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Reimagining modern politics in the European mountains: confronting the traditional commons with the neo-rural conception of the common good

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Abstract
Since at least the 1970s, the countryside of Western Europe has been the site of a myriad of "new" communal initiatives. Rural areas that were abandoned during the last century have witnessed the arrival of new inhabitants. These newcomers often flock to the mountains escaping urban lifestyles characterized by individualism, mass-oriented livelihoods, and isolation. Many of these individuals move to areas like the Catalan Pyrenees, where common property and communal institutions have had a strong historical presence. In embracing rural life, these new inhabitants are looking for a more integrated social life in which the commons are, on the one hand, a form of collective private property, and, on the other, represent a more egalitarian way of life in which contributing to the collective effort is not only an efficient way of dealing with particularly harsh ecological conditions, but also an ideological statement that defines the community as something different: an alternative to urban capitalism. Two definitions of the commons are colliding in these mountains; two longstanding lines of political thought are converging and establishing a dialogue that is not always easy: (1) traditional ideologies of land ownership that defined common property over the centuries, not based on economic equality, but on private property and locally shared responsibility on the economic base of the community; and (2) utopian anti-capitalism that views the commons as an alternative mode of social organization and ownership based on egalitarianism.

Keywords Commons · Common good · Identity · Neo-rural · Status/individualism · Utopianism

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This paper focuses on how a key social institution such as "the commons" is currently in a process of redefinition in the Pyrenean mountains due to the arrival of new conceptualizations of what the commons, the community, or even the common good are. These new ideas that interact with previous definitions of the same concepts are often brought to the mountains by new inhabitants of urban origin or by young generations of locals. On the one hand we have the "traditional" definition of the commons as strict collective private property, with stern rules and regulations of use that control access (or exclusion) and that often reinforce inequal local social structures. On the other hand, we have these new versions of the collective fact that emphasize the capability of the commons to generate social justice and equal access to resources.

This cohabitation of definitions of a single concept and the ideal form of what a community should be, provides a perfect case study to discuss the impact of cultural imaginaries and collective desires on the materialization of the social. Different social groups carry specific cultural assumptions with implicit moral economies that act as an interpretative framework of the old and the new (Holmes, 1989; Narotzky & Smith, 2006). In this tension between the old and the new commons, implicitly, key political categories of contemporary social theory (community versus individualism; rural versus urban; status versus contract; commons versus open access; productivism versus environmentalism) are being discussed and reformulated.

Historically, the property regimes in the Catalan Pyrenees have been overwhelmingly dominated by the presence of the commons: communal land managed by local communities (collective private property). However, the commons as such, nominally disappeared during the nineteenth century when the property regimes of the country were "modernized" after the Spanish State implemented the disentailment campaigns in the mid nineteenth century (Serrano Alvarez, 2014). The outcome of these policies was that during the twentieth century all these communal lands had become one of the following: (a) municipal land (managed by the local council although technically belonging to the State); (b) national land (managed by non-local institutions and belonging to the State as well); or (c) societies of owners (collective private property of all or some of the old commons' users who got together and bought the land from the State) (Vaccaro & Beltran, 2010). With these policies and the deployment, starting on the 1980s, of a massive network of protected areas often overlapping with the old commons, the State, ironically, became a major player in the management of the "traditional" commons (Mansbridge, 2014).

This, in a nutshell, is the political process that officially dismantled the commons in Spain (something very similar occurred in France, see Whited, 2000). The reality is far more complex, as it often refuses to actualize itself via clear-cut historical shifts (Montesinos & Campanera, 2017). Local actors still often use the term "the commons" to refer to specific plots belonging to any of the abovementioned categories (Lana & Iriarte-Goñi, 2015). In some places, municipal land is still managed—or was until very recently—using some of the rules of the historical commons. Although municipal by law, the land is often managed by the *comú de veïns* (in Catalan, literally, "the common of neighbors"). The villages that ceased to be municipalities because of population loss witnessed their municipal lands (their ancient commons) being integrated into the municipal land of larger neighboring

villages that had remained as municipalities (sometimes the few inhabitants left on the vanished municipalities kept their rights to their lands; sometimes, they did not). To the members of the societies of owners their land is, unquestionably, exclusive private property, collective private property. To others, it is just another format of the old commons. To locals, the mountains are clearly partitioned and belong to individuals or institutions. To visitors, tourists for the most part, the mountains are perceived as commons in the sense of open access, or common (public) resources, and these people often do not understand nor respect fences and barred access. This was further fostered by the incorporation of large parts of these mountains into different categories of natural protection from the 1980s onward.

This urban idealization of the commons ran into a context defined by two ideological views in permanent tension: (a) the traditional approach to the commons and (b) the legal framework provided by the modern state that dismantled (or marginalized) the historical legal framework that had been generated by the traditional commons (Vaccaro & Beltran, 2019; Vázquez, 2020). In practice, however, a sort of legal pluralism consolidated as the national legal framework was clear, but in many municipalities containing several villages, the local lands were in fact managed by local boards that followed some of the traditional norms (Merry, 2017).

