

Paul Warde

**The Invention of Sustainability: Nature and Destiny, c. 1500-1870**

Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, 416 pp.

In this book Paul Warde presents the history of the idea of sustainability from c. 1500 to the late nineteenth century. He introduces how major scientific discourses across Europe dealt with sustainability problems *avant la lettre*. To this end, he defines sustainability as an *environmental problem* (p. 5), that is the challenge to continuously provide resources without degrading the conditions under which they regenerate. The issues at stake thus range from perceptions of scarcity (in land, in nutrients, in labour), to ideas of overuse. Drawing on rich material from Western Europe, each chapter identifies, for different periods and specific resources (notably, wood or food), the scientific rationale with which contemporaries approached sustainability challenges, and the particular topics of that discourse. The book is compelling in content and style, though at times challenging for non-En-

glish native speakers, and presents an impressive overview on a timely but previously hardly studied topic.

Chapter 1 focuses on agricultural production in 1500-1620, and describes major issues including tillage and enclosure, livestock husbandry and manuring, as means to avoid or mitigate “dearth”, that is shortage in resource provision. During the same period, a more conscious management aiming at securing natural resources for posterity is described for the use of woods in chapter 2, centuries before the scientific discipline of forestry emerged, or, for that matter, an actual large-scale shortage of wood. Chapter 3 introduces ideas of “improvement”, prevalent from the late sixteenth century through the mid-eighteenth century, as issues of sustainability. In contrast to tillage, where the focus was largely on the territory (enclosure), here the focus was on management aiming at increasing

rents. The “state” as a new concept emerged in the sixteenth century, and it is the focus of chapter 4 (“Paths to Sustained Growth, c. 1650-1760”), where sustainability questions are discussed as a matter of public institutions, culminating in the science of cameralism in the mid-eighteenth century. Debates revolved around feeding the population and providing the economy with resources, be it through domestic production or import. Chapter 5 is something of a discourse into assessing and measuring the availability of –forest– resources from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth century. Theories of circulation are the topic of chapter 6, in which the focus turns from political economic discourse and practice towards natural sciences and their interest in understanding life-sustaining chemical processes and establishing this knowledge in new scientific initiatives. Chapter 7 returns to political economy, and to the role of natural resources in those debates in late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Here, Warde argues that *political economists [did not] harbor [...] a fantasy of no limits. Rather, the idea of the limit was not seen as very relevant to the issues that did preoccupy them* (p.266). In the last chapter (“History and Destiny”) early ideas of collapse and scarcity are explored.

The book offers a formidable overview on how ideas of what is currently subsumed under the term *sustainability* shaped major scholarly discourses in past centuries. It provides counter narratives, e.g. against overly simplistic concepts of “sustainable” resource use in preindustrial times, against the negligence of scarcity problems and

against assumptions that resource conflicts emerged only in the course of the industrial revolution. By its broad perspective, encompassing discourses on political, economic, and biological questions, the book serves as a role model on how sustainability questions should be framed, touching upon all three pillars of sustainable development. The chapters on wood are particularly brilliant, synthesizing much of the previous extensive work by the author (e.g., Warde 2006, 2007).

Two major conclusions of relevance to current sustainability debates will be stressed here, one made throughout the book, the other in the conclusion. Firstly, Warde describes how throughout much of the period covered in his book, sustainability was perceived as a problem of lacking labor, diligence –virtue even– or technology, rather than a problem of resource scarcity or overuse. Well into the nineteenth century, nature appeared as an abundant source of resources, and institutional and political efforts towards sustainability almost exclusively focused on tapping this potential. In other words, until the fairly recent past, the thought of scarcity or overuse of nature was, in Europe, not part of mainstream scientific discourses or political agendas. This insight may be of explanatory value for the current political and institutional challenges of governing sustainability problems.

Secondly, Warde conceives of sustainability as something that is being made, or “invented”, as the book title states, rather than something that has to be, has ever been, or can ever be discovered. This pers-

pective, though seemingly in conflict with the “environmental” nature of sustainability introduced early on in the book, enables Warde to highlight the different disciplinary and topical approaches to the issue as equally valid and relevant in response to their particular spatio-temporal context. Warde’s perception of sustainability thus may inspire current sustainability debates by calling for a “re-invention” of sustainability that addresses the historically unique dimensions of global sustainability challenges today.

