

Liminal questions between sharp borders and encircling frontiers: the case of “common lands” in the South-western Alps

Marina Marengo *

Abstract

The concept of frontier land has always characterized the South-western Alps, where it combines with the concept of “land of civic use”, a particular kind of common land. The High Tanaro Valley constitutes from this point of view an exemplary case study.

Keywords: Frontier land, borderland, civic use, South-western Alps, High Tanaro Valley.

1. Introduction

“Luckily, little by little all territories touch each other at some point and we all become border people. [...] Therefore, even the most impenetrable borders slowly get transparent: buffer areas, transit regions, gates, interstices turn into the new centres where multitudes converge on and from where they expand, having become sensitive to a new way of listening to things” (Butor, 1987: 412). The quotation by Michel Butor helps us introduce the question of liminality, especially as regards those areas which are “on the margins”. The South-western Alps, especially the High Tanaro Valley, constitute an exemplary case of a mountainous area where, ever since Antiquity, liminality played a central role in the construction of territory. For the Romans, for instance, the conquest of the Alps does not coincide with the definition of a clear-cut border: on the contrary, it coincides with

* Dipt. Teoria e Documentazione delle Tradizioni Culturali –
Facoltà di Lettere di Arezzo – Viale Cittadini 33 – 52100
AREZZO (Italy)
marina.marengo@unisi.it

the control “[...] of a vast hotspot, rich in passages and extremely relevant for free circulation between the two sides [...]. Being a gigantic commutator, the Alps are in fact ‘borderlands’ within Europe, but in the sense of ‘frontier’, not in the sense of ‘boundary’ (limit)” (Raffestin, 1992: 371).

2. Alpine... liminalities

Although in the Modern Age the Alps became “borderlands”, for a long time they had been most of all “frontier lands”. The difference may appear irrelevant at a quick glance, but actually it is fundamental to understand a concept of separation centred on encounter, exchange and complementarity. Raffestin uses a pretty relevant expression about frontier lands: since they are not crossed by boundary lines, i.e. lines that separate, “[...] but by lines that, because of their location on the margins, allow different and complementary fields to come into contact with each other, they are but a promise of exchange: exchange of men, goods, ideas” (Raffestin, 1992: 372).

Frontier lands are transit areas in a wider sense, as they allow not only the passage of things, people and ideas, but also of different “worlds”, as is the case here with the Alpine and the Mediterranean. Raffestin (1992: 371) maintains that the South-western Alps “are frontier lands, but they are not separate lands [...] they have been shaped by transhumance, this seasonal alternate movement that follows the rhythm of climatic conditions and allows us to discover the ecological function of the frontier”. This rhythmic, circular and almost ritual movement highlights even more how lines – in this case, those traced by the routes of transhumance, but we might find many other lines in these “network” mountains – do not have a separation function, quite the contrary: they mark a direction. These lines almost always lead to external territories full of promises of exchange and innovation, thanks to internal territories that are somehow “curious”, or at least not closed to interaction and hybridization. Looking back to the past, Paola Guglielmotti underlines – referring to the entire Middle Ages – how fundamental was “[...] the copresence of linear and area borders [...] described by a

whole series of clarifications that make evident their function as contact (“a contact implying transmission, not limitation”) rather than separation elements (and that therefore turn out to be fringed, complex, fluid, intermittent, articulate, grey, permeable, porous)” (Gugliemotti, 2006: 1).

These borders, so fractalic and almost post-modern, if one looks into it, constitute today that “living membrane” (Gugliemotti, 2006: 1) that favours the “respiration” of frontier lands. According to Paolo Cuttitta, the “[...] function of these liminal areas, of these frontiers extended in two directions (i.e. developing both in length and in width), is that of preventing conflicts without necessarily preventing any potential activity of exchange and trade (though, of course, the latter are made less simple and immediate, hence more controllable) (Cuttitta, 2007: 28).