> "According to the sixth article of the Local Entities Heritage Regulation, approved by decree 336/1988, on October 17th, these assets belong to the Esterri de Cardós municipality, but their use is up to the respective Neighbors Councils of the different villages" (Ajuntament d'Esterri de Cardós, 2003).

The commons were dismantled by liberalizing policies that either privatized or nationalized all the historical commons. They were dismantled by legal frameworks built around the prevalence of the individual—the citizen—over the status group. Furthermore, in the villages where population loss and aging undermined demographic continuity, the neighbors' councils collapsed, and the municipality took over use and management.

To complicate things further, the definition of what the commons were and are is also in flux. And this flux is the result of the interaction of, at least, three historical and intellectual traditions. In the Pyrenees, a basic definition of the commons would present them as a property regime were the land is held in common by the local community. However, complications emerge when we dig further. Part of the literature concerning the commons is based on the assumption that communal management, by default, is more egalitarian and implies equal access to natural resources at a local level (Trawick, 2003). What, for lack of better terms, we refer to as traditional or historical commons in the Pyrenees did imply communal ownership and management of the land but did not ensure equality. Access depended on status. The wealthy houses tended to benefit more from the collective goods than the small houses.[1] In other words, the commons' governance contributed to reinforce

[1] In the Pyrenees, a *casa* (house) refers not only to the building, but also to the household it contains; it is a prominent social concept comprising an economic unit, a kinship structure, and a means of economic, social, and political organization in traditional Pyrenean society (Comas d'Argemir & Soulet, 1993; Pujadas & Comas d'Argemir, 1994).

the uneven social structure of the community. The regulations in place to control access were not egalitarian by design (Beltran & Vaccaro, 2017). The legal scaffolding that was used during the ninetieth and twentieth centuries to dismantle the commons was connected to a modernizing and individualizing intellectual framework (based on the Enlightenment) that dominated in the urban areas at the time. This legal framework (one adult citizen, one vote)[2], clashed with the traditional legal approach in which the reference was the house (the family), which implied one vote per household (more often than not, represented by the elder male).

In addition, the population of the mountains has been changing considerably over the last thirty years. The depopulation that characterized the second half of the twentieth century was followed by a new wave of immigrants, often referred to as neo rural population (generally former urban dwellers), which has gradually gained some demographic (and, later, political) weight (Aldomà & Mòdol, 2022; Collantes, 2009; Guirado, 2007; Monllor & Fuller, 2016). These people, mostly young and progressive, came from urban areas and in some cases brought along experience with unions, cooperatives, and associations of anarchist, socialist, or communist background. This new population is shaping a "new rurality": a conceptualization of rural life in which agriculture is not necessarily at the center of its economy (Estany, 2022; Viladomiu & Rosell, 2016). This displacement is, amongst other things, a consequence of the EU push for a multifunctional countryside—a diversified rural economy with an emphasis on tourism and conservation (Marsden et al., 1993; Salamaña, 2022; Wilson, 2007). Individuals with this experiential background come with their own definition of what the commons are, or should be, and it tends to include considerations of equality and social justice (Chevalier, 1981; Dardot & Laval, 2019; Nogué, 1988; Waldren, 1996).

This article intends to shed light on the interactive multivocality that is currently redefining a concept as important as the commons in, amongst many other places with a similar context, the Pyrenean mountains. Here, the political projects implicit in the traditional commons (status), modern law (contract), and the social economy (anticapitalism) are cohabitating and permanently recreating society and its access to its natural resources (Vaccaro et al., 2009). Furthermore, in a Europe more concerned than ever with environmental protection, environmentalism becomes a fourth ideological strand that plays a key role in these shifting definitions of the commons (and by extension, the mountains).

In 2013, the *Declaration of Valdeavellano de Tera for the defense and recognition of the Communal Uses and the areas preserved by local communities (ICCA) in Spain* was proclaimed. This document emphasized the social importance of the commons in rural Spain and highlighted their importance as cultural and natural collective heritage assets. At the same time, the *Communal Initiative* working group was created. The goal of the initiative is to preserve and promote "values that, as a general rule, characterize communal uses and make them especially valuable to society, including sustainability, adaptability, multifunctionality, the integration of

[2] Although, as we know, the process that expanded voting rights to the entire adult population, regardless of economic status and gender, took decades and unfolded very differently in each country.

cultural values, *the equitable distribution of resources*, social justice, responsibility, participatory processes and the empowerment of local communities".

In the Pallars Sobirà district, in the Catalan Pyrenees, in the last two municipal elections, for the first time, some municipalities were won by lists headed by long-term residents that were not born in the area. In Soriguera, a municipality at the heart of the district, the 2015 municipal elections were won by a non-traditional political party, "la CUP" (*Popular Unity Candidacy*), an anti-capitalist left-wing organization with an overwhelmingly urban-based constituency. For a couple of years, the new municipal team successfully called upon the neighbors to conduct communal work to deal with collective issues (i.e. fixing the roads to the village).

