

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Old woods, new rule: the annexation of Veneto to the Kingdom of Italy from a forest history perspective

Giacomo Bonan 

Department of Historical Studies, University of Turin, Italy
Email: giacomo.bonan@unito.it

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Abstract

This paper analyses the period following the annexation of Veneto to the Kingdom of Italy in 1866 from the standpoint of forest history. Recent historiography has demonstrated that the development of scientific forestry was a crucial factor in the state-building process. Post-unification Veneto provides an opportunity to explore these dynamics from a decentralised perspective, focusing on two critical aspects, relevant in Italy as in many other countries at that time: (a) the administration's attempts to study and manage forest resources, and (b) the forest conflicts arising from economic and institutional transformations in rural areas.

Keywords: forest history; Venice; Risorgimento; common lands; nation-building

Introduction

In recent years, many studies have investigated the environmental aspects of the state-building process on a cultural and material level (cf. Armiero and Graf von Hardenberg 2014; Graf von Hardenberg et al. 2017). From this perspective, a favoured field of research has been that of forest history since, at least until the beginning of the twentieth century, control of the woodlands was considered a crucial issue for governments in order to guarantee the supply of wood to strategic sectors and to limit hydrogeological instability (Oosthoek and Hölzl 2018). Furthermore, forest landscapes often played a central role in the rhetoric associated with the construction of national identities (Wilson 2012; Harrison 1993).

Even on a theoretical level, these themes are very relevant. James C. Scott, in his influential and controversial book *Seeing Like a State*, identified in the development of modern scientific forestry an archetype of how state apparatuses have promoted modernisation projects that were based on an oversimplification of ecological and social dynamics, in order to make them 'legible' to the central power. This process could lead to unexpected outcomes that were often contrary to the objectives that the interventions aimed to achieve, as in the case of German silviculture analysed by Scott (Scott 1999).

This paper critically engages with Scott's thesis by addressing two interrelated issues. The first is the need to study silvicultural theories, and the policies inspired by them, empirically, analysing their implementation in the different contexts in which they

were introduced. Recent studies have shown that even the German silvicultural debate in the nineteenth century was much more complex and diverse than the model proposed by Scott (Hölzl 2010; Lotz 2017). Furthermore, the development of forestry policies was not the result of the action of the state bureaucracy understood as a monolithic body. On the contrary, these policies arose through conflict and negotiations that involved multiple actors both outside and inside the governmental apparatus. State officials themselves often had non-univocal and conflicting interests (Bonan 2019a; Fedman 2024, 11). In other words, observed from the woodland, the process of administrative modernisation was much less linear and unidirectional than it might appear in the ‘eyes’ of the state.

Historians have explored these issues across different analytical and time scales. Some scholars have adopted a progressive approach, examining the medium- to long-term development of forest administration and the consequences this process had at the social, economic and ecological levels (Sivaramakrishnan 1999; Whited 2000; Rajan 2006; Brain 2011; Matteson 2015; Kochetkova 2024). In other cases, the analysis has concentrated on specific events, often characterised by abrupt changes in institutional structures, in order to evaluate change and continuity in the relationship between the political context and the management of forest resources (Sahlins 1994; Armiero 2008; Biasillo and Armiero 2018).

Over the following pages, I shall analyse this relationship from an unusual perspective, that of the annexation of the Veneto to the Kingdom of Italy, established by the Treaty of Vienna on 3 October 1866 and ratified following the plebiscites of 21 and 22 October (Melotto 2018). At that point the Kingdom of Italy had existed for just over five years, and the previous year a law had been enacted guaranteeing administrative unification across all the territories acquired by the Kingdom of Sardinia in the previous years. This law was extended with some modifications to the Veneto at the end of 1866 (Simone 2022). The administrative structure that resulted from these changes was inspired by a centralist and hierarchical model, with a mayor appointed by the king and a prefect holding broad powers who reported directly to the government (Aimo 2010).

