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IN 19TH CENTURY SPAIN: AN INTERPRETATIVE PROPOSAL**


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DIVERSITY OF ECONOMIC LANDSCAPES AND COMMON LAND PERSISTENCE IN 19TH CENTURY SPAIN: AN INTERPRETATIVE PROPOSAL

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ABSTRACT

The massive land privatization that took place over the 19th century deeply transformed the Spanish economic landscape. Nevertheless, the outcome of the process was quite different, both in pace and impact, depending on the geographic area we analyze. The explanation for this regional diversity in the persistence of common lands has been attributed to the institutional and environmental context, together with the level of market penetration that characterized the different rural societies. However, the important role that the commons themselves played in this process has been often overlooked. The aim of this paper is to complement those previous explanations by proposing a model that focuses on the collective land remaining, at any given moment, as a crucial explanatory variable and to provide an interpretative framework that would contribute to unveiling the complexity of a process that led to so many different outcomes.

Keywords: Common lands, privatisation, Spain, 19th century.

RESUMEN

La gran magnitud del fenómeno privatizador llevado a cabo a lo largo del siglo XIX transformó para siempre el paisaje económico español. Sin embargo, el resultado del proceso fue muy distinto, tanto en su ritmo como en su intensidad, dependiendo del área geográfica que analicemos. Aunque la explicación de la diversidad regional en la persistencia del comunal ha sido atribuida a las diferencias en el entramado mercantil, institucional o ambiental que caracterizaban a las distintas sociedades rurales de la época, menos atención ha recibido el importante papel que el propio monte disponible jugaba en este proceso. El propósito de este artículo es complementar las explicaciones anteriores introduciendo nuevos elementos que ayuden a enmarcar el problema dentro de un posible modelo que incluya al propio monte público disponible en cada momento como eje vertebrador del mismo y que sirva como propuesta interpretativa que contribuya a clarificar las causas que llevaron a que el proceso privatizador tuviera resultados tan dispares en las distintas zonas de la geografía española.

Palabras clave: Monte comunal, privatización, España, siglo XIX

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1. INTRODUCTION

Many recent studies have demonstrated the importance of common lands in the reproduction and development of rural communities in the preindustrial economies, and their capacity for adaptation and innovation¹. The commons constituted a source, among other different goods and services, of pasture, wood, fertilizer and fuel, together with the possibility of temporary cropping, thus playing a fundamental role in the working of the rural communities. The common land was indeed a crucial element of a system in which agricultural activity was completely integrated with cattle breeding and forestry. Moreover, although pre-industrial societies were not characterized by an equitable access to resources, the collectively-used land provided certain mechanisms of social cohesion that preserved the continuity of the system. In this sense, it was a way of guaranteeing the accumulation process of the upper classes, while simultaneously allowing the less favoured sectors of the population to obtain supplementary rents that were needed for their own reproduction. In a rural world whose productivity significantly depended on the use of the common lands, the welfare of these communities was thus influenced by their availability and by the way these collective resources were managed.

However, the transformations caused by the transition to capitalism, and the emergence of a new liberal state, triggered the progressive dismantling of the common lands through the privatisation, not only of their property, but also of the use of these resources. The gradual establishment of a market economy in rural areas, the incentives generated by a greater demand for land and other raw materials, and the policies carried out by the liberal government, certainly contributed to drive the privatisation process.

¹ See Vivier (1998), Moor, Shaw-Taylor and Warde (2002) and Allen (2004) for European examples and Moreno (1998), Iriarte (1998), De la Torre and Lana (2000) and Lana (2006, 2008) for Spanish examples.

The massive privatisation developed throughout the 19th century deeply transformed the Spanish economic landscape². Nevertheless, neither the pressures created by the market, nor those generated by the state, were completely successful, and thus the outcome of the process was quite different, both in rhythm and impact, depending on the geographic area we analyse (map 1). The explanation for this regional diversity on the persistence of common lands has been attributed to the institutional and environmental context, together with the level of market penetration that characterised the different rural societies (GEHR 1994; Balboa 1999; Iriarte 2002). However, the essential role that the commons themselves played in this process has often been overlooked.

Map 1. Common land persistence in Spain, 1900 (% of total land)



Source: Artiaga and Balboa (1992), GEHR (1994) and Gallego (2007); without the Basque Country.

² The term economic landscape refers to the configuration of a certain productive area in relation to its edafoclimatic and orographic conditions, and the way in which society organizes the use of its natural resources, all of which determine its productive orientation and the sustainability of those practices.

The aim of this paper is to complement those previous explanations by proposing a model that focuses on the collective land remaining, at any given moment, as a crucial explanatory variable and to provide an interpretative framework that would contribute to unveiling the complexity of a process that led to so many different situations³. In this sense, the very availability of the commons constituted a key factor, in specific social and institutional contexts, in limiting their dismantling. It is also particularly stressed how the privatisation process reinforced itself, once it was put into motion, due to the lesser value that the remaining common lands had for the community. Therefore, the diversity of economic landscapes that emerged from the privatisation process can be endogenously explained by the conflicting tension between centrifugal forces promoting the privatisation of the common lands, and centripetal forces facilitating its persistence. Although the process reinforced itself once initiated, the remaining common lands generated, in certain social and environmental contexts, the conditions and incentives that allowed local communities to retain a greater control over the property and management of this kind of resources, thus resisting the pressures that came from the market and the state.