We now highlight two issues addressed in the book which we hope will inspire future research in environmental history. Firstly, the geographical focus is, as the author states in the introduction, on Europe: the book tells *largely a European story, and the narrative focuses on particular parts of Europe: England and Germany, moving later during the eighteenth century to Scotland and France* (p.12). Warde indeed cites authors from even larger parts of Europe. While this provides relevant insights as such, it opens questions regarding the generalizability of the findings to other parts of the world. How do the European ideas presented compare to those in other world regions? In particular, this refers to the Global South, where an extensive and influential body of literature –beyond Carolyn Merchant– demonstrates the existence of debates and collective practices on the conservation of nature. For example, in the influential book *Memoria biocultural*, Toledo and Bassols (2008) elaborate pre-industrial sustainability discourses and practices. Comparative analyses of historical

sustainability discourses in Europe and other world regions appear as fruitful future research topics.

Secondly, as material environmental historians, we observe that Warde clearly chooses a discursive focus on historical sustainability challenges, though he does not entirely neglect their biophysical dimensions, *e.g.* stressing that *these things do matter* (p. 59). Given the author’s extensive experience in quantifying historical resource use (*e.g.*, Warde 2019), it is somewhat surprising that he resisted the opportunity to connect the intellectual birth of the idea of sustainability with existing empirical biophysical evidence. Instead, by providing a comprehensive overview on European scholarly debates relevant to sustainability challenges, the book offers substantial material for future work linking discursive and material perspectives on the historical emergence of and shifts between specific sustainability challenges. For example, future environmental history could inquire if, and to what extent, the lack of labor or the lack of land discussed in expert literature corresponded –or not– to actual material sustainability challenges in particular periods and places.

Overall, we find that the book offers a great overview on the history of the idea of sustainability. It is an important read not only for environmental historians, but also for historians of science and all scholars interested in the historical emergence of a currently seemingly ubiquitous concept. As we laid out, the book not only brings together in a highly skilled manner a broad array of otherwise rather disjointed debates,

contributing to sustainability thinking over a period of 400 years. In addition, and perhaps even more importantly, we believe that the book will inspire –not only– environmental history in the years to come, both by offering a solid reference on a previously under-researched topic, and by opening new grounds to build future research on. We highly recommend the read and look forward to using it in future research and teaching.

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## Jesús Fernández Fernández and Margarita Fernández Mier (Eds.) **The Archaeology of Medieval Villages Currently Inhabited in Europe**

Oxford, Archaeopress Archaeology, 2019, VIII + 119 pp.

**T**his short book contains some of the papers given at a conference held in Oxford in 2016. The meeting was an initiative of the ELCOS project, and one of the editors, Professor Fernández Mier, is the principal investigator for the project. The book consists of five papers (illustrated in colour) with a brief introduction and conclusion. The theme of the conference, repeated a number of times by different contributors, is that archaeological research into medieval rural settlements began with the study of abandoned village

sites, and that the time has come for investigation of places that survived, and are therefore still inhabited. A small minority of medieval settlements were deserted, and only study of existing places will reveal the characteristics of settlements as a whole. Deserted sites represent failures, and we risk distorting our interpretations by focusing on them. We ought to be defining the roots of resilience and explaining what factors contributed to the survival of villages.

The authors of the papers explore the theme in five European countries, giving an

contributing to sustainability thinking over a period of 400 years. In addition, and perhaps even more importantly, we believe that the book will inspire –not only– environmental history in the years to come, both by offering a solid reference on a previously under-researched topic, and by opening new grounds to build future research on. We highly recommend the read and look forward to using it in future research and teaching.

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The authors of the papers explore the theme in five European countries, giving an

overview of the whole subject, but often focussing on particular sites which have been well investigated. Lewis writes about a technique for sampling dating evidence (pottery) in English villages, by means of digging small test pits in gardens and open spaces. She presents an extended study of the village of Pirton in Hertfordshire, which from the evidence of more than a hundred test pits emerged in 850-1200, expanded in the next two centuries, and then shrank in size. Peytremann provides a comprehensive survey of research in France over recent decades, giving particular attention to the contribution of “preventive” excavations, that is work carried out in advance of the destruction of a site by modern development for housing or road building. There is more about methods and approaches to research than actual results, but she does examine Fossier’s argument that the French village began c. 1000, and finds a much extended chronology of village development, stretching from the Neolithic to the present day. A team from the Netherlands are discussing the “preventive” excavations which have led to “Malta driven research” or a surge in information gathering which they call the “Valletta harvest”. These are references to the Valletta treaty of 1992 which established the principle in Europe that developers should pay for the costs of excavation. They present an overview of data from many sites, but also show that particular villages such as Warnsfeld in Guelders have been the subject of focussed academic research with many small-scale archaeological interventions. Researchers are pursuing general factors in village for-

