

This is really a draft!

This paper does not set out to reconstruct a taxonomy of the myriad types of property and collective rights in existence, but rather to consider the economic structure of which communal land in the Alps forms a part and the dynamics this engenders. Common to the most important mountain ranges in Europe, from the Alps and the Appenines to the Pyrenees, is the importance of the exploitation of their superb collective resources: woods, meadows and pastureland. While the lower levels were predominantly intensively (in the sense of a high intensity of work) cultivated, in an attempt to produce goods essential to subsistence, it was the woods and pastures which became more important higher up.

An example of this is the development of the economy of high grazing in the Alps, where, even today, cattle is often taken to graze at altitudes higher than 2000 metres during the summer months. Since this method of using the high alpine pastures or *alpeggi* “used up space but saved work, with a favourable relation between costs and gains” it soon created an economy marked by a high differential of short term intensity, clearly visible in the exploitation of the *alpeggi* and the intensive work carried out at the lower levels where people lived<sup>1</sup>.

There are also many similarities among mountain localities regarding the other great collective resource – the woodlands. Obviously in an age of wood – as it was before industrialisation – the availability of large quantities of wood which could be capitalised on represented a significant source of income for mountain communities. All that might change were the characteristics of the demand.

The greatest demand for wood, both to be worked and for fuel, generally came from the cities of the plain, and Lombardy was no exception since Milan alone consumed over 250,000 tons per year<sup>2</sup>. In Lombardy, though, in addition to the huge urban demand for wood, there was that generated in the Alpine areas by the massive development of iron metallurgy. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the blast furnaces in the valleys of Bergamo and Brescia reached an annual productive capacity of 10,000 tons of cast iron per year, equivalent to the consumption of at least double that amount of charcoal, to obtain which they needed about 100,000 tons of wood – almost half of Milan’s consumption<sup>3</sup>.

The collective estates of the Alpine areas were therefore very important from an economic point of view. They became part of realities not closed in upon themselves but open economies, able to export to the plains and the big cities raw materials, finished products and manpower, thus obtaining the resources they needed to buy the cereals which they so chronically lacked. Undoubtedly weather conditions were tougher than on the plain, especially relating to the predominant economic activity, which was agriculture, but that did not necessarily mean that the farm workers were worse off. If anything the contrary is true, because although the mountain farmer worked land which was much more difficult than that of the plains and the hills, he was usually the owner of that land and moreover could count on the contributions from the land belonging to his community and his right to use it - things which, along with the peasant smallholdings, were fast disappearing on the fertile plains and hilly regions.

A good example of this is the region of Brescia (the Bresciano) where, already at the beginning of the seventeenth century, more than half of the communities on the relatively flat part of the province (97 out of 163) were devoid of land owned collectively or by peasant farmers. And not by chance are we dealing with the more productive part of the plain, for the sixteen communities in which there was more collectively owned than individually owned land were situated in the less favourable areas, from the agricultural point of view, such as the arid flats of Montichiari, where there were still over 2000 hectares of uncultivated common land in the mid eighteenth century<sup>4</sup>. It was very different in the mountainous part of the province where, still in the first decades of the nineteenth century, most of the fields, meadows and woods belonged to the community and covered extremely large areas, since, as shown on the provisional estimate of 1838, arable land and permanent fields accounted for less than 15% of the registered land<sup>5</sup>.

Fundamental to putting communal land and its customary rights of usage back into its own economic dimension, is the way in which it was administered, the use to which it was put and the results that those

using it aspired to. Regarding this, the literature has generally pointed out that, particularly in the mountain areas, there were essentially two objectives: one which could be defined as ‘ecological’ guardianship – particularly evident in the case of the woodland<sup>6</sup>, the other of a decidedly more economic nature, inasmuch as being able to make use of this land was essential to supplement the family income<sup>7</sup>. While all this is undoubtedly true, we must avoid the over simplifications which are made when we assume, consciously or otherwise, that in the matter of communal property, we are dealing with egalitarian communities. This is a veritable *topos*, particularly for the Alps, where the myth of mountainous, republican Switzerland, asserted in the Enlightenment, has contributed greatly<sup>8</sup>