³ Given the hybrid nature that characterized the concept of the “commons” in 19th century Spain, this paper, following Iriarte (2002), identifies common lands as those lands that were collectively managed at the local level, in spite of their ownership being collective, municipal or public. See Beltrán (2010) for a discussion of this assumption. Although the dismantling of the common lands also implies the privatisation of their uses (De la Torre and Lana 2000; Ortega Santos 2002), my aim is to focus on the redefinition of property rights. On the other hand, this process refers not only to the disentanglement carried out from 1855 onwards, but also to other processes prior to, and after that date, such as sales made by the local institutions, usurpations and appropriations, arbitrary ploughings, etc. or distributions, since the end of the 18th century (Balboa 1999, Jiménez Blanco 2002).

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. The next section examines the economic, social and environmental functions that commons fulfilled and how privatisation eroded them and made their subsequent dismantling even easier. Section 3 presents data on the Spanish historical experience at the provincial level and lays out a theoretical model explaining it that includes the common lands remaining as an explanatory variable. Finally, some concluding remarks are presented in section 4.

2. THE RELEVANCE OF THE COMMONS TO PROMOTE OR LIMIT PRIVATISATION

The economic, social and environmental function that common lands provide is influenced, among other elements, by the acreage that rural societies had at their disposal. In this sense, the utility obtained from the commons is the best incentive that local communities had to protect them and, therefore, their availability becomes a crucial factor in the analysis of their persistence. Nonetheless, changes in economic, institutional, and technological conditions could trigger the privatisation of the collective land, a process that would be more or less intense depending on the economic, social and environmental characteristics of the local communities (Iriarte 2002). What is more interesting to emphasize now is that, together with the process of privatisation, the function that a declining commons could develop would decrease even more and, given the lesser interest that their protection would arouse, it would make their subsequent dismantling easier, in a self-reinforcing process. Therefore, the commons offered high-valued services to the community, but only if they maintained a critical volume. Once a certain threshold is passed, their value diminishes to a greater extent and as a result, the concern for their defence. In fact, the reduction in the availability of collective lands promoted by privatisation not only reduced the utility

that they could provide to the community, but also had collateral effects in the economic, social and environmental variables that influenced the incentives to privatise, which led to further changes in the nature and structure of the rural communities.

One of the first arguments subject to this circular and cumulative logic, which helps to explain the acceleration of the privatisation process, and stresses the importance of the availability of common lands in order to explain the tempo and intensity of their dismantling, is the extent to which capitalism has spread over the rural society. If the diffusion of market relations favours the privatisation of common lands (GEHR 1994; Iriarte 2002), their dismantling, in turn, made the penetration of the market logic easier in different ways. On the one hand, as well as the marketing of the land factor itself, the process forced peasants to resort to the market to acquire the products that they obtained directly from the commons hitherto and this, in turn, pushed them to sell their workforce or a greater part of their productions to get enough resources to participate in the market (GEHR 1999, 130-131). Similar consequences were derived from the privatisation of the use of those lands that remained public⁴. According to Ortega (2002, 21), the growing predominance of market relations entailed a greater monetization of rural economies and the establishment of a wage relationship between individuals and nature. On the other hand, given the increasing role of the land

⁴ The transformation of collective uses into private ones would also contribute to the fact that the market directed production towards the most valued products and decided who the beneficiary was through auction. In fact, the progress of privatised uses was more significant in those provinces where the commons offered products highly valued by the market (GEHR 1999).

as mortgage security, the market for credit would also enjoy a boost that, in turn, would accelerate the transmission of land (Iriarte and Lana 2007, 227)⁵.

Secondly, the commons also fulfilled an important function of bringing rural communities together and enhancing social cohesion within them. Many studies have emphasized that a greater identification among the members of the rural communities helps in generating enough general consent to protect common lands from privatisation (Iriarte 1998; Moreno 1998; Lana 2008). This social link would be stronger in areas with dispersed settlements, fewer social imbalances and a generalised collective use of the common lands. Consequently, it would contribute to increase their social functionality, thus increasing the incentives to protect an asset greatly valued by the community. Nevertheless, the communal regime would only deserve to be defended insofar as its size was important enough to guarantee that its services reached most groups within the community and, on the contrary, it would lose its capacity to carry out its functions as it was being privatised. In this sense, the privatisation process could threaten this social link through the growing social imbalances caused by the property concentration that sales used to entail⁶, what in turn put more pressure over the

⁵ See also Jiménez Blanco (2002, 146) for a review of the implication that the existence of common lands had in the markets of goods and productive factors. It is true, nonetheless, that in those areas where social links were stronger, the increasing diffusion of market relations could not necessarily imply the privatisation of the common lands. On the contrary, the social cohesion and community relations that the commons and other mechanisms generated served as a complement to the market providing certain basic services, such as credit access and a kind of social security net (Gallego 2007; Lana 2008), that made the whole process more socially sustainable.

⁶ In Extremadura, Castilla-La Mancha and Western Andalucía, the privatisation of common lands was one of the keys of the property accumulation carried out by the local privileged classes (GEHR 1994, 120). Lana (2006, 19) indicates that more than 91 per cent of the surface area sold in Navarra from 1826

commons (Esteve and Hernando 2007). In the same way, the deterioration of the social fabric became accentuated due to the productive reorientation caused by privatisation, which usually implied the consolidation of a kind of extensive exploitation highly demanding on land but too scarce on workforce (Pérez Cebada 2007). The remaining common lands appear again as a relevant element to explain this process. Their dismantling entailed an ownership concentration that, together with the erosion of social cohesion mechanisms and the greater market dependence implied to those groups who lost the access to resources that used to be free, caused what has been called “the tragedy of the enclosures”⁷.