However, from a forest perspective, unification had not yet happened. Piedmontese forest law, dating back to 1833 (Bobbà 2015), had not been extended either to those territories acquired in 1859–60 or to the Veneto at the time of its annexation. In the various regions of the Kingdom, the legislation of the pre-unification states remained in force, some of which dated back to the eighteenth century, as in the case of Tuscany. In Veneto (and Lombardy) a law issued in 1811, during Napoleonic rule, was still in force (Sansa 1999).

This does not mean that the ruling classes of the time were not aware of the importance of the issue. During the period when the government was dominated by the Historical Right (1861–76), there was intense debate in parliament that led to the approval of specific regulations concerning the organisation of forestry personnel, reforestation programmes on uncultivated land, the establishment of a body of state forests and the setting up of surveys to ascertain the extent, characteristics and condition of Italian woodlands. A full five proposals were presented to achieve legislative unification regarding forestry; and all of these were the subject of in-depth studies and discussion, although they were not definitively approved. The initiatives were all promoted by the heads of the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry and Commerce (hereafter MAIC): Gioacchino Napoleone Pepoli (1862), Giovanni Manna (1864), Emilio Broglio (1868), Stefano Castagnola (1870) and Gaspare Finali (1874). Finali, when presenting his proposal to the chamber, began with the following words: ‘No proposed law has given rise to as much and varied discussion in Italy as the forest code’.¹

It is precisely this keen interest in the issue that explains the difficulties experienced in achieving comprehensive legislation. Additionally, this was a matter in which the

different economic approaches of the ruling classes emerged clearly. The majority held liberal positions and was therefore disinclined to accept state intervention and the introduction of rules that limited property rights. On the opposite side of the political spectrum there were those who requested forest protection measures to ensure both territorial equilibrium (to prevent landslides and flooding) and social harmony (due to the importance that these resources had for the poorest sections of the population). But between these two extremes there was a vast range of intermediate positions which were conditioned by various factors, starting with the geographical context of provenance (Vecchio 1980). In fact, interests linked to forest management varied greatly depending on whether one was referring to the coniferous forests of the Alpine valleys, the oak woodlands of the hilly regions or the coastal pine forests. The picture was complicated further by the multiple property regimes and management systems to which these lands were subjected (Vecchio, Piussi and Armiero 2002).

The situation was only resolved with the change in the political balance in parliament and the rise to power of the Historic Left in 1876. In early 1877, the minister Salvatore Majorana Calatabiano presented a new bill which became law on 20 June 1877. This law did not touch the overall management of the forests, nor the vexed issue of their economic exploitation, but rather it focused on the hydrogeological protection of the territory. However, it took a liberal approach and was disinclined to limit private initiative, especially concerning land that might be suitable for cultivation. The main directive introduced by the law restricted the felling of trees above the altitude at which the chestnut grew. Whereas below that altitude, the restriction applied only in specific circumstances relating to hydraulic or health issues (Greco 2017).

This directive was much criticised, since it was not always easy to delimit the altimetric range of the chestnut tree, which could vary significantly according to the climatic and morphological characteristics of the territory. Furthermore, the burdens of forest protection would all have fallen on those lands located at a higher altitude, without the central government having allocated adequate resources for this purpose or to compensate for the loss of income that the new restrictions would have entailed for the local populations. Despite these criticisms and various reforms proposed over the following years, the 1877 law remained in place for over three decades (Gaspari 1998; Tino 2004; Piccioni and Raffaelli 2002).

The decade between the annexation of Veneto to the Kingdom of Italy and the introduction of the first forest law was a critical phase in which the main forest policies of the new state were discussed, elaborated and implemented (Vecchio 1994). Veneto offers a vantage point from which to analyse these events for various reasons (Celetti 2008). First of all, a significant part of the forest assets of the new state was concentrated in this region, both in absolute terms and with reference to state woodlands. As we shall see, the statistics of that period have clear limitations, but nevertheless they still informed government action. The second reason concerns the prestige enjoyed by the forest administration of the area. The Republic of Venice was already considered a good example of woodland governance, celebrated in laudatory terms, although this was dictated more by rhetorical needs than historical knowledge (Vergani 2010; Zannini 2012). Moreover, the forest issue was one of the few areas where the Austrian administration was viewed favourably by the Italian government once it had taken control of the area, since German silviculture represented the reference model at the time. As proof of this, Adolfo di Bérenger, who was the founder and first director of the Forestry Institute of Vallombrosa and is considered the father of Italian silviculture, had trained at the forestry academy of Mariabrunn (near Vienna) and had pursued his career in Veneto during the period of Austrian rule (Lazzarini 2023).

