

Reading beyond your language zone: Exploring south of the Alps

After our ESEH conference last summer in France, *Environment and History*'s last Notepad offered a brief overview of recent scholarship in environmental history appearing in that country. We turn in this issue to Italy and the Italian peninsula to summarise a few cutting-edge works appearing in its language, with the ongoing assumption that most of us are reading in only one or two of our most comfortable languages and that all the rest escapes our notice. Judging from my own experience over the years researching in Italian sources, I have witnessed how many important works do not get translated into our *lingua franca*, and how there is a much stronger tradition of translating English works for Italian readers, rather than in the other direction. Non-Italian readers are clearly missing a great deal, not only about Italian-based subjects but about other more universal subjects. Environmental history's fascinating margins, in particular, are also being lost to a wider readership because of limited translations both entering and exiting that language. There certainly are phenomena (and terms describing those phenomena) that do not translate, or do so crudely. How else was I to understand the nature of a 'bosco ceduo' unless I walked through a heavily managed and trimmed beech or chestnut forest, for there are few close equivalents in the English-speaking world, even if labeled 'coppice woodlands'. Each geographical place is a distinct locus in biological and cultural evolution, and the more isolated and peninsular the site, the more unusual will be its productions. We are missing out on this diversity if we only consume at the troughs of the McDonalds and Starbucks that march across our borders.

I leave it to Andrea Filippo Saba, long a proponent of our field in Italy, to suggest the boundaries for circumscribing environmental history produced in his mother tongue. Again, he was asked to offer a few synopses of the most remarkable, intriguing (possibly weird?) or brilliant recent scholarship that deserves wider attention. I add only that I have been told that Italy contains more individual archival records, across more subjects and more centuries, than any other land – suggesting that the *materia prima* for our field may be richer there than almost anywhere. But actually extracting, deciphering and reporting on these records is a monumental task, so that each of the following authors deserves heartfelt thanks for presenting us with their published gifts, especially now that we have found out about them.

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Recent developments in Italian environmental history

The first Italian work with an explicit environmental approach to history in Italy was Alberto Caracciolo's *L'ambiente come storia*, published in 1988. But already in the 1960s there were several works about the devastating transformation of Italian territory caused by the processes of industrialised urbanisation and tourist exploitation of the sea shore. The outstanding geographer, Lucio Gambi, produced *I valori storici dei quadri ambientali* (1972), which explored the availability of natural resources and their dynamic transformation with human societies. Carlo M. Cipolla also contributed to that innovative approach, enlarging the focus to factors such as plague and human attitudes. But even if Italian environmental history has produced a number of works and authors, it fails to take off. Recent books by Marco Armiero and Marcus Hall and by Giacomo Parrinello, for example, have begun to change the traditional scarce availability of good histories about Italy's environment written in English. But some innovative research projects have taken many years to find a publisher. The difficulty that such works have encountered in finding the light of day is primarily due to two reasons. On the one hand, the ongoing lack of awareness of environmental issues means that there is less appeal to these subjects for a wide readership. On the other hand, the institutional concentration of the subject to a few historiographical groups who maintain rigid boundaries on their questions does not help to broaden the number of publications in this area. Below is a sampling of the most innovative and recent works in our subject.

Gabriella Corona, *Breve storia dell'ambiente in Italia*

Bologna: Il Mulino, 2015. 144 pp.

This concise book gives itself the task of providing evidence for the most important issues considered by Italy's environmental historiography. While the time span is the last three centuries, Corona does not fail to remind us that the Roman road network (*centuriatio*) still structures the Italian landscape, a crucial heuristic concept. Concerns ubiquitously present in Italy's history are seismic and volcanic, together with hydro-geological vulnerability, given the many past and present natural disasters. Linked to this, demographic growth generated many challenges in the *longue durée* across a very mountainous territory, which over the last hundred years became depopulated and exploited. Corona also details numerous sophisticated adaptations to the environments of farming and livestock raising, such as 'round-the-hill' agriculture (*giro poggio*), typical of sharecropping and tenant farming in central Italy; the 'agro-villages' of the *Mezzogiorno*; the commons management systems of *vicinie*, *partecipanze*, *regole*, *vagantivo*, which vary according to soils and landscape structure. Most such systems are no longer practised due to changing population pressures. The turn to capitalistic and free-market systems allowed for the survival of significant but marginal remnants of commons agriculture. The growth of city networks established in medieval times has been producing an