mation, such as manorialisation. Oye, presenting research in Norway, is troubled by the focus in his country’s research tradition on the farm rather than the village, and he agonises over the appropriateness of applying the term “village” to the “agglomerations of farms” which he studies in a district of western Norway. He seeks to explain the settlement pattern in terms of social power and the exploitation of resources, and sees parallels in these factors in other parts of Europe. The essay on Spain has been contributed by the two editors of the book, drawing on their research in upland districts at Vigaña in the Cantabrian mountains, and Villanueva in Asturias. They have carried out a number of small-scale excavations, demonstrating the multi-period character of occupation, in which prehistoric and medieval sites coincide. Their research extends into the fields and is concerned with the villages’ methods of using local resources. They make much use of environmental evidence. They seek to connect their academic work with the local community, and in this respect their work has some similarities with Lewis’s involvement with local inhabitants in her work in villages in eastern England.

Chris Wickham provides a useful conclusion in which he advises against defining villages in terms of a cluster of houses, but instead the village should be seen as a territory that provided resources for its inhabitants. He notes the capacity of these settlements to change, which invalidates too much reliance on modern maps as evidence for earlier forms of settlement. He is impressed by the villages presented in the

book which are sited on or near prehistoric monuments, but wonders if that tells us about continuities, as they could be cases of coincidence. Perhaps medieval people were attracted to settle near prehistoric religious sites which excited their curiosity. He picks up the point made by some contributors that the church provided a focus for settlement and served as an anchor that helped to fix the village in the landscape in subsequent centuries.

While it is very understandable for researchers to embark on new projects to claim novelty for their methods, and to promise fresh insights from developing a neglected branch of learning, it is only right to remind ourselves of the value of research on abandoned settlements. When work began on deserted villages in the 1950s and 1960s the research questions that justified the excavations were basic and unsophisticated. The pioneers wished to demonstrate that “lost” villages had once existed and their remains could be identified. That was relatively easily accomplished. They aimed to learn more about the desertion process: why was a village abandoned, and how was it removed? Archaeology was not the best way of addressing those questions, and they still remain only partly resolved. The third research priority was to investigate the material culture –as we would now call it– of the peasantry, finding out more about houses, possessions, the rural economy and so on. Houses were certainly revealed and studied, but the wider questions still need more research, and in subsequent decades more evidence is being investigated using scientific techniques, for example by analy-

sing environmental material such as human and animal bones, and plant remains. While the investigation of peasant life was progressing slowly, the burning research question through the 1970s and beyond related to village origins, which meant that research focussed on early periods, in which archaeological evidence was not always abundant. These avenues of enquiry took into account such matters as settlement planning, which was supposed to reveal the role of lords and the state in the creation of villages. It also became a goal to understand more about regional differences, as it was necessary to explain why in one area villages were created, often in a regular and orderly fashion, while elsewhere people lived in straggling and undisciplined hamlets and farmsteads.

All of these developments emerged from the investigation of deserted settlements, and with good reason. A village abandoned in *c.* 1450 presents opportunities for research. Here the settlement’s plan has been preserved for us to photograph, survey and analyse. Of course the abandoned skeleton of the village represented the last phase, and its plan might have changed radically in previous centuries –but that can be discovered by excavation or geophysical survey. The settlement has not been covered by centuries of modern buildings and alterations which obscure the medieval past. Large scale open excavation of parts of a deserted village can lay bare the foundations of buildings, and ranges of pottery, artefacts and environmental samples are recoverable. The ambitious archaeologist can gain a full view of the peasants’ living and

working space. Much of the work in modern inhabited settlements resembles key-hole surgery, in which a complete house, farmyard, or smith's workshop will rarely be visible. More advanced questions about the sociology, mentality and technology will be addressed with difficulty if the evidence is confined to the fragments of data derived from small-scale work in surviving settlements.

