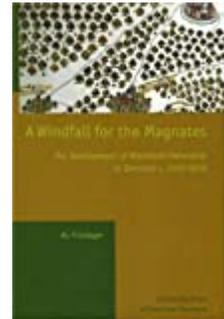




**Bo FritzbÅger.** *A Windfall for the Magnates: The Development of Woodland Ownership in Denmark c. 1150-1830.* Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2004. xii + 432 pp. Danish summary. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-87-7838-936-7.



**Reviewed by** Per Eliasson (School of Teacher Education, MalmÅfÅ University, Sweden)

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### *La Longue DurÅ©e of Danish Woodlands*

The transition from a diversified forest for multiple use in an agrarian society, to a monocultural timber or pulp wood forest in an industrialized society is to a great extent the history of property rights. In his book *A Windfall for the Magnates*, the Danish historian Bo FritzbÅger, Department of History, University of Copenhagen, analyzes this process in Denmark from early medieval times to the nineteenth century. Although he does not mention it, it is impossible to review this book without raising associations with the phrase *La Longue DurÅ©e* and the long-term perspective of the Annales School. Using a definition of property rights inspired by Eirik Furubotn and Svetozar Pejovich—“the set of economic and social relations defining the position of each individual with respect to the utilization of scarce resources”—FritzbÅger sets out to research the historical praxis of the access of different individuals to different woodland resources (p.23). Adopting this approach, the concept of property rights becomes a tool for mirroring the great transition affecting woodland use rather than the research object per se.

Woodland is a very complex resource and FritzbÅger

uses the terms horizontal commonage for the common use of resources (pasture, underwood) in the same area, and vertical commonage for the common use of resources (underwood, overwood) on the same spot. These horizontal commons existed in Denmark from the beginning of the Middle Ages. However during the fourteenth century, a new kind of vertical common was introduced in the form of the seigneurial right to mature oak and beech trees, overwood, and the peasantsâ right to smaller trees, underwood.

This account provides a periodization of Danish forest history that is different from the usual one. In the first part, FritzbÅger deals with the early medieval period until 1350 and in the second part, the late medieval and early modern periods, 1350 to 1750. The latter is a period of distinct feudal relations between landlord and tenant. These conditions also had an impact on the forest resources. Since large trees, overwood, come from small trees, underwood, the peasants in practice had control over both. This de facto control resulted in a constant deterioration of the overwood, which was categorized by the landlords as deforestation. However the needs

of peasant household for forest allowances for fuel and pasture restricted the opportunities available to landlords to claim property rights to woodlands by the simple fact that this was the only accessible resource. The third period, 1750 to 1830, is characterized by a loosening of these bonds of fixed resources in agrarian society. The increasing use of peat, import of coal and wood, and the introduction of stall-feeding at the end of the eighteenth century presented alternative resources to these woodland use rights. New opportunities opened up for a reallocation of forest resources. This was the forest enclosure promoted by the state, the most important actor in Danish forest policy. Since the end of the eighteenth century, the state sought to separate the common use rights physically on the ground, first in the crown woods and then in 1805, under the Forest Conservation Act, in all Danish forests. In this legislation process, the landlords as owners of the right to overwood were regarded as the holder of property right to the forest. As a result of this development, the older interdependence between peasant and landlord was replaced by a new interdependence between forest owner and state.

During the early modern period, wood and “forest” theft was a constant source of antagonism between peasants, landlords, and state. In this way, Denmark joins a several-hundred-year-old European chorus of complaints from landlords over illegal cutting of wood and use of pasture and pannage. This widespread forest theft may be interpreted in different ways. It may be seen both as an expression of a moral economy, where a tree belonged to the person who invested his labor by cutting it, and as a sort of policy declaration from a peasant point of view, upholding righteous claims to customary rights. These complaints of forest theft ceased, however, during the reform period in the first half of the nineteenth century, and by the middle of the century, crime was insignificant. This development is contrary to that in Germany, for example, where forest theft was one of the most common crimes in Prussia at the same time. FritzbÅger’s explanation is that the agrarian reform movement and its forest enclosures were made with a high degree of sensitivity regarding the needs of the peasants. Since the abolition of customary rights were followed by remunerations given to the holders of underwood and pasture, the experience of injustice was not as great as in some other European countries.

However FritzbÅger’s inclusion of the high frequency of forest theft in Sweden in the second half of the nineteenth century in this European pattern of development appears somewhat incorrect. In southern Sweden,

the frequency of forest crimes fell considerably as it did in Denmark and probably for the same reason. However in northern Sweden, another form of forest theft was being conducted, not on a small scale for agrarian household needs, but on a large scale for industrial use in the new expansion of timber exports. This form of industrial forest theft was standard in the boreal forests of the Nordic countries at that time and is encouraged rather than ended by the breakthrough of capitalism in the access to forest resources.

The main reason for the abolition of common rights during the reform period is the introduction of modern forestry. FritzbÅger terms this the silvicultural revolution. During the last half of the eighteenth century, Danish forests were rapidly reduced. Around 1800, woodland comprised only 4 percent of the area of Denmark. The physical division of the landscape by enclosure was necessary, partly for pure conservation of forests and partly in order to start a systematic regeneration by sowing and planting. This development was driven by a need for sustainability, *Nachhaltigkeit*, which was the German keyword for the new forestry. Sustainability created a need for measurement and predictability which meant mono-functionality by enclosure. Therefore the multifunctional forest with its different layers of use rights had to be brought to an end.

FritzbÅger manages to identify and categorize all the different forms of customary rights to the different layers in the complex resource of the agrarian forest. He uses normative material and, to a great extent, sources that tell us about the praxis of the woodlands. The ambition is to mirror this praxis as cognitive action. Sources dealing with conflicts are of course overrepresented. However they also provide us with a good insight into what was regarded as praxis and normal use in the woodlands. In the author’s view, his book is concerned with human relations while the structure and dynamics of the cultural landscape is only dealt with in a summary fashion. This is not true. For scholars who are interested in the development of Danish woodlands in order to gain a comparative perspective over their own research, this book provides a lot of information. Not least the quantitative analysis of the introduction of modern forestry after the Conservation Act of 1805 is the result of thorough investigations.

Though FritzbÅger does not explicitly adhere to any theoretical school, his perspective is very much the one adopted by Peter Blickle and his view of peasant communalism.[1] This is partly explained by the highly complex character of the woodland resources and the need

for both collective work and political action in the use of them. Another explanation is provided by the interdependence of peasant and landlord in an agrarian society with fixed resources. Inspired by environmental history, Fritzberger hesitates to place his own work in this category. Nevertheless it fits very well into the perspective of deforestation and ecological depletion in the agrarian society of the late eighteenth century, as for example presented by Rolf Peter Sieferle.[2] However Fritzberger's

scope is too wide and his conclusions too careful to allow this development to provide the sole explanation.

#### Notes

[1]. Peter Blickle, *Deutsche Untertanen: Ein Widerspruch* (München: Beck, 1981).

[2]. Rolf Peter Sieferle, *The Subterranean Forest: Energy Systems and the Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge: The White Horse Press, 2001).

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