

# The Sense of Property, Deprivation and Memory in the Case of *Obștea Vrânceană*\*

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*The system of collective property over forests that we find in Vrancea Region, obștea, has participation as fundamental principle. Each member of the obștea has the right to participate in the village assembly, in the voting process, equal right at the distribution of revenues. In this context, the sense of property that the members of the entitled communities manifest towards their collective forests is an element that becomes important, beyond any other elements like institutional arrangements or economical issues. This article tries to grasp the affective and material elements that form the sense of property on one side, and, on the other side, the sense of deprivation in the case of Obștea Vrânceană. Moreover, it offers theoretical insights for the study of these "hidden transcripts", the less obvious part of property, which is not sufficiently treated in the sociological and anthropological literature.*

## Background information<sup>1</sup>

In Romania, the immediate property reform in 1990 did not consider the restitution towards former juridical owners, such as villages. The restoration of *former village forests* took place very late after the fall of communism, in 2000, when the newly elected right-wing ruling coalition had as a declared target to undo mistakes of the law 18/1990 and to do "more" justice to the former owners, be they individuals or groups.

Of great importance in this discussion is that forests in pre-communist times were mostly owned by juridical bodies (48.5% of

total forest property, according to Cartwright, 2001, 115), like villages or common-descent groups, named *obști* or *composesorate*, who dissolved under the communist rule, becoming merely state property.

The subject of my paper is one of these collective private forms of property over forests, *obștea*, recently re-established on a decentralised foundation. My focus is on the communities from Vrancea Mountains (eastern part of the Carpathians) which have a particular evolution of property rights, comparing to other communities in Romania.

The ownership of forests in Vrancea Region might be called the "most collective" form of property in Romania, since there is

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no account for an individual precisely measured share, the village being the only entity that holds rights. The institution of *obște* is the actual juridical owning body (from a legal point of view it is not clear what the *obște* actually is – the most common juridical denomination is that of an association). It operates through an elected administrative structure, the *obște* council and the periodical village assembly (*adunarea generală*), all though it is a participative self-governance institution.

Briefly, this institution has as operational task the management of the common property (mainly forests and pastures), aiming to raise funds for the local development (through investments in infrastructure, small business or tourism activities). Invested profit reaches in some communities an amount of 80.000 euros. In fact, *obște* is the most powerful instance of rural development for the region (Măntescu, 2006).

The communities are heterogeneous concerning the economic performance of *obște* (Vasile, 2006a, 119). In a few cases, the management of the council is very good and the general assembly has an effective decision-making role. In some other cases, there is much talk about corruption and abuses involved and the visible economic outputs are at a very low level (*ibidem*). Mostly in these cases occur sharp conflicts and long trials, which severely hamper the activity of *obște* (*ibidem*, 119-120).

Besides the *obște*, there are also other forestry structures, the *ocol silvic*, which is responsible in the region for monitoring and guarding the resource. There are five such *ocoale silvice* for all the *obști* in Vrancea.

## Introduction

This paper aims to go beyond the discussion about economic performance of *obște* or the discussion about institutional arrangements briefly described above. It aims to analyze the symbolic meaning of this property form for the members of the commu-

nity and the sense of property that the villagers develop around it, from both material and sentimental points of view.

In this property regime, the individual does not hold any measurable right. He is not the owner of a precise plot, the only object to be owned here is the “right to be a member,” meaning the right to vote in the village assembly and to receive an annual quota of wood, constantly changing according to the population number and annual decisions about individual shares. He cannot look to his property and feel satisfied about his crops or large surface of land, or whatever other tangible entity.

In this situation and keeping in mind that the individual revenues from the forest are not very high<sup>2</sup>, one might think (in full liberal way) that the individual does not attach any value to the forests.

The article, I will argue that this is partly true, as long as we consider only the material meaning that people attach to property. People explicitly say, “I do not feel as a proprietor with only two cubic meters of timber”, but they attach feelings to this state of things, they show rage and feel deprived of their ancestral right. So, by virtue of sentimental value, they feel as proprietors. They manifest an oscillation between deprivation, based on the perceived economic value, and the feeling of actually being proprietors, based on memory and affective commitment.

The feeling of being a proprietor is difficult to define in theoretical terms. I see it mostly as a sense of ownership, which includes the functional and economic value of the property objects, but is not limited to it. It includes as well the awareness of the property rights, and, on top of all these, it includes the emotion of being an owner. In contemporary Romania, one often hears about the attachment that peasants feel towards their land, although in material terms the land became a burden, which requires more inputs than it produces economic outputs. In the case of Vrancea forests, the produced outputs exist, but they are mostly community returns, and are often thought about as being

illicitly appropriated by the powerful. Thus, the relationship between the individual and the forest is more complicated than the relationship between the peasant and his land. I see this feeling mostly as a process, as a dynamic and changing sentiment, which is difficult to grasp and to make clear-cut allegations about.