In reality the situation is very different because most of the mountain communities lacked both institutional and economic symmetry. Once more the Bresciano furnishes an example, there the communities were torn apart by an age-old conflict between the original and non-original inhabitants, particularly in the mountains, where the concept of ‘local’ was so much more restricted<sup>9</sup>. Indeed in 1764, the vast majority of the families in the valleys around Brescia were the original settlers, 10,026 as opposed to 3,544 non-origians, but this was not so on the plains, where there were only 15,386, as against 21,691<sup>10</sup>. The main reason for the numerous conflicts occasioned by this division was the foreclosure to the non-origians of the benefits deriving from the communal assets. Not surprisingly, here as elsewhere, we see a huge increase in the steps taken to reaffirm the rights of the ‘insiders’ (*vicini*) and exclude the ‘outsiders’ (*forestieri*) from access to woods, fields and pastures. Further exacerbating this conflict was the fact– of which the original inhabitants were fully aware – that what was at stake was not simply the possibility or otherwise of using the assets in question, since these also had important economic implications, in that they could be rented out, and the proceeds used to reduce community expenditure or be distributed among the inhabitants<sup>11</sup>.

To this notable difference between original and non-original inhabitants, in itself enough to demolish the myth of an egalitarian mountain society, was added an even more important one, the huge disparity in wealth and income among the members of the community, which seems to have increased following the gaps left by the plague in the seventeenth century. An example of this is the case of Malegno, in the Camonica valley, where, already in 1660 the 119 families on the census drew an estimated income of 11,168 lire from their cultivated land, but the first five accounted for 27% of this, while the 83 poorest families earned less than 15%<sup>12</sup>. The details which appear on the estimate that followed in 1735-7 allow us to make further calculations, which are in no way affected by the fact that the findings did not attribute a value to dwellings, industrial sites, chestnut groves and a part of the fields, whose value is not given in estimated lire but in weights of hay. The first thing we see is the considerable disproportion in wealth among the 89 original inhabitants on the census, since the richest of them, Pietro Antonio Pedercini, had assets to the value of 15,500 lire, that is to say 15% of the total of everybody appearing on the census, while 48 individuals – more than half - had assets of less than 400 lire, making a total of 6,317 lire<sup>13</sup>. If we then consider the four members of the Pedercini family, the total exceeds 30,000 lire – almost a third of the total estimate. The enormous disparity becomes very clear when we divide the population into tenths from the richest to the poorest, since the richest 30% account for 76% and the poorest 1.2%, while the 40% in the middle reaches less than 13% (see Table 1).

Table 1 Estimated original inhabitants of Malegno divided into tenths (total estimate 99.211 lire)

Tenth	Estimated lire	Percentage
First	59,497	59.9
Second	16.066	16.3
Third	9.081	9.9
Fourth-Seventh	12.629	12.7
Eighth	836	0.8
Ninth	382	0.4
Tenth	0	0
Total	99.211	100

Even more apparent is the difference between original and non-original inhabitants , since the total estimated wealth of the 62 “resident foreigners (i.e people from other areas)” amounted to just one fifth of that of the ‘originals’ – a pro-capita figure of respectively 318 lire compared with 1.114 lire. This disparity is conspicuous not only at the top of the table, where we can see that the richest resident ‘foreigner’, Giovanni Gaioni, had an estimated wealth of 2.904 lire – less than a fifth of Pietro Antonio Pedercini’s patrimony - but also particularly so at the lowest level of the economic hierarchy, that of the indigent poor – of whom 10% (10 out of 89) were ‘originals’ and 40% (26 out of 62) were resident ‘foreigners’. Moreover even among the ‘non-originals’, there was a notable disproportion, in that the first two tenths held 81.5% of the total wealth (the figure was 76% in the case of the ‘originals’).

In actual fact the disparity between the ‘originals’ and ‘non-originals’ was even greater because the former, besides benefitting from the fact that assets such as livestock were not estimated, carried considerable weight in the administration and use of the substantial resources of local corporations. Indeed the local bodies of Malegno, excluding the town council, had declared properties to the value of 24,394 lire, the most important of which, the Pio Luogo Hospital for foundlings ,had a patrimony amounting to 14,395 lire - comparable to that of Pietro Antonio Pedercini.

Economic inequality within the community was not restricted to Malegno, however, as is clearly demonstrated by the estimates relating to the assets of ‘outsiders who are not residents’ (*forastieri non abitanti*), which included almost all the most important families in the surrounding communities, owners of profitable pieces of land such as vineyards and so-called “*campi opulati*” (high -yielding fields) . This concerned no fewer than 100 people (over half of whom – 54 – lived in the neighbouring communities of Breno and Civate camuno), who had declared assets of 36,261 lire – 362 lire per head – higher than the resident ‘*forastieri*’. It is surely not by chance that the wealthiest of them, Vitale Romelli from Civate camuno, had assets worth almost 5,000 lire, making him the eighth biggest landowner in the community. (see Table 2)

