

Communitarian Institutions in Trenta Valley

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INTRODUCTION

The emergence, maintenance and disintegration of various collective, cooperative, communitarian management practices are examined in this article. I trace this stream inside different institutions (Douglas 1986). Households, neighbourhoods, villages, agrarian communities (commons), cooperatives, and tourist associations will be presented as persistent materialisation of the communitarian principle in the Trenta valley in the Slovenian Julian Alps. Persistence suggests that there was no clear historical break from a closed and collective to a rational and individualised society as sociology revealed (Tönnies, 2001 [1887]; Durkheim 1984 [1893]). Instead, everything is latent and total (Mauss 1966 [1925]; Graeber 2004) and most of it is (substantively, contextually) rational (Malinowski 1992 [1922]; Boas 1940). Socio-economic

and socio-environmental relation should rather be classified due to kinship and spatial distance of the people involved (Polanyi 2001 [1944], 1957; Sahlins 1972; Ingold 1993; Narotzky 2007) and their morality (Scott 1976; Widlok 2017). Continuous communitarian institutions in Trenta could also mean that small Alpine valley holds some special features for the maintenance of indirect democracy and far-reaching distribution of resources and incomes, i.e. biophysical conditions and demography (comp. Netting 1981; Viazzi 2015).

Trenta fair – a local market and religious holiday, will serve as “a ritual window”, a symbolic code of transition in this Alpine community in the 20th Century.

ENVIRONMENT – ECONOMY - DEMOGRAPHY

Trenta is a long and narrow Alpine valley in the Slovenian Julian Alps. It stretches for about 20-25 kilometres from the southwest to the northeast, and covers about 8 to 10 square kilometres. Arable land is hard to find. Soil is shallow and covered with rock and stones, the terrain often too steep for agriculture. Survival in this surrounding has been quite demanding, depending on smallholdings, but mostly on the pasturing of goats and sheep, and forestry.

Following the peace treaty between the Venetian Republic and the Habsburg Empire in 1520, Trenta belonged to the latter (Panjek 2002; Komac 2003: 21). At that time, the plains of lower Bovec were already overpopulated, which triggered colonisation of the upper valleys. The process of Trenta settlement was also stimulated by the excavation of iron ore.

Historically, the Trenta Valley went through several timely uneven environmental, social, economic periods or strategies. The first strategy was hunting, gathering/forestry and transhumance of post-Neolithic inhabitants until the Middle Ages. The second distinctive and much shorter period (Hapsburgs' era after the 16th Century) still consisted of transhumance, small agriculture, forestry and hunting, but iron forging was also possible after ore discoveries in the Alps (Cole 1972). Discoveries attracted skilled ironworkers from Trentino (today Italy), which was also a part of the Habsburg Empire at that time (Komac 2003: 20). The third period is Austrian and the Austro-Hungarian from 19th to 20th Century with remarkable population growth. The last great narrative is characterised by huge emigrations of people from Trenta (“Trentars”; Slo: “Trentarji”) to Slovenian, Italian

or German industrial centres and the emergence of eco-tourism in the valley during the 20th Century (Simonič 2013). Listed periods function as paradigms, exchanging various elements with each other and resetting them through institutions like inheritance and common pool management and ritual. Trenta is a bookcase on increased influence of urban centres since the 16th Century (Bovec, Gorica, Ljubljana, Trst, etc.), and their influence on the transformation of “distant places” into leisure and recreation destinations (see Southall 1998; Boissevain 1996). Locals have used various collective strategies to minimize social disintegration and maintain some kind of social continuity.

For several centuries one of the basic sources of dairy was goats, which could feast without restrictions in the surrounding forests. Sheep were a subject of seasonal high and lowland pasture (transhumance). The *Law on Forests* in the middle of the 20th Century (Zakon o gozdovih, 1953) had a devastating impact on the local population. In local social memory, the prohibition of goat pasture in the woods marks a traumatic historical break in the agro-cultural model and consequent (demographic) decline. “First, the goats disappeared, then also the sheep,” stated an older informant. Due to technological and political changes in the broader society, during the 1970s and 1980s, the valley sunk in apathy. Abandoned and devaluated properties were slowly sold to weekenders, mostly from central Slovenia (Vranješ 2006). Today, they already represent a majority (arr. 330 vocational owners and 230 permanent residents).

Marshall Sahlins (1972: 185-200) proposed a triple scheme of reciprocity. In his opinion, it was kinship or blood distance among people, which decided the quality of their relations: family or household is a setting of almost unconditional, generalised reciprocity. Further, into tribe and village, Sahlins saw “kinship based territorialities”, the practice of which balanced reciprocity, trying to build long-term trust and belonging of place and community. The third type, the so-called negative reciprocity or market, is the typical attitude toward strangers. I will try to follow and evaluate Sahlins's classical theorem in the analysis of social life in Trenta.