*The aim of the paper is to grasp these meanings, values or feelings, the way they contribute to narratives either of deprivation or of feeling as a proprietor. Another target is to analyze the way in which they are produced by different types of actors.*

I present the flow of these ideas (the concept belongs to Wolf, 1990, quoted in Nuijten, 2003) by analyzing narratives produced by different people. Even though I speak about deprivation, the narratives in this case are not “hidden transcripts” of dominated people, meaning narratives developed among the powerless about and against the powerful that are only voiced behind their backs. In some cases from Vrancea, the producers of these narratives overtly struggle either to take over power, or to impose their point of view in village assemblies.

I had the opportunity to do short inquiries on collective forests in other parts of Romania (2 villages in the Bucovina Region)<sup>3</sup>. The comparison proved spectacularly fruitful with respect to displayed meanings. In this region, as anywhere else in Romania excluding Vrancea, the system of establishing rights is genealogical (the member inherits the right after the death of their parents, the right is divided among brothers) and this form of property does not have a long history in the village. The economical returns are mainly individual advantages. It is mostly relevant that when the individual advantage is at stake, and individuals are not bounded to any sentimental customary foundations, they show against the collective regime. Almost exclusively, the value of the forest is a pragmatic one. Considering this comparison, what makes the Vrancea case outstanding is the affective bond, meaning the memory

of former practices and the historical legitimacy that keep the resource significant in people’s mind and life, although mostly deprived of its material value.

For reaching the above-mentioned aims, I consider several points in the discussion. Firstly, I will consider the “conflicting” narratives of feeling as a proprietor and of being deprived. Then, I try to see the two major components of these narratives, the material and the affective meaning of property. A very important point in the discussions with my informants is the periods to which they refer as references for comparison. I will treat the period before communism as the “narrative of access” and the communist period, the latter enabling the discussion of the narrative of functional property (state-owned, but functional for local people) as detached from the ownership dimension. The final discussion will be about the narratives of individualization or collectiveness<sup>4</sup>.

### **“Our forest does not belong to us”**

I will take two case studies to illustrate how sense of property might be understood through apparently contradictory discourse.

#### **Case 1**

This case is that of a younger person (N.C., age 44, village of Nereju). He proves a very good knowledge of the past, but not from his own experience, only from stories told by his parents; he is the son of a *chiabur* family that was oppressed when the communists took over power, his father was in prison for 8 years. He shows a strong attachment to the forest, by discourse and by effective involvement in the first attempts to legalize the collective property in 2000. He was one of the principal actors in the restoration process for his village, but retreated afterwards from all committees.

“The *obște* is us. What Stephen the Great gave us, this is our merit.[...] We must have the heart of true people of Vrancea, to prove that we are the heirs of Stephen.” “[...]”

Yes, it [the property] is ours, but if I cannot take it to the market to sell it, than I do not know why they [the executive committee and the forestry structures] argue that it is ours. I do not feel as a proprietor because I see that nothing is actually mine.”

We see in this case how the forest belongs to the villagers when the affective content is at stake and how it ceases to belong when they talk about material issues. The discourse moves from “*we*” to “*they*”, while *arguing for the idea of dispossession*.

### Case 2

This case is that of an older person (N.F., age 84, village of Spinești). First, he says, “People do not feel as proprietors anymore, because they use to go to the forest before without being asked any questions”. He places the reference before communism, emphasizing freedom of access and now, comparing to that period, one cannot feel as an owner. Few minutes later, he says that “now it is our property, because they restituted it by this law”. He places now the reference in communism, sees the change in the process of restitution and says that the forest now belongs to them. Then, when I try to make him aware of the contradiction in his thoughts, he tries to explain, “Yes, it is ours, the soil is ours, the forest is ours, but one cannot take wood without restrictions, it is under forestry regime. In the past property was property, nobody interfered. We were the masters, like I am the master of this house.” In this phrase, he makes the difference between ownership and use. Ownership is not complete, unless there is also right to use the resource freely. The interference of restriction is the one that limits him to feel as a proprietor. To be a proprietor is to be “the master” and to use. In this sense, the contradiction can be understood again as *a feeling of dispossession*.

Firstly, one important issue is that it is not possible to draw a clear-cut conclusion whether somebody considers himself a pro-

prietor or not. The same persons use in their discourse expressions like “our forest”, “our obște”, while saying, “It doesn’t belong to us”. It is commonplace knowledge in social anthropology that informants’ discourses are very often contradictory (Heady, Gambold Miller, 2006, 43). In my case, it has to do with variations of discourse according to discussed situations. One essential factor intervenes to structure the dissonance, as I tried to show in the discussed cases: whether they refer to the material or affective sense of property. Usually, when they talk about affective issues, the forest belongs to them, and when they talk about material meaning of property (including access and use of the resource), they feel dispossessed. It is obvious that people do not keep those analytical frameworks separated during their speech, and that is why one can find apparent contradictions.

### Who feels as a proprietor ?

Trying to solve contradictions, and to move away from a relativistic interpretation of discussing only situational sense of property, I “forced” people in the questionnaire survey to place themselves in the categories of “feeling as a proprietor” or “not feeling as a proprietor”. The result was that 42.2% feel as proprietors “a lot”, 32.7% feel as proprietors “to some extent” and 24.1% do not feel as proprietors at all.

