

# PROPERTY RELATIONS AND SOCIALLY EMBEDDED INSTITUTIONS. REOPENING THE STUDY OF OBSTEA IN VRANCEA

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*H.H. Stahl predicts the dissolution of obstea in Vrancea in a natural way. The year 1950 does bring the dismantling of these old forms of organizing, but in a violent manner, by the total seizure of the forests as State property. Only long time after the fall of communism, the law 1/2000 permits the restoration of obstea.*

*This paper reopens the topic that H.H.Stahl acknowledged as a major discussion in the Romanian sociological tradition and discusses what happens with the contemporary obsti. The approach emphasizes the way in which the community and its social actors interact in and form the net of property relations that occurred after the re-establishment of the obstea institution. I propose several dimensions to be followed in detail, such as the local participation in decision-making process and the satisfaction of local population with the obstea, and, implicitly the issue of corruption and trust.*

## Theoretical and methodological clarifications

The paper speaks about a legal institution that rules the common property of each mountain village (mainly forests) in Vrancea Region of Romania and about the 'bundle of social relations' inside the community associated with the actual functioning of this institution. The focus is on the actors' narratives about satisfaction, support, involvement and their effective actions related to the institution and to the forest itself. The subject is very generous; there are many issues to be addressed; I have a large amount of fieldwork material and thus, the temptation to treat many dimensions at once underlines the density of this paper.

Lately, property has been in the attention of social anthropologists writing on Eastern Europe (see Hann 2002, 1998). In Romania's case, property relations are very well depicted in anthropological literature, mainly the restitution/decollectivisation process and the specific post socialist emergent social relations (for example, see Cartwright 2000; Dorondel 2005; Kideckel 1993; Verdery 2003). My study is *not* about decollectivisation or post socialist property relations. Although 'my' situation bares several contextual influences from the socialist period, the analysis shows that internal, local mechanisms are more likely to be at the core of it.

I take the liberty of drawing on several different bodies of theoretical literature, for I find them useful in clarifying analysis, without agreeing to Marvin Harris's condemnation of 'eclecticism' (Harris 1979).

Along with considering some structural aspects, the study is built on an actor-oriented perspective (Nuijten 2003).

The commons<sup>1</sup> issued a large amount of literature mostly concentrated on the institutional side of the topic, so to say, on a 'holistic' village-size view on self-driven management (for example see Ostrom 1990).

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<sup>1</sup> I refer here to the commons as to a specific property regime, defined as access limited to a specific group of users who hold their rights in common (Mc Kean, Ostrom, 1995), not to be understood as open access.