HOUSEHOLDS

19th Century statistical data reveals that during that same century natality in the villages of Trenta and Soča was the biggest in the Bovec municipality, counting an average of 6 members per household (could

also be up to 15). The central village of Bovec counted an average of three persons per house at that time. Resident population in today's Trenta Valley is just about 1/10 or 1/15 of that in the middle of the 19th Century (comp. Abram 1907; Komac 2003: 41, 132; Statistični urad Republike Slovenije 2002). After the peasant liberation in 1848, many bought off properties, and some of them ended in debts or they lost their property entirely (Rutar 1889: 1580; Abram 1907; Komac 2003: 132). Facing limited natural and social conditions, many people left to work in Italian, German, Bosnian and even North-American forests and mines. Mortality was also still high: accidents among foresters and mountain shepherds were quite often; and less than half of their children reached the age of twenty in the middle of the 19th (Komac 2003: 146).

Approximately eight different family subsistence or income strategies evolved in the second half of the 20th Century. First, again agriculture, horticulture and pasture, but this time combined with tourism and trading of real estate (combined model, suitable only for a couple of larger families). The second strategy was daily commuting to industrial and administrative centres. The third was permanent migration to urban centres. The fourth was several local and seasonal jobs in crafts or the forest agency, natural park administration, guesthouses and cooperative shop, etc. The sixth strategy would be pensions or scholarships. The seventh was the selling of properties to weekenders, and the last permanent or seasonal tourism services and small enterprises.

The first possibility – surviving simultaneously with local resources like meadows, forests, animals, water, and destination – is appropriate only for a couple of remaining larger families. They function as small-family-farm-businesses. This model is work demanding for all the family members and varies due to yearly natural and socio-economic cycles in the valley. Two representatives of this model are the Jelinčič family from Soča and Pretner family from Trenta. The first household counts eleven members, the second six. Jelinčič owns 3-5 hectares of land and rents another 25 hectares from close or distant neighbours. Pretner has approximately 5 hectares and rents another 15. The first has around one hundred sheep, the second sixty. Jelinčič produces cheese, Pretner sausages; they sell the majority of their products to tourists during the summer season. Both fathers are important opinion-makers in “their part” of the valley.

Besides legislative brakes in traditional subsistence and post-war demands for industrial workers, farm and household reproduction in the valley was also challenged by children, who left for secondary and higher education in a greater number – one of the benefits of a

socialist welfare state. The majority of them left for ever. Consequently, “there are more funerals than marriages in the Trenta valley today”, one might hear. Due to changes in land ownership and tourism destination development, higher property values increasingly determine the possibilities of younger residents establishing new households.

Technological changes in the second half of the 20th Century – like agricultural mechanisation, personal transportation, telecommunication, managerial reasoning, and ideology of progress have detached former agricultural households. People used to work together. In an old agricultural community, they were unable to survive without cooperation (harvest, woodcutting and rafting, shepherding, etc.). Help among people was more common in the closest gorges, kin or class, not among spatially and socially distant residents (comp. Polanyi 1957: 253). “Today, everyone has a chainsaw. One can cut down a full truck of wood, without needing anyone else,” explained an older man. Infrastructure in Trenta today includes water supply, all kinds of machinery, asphalted main roads, Internet connections, frequent two cars per household, etc.

AGRARIAN COMMUNITIES (COMMONS)

The importance of free pasture for goats and sheep made pastoralists reluctant to the individual property of forests and mountain slopes. It would be hard to draw and maintain strict property limits for people and especially for herds. Territory was rather divided into several mountains (pasture and forestry) zones, and managed as land commons, each including around fifteen to twenty households.

Agrarian communities (Slo. “agrarne skupnosti”) were formalised in the Austrian Empire at the beginning of the 19th Century to continue the rights of (pre)feudal parishes (“srenje”; Repič 2014: 39). They secured the right of exclusive usage to Alpine pastoralists inside the new state’s legal framework. An informant recalled that *before the Second World War* there were eleven such communities in the Trenta valley. Each household owned a herd of approximately 200-300 sheep, and the whole valley counted up to 3000 sheep. Nevertheless, in the 19th Century, this number was considerably larger: in 1869, 357 houses in the valley possessed around ten thousand sheep and goats (Komac 2003: 41).

