

Ownership and Political Ecology

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Source: *Anthropological Quarterly*, Jul., 1972, Vol. 45, No. 3, Dynamics of Ownership in the Circum-Alpine Area (Special Issue) (Jul., 1972), pp. 201-205

Published by: The George Washington University Institute for Ethnographic Research

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3316532>

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OWNERSHIP AND POLITICAL ECOLOGY

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The studies presented in this symposium demonstrate how sophisticated anthropologists have become in following through the connective linkages in local ecosystems and in specifying the parameters of economic change. The Alps, of course, offer a magnificent laboratory to the ecological anthropologist interested in the ramifications, at any given time and over time, of microvariations in altitude, slope, soil, precipitation, temperature, wind, and in the incidence of sunshine and shade. The papers presented here document the importance of these variations on the distribution of men, animals and plants over the landscape, and on the specification and scheduling of work sites and work tasks. All the papers demonstrate how important it is, for any one household at any one time, to achieve a balance between unimpeded access to an effective combination of resources characterized by such heterogeneity, and the operation of the jural rules concerning who owns what. In fact, much of the data on cultural ecology in the Alps could be phrased as the outcome of a continuing game against a centrifugally organized environment by populations equipped with two sets of ambiguous and often contradictory rules. To survive in such an environment, a population must organize its resources into viable resource bundles, whatever the requirements of property and inheritance. It does so largely, to adopt the parlance used by Robert Netting in his paper, through the development of long-range strategies of expansion, intensification, and regulation. At the same time, the dynamics of ownership by individual households often run counter to these long-range strategies by favoring short-term realignments of resources according to another set of rules, the rules of property and succession to rights in property.

The symposium papers take us a long way on the road towards a better understanding of the phenomena involved. Eschewing a static analysis of jural rights, they offer a processual view of ownership, in its varied ecological and social parameters. They thus also point the direction in which analysis must go, adumbrated perhaps most clearly in Berthoud's paper. The property connexion in complex societies is not merely an outcome of local or regional ecological processes, but a

battleground of contending forces which utilize jural patterns to maintain or restructure the economic, social and political relations of society. Thus capitalism progresses through the employment of jural rules of ownership to strip the laborer of his means of production and to deny him access to the product of his labor. The local rules of ownership and inheritance are thus not simply norms for the allocation of rights and obligations among a given population, but mechanisms which mediate between the pressures emanating from the larger society and the exigencies of the local ecosystem. Certainly rules regarding inheritance are often shaped by the changing interests of non-local elites. The Catalan Cortes is said to have favored the introduction of impartibility in order to recruit man-power for maritime trade and warfare. The territorial rulers of Bavaria favored impartibility in the seventeenth century and partibility in the eighteenth; in Scandinavia partibility was general until the seventeenth century and set aside in the eighteenth.

A similar point may be raised with regard to rules governing the distribution of decision-making power in the family. On first glance, one is tempted to derive the role of the head of the household largely from factors of decision-making within the local ecological context. Thus the features of impartible inheritance, social distance and antagonism among siblings, and heirship with unitary authority seem to form an invariant functional nexus. Yet unitary authority and social distance between siblings also exists in St. Felix in the South Tyrol where inheritance practice often contradicts the ideal of impartibility (Cole and Wolf, forthcoming), as well as under conditions of partibility, as in Oberhausen in Rhineland Palatinate (McGregor and Pelto 1963). One is tempted to ascribe these occurrences of authoritarian household structure as much to the integration of these households into authoritarian political systems as to any causation emanating from the local ecological context. The need to view local life in a dialectical relationship with the larger man-made environment is also underlined when one considers out-migration as one of the strategic regulatory mechanisms within the local eco-system, as does Robert Netting in his discussion of Törbel in the Swiss Valais. Certainly Switzerland began to export military man-power rather early, with important political consequences both abroad and at home. Speaking of the sixteenth century, V. G. Kiernan says:

A new race of hill-folk was coming to market, the Swiss, for two centuries the mercenary soldiers of Europe par excellence. It was a

striking paradox that the old ruling groups were now, in great measure, saved by the mountaineers who most resolutely defied feudalism in their Alpine strongholds (Kiernan 1967:130);

and he goes on to point out that this not only had implications for the world at large but for the Swiss communities of origin themselves:

For Switzerland the three centuries of symbiosis with despotic France had evil consequences. Cantonal politics were corrupted by the fees received for licensing the export of soldiers, and rings of patricians increased their power at the expense of the common people. In vain had Zwingli tried to put an end to the traffic along with prostitution and adultery (Kiernan 1967:138).