Knowledge to govern

The Italian authorities had already become interested in the forest problems of the Veneto region in the weeks following the signing of the armistice of Cormons (12 August 1866), even before the formal transfer of Veneto by Austria at the Peace of Vienna (3 October 1866). In this transition phase, the authorities focused their attention on three aspects: legislation; the staffing and structure of the forestry administration; and the surface area and management systems of the woodlands. Between late summer and autumn, this information was collected mainly through royal commissioners, *pro tempore* figures placed in charge of managing the administration of the newly acquired provinces, with responsibilities similar to those of the prefects who would take over the governing of the territory at the end of 1866.²

In addition to collecting the information requested by the government, the royal commissioners took charge of the contingent tasks relating to the protection and exploitation of the woodlands. For example, the royal commissioner of Belluno, the future prime minister Giuseppe Zanardelli, had to manage the problems caused by the temporary suspension of the timber trade derived from the rich forest areas of the province. This trade formed one of the main economic sectors of the region, an industry 'from whose fruits a large and widespread class of workers lived exclusively' (ASBl, b. 13). Transport depended on the construction of rafts that were then taken down the Piave river to the commercial emporium of Venice; and this activity had been blocked in those months by military operations and the construction of a temporary bridge for the movement of troops in the lower Treviso plain (ASBl, b. 16).

In order to collect the required information and to carry out their regular duties, the royal commissioners relied on the personnel already in service under Austrian rule, apart from the defection of a few inspectors who had decided to abandon the territory with the imperial armies: the forest inspector of Palmanova, Antonio Krammer, and that of Verona, Carlo Rizzoli (ACS, b. 240, f. 843). Apart from these exceptions, the personnel in service were confirmed after the annexation. There were several instances of promotion, starting with Adolfo Di Bérenger, who was transferred to Florence (then the capital of the kingdom) in 1867 with a promotion to inspector general, entrusted with the task of setting up the first Italian forestry school (Lazzarini 2009, 111–194).

As already mentioned, after the annexation the pre-existing forestry regulations were confirmed, i.e. the law of 27 May 1811, issued by the Napoleonic administration and kept in force by the Austrians (Bollettino delle leggi del Regno d'Italia 1811). The debate on its application was essentially limited to financial questions, in particular to the criteria to be used when collecting the tax due to the forest administration for each felling carried out in the public woodlands, which corresponded to 8 per cent of the value of the goods (ACS, b. 234, f. 830 and b. 235, ff. 831–833). From an administrative point of view, the most significant change was the transfer of responsibilities in forestry matters from the finance department, to which they had been assigned in the Napoleonic era and maintained under Austrian rule, to the MAIC. The reason for this was 'that forestry industry also eminently affects public hygiene and safety' (ACS, b. 240, f. 843).

In the period immediately following the annexation of Veneto, the new administration focused above all on collecting information that would enable the region's forest assets to be assessed from a quantitative and qualitative point of view. On 31 October 1866, the heads of the Venetian forestry administration presented to the MAIC a summary of the data collected from the inspectors of the various provincial districts of the region. The results showed a total of 437,969.46 hectares of woodland, of which 289,214.94 hectares were publicly owned (managed by the state, municipalities or other public bodies) and the remainder owned by private individuals. In terms of typology, 188,973.16 hectares

of high forest were indicated and 248,996.30 hectares of coppice and wooded pasture (ACS, b. 685, f. 2685).