In June 2016 there was a meeting of the *Communal Initiative* in Alsasua, Navarra, devoted to discussing *The Commons in the Twenty First Century*. One of the goals was to debate the governance of the commons considering the guidelines for good governance issued by the *International Union for the Conservation of Nature* (IUCN). Moreover, the *Institute for the Development and the Promotion of the High Pyrenees and Aran* (IDAPA) and the *Rural World Foundation* have promoted meetings and discussion groups about the Pyrenean commons for years now (2002, 2008, 2015). It was not until 2015 that biodiversity and protected areas became a prominent issue in their conclusions. Until then, the focus had been on local sustainable development. This fact, it must be added, cannot be detached from the fact that the Natural Park of the High Pyrenees, covering 79,317 ha, was established in 2003 and since then has gradually become a fundamental part of the institutional framework for the area.

This combination of concerns about rural revitalization and environmental justice has also translated on a rethinking of productive practices. The new farmers have distanced themselves from the mass production-oriented agroindustry, and embraced small scale, high quality, organic produced food (Liverani & Gallar Hernández, 2021). A productive approach that specifically emphasizes the value of cultural and environmental heritage on the production of food (Bérard & Marchenay, 2004; Ilbery & Kneafsey, 2000; Paxson, 2010).

The commons, then, have been infused with a meaning that makes sense to these new left-wing citizens. The new commons are articulated around concepts such as heritage, environmental restoration, social responsibility, and egalitarianism. However, this environmentalist approach to the commons ignores that ownership is often connected to management and to environmental engineering. For centuries, many of these mountain communities had been carefully managing and transforming their environment, promoting the emergence and unfolding of specific segments of biodiversity (i.e. pastures and grasses) while eradicating others (i.e. large predators). The sustainability searched by these communities was not necessarily connected to the survival of complete ecosystems, but to the idea of social sustainability, that is the survival of the community (social reproduction), and the set of socio-ecological relationships that was instrumental to that survival (Netting, 1981).

In the nineteenth century, during the many civil wars that ravaged the country, an important part of rural Spain fought with the Carlist side (the monarchic, conservative, anti-liberal side), against the urban-based, capitalist-oriented, liberal, individualistic, and modernizing side. One of the goals was to preserve their collective,

non-individualistic institutions and privileges. These odd, cross-cutting political alliances are deeply rooted in historical and often uncomfortable ideological factors.

In this article we explore the historic development of the commons both in practice and as a theoretical concept, with an ethnographic focus on the Pyrenees. After introducing some general debates on the history of the concept, we delve into the intricacies of the unfolding of the commons in the concrete setting of a mountainous area, paying special attention to its uses and conceptions across time. We analyze the development of the historical or "traditional" commons and its continued existence until today, and its coexistence with newly arrived visions of the utopian commons in the 1970s and the more recent developments emphasizing the common good in the twenty-first century. The extend of perspectives and interpretations is rooted in cultural assumptions that were the result of historic social experiences and is deeply affected by the changes in society prompted by drastic socioeconomic transformation in the past decades.

The commons as a theoretical concept

"The commons" is the key concept we reconsider in this article. In fact, the article discusses how this concept has been evolving in some places of the world. This evolution, in the sense of change, has been fueled by the multiple definitions that are currently and simultaneously being used to explain them. Here we intend to shed some light on this conceptual genealogy and illustrate this historical process with ethnographic examples.

One of the most famous definitions of the commons was the one provided by Hardin in his "the tragedy of the commons" (1968), in which he describes the commons as unregulated pools of resources very likely to collapse due to the fact that their users have no incentive to restrain from overuse. This definition, although extremely influential in many circles, has since been rejected by almost everybody, including Hardin himself (1994). The definition that was provided to inform this conceptualization corresponded in fact to the absence of property regimes or open access resources. While trying to prove that Hardin was wrong—that the commons were not, by default, an open access system—three bodies of literature emerged:

a) One focused on the characteristics of the resources. Resources are classified according to their excludability (if it is easy to deprive others from using them or not) and rivalry (if someone's use deprives others from using them). The classification that emerged from this approach talks about private goods (easy to exclude, high levels of rivalry), club goods (easy to exclude, low levels of rivalry), common-pools goods (difficult to exclude, high levels of rivalry), and public goods (difficult to exclude, low levels of rivalry) (Berkes, 1989).
b) Another one focused on the characteristics of the social institutions created to manage resources (Bromley, 1992): private property (property is held by an individual or household), common property (collective private property), public property (state owned), or open access (no regulations).

c) A third one was led by a combination of political scientists and economists who were studying collective action, which is, essentially, the study of the characteristics of the socioenvironmental context that facilitate or obstruct the emergence of a collective effort that will affect how resources (as defined in a.) end up being managed (as defined in b.) (Agrawal, 2003; Ostrom, 1990). Collective action theory studies the context that might facilitate successful collective effort to turn common-pool goods into a common property regime, or how, after a failed concertation effort, a common-pool good ends up becoming an open access or public property case.

This article compares the characteristics of the traditional commons and those of the new commons to discuss the ideological shifts implicit in the ways they are narrated and imagined (Harvey, 2011; Li, 1996; Villamayor-Tomas & García-López, 2021).

The ethnographic case we present in these pages provides a glaring example of how quickly and radically a key social institution might change and become something else. It is a case that prompts us to ponder the historicity of ideas and concepts and how theory might be able to grapple, or not, with this mutability.

