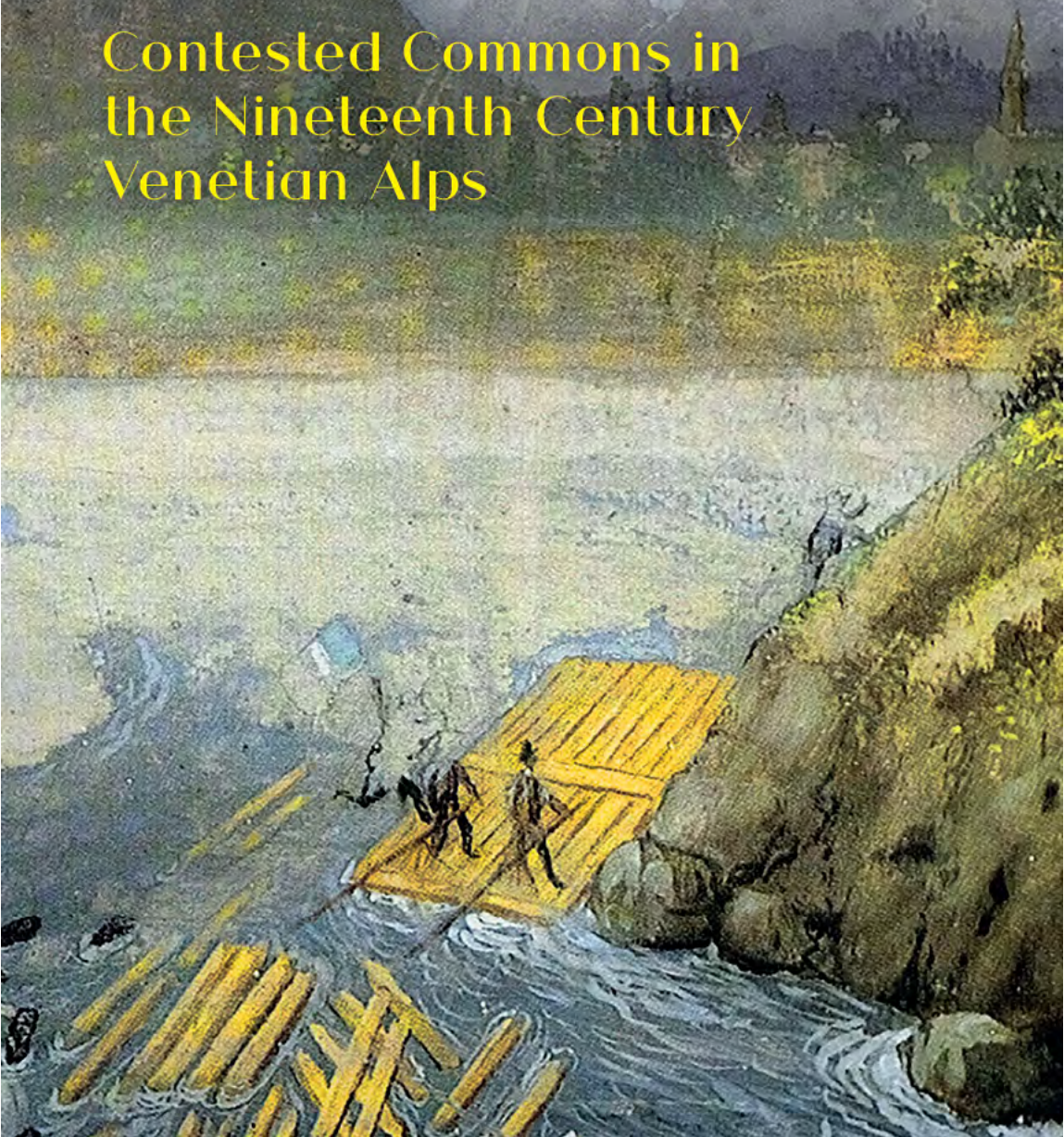


Giacomo Bonan

The State in the Forest

Contested Commons in
the Nineteenth Century
Venetian Alps



Sample excerpt from

**THE STATE IN THE FOREST.
CONTESTED COMMONS IN THE
NINETEENTH CENTURY VENETIAN ALPS**

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First published 2019 by
The White Horse Press, The Old Vicarage, Main Street, Winwick,
Cambridgeshire, UK

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-912186-08-2

Cover image 'Giacomo Della Lucia called Bozze miraculously saved with three raftmen, 7 May 1883, ex voto'. Source: Church of Beata Vergine dei Caduti (Belluno).

