

PRIVATE PROPERTY:
FROM POSTSOCIALISM TO NEOLIBERALISM?

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Postsocialist privatization in Central and Eastern Europe has been based on the belief that private property simultaneously forms the backbone of a market economy and facilitates the rational use of natural resources. In the process of privatization, however, governments often neglect the local-historical and social dimensions of property rights, as they prioritize aspects of ownership that are oftentimes alien to the new landowners. Whereas governments emphasize economic and individualist elements of private property, many villagers contest the notion of land as a source of individual wealth. Negotiations over postsocialist property thereby resemble the struggles associated with neoliberal projects observed elsewhere. This introduction argues that postsocialist experiences provide important insights for broader work on neoliberalism.

Key words: postsocialism, neoliberalism, private property, embeddedness, Central and Eastern Europe.

This special issue is the outcome of an international workshop hosted by the New Europe College Institute for Advanced Studies Bucharest in June 2007. The workshop facilitated a review of research on the development of private property in postsocialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe. One of the key questions debated at the workshop was about the influence of international factors on postsocialist negotiations over property. The present special issue was conceived in response, as the question has not received sufficient attention in anthropological research on postsocialism (cf. Verdery, 2003, Hann, 2007). In this introduction, we explore how the neoliberal discourse on private property shapes villagers' understandings, discourses and practices regarding property in Central Eastern Europe with reference to the papers included in the issue.³ We surmise that, despite the rich anthropological literature on postsocialist property and rural transformations,

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³ Neoliberalism has been defined in many ways. We understand neoliberalism as an ideology, a policy framework, and a form of governmentality (see Schwegler, 2008).