The same logic applies if the cohesive role attributed to collective use is analysed⁸. The persistence of collective-use rights had a shock absorber effect over social imbalances or, at least, over their worst consequences, that allowed the peasants’ reproductive strategies a wider margin to manoeuvre and, consequently, influenced the general consent about the protection of the communal regime⁹. In that case, the growth of privatised uses not only brought about the penetration of market relations in rural societies, but also increased inequality, by denying free access to communal resources.

to 1860 ended up in the hands of well-off landowners, which gives an idea of how the privatisation process could increase the level of social imbalances, thus reducing the social cohesion needed for the defence of the commons.

⁷ See Sala (1996) for a review of this view.

⁸ According to Cabral (1995, 108) the privatisation of collective uses during the Ancient Regime in the province of Cádiz ruined the rural communities and accelerated social polarisation and rural proletarianisation.

⁹ Lana (2008, 178-180) states that collective-use rights not only persisted over the common lands still remaining, but also over certain privatised spaces, and both outcomes “tended to favour the community as a whole, suggesting that the intention was not to disrupt local balance”.

From another point of view, Moor (2007, 138) argues that the reduction in the number of users accentuated the dissolution of the commons, since the relative proportion of individuals who really benefited from them had become too low to guarantee active support for the system¹⁰. On the other hand, the collective use of the common lands favours local cooperation. The communal management of these resources contributes to the making of cooperation networks within the community and, consequently, helps to promote social cohesion (Iriarte 1998; Gallego 2007). In those areas where communal bonds were strong enough to preserve traditional collective-use rights, these same practices served to strengthen those ties, as well as to counterbalance the privatisation dynamic¹¹.

In general, the level at which the interests of the ownership elite and most of the population for preservation of the commons coincided would therefore depend on the intensity of the links that hold the community together. These communal ties would limit the ability of the privileged classes to direct the process to their own benefit, including the wider interests of the local community in their decision-making. In fact, the outcome of this implicit negotiation would be influenced by the choices available to everyone involved, so that the negotiation process was more or less balanced. According to Gallego (2007), the level to which privileged groups subordinated peasant

¹⁰ This argument reinforces the idea of the existence of a critical threshold, the number of users in this case, from which interest in the maintenance of the commons would decay and the privatisation process would be accelerated.

¹¹ The existence of these communal ties provided peasants with mechanisms different from the market, and also made the transition to a market economy more socially sustainable, an outcome completely different from what happened in other areas, especially in the south of Spain, where this social cohesion was lacking (Ortega 2002).

exploitations to their own interests depended on the whole array of possibilities that peasant families could lean on. The availability and level of access to common lands was one of the primary assets that peasant families had, helping them to broaden their room to manoeuvre in the negotiation processes with local elites¹². Although arrangements to preserve common property or collective use were part of a wider agenda, the negotiation outcome would be partially influenced by the initial conditions in relation to the commons remaining and the way their access was allowed, determining thus the possibilities that less favoured groups had and their degree of freedom to negotiate. The privatisation process would weaken these social constructs and facilitate subsequent movements in this direction.

On the other hand, the commons were a crucial element of the integrated and organic agriculture that characterized pre-industrial economies. Their role as provider of pasture and fertilizer contributed to improving agricultural productivity, resulting in a greater interest in their preservation¹³. In fact, those areas where this integrated

¹² Other elements that contributed to shaping the negotiation margin of peasant families were the level of access to other resources, such as land or credit, the possibility of obtaining an alternative income (wages, sales or remittances) and the cohesion of local and familiar networks (Gallego 2007, 165). In fact, the greater labour market dependence caused by the disappearance of collective-use rights left peasants in a more vulnerable position, since they lost their freedom of choice and were doomed to a compulsory submission to work conditions that benefited their employers (López Estudillo 1992, 93).

¹³ As well as water, the other major limitation of Spanish agriculture was the structural lack of fertilizer and, therefore, the importance of the commons to the agricultural system is even more crucial (González de Molina 2001, 55). Their function of improving agricultural yields was well-known to local communities. A municipality in La Rioja that was fighting against the privatisation of its common lands explained in a memo how peasants depended on those lands to feed their livestock, which was essential in turn to improve agricultural productivity because animals provided both workforce and fertilizer.

system yielded better results could meet the growing demand of agricultural products, increasing their output through intensification, rather than resorting to an extension of arable lands¹⁴. On the contrary, those areas of the Iberian Peninsula with lower yields, because of a substantial water shortage or the presence of extreme weather, were compelled to plough the common lands to increase production. In this sense, the reduction of communal surface area triggered by the privatisation process limited its potential to supply fertilizer and to support livestock that provided more fertilizer and workforce. Consequently, it reduced agricultural yields even more, which in turn required even more arable land to face the increasing demand.