Furthermore, from the survey I could make the portrait of those who feel as proprietors. They are usually indigenous (born in the village), elderly people without higher education, with larger individual property (hay fields and pastures), implicitly with larger livestock<sup>5</sup>. This portrait tells us that the “proprietors” are those with a more “traditional” profile. This profile corresponds to the category of people that are more actively involved in the village meetings, in other words those who manifest themselves more as proprietors. Thus, one might observe that they do not only declare their sense of prop-

Table 1. *How many villagers feel as proprietors ?*

Do you feel as a proprietor of the village forest ?	
A lot	42.2%
To some extent	32.7%
Not at all	24.1%
Total	100%

erty for the survey, but actually act as proprietors as well.

The variable of being better off in a traditional sense (owning hay fields and live-stock) is important because it has very much to do with the kind of experience that they had before communism. In this region, the traditional wealth of a household today is usually a sign of wealth throughout generations. Consequently, if somebody had the possibility to access the forest before communism (had good oxen), that experience will enhance his affective bond to the forest and at the same time, due to the break of access that he suffered during communism, he will tend to appreciate more the restitution of

forest. This does not mean that this category holds a stable and coherent sense of property. It is only a tendency to manifest sense of property more pregnant than the others are. They still display contradictions in their discourse and emphasize the negative aspects of the present.

Not only have the elders manifested a good sense of property. It is often the case when younger people do so, as in case 1.

Nonetheless, the percent of elderly people that feel a lot as proprietors is much higher than the same category of younger people, as showed in the table below. From the population above the age of 60, 59.9% feel

Table 2. *Crosstabulation. Comparison of sense of property and knowledge at the past at different ages*

Sense of property	Knowledge of the past		Sense of property		
	Below 60	Above 60	Below 60	Above 60	
<i>A lot</i>	31.1%	59.9%	<i>Good</i>	7.4%	23%
<i>To some extent</i>	37.9%	26.2%	<i>Weak</i>	15.9%	32.8%
<i>Not at all</i>	31%	13.9%	<i>Not at all</i>	76.7%	44.2%
	100%	100%		100%	100%

a lot as proprietors, comparing to the 31.1% of population below 60 who feel the same.

It is not the age itself and the experience embodied in age that constitutes the explanation, but it is the knowledge about the past (before communism) that determines property feelings<sup>6</sup>. In Skibris's terms, memories can be seen as a source of "emotional capital" (Heady, Gambold Miller, 2006: 34). Consequently, the emotional capital can be translated into sense of property.

As we can see in the table, the age itself does not necessarily induce a good knowledge about the past; good knowledge is a characteristic of only 23% of the people above 60.

The memory as emotional capital enhancer can be perceived twofold. Firstly, I consider memory as experience, as remembering past practices and secondly as collective memory, in the sense of a stock of knowledge about the past that circulates inside the

community, the communicative memory (Assman, 1995).

I showed in this section that the feeling of property over the forest commons depends mostly on the level of knowledge about the past. Through memories and communicated stories, this type of property gains emotional capital. Property appears significant and worthy in its affective meaning (see section on affective meaning for a more elaborate discussion), although the value diminishes when looking at the economical significance, as I will show in the next section.

### *Narratives of deprivation*

Most of my informants, although they placed themselves in the category of “feeling as a proprietor” expressed a certain ambivalence. The many negative things that they see nowadays happening with the forest, things over which they feel to have no influence at all make them argue that the forest is theirs only “with the name”, but not in practice.

#### *Case 3*

“Now the *obște* is ours, by name, but others eat it. The bosses do what they want, the president with his subordinates. For me, I do not have the right to take anything without papers. I should better buy it directly from others.” (V.S., Praznicel, age 75, village of Haulisca)

Here we see the idea of deprivation through the metaphor of “eating”. This metaphor appears many times in interviews. It expresses the idea of use and fulfillment of basic needs. The old man makes the difference in power between the committee and ordinary villagers. Those without power are deprived of their “right to use”, by the bosses and through the mechanism of imposing formalities (through the bureaucracy, the discourse encompasses the idea of state in the background).

#### *Case 4*

“We are not even allowed to go and check what is happening in the forest without

announcing this in public. What kind of control might it be then? [...] We are not the masters of the forest anymore. They extract, they make auctions, they sell, and we know absolutely nothing.” (V.R., age 50, village of Vranceoiaia)

In this case, the repeated term “they” points out the lack of control expressed through the lack of information. This is one of the quite rare cases where the idea of being a proprietor is not associated with the idea of use, but with the idea of participation and monitoring. Thus, deprivation occurs through vitiating the democratic practice and transparency.

#### *Case 5*

“The village’s forest is now in the hands of thieves, they handle it. The forest belongs to the president together with the forestry department.” (P.B., age 55, village of Nereju)

Here appears explicitly the idea of corruption, applied to the committee and to the local forestry authorities. The fact that “they handle” and “the forest belongs to them” includes deprivation on every level.

The concept of deprivation includes the illegitimate state of things. All discourses above contain reference to injustice. The man in case 4, who is only 50 years old, refers to a regime where people were masters<sup>7</sup>, even if he did not experience it directly, precisely to underline illegitimacy.