The ways in which this remarkable mixture of linear and area borders is shaped and continues to exist along the frontiers of the High Tanaro Valley and the South-western Alps provide many opportunities to reflect on an open territoriality that “[...] offers its own space to the copresence of borders that are ephemeral (for they are not necessarily due to last) as much as mobile (for they can move) and potentially limitless in number and variety: therefore, they are potentially ubiquitous (for they can appear everywhere). This means, on the whole, that in an open territoriality, in the ambiguous mixture of frontier lands, space – i.e. the territory – can be marked by as many border traces as there are demonstrations of power [...]. The borders of power, the borders of political and decisional authorities, appear in frontier lands as scattered, isolated, punctiform, mobile and potentially ubiquitous, for they lack the continuity and uniformity that define linear borders (Cuttitta, 2007: 30).

3. Common lands: the complex and unique liminalities of the South-western Alps.

The aforesaid concepts and categories are the raw material we need to start a reflection on common lands. First of all, we need a clarifying definition: “The terms ‘lands of civic use’ or ‘civic

lands' indicate all those lands which are meant for public use, whether they have belonged to a whole community for a long time or their possession has derived from the abrogation of rights on alien lands" (Marangoni, 2005: 143)¹.

The area of lands for civic use is estimated to be "[...] about 3 million hectares, equivalent to 10% of the whole national territory. Most of them are located in mountainous areas. These data are rather eloquent about the relevance of this phenomenon, especially in mountainous areas where vast expanses of forests and pastures are meant for civic use" (Marangoni, 2005: 144). The available data are related to the Piedmont Region: "[...] according to the first results of a census of lands of civic use accomplished by the Piedmont Region between 1987 and 1991 [...], such lands cover an expanse of more than 290,000 hectares, equivalent to about 11% of the regional area; therefore, lands for civic use make up approximately 24.5% of the mountainous lands of this region" (Marangoni, 2005: 144).

3.1 The construction and transmission of the rights on lands for civic use in the High Tanaro Valley

Having defined the overall picture, we need now to trace the origins of this phenomenon. This has been made possible by research carried out by scholars from various scientific fields. In the Western Alps there still exist ancient traditions related to transhumance and to the practice of common use of lands: most of all pastures, but also forests and arable lands.

In the South-western Alps, and in particular in the High Tanaro Valley, especially the area of the source branches of the river, it is most of all grazing land and forests that are involved in the process of normalization. The micro-territorial features of this Alpine context have often been shaped by questions related to common lands, as "[...] there were frequent conflicts between the various communities of the region, and usually they were related to border questions or to the management of water resources. In such cases landlords and peasants became allied to defend shared interests, taking part in a hard competition aimed

most of all at the control of grazing and forests” (Grillo, 2007: 39).

Ever since the beginning of the Modern Age common lands have been the object of a conspicuous effort of regulation by local authorities. The strategies adopted in every single case make evident what the aims of such a process of normalization were: to reduce political and administrative conflicts in borderlands and to increase the extension of arable lands, in order to favour some specific economic interests. One of the main sources on the topic “[...] are the *Bandi campestri* [countryside regulations], regulations issued by the community to impose prohibitions and sanctions”, as well as rules for “the use of common goods, such as collecting wood for burning or any other purposes; collecting grass, leaves or fruit; ploughing and cultivating; distributing water for irrigation; the production of lime or the exploitation of common caves; the use of common facilities such as ovens or mills” (Marangoni, 2005: 148).

3.2 Zones-tampons and cuneo di pascolo: two key concepts for the Tanarello Alps

In order to explain such complex realities as the topics of the present study, a great effort of creativity is needed. There are two concepts that have been used in research on common lands in the South-western Alps: the concept of *zone-tampon*, developed by Jean-Paul Boyer (1990) and the *cuneo di pascolo*, as defined by Beatrice Palmero (2007).

Rethinking the complexity of the concept of area border and applying it to the context we are examining, we are faced here by an area forming a transitional space between two or more States or administrations: “Divided between the Republic of Genoa and the Duchy of Savoy until the end of the XVIII century, and later on (in the various stages of the unification of Italy) between the future provinces of Imperia and Cuneo, it is currently divided between two regions (Piedmont and Liguria), five municipalities (Cosio d’Arroscia, Mendatica, Triora, Briga Alta, Ormea), three Mountain Communities (High Arroscia Valley, High Argentina Valley, High Tanaro Valley) and two different

Commands of the State Forestry Corps (Imperia and Cuneo)” (Rota, 1994: 584-585).