This is a very significant surface area, which represents approximately 18 per cent of the entire Venetian territory, especially if we consider that the publications of the time continually complained about the damage caused by excessive deforestation. However, it is reasonable to doubt these figures. First of all, there was no forest cadastre available. Furthermore, they did not correspond to any of the previous investigations carried out on the forest heritage of the region (ASMi, b. 7). Finally, they are not supported by the data that can be obtained from the Lombard-Venetian land cadastre, which had been completed in the middle of the century and was considered among the most advanced of the time (Berengo 1963). Thanks to the work carried out by Giorgio Scarpa on the cadastral documents, it is possible to distinguish between forest in the strict sense, amounting to 246,476 hectares of territory, and a forest area in a broader sense (with the addition of rocky ground, turf and wooded pasture) of 353,755 hectares (Scarpa 1996).

Therefore, even taking the broader definition of the forest area, the total indicated by the forest agents at the time of the annexation would still be out in excess of 80,000 hectares. It is difficult to justify this difference, which may even be due to errors in data processing. One also cannot exclude a possible conflict of interest: in exaggerating the wealth of the forest heritage, the authors of the report were first of all underlining the importance of the people in charge of managing that heritage – that is, themselves – in the hope of being reconfirmed in their positions within the new institutional context.

Over the following years, the Italian administration failed to produce more reliable data. The first forest statistics for the kingdom were published in 1870 and compiled by forest agents on a municipal basis through the study of the available archival, cadastral and cartographic documentation. However, these sources had been produced by the administrations of the pre-unification states and therefore according to very different parameters. A further limitation was the absence of information on the origin of the data collected and the collection methods (Regno d'Italia 1870). The limitations of the statistic were immediately apparent to the MAIC officials, who harshly criticised them in a publication referring to the state of agriculture in 1874 (Ministero di agricoltura, industria e commercio 1876). However, the surveys conducted in the following years, in addition to containing less information than the statistics of 1870, were also criticised over the data processing criteria (Agnoletti 2005; Armiero 2007). Even after the First World War, the leading agricultural economic expert of the time, Arrigo Serpieri, was calling for a forest cadastre to be created as soon as possible (Serpieri 1921).

In this context, even competent officials could provide very unreliable assessments on the state of the woodlands. In 1879, the Forestry Inspector of Belluno, Pietro Soravia, communicated to the MAIC that over the previous 70 years the forest area of the province had increased from 85,000 to 132,000 hectares. This was a huge increase but, just five years earlier, Soravia himself had estimated the forest cover to be around 69,000 hectares, therefore significantly less than the starting figure provided a few years later (Lazzarini 2013, 11–12). As some commentators of the time were already noting, it was a paradoxical situation: endless parliamentary debates on forest legislation that characterised the early years of the new state were being conducted without adequate knowledge of the extent of the woodlands and their characteristics (Bajo 1882, 116–118).

The state woodlands deserve a separate discussion, since in the pre-unification period these had been the subject of particular attention and a separate management system. The Republic of Venice had reserved for the exclusive use of the Arsenal certain woodlands which contained tree species that were necessary for shipbuilding, using public bans that placed them under the direct protection of the state and severely restricted the activities that private individuals could carry out in those areas (Vergani 2006;

Agnoletti 2004). This situation was continued after the fall of the Serenissima by both the French and the Austrians (Lazzarini 1999).

Already during the first weeks following the annexation of Veneto to the Kingdom of Italy, the royal commissioners had produced specific reports on these woodlands, but a series of more in-depth investigations was carried out in 1867. In fact, shortly before the annexation, the Austrians had initiated a procedure for the sale of state woodlands which was taken into consideration by the new authorities (ACS, b. 684, f. 2681). Estimates of the size and income of the lands in question were made; budgets and cultivation systems were analysed; new maps were drawn up; and the experienced forest inspectors were asked their opinion on the pros and cons of a possible privatisation (ACS, b. 684, ff. 2682–2684). In the summer of 1867, a commission was also established by the navy to evaluate the capability of these woodlands to satisfy the needs of shipbuilding (ACS, b. 685, f. 2689).

