

The State in the Forest: Contested Commons in the Nineteenth Century Venetian Alps, by GIACOMO BONAN, Winwick, Cambridgeshire, White Horse Press, 2019, 230 pp., €80.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-912186-08-2

Giacomo Bonan's first book, *The State in the Forest*, represents both an important milestone and a point of departure for historiography on the Italian commons. It is the first English monograph on the history of collective action in the Italian peninsula, joining a growing literary production on a topic that has been gaining momentum in the European academia over the last decades. As the author himself points out in the first page of the text, while much of the recent scholarship on collective action and European context has focused on the organisational aspect of the commons, this book deals with the socio-environmental consequences following the privatisation of forest areas for industrial purposes and the consequent criminalisation of collective customary practices.

Such an ambitious task is accomplished by condensing different historiographical approaches into a concise reconstruction, creating a methodological approach that bridges the gap between several disciplines. Hence, traditional disciplinary approaches of commons scholarship, political and institutional history, are interwoven with other historical approaches, such as forest studies, as well as environmental and social history. Equally important for this purpose, is the choice of the historical period under scrutiny: from the years of the Napoleonic reforms in the early nineteenth century to the period immediately following the national unification of Italy in 1861. The geographical reach of Bonan's book is restricted to a very local context: the territory of Cadore, located in the north-eastern region of Veneto, a small geographical unit of rugged valleys nestled between the highest reaches of the Piave river and the Alps.

The author's decision to intermingle different methodological approaches in a circumscribed historical and geographical context serves the book's main purpose: to produce a historical reflection on the contested management of woodland areas during the advancement of liberal ideals. Moreover, this choice also allows the author to construct a comprehensive historical reconstruction, not limited to describing governmental policies, but also aiming to understand the consequences of their applications, and to detail their socio-environmental impacts on the environment of the Cadore valley and on the livelihoods of its inhabitants.

In terms of its structure, the text is divided into five chapters. Chapter One outlines the research context of the book, describing the history of institutionalised commons economies in the Alpine territories of Veneto – the so-called *vicinie* or *regole*. In depicting these institutions and the customary practices associated with them, the author traces meaningful connections with other studies that have described similar governance systems in other regions of Italy and Europe, providing a comprehensive explanation of the difference between communal and municipal lands in the area. The chapter also provides an extensive historical and geographical contextualisation of the Veneto region before and during the Napoleonic period, outlining the transformations experienced by common institutions of forest management and the timber trade, and showing how these were informed by the production of scientific treaties on forest science. In Chapter Two, the narration zooms in to the geographical region at the core of the text – the Cadore valley – looking at the complex interrelations between the three main actors of the story: populations, institutions and resources. This complex narrative draws on documentary sources from several national and local archives, managing to reconstruct the tumultuous relations between traditional agricultural practices, pastoral activities and extractive agendas. This chapter demonstrates the presence of a controversial social scenario, where institutional policies aiming at privatising local forests for the sake of economic 'progress' had to confront local communities advocating traditional customary practices, but also emerging entrepreneurial families seizing the economic opportunity offered by the growth of timber trade in the region.

This social scenario is further explained in Chapter Three, which illustrates the social contrasts that generated conflicting practices of wood exploitation, demonstrating the presence of divergent ideologies in the management of local forest areas, informed respectively by traditional knowledge and cutting-edge scientific theories. Chapter Four examines the effects of the administrative reforms promoted after the Napoleonic occupation, inspired by emerging ideologies of economic liberalism. Using a vast array of archival sources, the author details the social conflicts caused by the redefinition of the legal status of common lands in the region, describing various instances of popular riots and uprisings, as well as the legislative issues faced by local institutions in attempting to regulate the privatisation process. However, as the author notes in the fifth and final chapter of the book, these social disputes came to a close with the annexation of Veneto to the emerging Kingdom of Italy in 1866. As Bonan explains, the increased demand for wood propelled the

privatisation of common lands and led to the systematic criminalisation of customary practices. These tensions and debates were sublimated by the formulation of the 1877 forest law, liberalising timber trade in the region. However, in a paradoxical historical turn, by the early 1890s the expansion of the railway network – directly related to the timber trade – marked the end of the competitive advantage of the Cadore region conferred by its proximity to the Piave river, and inaugurated a season of forced migrations for former commoners.

Overall, Giacomo Bonan's book should be considered a valuable contribution to the field of Italian studies and to contemporary Italian historiography as it provides a detailed historical account of the social and environmental consequences of woodland privatisations in the Italian peninsula during the first half of the nineteenth century. Moreover, this book also constitutes an important contribution to the growth of environmental history in Europe, in spite of its upstream localised perspective. While today scholarship in environmental history is increasingly focusing on global narratives aimed at understanding complex natural processes beyond political and institutional borders, *The State in the Forest* reminds us about the importance of local history as a tool to understand the consequences of epistemic socio-environmental transformations that still permeate our daily reality.

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