Thus rules striving to direct and contain the dynamics of ownership may on occasion dove-tail with the long-range strategies utilized by a community to expand, intensify or regulate its own ecological niche. Ideal rules of inheritance may sometimes confirm efforts at regulation in yielding a finite set of homesteads with viable combinations of resources. On the other hand, rules of partibility may threaten to fragment resource combinations and thus endanger the regulatory mechanisms, as in the case of Kippel described by Friedl. The same may happen in situations where ideal impartibility is not followed in fact, as in any situation where the short-range interests of households run counter to regulatory controls of the community.

To survive these contradictions, the local ecosystem needs to strike a balance between centrifugal and centripetal tendencies. It was probably best able to do so when relevant decision-making power lay largely in its own hands, and when disruptive influences impinging from the outside could be contained at the border of the community. The fast-running changes which have set in after World War II—most especially the development of pursuits outside agriculture and the transformation of land, labor, tools and money into commodities subject to households and members—suggest that the use of strategies of ownership and inheritance are now increasingly prompted by factors over which the community has little control.

When we read these studies of local communities in the Western and Eastern Alps in relation to each other, finally, the Alpine area appears to be less uniform than we have perhaps thought it to be in the past. Perhaps there exists a real difference between the two sectors of the Alpine crescent. The Western Alps were the scene of an early process of settlement, creating a dense network of self-regulating communities. The large transverse valleys, as well as their lateral offshoots, came to

exhibit a strong tendency to political confederation and unification, both within valleys and between valleys. These confederacies perhaps had prehistoric prototypes, as Robert K. Burns has suggested on numerous occasions, but the Swiss forest cantons confederated only in the thirteenth century, and the Republic of the Escartons in the French Alps and the Grisons in Eastern Switzerland only in the fourteenth. One suspects that such far-flung "horizontal" extensions of political alliances may have had some relation to long-distance trade, long-distance transhumance (such as the movement of livestock from the mouth of the Rhone to the heights of the Queyras), and far-flung seasonal migrations of craftsmen and specialists. On the other hand, it is also true that the Holy Roman Empire which laid claim to much of the area never developed a viable hierarchical, "vertical," political framework. In the East, too, the self-regulating community formed the basic cell of the societal edifice, but one misses any strong development of valley-wide confederations or inter-valley alliance. Instead we witness an early consolidation of territorial rulership, with a viable "vertically" organized apparatus of government. The circulation of livestock and of craftsmen is much more restricted in space, and long-distance trade expands under the aegis of the hierarchically organized polity rather than under the aegis of leagues.

One is impressed still further with the predominance of partible inheritance in the West, of impartibility in the East. Since partibility appears to be associated with zones of old and dense settlement, while impartibility seems to characterize zones of frontier expansion, perhaps this difference in inheritance patterns can offer us a lead to still "deeper" chains of structural causation which ultimately may serve also to explain the other contrasts noted earlier. The Western Alps in fact form a part of *Urdeutschland*, of the border zone between Roman provincials and Germanic confederacies, a zone which comprised the drainages of Rhine and Rhone, the ancient Lorraine, Swabia and Burgundy (Whittlesey 1944:166-173). In contrast to this, Bavaria and the Tyrol faced eastwards along Inn and Danube towards the expanding Austrian march, pushing its frontiers outward against the resistance of Avars, Magyars and Slavs. It seems not impossible that old and dense settlement, partibility, wide-ranging alliances, absence of a viable overarching polity all dove-tailed in the West, while frontier settlement, impartibility, narrow range of local political units, but strong multi-level "vertical" polities conditioned each other in the East. In order to prove or disprove such guesses we shall need to combine our inquiries

into multiple local ecological contexts with a greater knowledge of social and political history, the study of inter-group relations in wider structural fields.

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