It is very important to observe that people usually understand very well how the forest regime functions *de jure*. Most of them, albeit they did not experience a better period, have certain expectations according to the bundle of rights that they legally and equally hold.

They hold a certain idea about access and use. *Access* should be free for a man with his oxen or horse, and the extracted quantity should fulfill basic needs. They also have a certain idea about *participation and power*. Power should be equally distributed among owners; they should be listened to or should at least be informed about decisions that are made.

In all these dimensions, the owners feel deceived and though deprived.

The question that arises at a more abstract level is “precisely, what is it that is been illegitimately taken away?”, what is the object of deprivation? Is it the right, or is it the effective wood? They refer to a deprivation of rights (case 3). However, I would rather call it differently according to which dimension we consider. If we consider *the dimension of use*, it might be a deprivation of *tangible benefits*, like wood, since they have to pay taxes, transportation or bribes, which in the end make them abandon the idea of getting wood. If we consider *the access dimension*, namely the physical access that people complain about, it might be deprivation of *right* to go into the forest and to chop and pull wood. *Obște* institutions in certain villages explicitly deny access and employ professionals for these operations (*cărăuși*). When speaking about the dimension of *participation*, one is deprived of *the right* to be a part of the decision making process (through the village assembly).

How could we understand deprivation and what are its sources?

*The multi-dimensional deprivation* has to be understood as different from removal of rights. The removal of rights occurred during the communist regime when the complete bundle of rights was handed to the state. The deprivation might be understood as a divergence between projected practices (the ideas that they hold about access, participation and power), and real practices. It consists in a process of twisting the practice against the villagers, due to divergent interpretations of the same statutory regulations<sup>8</sup>. The source of deprivation is the interpretation that the committee might give, sometimes on purpose to cover illegalities or to preserve power in few hands, and the way practices are bound to develop from this interpretation, against the interests of certain categories of villagers. *Thus, I am tempted to identify the source of the deprivation ideology in the instability of practices. Since practices are not yet embodied in a well-established pattern, people can*

*easily claim that they are as illegitimate, if they contradict their ideas or interests.*

Who precisely produces deprivation?

In the light of the findings above, the deprivation agent has to be the one that makes use of the instability of practices in order to drive them in the directions that he considers fit (or that serves best his own interest).

We saw in the presented cases that the first agent of deprivation is the president, together with his more “pale” councillors. They are usually seen to be accomplice with the local forestry authorities (*ocol silvic*), namely the rangers and the more invisible bureaucratic structure inside the forestry department who decides annual quotas and places to harvest. The forestry authorities, although almost entirely privatized are still apprehended as a state structure (see below for more detail).

For several of my informants, the malevolent instance is external, seen as some diffuse powerful entity, partly as a state administrative structure (more central one such as legislators, ministry, or local one such as county department) and partly as a political structure. People think that the persons who are part of this combination held certain interests, material as well as ideological, in the property issues of the area. However, this idea of externally driven deprivation, although expressed in various forms throughout many interviews, does not appear as important as the locally driven deprivation.

People usually associate a certain type of economical behavior (free-riding, corruption) with power positions. There is a pattern of the culpable leader as a structure that reproduces itself in many forms and is embodied in the agencies of different actors in the villages and beyond it.

What is the explicit connection between deprivation and sense of property?

The centrality of discussing deprivation in a chapter about sense of property came to my mind while analyzing people’s answers to questions about feeling as a proprietor. In different formulas, they say, “We do not

feel as proprietors because we feel deprived”. Logically, this is not correct, because one is deprived only of something that he is entitled with. Therefore, in order to feel deprived, first, they must feel entitled with something and here we already have a kind of sense of property. I see the relationship between sense of property and deprivation in terms of an assault. This deprivation feeling deteriorates the sentiment of owning.

In this context, one must strive to understand what counterbalances this sense of deprivation in order to be able to declare “I feel as a proprietor a lot”, for example when somebody asks for a survey answer. The deprivation refers mostly to material issues. However, the sense of property is not one-sided, is not only about the material value, it is also about affective value. I think that this affective bond is the counterbalance and the “special something” that the forest property in Vrânceană Region has.

In the next section, I will separate the two components of the sense of property, material and affective, and analyze what meanings are contained in each of them.

### *Components of property sense*

**Material meaning. Property = access & use**  
Usually, when the topic of the forest comes to the forefront in discussions, people tend to associate it firstly with economic returns. This incentive appears equally to argue for or against the sense of property: the satisfied ones say, “We are proprietors because we take our share of timber and firewood”, while the unsatisfied say, “We have to pay for this wood,” or “It is not enough what they give us.”

An important element is that this economic return is not seen as a profit, but as the fulfillment of a basic need. The use defines the property, rather than the value of owning or accumulating capital.

Linked with this definition of property as a use-right, while looking closer to the interviews, one might notice that the sense of property is more *about the access to the forest*, the way they acquire this return.

Through the interviews, sense of property is devolved through access in multiple ways<sup>9</sup>. The strongest idea is that of the concrete physical access. One has property when they go to the forest and cut down the trees themselves. Property gives this freedom. However, the freedom is rational, limited (in the sense that Rousseau gives) by the fulfillment of need, the proprietor “goes to the forest and cuts down as much as he needs”.