It is also alleged that deserted settlements are giving us a false picture of settlement forms and material culture because they represent failure. This is very difficult to prove. Archaeological work on the final phase of a deserted village have problems in identifying signs of decline; indeed, the last stage of occupation often seems to show a better quality of buildings and signs of prosperity. Of course we know that some places were closed down by their lords, or fell victim in times of war, so that they experienced no slow decline, and may not have suffered from inherent weaknesses.

This book offers an overview of new trends in settlement archaeology. It would be more fully convincing if some authors were less preoccupied with the bureaucratic processes of "preventive" archaeology, and if they could convince us that work on inhabited settlements could answer important and well-defined research questions. Archaeological theory is now so ambitious and comprehensive that every change in the past can be seen to have multiple explanations and implications, leaving the reader without clear guidelines for understanding the subject. Fossier's statement that villages began *c.* 1000, in a particular set of

social, economic and environmental circumstances, receives sharp criticism here, yet he provided a bold and useful point of reference which clarified our thinking.

Wickham ends his conclusion with the point that we do not need to choose between research into deserted and surviving medieval villages. Investigations of all types of settlement, regardless of whether they are now occupied by modern houses, should be welcomed because they have the potential to extend our knowledge of the subject and answer the many questions about the medieval rural past.

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Giacomo Bonan

## **The State in the Forest: Contested Commons in the Nineteenth Century Venetian Alps**

Winwick, The White Horse Press, 2019, 229 pp.

**T**his book addresses the intervention of the State and the conflict that occurred around common forests in the Cadore region, located in the Venetian Alps, on the border between present-day Italy, Austria and Germany, during the first six decades of the nineteenth century. The area is interesting because it had an enormous natural wealth (especially in forestry) and was traditionally one of the natural routes between central Europe and the Mediterranean. On the other hand, the period chosen for the study is especially eventful. The first decades of the nineteenth century witnessed the final erosion of the Old Regime and the consolidation of a liberal society in many parts of Europe. Those changes intersected in the Cadore region with the succession of three different administrative regimes: the final disappearance of the Venetian Republic by the Napoleonic conquest in 1797 and the establishment of a French rule in the area; the annexation of Cadore to Austria with the Restoration that emerged from the Congress of Vienna in 1815; and, finally, the ascription of those territories to Italy with the unification of that country in 1866. In this geographical and chronological context, the author places a historical study of great interest, which explores the relationship between administrative modernization inherent to the consolidation of liberalism and its effects on the use of na-

tural resources.

During the whole period, wood maintained an enormous importance as a raw material for the construction of ships –essential for naval power and long-distance trade– as well as providing materials and energy to the local population. This makes the timber trade an especially interesting subject to combine the study of local problems with aspects of much wider spectrum. In this context, the book's perspective is at the intersection between environmental history and the history of institutions, and it combines analysis of the political and legislative changes that affected the region with analysis of the abundant conflicts that arose with the attempts to apply the new rules. The book is divided into five chapters that are roughly organized in chronological order. Each chapter introduces complementary aspects of the complex puzzle that constitutes the relationships between institutional change, use of natural resources and conflict. An added value to the work is the introduction in the text of personal stories of some individuals who played important roles in the conflicts.

The prologue (Chapter 1) dates back to the period in which the region was under the power of the Republic of Venice (1420) and begins with a detailed description of the local institutions that managed the use of the abundant common forests. It was a pyramidal organization that had its base in

local assemblies (*regole*), which were later grouped into a higher level of representatives (*centeneri*), who elected the General Council as the highest board of the community. This traditional structure that managed the use of resources on the ground had to overlap the legislation that emerged from the power of Venice, whose merchants were especially interested in disposing of the area's timber resources for the construction and maintenance of their ships. In this context, there were constant tensions between different local interests and those of the commercial elite of the Republic. These tensions led to the differentiation between two types of commons (*beni comunali* and *beni comuni*) depending on the greater or lesser rights granted to the Republic on the one hand and to the local communities on the other. This traditional structure collapsed at the beginning of the nineteenth century, with the administrative reform launched after the French conquest of the territory. According to the Napoleonic Code, municipalities were considered the only legal entities at the local level and, therefore, communities were not recognized as subjects of the law. The approval in 1811 of a new forestry law that sought to impose scientific management on forests triggered the conflicts that would occur in the area in the following decades.

