

# **Landscapes, resources and rural societies, their changes and continuities**

**by**

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We begin with the premise that the use and exploitation of land, whether for agriculture, water, mineral extraction, leisure and pleasure or for building and suburbanisation involves choices which are essentially political in nature. In this paper we offer some thoughts about how these choices have been made in the past and how they might be made in the future.

1. The fundamental choices are between retaining land for national parks, allowing it to be used for different kinds of agricultural activities or for a whole range of urban or semi-urban exploitations (including industrial developments, airports etc). The development of cheap private transport in the late twentieth century has allowed an unparalleled mobility and the possibility for people to live considerable distances from where they work. The tendency has therefore been for large parts of the countryside to become a dormitory for people working in towns for whom the

trouble of travel is seen as an adequate trade for a rural, or semi-rural lifestyle. Even where large scale development has been prohibited, small-scale housing development can penetrate the countryside and produce a scatter of modern buildings within an essentially rural context.

Obviously, whereas changes in agricultural practice are essentially reversible, suburbanisation, in its many forms, is a one-way street. What has planning done to mitigate the worst effects of rural industrial development and creeping suburbanisation?

2. Throughout the late twentieth century choices were to be made between agriculture and the amenity value of land and landscape for conservation, tourism and recreation. For most of the half century after the end of the second world war, this argument was settled in favour of productivity although arguments in favour of alternative uses gradually gathered strength after the 1970s. In the last years of the century public subsidy increasingly came to be focussed on the maintenance of countryside and landscape rather than further supporting agricultural productivity.<sup>1</sup> Is the cost of conservation and recreation sustainable? If there is to be a renewed emphasis on agricultural productivity, is it even desirable?

3. Within agriculture, choices have been made between the use of the land in accordance with “low input” agroecological principles, according to which agriculture was a relatively closed, highly labour intensive natural system, and systems of agriculture requiring high inputs of off-farm nutrients. This is a shift from systems where land use was complex and, even within the individual farm, multi-purpose orientated. Farm and local self-sufficiency was seen as desirable compared to ones where market mechanisms allowed farms to specialise in a limited range of produce whilst sourcing a high proportion of their inputs from elsewhere. The success of high input/high productivity farming systems has brought its own costs, in state-subsidized overproduction, but also environmental damage (through, for instance, nitrogen pollution of water but also pollution arising from factory farm effluent) and the over-abstraction of water from rivers. Some extension of the cultivated area may, in the long term, be unsustainable, whether as the result of soil salination arising from irrigation, or the consequences of global warming on coastlines

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that another COST action (A27, Understanding pre-industrial structures in Rural and Mining Landscapes) is also concerned with the historical evolution of European landscapes.

and low lying areas. There are therefore choices to be made about the desirability of these forms of farming. In what way has government acted to first encourage and then moderate the environmental damage caused by these and other forms of agricultural practice?

These questions, for obvious reasons, can *not* be reduced to a series of market choices. One complication is that while some rural activities produce privately-owned products that are bought and sold through conventional market mechanisms (e.g. agricultural products, timber, buildings), others produce “public goods” or services such as landscape, wildlife or CO<sub>2</sub> absorption which create utility for consumers and citizens but are neither bought nor sold through market mechanisms. There are also rural activities that create external costs and benefits (water pollution is an external cost arising from the abuse of fertilizers, hedgerows may be seen as an external benefit resulting from the desire to control the movement of livestock) that are ignored by conventional market mechanisms. The changes in public subsidy policies in the last decade of the twentieth century and the present decade may be seen as attempts to recognize clearer the interactions between self-organisation of markets and politically defined rules both empowering (i.e by subsidies) and limiting microeconomic actors (i.e. by restraining the use of property rights). Equally, they may be seen in turn as creating further imperfections, in that the ownership or occupation of some areas of rural land then implies the publicly-created right to receive monies from the public purse or the restriction not to use land and biotic resources in the economically best way because society decides to use it for other purposes.

It is our contention that the ways in which choices as between agriculture and wildlife or between agriculture and urbanisation are resolved, is essentially political rather than economic, and reflects arguments over cultural as well as economic preferences. A common feature of these choices is that they are no longer ones which can be made by private landowners alone. Whilst western governments have fought shy of general land nationalisation or collectivisation, they have not hesitated to qualify or compromise private property rights. Hence modern property exists almost universally within a framework of law which denies private landowners the right to use their property as they wish. These systems

of land law are not universally the same, but their form is itself a reflection of the cultural preferences and valuation placed on landscape in different nation states.

In this paper we want to explore some of these issues in a historical perspective, looking at the ways in which decisions over landscape and biotic resources have been taken in different European countries, and advancing some ideas about how matters might develop in the future.