For them, the ecological security of the use-right is central to this collective arrangement. Contrary to what somebody might think considering the “tragedy of the commons” paradigm (Hardin, 1968), these people seem to argue that a commons regime limits the individual in his attempt to deplete the forest. They say that the villagers would cut down irrationally only if the forest would be handed over as individual property (see section below on indivisibility). Thus, they are aware that the liberty of the total owner is different from the liberty that they have; nonetheless, they perceive theirs as better in an ecological sense.

Another way in which property is understood as liberty of access is towards the market. Several informants told me that a proprietor has to be free to go and sell his wood anywhere. Selling is a source of livelihood, since it is designated to buy other necessary goods and not to make a profit<sup>10</sup>. This conception is again oriented rather towards a customary way of seeing property than towards a capitalist conception of market economy.

The analysis above leads us to a preliminary conclusion about the meaning that people attach to the expression “being a proprietor”. In this regime, property over the forest means mainly *to access the resource in order to be able to make a use of it*. This definition sounds very “traditional”. It seems to be very close to the pre-communist way of dealing with the forest.

**Affective meaning. Property = Memory**  
Alongside with the material meaning there is the affective meaning of the forest. This affective meaning refers to the emotional charge displayed when remembering or invoking

the past. The past of my informants involves the distant past of origins and the more recent past of modern times, which is conceived in dynamic terms of activities like harvesting and going to the market.

Usually, emotions come to the forefront when discussing about the forest in terms of collective inheritance and ancestral justice for mountain communities that have no other source of livelihood.

One important element of collective memory, which shapes the affective dimension, is the myth of property origins.

The legend tells us that Stephen the Great in the 16<sup>th</sup> century endows the founders of seven villages for their military merits with the Vrancea Mountains. This legend has many believers to this day. When I opened the discussion about *obște*, most of my informants started by telling me “this forest is our legacy from Stephen the Great”. Even though many versions of the story that I have heard lack elementary logic, the villagers, even the educated ones, believe in it.

The legend of the seven sons to whom the mountains were donated serves for double purpose, for strengthening identity, village (common descent from one of the brothers) as well as regional identity (the local founders are related to a regional, supraordinated founder, the old woman Vrâncioaia) and, on the other hand, for legitimizing property over the mountains from “once upon a time”.

In Vrancea, the link of a certain village to a certain mountain or forest area is not obvious through spatial arrangement<sup>11</sup>. Thus, it seems that in Vrancea the mountain property does not belong to a population by virtue of some sort of “natural” bond between the settlement and the surrounding territory, developed over a long period. The bond was created through practice.

Stephen gave this property to the *vrânceni* as a legacy, they fought for it in the past and thus, the contemporary *vrânceni* have to defend it as well. I encountered this idea in almost all conversations I had.

Some informants see the property over the mountains as a compensation for the in-

habitants, since they do not possess arable land in the plains. The idea of equity between larger units – the inhabitants of plains and the inhabitants of mountains, was established through an act of justice, made by the greatest *domnitor* of Moldavians. Here appears also the difficult livelihood of mountain men, comparing to the easy life in the prosperous plains. The historical act contributes to the balance of this inequality.

The legend stands for a source of legitimacy for the present property arrangement. Many of my informants cannot conceive the divisibility of the resource, since this is “the old way”, collective property is more than a commodity or a good, is a “historical fact”, a “given”.

In the light of the initial act everything appears indubitable (*e.g.* the unequal distribution of forests in terms of distance or quantity is seen as fair, since “this is the way that Stephen gave it to us”). As I have shown above the legend is a source of legitimacy for present “structural” conditions of this regime, it solves potential inner and outer conflicts that might stem from perceived inequalities or inequities. The legitimacy of Vrancea’s property regime feeds itself with the charisma and authority beyond doubt of the greatest *domnitor* of Moldavia. In people’s representation, the legendary “given” is immutable and thus the organisation principles cannot be changed at an ordinary man’s will.

The second way of transforming past times in emotional capital is, as I have mentioned before, remembering and story telling. I showed above that a stronger sense of property is associated with a better knowledge of the past. Remembering how “we used to live with the forest” enhances nostalgia, contributing to the formation of personal identity. Story telling maintains collective local identity and it refers to personalities and events (achievements, fights) around the *obște* and the forest. The symbolic and affective dimension of property is thus strongly nourished through the mechanism of contributing to the creation of identity, local and personal.

**Material versus symbolic meaning – discussion**

The powerful affective meaning appears as a source of enforcement for the sense of property, while the material side manifests itself in the form of deprivation ideas.

One of my informants expresses explicitly this idea of the affective counterbalancing the material, saying that “I have no advantage [n.a. from the forest], but this soul of mine does not live me alone... my ancestors fought the war together with Stephen the Great...” (A.C., age 51, Nereju village).

Comparing the two meanings of property, the more material meaning of “use” and the more affective of historical inheritance, one might observe that they belong to different registers – property as use is a functional property and property as historical legacy is based on the significance of ownership, property as “belonging to”. Frequently, the commons are associated more with the idea of property as function (Grossi, 1981, quoted in Wiber, 1991, 470). Therefore, it is important to assess the ownership dimension.