Ethnography of the commons

Historical commons: social differentiation and internal conflict

In the Pyrenees, a significant amount of the "traditional" commons survived as municipal land until today. Although they became public land, in many places, the villagers kept the old access rules. In most cases, the areas that could be farmed were managed as private property. Contradicting Hardin's "tragedy of the commons" hypothesis (1968), the consuetudinary regulations seemed designed to guarantee an efficient but judicious use of the collective resources. These regulations covered four concerns: (a) which resources could be used (what resources and in which areas: grass, timber, fruits, wood); (b) who could use the resources (access was not open); (c) when they could be used (calendar); and (d) how they could be used (local practices and ecological knowledge).

However, the traditional commons did not guarantee an egalitarian society. In fact, social differentiation in these communities, with "strong" and "small houses" was ever-present. The old commons were not evenly accessed by all members of the community. There could be a maximum number of animals per house that could be sent to the commons, but, invariably, the wealthier houses of the village benefited from them disproportionally. Often, rights over the commons were strictly connected to private wealth. Using a specific example concerning mountain pastures: in the summer one could not have more animals grazing in the commons than those one could maintain on one's own land and barns during the winter. In other words, rich houses with more valley land (held as private property) had the right to put more animals in the commons than landless houses or small landowners.

In addition, not all households or members of the community had equal access to or decision-making power over the commons. Access was dependent on having been accepted as local. This could take years, or generations, after a family settled there; identity is an exclusion criterion. In other words, the traditional commons were a tightly regulated form of collective private property where inclusion and exclusion (rights of use) were defined by collectively accepted belonging and internal power hierarchies (Pons-Raga, 2022). In densely populated mountains with relatively scarce resources, there was a strong competition to access and control the higher pastures between individuals inside the communities and, also, between those communities (Vaccaro & Beltran, 2008). The regulations about when animals could enter and had to leave each patch of the common lands during the entire summer were very specific. Each of these sets of rules was different depending on the type of animals (sheep, cows, horses, or goats).

In fact, all houses were equally responsible for the upkeep of the commons with work and by paying its costs, regardless of their wealth and use, which implied that small houses, having to contribute the same amount of labor as wealthy houses, were contributing relatively more to the maintenance of a collective good from which they were benefiting less. Wealthy houses could even pay others to work on their behalf if needed. In such cases, the commons reinforced internal inequalities. In the traditional commons, common ownership of the means of production did not necessarily result in a society without social classes and inequality.

In the central Pyrenean districts, common property had a central role in the economic and political life of its local communities. During the nineteenth century, 92.3% and 82.5%, respectively, of the land in the Val d'Aran and Pallars Sobirà districts (mostly high altitude, mountain and pasture areas) were held in common by local communities (Bringué, 2003, 43). Private land, therefore, occupied only 7.7 and 17.5% of their land, mostly the scarce plots of arable land. This situation reaches even more impressive levels when we narrow the focus: the municipality of Lladorre, in the Pallars Sobirà district, had only 650 ha out of 12,700 held as individual private property (5.1% of its land). Fourteen houses owned more than 10 ha each. The other 55 owned less than 2 ha each. Despite the prevalence of common land, the community showed clear signs of social differentiation. This differentiation was equally evident in the built environment: the sizes of buildings and barns reflected these inequalities and signaled the relative position of each house and domestic group within the community (Roigé et al., 1997). If common property implies a formal equality of all members of the community vis-à-vis the use of its key resources, this equality of access among unequal actors facilitates the reproduction of inequalities (Netting, 1981).

This inequality also emerged in the relative political power some houses had over others. In the Val d'Aran there were two ways to become a member of the *common of neighbors*: by inheritance or by admission (resident born elsewhere). The commons board was made up of individuals who represented each house, yet not all houses had the same rights and prerogatives. Those that were there through inheritance represented the "old houses"; those included through admission represented the "new houses" (Sanllehy, 2007). The latter had limited rights: they could not intervene in the commons decision-making process nor transfer their neighbor rights, and they

were excluded from the benefits of selling of renting collective spare resources. The existence of new and old houses embodies the political manifestation of the internal socioeconomic differences. Social reproduction (and eventual domestic prosperity) was affected, promoted, or limited by the context mentioned above and the resulting different level of access to the common resources it guaranteed it.

Nonetheless, the social inequality of these upper-valley small villages in the nineteenth century cannot be compared to the complex differentiation of classes and statuses in the urban areas, and even less so with the intricate structure of current class societies under neoliberalism regimes. In any case, however, the supposed solidarity, altruism, and concerns about common good that have been uncritically attributed to common property regimes do not line up with the strict rules that regulated domestic and individual participation in public life. One of the most tangible manifestations of this fact is the abundant legal activity that can be traced in past court records, revealing communities where internal conflict was not uncommon nor exempt from a certain degree of violence (Beltran & Vaccaro, 2014).

Although most of the conflicts focused on debts amongst neighbors (unrepaid loans, unpaid sells, and incomplete agrarian contracts), evidence of high levels of economic uncertainty, a significant number of cases were connected to disputes about the ownership of some goods, the boundaries of properties, and the acknowledgement of rights. The conflicts had the potential to unfold in threats and even physical violence and it was not uncommon they would end up in court where individuals from the same village would defend their particular interests.

