1.2. Management of common land in western alpine regions, 18th-19th centuries

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The huge size of collective property in high alpine regions, their free use and consequently their overexploitation are generally accepted ideas for foreigners and modern historians. Such was not the case. The paper will in its first part show the diversity in the statutes of common lands and the consequences on the tensions within villages. Two cases will be studied: the Savoy Duchy and the Dauphiné in the 18th c. In Savoy the laws passed in the 1780s allowed the lords to claim for a share of commons, hence sales for grazing purposes, to provide cultivated plots, for planting fruit trees or as woodland, and in the case of infringement of the relevant rules and regulations the sanctions varied accordingly. Another question is that of the diversity of the institutional arrangements regarding the allocation of income derived from common land resources in the mountain regions of the various European countries. This problem emerged towards the end of the 18th century but became more critical in the course of the 19th century. The relations between the communities or collective associations owning common land on the one hand and institutions, such as the municipalities (that is the communes composed of all inhabitants) or the central state on the other resulted in lengthy disputes. By the end of the 19th or the beginning of the 20th century most parts of Europe had resolved such problems in their own individual manner. However, they still remain unsettled in a few areas where the two parties – the associations possessing common land and the municipalities – continue to be intractable.

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1.2.2. Nature and Culture: tensions and challenges regarding landed property in High Alpine areas of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

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Since the high alpine valleys were developed in the 19th century as a tourist destination, first for the urban elites and then in the 20th century, for a consumer society of leisure, these territories have not only entered public awareness, but have become the object of diverging real and symbolic appropriations. The remaining collective property which still exists there, functioning as a playground for town dwellers and tourists (some of whom being members of the former indigenous population now occupying a secondary residence), is the source of tensions which reveal the complex antagonisms and incommensurability at the heart of contemporary societies. There are the problems relating to the use of land for tourism, to its use as pasture, to the possession of private property (whether individual or collective), to areas reforested with the aim of averting natural risks and, since the 60s, to protected areas needing to be defended. In this paper I will present some concrete examples relating to the contemporary situation in the Alps Dauphinois (Isère, Hautes Alpes). To understand clearly the situation described in these examples and to judge its implications, it is necessary to consider in detail the progressive development of the contradictory functions that have been attributed to collective property since the end of the 19th century.

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