array of problems centred on hygiene and water management, only to be exacerbated in modern times. ‘New industrialised areas’ of the 1930s and 1950s dramatically increased resource use and quantities of waste for disposal, resulting in irreversible damage; paradoxically, the first general report about the need to limit industrial pollution was published by Techint, a subsidiary of the oil company Eni. Over the long run, the real problem of Italy has been (and still is) the insufficient response of political and administrative structures to the tragedies set in motion by frequent earthquakes, eruptions and landslides, followed by ambiguous measures that favour individual advantage over collective needs. Movements for the protection of landscape and nature have been a vibrant concern in the country, and sometimes in the world, leading to innovative changes and strict regulations to cultural and natural resources. Powerful local lobbies have nonetheless allowed dramatic setbacks to this trend.

Pier Paolo Poggio and Marino Ruzzenenti (eds), *Il caso italiano. Industria, chimica e ambiente*

Milano: Jacabook, 2012. 522 pp.

This collective work might be considered a book of books, containing nine very long essays that are much longer than typical chapters, together with key dossiers of Giorgio Nebbia and Laura Conti, key figures of Italian environmentalism and Italian ecological thought. Dealing with cases such as modern attitudes of the Italian Communist Party, the treatment of industrial pollution by the mass media, and (what the editors define as) phases 1 and 2 – up to the 1950s – of the history of environmental impacts by the industrial and chemical sectors, the authors promote a flipped view of environmental history: a view that accounts not only for traditional archival sources but also for scientific data, such as plant remnants, which can promote a kind of ‘archaeology of the present’. Poggio and Ruzzenenti’s focus on a sophisticated disciplinary foundation is aimed not only at questions of ecological crisis that an old idea-based history was unable to incorporate either in its progressive narrative or in its present fragmented historiographical framework; their methods also focus on patterns of self-colonisation whereby workers and citizens have been deprived of their basic human and environmental rights in a system that favours the transfer of their incomes to company profits.

Guido Alfani, Matteo Di Tullio and Luca Mocrell (eds), *Storia economica e ambiente italiano (ca. 1400-1850)*

Milan: Angeli, 2012. 416 pp.

Here one must admire the fact that economic historians are beginning to identify ‘environmentally friendly’ categories to enrich their discussions. In this collection there are clear examples of appealing and updated terms for ‘environment’ that don’t offer any real differences from ‘older’ economic histories. Readers will begin to discern these similarities. For example, in the section of

the book about rivers and waters – a recent unifying topic of world environmental history – one finds relevance in long-term trends. Extremely important is the section dedicated to factors modifying human choices over the long run, such as climate and physical environment. Elsewhere, counterfactual suggestions about Tuscany's demographic transition make us wonder how human factors not linked to resource scarcity led to overpopulation and emigration. Moreover, tracing non-catastrophic climatic and meteorological phenomena can clarify long-term interconnections between particular agricultural productions and their underlying socio-economic structures – for example, of sharecropping. Specific farming systems, such as those in Northern Piedmont that centred on more hardy crops and cereals, were substituted with chestnut trees, rye and corn when climate changes and subsistence needs demanded it, and when further shaped by external factors such as rising competition from Turin, the new capital of Savoy. Yet institutional factors, for their part, mitigated a deepening 'timber crisis', as in the State of Milan in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with new climate regimes producing few changes to the management of forests over the medium term.

Pope Francis, *Laudato si*

Roma: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015. 85 pp. (http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html).

Pope Francis' amazing Encyclical is one of the most intriguing books on environmental policies published in 2015, initially in Italian. It must be considered a milestone in the thousand-year old approach of the Catholic Church toward nature and its resources. Environmental writings have made clear that, as human beings have become technologically sophisticated, exploiting and abusing natural resources, they see themselves as omnipotent while forgetting that their ultimate power lies in the gifts of God and of Creation. The slow pace taken by the Holy See with the participation of the U.N. Stockholm Conference on Human Environment (1972) was quickened by John Paul II. In the present work, Francis emphasises the greedy attitude people have taken with regard to natural wealth, thereby depriving many others of their basic rights to health and happiness. The accent is on the human denial of being part of a wider cosmos, and through the gifts of God, humans now put faith in their technological superiority and omnipotence, disrespectful of other people and the integrity or reproducibility of resources. One begins to realise that the Encyclical dwells on an analysis of environmental issues that might actually be found in a comprehensive conference of environmental historians.

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