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**Changes in the Way Rural Inhabitants Understand  
the Concept of Property – Various Perspectives of the Analysis  
of the Transformation Taking Place in the Countryside**

Laschewski, L. and Penker, M. (Eds.) 2009 *International Journal of Agricultural Resources, Governance and Ecology (IJARGE)*. Special Issue on Rural Change and the Revalorisation of Rural Property Objects. Vol. 8 (1).

Thematic Sections: Rural Property. 2009 *Anthropologica*. Vol. 51 (1): 3–108.

During recent decades rural areas have undergone a process of intensive change affecting various aspects of the lives of their inhabitants. This was a consequence of both the introduction of new types of production, a change in the relationship between rural and urban inhabitants and the emergence of new problems which preoccupied the members of rural communities. For rural inhabitants this was a time of redefinition of their role in society, defining their own identity, building and shaping their interaction with other groups. In a natural way the countryside and changes taking place there became a topic of interest for members of various academic disciplines, including economics, sociology and anthropology. An interesting yet rare way of analysing change taking place in rural areas is observing it from the perspective of changes connected with definition and understanding the question of property rights and the possibility of deciding about owned resources.

Issues connected with property and owned resources have a significant influence on shaping interactions in society, placing individuals within a social hierarchy, becoming important tools of influence but can also put people at risk in the face of external pressure. The possibility of freely making use of one's own property is frequently restricted by external regulations which can often be observed in rural areas. The right to decide about individual property

is sometimes in conflict with decisions made outside the local level, connected with policy promoting the sustained development of rural areas.

The property issue is no novelty to researchers of rural areas – issues connected with land reform and ownership appeared within their area of interest from the very beginning of modern rural research. However, in recent years these matters were not given much attention, particularly in East European countries so publications undertaking this topic deserve all the more attention. Two interesting publications appeared in 2009 raising the property issue with reference to various aspects of agriculture or – broadly speaking – agricultural economy, discussing this issue from the economic, sociological and socio-anthropological perspectives.

The first was the *International Journal of Agricultural Resources, Governance and Ecology (IJARGE)*, Volume 8 – Issue 1 – 2009, Special Issue on Rural Change and the Revalorisation of Rural Property Objects, edited by Lutz Laschewski and Marianne Penker. The texts in *Anthropologica*, No. 1 (2009) the official publication of the Canadian Anthropological Society (CASCA) analysed a similar topic from the anthropological perspective.

According to the editors of both volumes, research and analysis of property rights with reference to agriculture is significant as it enables not only the understanding of conflicts appearing in connection with existing resources, it also seems necessary in order to acquire essential information for constructing policy promoting sustained development in rural areas.

According to the editors of *Agricultural Resources, Governance and Ecology*, economic and social changes taking place in rural areas brought about the revalorisation of rural property. As has already been mentioned property rights can be an interesting tool when analysing transformation processes taking place in rural areas and moreover this is of focal interest for people living in rural areas. Much attention and daily discussions are devoted to issues connected with property, the possibility of deciding about one's own property and the relevant rights. It sometimes happens that restrictions connected with having property at one's disposal become a source of conflict in rural areas. It is important to observe what is new with reference to property rights, registering change. However, it seems that even more important is the reflection about the new significance of property rights which emerges in the context of balance between rights and duties, profit and costs, quality change which appears within rural communities and also in their external relations with other groups.

The rapid development of technology applied to agriculture which leads to the separation of agricultural production from its local land base is considered as a reason for the dynamic changes taking place in the countryside. A consequence of this phenomenon is the growing segregation appearing in rural areas, the intensification of some and marginalisation of other areas of activity among rural inhabitants. Both phenomena cause unfavourable consequences for both the environment and landscape. Whereas changes in nutrition patterns observed in recent years are enforced by changes connected with the growing food processing sector and related services. That leads to changes in the farming economy and also influences relations between town and country because numerous typically rural activities can now be moved outside the village.

An important trend which appeared during sociological research were problems emerging from 'consuming' by agricultural activity of lands which institutions and organisations are interested in connected with environmental protection, land and water conservation as well as recreation. The development of technology and production changes lead to the countryside losing its rural character and consequently values disappear which attract people who are not permanent residents in the countryside. While discussing property rights and the use of resources new problems emerge such as clean water and landscape conservation, its aesthetic values, discussions regarding types of agricultural production involving not only farmers. An example are controversies concerning genetically modified food, the use of pesticides etc. involving not only food producers but representatives of consumer protection organisations, ecologists and decisions are made at national level and sometimes even as a result of international agreements.

The positive aspect of both publications is the concise reminder of definitions and concepts, connected with the issue of rural property, a reminder of theoretical concepts, the purpose of which was to analyse these problems in the past and also the presentation and discussion of general trends appearing in modern societies with reference to the property issue.

