

# COMMON LANDSCAPES

## The evolution of commons through the story of several Catalan productive landscapes

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### abstract

*Common goods are commonplace in a myriad of cultures, since antiquity to the Industrial Revolution. Usually, common goods are natural resources that are used and managed by a community. In pre-industrial societies, these goods play a very important role in guaranteeing the survival of common people – those who do not own lands, as they are not members of clergy, nobility or royalty.*

*In England, from the 17th to the 19th century, landowners privatise common lands. This process leaves peasants without many of their livelihood, so they are forced to work for a wage. This lays the foundations to transition from a feudal to a capitalistic economic system. Due to the privatisations, peasants have no choice but to move to cities to find jobs. They take their communal practices with them, which they adapt to the requirements of the industrial society. These practices are later taken in by the public sector, through the New Deal in the United States and the welfare states in Europe, destroying self-organised communal practices. Common goods fall into oblivion during the period of splendour of social democracy.*

*Since the early 1970s, the crisis of welfare states and the new wave of neo-liberal privatisations make the demand of commons relevant again. The concept of new commons becomes broader, and it is redefined in opposition to the new enclosures. Nowadays, the term commons refers to systems of resources that are more complex than the ones from previous periods and it emphasises the act of reclaiming them as a community. In this paper, we want to prove that this evolution of common goods is a dynamic that is still present in several productive landscapes in Catalonia. This shows the urgency for architects and urban planners to start working on this fascinating topic.*

**keywords** Commons, Cultural Landscapes, Productive Landscapes, Cooperation

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It seems that economists and politicians can only see the world as divided between private and public, either owned by capitalists or controlled by the state, as if the common did not exist. Economists do recognize the common, in fact, but cast it generally outside of properly economic relations, as external economies or simply externalities. In order to understand biopolitical production, however, we need to invert this perspective and internalize the productive externalities, bringing the common to the center of economic life. (Hardt & Negri, 2009)

The right to live and to move about with dignity, the right to take part in government, the right to learn and teach freely, the right of public assembly, the right to public health, the right of self-realization and self-determination... The state claimed to use social rights to spare us from the excesses of capitalism. The dialectic relationship between social democracy and neoliberalism forged a system considered by many as "the lesser evil". The lucky few had their fortunes fattened at the expense of each other's time, effort and ingenuity. In exchange, however, the state guaranteed their Maslow's pyramid – or at least its base. After the recent economic global crisis, many voices claim that the failure of this model is empirical: neither does the market regulate itself, nor does the state can control its excesses.

In this context, the old dichotomy of public and private – one of the theoretical pillars of urbanism since the end of the 19th century<sup>1</sup> – becomes increasingly limited to explain cities and territories; more so, as Harvey (2013) states, when a minority consistently pockets the urban surplus value that is produced collectively. Against the neoliberal reorganisation of global capitalism and a State that is increasingly unable to defend the common, a

lot of alternatives emerge bottom-up from the self-organised civil society. As urbanists, we believe they must be studied in order to explore new perspectives that place value on common.

The goal of this article is to prove the hypothesis that cultural landscapes – at least the ones that we have analysed – should be placed within the broad spectrum of common goods, demanded with increasing determination since the end of the 20th century. To do so, we analyse some Catalan case studies that are being demanded collectively by civil society. Our goal is to highlight how important it is for architects and urbanists starting paying attention to this interesting reality.

In short, the main objective of this article is to prove that the evolution of common goods observed by economists, philosophers, sociologists and other academics from all over the world is a dynamic that is still present in several cultural landscapes in Catalonia. The methodology used to highlight this issue consist in a comparison of several study cases around the Llobregat River.

## **A Round-Trip Back To Commons**

### ***“Omnia sunt comunia”***

Historically, common goods are sort of an institution or system<sup>2</sup> on which people with no properties rely to survive. In preindustrial times, the lower social strata are alone amongst the adversities of the physical and social environments. To cover their needs, they develop a series of cooperation mechanisms that allow them to help each other in the difficult task of surviving. As they only own what is given to them by natural law when they are born –natural resources–, they establish a series of pacts that lay solid cooperation models, which allow them to exploit rivers, fishing grounds, forests and meadows sustainably throughout time (Ostrom, 1990). This cooperation does not respond to a moral stance nor to affinity – it is simply a survival mechanism and a way to adapt to the environment<sup>3</sup>.