**Reference periods****Before communism**

Throughout the chapter, there is one obvious idea – the period before communism highly contributes to the enhancement of sense of property, through the different mechanisms of memory. I showed above the emotional dimension that this period brings to the current members. I also showed that the material value is currently perceived through a traditional lens, sending us back to this period.

Nevertheless, the people’s perception about this period is far more differentiated. To a certain degree, this period serves as a double-edged weapon, because, despite the positive contribution to the sense of property, it might as well make one feel deprived in the present, in the light of positive past events.

In the next section, my aim is to analyze the way different categories of people perceive this period.

Firstly, evidence from the quantitative survey shows that 36.5% of the population has knowledge of the past<sup>12</sup> (before the communism). From these, only 37.6% have “good” and “very good” knowledge, a percent of 13.7 of the total population. Most of these people are elders, men, and rich people in a traditional sense, own larger hay fields, pastures and livestock<sup>13</sup>.

The majority of those who possess information about the old *obște* manifest the tendency to evaluate the past highly positive, compared to the present. 80.9% appreciate that there was more freedom to access the forest, 71.1% consider that the old *obște* achieved more for the village. There is no striking difference in the expressed opinion among villages; they all go more or less in the same direction. The observed differences occur because of the different situations at that time (*e.g.* in Nereju, people perceive more freedom for the people to access the forest because it is the village nearest to the forest, in Vrâncioaia, the achievements were significant indeed, as described in the historical chapter):

Table 3. Perception about old *obște* (before communism) across villages

Village	More freedom for the people to access the forest (yes)	The old <i>obște</i> achieved more for the village (yes)
Vrâncioaia	78.1%	83.3%
Negrilești	67.9%	61.3%
Nereju	83.9%	58.3%
<i>Total</i>	80.9%	71.1%

One category of people (~30 %) perceives the past equivalent to the present in negative terms. To this category belong most of the well-informed villagers, people that hold good information about past personalities and events and display a very good knowledge of the present situation. Their complaints about both periods concern the depletion of forest and the corruption. Equal depletion is a complaint that occurs mostly in the village of Nereju, because of the location near to the mountain. Indeed, from Nereju it is visible how loaded trucks are driven out of the mountains (~10 per day). Thus, the present concern about ecological disaster recalls the symmetrical past element of “carrying the mountains away with the little forestry train”.

A small category perceives the past negatively compared to the present. They are usually persons in their 50s or 60s who emphasise rudimentary means of extraction in the past as a shortcoming in gaining profit for the community.

When not asked about specific issues from the past, but only general questions like “how was it in former times?” most of the elder people (from all villages) spontaneously give account about good old times where there was freedom to access the forest and where everybody made their livelihood out of harvesting and trading wood. Market is seen as a positive thing and exchange of goods is highly valued. The harsh transportation conditions and the long distance from the market (approx 90 km away from the villages) are not seen as an impediment for the well-being of households. Most of these issues are valued now because people do not access the forest as easily as they did before, the quantity of wood that they can harvest is limited, they have not free access on remote markets, and they perceive that the State limits them nowadays.

Usually people think about the past in better terms because of *individual* economical returns from the forest (the liberty to harvest, the value attached to sawmills and to markets – are linked to the economical return). Nevertheless, these revenues are not

perceived as financial profit, but only the fulfilment of households’ subsistence needs.

When remembering the period before communism, the communitarian dimension is most often left aside, in favour of accounts about individual actions and uses. In most villages, this image fits the reality of former times. If one looks at the current reality, sees that the balance reversed, communitarian investments are preferred to distribution of larger individual shares. In some cases, the individual is not even allowed to enter the forest for harvesting his limited share.

Through this account, it becomes understandable why people who lived in that period feel deprived and say that they do not feel proprietors. The material aspect of property diminished, in the form of use and access.

Of course, if it were for me to judge their judgements, I would say that they are not fair to the present regime, because it is impossible to give free access to everybody the way it was in the past. Nevertheless, most of them are aware of this fact, and still cannot escape from their unfair feeling. The things have moved at a more advanced technological stage, some of their neighbours took the step further, and bought electric woodchoppers, yet their ideas about access remained backward, “unaccustomed” to present technological conditions. I explained this lack of balance between ideas and actual conditions, through the fact that ideas about practices are still embodied in the old “code” of customary ways, as the only one available as coherent and legitimate.

The role of this period in shaping the sense of property is ambivalent. On one hand, it enhances the “emotional capital”, thus the sense of property (as explained above). On the other hand, in its material aspects, it acts as a source of deprivation, by providing an established set of practices related to access, to which people refer, a set that does not fit the present conditions (legal restrictions, advanced technology).

### *Narratives of collectiveness*

In other parts of Romania where I conducted short fieldworks I could observe (as I noticed in the introduction) the strong desire for individualisation of collective forests. There, the institution of *obște*, although it exists, it is not as powerful as in Vrancea, and nobody thinks about the communitarian dimension of property, about the community achievements to be drawn out of it. There, the only benefits are the individual shares that everybody gets.