Laschewski and Penker point out that property in the context of agriculture concerns two kinds of assets: one connected with natural resources (mainly land) and the other with production and services, acquired with the help of those natural resources. The editors make a concise analysis from the point of view of economics, sociology, legal sociology, anthropology as observed in various studies during the past twenty years. They present various research

and analytical methods, pointing to similarities and differences between them. They underline that five features can be distinguished in the current analyses of problems concerning property. They notice that many assets which we currently deal with are of a non-material nature (e.g. brand, patents), changes concerning property rights begin to transform from concentrating on material values to noticing and defining non-material ones. Another issue which the authors pay attention to are changes concerning how problems connected with property influence relations between those involved in agriculture and those not involved in it. It seems that the new way of perceiving the property issue in agriculture was initiated by actors not directly involved in agricultural production. A significant voice in the discussion on decisions concerning environmental protection, shaping the landscape, food production safety etc. is often that of organisations which are not connected with agriculture: ecological, tourist, civic, consumer etc.

Due to attempts to preserve the image of the countryside connected with the aesthetic values of rural areas, growing concerns about the degradation of the environment and landscape, concerns about the irreversible destruction of natural resources more and more often decisions about rural areas are the result of academic discovery and political decisions. Along with that there is a frequent and growing tendency through legal regulations and for the common good they restrict the landowners/users in making decisions concerning their property.

Another change which the authors point out is the political and institutional level at which issues connected with property are negotiated. They notice that negotiations take place between many interested groups, often at regional, national or even international level.

New interest groups and institutions appear, engaged in the shaping of a future image of rural areas, representing not only the owners' interests but influencing politics for the broadly understood common good. Often problems which they indicate do not directly affect agriculture itself an example being issues connected with road routes, noise level, waste disposal etc. The appearance of new priorities among the representatives of rural communities (and also among those urban residents who are interested in rural issues) has an influence on the views and position of local governments and consequently decisions made by them.

The texts presented in the *International Journal of Agricultural Resources, Governance and Ecology*, based on examples from various countries show the process of diversification in rural areas. The combination of supposedly very

different problems allows one to look at the issues connected with property from a broader perspective, it allows the possibility of referring to more general theories and consequently the complexity of changes taking place. Gill's text is devoted to negotiations and the building of a definition of property rights in relation to genetically modified food and controversies which arose in the US, EU and Japan. The remaining texts deal with the more 'material' aspects of ownership. D. Roth analyses them with reference to Danish flood prevention policy which intervenes in farmers' rights in deciding about their land. Using the example of two national parks in Romania and Albania J. Stahl, T. Sikor and S. Dorondel embark on the issue of institutionalisation of the biodiversity phenomenon, which is becoming an international issue causing complications at local level. Protests and negotiations which were carried out in those countries by users of the land are an example of the battle for rights, duties and advantages which emerge when we are faced with the problem of landscape and nature conservation.

Ch. Schleyer deals with issues connected with the re-cultivation of rural areas and rural infrastructure in Poland, noticing that the opportunities which Poland's entry into the EU have provided for rural inhabitants led to a change in their way of perceiving their property and forced them to place it in a wider context including regulations and procedures. This forces rural inhabitants to think in terms which go beyond local or individual interests.

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The whole of the first part of No. 1 *Anthropologica* (2009) is also devoted to the subject of property in rural communities and rights and duties emerging from it. The texts published there present a more complex, anthropological view of the problem and property issues are viewed from not only the European perspective which is dominant in the earlier discussed publication. The paradoxical links emerging between agricultural property and the access to agricultural resources as well as the natural environment are analysed by B. Turner and M.G. Wiber who also analyses the influence of the law and economic conditions on farmers' property rights. However, as has already been mentioned the authors' research presented in this publication also refer to property rights in communities which are distant to the realities of life in Europe or the US. Despite the fact that property issues in the communities of Peruvian shepherds who emigrated to the US (M. Nuijten, D. Lorenzo), the influence of international organisations and application of legal solutions,

being the result of decisions made at international level on local communities as in the example of inhabitants of Senegal (M. Weilenmann), changes in awareness concerning property rights which emerged among the inhabitants of Botswana (E.N. Wilmsen) or changes in rural communities in Morocco, being the consequence of confrontation with globalisation and changes it has brought about, finally the effects of international migrations for the property of inhabitants of rural areas in South-Eastern Albania (J. Sathl, T. Sikor) may appear difficult to compare rather like the texts in the first discussed publication, allow for awareness of the complexity as well as repetition of certain types of problems.

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Both presented publications complement each other in providing an interesting view of the same problem of property rights in the context of rural areas and their inhabitants. The broad theoretical elaborations sum up research which was earlier carried out and discuss the theories which were followed. The studies devoted to small communities allow the reader to become aware of how theories are reflected in the complex reality of everyday life of rural inhabitants. Both presented works deserve the attention of not only those people who are interested in the issues of property rights but whoever deals with changes taking place in rural areas, they provide a glimpse at changes taking place from an interesting analytical perspective and also reveal that despite various living conditions, different ways of farming, legal regulations, certain problems concerning property rights are universal and regulated in different ways by the law and customs.