more concerned with adjusting Hobbes and Locke to the requirements of his constitutional position, than with providing persuasive reasons for his position. In other words, the account seems result-driven, and does not seriously attempt to justify the building blocks. For example, Epstein seems to assert that first possession gives a moral claim to ownership, but does not explain why, beyond invoking the familiar common law rule. Yet, in an earlier paper, he acknowledged that the first possessor's right to continue to possess depends upon the consent of others. And if we must look to consent, we may argue about the terms upon which consent might have been reached.

Similarly, Epstein's suggestion that a strict compensation requirement for government action might replace consent as a ground for constitutional protection lacks legal or philosophical justification. A rule of forced compensated exchange does not substitute for consent, because it lacks the legitimizing moral force for a restraint on government power that Locke saw in limited consent. Although the rule of forced compensated exchanges would limit government, why should one accept it as morally required or even legitimate? Epstein seems to find the moral force of his theory in its ability to circumvent structural barriers to actual consent (as damages in a nuisance action are said to substitute for an efficient agreement by landowners to end conflicting land uses). But the mere fact that the forced compensation rule might provide a rational substitute for an actual compact (a question I pass by) does not confer on the rule a moral force that places it above ongoing policy debate. This returns us to the realm of utilitarian policy analysis, where there is no reason ex ante to prevent ongoing debate about the costs and benefits of changing particular property rules. At most, Epstein can only propose how we should view

26 Epstein is enthusiastic about Locke's argument that government cannot abrogate pre-existing property rights because no party to the agreement can convey what he does not own and no one has the right to abrogate another's property rights. Epstein, supra note 7, at 12. He even states that this is one of the "pillars" of his analysis. Id. But this argument is weak, even granting Locke's premise, because each party to the compact could easily be understood to have consented to abrogation of his own property rights when necessary for the public welfare in exchange for the similar promise of every other party.

27 Id. at 15.

compensation as a matter of policy, not as establishing how we must view property rights as matters of constitutional law or morality.

Thus we cannot conclude that natural rights theories support a constitutional regulatory takings right. Property rights do not assume a natural dimension or form that precedes and binds subsequent law. Rather than viewing property rights as standing against law, they are the creations of the law, designed to serve social interests in the ways Professor Rose eloquently recounts. But property rights also, as Professor Rose takes pains to show, cause problems, some of which may be ameliorated by revision of the rights themselves. It would be odd if the government were disabled from revising the contours of property interests to better account for the interests of its citizens in order to protect established benefits; such a rule would weaken the property system in the long run. As seems implicit in Professor Rose's article, property should serve society rather than society serving property.

CONCLUSION

Carol Rose's essay on property as the keystone right characteristically displays verve and insight. Unfortunately, it harbors a basic ambiguity about just what a property right is. In this Response, I have tried briefly to clarify what we mean when we speak about property rights, and to show how difficult it is to argue persuasively that property is a constitutional right that binds lawmakers. Respect for property rights by both individuals and officials reflects the rule of law, and that, indeed, is the guardian of every other right.