Lastly, even though the social sustainability promoted by common lands might have more significance for their contemporaries (Moreno 1998), it is useful to stress the environmental benefits that common lands provided: limiting deforestation, biodiversity losses and soil degradation, resulting from the extension of single-crop farming. According to Jiménez Blanco (2002, 168), the progressive privatisation of property, and of the management of common lands, meant a reduction of woodland and

Moreover, given the poor quality of their fields, the report stated that, if common lands, unfortunately, ended up being sold, the agricultural and livestock wealth would disappear (Gómez Urdáñez 2002, 158).

¹⁴ See Beltrán (2010) for a discussion of this relationship. The persistence of common lands in humid Spain can be explained partly because of the greater capacity of its agriculture to improve its yields without resorting to land extension, and to the role that the common lands played in sustaining the growth of agricultural productivity. In certain environmental contexts, the availability of common lands became even more important, in that it improved the room to manoeuvre for peasant families, as previously analyzed. According to Gallego, the whole array of choices open to local communities that influenced their capacity to negotiate not only depended on the kind of rural society, but also on the potentialities and limitations imposed by environmental conditions (2007, 175).

the appearance of negative externalities¹⁵. González de Molina and Martínez Alier (2001, 11) do not indeed limit the concept of the “tragedy of the enclosures” to the social issues, but widen it to include the degradation of many communal resources¹⁶. The degradation of the commons would diminish their capacity to fulfill the functions that the rural community demanded from them and, in doing so, it would reduce the incentives for their protection. In this sense, apart from the potential overexploitation that their privatisation promoted, Balboa (1999, 119) stresses that the reduction of

¹⁵ Among the externalities that Jiménez Blanco (2002, 168) discusses, there were erosive phenomena, floods, the silting up of wetlands, alteration of water flows, etc. The author contends that these problems became serious - even irreversible - in fragile ecosystems such as southeast Spain. In a study of communal practices in Flanders, De Moors (2007, 137) shows that, in opposition to the practices carried out by the users of the commons, who perfectly understood the dangers of demographic growth and the marketing of communal resources, and made an effort to reach an ecological optimum, their privatisation led to a less ecologically-balanced system. The Spanish experience leads to similar conclusions and underlines the fact that rural communities administered their resources effectively, far from the exploitative behaviour that is usually attributed to them (González de Molina *et al* 2002, 507).

¹⁶ These authors interpret the expropriation of common assets as a globally negative process for the peasant economies, for their standard of living, and for the preservation of forestry ecosystems (González de Molina and Ortega 2000, 97). In a different work, Ortega (2001, 387) similarly argues that the changes in the use of the commons caused by their privatisation entailed the socio-environmental disarticulation of the communal regime. In a study of what happened in the Granada county of Baza, Ortega (2002) establishes that the privatisation of the commons, not only of their ownership, but also of the collective uses of the land that remained public, transformed the relation between man and nature, causing the expansion of forestry monocultures, the increase of extractive effort, and the putting of most of these spaces under the plough. On the other hand, the peasant protests defending common assets in the 19th and 20th centuries, without using an explicitly ecological language, has been identified as an environmental conflict, since it called into question the sustainability of the management of these resources (Soto Fernández *et al* 2007, 281).

collective resources would facilitate their degradation. A reduced availability of these resources would put more pressure on them¹⁷ and, at the same time, a greater insecurity about their use would lead peasants to prioritize survival over resource preservation, resorting in addition to expressions of protest that could imply aggressions to common lands¹⁸.

3. AN INTERPRETATIVE PROPOSAL AROUND THE REMAINING COMMONS

The arguments developed above about the value that the common property regime represented for local communities highlight the incentives that these societies had to defend a key resource in terms of their welfare. This view also points to the circular and cumulative negative effects on the persistence of collectively-managed resources derived from the privatisation process, a process that would reinforce itself once it reached a critical threshold. The extent of common lands still remaining would, therefore, be a mixed factor; acting in favour of communal persistence when their amount was great enough, while facilitating privatisation as it adopted smaller values as privatisation was carried out, a trend that became self-sustaining once it reached a certain critical size. Thus, an important availability of collective resources, given the value they provided to the rural society, would maintain a high interest in their protection, especially in certain social and environmental contexts. On the contrary, the less communal surface area, the less value to the community and, consequently, the

¹⁷ In a well-known study on the eastern Netherlands, Van Zanden also finds that “the enclosure of the pastures resulted in pressure on the remaining commons becoming even greater” what lead to overexploitation and “the emergence of sand drifts” (1999, 134).

¹⁸ These aggressions ranged from increasing illegal uses to intentional fires.

fewer incentives to protect it, which would accelerate its dissolution. Furthermore, their reduction in size would undermine the social and environmental balances that the commons sustained, reinforcing the negative effects in the same direction.

