

Preface

Rural commons. Aims and key issues of the volume

In the last 15 years, rural commons as a topic of historiography has undergone a peculiar development. While innovative studies in this field have multiplied in the Netherlands, in Britain, in Spain and, though to a lesser extent, in France and Italy, the formerly vivid interest in the German-speaking world has noticeably declined – not to speak of Eastern Europe, where contributions have always been the effort of a small minority. Such discrepancies can hardly be attributed primarily to national differences in the economic, social and political significance of the phenomenon itself. Rather, the varying attention to past and present forms of collective property and use of resources in the European countryside seems to reflect divergent scholarly trends and shifting research agendas.

The editors, currently conducting or having recently carried out investigations of rural commons in Germany and Austria themselves, wish to take a first step towards redressing this imbalance. We have assembled experts from most European macro-regions in order to exemplify the wealth of research potentials and to set the scene for comparative considerations elucidated in the final synthesis. Not least, we are glad to include surveys on Bohemia, Hungary and Poland, which have so far been largely neglected in the relevant literature. If this volume serves to encourage advanced methods of historical studies on rural commons in areas as yet insufficiently covered, one of its major objectives will be achieved.

At this point, we abstain from a detailed introduction to the field of research on rural commons. Instead, we conclude the book with an extensive summary, which relates the articles to the state of the art. The aims, the analytical framework and the key questions emerge more clearly from the slightly adapted call for articles printed below – the starting point of our enterprise in the run-up to the Rural History Conference in Bern 2013. First, however, we would like to pay our gratitude to a number of people and institutions, who made this volume possible. Our thanks go to the authors for their willingness to embark on the project and also for their patience on the long way to its fruition. Leila Gray greatly helped us in proofreading the English manuscripts. The Institute of Rural History in St. Pölten (Austria) and its managing director, Ernst Langthaler, readily accepted and supported our idea for this issue of their publication series. The final editing was in good hands with Martin Bauer there. Some papers were presented at the annual conference of the German Association of Agrarian History (Gesellschaft für Agrargeschichte, GfA) organised by the editors in June 2015.¹ We have profited from the fruitful discussions on this occasion, especially in our conclusion. We owe further thanks to those institutions that have generously co-financed this volume: the Institute of Rural History, the Austrian federal provinces of Tyrol and Lower Austria, the

Annex: Call for articles

General aims:

Along with the edited volumes on the history of rural commons published during the last one and a half decades² this subject area has experienced a remarkable boom, which continues even today.³ Beside the multitude of empirical case studies, however, comprehensive syntheses have largely been missing. With regard to this situation, the Rural History Yearbook 2015 has three main objectives. They will structure the volume along the different perspectives, under which the articles can be categorized. Together the sections shall provide a synopsis of current research:

- (1) *Research trajectories and new orientations*: Summaries of research literature shall outline the major insights recent explorations in the collective management and use of agrarian resources have offered compared to older approaches.
- (2) *Local and regional case studies*: Case studies shall exemplify the sources, techniques and results of micro-historical methods, which have dominated in the field for some time.
- (3) *Problem-specific analyses and comparisons*: On this basis, there shall be an in-depth examination of selected fields (e. g. forestry, communal law, sustainability, market integration, credit relations, state building) into how traditional narratives and established models of supra-regional comparison might be challenged by new findings.

Analytical framework:

- (1) By 'rural commons' we mean natural resources exploited for agrarian purposes by organised social collectives in accordance with rules of use. As for the areas concerned, this refers primarily to woods, pastures, heaths and waters, but in part also to meadows and arable land.
- (2) The analytical priority is set on societal, legal etc. institutions of rural commons and the economic, social, cultural and political contexts and practices connected with them.
- (3) The time frame of the yearbook covers the Late Middle Ages until the twenty-first century. Geographically we focus on Europe, taking into account regional and national fields of research also including comparative studies within Europe and even between European and non-European regions.

Key questions:

- (1) *Resource systems*: Who uses rural commons under which natural and geographical conditions? What is their practical value for the beneficiaries?
- (2) *Institutional arrangements*: How are rural commons organised? Which forms of institutionalisation (e. g. monitoring, sanctioning, conflict-resolution) can be observed? What effect do ecological, demographic, economic, social, cultural, political and legal circumstances have on these institutions?

(3) *Inclusion and exclusion*: Who is allowed to use rural commons? Who is excluded from them and according to which criteria (e. g. social, confessional, ethnic)? How is inclusion or exclusion communicated and legitimised? Which consequences do such processes have in terms of establishing and forming social inequality (estate-based, market-related etc.)?

(4) *Conflicts*: Which disputes (e. g. in regard of use and management) between which (groups of) individuals are provoked by the collective cultivation of rural commons? Do stakeholders develop specific practices to resolve conflicts and to balance interests?

(5) *Constitutional structures*: How do local or regional collectives of users respond to municipal or state authorities? Which interdependencies exist between the cooperative governance of rural commons and the political authorities?

(6) *Processes of change*: How and why do institutions and practices change? Which endogenous and exogenous factors help towards persistence, modification or dissolution of rural commons? How important is, for instance, the agrarian economy (e. g. individual or collective use of land) and its shifting (e. g. by demographic growth, commercialisation, urbanisation) in that process?

References

- 1 See the programme of the GfA conference ‘Totgesagte leben länger? Geschichte und Aktualität ländlicher Gemeingüter in vergleichender Perspektive’: <http://www.hsozkult.de/event/id/termine-27911> (18. 9. 2015). A report is available there as well: <http://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-6430> (4. 3. 2016).
- 2 Martina de Moor/Leigh Shaw-Taylor/Paul Warde (eds.), *The management of common land in north west Europe, c. 1500–1850*, Turnhout 2002; Uwe Meiners/Werner Rösener (eds.), *Allmenden und Marken vom Mittelalter bis zur Neuzeit*, Cloppenburg 2004; Rosa Congost/José Miguel Lana Berasain (eds.), *Campos cerrados, debates abiertos. Análisis histórico y propiedad de la tierra en Europa (siglos XVI–XIX)*, Pamplona 2007; Christopher P. Rodgers et al., *Contested common land. Environmental governance past and present*, London 2011. Recent overviews tend to be restricted to particular, e. g. ecological, aspects of the topic: Bas van Bavel/Erik Thoen (eds.), *Rural societies and environments at risk. Ecology, property rights and social organisation in fragile areas (Middle Ages–twentieth century)*, Turnhout 2013.
- 3 This can be seen, for instance, in the appeal of the platform ‘Institutions for Collective Action’: <http://www.collective-action.info> (18. 9. 2015).