Table 2 : The most important landowners in Malegno

<u>Name</u>	<u>Status</u>	<u>Estimation (lire)</u>
Pedercini Pietro A.	Original inhabitant	15.500
Pio Luogo Hospital for foundlings	Local body	14.395
Bonettini Pietro	Original inhab.	8.885
Furloni Francesco	Original “	6.718
Regazzi Eredi	Original “	6.049
Pedercini Michele	Original “	5.442
Pedercini Giacomo	Original “	5.253
Romelli Vitale	Non-resident Outsider	4.970
Pedercini – Marietti Pietro	Original inhab.	4.373
Pio luogo della Misericordia	Local body	4.077
Pisani Giovanni Battista	Original inhab.	4.058
Bornina Eredi	Original “	3.216
Andreotti Chaplaincy	Local body	2.973

It is significant that these first thirteen subjects own 50% of the entire estimated wealth of Malegno – amounting to 179.588 lire – whilst representing just 5% of the 262 listed on the estimate. Clearly, if the communities where communal assets and civic rights of usage were predominant were asymmetrical and extremely polarised, this would condition their effective use, with the risk that they were communal only in theory and not in actual fact. To illustrate how such an uneven social and institutional configuration might have affected the administration of the common lands, I will concentrate on the vast areas of forest and pastureland at high altitudes, which are by far the greatest of the communal assets.

The first thing to point out about pastureland is that , although common land, it did not benefit everybody equally but only the villagers who owned any cattle, and in particular those who had a significant number of animals. This was obviously the case in the communities where cattle breeding was the principal

commercial activity. In Ponte di Legno, high up in the Camonica valley, in the early 1760's there were 347 families and no fewer than 6,071 sheep – an average of 18 sheep per family. But in 1786, when Omobono Zuelli, one of the most prominent shepherds, took his flock and those of five other owners to the summer pastures of Fraele, he found himself in charge of over 1,200 sheep<sup>14</sup>.

In Lombardy, the raising of cattle and sheep based on the practice of alpine transhumance, which began in the XVII century, but became increasingly important in the following century, put many communities at a disadvantage. On one hand because the prime movers in this extremely profitable activity were *forastieri*, and on the other because the choice of the villages to rent out their pastures for an easy and lucrative source of income, often meant that local people could not use them. A good example of this is the State of Milan, where, as a result of the spread of bovine transhumance organised and carried out by the "*bergamini*" (breeders involved in transhumance), the situation in which each member of the community "received a share of the Mountain according to the number of animals he had, or according to the way in which the land was divided up" changed radically to that in which "the mountains were rented out by the commune, and the contract was agreed among the owners of the cattle in transhumance"<sup>15</sup>. So the practice of renting out pastures to private individuals or consortiums of cattle breeders in the summer months obviously constricted collective rights, though with variations from one place to another. However the fact that these rights were not used as intended, and I believe that this has not been pointed out, led in the end to a more equitable outcome, when compared to when the pastures were used solely by members of the community. Inasmuch as the revenue from the rents was enjoyed by all the original inhabitants, including those who did not own any cattle and would therefore not have benefitted from the use of the pastures.

Moving on to looking at how the woods belonging to a community were exploited, we immediately see some notable differences with respect to what has been said about pastureland. In the first place their use favoured all those in the community who had authorised access to collective resources, therefore even the poorest, guaranteeing firewood and food (think of the use of chestnuts in the Appennine area), grazing rights for small animals and manure for fertilizing. Secondly the conservation and care of woodland was and still is fundamental in the prevention of hydrogeological problems<sup>16</sup>, so excessive exploitation had much graver consequences than in the case of the pastures.

From the middle of the eighteenth century, the deforestation in the mountains of Lombardy (but not only there) intensified, due to the huge increase in demand for wood, both in the mountains and on the plain, which followed the rise in population and improved roads, which meant a reduction in transport costs. It is difficult to apportion blame for the losses suffered by the mountain woodlands because, since their extent almost everywhere exceeded local needs, the wood was also used to meet the needs of other markets, either near or far.

So although the mountain dwellers are held by many to be responsible for deforestation, we must not overlook the fact that it was the pressure of the demand for wood from the outside world and particularly from the neighbouring cities, which resulted in the most damage to the woods. However, more than attributing responsibility, what I am interested in evaluating here is the effect on mountain communities of the spread of deforestation. It must first be pointed out how seriously the ecological protection afforded by woodland was compromised, especially when the woods were sold to meet the increase in local financial needs. For the people who bought them usually had a short term policy and felled the trees indiscriminately in order to get a quick return from the capital invested in the purchase. As a result portions of cultivated land or pastures, sometimes quite large areas, were lost because of landslides or subsidies<sup>17</sup>.