The commons as a utopia

The second half of the twentieth century changed everything. The dramatic depopulation suffered by these mountain communities during that period altered their particular socio-ecosystem (Campillo & Villaró, 1988; Collantes, 2009; Fillat, 2003). With far fewer herds, there was no need to fight with neighbors to control the numbers of animals, and so on. Until the reintroduction of the brown bear in the late 1990s, there were not upper predators left either (Pons-Raga et al., 2021). Those herders who had stayed could let their animals loose on what had become municipal land. Many villages were abandoned or lost so many of their inhabitants that were incorporated into other villages. The resulting disintegration of social ties and traditional norms and values, and the fragmentation of local governance together with the emptiness both in terms of collapsing houses and of abandoned farmlands, paved the way for the colonization of and by urban imaginaries and newcomers in search of a socio-natural ideal.

Constant population loss, especially in the upper valleys, left behind a landscape of emptied villages, expanding forests, and abandoned farmlands that were easily reconceptualized as idyllic natural areas by means of political and economic programs at the turn of the last century (Del Mármol, 2012; Roigé & Frigolé, 2010). Starting with some early experiments in the 1960s and 70s, this demographic "void" facilitated the arrival of different waves of former city dwellers aiming to rediscover the simple life (Chevalier, 1981; Nogué, 1988). The 1970s was a decade marked by the end of the Franco regime in Spain, a period of openness traversed by left-wing

ideologies coming from abroad that had an impact on a rapidly growing young urban generation (Cheyrossa-Cheyrouze, 2011; Preston, 1985). Emerging or inspired by different leftist movements, and deeply influenced by May 68 in France, a new wave of rural communes[3] spread throughout an emptied rural Spain (Cucó, 2018; Moreno-Caballud, 2010). Also in Catalonia, groups of young people left the city in search of an alternative lifestyle, away from the crowded city, rampant consumerism, and what they perceived as alienated lives (Martínez Illa, 1987; Nogué, 1988). Even if it could not be described as a mass phenomenon, it was powerful enough to leave behind a footprint of the first lifestyle migrants to rural areas, countering the dominant emigration in the opposite direction (Aceves & Douglass, 1976).

Belonging to a worldwide phenomenon, from the subcultures within the counterurbanization processes in North America (Berry, 1980) to the different "back to the land" movements in Europe (Chevalier, 1981, 1993; Hérvieu & Léger, 1979) ,[4] these people often referred to by locals as "hippies" lacked a structural organization but shared a worldview based on an array of political influences, volatile urban imaginaries, and utopic representations of the pastoral (MacClancey, 2015; Waldren, 1996), anticapitalistic hopes coupled with ideals concerning new types of family (Carandell, 1977), an emerging environmental awareness, and the search of a closer relationship with an abstract nature, the victim of industrialization (Williams, 1975). Some authors traced the ideological roots and legacies of this movement back to the utopian socialists of the eighteenth century, and more directly to the counterculture and protest movements both in the USA and in Europe during the 1960s (Martínez Illa, 1987). Nogué (1988) referred to two waves in the establishment of these urbanites in rural areas of Europe. Whereas in the late 1960s the first groups began to settle primarily in remote areas of Southern France, showing more radical and political attitudes, the 1970s gave way to a second wave in which smaller groups embarked on a less ambitious quest with a greater focus on a personal search for a more natural lifestyle. Spain mirrored these processes, starting slightly later, mostly in the early 1970s.

What all these groups did share was an idyllic vision of rural life, more often than not conflated with a romanticization of local societies, promoting environmentalist perspectives as well as prompting a return to previous ways of production. Within this context, the promotion of cooperatives, communes, and collectivist

[3] There was also a movement of urban communes sharing common objectives and struggles such as conscientious objection to military services or fostering self-organized services and peace demonstrations (Olivé, 2011: 281).

[4] The conceptualization of urban migration to rural areas is not always clear cut, especially if we consider differences between languages and national academic tradition. While the first analyses of these phenomena came from French and Spanish sociologists and geographers referring to the "back to the land" movement (Hervieu & Léger, 1979) and more clearly to neo-rurality (Nogué, 1988; Chevalier, 1993), the English literature coined several concepts such as counterurbanization (Berry, 1980) or, more generally, migration to rural areas, newcomers (Forsythe, 1980; MacClancey, 2015), and even referring to the opposition between insiders and outsiders (Waldren, 1996), actually encompassing much larger mobility flows. This picture becomes even more complicated when ethnographers must deal with emic categorizations of locality, in which the richness of popular labels elaborates on the expression of belonging and foreignness.

ideologies, often associated with a romantic view of rural traditions, was a common trait of many of these groups identified as part of the neo-rural flows (Chevalier, 1993). Moreno-Caballud (2010: 247), analyzing the libertarian and anticapitalistic discourses of rural Spanish communes in written documents of the time, found more echoes of the Marxist, anarchist, and labor movements than a proper knowledge of local rural societies. In this sense, urban migrants often depict themselves as part of a resistance movement against the State and capitalist practices (Hummel & Escribano, 2022a, b).

