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COUNTRYSIDE: HISTORIES, RESISTANCES, AND FUTURES

**RURAL COMMONS AS PRACTICES OF POLITICAL IMAGINATION IN
SOUTHERN EUROPE**

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In an era marked by authoritarian resurgence, ecological devastation, and the foreclosure of political alternatives, this paper argues that rural commons constitute privileged sites for renewing political imagination. Drawing on recent critiques of neoliberalism's capacity to render itself unsurpassable, the paper conceptualises rural commons not as residual governance devices but as living archives of democratic practice. Focusing on Portugal, Spain, and Turkey, it advances the claim that commons operate as "pockets of rupture" within hegemonic regimes of enclosure, extractivism, and state-centric rule.

The analysis is structured around a critical dialogue with Elinor Ostrom's design principles through the lens proposed by Wagenaar and Bartels (2024), who identify five blind spots in dominant institutionalist approaches: ethnographic-relational, hermeneutic, historical, political-moral, and prefigurative-democratic. Using an exploratory comparative review of the literature on Portuguese baldios, Galician montes veciñais en man común, and Turkish imece-based and pasture

commons, the paper shows that the persistence of commoning cannot be explained solely by rational-actor governance arrangements. Rather, endurance depends on dense relational bonds, struggles over meaning and legitimacy, *longue durée* trajectories of enclosure and restitution, and the enactment of democratic subjectivities in everyday practices of assembly, mutual labour, and stewardship.

Historically, Portugal and Spain illustrate how commons were reclaimed and re-institutionalised as instruments of post-authoritarian democratisation. In contrast, Turkey exemplifies the opposite trajectory, in which centralisation and neoliberal authoritarianism progressively eroded communal tenure. Yet even under conditions of dispossession, Turkish commons persist as moral and political imaginaries of resistance.

The paper situates rural commons within an emancipatory horizon, conceptualising them as “real utopias” (Wright, 2010): ordinary yet transformative institutions that prefigure alternative grammars of community beyond state and market. In doing so, it contributes to contemporary debates on democracy by demonstrating how political imagination is sustained not through abstract blueprints, but through historically embedded practices of commoning.

Palavras-chave: rural commons; participatory governance; collective action; portugal; spain; turkey.