In the end it was decided to maintain them as a state asset and the woods were subsequently all inserted into the list of ‘inalienable public woodlands’ identified by the law of 20 June 1871. Of the approximately 45,000 hectares of total surface area protected at national level, one third – more than 15,630 hectares – was located in the region annexed in 1866. This latter surface area was then concentrated in two large woodlands: the Cansiglio (7,242 hectares) and the Montello (5,914 hectares), which had very different characteristics (AP, n. 283, doc. n. XVIII.).

The Cansiglio was located on a plateau at 1,000 to 1,300 metres altitude on the border between the provinces of Belluno, Treviso and Udine. The forest was mainly populated by beech trees, from which the Serenissima obtained the oars for its galleys; but beech was also the most suitable species for energy consumption, both as firewood and through conversion into charcoal. The wood was also used in some local artisanal activities, in particular for the production of boxes. There were frequent tensions between the forestry administration and the local population over the woodland and its use. However, at the time of the annexation the Cansiglio was overall considered to be flourishing, both due to certain management choices implemented during Austrian rule and because the geographical and pedological characteristics of the area limited its intensive exploitation (Lazzarini 2008).

The situation in the Montello woodland was very different. This was a mixed forest containing mainly oaks, which were particularly valuable in naval construction. The woodland spread over a hill with a maximum altitude of just 370 metres. Furthermore, the Montello was located in a densely populated area, just a few dozen kilometres from the cities of Treviso and Venice. In other words, the Montello was all too accessible and had become the main means of livelihood for a substantial part of the population in the villages located around the hill. These people, known as the ‘*bisnenti*’, were permitted to collect the secondary products of the woodland (forest litter, dry wood, medicinal products) and could be employed in the felling, preparation and transport of logs destined for the navy. The ‘*bisnenti*’ supplemented these activities by selling illicitly felled timber, sometimes with the connivance of forest agents or with their tacit consent (Buosi 1992).

In November 1866, the Italian administration limited the concessions for the collection of secondary products from the forest. It also decided to authorise the sale of large quantities of timber by public auction, felled without the use of local labour. These decisions led to a strong reaction by the ‘*bisnenti*’, who felt disadvantaged on all fronts: as well as their exclusion from forest work and from access to the forest for the collection of secondary products, the auctions competed with their own small sales of timber that they conducted illegally. The situation remained very tense over the following years, with repeated protests and invasions of the Montello by the local population; and there was consistent degradation of the forest cover (Casellato 2012, 63–65; Simonetti 1988).

Indeed, the latter became so serious that the idea was put forward of privatising the area and converting it to agricultural use. This option was pursued in the law of 21 February 1892 and implemented in the following decades (Buosi 2018).

Forest issues, social issues

The Montello case provides a good example of how forest management was part of the so-called ‘social question’, which at that time was much debated in the public and political arenas (Case 2016; Taccetti 2023). The transformations resulting from industrialisation, the intensification of international trade and the spread of capitalism in the countryside were producing strong tensions in the rural world. These conflicts often had forest resources at their centre, since their use was traditionally associated by local people with customary practices and rights whose legitimacy was being questioned ever more sharply by landowners and the state apparatus (Davis 1988). Such tensions could assume the acute form of collective protest or the endemic form of forest crimes.

The social reasons behind the violation of forest laws are a particularly popular research topic among historians (Thompson 1975; Griffin 2008; Hölzl 2011; Szabó 2023). For post-unification Veneto, the widespread diffusion of the phenomenon had already been reported by the Agrarian inquiry into the conditions of the agricultural class (Morpurgo 1882). An early historiographical study was carried out by Federico Bozzini in a work dedicated to rural theft that analyses the mentality behind this type of crime (Bozzini 1977). Subsequent research has revised some of Bozzini’s interpretations, including his identification of 1866 as a turning point, since it has been shown that this phenomenon already had structural roots in previous periods (Sbriccoli 1980; Brunello 1981; Melotto 2016).

Furio Bianco’s analysis of the documents produced by the tribunals and magistrates’ courts in the province of Udine in the 1870s made it possible to assess the incidence of different types of rural theft. Forest violations and illegal grazing seem to predominate in areas where woodlands once belonged to village communities as common land. The local people were convinced that they still enjoyed rights of various kinds on these lands, regardless of their formal legal status. These rights were based on cultural models that were still very widespread and reiterated by transgressors who had been caught in the act of committing a crime in order to legitimise their actions (Bianco 1999).

