

# Rural commons in Mediterranean France from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Mediterranean France, including Provence, Languedoc and Roussillon, ranging from the Alps near Nice to the Pyrenees near Perpignan, has specific and significant physical characteristics. If nature does not exclusively determine history, its influence, however, has to be taken into consideration by human societies, in Mediterranean France probably more so than in many other regions.<sup>2</sup> This environment is characterised by vegetation adapted to the Mediterranean climate and by some vast infertile and rocky areas, where the mountains are close to the sea and the Mediterranean is not limited to a narrow strip along the coast: The nearby mountains still experience the same climate. The scarce vegetation and its high susceptibility to degradation have already been highlighted, especially for periods of increasing population pressure at the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> But even during times seemingly less constrained by human presence like the transitional phase between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the scrublands, named *garrigues*, also experienced significant damage.<sup>4</sup>

Actually, all areas of Mediterranean France and their hinterlands were structurally in a fragile condition, suffering especially from soil depletion and erosion when they were over-exploited<sup>5</sup>. Fire also affected this environment,<sup>6</sup> as when shepherds used pastoral fires to maintain an open environment<sup>7</sup> or when a decrease in population pressure caused the abandonment of vast spaces to flammable vegetation.<sup>8</sup> Thus, in Southern France, there were many lands regarded as unproductive, steep, and often degraded with shallow soils sensitive to drought. In these hills and mountains, many of the scrublands of the slopes consisted of commons, which were largely mountainous places with extensive agricultural use like grazing and the gathering of some spontaneous natural productions.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, in the flat and fertile areas there were and still are very few common lands.<sup>10</sup> Due to their marginal position within past societies – and in their historical records – the resources of these commons are extremely difficult to quantify *ex post*, but they are supposed to have yielded little revenue.

Nevertheless, soil and climate should not be seen as the sole cause of low productivity land-use. Peasant popular culture also tended to leave certain areas outside the scope of individually used arable land in order to exploit them collectively. For example, at the end of the nineteenth century, farmers often refused the decisions of the French authorities to reforest the vast slopes and desert-like peaks of the Mediterranean mountains<sup>11</sup> with an argument that they seemed to consider irrefutable: They claimed that there had never been any trees as long as anyone could remember, because of the alleged inability of trees to grow there, due

to altitude, topography, soils or excessive wind.<sup>12</sup> Successful reforestation in the twentieth century proved that this argument was wrong.<sup>13</sup>

Despite their marginal status in historiography – or maybe because of this lasting disinterest and also because of the boom of environmental history in France – a recent trend tends to highlight these areas.<sup>14</sup> Of course, Mediterranean France has also been studied for its commons in the past, but rarely in a long-term perspective or with regard to the management and usage of common-pool resources. Usually, the issue of commons has only been covered as part of local or regional monographs. Some scholars have conducted studies with a special focus on commons in the transitional period between the Ancien Régime and the nineteenth century, and mainly for mountains and pastures.

The aim of this article is to develop a few issues about commons in the Mediterranean plains and mountains of France in a long-term perspective. It is still the result of a work in progress because local situations differed significantly from one village to another and, in the course of history, in the very same place as well.<sup>15</sup> In such a historiographical context, the purpose of this article is to stake out some research perspectives for the future, rather than to claim to present conclusive results. Its chronological boundaries are the seventeenth and the mid-twentieth centuries. The beginning of this period is determined by a growing amount of available historical documents; its end is characterised by a sharp decline in the usage of common lands for agricultural purposes on the one hand and by their increasing importance as recreational areas on the other hand.

## The nature of common-pool resources

### *Primary use of commons*

The commons consisted mostly of vast pastures on rocky slopes. The rural communes were given the right of grazing by landlords or bought it from them.<sup>16</sup> Before the harvest, during spring and part of summer, commons were the only wasteland areas that could accommodate the many herds of sheep. This was the period of maximum pressure on the environment or even of overexploitation.

The commons were also used to gather plants for fertilization. This could contribute to the improvement of agrarian practices, directly by transferring organic material to cultivated land or, most often, indirectly by using those plants first as bed for stabled livestock and then as fertilizer. Thus, mostly boxwood (*Buxus sempervirens*) was mixed with animal manure,<sup>17</sup> particularly to fertilize olive trees. Some other plants, lavender (*Lavandula latifolia*) in High Provence for example, could be used in the same way.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, the commons were temporarily appropriated for slash-and-burn cultivation: Farmers were usually allowed to clear parts of these lands in order to keep and cultivate them as long as they were able to plough and sow them. But as soon as the soil was exhausted, peasants finally relinquished these lands, which therefore became collective again.<sup>19</sup> This practice is attested for the Ancien Régime, but still existed in the late nineteenth century. From this time onwards, because of rural exodus, the standardization of local usages by state regulation and the decline of traditional agricultural practices, farmers did not cultivate common lands for such individual purposes anymore.

