

From «Vicinanze» to «Patriziati»

Rediscovering an old way to manage resources



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After Carnival, on L'universo, at least on English pen, we are back on track, while all my other colleagues are talking about drugs. Recalling my usual localist spirit – maybe I'll change stile sometime – I would like to make you aware, dear friends, of a peculiar Swiss institution, the «Patriziato» (German Bürgergemeinde, French Commune Bourgeoise, Romansh vischnanca burgaisa) – in English, it would be «Common». What is it? It is a rare and unique example of a mixture between the institution of private property and public property. The best way to understand it, is by doing some history. The current institution replaces the old «Vicinanza» (read neighbourhood), of which there were some forms already in the thirteenth century in Switzerland. These were forms of collective organizations that had the task of managing some common goods such as roads, bridges, woods and so on. They are not like the modern commune because everyone of them was independent with respect to their criteria for being

accepted in the «Vicinanza». Usually one could enter by marriage or invitation, the latter especially if it was lacking people. To be accepted, one had to be an honest and honourable person and he had to swear his faithfulness. Indeed, one did not have only rights but also duties as he was entering in the «Vicinanza». These included associative fees and so on.

With the creation of the Swiss Republic in between 1798 and 1803, many disappeared while in Ticino left their trace in the current «Patriziato». And during those years, Napoleon wanted to erase this institution reducing everything to the actual commune, transforming everyone into ordinary citizens. However, the institution made its way through and is still operative. How does it work now? Some say that in Ticino the «patrizi» families are the local aristocracy, nobility. And there is some truth behind that claim. In Ticino they own more than 75 % of the woods and about 50 % of the cantonal land. The criteria are a little more open: one could become a Patrizio after having lived for a long time in the same town. And even more, they are granted a special set of legislation that does not make it reducible to ordinary private property. It is in this sense a remainder of a past before the modern simplified distinction between State and Individual, public and private.