This same ‘rebellious and traditional’ mentality (Thompson 1993, 9) lay behind the collective protest by which the local population claimed the use of forest resources through land invasions (Hobsbawm 1974). This was a typical form of peasant action to mark the reappropriation of a territory by a rural community that did not recognise the legitimacy of new ownership structures. In the case of woodlands, these invasions were usually associated with the mass felling of trees or the dividing of woodlands amongst the inhabitants.

Such protests occurred above all during crises provoked by sudden changes in institutional structures. They were motivated by the disintegration of the pre-existing repressive system and the resulting opportunity to act with impunity; but also by the hope of exploiting the changed political context in order to obtain concessions from the new government. Jonathan Sperber has effectively summarised the phenomenon in the circumstance of the 1848 revolutions: ‘peasant resentment about use of the forest was the greatest source of social tension in rural society before the revolution; it was also the single most common and most prevalent source of violence in the countryside during the spring of 1848. Everywhere that there were forests, there were forest riots’ (Sperber 2005, 124; Buttiglione 2023).

Similar actions also occurred during Italian unification and in particular with the arrival of Garibaldi's expedition in the Kingdom of Naples. Probably the most well-known case took place in Bronte, Sicily, in the summer of 1860. Lucy Riall has shown how the discontent that provoked the revolt was linked as much to the political contingencies of the time as to long-term grievances. In fact, it was precisely the combination of these two elements that unleashed the tensions, since the population considered the arrival of Garibaldi as an opportunity to obtain the division of the common lands among themselves, which had been a consistent demand in previous decades and had always been blocked by certain local notables (Riall 2013). However, the Bronte case was only the best-known of a series of protests that broke out during the collapse of the Bourbon regime to obtain the division of state or feudal land, which was often woodland (Armiero 2003; Capone 2015).

Similar events also occurred during the annexation of Veneto to the Kingdom of Italy. In addition to the already mentioned events in Montello, the most significant protests took place in the district of Auronzo, situated in the northern part of the province of Belluno. The orography of the area, mainly located above 1,000 metres altitude, placed severe limits on agricultural production, which was largely unable to meet the needs of the population for more than three or four months of the year. The economic cornerstone of the territory lay in the vast forest cover of tall trees, predominantly conifers (Sacco 2002).

During the Ancien Régime, these woodlands were owned by the rural communities and the local population had the right to collect the wood for domestic needs and to carry out several other activities according to the model of an integrated economy typical of the Alpine regions (Bonan and Lorenzini 2019). Furthermore, the woodlands represented one of the main sources of supply for the Venetian market, where the timber arrived by river transport along the Piave. This trade allowed the rural communities to accumulate the financial resources to cover their main expenses, of which the most burdensome and frequent was the import of foodstuffs. In addition to this, the forest activities guaranteed opportunities to large segments of the population. Indeed, the contracts drawn up with the timber merchants contained clauses that guaranteed the use of local labour in the cutting and logging operations (Pozzan 2013).

After the fall of the Republic of Venice and the Napoleonic reforms, the rural communities were suppressed and replaced by municipalities. The state authorities increased their control over the management of the woodlands and the customary rights of the local people were severely limited. In the first half of the nineteenth century, this situation caused several protests over two interrelated issues. The first concerned the ownership of woodlands and of common land in general. The majority of the population, supported by many local officials, considered these assets to be their property and did not recognise the legitimacy of the new administrative management. As a result they asked for the common lands to be divided up among the original inhabitants of the area. The state authorities consistently refused to do this, arguing that the lands belonged to the municipality as an administrative body (Bonan 2019b).

A second issue concerned the work of cutting and logging timber, which according to the law of 1811 had to be assigned by public auction and the proceeds of which were used to cover the expenses of the municipal and forest administrations. Unlike what happened over the question of the division of common lands, in this case the pressure applied by the population and local officials had some effect, since both the French and the Austrian governments granted enough exemptions for the system that had existed during the Ancien Régime to remain in force. This system guaranteed that at least one individual for each household in the area was employed in forest works under the coordination of a person elected by the families themselves. Part of the proceeds from the sale of timber was then distributed among the families, often directly as foodstuffs (Bonan 2019a).