Among several villages that are representative of a neo-rural past in the Catalan Pyrenees, Ossera, in the relatively isolated valley of La Vansa-Fórnols, stands out for the longevity of several of the life projects that began back in the 1980s. Alfons,[5] one of its first "newcomers," recounted how, after searching in libraries and atlases for a "depopulated place," he finally settled in this isolated valley of the pre-Pyrenees, together with his partner and two other couples, dreaming of setting up a commune. While some of the people that arrived in Ossera had a clear political orientation with anarchist and Marxist influences, others looked forward to building something "different" and "new", more "authentic" and "purer," without identifiable ideological frameworks.

This group of families that settled in Ossera bought together a farm, its buildings and its land. They created a commune. The property inside the farm was collective, communal, on their own words, and important parts of the work was conducted in common as well. Access to the village commons, however, would take years. Even though the first commune and a second one founded some years later disintegrated, around 20 individuals with similar hopes and claims that arrived during the 1980s from different national origins, political influences, and social strata ended up remaining in the village. Nowadays, Ossera is a well-known handicrafts cluster, boasting a jam shop, a prizewinning goat dairy, two artists, and a local herbal remedies store, all of them run by neo-rural inhabitants.

The idealization of the commons as, by definition, an equalitarian institution, consciously or unconsciously ties into an old intellectual genealogy with roots as deep as the early utopian socialism and communism: all those thinkers—More (1516), d'Hupay (1777), Fourier (1808), or Owen (1813), amongst many others—dared to dream utopias based on the communalization of goods (Hertzler, 1965).

> "[…] from whence I am persuaded that till property is taken away, there can be no equitable or just distribution of things." (More, 2000 [1516], 21)
> […] where no man has any property, all men zealously pursue the good of the public.
> (More, 2000 [1516], 66)
> "Property is odious in its principle and murderous in its effects." (Babeuf, 1795).
> "No more individual property in land: the land belongs to no one. We demand, we want,

[5] The information and quotes come from several interviews conducted between 2010 and 2021.

the common enjoyment of the fruits of the land: the fruits belong to all." (Maréchal, 1796) *Manifesto of the Equals*)
"Property is theft!" (Proudhon, 1996 [1840], 12)
"[…] may be founded *on the principle of united labour, expenditure, and property, and equal privileges*." (Owen, 1927 [1813], 266)

The new commons are bringing with them the idea of the common good (a resource that belongs to everybody), of equal access (an egalitarian open access, if you will, that nowadays is deeply influenced by the digital commons), and the certainty that common resources must be socialized (Furukawa Marques & Durand Folco, 2023).

There are two elements that converge to facilitate this interconnectivity between the traditional commons and the modern ideological framework developed around the commons. One is semantic: very similar words are used, sometimes even the same. The second is that both are based on the communalization of goods, the shared use of resources. This is what brings them together. What separates them is the internal meaning of some of these concepts, which is intimately connected to the different governance systems that were/are implemented in each case.

Exploring the reinvigorated commons

Today, the commons are increasingly revisited as the basis for an argument to promote the articulation of new local governance horizons revolving around the ideas of the common good and egalitarian participation (Garcés, 2013; Caffentzis & Federici, 2014). The apparently open land (municipal and state-owned land) is "historical commons" underused because of depopulation. In some places, where depopulation had been severe enough to completely deplete the local ranching networks, the interaction of the remains of this local form of ownership with the cultural framework brought about by these "progressive" former urbanites created the space for a reinvention of the commons themselves.We do not intend to approach the commons as part of an idealized vision of historical communities, but instead to consider them as a central element of some alternative political projects in the region stemming from the political contestation that emerged after the 2008 economic crisis. The social activism that emerged in the cities as a response to the crisis spread to the rural areas. The new urban-to-rural populations, together with the consolidation of a new generation of local young people influenced by a new wave of left-leaning political interests, rediscovered and rethought the commons. The notion of the commons is being clearly reinvigorated and reconceptualized to stretch far beyond the local management of common lands (Villamayor-Tomas & García-López, 2021). The consolidation of a political discourse reclaiming the commons as a political project capable of confronting rampant neoliberalism is spreading throughout the Pyrenees in the form of social movements, cooperatives, and community organizations (Cerarols & Nogué, 2022; Romeva, 2022). Many of these projects have the shared goal of trying to recover the traditional governance forms associated with the mountain commons.

In an interview with the members of the municipal government of the CUP in Soriguera (2015-17), they stated their intention "to recover the old ways" they had

heard about from the elders: "Based on what we learned from the tradition in the district, historically there had been village gatherings [*consells de poble*] that organized the commons [and] the collective tasks to preserve the spaces." They aimed to implement the neighbors' meetings "to decide on the priorities for the common good," leading to proposals "to organize communal workdays" [to arrange the access to the inhabited hamlets]. "All that contributed to generate very cool synergies".