## Secondary use of commons

Common lands were also places for hunting and for gathering a great variety of resources, some of them frequently referred to in the literature, but often without archival evidence. Actually, this subsidiary usage of commons has existed for a long time. For fiscal purposes, some documents from the early modern period list all buildings, lands and rights belonging to a rural community.<sup>20</sup> According to these sources, the peasantry of seventeenth-century Languedoc often enjoyed significant common rights of hunting and fishing. The commons were also used for other household needs such as heating: *Lignerage* rights – the right to collect dead wood – were practiced regularly.<sup>21</sup>

Commons also provided food for human consumption: Asparagus and mushrooms were picked in the commons near Nîmes or Nice during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>22</sup> In Alpine Provence or in the Languedoc *garrigues*, the commons were a place known for herbs for distilling essences, at least from the eighteenth until the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup> For example, in 1927 the rural commune of Saint-Privat, near Lodève in Languedoc, signed a contract with a distiller for picking plants such as lavender.<sup>24</sup> Many species of plants were also used for bee-keeping: In 1787, a royal administrator complained about deforestation and excessive collecting of vegetal resources in the Corbières hills so that ‘most of the rosemary bushes favoured by bees’ were destroyed.<sup>25</sup>

Boxwood, omnipresent in the limestone scrublands of Mediterranean France, was not only mixed with animal manure. Like heather, it was used to make wooden utensils like pipes and toys.<sup>26</sup> The *maurelle* (a sunflower used by dyers) grew wildly everywhere in the south of France and was especially picked by the inhabitants of the village Gallargues-le-Montueux in Languedoc.<sup>27</sup> In the *garrigues* around Nîmes and Montpellier, peasants used to gather kermes (*Kermes vermilio*), an insect that feeds on the kermes oak (*Quercus coccifera*). The females produce a red dye that was used as a source of natural crimson.<sup>28</sup> Peasants also collected mulberry leaves on the commons to feed silkworms. In 1769, in a village situated north of Montpellier, these communally-owned trees were leased for five years by the municipality.<sup>29</sup>

The commons not only supplied plants but also minerals: Millstones were cut in common quarries,<sup>30</sup> while sand mines provided material for house building, as was especially the case in southern Larzac at the end of the Ancien Régime.<sup>31</sup> For a long time, ice was also exploited in the mountains above 1,000 meters high in order to be sold in towns and plains. Its common gathering in the Montagne Noire in Languedoc and the Mont Ventoux in Provence is documented from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries.<sup>32</sup> These are only a few examples of resources that could be gathered from the commons. They convey a rough idea of the diversity of products obtained from them.

## Access rights to common-pool resources and common-property arrangements

### *Blurred distinction between private and common lands*

The regulation of access to all these common-pool resources has not thoroughly been investigated in Mediterranean France, because most rural historians do not clearly distinguish between private lands and communal areas. Given the overall low surplus of these lands, their products only being supplements for the peasant households, economic historians have reasoned by type of 'natural' space rather than by legal category, that is by resource type – botanical or animal species, ground products, etc. – rather than by the legal mode – common or private – of access.<sup>33</sup> Thus, in the perspective of economic history, the same products could often be gathered on both common and private unploughed lands: For example, mushrooms were gathered on both private and common lands, game was hunted on both types of lands, etc.

The distinction between common and individual or public and private land has also been neglected because property was not absolute under the Ancien Régime.<sup>34</sup> Even in Southern France, the manor played a significant role in the organisation of the community, including the commons.<sup>35</sup> Not even after 1789–1815 was the issue of ownership exactly reducible to the duality of public and private ownership, although private property gradually gained more and more importance. Peasant properties were still subject to collective access rights: After harvest, the landowner was forced to let his neighbours graze their cattle on the stubble ground. It was the right of *vaine pâture* (common grazing), a form of 'common arable', i. e. fields physically open when left fallow but not common.<sup>36</sup> As elsewhere in France and Europe, both common lands and common grazing were enduring forms of collective agricultural practices.<sup>37</sup>