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the theme of the commons (both as common land and as common rights over land) has been the focus of much attention. This interest, I believe, stems from the growing concern for environmental issues in academia and, more widely, in the public sphere. This is because the commons is a field of study where the links between environmental, social and political problems (and conflicts) are more evident.¹ It is in this context that the historical approach assumes particular relevance, since it allows us to reflect on the dynamic and conflictual construction of territorial structures and on the active role played by local actors in these processes.²

The most recent studies on this theme have been mainly concerned with the organisational aspect of the commons, focusing particularly on the *ancien régime*, a period in which specific local institutions were often associated with these lands. Less attention has been paid to the following period, when these bodies were no longer formalised and legitimised at the institutional level, leading to the criminalisation of the traditional use of their associated resources, rather than the disappearance of these practices.³ In much of Europe, this process should be placed within the context of the comprehensive socio-economic change that transformed the continent between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and one of whose features was the drive towards agrarian individualism.⁴

The development of agrarian individualism, at the expense of more open and hybrid forms of land tenure, took place as a result of two interrelated processes, which followed autonomous and sometimes divergent paths. The first has been a much-debated subject of research in the past and concerns the privatisation of common land during the

1. Bonan 2015, pp. 108–13; see also Wall 2014.
2. Ingold 2008; Tigrino 2015.
3. For two thematic reviews, cf. Cristoferi 2016; Bonan 2018.
4. The milestone on this is Bloch 1930a-b.

spread of capitalism in the countryside.⁵ The second one has also been a long-standing historiographical theme, but its implications in the dynamics of the use of common resources have been investigated to a lesser extent: this is the process of state centralisation.⁶

This book explores the relationship between administrative modernisation and the criteria for using natural resources. In particular, I have sought to examine how, and to what extent, certain institutional changes introduced during the nineteenth century, and linked to the dynamics of state centralisation, influenced the systems and practices traditionally associated with the common use of the woodlands.

The research has been carried out in a geographically circumscribed area – some valleys in the eastern Alps that make up the territory of Cadore, in the higher reaches of the Piave river – and within a relatively limited time period – the six decades between the introduction of the Napoleonic administrative model at the start of the nineteenth century and the period immediately following the annexation of these territories to the Kingdom of Italy.

The choice of woodlands as the focus of analysis was motivated by their importance for all the social and institutional players involved in their management. In the areas covered by this study, the woodland and the different uses made of it represented the main resource for the population and were of vital importance, in order to cope with the chronic problems of food supply that characterised the Alpine regions. At the same time, the control of forest resources, both to ensure the flow of timber to the urban areas and to limit hydrogeological instability, was considered a strategic issue by the government, and its importance grew during the process of centralisation of state power in the course of the nineteenth century.

From the methodological point of view, I have tried to combine the well-established strengths of political-institutional history with the recent propositions of environmental history. In the former field, recent decades have been characterised by a growing interest in the ‘spatial dimension’ of the process of construction of the modern state;

5. Cf. Démelas, Vivier 2003; Congost, Lana 2007.

6. Caffiero 1990, p. 74; Serrano 2014; Ingold 2018.

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this has allowed both the problematisation of the relationship between institutional structures and related territorial configurations, and a more in-depth examination of the role played by local actors in these dynamics.⁷ At the same time, environmental historians have started to examine the relationship of mutual redefinition between environmental and institutional contexts, identifying in forest history a significant field of study in this respect.⁸