In the autumn of 1866, the local population exploited the change in the institutional context to once again ask for the dividing up of the common land. At the end of September, the forest inspector of Pieve di Cadore reported to the royal commissioner that the inhabitants of the area 'are doing all they can to ensure that these precious forests are shared out among the individuals, to be enjoyed as they please; and even more so now in that, as they say, by entering under a new totally free regime, it is no longer necessary to submit to the forest authorities' (ASBl, b. 24, f. 4). Such demands grew over the following weeks and three municipal councils (Auronzo, Lozzo and Danta) presented plans to divide the lands among the inhabitants. The refusal of the newly installed prefect of Belluno to authorise the execution of these plans caused popular discontent to erupt. The most serious protest took place in January 1867 in the municipality of Comelico Superiore, where a company of Bersaglieri had to be sent to restore order (ASBl, b. 24, f. 7; ACS, b. 236, f. 834). Scuffles broke out and eight people were injured. Fifty-eight inhabitants were arrested and subsequently sentenced to prison terms of between eight months and three years (*La voce delle Alpi*, 7, 21 February 1867, 3; *La Gazzetta di Venezia*, 195, 22 July 1867, 776).

Over the following months, tensions shifted to the issue of forest work. The law regarding administrative unification, issued by the Kingdom of Italy on 20 March 1865, stipulated that municipalities had to award all contracts over a value of 500 lire by public auction. The municipalities of the Auronzo district appealed against the application of the regulation (BSC, b. 16, f. 489). However, in this case also the government authorities enforced the law. This led to further discontent among the local people, and in 1870 the army had to be sent in again to supervise on site the carrying out of the forest work (Zanderigo Rosolo 2013, 98–109; Talamini 1871a, 1).

The controversies over the management of the woodlands also aroused strong feelings in local publications, where these topics became intertwined with the debate on social issues and forest legislation. The first deputy from Cadore in the Italian parliament, the priest Natale Talamini, although condemning the attempts to divide up the woodlands, was a fervent supporter of the practice of assigning forest work to the local population. Talamini argued that forest work was the main means of subsistence in the area and the loss of this employment opportunity would exacerbate migration and social tensions. He further argued that there were ecological reasons for maintaining the status quo. Indeed, for Talamini participation in forest work reinforced the belief among the local population that these resources should be preserved for the common good (Talamini 1871a and b).

Most of the provincial elites took a very different view, and this is summarised well in the writings of the secretary of the Belluno chamber of commerce, Riccardo Volpe. According to the author, the traditional system of assigning forest work had fuelled a mentality dependent on welfare and had held back the economic and social development of the territory. Furthermore, he argued that smuggling had become a widespread problem as a result of the authorised and collective presence of the inhabitants in the woodlands, without the constraints and controls which would have been in place under an auction system. Therefore, Volpe supported the government's decision to impose auctions for forest work and hoped for a more repressive response to violations of forest legislation (Volpe 1879, 49–53; Volpe 1871, 87–92).

Conclusion

Post-unification Veneto enables us to reflect on the relationship between the centralisation of political power and the management of forest resources from a decentralised and *in fieri* perspective. If we return to one of the best-known works regarding these issues, the aforementioned *Seeing Like a State*, the comparison yields some similarities with

post-unification Veneto, but also notable differences. The differences reside principally in the idea of scientific silviculture as a system for obtaining a mathematical and rational management of forest resources. In Veneto, as in the rest of Italy, knowledge of the quantitative and qualitative characteristics of the forest cover remained approximate for a long time. This also resulted in much uncertainty regarding the legislative guidelines, as was often mentioned by commentators at the time. It was not until the period between the two world wars that more reliable data was available, with the creation of a forest cadastre.