### *Individuals and social groups on the commons*

Another issue concerns access of usage to the commons. In Languedoc, the literature usually indicates that under the Ancien Régime the right of access to the pastures tended to become more and more restricted to the owners of registered land, for example by setting a maximum number of animals that each commoner could graze. This phenomenon called stinting is often related to the progress of individualism and liberal ideas during the Enlightenment, but local situations still differed greatly:<sup>38</sup> In the nineteenth century, some municipalities even charged a fee per animal for the right to graze it on the common.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, other municipalities within the same region excluded livestock belonging to inhabitants of neighbouring villages but put no restrictions on the grazing of local peasants' livestock.<sup>40</sup>

A striking example of the complex implementation of access-rules to common-pool resources is provided by water supply: Water was often a resource held in common and managed by the communities in the Mediterranean south because of its natural scarcity.<sup>41</sup> Usually, fountains in densely populated localities serving a significant number of families and extensive infrastructures for irrigation were common property. However, when the number of families was smaller and dispersed, a written or verbal transaction was sufficient to define the

access right to water between a restricted number of people, so that the consumption of this resource was not always subject to a strict common-property regime. The legal entitlement of usage was modelled according to the local customs and social circumstances. In contrast to certain access rights to common pastures, the right to get water for irrigation was closely connected with the possession of lands suitable to be irrigated.<sup>42</sup>

The different ways of common-management not only concerned synchronic differences, they also changed diachronically: In the Roussillon plains, an old and important region of collectively organised irrigation, the legal organisation was transformed between the fourteenth and the twentieth centuries with changing power balances between the state, its local representatives, lords and peasant user associations.<sup>43</sup>

## Commons in a long-term perspective

### *Commons as dynamic spaces*

Commons were neither static areas nor can they be reduced to remote infertile lands. Indeed, their location and extent fluctuated, not only depending on the demographic development but also due to many other factors.

Firstly, the commons should be linked to the issue of abandoned lands and their reallocation. When land was left permanently fallow, two authorities intervened in order to reassign it to a farmer: the community, which ensured that royal taxes were paid, and the landlord, who expected to obtain fees to his benefit. Temporarily abandoned properties as a result of demographic decline can therefore be considered as commons, even if this issue is under debate.<sup>44</sup> They were administered by the community and open to beneficiaries before being reassigned to individuals, sometimes several decades or even centuries after their abandonment.

Secondly, commons were influenced by feudal power relations like, for example, attempts by local landlords to confiscate common land. Their extent also decreased when the communes had to sell lands to cope with sudden expenses. A significant example is provided by the community of Arles, a city whose vast rural territory of nearly 100,000 hectares encompassed much of the Camargue. Like hundreds of other communities in Provence,<sup>45</sup> Arles had to sell almost 20,000 hectares of its common lands to service debts in the wake of the civil wars of the late sixteenth century. In 1720, over 3,000 hectares were on sale again for the same reason.<sup>46</sup>

The royal declarations of the 1760s and 1770s about land clearance resulted in a more systematic way to privatise common land for cultivation purposes. This process of privatisation was extended by the act of 1793 on commons' shares and by new legislative measures during the nineteenth century. However, this privatisation policy did not cause a general disappearance of the commons. Instead, they were resistant and persisted until the nineteenth and even the twentieth century.<sup>47</sup>

The issue of commons was increasingly determined by state legislation, but still depended primarily on social and natural conditions. While in some areas with scattered settlements commons had never been necessary nor spacious,<sup>48</sup> they resisted dissolution particularly well in other regions, for example in Corsica, where at the end of the eighteenth century 37 per cent, and in 1930 28 per cent, of the island surface was still taken up by commons.<sup>49</sup> In several

Corsican communes, as in some areas of the infertile southern Massif Central, the majority of land still remained common until the early twentieth century.<sup>50</sup>

Historians of Southern France have not quantified the extent of the commons for the Ancien Régime. Until the French Revolution common lands were often not included in land registers because they were usually made without maps and only recorded taxed lands. Land registers indicating commons are rare and appear late.<sup>51</sup> But, fortunately, commons are indirectly mentioned in land registers in order to define the limits of privately owned land. We can thus guess their position and extent, even if we cannot measure them. Their territories could be mapped using a historical and geographical approach, positioning the commons according to multiple documents from archives. It would be a long and ambitious work of research for the Ancien Régime, to be conducted by a sum of local studies.