The small-scale local analysis undertaken in this study is different from the usual approach to these issues, which has tended to favour research on broader territorial areas, either national or regional.⁹ This more local approach has allowed me to focus the analysis not only on the forestry policies adopted at governmental level, together with the administrative apparatus set up to implement them and the guiding role played by the nascent science of silviculture,¹⁰ but also on their concrete reception and application – and also negotiation – at the local level. This has been especially the case in those areas where there was an established ‘environmental vocation’ linked to the exploitation of forest resources.¹¹

While most of the research carried out on macro-areas, partly as a result of the scale of observation adopted, has only examined forestry policies, the micro-analytical approach has allowed me to relate these aspects to other factors, both institutional and socio-economic, that influenced in equal (or greater) measure the management of forest resources. As well as these advantages, the adoption of a local scale of analysis also has some disadvantages. In summary, one can question to what extent the local events studied in this work are useful to understand better and in more depth certain global (historiographical) issues.

I have tried to respond to this question in two complementary

7. Cf. Bordone et al. 2007; Blockmans et al. 2009; Torre 2011; Meriggi 2016.
8. To pick a few, cf. Sivaramakrishnan 1999; Armiero 1999; Sansa 2003; Appuhn 2009; Wing 2015.
9. Cf. the previous note; there are exceptions: see Warde 2006a; Bertogliati 2014.
10. Aspects which have already been studied in some depth: see Lazzarini 2009.
11. On the concept of environmental vocation, see Gambi 1972.

ways. The first is based on the conviction that from a particular perspective it is possible to reconsider certain general assertions or to propose new lines of interrogation that are also valid for other, and perhaps wider, contexts. The second concerns the model according to which this work has been articulated, in that there is a continuous juxtaposition of local and wider events, of conjunctural and long-term elements, in an attempt to explore the interconnections between them as much as possible.

My hope is that this will not disorientate the reader, but rather open up perspectives that, from the starting point of the Cadore woodlands, will allow us to reflect on different themes: the role of local actors in the dynamics of state building; the European debates on the deforestation of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; the process of privatisation of common land; the changing relationship between populations and resources in the Alpine regions during the nineteenth century.

As for chronology, I have chosen as my starting point the introduction of the Napoleonic reforms in the area covered by the present study. It almost goes without saying that there were prodromes to the Napoleonic administrative system, and that there were various developments of the system in the European states after the Restoration. Furthermore, much remains to be written on the actual impact of Napoleonic legislation at the local level. However, it is difficult to deny that this period was one of considerable discontinuity with respect to the models of organisation of power that had been experienced up until then across most of Europe.

The change initiated in those years can be observed and analysed from different points of view: the criteria used to operate and recruit to the bureaucratic machine, the methods used to identify and control people, the relationship between executive and legislative power, or that between the army and society, just to give a few examples. Here it is worth remembering that a new way of describing the territory, and therefore of relating to it, was also imposed during that period.¹² For the region that concerns us, this watershed can be ex-

12. Sereno 1991; Barca 2010. On forest management, see Grewe 2010, pp. 47, 53–54.

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emplified by the start of work, later completed during the Restoration, on drawing up the new cadastre, and by the administrative reorganisation that led to the creation of a homogeneous and rigidly hierarchical institutional space.

I shall say more about the end point of the research in the final chapter. For now, it is enough to suggest that the chosen timespan of six decades is more than sufficient for my purposes since, in order to evaluate the ever-changing relationship between institutions and individuals, I consider it appropriate to adopt the lifespan of an individual.

The most important sources for my research have been those preserved in the municipal and local archives of the Cadore area. Initial investigations had enabled me to identify a series of archives in which the documentation seemed sufficiently extensive for the period I was proposing to study. This documentation was then combined with that produced by the different levels of governments and forest administrations that succeeded each other from the setting up of the Piave department during the Napoleonic period up to the annexation of these territories by the Kingdom of Italy. These documents are kept in the State Archives of Belluno, Milan and Venice.¹³

There is a phrase of Franz Kafka that could also sum up several of his stories: ‘the chains of tortured humanity are forged out of *Kanzleipapier*’, the paper of officialdom or red tape.¹⁴ This came often to mind while I was reading the accounts that made up this research and leafing through those papers: the reports and memos written across half a page on a white form or the minute notes on blue sheets. I read them whilst trying to understand the costs at local level of the process of state modernisation; and I was reading from the very sheets that, according to Kafka, are one of the most oppressive symbols of that process.