## I

To begin: landholding. There is no common European pattern of landholding, with marked disparities in the early modern period between areas which were dominated by large estates and those in which landownership was more dispersed and peasant or smallholding ownership was a real force. Where estates existed though, we can trace a tendency, which continues, for land to pass out of their hands and into the hands of owner-occupiers. This is summarized in the attached table. The norm, indeed, the ideal, in much of Europe, perhaps since the French Revolution, has been that the farmer should own his or her land. In some countries this has been seen as a deliberate policy to diminish the power and authority of landholding, aristocratic elites; in others the preoccupation has been to create property-owning democracies. In some the pressure has come from within rural society and has been marked by a rejection of the principle of aristocratic landholding; in others market forces have been largely allowed to take its course, albeit in a tax environment hostile to the large landowners. The speed at which these changes worked through has varied enormously from country to country. One may note the confiscation of aristocratic property in France in the 1790s, the progressive disappearance of the Irish landowning class through state-sponsored purchase schemes from the 1880s, and the confiscation of large landholdings after the Portuguese revolution of 1977. Even where there has been no state action, the political influence of aristocratic landowners has waned.

The experience of some countries in central and eastern Europe has, in one important aspect, deviated from the western European pattern. The lands of a freeholding peasantry to which they had achieved title as a result of the widespread land reform programmes of the interwar years

were largely confiscated in the post-war years to make collective farms. These were in turn dissolved in a property-owning sense in the 1990s and, sometimes, the land restored to the heirs of the pre-collectivisation owners, with the result that the ownership of land is in some countries probably more widely dispersed within eastern Europe than within western Europe, but much of it is held by urban proprietors who lease it to the lineal descendents of the state collective farms. They are therefore emphatically not owner-occupiers as they would be understood in the western Europe.

At the same time complex multiple rights over land have often, but not everywhere disappeared. These rights can be divided into two sorts: the use rights which tenants had in land, often customary use rights, and the agricultural rights, which meant that land was shared through the exercise of common rights, either in fallow years in arable open fields or over common pastures. Enclosure has often been associated with consolidation, so that the lands of single farmers, instead of being scattered and subject to collective farming regimes, have become consolidated and held in severalty. Again, the disappearance of these rights has often been at the initiative of governments.

Within the West, the political preference for owner occupation over estates has led to the creation of a tempered owner occupation. Owners are generally no longer subject to multiple and overlapping use rights on the surface of their land, but do not have the freedom to exploit their land in the ways that they would wish. Neither do they have the right to build without licence, nor to abstract water at will, or to dig for minerals, the ownership of both having been abrogated to the state. They do not have the right to take all animals or birds on their lands as a range of both are protected. They do not have the right to improve their land through drainage or disafforestation or destroy environmentally important habitats, or buildings or archaeological remains (or to excavate those remains without state licence). Nor, finally, do they have the right to grow any crops they wish on their lands, but are in effect controlled over the amount they can grow. The state has increasingly come to control over what is grown by a mixture of financial incentive and subsidies for selected crops and products, or by fixing finite limits on production (set aside, milk), or through the regulation of animal health and consumer protection. At the same time, they may have to allow a

public right of access for recreation to some or all of their lands at least at certain times of the year. The extent to which this is so varies from country to country, sometimes even from region to region: but the general pattern of state control is recognisable in all.

The direction of change over the twentieth century has been, generally speaking, towards the creation of owner-occupation, at the same time the rights of landowners have been progressively eroded. Leaving to one side the adoption of command economy powers in wartime, the pattern has been to leave landowners in possession of their land whilst implementing legislation which gave the state the capacity to control aspects of landholding to the wider public benefit. These rights include the power to make compulsory purchases of land for public projects – roads, railways, public utilities etc - including the acquisition of land for military training. In some countries the state has also taken upon itself the power to undertake large scale agricultural improvement works – sometimes drainage, sometimes irrigation, in some cases the consolidation of holdings – with the aim of increasing agricultural efficiency, national prosperity or self-sufficiency. Where the state is the notional owner of unexploited or wild land, then it remains able to licence its enclosure and, in effect, its privatisation, to create commercial assets, whether new agricultural land or, for instance, Alpine golf courses. This is effectively a continuation of long-established forms of enclosure of the countryside.

