

Forest clearing and land reclamation: between ownership rights and resource management, 10th – 20th century

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The concepts of forest clearing and land reclamation have been a constant in the history of farming, and have crucially contributed to the transformation of Europe's countryside. Centuries ago, our ancestors began the practice of clearing forests and draining the land, major works undertaken to increase the surface areas of arable land for farming production, to meet the demand for food and to promote more intensive practices of land use. These interventions have often called into question the existing forms of land appropriation and ownership systems. In the Alps, for instance, the colonisation of the highlands, which began in the 13th century, was achieved by means of land-clearing works based on tenancy agreements in perpetuity (*Erblehen*). With these, monasteries, which exercised manorial rights over vast areas, granted peasants useful possession of these lands and the right to exploit them in exchange for dues in kind or in money. Concurrently, at a time when usage created rights, as productive activities changed, so did the definition of ownership relations within the peasant communities. The partial reconversion of upland farming economies, where cereal cultivation was gradually phased out to make room for cattle raising, brought about a new definition of forms of land appropriation. As a result, individually-run property was partly ceded and partly replaced by a system of joint property for collective use. Subsequently, the development and improvement of low-yield land – marshland being an example – often coincided with the stages of privatisation of collective land and of the abolition of usage rights. It also coincided with the strengthening of the legal framework, whereby States and public authorities acquired the instruments to increase their power of intervention on regional management.

The panel will seek to analyse the relations between the transformation processes affecting different types of land use and ownership rights. In particular, the panel wants to focus on the following questions:

- What is the impact of forest-clearing and land-reclamation on ownership regimes and on the land tenure structure of the areas affected by these works?
- To what extent can ownership regimes slow down or speed up change in the forms of land use and enhancement/improvement/exploitation by expanding the surface of agricultural land?
- What role does conflict play in (re)defining ownership regimes applied to new agricultural land?
- To what degree do collective (or public) property regimes hinder or stunt the creation of speculative logics?
- To what extent do forest clearing and land draining contribute to enhancing the role of the State as the holder of eminent domain over the new lands?

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Conference website: <http://ruralhistory2019.ehess.fr>