After the socialist nationalisation of common properties in 1947, agrarian communities re-appeared in 1994 with the *Law on*

establishment of local communities and returning of their property and rights (Ledinek Lozej 2013: 60-61). Today, there are four agrarian communities in the village Trenta (Trebiščina, Zajavor, Zapotok, and Action group of Trenta village), and another two similar communities in Lepena and Soča (Duplje and Plazi). Some of them rent parts of mountains (e.g. Duplje), and income is used by members and local community. Part of the earnings from annual purchase of 1000 to 3000 m³ of wood from the valley goes to the agrarian communities, who now again own fractions of forests. One of the informants explained that every indigenous villager has a right for a portion of wood, being a member of the agrarian community or not (comp. Widlok 2017).

Regardless of legal frames in the last couple of centuries, membership in these commons was guaranteed only to those men who inherited their birth address; entitlement to become a member of the community was strictly limited by primogeniture and the number of peers could not expand easily. It worked as a kind of “closed and homeostatic corporate community” (see Netting 1981). Commons (“srenje”) – later Agrarian communities – were originally brotherhoods of patrilocal pastoralists. They took care of fair distribution of high pastures and measured carefully the success of each member: those with the most material advantage in the shape of milk and cheese had to repay their gains with additional work for common benefit (rebuilding roads and shelters, etc.). In the 20th Century and especially after the Second World War, when the majority of people in the Trenta valley abandoned transhumance, this kind of communal cooperation and control was economically redundant, yet left alive as a traditional value system and behavioural code of the inhabitants (culturally distinctive to the values and practices of weekenders; Vranješ 2017; comp. Netting 1981). In the meantime, the inheritance pattern in the valley changed from firstborn heir to divided succession among descendants.

COOPERATIVES

In the 1950's, the first socialist state cooperative was established in the village of Soča to collect and buy cheese and lamps from shepherds. It only lasted for several years, as pasture was already vanishing.

Development Cooperative Soča-Trenta was established by locals in 1990's for the purpose of building the hydroelectric power plant Krajcarca. The membership fee was five hundred Deutsch Marks (approx. 250 Euros), and forty hours of voluntary work. The plant now

earns about 400.000 euros per year. The Development Cooperative also holds concession for parking slots on the mountain pass Vršič and owns a snack bar Kamba in the village of Log. Incomes are invested in other activities and job opportunities, most recently a cooperative shop in the village of Trenta (since 2013), which is quite an important acquisition for *Trentars* – people still distant to commercial centres (Bovec), especially during the winter. The Development Cooperative also plans to help youngsters in resolving their housing problems (due to increased property values).

We can see how the economic basis of inhabitants noticeably changed during the 20th Century, but communitarian patterns of property managements (Netting 1981), (re)distribution (Polanyi 2001) and sharing (Widlok 2017) remained important. Their form has adapted to new political and legal frames, yet local essence of inputs and expectations appeared similar in agricultural and later touristic society. “Kinship based territorialities” have always been an important frame of Trenta’s communitarian organisations and their members.

TOURIST ASSOCIATIONS AND NETWORKS

Tourism is the most common subsistence strategy in Trenta today. It is also based on family properties, registered officially as individual, family, or farm enterprises. Many inhabitants sell (market) the valley as a destination, not as an object of plant and land cultivation, pasture, or excavation of iron ore: the emerging ecosystem of 19th-20th Century described above became a distinctive cultural landscape, ambient to experience the Alps.

Scientific and adventurous curiosity of the Alps has set the path to future development of Trenta as tourist destination. Reports on Bovec and Trenta multiplied in the second half of the 19th Century, in times of the invention of nationalism, leisure and spa. Štefan Kociančič published several articles on Bovec and Trenta in 1854 in Zagreb; Baron Karl Czoernig von Czernhausen included notes on Bovec in *Das Land Görz und Gradisca: mit Einschluss von Aquileja*, 1873. Morelli di Schönfeld wrote *Istoria della Contea di Gorizia*, 1855–56; Simon Rutar published *Zgodovina Tolminskega* in 1882. Later contributions included brilliant Josip Abram (1907), and Viktor Dvorský (*Studie ku Geografii Slovanských Sidel: Trenta*, 1914) (Marušič 2002; Komac 2003; Kozorog 2009). The dawn of the 20th Century was “a golden age of discoveries in the Julian Alps,” and promoter Dr. Julius Kugy

became “a father of Slovenian alpinism« (Wraber 1980; Komac 2003; Šaver 2005). In this respect, the Triglav National Park (1996) just institutionalised an already existing web of *natural sciences* (geology, botanics, and health), *national ideology* and heritage (Alpine myth of pristine culture and Slovenian evangelisation) and *market* (tourism). In the longer term, this also led to a change in land ownership in the valley: its “abandoned”, “distant” and certainly peaceful surroundings started to attract Slovenian city dwellers, among them many respected intellectuals, politicians, etc., who visited the place and eventually bought property there (see Celec 2014).