Chapter 2 draws an overview of some socio-economic variables of the region between approximately 1810 and 1870. In general terms, it can be said that the dynamics of the region responded to a typical model of European mountain economies, which despite having very little arable land

had high population growth rates supported by the development of complex economies. The exploitation of natural resources (forests, pastures, water), temporary immigration networks, and varied commercial traffic (which also involved livestock transhumance) granted the communities access to other resources that could not be obtained in the local area. Perhaps the most distinctive issue in the Cadore region was the enormous importance that the timber industry had in that economic framework. In fact, the felling of the forests, the first transformation in local sawmills, and the transport by water courses to the centers of consumption, composed a good part of the economic activity of the area.

Chapter 3 explains some of the disagreements that took place surrounding the specific forms of exploiting resources as administrative modernization was put in place. For instance, it analyzes the different understandings of the appropriate time to cut down trees, which in traditional forestry was based on the phases of the moon, something not recognized by the new scientific exploitation of forests. It also explains the differences between traditional and new official accounting methods, and the opportunities that provided local managers to conceal capital from the forest administration. Another example is the different importance granted by locals and forest administration to goats, which had traditionally played an essential role in the reproduction of domestic economies (“the cow of the poor”). The new forms of management wanted to reduce their use because they were considered harmful for the forest.

These examples all together allow us to clearly perceive different conceptions of forest management, and also allow the author to make arguments about sustainability as a relative concept in historical perspective.

The rest of the book (chapters 4 and 5) focuses on the conflict that surrounded the Austrian authorities' attempts to privatize the commons once the territory came under its jurisdiction after the Napoleonic defeat. As in other parts of Europe, legislation referring to the privatization of the commons had a complicated consolidation. In the case at hand, it was not until 1839 that a privatization law was passed that fully affected Cadore. This law granted full ownership of the commons to the municipal administration (eliminating the traditional distinctions between *beni comuni* and *beni comunali*) and forced the indebted municipalities to sell their commons. It also allowed the privatization of those commons by a possible buyer by municipal agreement. According to the author, the approval of this law was combined with two other processes that complicated its application. On the one hand, since the beginning of the century the changes in the composition of municipal power (once the community ceased to be recognized as a subject of the law) had given a growing prominence to the popular classes in mountain areas. On the other, the expenses of the municipalities had grown substantially due to the cost of the road that crossed the territory from north to south, which was built beginning in 1819.

The combination of these elements elicited protests in several villages of Cadore, which called for the distribution of the

commons among the members of the communities, basing their claims on the traditional forms of management under the *regole*. These protests involved popular revolts, military interventions and arrests. They coincided with the approval of the aforementioned law (1840), the revolutionary process that took place in Europe (and especially Milan and Vienna) in 1848, and the Unification process that would integrate the Veneto (including the Cadore region) into the Kingdom of Italy.

In addition to violent outbursts, there were many illegal uses of the forest because of a lack of recognition of the new rules. The collusion of local forest guards as well as some members of the clergy with the offenders made the phenomenon endemic. In the municipality of Sappada, a young man (son of a timber merchant and nephew of the parish priest) impersonated the prophet of a new religion and defended the distribution of common forests among residents. Although tensions of one kind or another abounded, there were hardly any effective changes in property rights in Cadore during the entire period considered. The conflicts give the author an opportunity to reflect on the nature of the protests, which he places in an ambiguous territory between traditionalism and revolution, both in the 1848 episodes and in the Unification process. The adscription of the Cadore region to the Kingdom of Italy did not end with the forest conflicts. The end of the "wooden age" and the development of the railway network in the late nineteenth century reframed the question, but this could be object of a new future research.

To sum up, Bonan's book is an interesting study that provides valuable historical information on political and institutional change and its effects both on society and on its relations with the environment. It is missing, perhaps, a greater support in the literature on the commons, which has been lately very prolific. The use of this historiography would have given a useful theoretical support to the case analyzed. The comparison with similar cases from other mountain areas in Europe would also have been useful, as many aspects described in

the book have strong similarities with other cases shown in the Spanish common forests, for example. These questions do not tarnish the value of a very interesting book, very well documented and written which, through a case study, addresses some key issues to better understand the complex processes of historical change.