I will not enter into a detailed comparative description; I just wanted to underline that the largely communitarian dimension of the Vrancea forest regime is the difference from all other collective forest regimes.

Until now, the discussion was more about individual access and use; about people feeling deprived because their individual need cannot be fulfilled. Would it be reasonable to identify the deep cause of all this distress in the “tragedy of the commons”? Do people argue that the collective character of the property regime hamper their own individual interests?

In this final section, I want to grasp the nature of the *collective* dimension of property feelings in Vrancea by putting it in contrast with the idea of dividing the forests among villagers.

The idea of division did not occur spontaneously in discussion. Most of the issues I will discuss in this section are a result of the researcher challenging the informants with questions like “Do you think it would have been better if the forest had been returned individually?” or “Do you think that the solution for the misgivings would be the division?”.

The evidence of the quantitative survey shows that the supporters of division are not a majority: only 41% of the population.

Regarding the attitude towards the division of forests, I drew a typology, which might be seen as an ordinal scale going from “pro division” to “against division”:

- (1) those who are for the individualisation;
- (2) those who argue for a division into smaller units than the present ones, but not for the total individualisation;
- (3) those who are against individualisation for various rational reasons;
- (4) those who are into the collective idea so much that they cannot even imagine it divided.

The typology is based on selected interviews (29), in which occurs the discussion about the division<sup>14</sup>. The distribution of answers in the set of interviews is given below:

For people in category (1), who think that the individualisation would be better than the current regime, the main arguments are of the type “tragedy of the commons”, based on increased responsibility, “I would not deplete my own forest”, “I would care for it to leave it to my heirs”. Others step out from the tragedy of the commons, highlighting the inequitable distribution of power involved in collective regimes, “The ranger would be than subordinated to me”.

### *Case 5 Land hunger and forest hunger*

One “extreme” case, an old man (age 80) manifests an outstanding mercantile vision towards the forest property. He is the only one of my informants who told me that his share of the forest would be 5 hectares together with his wife and he consulted a lawyer in order to see if it was possible to divide his share of the rest of the *obște* property. He is very much into calculations, like how much wood would be allowed to chop in one year and how much money would it

Table 4. *Distribution of opinions about the division according to qualitative/quantitative data*

Category	Interviews (29)	Questionnaires (304)
(1)pro	17.2%	41.2%
(2)pro*	6.9%	
(3)against	41.4%	58.8%
(4)against	34.5%	
		75.9%

mean. He already owns a plot of 2 hectares of forest and he claims another 3 (apart from the *obște* property). He manifests a constant “hunger of land”, he bought hay fields although he inherited a considerable plot, now his land property is about 20 hectares, which is a lot for the Vrancea Region.

Most interesting is that after he got the share from the *obște* forest, he would sell it entirely to the state, to make a good profit out of it.

Up to the point where he wants to sell it to the state, his discourse has a strong resemblance with the discourses of people in Bucovina region. It is important although to notice that what appears to be a commonplace reasoning in Bucovina, through my data becomes a striking outlier.

People in category (2) are a small number of cases, only 2. They argue for the dismantling of *obște* into smaller pieces, but see the impossibility of total division because of the unequal quality of the forest. However, they think that into smaller pieces, there could be more control, though a better coordination. By smaller pieces, they mean less people involved (and not less soil to “keep an eye on”), calculating the division according to number of people “We are 3000 members, so I think into 3 pieces, 1000 people would be more reasonable.” (I.V., age 64, village of Nereju). Thus, the problem with participation bothers them more than the effective control of the forest itself. These local theories seem to go in the same direction with the collective action theory by Mancur Olson, arguing for the optimal number of persons involved (Olson, 1965).

For category (3) people argue against the individualisation by deploying instrumental reasons of avoiding chaos, conflicts and the depletion of the forest. In the case of division, they see their fellow villagers as eventually turning one against the other, greedy to extract wood, and make profit. One of my informants who worked as a police officer in the village of Nistorești (in Vrancea as well), reports that in that village more people had individual plots and that there was reported

an increased number of thefts and an increased rate of violence.

Another instrumental reason would be the resulting alienability of forest, thus the breakdown of equality between households, the creation of legitimately very rich fellow villagers.

A few informants in this category (3) see the priority in the interest of the community and argue that the villages will definitely remain backward in terms of infrastructure if the forests are divided.

Reasoning in category (4) might be best understood in Max Weber’s concept of *traditionally oriented rationality* (Weber, 1904). In this category, people do not conceive the divisibility of the forest, because it is somehow by nature a common property. They say, “This does not exist, the forest belongs to all villagers” or explicitly, “this is tradition, we inherited it undivided”, or argue with the legendary legitimacy, “when Stephen gave it to us, he gave it undivided”. In this respect, the traditional side of reasoning seems to touch more on the affective meaning of property.