In fact the Alpine Tanarello area, a source branch of the Tanaro river, is even now “[...] characterized by a mixture of customs and jurisdictions involving both France and Italy [...] There is a huge documentation on this situation – the outcome of several territorial and delimitation agreements – which dates back the divisions of Alps and grazing land to 1250, at least” (Palmero, 2007: 145). Even though the area was divided between two different countries, territorial proximity contributed to preserve the indivisibility of these grazing lands and forests. It is worth noting that in the beginning the “[...] rules on summer pastures and on the exploitation of the Alps were transmitted orally; after 1000 AD [...] some agreements were signed on the division of the Viozene pastures and forests between the inhabitants of Pieve di Teco and those of Ormea, notably from those of the village of Quarzina, that claimed rights of property because of their closeness to the area” (Pagliana, 1996: 150).

So far we have been talking mostly of grazing land, but actually the common and undivided lands near the Tanaro sources also comprise large forests. Describing the Ormea county Chabrol de Volvic, a prefect in Napoleonic times, underlined that the “[...] exploitation of the huge evergreen forest near the Tanaro sources [...] would allow the village to earn considerable money in transport” (Chabrol de Volvic, 1994, vol. 1: 232).

The “discovery” by Chabrol de Volvic would still remain ineffective for some decades because of the practical difficulties of building a carriage road in such a karstic area. From that moment onwards, vast expanses of forest were partially cut down, sometimes in an indiscriminate way. All this lasted for about a century, but “Whole forests were destroyed even after the end of World War II, when the entire territory of the municipalities of Briga Marittima and Tenda, included the High Tanaro Valley strip, seemed likely to be ceded to France (Rota, 1994: 593).

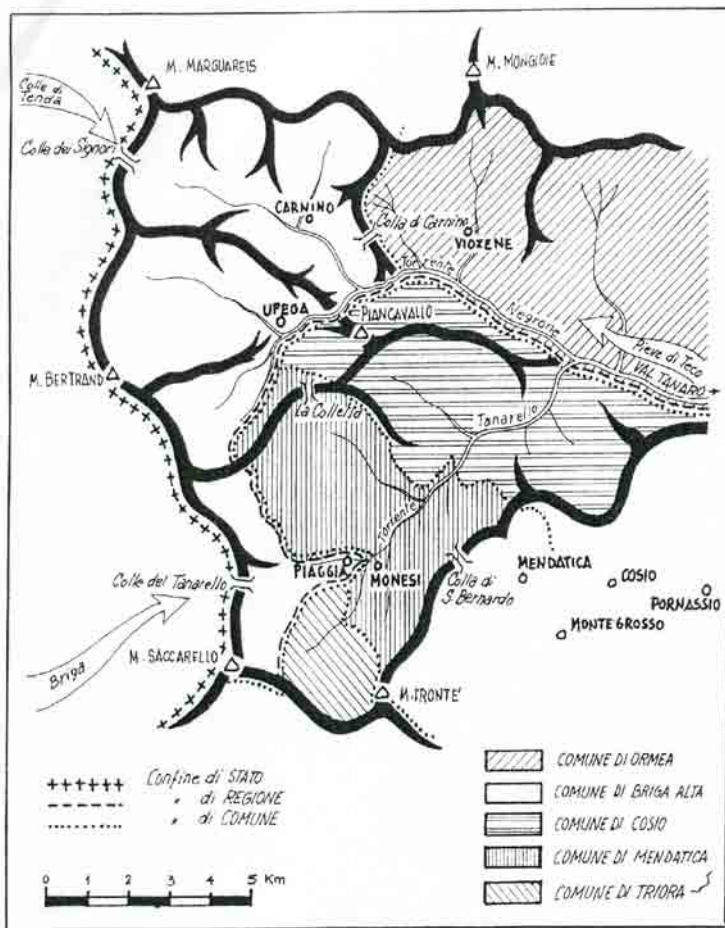


Fig. 1 - The area of common pastures and forests near the Tanaro sources [Source: Rota M.P., 1994: 585.]

