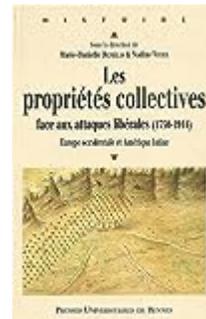




Marie-Danielle Dem  las, Nadine Vivier, eds. *Les propri  t  s collectives face aux attaques lib  rales (1750-1914): Europe occidentale et Am  rique Latine*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2003. 328 pp. EUR 22.00 (paper), ISBN 978-2-86847-872-6.



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Land, Power, and Historical Liberalism

In his classic *The Great Transformation* (1944), Karl Polanyi argued that the nineteenth-century liberal utopia of a market society had failed. Because considering land and labor as commodities was just a liberal fiction, society eventually had to create instruments in order to protect itself against the extreme implications of such fictions. There would thus be a “double movement” in and out of liberalism, in and out of the commodification of social life.

Although Polanyi was probably more interested in the implications of considering labor as a fictitious commodity, the implications of doing so for the case of land were no less far-reaching. This is the context in which we may insert the large body of historical research devoted to the study of common property in modern Europe. What this research shows us is that, even during the era of “high” liberalism, the commodification of land was never complete and there remained spaces of economic and social interaction where non-liberal rules played a crucial part. Local resistance to the privatization of the commons would thus suggest that Polanyi’s double movement was indeed less diachronic than Polanyi him-

self originally thought—there seems thus to have been a continuous tension between two different logics of organizing economic interaction. Once we perceive the local-state linkages that built such a tension, we may come to the conclusion that textbook liberalism is one of the elements, but not the only element we should consider when trying to understand historical liberalism.

The book edited by Dem  las and Vivier provides a timely compilation of interesting case studies about the tension between liberalism and common property in both Western Europe and Latin America during a long nineteenth century spanning from 1750 to 1914. The book is divided in two parts—the first one about western Europe, the second one about Latin America. Following Vivier’s introduction, the part about western Europe consists of eight national case studies (Jeanette Neeson on England, Stefan Brakensiek on Germany, Anne-Lise Head-K  nig on Switzerland, Martina de Moor on Belgium, Vivier on France, Gabriella Corona on Italy, Margarida Sobral on Portugal, and Mar  a-Teresa P  rez-Picazo on Spain) and a comprehensive survey on northwestern Europe (by Paul Warde). The Latin American part is shorter and

comprises five studies (Rosa-María Martínez de Cedeño on Mexico, Hans-Jürgen Priebe on Guatemala, Edda Samudio on Venezuela, Jean Piel on Peru, and Demélas on Bolivia).

Unlike so many compilations, we really find here a joint effort to produce homogenous analyses of a shared theme. The chapters in this book are strong on three important facets of this shared theme: (1) how to define the commons and how to produce a useful typology of them; (2) what happened to the commons in a long nineteenth century of triumphant liberalism; and (3) what were the political, social and economic factors behind the outcome described in (2).

Regarding the first topic, the chapters in the book show in a clear and systematic way the complex meaning of the commons in each country, depending on the diverse social relations involved in the definition and use of common property. The European case studies reveal the complexity of the web of social relations involved in the diverse definitions of the commons in each situation. This is important because the incorporation of the commons in broader economic and social histories has sometimes suffered from oversimplified premises and a certain degree of hidden geographical specificity. However, as the survey by Warde on northwestern Europe shows, we have a lot to gain if we take a further step and try to structure this complexity in order to develop a comparative, more analytical perspective. The materials in this book are certainly useful in order to take such a further step in the future. In the case of Latin America, all of the chapters underline the interlinking of the issue of the commons with the issue of indigenous populations and their place in colonial and postcolonial society. This suggests that the structuring of complexity may proceed along significantly different lines in Europe and in Latin America.

The chapters in the book also provide a description of what happened to the commons in the era of liberalism. In many cases lack of reliable sources seems to be an obstacle for a precise quantification of common lands at the beginning and at the end of the period. In spite of this, most of the chapters underline that historical liberalism did not necessarily imply the elimination of common lands.

This leads to country-specific discussions of the po-

litical, social, and economic factors behind the evolution of the commons. It is impossible to do justice to the variety of arguments posed in very different contexts. My impression is that a common thread in most of the case studies is the role played by geography and the environment in shaping the trajectory of the commons. Many case studies, both from Europe and from Latin America, suggest that the liberal attack on common property was particularly successful in those lands endowed with a high potential for agricultural intensification. On the contrary, continuity was a likely outcome of the impact of historical liberalism for common lands in many upland and mountain areas. Another common thread is probably the important role played by local communities in the eventual shaping of state-driven, historical liberalism.

The editors have been broadly successful at getting their authors to write concisely about a specific issue. There is a remarkable level of homogeneity across the book and all of the authors seem to be aware of their place in the general project. Historians interested in the commons will find here a lot of useful materials for their work and updated states of the art for each country.

I would have liked to know more about the economic and social consequences of the outcomes described in the book, both for rural communities and for each country as a whole. It seems to me that the book is stronger on the description and analysis of what happened than on its long-run consequences. There are, of course, hints on this in many chapters, but the issue is not treated as systematically as the three other issues alluded to above. In addition, the study of the third issue (the determinants of privatization or persistence) is very country-specific. This is a logical consequence of the nature of the issue, because we should not expect general models to be applicable everywhere. However, I would have personally liked to see more links between country-specific arguments and general perspectives. Some cross-citation between the different chapters would have been enough to create a less country-specific orientation. Maybe a longer concluding chapter, in the line of Vivier's well-structured introduction for the European part, would have had a similar effect. These criticisms aside, there can be little doubt that the book is well above the usual standards for compilations and makes a relevant contribution to our understanding of the commons and their historical interaction with liberalism.

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