The exact chronology of such changes, and their character, reflects national concerns. In Spain for instance, we can identify, from the late nineteenth century onwards and mainly during the first third of the twentieth century, the evolution of a set of public rules and controls over private land ownership, particularly regarding the protective role played by forests in preventing erosion which is intimately connect to the building of big water dams and reservoirs. The notion of ‘protective forest’ was enforced by a law on forest conservation and afforestation of 1908 which followed on the establishment of a “Catalogue of forests of public utility”, in 1901 and the corps of state forest Engineers, in 1877. After 1908, the cutting and removing of timber or firewood by any Spanish private landowner required the approval of a logging plan by these state officers. From the interwar period we have the development of state-sponsored irrigation schemes, the state often taking the role of private companies which had tried, but failed, to deliver irrigation. In Switzerland, the whole of the then still existing area covered by forest was

protected by law in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The afforestation that followed the population decrease in many areas of the upper lands and the process of suburbanization in the midlands resulted in a drastic loss of agricultural land whose area was not protected by law.

The tendency of the last fifty years has therefore been for the state to annex to itself some rights over the assets of the countryside (water, minerals) whilst shifting ownership of the land to farmers. Landowners, however, have been placed under increasing restrictions which limit their freedom to use their land as they wished whilst the state itself has become the major driver of agricultural and rural change. The question thus becomes one of how the state has mediated the choices we discussed earlier (and made its own choices), and how it might continue to do so in the future, given the tendency for state policies to convert on terms set by the EC.

## II

The past twenty years have seen a high degree of governmental disillusionment with agriculture. The post-war priority was to increase agricultural productivity as part of a geo-strategic vision of national food security. Whilst farming was to a greater or lesser extent state-directed, with most western European states taking steps to both subsidise production whilst making structural changes to farming to facilitate greater production (e.g. the consolidation of holdings, subsidies for technical innovations), the state also contributed to agricultural development through the sponsorship of agricultural education and research, the latter role progressively being taken over by ‘agribusiness’. The rush to produce more food saw not only the adoption of high input forms of agriculture but also the abandonment of traditional patterns of production including those which used marginal land, for instance terraced uplands in Mediterranean Europe, but also crop rotations and systems of mixed farming which were, to a greater or lesser extent, sustainable.

By the late 1980s there was an appreciation that production had reached conditions of overproduction and that the levels of subsidy required to maintain an excess of food production were unsupportable. Within the EC there was a recognition that the same levels of subsidy could not be given to the rural, eastern members of the enlarged EC; and the public subsidy of agricultural production was increasingly seen to

be at odds with the idea of free trade. The emergence of environmental awareness from the 1970s onwards, brought into question the environmental degradation caused by that post-war agricultural revolution.

These considerations all led to European government withdrawing from some aspects of agriculture since the 1990s – and engaging in others. Production subsidies were reduced and progressively focussed on landscape maintenance. Falling prices, state-imposed limits on production forced farmers to squeeze their assets harder whilst at the same time acting on behalf of the national interest as guardians of the countryside and landscape. Agriculture remains a low political priority, but there are signs of a renewed interest in questions of food security within Europe, and the acquisition of extensive tracts of Africa by non-European nations shows that there is some considerable concern on their part that the supply of foods for their populations may not be as robust. It is possible that agriculture within Europe may once again become a matter of keen government and national, or European self-sufficiency again be seen as desirable. In this light, how will the choices we discussed earlier: of land versus suburbanisation, of agriculture versus the amenity and recreational value of the countryside and the high input agriculture versus its high environmental costs be seen by policymakers in the next generation? It is here, where a precise knowledge of traditional patterns of food production is required, that historians could play a useful role as partners of policy-makers.

So what does the recent history of the countryside tell us about the way matters might develop in these two areas?

### III

#### *Agriculture versus suburbanisation and industrial development*

Agriculture is a residual user of land since the industrial revolution. In other words, non-farming uses of land such as housing and industrial development can afford to pay more for land than farmers operating according to market forces. The historically rare circumstances in which this no longer applies have been wartime food shortages, when trade links have been disrupted. Consequently, the transfer of land from agriculture to urbanisation and industrialisation normally depends on the demand from the latter – and the willingness of a society to regulate it or not. When

housing and industrial demand is high it will tend to be rapid, and vice versa. In many European societies it has also been the case that housing demand is income elastic, whereas the demand for agricultural products is income inelastic. In other words, as consumers get richer, they may not eat much more food, but spend more of their income on improving their housing standards, increasing the size of their gardens, or acquiring second homes in beautiful rural areas. But this trend is sensitive to income changes. Thus for much of the last third of the twentieth century non-farming buyers, often from the Netherlands, the UK or Germany, were until recently significant competitors for small rural properties in south-western France and Spain. Another aspect of the financial crisis of 2008/9 has been a decrease in demand for agricultural properties in the UK from 'lifestyle' buyers. The fall in the value of the pound against the Euro may well bring about a new depopulation of some areas of rural France and Spain as British life-style emigrants are forced back to their natal country. In future, therefore, as long as economic growth continues, the housing and industrial demand for farmland might also be expected to continue, and the possibility of working from home, linked electronically to the workplace, would only serve to emphasise the trend. On the other hand, to the extent that people continue to have to move from their residential to their working locations, increasing transport costs should restrict the geographical growth of urban areas. The biggest impact, however, on land use changes, will come from national and local government policies. As land use zoning policies have become more pervasive across Europe over the last century or so, it is clear that they have increased their capacity to lead market forces. In future, therefore, the extent to which local and national governments are anxious about food supplies, or responsive to housing demand, is likely to have the biggest influence on what happens to farm land.