4. The *cuneus comune*: an age-old frontier land

First of all we need to clarify this concept, which might seem somehow obscure, especially in relation to the frontier; we will therefore see it in the context which produced it and look into it by drawing on the reflections developed by Beatrice Palmero,

who defined both its medieval and later meaning. As we have just seen, the Tanarello “Alps” have gone through all sorts of events, but anyway from time immemorial they have been run by various communities as common lands: “Since 1250, on the border between the communities of Briga and Triora there emerged a tradition of *cuneus comune* that defined the boundaries of specific common areas for pasture; in these areas country justice was administered by the communities according to common rules [...] The Piedmontese government then established the bailiwick of Tenda and Briga [...], confirmed the right of these communities to issue their own rules for the administration of the territory and the right of enforcing them, apart from recognizing the previous conventions (Palmero, 2007: 146).

Palmero highlights how all the coming into being of the international border between the XVII and the XVIII centuries was strategic, as it was a political space connected to the common grazing use of mountainous lands. In any case, the common lands of the *cuneus* represent “[...] the *innovation* of an Alpine *border tradition* being established at that time, together with the frontier solution between national states. In this specific case, the Alpine *border tradition* is related to an international arbitration dating back to 1670 (the Servient arbitration), which in turns confirms its derivation from late medieval arbitrations and divisions” (Palmero, 2007: 146). This arbitrate put an end to the long-lasting disputes between Savoy and the Republic of Genoa on the question of territorial jurisdiction over this strategic mountainous area. “In particular [...] they set crosses all along the ancient *cunei* and rules were established for the access to disputed pastures; in this way some specific jurisdictions on grazing were highlighted (*alpi*, i.e. mountainous areas involved in transhumance, and *bandite*, i.e. lands under the jurisdiction of a *bando campestre*)” (Palmero, 2009: 49). In this area, however, there were also some other political interests only indirectly affecting the local communities, notably the possibility of territorial rule “[...] over the intersection of valleys up to Alpine passes, where, apart from those related to pastures, other jurisdictions exist too (those on roads, waters, forests, etc.)” (Palmero, 2007: 146-147).

Examining the available documents, Palmero (2007: 151) identifies the “territorial border, *sharing the same centre* of the Alpine ridges”. While the Savoy government was trying to define its own strategic “*strada marenca*” [route to the sea] by penetrating into the – modern, in this case – borderlands between Piedmont and Genoa, “[...] the *lords of the pastures* from Genoese Triora identified their own border Alps. The whole of the Briga ridge remained undivided, and its identitarian importance was confirmed by the forms of property and transmission of land that the 1702 land register had furtherly legitimized as common property” (Palmero, 2007: 151).

5. Conclusion. Civic uses: that strange object between tradition and new perspectives

Among millennia-old traditions related to transhumance, everyday needs to satisfy, property interests that are sometimes hidden, the question of civic uses is still an open one in the High Tanaro Valley. In this mountainous area in which frontiers are the rule and not the exception, civic uses represent:

- a problem, when they are neglected by the individuals or the communities they belong to;
- a resource to preserve and exploit both from the human and the naturalistic point of view. The practice of grazing livestock, the forests and the mountain arable lands have all left traces of the long-term processes of construction and management of the territory.

Current political, administrative or jurisdictional frontiers, unlike what used to be in the past, are no longer overcharged of elements of social conflict or social peace. However, they have been the cause of a lack of organization, more precisely a lack of effective and pragmatic coordination that might allow the planning of a common management of the territory – which constitutes a paradox for so vast an expanse of lands of civic use.

Notes

¹ National laws currently in force on the subject: Act n. 1766, June 16, 1927; R.D. of February 26, 1928 n. 322; Dpr. n. 11 of January 15, 1972; Dpr. n. 616 of July 24, 1977 (Cf.: Ciampi, 1989, pp. 739-740). With reference to this specific case, the Piedmont Region, by the Regional Act n. 29 of December 2, 2009, *Attribuzioni di funzioni amministrative e disciplina in materia di usi civici*, defined a juridic instrument that regulates the lands which are included among those meant for civic use.

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