The new commons are articulated around concepts such as participation, social responsibility, and egalitarianism. A partial reinstatement of the managerial modes is proposed: rights and duties are attributed to the people included in the census, regardless of whether they are recent or longstanding residents, in accordance with their legal status as citizens rather than representing one of the traditional local houses.These groups are often embedding the old commons with all sorts of new meanings (pro-egalitarian and pro-environmentalist, for starters). The new "commons" narrative mixes anarchism, communism, and environmentalism. It proceeds to empty the meaning of the traditional commons—which by no means were synonymous with social equality, a challenge to private property, or restorative environmentalism—and fill it with a new definition of what they are. Ironically, this definition follows the same path as Hardin's mid-twentieth-century colonization of the concept and assumes that the commons manage open-access resources. In a 2022 publication, a Pyrenean housing cooperative vows to protect common heritage:

> "The shared or communitarian tenure of the land intends to maintain the cooperative ownership and the social use of the spaces and buildings over time. The goal is to de-commodify and socialize heritage with a high social and environmental meaning to benefit the community and social and solidarity economy organizations, and to prevent it from including speculative logics in the future." (Coop57, 2022)[6]

The commons are reclaimed as a reason for rebuilding a new/old local governance articulated around the notion of the common good and egalitarian, participatory decision-making, not to be seen as an idealized vision of the communities of old, but as a central element of a political project. In this context, the commons are not considered as a type of collective private property and an efficient mode to face specific ecological conditions. They are constructed as a key element that defines the local community as an egalitarian entity, an alternative to the capitalism that is perceived as consubstantial to urban life (Broumas, 2017). This utopian anti-capitalism identifies the common goods as an alternative form of social organization and an ownership approach based on egalitarianism and environmentalism.

In a 2022 workshop called "Cooperative Pyrenees" different individuals discussed their experiences as members of rural cooperatives and associations. In the case of the housing cooperatives, it was emphasized that "members have the right to use the house, but they are not owners." The common good is, again, disconnected from the idea of ownership, specially, of private ownership. The goal, as stated by another member of the audience, is to overcome individualism.

[6] https://coop57.coop/ca/noticia/copsant-impulsa-el-cooperativisme-dhabitatge-i-un-banc-de-terres-al-pallars.

In the interviews, some of these newcomers identified with “the philosophy of the commons”, “the commoning.” The updating of the commons would contribute to “creating a different community.” Even though in the past they did not sustain social harmony (based on equality and consensus), “they generated conviviality. It may not always have been easy, but it existed. There were things to talk about. There was something common to manage. And this is what no longer exists nowadays […]. What bothers me is that these communities are very fragmented […]. We must do something to find common spaces.” Even if people no longer need the pastures for their livelihood, “the common space is geographical. And this is what might allow us to come together […], what would provide us with some structure”.

In a proposal for possible new regulations concerning the commons of the Baix Pallars municipality put forward by a local civic association composed mainly of neo-rural residents, we read: “The severe economic and health crisis we are experiencing highlights the dilemmas we face in relation to the management of our individual and collective life. The environmental crisis also highlights what kind of relationship is needed between humans, the environment, and the land. The elaboration [of these regulations] cannot happen at a most critical and important moment […]. The demographic situation and the absence of economic opportunities of our municipality is not an unimportant factor.” Among its goals, one can highlight: “(1) The preservation of the commons as a mature, balanced ecological space; (2) In those villages that choose to do so, to set up a neighbors’ council to oversee the communal resources and tasks; and (3) To promote repopulation taking into account the resources of the commons and fostering access to complementary resources”.

Many of the urban citizens who are moving to rural areas and are becoming significant actors in the revival of the old commons are also active Internet users and networkers, and belong to large networks of activists who, in one way or another, are familiar with the reconceptualization of the commons presented in the Internet research literature (Turner, 2010).

Conclusion: rural status versus urban individualism

In a way, the commons constitute an excellent example for discussing the different ways the social contract can be reconceptualized. In the “traditional” rural world, the individual did not exist without the context of the community and a larger unit of reference: the household as the embodiment of a family and its local history. Each individual was a transient representative of a historically transcendent household. The rights of the individual depended on belonging to a specific household that was, in fact, the holder of the entitlements. Therefore, each mountain community had a correlation of forces that ranked the houses and, consequently, the individuals. Belonging and inclusion—in a sense, the possibility of commoning (De Angelis, 2017)—depended on status. Individual identity was shaped by the standing of the household. Some households with weak standing on the community, or that had only arrived recently, were not allowed to be part of the decision-making processes relating to the commons.

The modern commons, as described in the previous pages, are being re-thought by people coming from the lowland cities. In large cities, individuals manage to detach themselves from their family's history. They achieve almost complete anonymity, which would be virtually impossible in the small mountain communities. In these new emerging commons, inclusion is defined by being there (a key concept in areas that have recently lost most of their population) and by being willing to contribute. An important number of their members are "newcomers," people without a local history or deep roots in the area, and therefore without a locally-based status.

As mentioned before, in 2015 a progressive party, the CUP (*Popular Unity Candidacy*) won the municipal elections in Soriguera. The new municipal team "brought back" the village councils. The municipality of Soriguera has 14 inhabited villages and hamlets. The mayor and the members of his team visited every village, and the inhabitants were encouraged to show up and discuss the problems of that part of the municipality. Before then, the municipal neighbors' council was the only local institution and only owners were allowed to speak in their meetings, leaving most of the new arrivals (often young renters) disenfranchised. As stated by the mayor at the time, "The goal was to break the historical classist dynamics […]. If you were in the census, you were allowed to vote"; "to include the new residents and those natives who were not farmers [into the decision-making processes of the territories that had been commons in the past]"; "to open the doors of the commons" [as an anticapitalistic strategy].

