

Stefania Barca. *Enclosing Water: Nature and Political Economy in a Mediterranean Valley, 1796-1916*. Cambridge: White Horse Press, 2010. 196 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-874267-56-0.

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Recovering a Forgotten Past

This book examines the environmental impact of two revolutions: the French and the Industrial. There has been no shortage of writing on either of these topics, but historians have become much more reluctant in recent times to make linkages between them, despite the “new institutional” focus of much current writing in economic history. Stefania Barca seeks here to breathe new life into an old story: the demise of the feudal regime was a precondition of the florescence of manufacturing industry, and she sets “enclosure” at the heart of this process. So far, so Karl Marx. But now the story takes a novel turn. The focus of the study is the Liri valley, carved out of the Apennines between Rome and Naples, and referred to in the 1840s as the Manchester of the Kingdom of the two Sicilies—albeit a comparison that was rather stretched in many ways. The subject of enclosure is not the land, thus proletarianizing the rural labor force, but the always-in-motion, irrepressible force of water. This is thus an ecological story of both revolutions, and one very rarely touched on, in contrast to more familiar accounts weighing struggles over land resources in revolutionary France, or the transition from traditional to fossil fuels in industrialization. Like the discontinuous and unpredictable force of the mountain waters, we discover a story that seems to run down familiar channels, but then bursts out in unexpected ways to subvert expectations and intrigue us.

The book is structured around explanations of the emergence and temporary dominance of particular discourses, in roughly, but not entirely, chronological fashion.

We begin with the political economy of the Italian Enlightenment that had a particularly vigorous base in Naples but that was part of a much wider movement of “Improvement.” This fed into demands for legal changes, and the juridical disputes and discourses around property rights to water in the confused aftermath of the dissolution of the feudal property regime in 1809. As the river Liri and tributaries became increasingly harnessed for industrial purposes they also became more prone to catastrophic flooding, drawing in the expertise of hydraulic engineers. Each discourse is viewed as an “emergent property” of, and element within, systems of capital accumulation. Accumulating a fluid is not, however, a simple matter, although it provided the industrial motive power that gave value to capital.

Barca’s standpoint emerges within a Marxist-influenced tradition of southern European environmental history. The centerpiece of the drama remains the political struggle over the means of production. Informed however by environmental history, this is framed as a “socio-ecological” struggle where dependency on particular resources is a key element of the productive process that shapes property regimes. The accumulation of capital in the means to generate power on the river (industrial mills) generates in turn a contradiction between the stock of machinery and the flow of water—the ecological dynamics cannot in the end be tamed. This analysis also owes something to American traditions and the idea of the “organic machine” offered by Richard White (in *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River*

[1995]), and it stands in kinship too with a wider literature on socio-ecological systems, although eschewing the modelling and quantification often associated with them. Human actions in nature are sometimes seen as “colonizing” in socio-ecological approaches, and Barca makes great play of the Napoleonic state in southern Italy as a colonizing enterprise injecting French projects into a different kind of landscape.

Marshaled in this struggle are discourses of surveillance, categorization, and control. There are statistics, in the original sense of the word as the collection of general information about the “state” to enable social and economic development: topography, agricultural practices, industries, population, local custom, and so on. Alongside cartography this information was employed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to make legible a polity that could then be arranged according to the dictates of political economy. In Barca’s account knowledge itself becomes a colonial project; clearly the creation of knowledge is implicated in relations of power. But does this make the effort to describe and categorize a land itself “colonial,” or is it simply at the service of a colonial government? Gathering Information is a property of all governments not immediately present in the locality (and by one definition, this supra-locality is in fact what defines the idea of the “state” as opposed to other local or personalized forms of rule). Is it a helpful analytical step to characterize all relationships not essentially and somehow authentically local as “colonial”? Such projects of improvement, drainage, and surveying were, of course, being undertaken in France at exactly the same time. “Colonial” could be used as a very general metaphor to describe relationships between “improvers” and traditional peasant economies (and the landscapes they inhabit), for which Barca uses Karl Polanyi’s term “habitation” (from *The Great Transformation* [1944]). Or should we retain the narrower meaning of a political order imposed by people from outside the territory? Certainly in the Liri valley the perceived foreign-ness of the French regime played a major role in reactions to it. One wonders if there is also a danger in taking too literally discourses of improvement, in that the backward “other” they construct is inverted to become the positive force of habitation, a way of living less ponderously, more intimately, and reasonably with local ecologies.