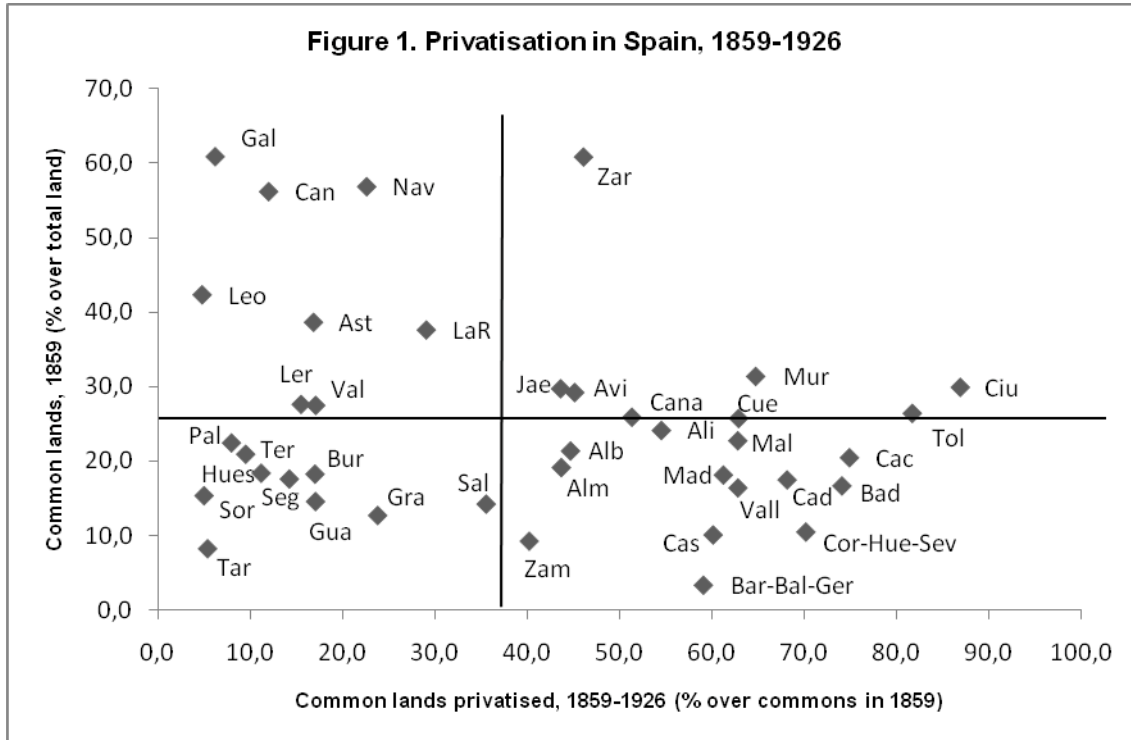
The Spanish historical experience supports this interpretation. Although we do not have data on the availability of commons at the beginning of the process (the end of the 18th century), a close analysis of the different cases generated between 1850 and 1900 allows for interesting conclusions (figure 1)¹⁹. Firstly, focusing on the upper-right square, it is shown that, with the peculiar exception of Zaragoza, there are no situations in which high percentages of common lands at the beginning of the process implied important privatisations, a point that supports the thesis defended in this paper²⁰. The upper-left square shows those provinces that enjoyed significant amounts of collective resources in 1859 and, interestingly, were largely still public in 1926²¹. These areas certainly shared social and environmental features that facilitated the persistence of common lands. In contrast, those provinces that began with lower amounts of public

¹⁹ See Beltrán (2010) for a discussion about the different social and environmental conditions that characterize the diverse areas portrayed in the graph and their influence on communal persistence.

²⁰ In the atypical case of the Ebro valley, the privatisation process did not really begin until the last third of the 19th century, following the new economic conjuncture in the wine, wheat and sugar beet markets (GEHR 1994, 122).

²¹ The scarce evidence available at the district or local level also points to the idea that common lands still remaining were a crucial factor in explaining the diverse privatisation process even in the interior of a province. The data offered by Iriarte (1998) for the case of Navarra shows how those areas that enjoyed a greater percentage of common property in 1861 suffered a much less significant loss between 1861 and 1898. There is also evidence from the province of Lérida that supports the idea that those areas where common land survival in the 19th century was greater were those where these kinds of resources continued to be of major importance at the beginning of the process (Bonales 1999).

lands show much more diverse privatisation results. The different outcomes can be explained by analysing the timing of the process, as well as the different economic, social and environmental context of each area.



Source: Artiaga and Balboa (1992), GEHR (1994) and Gallego (2007)²².

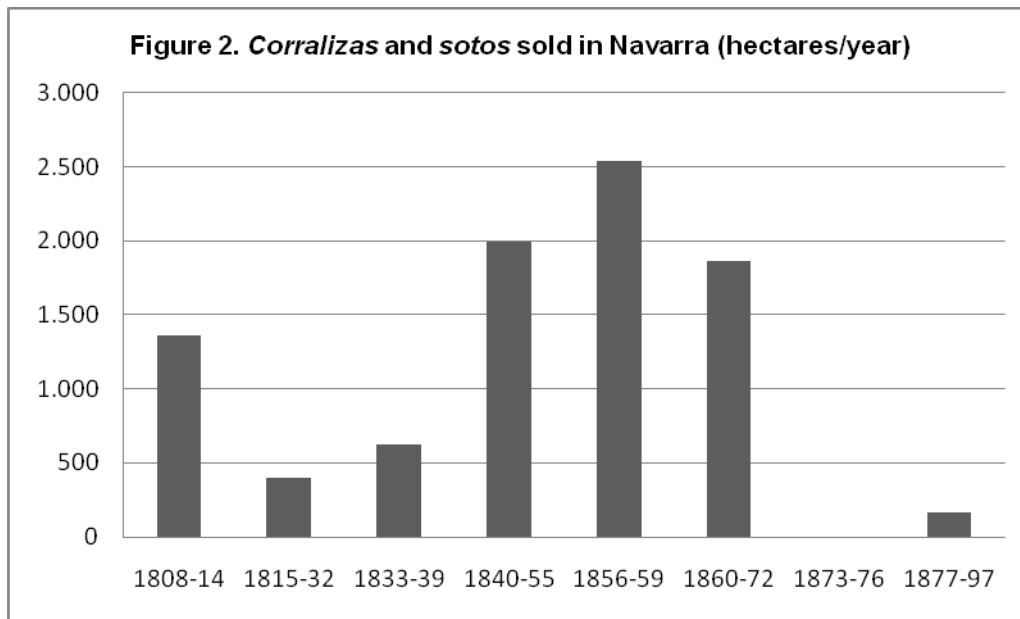
In the first place, the lower-right square shows those provinces where the privatisation process was really ahead during the period prior to 1859, and where land sales continued at a high rate during the second half of the 19th century. In these areas, less favourable social and environmental circumstances led to a major dismantling of collective lands during the whole period, based on the circular and cumulative processes presented in this paper. Alternatively, the lower-left square reflects those situations where the privatisation process was relatively ahead around 1850, but made little progress thereafter. This can be explained by the saturation effect caused by the