These urban-educated individuals tend to be ideologically progressive and, in the past, before their rural migration, many had been exposed to social organizations like unions, cooperatives, or communes. In all these cases, the emphasis is placed on the freedom of joining and leaving an organization and on its democratic decision-making processes (one individual, one vote), the emphasis is on the practice, the communing, not the resource (Euler, 2018). The traditional commons, interestingly enough, might have been successful collective action institutions, but developed in societies revolving around status-oriented structures; ironically, the new emerging commons, despite their cooperative-like structures, are being built according to an individualistic ideological framework.

The contemporary revitalization of the rural commons in places like Spain has often been conducted by former city dwellers connected to leftist movements with a perception that equates commons with some form of "communism." They tend to view the commons as an institution that equates rights, duties, and equal right to profit from these common resources, and their approach is deeply linked to environmentalism. Although in 2019 the CUP lost the following elections in Soriguera, similar parties supported by former city dwellers won in neighboring municipalities, Sort and Baix Pallars. Others achieved significant representation.

Despite all these novelties, the local ordinances regulating the use of the municipal (previously communal) resources reflect some of the abovementioned contradictions between the old and the new forms of defining the individual and access to the resources. Despite the individualization brought about by the liberalization policies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the egalitarian ideological background permeating the newcomers' visions of the mountains according to some of these ordinances, to be able to use the commons one must be an "original" neighbor—the owner of a house that is used during most of the year in habitable conditions—or a non-original neighbor

who, in the same conditions as the former, has lived in the village for a certain number of years. These are the prerogatives which, despite the prevailing individualistic and citizen-oriented legal framework, preserve some form of traditional differentiation. There is a certain level of arbitrariness in how these prerogatives are implemented: for instance, in Esterri de Cardós one needs "to have been there" for ten years, while in Llavorsí and Baiasca the ordinances prescribe five years of residency. In the Vall Fosca only the descendants of those that were part of the 1978 municipal census have the right to receive part of the benefits generated by the agreement the local council signed that year with the hydropower company that uses its commons. As we can see, although regulated, standardized, and legalized, some of the old "naturalization" limitations survive—regulations that would be inconceivable in an urban context. Ironically, the new regulations have given right to all censused adults to vote, but the benefits from the use of the commons are still distributed per household, regardless of the number of family members, as defined, for instance, in Article 6 of the regulations of Esterri de Cardós and Baiasca.

The commons are, thus, in dispute. Their inclusion and exclusion boundaries are in a permanent process of transformation. Which identities are allowed to use them and which are not? Only families that can prove long-term residence? Only families with long-term residence and proven dedication to animal husbandry? People legally living in these valleys? People legally living in these valleys and owning a house? Everybody?

> "I don't see why they [the commons] have to belong to someone. In the past it didn't." (personal interview with a former city dweller, 2021).

In the document drafted by a local cultural association to contribute to future possible commons' ordinances for the Baix Pallars it is suggested that it is necessary "to provide incentives to use modern organizational working methods in keeping with the communal philosophy—formats such as social economy or cooperatives as an organizational framework to obtain economic resources from the commons." It is important to highlight that many of the so-called newcomers who engage in these innovative political initiatives have been living in these valleys for over ten or twenty years, in some cases, even more. The fact that they are still defined as out-of-towners by many locals speaks of the political climate and social differentiation by origin that is still prevalent in these mountains. Their current political success would have been inconceivable ten years ago. There is a demographic transition in process in the mountains and only now are these ideas gathering enough social capital and demographic momentum to gain some traction.

It is not our intention to establish a rightful definition of the "commons" by promoting one conceptualization while discrediting another one. The commons are social institutions, and, as such, they are alive, they change and adapt. They always have. The fact that this article highlights that the traditional commons were different from some of their emerging formats does not make one better or worse than the other. The traditional old commons did not falter because they were inefficient or badly designed. The political attacks of the liberal State plus a demographic collapse were at the root of their progressive collapse. The new conceptualizations of the commons are not emerging because they are better than the old ones, they are gaining momentum because during the last forty years there has been a demographic

transition in the area that has brought a different type of population with a different moral economy, with different ideas of what is right and wrong. Needless to say, we caution against idealizations or falsifications of the past to justify the present, but today's commoners, all of them, have the right to define themselves as they see fit.

This last fact, of course, has an impact on the explanatory potential of the theoretical armamentarium that, during decades, has been developed to study the commons. Many of us, for many years have been trying to identify what was wrong with the theory or the definitions, and why there were blatant dissonances between the former and the latter (see Vaccaro & Beltran, 2019). What was missing from our analyses, perhaps, was the acknowledgment of the historicity of the concept itself. The "commons" as a category is historically constructed by its users as much as its analysts, and as such it is context dependent and in permanent transformation. Our analytical tools tend to look for fixed, standardized, types, and the ethnographic case we presented in these pages offers a perfect example of how time and people tinker with concepts and agency.

In any case, it is fascinating to observe how the commons are currently being redefined as a tool for social engineering and environmental recovery while remaining key to understand how territories and resources are appropriated and managed.

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Declarations

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