For the period after 1789/1815, however, thanks to advances in statistical surveys and the Napoleonic cadastre, fairly reliable figures can be gained.<sup>52</sup> Around 1840, in most of the Mediterranean *départements* about 15 per cent of the surface were composed of commons. The ratio even reached 27 per cent for Basses-Alpes and 58 per cent for Hautes-Alpes, but only 8.5 per cent for Bouches-du-Rhône. In France as a whole only 8.8 per cent of the territory consisted of commons.<sup>53</sup> On a more local scale, the flat and fertile areas of Southern France only had scarce commons whereas the hills' and mountains' rural communities owned huge areas of common waste.

### *Better-documented common-pool resources in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries*

The first section of this article highlighted examples of resources collected on the commons from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, but rarely before. This section will illustrate how the documentary lacunae are responsible for speculative interpretations of property rights and access rules concerning common-pool resources.

In the 1920s, for example, in some of the villages near Nîmes, the municipalities made out documents to some inhabitants each year, allowing them to collect truffles on common land; yet this right could also be sold to just one person by a leasing contract. This practice could change every year or from one commune to another in the *garrigues*.<sup>54</sup> The only reason why historians are informed about this practice is that written documents were produced to define the access rules to this common-pool resource.

The second example is set in a commune north of Carcassonne, on the slopes of the Montagne Noire, where a plant unusual for distilling was used at least in the nineteenth century: At Conques-sur-Orbiel in 1860 a woman received permission sold by the municipality to collect asphodel roots – for 18 years – to make alcohol, while other farmers were allowed to continue to send their sheep to the commons. There is only one mention of this activity found in the archives,<sup>55</sup> but one can assume that the practice of gathering this plant already existed, regulated by non-written rules of access.

A last example of the individual appropriation of common-pool resources refers to felling trees for firewood on common land. In 1924, the commune of Salasc in Hérault, west of Montpellier, decided to sell the right to cut down trees in common woods, which had not been traditionally cut, as they were usually maintained so that they could be used by the

local poor.<sup>56</sup> This archival source implies a long-term collective use of common woodlands by the rural population.

In reverse, sometimes long-term use of common land is insinuated, although it cannot be proven on the basis of archival records: For example, the use of boxwood to make small objects is reputed to be a local peculiarity in the village of Aiguines in High Provence. Certainly this village has poor soil and vast areas covered with boxwood. However, this plant is ubiquitous in Southern France, and thus it seems reasonable to ask if this alleged local peculiarity does not actually result from an *ex post facto* interpretation.

This village benefited from an ethnological study of boxwood more than thirty years ago, which led to the opening of a museum dedicated to this topic. Thus, the ethnological approach seems to have generalised a post-revolutionary practice into a long-term local custom. While some documents reveal that boxwood was also exploited in Aiguines before 1789, collecting raw material seems to have been a great source of conflict between the inhabitants at that time. And the role of commons in the provision of boxwood seems much more doubtful for the Ancien Régime, whereas it is well documented for the period after 1789.<sup>57</sup>

These examples show that we can mostly get information about the specific kind of common-pool resources when the rural community granted right of access to them to an individual. But for the time before and after the contract of usage between the community and the beneficiary, the archival sources of the Ancien Régime usually remain silent. The commons' productions are better recorded for the nineteenth and early twentieth century. This over-representation of the nineteenth and early twentieth century in the examples of known common-pool resources is due to the better archival documentation and more systematic record-keeping of communal arrangements about rights of usage that were in earlier times often only made orally.

## Conclusion

In Mediterranean France rural commons were vast, although the figures of their size are inflated by the presence of large low-populated areas with infertile soils. More than the Mediterranean climate, the mountainous relief is at the origin of the commons: The state of the resource system caused commons, and not the reverse, because it was not profitable to cultivate these wastelands individually. Thus, there was no 'tragedy of the commons' but a pattern of low productivity land-use. Nevertheless, the commons of Southern France provided a great variety of resources useful for the functioning of the agro-system and the rural economy in general. Compared with privatised land they yielded less revenue, but the generated proceeds could have been significant, even if unquantifiable, especially since there are no detailed records on their nature.

When political, economic and social developments did not make the collective resources scarce, they were exploited collectively with free access for all residents. However, when sustainability made it necessary to regulate the usage of common-pool resources, access rules had to be implemented. National legislation played a major role in the commons' regulation, but according to important stakes regulated at the local level by the community of users itself, there were significant local differences from one common to another. Nowadays, the commons of Mediterranean France have become vast un- or underexploited areas. They are an ecological and also historical heritage waiting to be rediscovered.



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