The nearby Alpine centre Bovec and the ski resort Kanin became state development priority in the 1970s-1980s. The municipality and the ministry strongly encouraged daily arrivals of people from Trenta to work in this new resort, offering them in return quite a high material standard of living, compared to their previous agro-cultural subsistence. Let me underline, that Bovec and Slovenia also practiced Yugoslavian socialist self-management at that time. A great number of people from Trenta became members of different professional groups outside their valley, learning alongside the skills of tourism marketing and arrangements. Local success in tourism (private accommodation and services, also during socialism) encouraged many people from the region to support the transition to a market economy in the 1980’s, wrote ethnologist Dunja Miklavčič Brezigar (1988).

Two tourist associations are active in the valley today: Trenta and Soča-Lepena. The second emerged in 2005, as some (returning, pensioned) residents from Soča and Lepena felt they deserved bigger share of investment in the local tourism planning. Latent rivalry between villages was recorded during the research, yet competition never seriously hindered social relations among the people (marriages, masses, infrastructure, etc.). The entrance point of the Triglav National Park – Infocenter Trenta – offered a great advantage to the village of Trenta in the 20th Century, while the village of Soča was most important in the 19th Century (post, school, more households, etc.).

Today, tourists can choose between six camps, twenty-five apartment and room providers, three tourist farms, and seven mountain lodges. Facilities are completely sold-out in July and August. There are also four inns, two snack bars, and two congress halls. The number of daily Trenta visitors or passersby reaches up to 250.000 per year, I was told in park management office.

Among measures to stop emigration in the 1980s, a youth club was approved in an old building on the site of later TNP Infocentre

in Trenta. Youths, predominantly from the village of Trenta, could socialize, practice self-management and plan various social and cultural events. The current layer of active residents in the valley is very thin, counting maximum 10-20 people and many of them used to be members of that club. The majority of inhabitants are over 65 years of age and prefer to stay at home or offer sporadic help. A small group of organisers uses different institutions to support their development projects: cultural societies, tourist associations, hunting societies, peasant women associations, municipality, TNP, church, etc.

TRENTA FAIR AND ST. ANA

The Trenta fair (locally “Trentarski senjem”) is a great indicator of the structural changes in the valley. On the level of performers and their backstage social drama (Turner 1967; Boissevain 1996), as well as on the level of symbols (Cohen 1998 [1984]) and spatial and temporal structure of the “ritual” (Gluckman 1940), we can notice a shift from an agro-cultural (transhumant) to an eco-touristic type of communitarianism. We can also identify major state interventions in that process with the blocking or stimulating of various practices and customs.

Traditionally, up to the first half of the 20th Century, the Trenta fair -Trentarski senjem - was held on 8th September, the Nativity of the Virgin Mary. The fair was intended to trade breeding livestock, the most important source of subsistence at that time. After the First World War and Austrian defeat, the new Italian authorities forbade gatherings and public life of Slavic inhabitants in general. Fascism after 1923 was especially harsh in this respect (Dolenc 1988). Political pressure hindered the exchange of livestock. Another historical misfortune regarding the fair was socialist aversion to religious holidays after the Second World War. Exchange of animals was again influenced by political ideology.

A hundred years later, the Trenta fair is alive again, yet different. It is now a series of cultural events, including art workshops, concerts, exhibitions, hikes, etc. The greatest effort to “revive” the Trenta fair was made by a younger local couple. The first modern version of the fair appeared in 1996, in the same year as the Infocentre of Triglav National Park was opened. The plateau in front of the Infocentre offered an excellent setting for public events. Today, the Triglav National Park is actually host of the fair. This traditional event is used for social integration of the valley and as a tourist attraction.

THE PURPOSE OF COMMUNITARIAN INSTITUTIONS IN TRENTA

I have tried to show how collective initiatives were present in many spheres of social life in the Trenta Valley: in households and kinship, as inter-neighbourhood help in gorges and villages, in pastoralist ownership structure (transhumance, agrarian communities), cooperatives, tourist associations and (traditional) festivities they stage. Communitarianism is a historical fact, appearing in different times, shapes, and under different names, but constant in this Alpine community.