²² The thicker lines that draw the four different squares in the figure reflect the country average of the variables in play.

privatisation dynamic in those areas where potentially productive plots of land had already become private. Once past a critical threshold, the self-reinforcing privatisation process would diminish before common goods disappeared, since the remaining lands would increasingly be of worse quality. Supporting this idea, it is worth noting that the provinces that appear in this square combine a steep orography and/or extreme weather, implying that, given the significant advance of privatisation, the scarce common lands remaining in 1859 did not offer sufficient incentive to potential buyers. Discussing the dismantling of the common lands in Navarra, De la Torre and Lana confirm its exhaustion, attributing it to the meagre attractiveness that the assets subject to expropriation could offer as an investment, due to their intrinsic characteristics as remnants (2000, 82)²³. Figure 2 stresses both the acceleration and the slowing down of the privatisation process in Navarra, the only province from which we have detailed data on the timing of the process throughout the 19th century²⁴. Therefore, although the common lands remaining played an important role in explaining their own persistence, their significance is diluted as they are dismantled, not only because their gradual disappearance made the privatisation process self-reinforcing, but also because of the increasing scarcity of incentives offered by the stunted land remaining.

²³ The GEHR (1994, 117) also refers to the limited productive potential of the remaining public lands at the end of the process in most of the southern half of Spain, where the frequency of sales was especially intense.

²⁴ The disturbing data of the 1808/14 interval is caused by an extremely convulsed period in political terms. See Lana (2006) for a comprehensive analysis of the situation.



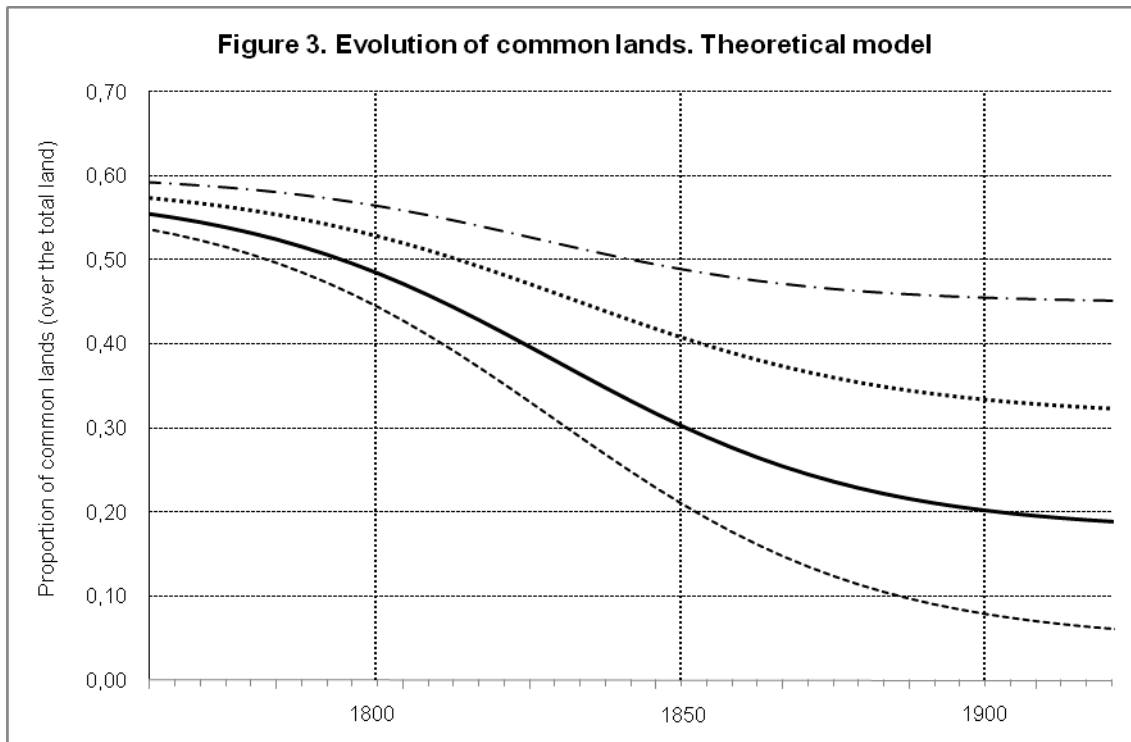
Source: De la Torre y Lana (2000)²⁵.