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Rosa Congost, Jorge Gelman and Rui Santos (Eds.)

### **Property Rights in Land: Issues in Social, Economic and Global History**

New York, Routledge, 2017, 212 pp.

**T**he dual relationship between property rights and economic development is one of those big topics that are well suited for coming up with stylized models and grand narratives. Unfortunately, many of those attempts lack the detailed historical knowledge necessary to ground those theories on the empirical reality of past societies. This book, edited by Rosa Congost, Jorge Gelman and Rui Santos, constitutes a welcome contribution that challenges and qualifies some of the assumptions contained in those general accounts of how modern economic growth came to be, especially regarding the distinction between “good” and “bad” institutions. In particular, instead of only focusing on rules, norms and beliefs –as well as on the agency of state and elite organisa-

tions–, the articles contained in this collection frame their discussions around the social structures –and actual social practices– that surrounded those –more formal– institutions that governed property rights in land. By doing so, they stress the complexity of the dynamics between institutions and the social relations surrounding them. In addition, the wide regional and temporal coverage of the nine articles gathered in this volume successfully portrays the diversity of the historical arrangements around these issues.

The first chapter, “Migration and accommodation of property rights in the Portuguese Eastern Empire, sixteenth-nineteenth centuries”, by José Vicente Serrão and Eugénia Rodrigues, looks at the interaction between the Portuguese colonial state and

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The first chapter, “Migration and accommodation of property rights in the Portuguese Eastern Empire, sixteenth-nineteenth centuries”, by José Vicente Serrão and Eugénia Rodrigues, looks at the interaction between the Portuguese colonial state and

their subjects (both settlers and aboriginal) in India, Ceylon and Mozambique between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries. The implementation of land policies and the redefinition of the institutional framework constituted an ongoing learning process that varied across time and space, thus stressing the individual and collective role of the different players involved. Although initially attempting to impose a universal arrangement regarding property rights, the different local contexts and the subsequent adaptive evolution resulted in very different outcomes, including the incorporation of native elements into the institutional reconfiguration.

The long-term evolution of property rights in Scandinavia is the subject of the second essay. In “Alternative uses of land and re-negotiation of property rights: Scandinavian examples, 1750–2000”, Mats Morrell clearly shows how changes in land use and the underlying balance of power continuously shaped the institutional arrangements and their implementation from the end of the eighteenth century to the post-industrial society existing today. The compatibility of different kinds of property and use rights and how land is actually used creates conflicts, externalities and solutions in a path-dependent way. In this regard, this co-evolution was not necessarily linear and was fundamentally delineated by what past institutional forms allowed for.

The third chapter, “Innovation in property rights and economic development in Lombardy, eighteenth-twentieth centuries”, by Andrea Locatelli and Paolo Tedeschi, shifts the focus to Italy to provide

evidence of how changes in property rights in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century were conducive to economic growth. Interestingly, this example conforms to the conventional narrative depicted by new institutional economics, but seems to be contingent on the local context: an agrarian system that coexisted in Lombardy with a dynamic urban economy. Crucially, the existing cultural values stemming from the late medieval period legitimized social behavior based on self-realisation and thus helped these transformations. The authors indeed argue that the same reforms failed in Southern Italy due to its different socio-economic context.

The next chapter, “The shift to ‘modern’ and its consequences: Changes in property right and land wealth inequality in Buenos Aires, 1839–1914”, by Julio Djenderedjian and Daniel Santilli, turns the relationship between property rights and economic development upside down. Studying the province of Buenos Aires in Argentine during the nineteenth and early-twentieth century, the authors show how changes in land values, arising from a strong economic growth, pushed the landed elites to secure their ownership rights, thus resulting in growing inequalities. They use the neighbouring province of Santa Fe to stress how these developments were heavily context-dependent. Although the institutional framework and the administrative tools were the same in both provinces, critical differences between both regions produced very different results.

Similarly, in “Taming the platypus: Adaptions of the *colonia* tenancy contract

to a changing context in nineteenth century Madeira”, Benedita Camara and Rui Santos also stress the importance of the existing socio-economic environment on shaping how property rights evolved despite the establishment of new formal rules. The different players, constrained by their respective bargaining power, both adapted to and influenced the new institutional regime so as to secure the reproducibility of the system and their own interests. This essay also shows how the system resilience resulted from an adaptive process that was highly dependent on initial conditions.