Common goods actually lead to confrontation within the Catholic Church – between Franciscans and the papacy – when they former try to establish the limits of private property<sup>4</sup>. Continuing the debate, St. Thomas of Aquinas sates: “In extrema necessitate omnia sunt communia” (“in cases of dire need, everything is common”). The theologian dedicates part of his work *Summa Theologica* to legitimise private property and commerce, but he understands that, when subsistence is compromised, everything is susceptible to becoming common. This exceptionality is habitual in pre-capitalist societies that understand that certain resources are essential to subsistence and must not be commercialised (Subirats & Rendueles, 2016, p. 39).

The importance of the common goods system transcends the economic survival of common people, as proven by the relevance of the Magna Carta and the Charter of the Forest<sup>5</sup>, one of the most important references in the Anglo-Saxon legal world and in modern political regimes (Linebaugh, 2008). Linebaugh states that both Charters convey the message that “political and legal rights can exist only on an economic foundation”. Apart from protecting the rights of the nobility and Church, the Charters also recognise that the customs of the commoners – who rely on wood and fruit picking as a source of energy, construction material, livestock feed... – are above private property<sup>6</sup>. In short, we can say that in pre-industrial societies, common people rely, to a great extent, on cooperation around natural resources – which no one can deny them, yet – for their survival. However, the arrival of the industrial era will change this drastically.

### ***Two darkest centuries for commons***

In England, during the 17th and 19th centuries, landowners (becoming capitalists) complete what Marx (1867) calls “enclosures”<sup>7</sup> or privatisation of common land. This process leaves commoners (becoming proletarians) without their main means of production, forcing them to depend on wage labour. Despite the fact that this process faces popular opposition, its culmination lays the foundations to transition from the feudal to the capitalist economic system. Since then, physical or violent coercion is no longer necessary to find people willing to work for money.

Pushed by the enclosures, peasants move to cities to find jobs and take their communal practices with them, which they adapt to the requirements of the industrial society. Social security systems, as well as consumer and housing co-operatives appear as proletarians start to organise themselves. These practices are later taken in by the public sector, through the New Deal in the United States and the welfare states in Europe, destroying self-organised communal practices (Kratzwald, 2015, p. 27). From this moment on, common goods fall into oblivion and the duty of ensuring the survival of the most vulnerable is delegated to the State.

At the end of the 60s, Henri Lefebvre (1968) redefines the anti-capitalist fight by reclaiming the collective right to co-produce the city. The same year, Garrett Hardin (1968) publishes a controversial article in *Science* magazine

called “Tragedy of the commons”, where he talks about the damage produced to a scarce resource through collective management. The alternatives to this tragedy would be privatisation or state control. Despite the fact that Hardin is not the first to express this idea<sup>8</sup>, in the emergency context of neo-liberal ideas of the early 70s, his article is used to attack the social-democratic ideas that had have been dominant since the end of the World War II<sup>9</sup>. From that moment on, a new wave of enclosures take place (Midnight Notes Collective, 1990) and makes the reclaiming of common goods relevant again. In this context, the concept of new commons becomes broader, and it is redefined in opposition to the new enclosures or privatisations.

### ***The return of commons***

In 1990, the doctor in political science Elinor Ostrom refutes Hardin’s metaphor through rigorous research (Ostrom, 1990), proving that there have been many societies throughout history that successfully co-managed their resources. In 2009, she is awarded a Nobel in Economic Sciences, due to her work on the government of common goods. Since then, the demands on common goods forcefully emerge and object of reflection for a large amount of researchers. Such is the success of the concept, that even publicists refer to it (Subirats & Rendueles, 2016, p. 10).

Ostrom focuses his analyses on the historic idea of common goods, a resource of collective use and management, generally natural and characteristic of relatively enclosed rural communities. However, nowadays, one talks about the common or pro-common to refer to more complex resources, broadening the concept beyond legal ownership or the nature of the resource and highlighting the action of claiming and managing it collectively. As Hardt and Negri state:

Whereas the traditional notion poses the common as a natural world outside of society, the biopolitical conception of the common permeates equally all spheres of life, referring not only to the earth, the air, the elements, or even plant and animal life but also to the constitutive elements of human society, such as common languages, habits, gestures, affects, codes, and so forth. (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. 171)

Continuing the enumeration of the quote above, in the context of this paper it feels appropriate to include the landscape in the spectrum of goods that are part of the common. This can be proved by the increasing emergence of agents around the world that demand it collectively, regardless of who owns the land. In the next section, we collect some examples of this dynamic, focussing in the Catalan context.