Following the ideas proposed by Krugman (1991), the privatisation of common lands may be considered as a path-dependent phenomenon, in which the relative tension between centrifugal and centripetal forces would endogenously lead to multiple economic landscapes. The diverse geography that emerged from this process depended significantly on initial conditions involving not only the economic, social and environmental variables, but also the actual availability of the common lands. Furthermore, slight changes in the parameters of the factors that influence the process, or in the availability of the commons through the privatisation dynamic, may have deeper effects in the persistence of common lands due to processes of circular and cumulative causation. In this sense, when any of the variables, especially the collective lands themselves, reach a critical threshold, the process becomes self-reinforcing. Thus, the differing tempo and intensity of the privatisation process would be caused by the

²⁵ *Corralizas* and *sotos* refer to different kinds of collective properties. See Lana (2006) for a detailed description.

interaction between centrifugal and centripetal forces, with some of these pushing to dismantling the commons, while others acting in favour of their preservation. The market incentives and the pressures enacted by the liberal State would be counterbalanced, especially in certain contexts, by the social and environmental conditions that characterized local communities. On the other hand, the commons would play a major role in explaining their own greater or lesser persistence. First of all, common lands limited the privatisation process since, given their crucial role in the functioning of the rural communities, they generated incentives for preservation, particularly in the areas just mentioned. Secondly, once their dismantling was put into motion and the common lands remaining reached a certain critical size, the process became self-reinforcing due to the lesser value that a declining resource could generate. Lastly, once the privatisation was relatively developed, the limited attraction of the common lands remaining would diminish the incentives, and thus sales would be greatly reduced.

The logistic distribution (figure 3) employed to describe growth processes that experience saturation states would be adequate to analyse the phenomenon described. The different variables would combine the economic and political factors that foster privatisation, together with the social and environmental conditions that characterized the diverse areas of the Spanish geography and that could, in certain contexts, set a limit to the process. The volume of the collectively-managed lands still remaining through time becomes a key variable that contributes to explaining the trajectory of each region, and the diversity of the resulting economic landscapes.



Generally speaking, the model proposed would depart from a theoretical equilibrium, found in organic-based agrarian societies where the communal regime constituted a central element, from which there would be no incentives for its dismantling²⁶. The pressures arising from an expansive market and the financial needs

²⁶ In theory, although this “idyllic” situation would extend back in time in an almost horizontal line, this theoretical situation does not actually exist. In fact, the history of the dismantling of the European commons could be traced to the Middle Ages (GEHR 1994). The demographic pressure and the increasing predominance of market mechanisms were undermining the role common lands played in diverse contexts. Although the initial situation, connected to the different evolution every rural society underwent, would not thus be the same in each case; what is stressed here is that the starting point would greatly influence the process. Data scarcity, however, prevents us from being more precise when it comes to quantifying the commons available in the different areas at the beginning of the 19th century. Yet when data is available, the relatively high communal persistence at the end of the Ancient Regime in Cádiz, Badajoz and Cáceres (42.1, 33.1 and 42.2 percentages of the total provincial land respectively), which were regions that suffered an intense privatization during the 19th century, is in line with the model

of municipalities, together with the priority that the liberal state gave to privatisation, promoted the dismantling of the collective lands from the end of the 18th century²⁷. However, the tempo and intensity of privatisation was determined by the social and environmental characteristics of the societies and the amount of common lands still remaining. In those places where the privatisation process reduced the commons to a certain critical size, the process accelerated, becoming self-reinforcing. Once most of the sales were carried out, the lack of appeal of the surviving lands would decrease the impetus of the process²⁸. The model that would be obtained should not be lineal, since historical evolution - complex, diverse and changing - could introduce changes in its parameters, both gradual and discontinuous, moving the function in one direction or another, or even serving to modify its slope.

outlined and gives support to this interpretation (Cabral 1995, 124; Linares 2004, 22). From a different perspective and according to Lana (2008, 165), in pre-industrial economies, the communal regime would have followed “an equilibrium path” achieving, at the same time, an efficient use of the resources and the reproduction of society, with its inherent inequalities. In fact, “the diversity of contexts and points of equilibrium would help to explain the variety of access and management modes of the common resources that are historically found” (165).

²⁷ Lana (2008, 165) argues that, from the second half of the 18th century, the equilibrium mentioned before would break apart following the path that the new economic and political situation created, since it caused a shift in the class interests in favour of the dismantling of the collective lands.

²⁸ Although the quantitative importance of the privatisation during the first half of this century remains unclear, research at the provincial level reveals that they were at least as important as the ones carried out under the Disentailment Law of 1855 and that they slowed down from 1873 onwards (Cabral 1995; Lana 2006). The ending point to which, at its most, the process tends in the Spanish case would correspond to the percentage of commons considered to be of “public utility” in 1901. This concept defines those lands that, given the benefits they provided to the environment, would be especially protected by the State and would not be affected by sales (Jiménez Blanco 1991).