Much of this account makes one think of Michel Foucault, or a more direct influence from various works of James C. Scott, among which *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (1999) has become the most renowned. But Barca’s

narrative takes an unexpected twist, and calls into question familiar dichotomies on the march to modernity. Far from being the property of “the state,” the “expert discourses” of political economy, law, and hydrology that sought to frame progress and backwardness in the Liri valley emerged from a range of positions and prove highly adaptive to the shifting political conditions of the era. This is a great strength of examining how the ecology of one place becomes refracted through different viewpoints that emerge in response to economic and political struggles. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Liri valley lay close to the northern edge of the Bourbon Kingdom of Naples until Italian unification in the 1860s, but was part of a short-lived Neapolitan Republic in the 1790s, before becoming a client kingdom of Napoleonic France. This political context is in turn reflected in the socio-ecological dynamics.

Thus while the “unruliness” or “disorder of water” was a constant theme in writing about the development of the valley, culpability for this shifted with the eye of the beholder; to those who lauded the noble ancient land of Graeca Magna, problems began with the Romans invaders. More blamed feudalism, abolished in 1809; the ancien regime was seen as allied to self-interest and inertia, or in the words of Domenico Tuppiti in 1806, the “carelessness of the Prince; laziness of the people; ignorance of both.” In all cases, the supposedly degraded state of the environment was used as a mandate for intervention and control, a habit that already had a long history within Europe, and, it is important to note, that had little if anything to do with overseas colonial encounters. But after 1815 the blame for backwardness and degradation shifted profoundly; it was seen as something more pronounced in decades just passed, and became blamed precisely on the revolutionary liberal reforms that had undone the feudal regime. The material consequences were the same: deforestation, increased erosion, flooding, and the “disorder of water,” but the role of property and government was conceived quite differently.

As we follow Barca through the nineteenth century, the problem is only superficially “seeing like a state.” Similarly, it is only superficially “enclosure”—at least in the juridical sense. For the enclosure of the Liri did not replace feudal and communal property regimes with private property over water, but effectively made for an open access regime governed by the law of the strong. In theory, navigable waters were state property, but this was weakly enforced and in any case the highly seasonal hydraulic regime of southern Italy made a mockery of such legal definitions. Against the determination of mill-

owners to seize their share from bankside properties, neither local nor central government had the wherewithal, and in the end the desire, to do anything. Barca's account is thus of a kind of bandit—or perhaps pirate—capitalism that developed industry through the absence of rules. For all its early efforts, the Bourbon and later Italian state became the “un-improving state,” incapable of making or enforcing appropriate laws and licensing regimes. The improving vision, in the sense of generating rationality and orderliness, fails to hold nature in thrall: “a Mediterranean vision of reclamation, that is to say, one where nature wins” (p.139). Given that the rivers were not previously “commons” with overlapping rights of use, we move from a situation that was more akin to private, restricted property rights to a free-for-all—but one that can only be accessed from the banks, where land is a fully tradable commodity. The result was that disorder, previously seen as the property of the commons and feudal backwardness, became the gift of industry. This is perhaps not enclosure at all, but it is certainly an important story.

The economic historian might want to see a more developed analysis. There is little use of quantitative data on social structure, land tenure, agricultural holdings, occupations, or incomes. Water power has not been that important in accounts of the long-term trajectory of en-

ergy history, despite its moments of genuine importance, such as the early mechanized textile industries. Thus while Barca sees that a “revolution” in socio-ecological relations had occurred with the emergence of industrial capitalism in the Liri valley, but without positively transforming nature or life, maybe the reason was perhaps that the transformation of property rights over water was not, after all, so important to the economy as a whole. More evidence would need to be brought to bear on this question.

This is a slim book and it packs much in, ranging widely across economic history, social conflict, environmental change, history of economic thought and the technologies of power, art, and demography. Although it might have benefited from being more expansive and drawing in more forms of evidence (and more detailed maps would have been helpful!), nevertheless it is an excellent addition to a literature that within environmental history, at least, has had a northern European focus. It also opens up new avenues for the investigation of European industrialization and agrarian change—albeit by familiar entry points. It should be read by any environmental historian interested in the Industrial Revolution, the Enlightenment, and the long story of European efforts toward “Improvement” and its impact on property regimes and welfare.

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