There is more affinity between the Veneto situation and Scott's model regarding the simplification of social dynamics within the forest areas. The interventions by the new centralised state led to a pronounced restriction of the customary uses that the local people had enjoyed in the woodlands. This process had already been underway for some time, at least, in this area, since the administrative reforms of the Napoleonic period, but it underwent a rapid acceleration after Italian unification, as shown by the events that occurred in the district of Auronzo. However, unlike elsewhere, these initiatives did not have as their primary objective the increase of timber production. In the Italian context, the main concerns were the protection of forest areas as part of water regulation and landside prevention. This approach is demonstrated well by the reasons behind the decision to assign responsibility in these matters to the MAIC rather than to the Ministry of Finance.

It is difficult to assess the impact of these political and institutional changes in the long term, since in that same period economic changes had a much more rapid and intense impact on the rural world. The development of industrial technologies and the resulting intensification of trade that characterised the so-called first globalisation (1870–1914) completely changed the market for various commodities, including timber. Domestic production gradually lost its economic and strategic importance in favour of imports from other countries, which were made possible by the development of a railway network of continental scope (Agnolletti 1998; Bonan 2023).

These changes also signalled the start of the migratory exodus, particularly intense during the last quarter of the nineteenth century in Veneto; and this migratory flow peaked precisely in some areas where previously forest resources had been one of the main sources of subsistence, such as around Montello and in the Auronzo district (Buosi and Nicoletti 1999; Lazzarini 1990, 191). This phenomenon had profound economic, social and ecological repercussions: in the Italian forest areas, with the development of new activities that replaced, in whole or in part, those linked to the exploitation of the woodlands, all of which led to significant territorial transformations (Bonan 2020). Furthermore, migrants with previous experience in the timber sector continued to practise similar work in their areas of arrival, contributing to profound changes in the characteristics of the forest landscape in those regions (Brunello 1994; de Majo and Moretto 2021).

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Notes

1. ACS, b. 228, f. 819. All bills and related documentation are in ACS, bb. 226–228.
2. The information sent by the royal commissioners to the MAIC is kept in ACS, b. 240, respectively in the f. 844 (Belluno), 845 (Padua), 846 (Venice), 847 (Verona), 848 (Vicenza), 849 (Treviso). There are no documents on the

province of Rovigo, but it was the one with the least forest cover. On the royal commissioners, see *Gli archivi dei regi commissari* 1968.

Archival sources

ACS: Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Ministero dell'Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio, Direzione generale dell'agricoltura, Archivio generale, primo versamento.
 AP: Atti parlamentari, Camera dei Deputati.
 ASBl: Archivio di Stato di Belluno, Gabinetto di Prefettura.
 ASMi: Archivio di Stato di Milano, Agricoltura, parte moderna.
 BSC: Biblioteca Storica Cadorina, Fondo De Pol.
 b./bb.: folder/folders; f./ff.: file/files

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Giacomo Bonan is full professor in modern history at the University of Turin and principal investigator of the European Research Council Starting Grant 2023 project INWOOD. He has worked at the Division of History of Science, Technology and Environment at the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm; the Centre for the History of the Alps at the University of Italian Switzerland; the Department of History and Cultures at the University of Bologna; the Historisches Seminar at the Goethe-Universität Frankfurt, the Rachel Carson Center at the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich and the Department of Humanities at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. He is the author of *The State in the Forest* (Cambridge, 2019) and *Le acque agitate della patria* (Rome, 2020). His research interests include forest history; water history; and rural social conflicts associated with modernisation.

Italian summary

Questo saggio analizza la fase successiva all'annessione del Veneto al Regno d'Italia (1866) da una prospettiva di storia forestale. La recente storiografia ha mostrato che lo sviluppo della selvicoltura scientifica costituisce un aspetto cruciale nel processo di costruzione degli stati amministrativi. Il Veneto post-unitario permette di esplorare queste dinamiche da un punto di vista decentrato attraverso lo studio di due elementi tra loro correlati: (a) le iniziative promosse dall'apparato statale per conoscere e gestire le risorse forestali; (b) i conflitti forestali causati dalle trasformazioni economiche e istituzionali di quel periodo nelle aree rurali.

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