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Studying and comparing abandoned farmlands from the social sciences: power, resources, and narratives

7 July 2026, 9.00-16.00

MSH Sud – salle Kouros site Saint Charles 2 (Montpellier) -

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Farmland abandonment -i.e., a reduction or even a cessation of agricultural activities, associated with a shift in land cover due to vegetation succession, is a major contemporary global land process. Initially, farmland abandonment has been mostly considered through induced risks, especially i) natural/ecological hazards – i.e., biodiversity losses, soil erosion, desertification, fire risk, and/or landscape closure; ii) socio-economic and sovereign risks, i.e., land occupation/use by marginal social groups (e.g., migrants, fugitives), foreign invasion. Recently, abandoned farmlands have been increasingly perceived as land of opportunity, that is, ‘empty’, ‘waste’ or ‘vacant’ lands made available for new uses in the context of climate change and increased land pressure. Three main re-use strategies are promoted

- Carbon uptake and compensation initiatives, through the implementation of “rewilding” initiatives and “nature-based solutions”;
- The implementation of renewable energy infrastructures – e.g., photovoltaics or bioenergy ;
- Agricultural re-development, for food security or agroecology transition.

So far, farmland abandonment and re-use have been mostly studied from land change and environmental sciences perspective, with a focus on drivers (Subedi et al., 2022) and trade-off (van der Zanden et al., 2017; Zheng et al., 2023). However, a few social scientists began analysing these processes, focusing particularly on conflicts for both their framing and future uses. This workshop aims to initiate a fruitful dialogue between social science scholars working on abandoned farmlands in different contexts. Special attention will be paid to (past and present) conflicts over the future of these spaces. By discussing and comparing different abandonment/re-use configurations, we will analyse this global contemporary phenomenon in relation to broader agrarian and socio-economic transformations – e.g., land rush and consolidation, planetary urbanization, or green grabbing.

Program

9.00-9.15: Introductory remarks

9.15-10.00: **Theresa Frei** (European Forest Institute, Governance Programme) – **Stories of abandonment: natural forest expansion and the politics of rewilding in Southwestern Europe**



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In this presentation, I will explore how land abandonment and natural forest succession are discursively constructed across different contexts. Drawing on case studies of natural forest expansion in Southwestern Europe and perception research of rewilding abandoned land across the continent, I will discuss the key conflicts and challenges that emerge from these processes. The presentation will further reflect on how the critical social sciences can contribute to addressing these conflicts, particularly by connecting local realities of land abandonment with broader governance and policy frameworks in the Global North.

10.00-10.45: Alexander Vorbrugg (University of Bern, Institute of Geography) – Concerns with rural land abandonment: On measuring and politics

Abandoned rural land is increasingly being presented as a reserve that could be utilised for carbon sequestration, ecosystem restoration, agricultural expansion, or other purposes. Controversies arise around the often implicit and inaccurate assumptions of the availability and malleability of such land. This, in turn, has led to tensions between approaches based on remote sensing, econometrics, and environmental sciences, which dominate studies of rural land abandonment, and critical approaches that accuse them of abstracting from local realities and being insensitive to questions of power and the histories of dispossession under the claim of empty lands. Yet, as I argue in this presentation, remote sensing and other data-driven approaches are constitutive for abandoned rural land as an object of knowledge and subject to politics, and cannot be simply replaced by situated or participatory approaches. A critical dialogue between different ways of knowing abandoned land is necessary. On a conceptual level, the distinction between “matters of fact” and “matters of concern” is useful for this purpose. At the methodological level, the particularities of land abandonment invite reflection and experimentation with novel ways of bridging approaches.

Coffee break

11.00-11.45: Amelia Veitch (EHESS & University of Lausanne) - Permanent scrub, never forest. The politics of abandoned farmland in France.

Scientific literature often frames farmland abandonment as a pathway to natural afforestation. In France, however, uncultivated plots grown over by shrub vegetation – known as friche (scrub) – have long been politically constructed as degraded environments in need of repurposing. In today’s context of land scarcity, friches are increasingly targeted as sites for Green Transition projects, raising questions of green grabbing. This piece traces how state officials mobilise regulation, planning and mapping to enclose diverse and evolving ecosystems into a fixed category of land use, making them legible, governable and ultimately ripe for reclamation – a typical frontier-making practice. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in rural Brittany and media analysis, I situate these practices within a broader capitalist logic of internal territorial expansion. At stake in this process of forest denial is a narrative struggle: who has the power to define what a forest is and whose environmental knowledge counts as legitimate? While multispecies entanglements offer a lens to appreciate such ecological complexity, I argue that ‘staying with the (shrubby) trouble’ in such cases of ecological uncertainty is insufficient to contest state power. Reframing friches as (would-be) forests may offer a more powerful counter-narrative against their ongoing reclamation.

11.45-12.30: **George Iordachescu** (Wageningen University) – **Europe’s green frontiers: Rethinking wilderness protection from the margins of Europe**

This communication critically examines the uneven geographies of the European conservation agenda and shows how yet-to-be-issued prioritization mechanisms could end up targeting only certain areas which are considered biodiversity hotspots while ignoring the complex socio-environmental relations existing on the ground and thus raising issues of social and environmental injustice. Building on political ecology approaches, and grounded in over ten years of ethnographic engagements in various mountain areas of Southern and Eastern Europe, this intervention will examine the spatial contours of wilderness protection initiatives across the European peripheries to contextualize how green growth by conservation could deepen existing environmental and social injustices.

Lunch break

13.30-14.15: **Rebekka Dossche** (University of Genova) -**From Fields to Frameworks: A Holistic Perspective on Land Abandonment**

Since land abandonment is a multi-dimensional process shaped by physical, environmental, social, and economic factors, research often remains limited in scope. In particular, demographic change, cultural values, and policy dimensions are still insufficiently understood and require further investigation. Studies addressing social impacts - especially in terms of quality of life - are scarce, and the role of local stakeholders and case studies remains underestimated. Given this complexity, abandoned landscapes cannot be treated as a single subcategory of Mediterranean landscapes. Their diversity and often polarized trajectories call for detailed, landscape-level analyses and place-based approaches to better inform locally grounded and effective policy responses. This contribution, illustrated through a case study in the Northern Apennines (Italy), examines agricultural abandonment alongside woodland expansion. Moving beyond land use and land cover changes, it frames abandoned landscapes in relation with demographic decline, socio-economic marginalization, and territorial remoteness.

14.15-15.00: **Alys Chaffey Ferdin** (INRAE, UMR Innovation), **Benoit Daviron** (CIRAD, UMR MOISA), **Hadrien Di Roberto** (CIRAD, UMR ART-Dev), **Antoine Ducastel** (CIRAD, UMR ART-Dev), **Armand Galy** (CIRAD, UMR ART-Dev), **Lucile Garcon** (INRAE, UMR Innovation), **Coline Perrin** (INRAE, UMR Innovation), and **Marie-Olive Thauray** (INRAE, UMR Innovation) - **Abandoned agricultural lands: The last agrarian frontier?**

This communication aims to better understand what the (diversity of) frontier studies tell us about abandoned farmlands and, conversely, what abandoned farmlands tell us about (contemporary) frontiers. Based on a critical literature review of different frontier frameworks (i.e., commodity- or resource-driven, space of frictions, etc.), and ongoing analysis and fieldwork on the political ecology of abandoned farmlands in the Ivory Coast, France, and Italy, we study the socio-historical making of these particular spaces in different contexts, as well as the current policy-making processes to turn them into resources.