1 / *“Since the end of the 19th century, the distinction between public and private space has been a theoretical core of the reflections on urbanism of the Western city.” (De Solá-Morales, 1992)*

2 / *(commons are) “a social system for managing shared wealth usually with an accent on fairness, transparency and sustainability. So it is the resource, the community and the systems they devised: the traditions, the rituals, the ways of managing it effectively (The Big Picture RT, 2016)*

3 / *“The collective management of goods and services that are essential to the community was not exactly an option for most of these towns. They were part of those long-lasting institutions that are deeply interlocked with the material subsistence conditions.” (Subirats & Rendueles, 2016, p. 16)*

4 / *“The Franciscans give prescriptive value to the mottos of Gratian’s Decretum- iure naturali sont omnia omnibus (by natural law all belongs to everyone) and iure divino omni sunt communia (by divine law all belongs to everyone) and iure divino omni sunt communia (by divine law all things are common) – which themselves refer to basic principles of the church fathers and the Apostoles, habebant omnia communia (keep all things in common) (Acts 2:44). A bitter debate, foreshadowing the events of Putney three centuries later, emerges between the papacy and the Franciscans (and within the Franciscan order) pitting those who affirm the rule of property, and thus negate the communion dictated by natural law, against the Franciscan groups which believe that only on the basis of common wealth can a good and just society be created on earth.” (Hardt & Negri, 2009, pp. 43–44)*

5 / *John, King of England, is forced to approve the Magna Carta in 1215 in Runnymede as an armistice in which the King, the barons, and Church sign an agreement through which the royal power is constrained. This important document is the origin of fundamental rights, such as the habeas corpus or the banning of torture, which are present in modern democracies, for example, in the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America, in Western constitutions or in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Charter of the Forest complements the Magna Carta with regard to the rights and the traditional lifestyle of commoners in English forests. (Linebaugh, 2008)*

6 / *“Usually the soil belonged to the lord while grazing belonged to the commoners, and the trees to either—timber to the lord, and wood to commoners.” (Linebaugh, 2008, p. 33)*

7 / *Marx defines the concept of “enclosures” in the chapter called “The Secret of Primitive Accumulation” of Capital. Volume I. In it, he describes the process of closing and privatisation of English common lands in the 17th and 19th centuries in favour of landlords.*

8 / *In chapter 3 of Book II of Politics, Aristotle states: “What is common to the greatest number gets the least amount of care. Men pay most attention to what is their own; they care less for what is common.”*

9 / *“Given the impossibility to achieve non-authoritative collaboration, the only alternative was privatisation.” (Subirats & Rendueles, 2016, p. 27)*

## **The Evolution Of Commons Around Llobregat River**

### ***The Llobregat of common goods***

River Llobregat, also referred to some academics as “the nerve of Catalonia” (Ferrer i Alòs, Piñero, & Serra, 1997) due to the key role it played during its industrialisation, is a common resource that was historically used by the different communities that settled in its area of influence. The common watermills that abound throughout Catalonia since the second half of the 18th century<sup>10</sup> illustrate the collective use of river water. Another example is the Manresa Canal, built in the middle of the 14th century, after the city is hit by a series of draughts. This medieval infrastructure still provides the city with drinking water. It is known as the most important hydraulic construction in Catalonia in the Early Middle Ages, and it carries water from Llobregat River through over 24 km, from Balsareny to Manresa. The Infanta Canal, built from 1817 to 1820 in Lower Llobregat along the left bank of the river, is an example of how local communities make a collective effort to broaden the area of influence of the river to water their crops (Alba Molina & Aso Pérez, 2008a, 2008b; Castillo Caso, 2014). This canal played a key role in the industrialisation of Catalonia, which, paradoxically, marks the end (temporarily, at least) of the long period during which Llobregat River is used as a common good.

### ***The enclosure of the Llobregat River***

As Marx observes when he describes enclosures in England, the industrialisation of Catalonia comes with the enclosure of several stretches of Llobregat River. The textile colonies of Berguedà – 15 industrial complexes lined along 30 km of the river, from Berga to Navàs – perfectly illustrate this process. Besides the factories (which use hydraulic energy from the river to make the weaving machines work), the homes and the associated services that come with them (the theatre, the shop, cafeteria, squares, parks, churches...) make them self-sufficient urban areas (Vall Casas & Sabaté Bel, 1997).