We can identify with Hardin's idea (1968) that the management of commons is related to demography: small communities, dependent and scarce natural resources (and on breeding animals) are likely to perform inclusive and egalitarian behaviour, and we may doubt about their eco-logical performance: brotherhoods themselves did not prevent the huge deforestation in the 19th Century. Besides, after decades of emigration and the individualisation of properties and services, many former plains are overgrown, and the microclimate is cooling down. Local communitarianism and egalitarianism certainly have not secured natural or social sustainability or durability in the 19th Century, yet we should not neglect the broader political and economic pressures on the local management and resources.

The State was namely always a decisive element in local decision-making (Hapsburg, Austrian-Hungarian, Yugoslavian, and Slovenian). It is not the same if the State and markets are interested in iron ore or wood, or they prefer to see the valley as a recreational resort. The Trenta community and institutions were part of "imagined" social solidarity, reciprocity and redistribution: monarchism, nationalism, socialism and self-management, social welfare state, nature protection, etc. Crossings between community and states (as "societies of exchange and redistribution"; Graeber 2011) could be devastating. Yugoslavian *Law on Forests* (1953) and later *Law on Triglav National Park* (1981; Peterlin 1985) therefore mark two milestones of transition from an agro-cultural to an eco-touristic social organisation and the branding of Trenta. The first law disabled the past and the second law codified the new future of the valley.¹⁴

I prefer to frame a series of presented organisations in Trenta as communalisms, since they practiced indirect democracy in a small

¹⁴ Along with interventions of the state, other stresses have made life in Trenta harder: earthquakes, hunger and poverty, dangers of travel and work in the mountains and forests (Rutar 1889).

and sharply defined geographical and social space (Alpine valley and primogeniture/kinship). Like states, communal local institutions have been interested in wood, but they have also been interested in pasture, water, and recently in local youth. Many *vital resources* of the Trenta valley became a subject of various historical “commons” (comp. Bollier 2014).

After the incorporation of the valley in the Triglav National Park (1981), Trenta’s communalisms collided with the ecological turn in contemporary society (comp. Pálsson 1996: communalism as the third mode of political economy of environment, connected to “deep ecology”). Eco-tourism represents a new front stage synthesis (Boissevain 1996): tourism facilities are actually individually owned yet coordinated through local tourist associations. Behind this public appearance of services and experiences, commons in the shape of agrarian communities or cooperatives still take care of (traditional) shared resources. It would be certainly inappropriate to describe village life in Trenta as a case of mechanical solidarity (Durkheim 1984 [1893]), with inert rules and institutions. Historical adaptations of the communitarian principle shows quite the opposite, that people from Trenta used all possible knowledge and consciously manipulate available material and symbolic resources (biophysical environment, cultural heritage, spa, etc.). The organic division of labour has been familiar to them since at least the 16th Century, and later under the Hapsburg absolutist state.

I would like to bring forward another idealisation or simplification of communitarian institutions: overlapping of theoretical/ideological and practical/factual equality. Ancient herders’ commons were *fraternities* with common possessions in forests and mountains. A small group of people, mostly men, also manages contemporary institutions (tourism society, cooperative, and agrarian communities) (comp. Mauss 1966: 63; Godelier 1986 [1982]; Narotzky 2007). About twenty “younger inhabitants”, mostly men (10 percent of the valley population, average age 30-40) are responsible for different institutions, public life, and development strategies. Knowledge and power *of* and *in* various communitarian institutions has never been equally distributed among members of these village communities. Additionally, social hierarchies in commons corresponded with other individual possessions of a member – and, of course, his/her family lineage in the valley.

Today, there are not many traces of market relations between members of the Trenta society, or at least they are not preferable. One can notice “generalised reciprocity” among family members and

balanced reciprocity inside all described communitarian institutions (“kinship-based territorialities”). Market relations (in the continuum toward so-called “negative reciprocity”; Sahlins 1972) are oriented toward strangers: tourists, trekkers, weekenders, forest service, municipality and state, etc. (comp. Sahlins 1972: 191-204; Vranješ 2017). In this sense, the local subsistence ethics still cherishes communitarian management and (re)distribution of basic resources, even though in the 20th Century inhabitants was severely disrupted by politics, law, war, emigrations, many new owners, etc. “Thus, the argument runs, the more communal the village structure is, the easier it is for a village to collectively defend its interest.” (Scott 1976: 242). These structures address biological, material and ideological aspects of social reproduction (from forest and goats to ritual and myth).

Communitarian institutions have different titles and face different historical challenges. I think we must study them together as various socio-historical formations of communitarian or communal morality. Spatial or biophysical limitations (Alpine valley) and demography (small population) makes it easier for us to acknowledge and describe these connections.

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