#### IV

##### *Agriculture versus the amenity and recreational value of the countryside*

As with the demand for housing, the demand for amenity and recreational uses of the countryside is income elastic. As people get richer, many of them wish to increase their leisure time, and to spend at least part of that leisure time enjoying the amenities of rural areas. Again, this has

been the case for many centuries; what was new in the twentieth century was the increasing number of people who were in a position to make these choices. Whereas only the richest socio-economic groups in the nineteenth century and earlier exerted an amenity demand on the countryside, for housing and country sports, in the twentieth century lower income groups, often assisted by more affordable transport links, began to engage in rural recreation. Examples can be found from the *Wandervogel-movement* in inter-war Germany to the expansion of the ski industry in Alpine areas after the Second World War. The extent to which this has an impact on agriculture varies greatly. In some cases the possibility of catering for a tourism market serves to maintain marginal farms in business; in others, the demand for land for roads and sporting facilities decreases the area of agricultural land. In these regions it becomes evident today that where the agricultural use of land is diminishing, the forest is growing thus fending off tourism in the long term as well. Here, it becomes obvious, that food production, landscape shaping and the creation or destructing of biodiversity are interlinked processes which cannot be separated and produced separately.

## V

*How will high input agriculture versus its high environmental costs be seen by policymakers in the next generation?*

As recently as the 1950s, as a visit to many of Europe's rural museums will reveal, there were wide variations in the technologies used by European farmers. Over the last half century the differences have lessened, partly as a result of communication changes, partly from the efforts of the various advisory services, including those operated by commercial firms, partly as a response to the price regimes of the Common Agricultural Policy and – probably most important of all: resulting from the availability of mineral resources in agricultural production since the 1950/60's.. Similar fertilizers, pesticides, tractors and, where appropriate, crop varieties and animal breeds, are now used across Europe, and most European countries have followed the same line in their rejection of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Where less intensive methods are now used it is not generally because farmers are unaware of advanced technology or high input - high output methods, but because they choose to employ the alternatives. This may be a function of transport costs and proximity to markets, or the availability of a tourism and

recreation market, or of the point that the farmer has reached in his career. For the future, several options are available. Some farmers will continue with conventional agriculture, more or less as it appears at present. Others will maintain their current position as organic farmers, or change to become organic farmers. A third alternative is emerging, in the form of what is being called ‘precision’ farming, which uses, based on a high demand on capital, high technology methods to reduce inputs of fertilizer and pesticides while maintaining high yields. The extent to which the output of agriculture or its environmental costs take precedence in the concerns of policy makers will probably depend on world food prices. As long as food is available at reasonable prices policy makers will respond to the political power of the amenity and conservation lobbies, which has increased over the last thirty years as the political power of the agricultural interest groups has, in comparison, waned. But the history of the World Wars of the twentieth century, and the commodity booms of the early 1970s and the mid-2000s, suggests that the possibility, let alone the reality, of food shortages may yet direct the attention of the policy makers back to the productive potential of European agriculture.

**Table One. Schematic account of changes in property rights, farming styles and market integrations**

	Possession Pre-1850	→	Property 1850-1950	→	Compromised property 1950-
Landholding	Rights in land shared between landowners, tenants (who often had customary use rights) and sections of the rural poor (who also often had customary rights);		Transfer of property from estates to owner-occupying farmers whether by state supported action (France, Ireland, Portugal) or by market forces. Decline of complex multiple use rights in land.,		Private rights in property qualified by government, that tries to reconcile ownership entitlements with both the positive and negative externalities of agricultural land-use, water-use and forest-use management. At the same time

					public land continues to be privatised for agricultural or recreational uses.
Farming	connected with a complex of multiple-purpose and integrated management of cropland, fallow, forest and pasture.		Production decisions taken by individual farmers to optimise their endowments, with increasing knowledge of present and likely future prices. Trend towards single-purpose land-use, livestock breeding or forestry management.		Trend towards single-purpose land-use, livestock breeding or forestry management
Marketing	Tendency for farm economies to be concerned with household subsistence with relatively small surplus generated for local sale		Much greater market orientation, often selling/buying into national and international markets through farmers' cooperatives.		Farmer merely the lowest level of long distance food supply systems; at the same time movements for real food, organic farming, farmers markets and local retailing.