The sixth essay, “Demithologizing and de-idealizing the commons: Ostrom’s eight design principles and the irrigation institutions in eastern Spain”, by Samuel Garrido, addresses how land and water property rights were connected within irrigation communities. In doing so, the author qualifies the interpretative framework provided by Elinor Ostrom for designing institutions governing the commons. Relying on rich empirical evidence, the article shows that, although these institutions did not always conform to the model depicted by Ostrom, they nonetheless effectively managed the commons. The essay also stresses the need to not over-idealise the commons because they were compatible with exclusionary practices and high levels of social inequality.

Framed within the land reform promoted by the Spanish Second Republic in 1931-34, the article “Hopes of recovery: Struggles over the right to common lands in the Spanish countryside, 1931-1936”, by Iñaki Iriarte and José Miguel Lana, analy-

ses how local councils and workers’ associations reacted to the possibility of recovering the commons that had been privatized in the course of the liberal reforms of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century. Relying on a large body of complaints filed by Spanish villages, the authors shed light on long-term disputes around the use of collective resources and the underlying social conflict regarding access to land. The article powerfully stresses that the local agents did not only respond to material interests but also to the perception of illegitimacy and abuse.

Similarly, in “Hurdles to reunification: Cultural memories and control over property on post-socialist rural East Germany”, Joyce Bromley and Axel Wolz also bring to the front the importance of the cultural memory of expropriation and appropriation. In this regard, the German reunification policies in the 1990s had to take into account the competing claims made by different interest groups which were very much based on collective narratives of cooperation and conflict. The resulting agrarian structure therefore was very different from what the initial policies have initially envisioned.

In the last essay, “Property rights in land: Institutions, social appropriations and socio-economic outcomes”, the editors discuss how the different pieces of this collection fit into their theoretical framework. In accordance to the spirit of the whole volume, Rosa Congost, Jorge Gelman and Rui Santos highlight that institutional arrangements do not live in a vacuum but are fundamentally shaped by the context in

which they operate. They are seen as social constructions that reflect the interactions and power relations between the different actors, both at the local, regional, national and international level, as well as by processes of path dependence. Overall, this volume not only provides much needed empirical evidence on how property rights

evolved in their particular historical contexts but will also serve future scholars as a useful source of inspiration.

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Alessandro Carassale, Claudio Littardi and Irma Naso (Ed.)  
**Fichi: Storia, economia, tradizioni / Figs: History, Economy, Traditions**

Ventimiglia, Philobiblion, 2016, 382 pp.

In 1996, one of today's most important Italian songwriters, Francesco Guccini, published an old song of his for the first time (*D'amore, di morte e di altre sciocchezze*, EMI), written in 1976 and titled *I fichi* ("figs"). It is a cabaret song, a genre which Guccini has mastered, and it is an adaptation of a song by another well-known songwriter, Ivan Della Mea, titled *I crauti* ("Sauerkraut"), itself a humorous ironic song, about a humble and popular product. The song *I fichi*, also about a cheap and popular fruit, starts like this: *I don't understand people / that don't like figs / even the ancients said / yes to figs and no to cream puffs*. Later, it continues: *Figs are good for vision / birds eat plenty of them / and... almost none has glasses, / but this is a little secret*, demonstrating that even in 1976 people ascribed beneficial and therapeutic qualities to figs. This belief was discussed at length in medieval medical-dietetics literature, as shown by the essay by Irma Naso in this book ("Ficus ceteris

fructibus laudabilior est...'. Un frutto speciale nella letteratura medico-dietetica del tardo medioevo", pp. 169-84). As birds knew well and kept secret, the consumption of figs can even heal and preserve vision.

This is a small, but meaningful anecdote that attests to figs' relevance. It proves that even today, stories about figs can elaborate and convey ancient and culturally profound motifs. The book edited by Alessandro Carassale, Claudio Littardi and Irma Naso deals with these traditions, together with the history and economy of figs. It includes 18 essays and four interventions that resulted from a roundtable held at a conference that took place in Sanremo (Bordighera) on 22-23 May 2015. That conference, like the book, was divided into four sections: production and conservation; markets and consumption; literary, artistic and linguistic testimonies; and botanical and genetical diversity in the Mediterranean region.