Some artisan families that are settled in the Berguedà area and have been linked to the textile industry for several generations establish the colonies, taking advantage of the very favourable legal framework<sup>11</sup> that delegates to the private sector the colonisation and modernisation of the territory. Until then, the artisans coordinated a dispersed textile manufacturing system, which relied on the work of peasants with domestic spinning and weaving machines. They complemented with this work the limited resources obtained from agriculture (mainly vineyards, exploited under *rabassa morta*<sup>12</sup> contracts). As mentioned already in this paper, before industrialisation, another key source of resources for peasants were common goods. However, in the middle of the 19th century, the damage caused by the First Carlist War and the enclosure of common goods greatly deteriorate the living conditions of peasants and puts their cooperation model at risk. The auction of the common mill in Gironella in 1864 to establish a textile factory illustrates a practice that becomes commonplace in this period<sup>13</sup>. As an alternative to the increasingly difficult rural way of life, peasants accept the tough working conditions imposed by textile artisans, who are now the masters of the colonies.

The origin of these colonies illustrates also the decadence of common goods, which will remain left in oblivion the entire period of industrial splendour. Nevertheless, some communal practices remain in popular celebrations and collective spaces of the colonies (cooperatives, vegetable gardens, washing places, theatres, parks...), forging close ties between its inhabitants, which will be key in the next section of this analysis.

### ***The Llobregat, common again***

The crisis in the textile industry at the end of the 20th century hits Catalonia and the colonies go into irreversible decline. The crisis quickly spreads to other industrial sectors. The factories that could be found throughout Catalonia in the 19th century no longer have a place in a global context in which the widespread availability of electricity and the possibility to transport commodities easily and affordably leads to the relocation of production with cheaper labour.

Having lost their productive vocation, many manufacturing plants are abandoned. The situation of colonies is especially difficult, as a lot of former employees still have their homes there. However, the city of Barcelona is not immune to this reality, and its factories are also abandoned. Neither the private nor the public sectors are able to find a solution to the deterioration of this rich industrial heritage that is left on standby, waiting for property development to be profitable again.

In the early 21st century, the civil society takes control over the situation after decades of empowerment<sup>15</sup> and starts reclaiming these productive landscapes. In some cases, the inhabitants of the industrial plants are who

step up and place value on their homes. Such is the case of the textile colonies where, with the support of a large group of experts (Vall Casas et al., 2007; VV.AA., 2005), the cohesive local community appropriates<sup>16</sup> them. Other times, even if they do not live on the plants themselves, the residents of the surrounding neighbourhoods reclaim the value of the factories. A successful example is the Can Batlló industrial complex, occupied in 2011 by neighbours from La Bordeta, where they collectively create a self-managed social infrastructure that includes a library, a meeting space, a centre to document social movements, a climbing wall, several workshops, a housing cooperative and social economy cooperative incubator, amongst other initiatives (La Col, 2013).

These are just some of the cases that reflect how, after a long period during which common goods were forgotten, the 21st century is bringing the collective reclaiming of the productive landscapes around the Llobregat River, which is seen as a common once again.

We would like to conclude this paper by referring to Sauer's definition of cultural landscape (1925) that "is fashioned out of a natural landscape by a culture group", as that collective work accumulated on the territory is probably what makes cultural landscapes fall clearly within the field of commons.

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10 / *The long tradition of hydraulic exploitation goes back to the technology of the Roman hydraulic machines, which was recovered in the 15th and 16th centuries (Tarragó, Pallés, del Callejo, Prieto, & Bascones, 1987).*

11 / *The main objective during the creation of the Spanish liberal State from 1833 to 1868 is the modernisation of the countryside. To do so, a series of pieces of legislation are passed, such as confiscation laws (Mendizabal, 1836 and Madoz, 1855), or the colonies laws of 1866 (to promote rural communities; completed with the Water Law) and of 1868 (which sets the foundations for the real development of industrial colonies) (Serra Rotés, 2010, p. 242).*

12 / *"The contract requires the plantation of vines and the payment of a quarter of its fruits. The contract is valid as long as the vines live. This means that small-scale farmers have access to partial ownership of land, which stimulates labour investment." (Vall i Casas, 1999, p. 14)*

13 / *"A lot 18th-century mills, established during the commercial expansion of cereal farming, use the location and often even the buildings of medieval mills. The economic ruin of the farmers that own these mills in periods of poor harvest allows the industrial sector to buy their assets at a low cost." (Vall Casas & Sabaté Bel, 1997)*

14 / *It is important to highlight the long tradition of community movements in Catalonia: popular, republican and libertarian ateneos; anarchist collectivisation during the civil war; neighbourhood associations and district assemblies; self-managed squatted social centres, which proliferate in the city in the 80s, 90s and until the early 2000s.*

15 / *Here, the term is used metaphorically, but also literally, as a lot of neighbours purchase the properties that used to belong to the owners of the colonies. In many cases, the town halls also buy them and take charge of these public spaces.*

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