Two of my informants see this kind of property so distinctive, as a “thing” that does not fit in the word “property” at all. The denomination of proprietors is only for those who enclosed forest before communism, merely for those who own individual plots. To illustrate this idea, I give the discourse of one of my informants who showed outraged by my question about feeling as a proprietor of the *obște* forest, and as an answer, he gave me a beautiful account of the *obște* as a historically undivided soil :

### ***Case 6. The immutable traditional sense***

“There is no such thing [as proprietor]. From the *obște*, this tradition exists... One cannot be a proprietor, because it had never been like that. It is a historical fact, it is a given from Stephen the Great.” (D.T., age 75, village of Negrileşti)

For him, the sense of property over the forests is explicitly something different from the sense of individual property. The thing that gives its uniqueness is the historical meaning. In his conception, the perpetuated tradition of the initial act gives to this property an immutable sense.

The analysis presented in this section proves that the “collective” dimension is a very well established characteristic of the regime. Indivisibility is supported by both rational-instrumental and traditional types of reasoning.

## Conclusion

In the beginning of the chapter, property appears as a contradictory construct. It is referred to in terms of both “our forest and their decisions”. The signalled contradiction stems from the balance in narratives between the rhetoric of deprivation and the rhetoric of feeling as a proprietor. Furthermore, this balance can be understood by referring to the twofold meaning involved. I have shown that the meaning of forest property in Vrancea Region moves back and forth between material and affective dimensions, accounting either for property as “use”/“functional” or for property as “ownership” including affective/symbolic dimension. In narratives, the property discussed is conceived in both ways. People emphasise one or the other according to the issue discussed or according to their experiences.

However, no matter how much I would like to formulate a more general assumption, the mechanism above is not valid for all other kinds of property. Especially, it does not function for other kinds of contractual or almost newly formed commons. It is

the traditional foundation and the historical legacy that enhances the affective meaning of this regime and gives the “emotion” and symbolism of ownership. Through historical legacy, I mean not only the myth of origin, but also the bond to the period before communism and to the practices of that period.

The anthropological literature suggests that both rational self-interest and emotional commitments are needed in order to act properly in the economic field (Heady, Gambold Miller, 2006, 50). Generally, the emotional side is harder to achieve, because it depends on structural incentives, on long-term relationships. In our case, I am tempted to state that the instrumental rationality of relating to the common forest will be achieved through a good performance of the actors involved in the property management, thus through actions dependent on agencies of local actors.

From their narratives about the past, both pre-socialist and socialist, one important thing to be considered is *the set of established practices of access and use*. This set makes the property more functional for lay people. Otherwise, the deprivation ideas seem to invade to the more “idealistic” emotion/symbol of ownership.

The idea of community and “collective” property is not important in the instrumental sense, as community returns, but in respect to common, shared identity and traditions.

Thus, my study asserts that a regime of common property is not all about calculations, performance, material value and revenues. It might contain a very strong affective/symbolic dimension, based on different mechanisms related to memory. In this case, the symbolic dimension is the one that keeps people interested and involved in the processes related to their forest property.

## Notes

1. For a detailed descriptive discussion, see Vasile, 2006a, Vasile, 2006b and Măntescu, 2006.
2. For a two adults household, about 80 euros, approximately 5% from the total annual household income.
3. In 2006 I did a 20 days fieldwork in the Dorna Valley, the village of Poiana Negri and in the Suha Bucovineana Region, the village of Gemenea.

4. The methods used for this article combine quantitative with qualitative data; I have a questionnaire survey of 304 cases, random sample in 4 villages, and 120 interviews from 10 villages.
5. Significant correlations between variable “sense of property” and “born in the village”, age, education, individual property surface, number of large animals owned.
6. Idea also visible through statistical significant correlation between variable measuring knowledge about the past and variable measuring sense of property.
7. Suggested by the word “anymore”, “we are not masters anymore”.
8. E.g. An assembly is legally constituted if it consists of 50% + 1. In some villages this number is never reached, so a committee is entitled to decide by itself. This inconsistency could be avoided only by local informal arrangements. Nevertheless, it depends again upon the good will of the committee, if it makes a call for an informal arrangement to enable the participation or not.
9. Access in the context of natural resources studies might be defined as “the ability to benefit from things”(Ribot, Peluso, 2003); the access issue for the Vrancea *obști* is described in Vasile, 2006b, 110-113.
10. One of my informants says, “*It is our property, our forest, than let us go with these 2 m<sup>3</sup> to the market and let us bring home to the mountains corn and bread... we don't eat wood here*”. (N.C., age 44, village of Nereju).
11. The forests are all located in two areas: in the western and south-western part of the area, where the Carpathian Mountains border the region, while the settlements are spread along the river valleys. Only two of the villages are positioned next to the mountain (the Nereju village to the southwest and Tulnici to the west), while some of the villages are even 80 km away from their forest (the village of Negrileşti); see the map enclosed.
12. I measured knowledge of the past, asking about specific events and what do they remember from that period and then appreciate this knowledge on a 4 items scale (very good knowledge, good, poor knowledge, total lack of knowledge).
13. All 4 variables (age, sex, surface of pasture plus hay field, livestock) correlate significantly with the variable measuring knowledge of the past at  $p < 0.01$ .
14. We can observe in the table below that the difference in percentage between qualitative and quantitative analysis is of 16%, which means that we cannot treat the quantification of answers in the qualitative analysis as representative measures, but more as an illustrative set. That is why, in this case, the qualitative helps us more to understand the underlying mechanisms for attitudes “in favour of” or “against” division.

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