Considering now the fundamental function of the woodland, which was to supplement the income and guarantee the survival of the mountain families, it must be pointed out that such sales did irreparable damage because payment was made only once – *una tantum* – and in the middle and long term the money was not sufficient to compensate for the loss of the 'fruits' they garnered from the forest, particularly for the poorest people. Even when the woods were not sold but rented out there were similar problems, because the tenant over-exploited the resource, leaving little opportunity for the exercise of customary rights.

Tree-felling and/or the loss of control over the woods had serious consequences for the communities,

therefore, because they upset the logic which governed the use and management of communal assets, as can be seen clearly in the case of the forest resources. In effect, the objective was not to get the best possible yield from the resources available, but rather to work in the best interests of the community and guarantee its survival. So the inhabitants deliberately chose not to exploit the communal resources to the fullest extent, thus allowing them to dispose of them as they wished.

However, from a historical-economic perspective, when evaluating the role played by communal resources they cannot be considered separately, without taking into account the way in which they interacted with the peasant small-holdings which were so prevalent in the mountain areas. This fact has led us to place the accent on the complementary nature of the relationship between privately owned and communal land, considered essential for the economic balance of the community, and also to recognise the economic rationality of using different types of soil in different ways. It was Robert McC. Netting who maintained that the system of property rights in mountain communities was usually "directly related to the manner in which resources are exploited, the competition for their use, and the nature of the products produced", therefore, comparable to the peasants' intensive exploitation of small plots of land for the production of foodstuffs was the extensive use of the communal land, be it woodland and/or pastureland<sup>18</sup>.

Such close interaction, however, prompts us to extend the analysis beyond the mere manner of management and use of the different types of land, and attempt to assess how much the presence of woods and pastures might have impinged upon access to the greatest asset of all – cultivable soil. And it is opportune that we do so because the market value of land in the mountain areas was often higher than on the plain, a paradox which led contemporaries to observe that such high prices were totally "out of proportion to the income which can be generated using the usual systems of cultivation"<sup>19</sup>. Paolo Tedeschi has shown, for example, that the average prices considered for arable land were 1.610 lire per hectare in the west-central plain of the Bresciano, 1.230 in the eastern plain and 2.180 in the mountain areas<sup>20</sup>. The fact that land in the mountains was generally held to yield less than that on the plains accounts for people's surprise at such high prices.

But this was not always the case. If we look at the cultivation of maize, for example, it transpires that where the fields were not irrigated, the best parts of the Brescian plain produced 16,4hl per hectare, whereas in Gardone and Preseglie in the Val Trompia it could be as much as 18,8hl per hectare. This was due to the fact that on the non-irrigated plain the soil was less fertile, while in the mountains the areas under cultivation were always the best available and furthermore the lack of irrigation was made up for by the greater average rainfall.

Confronted with such evidence it becomes important to understand how the presence of communal land affected the establishment of land prices. In other words to ascertain whether it is correct to say that where collectively owned plots of land "are important, the use of them raises the price of agricultural land, which profits from this"<sup>22</sup>. The case of the Bresciano studied by Paolo Tedeschi does not show such a correlation because the mountain area with the largest extent of communal land, Vestone, offered considerably lower prices for arable land than the neighbouring district of Preseglie. Nor can we attribute this difference to the more limited availability of cultivable land in Preseglie, since each inhabitant had at his disposal 475mq of land to work, compared to Vestone, where the figure was 435mq. A situation like this could even lead us to formulate the opposite hypothesis – that the greater availability of communal land did not equate with higher prices for arable land, but rather that it put a ceiling on market values, because in the final analysis the considerable amount of additional resources to be derived from the collective property made the need to have your own land less cogent.

If this were the case, the cession and transfer of communal land, especially the woodland, would have penalized the poorest peasants twice over, because it would mean not only the withdrawal of their customary rights of use, but also higher land prices. The result was therefore yet more inequality in a society which was already extremely polarized and unbalanced. Moreover the serious problems arising from the loss of access to communal land are attested to by the fact that the authorities often exercised great caution when faced with the hypothesis of putting the *comunalia* (communal property) of the mountains up for sale, and also by the growing tendency of the mountain people to "arbitrarily encroach upon the pastures and wastelands of the community, claiming the right to cultivate them; even raising

hedges or a wall around them”<sup>24</sup>.