On that account, the choice of aspects to be explored was driven

13. In some instances, especially in the case of papers kept in the municipal archives, the documents are organised into folders but not files. In such cases, after the folder number, I have added the date of drafting of the document as an alternative reference.
14. Löwy 2007, p. 11. I owe this quote – and the meaning it can assume for those who spend time amongst archival papers – to conversations with Piero Brunello, see <http://storiamestre.it/2008/02/notes-nodi/> (accessed 31 Jan. 2019).

first of all by my interests, which include a certain attraction to those incidents that broke, at least a little, the 'chains' of the bureaucratic treadmill. At the same time, I hope that the events I have analysed, as they unfold, will also allow us to understand better what could, on the surface, seem rather ordinary.¹⁵ The results of my research are presented chronologically, but I have aimed to organise the chapters around key themes.

In the first chapter, I set out the premises of the research and establish the starting point. Although this book focuses on the period when the *ancien régime* was overturned, I have spent some time defining some of the features of the area covered by the study (the Cadore) and the governmental structure in which it was inserted in the early modern period (the Republic of Venice). I have brought together here the information that is necessary to understand the nineteenth century developments analysed in the remaining chapters, rather than weighing down the text with long digressions. In this respect, the number of studies produced recently on these issues for the Venetian period has facilitated my work. In the concluding part of this first chapter, I have illustrated some of the features of that institutional rupture represented by the period of French rule in north-eastern Italy. Regarding forest law, I have focused also on the ideological presuppositions that directed legislation on the subject. In fact, although concerns about the disappearance of woodlands and the increase in the price of timber were themes that cyclically re-emerged in early modern Europe, in the eighteenth century these preoccupations assumed unheard-of proportions, in terms of both their wide diffusion and the severity of the language in which they were couched. From these preoccupations emerged the forestry policies introduced across most of Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In the second chapter, I have described the region where the effects of the changes presented in a general sense in the previous

15. This particular archival path may perhaps be understood with reference to the famous oxymoron of the 'exceptional normal' proposed in Grendi 1977. On the multiple interpretations of this term, see Revel 2006, pp. 36–38.

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chapter are evaluated. The local context and its transformation during the nineteenth century are delineated according to three criteria: institutions, population and resources. These aspects are closely intertwined, especially the last two, and their evolution during the course of the century is only comprehensible within the context of their mutual interaction.

In the third chapter, I give an account of the first attempts to apply the new legislation, in particular forest legislation, in the Cadore area; the resistance that these attempts provoked; and the negotiations and/or conflicts that ensued.

The fourth chapter discusses the issue of common resources which, in many ways, coincides with that of the forests. Throughout the early modern period, the majority of the woodlands of the Eastern Italian Alps – and the same can be said for the pasture lands – was managed in common, according to various rights, by village communities. The administrative reforms of the early nineteenth century led to a redefinition of the legal status of these lands and of the constraints to which their use was subjected. Moreover, during the course of the century, there were more concerted attempts by landowners and by the government to privatise these resources, as was the case in much of the continent. By analysing the conflicts that these phenomena caused, I shall re-discuss certain assumptions about the role of common resources in the process of social and economic change that swept through Europe in these decades.

In the fifth and final chapter, I have placed the issues discussed within the context of wider events: the relationship between the rural population and the Risorgimento movement, with particular reference to the revolutions of 1848; the process of criminalisation of customary practices, upon which the treatment of forestry violations throws a clear spotlight; some disputes arising from the management of forest resources after the annexation of these territories to the Kingdom of Italy. Finally, I have tried to justify why the last third of the nineteenth century can be considered the end point of the events analysed in the course of this book and, at the same time, the starting point for new dynamics that resulted in a reconfiguration of the relationships between institutions, population and resources.



Map 1.

Location of Cadore in the North-East of Italy. Cartography by Nieves López Izquierdo.