4. CONCLUSION

This interpretation gives a major importance to path-dependency, since concrete institutional designs are the result of social interaction in the long run. The consensus over the commons depends on the function that these lands play in the society where they exist; a function that is influenced by the social and environmental context and by the availability of collective lands, and that is ultimately going to be modified by the outcome of the privatisation process. Reinforced by a continuous interaction over the centuries, the initial conditions of the rural societies that were being formed in the different Spanish regions would have allowed the development of a kind of institutions that made the persistence and adaptation of the commons more or less difficult²⁹. Summing up the outline presented in this paper, the mutual interaction between social and environmental factors was reinforced, once the privatisation process was set in motion, as a result of the gradual establishment of a market economy supported by the liberal State. The dismantling of the commons was initially easier in certain areas, a process that would become self-sustaining due to the lesser value - economic, social and environmental - that the still surviving collective lands could offer. Therefore, starting from a hypothetical situation typical of pre-industrial societies, where the common lands available to the rural communities constituted an important, but variable, percentage of the territory, the different areas would diverge in as many potential paths

²⁹ Balboa (1999, 107) stresses the importance of past epochs' inheritance to explain the historical evolution and the diversity of situations and outcomes of the privatisation process in Spain. In this sense, the initial legal conditions were not the same in different areas; the collective entitlement to the land being predominant in northwest Spain, as opposed to the state or municipal entitlement present in most of the rest of the country (Jiménez Blanco 2002, 151).

as there were provinces, or even counties³⁰, depending on their social and environmental conditions. Applying Krugman's terminology, the Spanish rural areas witnessed the transformation of their own economic landscape, from a relatively symmetric equilibrium where common lands enjoyed a major significance in each region, to a system where multiple equilibriums coexisted, depending on the persistence of the communal regime in each situation.

The model suggested could be able to reflect the whole array of cases occurring in the Spanish commons throughout the 19th century. In general, the collectively-managed lands only persisted under certain social and environmental conditions, capable of partially offsetting the pressures coming from the market and the State. In other regions, more adverse conditions led to high privatisation levels³¹. In these places, the risk of reducing the volume of the common lands below their critical level, and thus making the process self-reinforcing, was greater, and especially so in those areas that had more unfavourable circumstances. Likewise, the historical dynamic would introduce unsettling effects that may have caused movements in the communal persistence function³². In this sense, the role played by the liberal State to shape the process was by no means uniform. The turbulent first half of the 19th century, for

³⁰ It is important to acknowledge that the outcome of the privatization process may also present remarkable differences within the same province (Balboa 1999, 113).

³¹ The northwest of Spain preserved a large part of their common lands, while the southern half of the Peninsula suffered an intense privatisation. The rest of the country would occupy an intermediate position, with diverse exceptions and gradations between them. See GEHR (1994), Iriarte (2002) and Beltrán (2010) for a review of the specific social and environmental conditions that influenced the persistence of common lands.

³² See Balboa (1999), Jiménez Blanco (2002) and Iriarte (2002) for a detailed summary of what took place during this period.

instance, characterized by continuous conflicts and their negative effects over the municipal treasury, led to an increase of the privatisation incentives, since local authorities saw the potential privatisation as a solution to their financial troubles³³. The public intervention that fostered the sale of common lands through the Madoz Law (1855) constituted another inflection point in the disentailment trajectory³⁴. On the other hand, the whole period witnessed a growing market penetration and, therefore, the relative tension between centrifugal and centripetal forces was gradually undermined³⁵. Market incentives were indeed higher from the second half of the century, which would

³³ In an exhaustive analysis of the sales carried out in Navarra in the first half of the 19th century, Lana (2006) wonders if the municipal financial troubles might have been an excuse for the local elites to appropriate the collective resources. The political instability also favoured illegal appropriations of these lands (Iriarte 2002, 22). On the contrary, once this turbulent time was over, municipalities might have realized that preserving the commons was a convenient strategy because they represented an important asset that could be used as a source of income or as a source of valuable services to the community (Moreno 1998, 98).

³⁴ This law theoretically forced local communities to sell all land that was considered as “propios”, so to say, those common lands that were enjoyed privately after paying a rent to the municipalities (Iriarte and Lana 2006, 695). However, the law’s application was by no means homogenous, nor lineal. Lana (2006), for instance, affirms that, during the four years previous to the application of the General Disentailment Law, Navarran municipalities embarked on a rush to privatisation, to avoid sharing the revenues with the central State, which would cause a major displacement in the communal persistence function. On the other hand, the State’s actions could not only drive the process, but also slow it down through the active protection of “some environmentally sensitive uplands” (Iriarte 2002, 23).

³⁵ According to Lana, “the gradual enlargement of markets for agricultural products and the permeation into society of an utilitarian individualism [...] were the driving forces behind the transformation of land into a commodity” (2006, 27).

imply a stronger pressure on the commons³⁶. Each of these developments could, in certain areas, have reduced the availability of common lands, thus crossing the critical threshold by which the value these resources offered to the local community declined to a greater extent. Consequently, the process became self-reinforcing, with fatal consequences for their persistence³⁷.

Although a model as described might miss the richness of detail inherent in such a complex phenomenon, it could perhaps serve as a template for future research to test its validity in the multiple circumstances that shaped the historical trajectory of the common lands. Likewise, the availability of more complete data about the forces that drove the process, and especially about its timing, would help to improve the model sketched here.

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³⁶ The end-of-century farming crisis, on the contrary, slowed down market incentives and involved a reduced pressure on a communal regime that, in many places, had already suffered a very intense attack (Iriarte 2002).

³⁷ The actual value of this critical threshold would be determined by the social and environmental conditions of each rural community. Its quantification remains to be approached in future research.

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