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**Back to the Commons:  
Emancipatory Rural Politics in Galiza**

*Joám Evans Pim*

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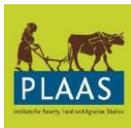
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## Back to the Commons: Emancipatory Rural Politics in Galiza

Joám Evans Pim

### Abstract

*Much of rural Galiza has been for decades an almost uncontested stronghold for the Spanish right-wing Partido Popular and its predecessors. Most of these rural municipalities are characterized by small, dispersed and aging populations, lack of employment for youth and continuous dismantlement of basic services. The 1936-39 civil war and subsequent dictatorship attempted to erase the memory of rural emancipatory politics and the grass-roots institutions where it emerged and developed. Lousame, a municipality with 3,500 inhabitants in the West of Galicia, fits within this pattern but also displays signs of emerging social contestation. In 2015 a libertarian municipalist platform gained 12% of the vote and was close from depriving the right wing from its majority. Simultaneously, the grass-roots civil society collective “Coluna Sanfins” was formed taking its name from the anarcho-syndicalist column that left Lousame in July 1936 to fight the military coup. The collective has been catalytic in mobilizing popular resistance against government-backed destructive projects such as industrial waste landfills, mining operations or common land grabbing, while reconnecting current struggles with the local emancipatory movements of the past and inspiring care and connection with the land. The process of reclaiming institutions of rural direct assembly democracy in traditional Common Land Communities is especially significant. Lousame currently has 32 Commons Assemblies that self-manage almost half of the municipality’s territory. Commons Assemblies are outside of the system of State institutions and self-manage important services such as water, wood for heating and cooking, common village machinery and also represent a significant contribution to household economies. The shift to repoliticize traditional commons institutions as tools for emancipation outside the logics of capitalist modernity is the focus of this paper. Through the study of a small commons community in Lousame, insights are gained on how these experiences can contribute to emancipatory rural politics elsewhere.*

### Acknowledgements

-To the upspring of little commoners being brought up in Frojám.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) implies that whole communities become active co-researchers in common experimentations. The findings presented in this paper were made possible through the openness and active engagement of the people of the Frojám Commons. I am also indebted to the board of the “Coluna Sanfins” Society and to the different organizations and hundreds of individuals that became involved in the actions carried out in the Commons throughout 2017 and January 2018. I am especially thankful to the Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI) and the Political Economy of Resources, Environment and Population (PER) research group (International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam) for accepting this research proposal allowing the sharing of its findings well beyond the forests of Frojám.

## 1 Introduction

In the morning of May 1, 2016, commoners in Frojám sensed how the strong north-easterly wind that had just begun to blow the day before announced an incipient forest fire. Quad bikes had been heard moments earlier in the NE zone of the Commons, and as soon as the first clouds of smoke were seen, villagers rushed toward them equipped with basic fire fighting gear. The immediate intervention of the commoners and the fire extinguishing services—that joined in soon after—stopped a quickly advancing fire that the wind was pushing toward the village itself. A dense oak wood that serves as a living firebreak reduced the damage to just about 10 hectares (10.000 m<sup>2</sup>) of the Commons' 100 hectares of ancestral lands.

Even before the last flames were put out, people in Frojám clearly realized that the fire had been set intentionally in the most favourable conditions for severe harm and damage. Just months before, a delegation of commoners from Frojám and the contiguous commons had met with the managers of an encroaching mining operation, demanding that the integrity of their land be respected. Sarcastically, the mining engineers responded: “Don’t worry, we’re already leaving!” Administrative claims followed and word about the conflict spread. For decades, fire has been used in rural Galiza to retaliate and keep people scared and silent.<sup>1</sup>

Almost a year later, representatives of the Frojám Commons were sitting nervously at a large room in the Spanish National Environmental Education Centre (CENEAM), in Valsaín (Segovia). For the first time, two local communities were going through a national peer-review process to be formally declared Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCA). After hearing the reports from evaluators and listening to the commoners, the committee of experts adopted the decision to approve both proposals.<sup>2</sup> In October 2017 a light green stain representing the Frojám Commons entered the World Database on Protected Areas (WDPA) managed by the United Nations Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Centre, making it the first ICCA to be added after going through a national peer-review process.<sup>3</sup>

After over a century of State-driven protected areas that marginalized human communities traditionally living and interacting with such spaces, ICCAs emphasize the relevance of these communities in the conservation of biodiversity and ecosystem services. But beyond their practical relevance in conservation, the international recognition of ICCAs has also become a new tool for communities (from Mesoamerica to the Philippines) facing threats of land grabbing, extractivism and other projects that degrade and destroy the land that sustains them. In the face of an ever-encroaching capitalist modernity, rural and indigenous communities like Frojám are expanding the set of available tools to defend their land, lives and livelihoods, which now include the development of wider and international alliances for synergy and solidarity and direct engagement in the development of international legal instruments such as “No-Go Zones”, “Free, Prior and Informed Consent” and ICCAs as such.

“We exist to support communities that simply want to say no” explained one of the Coordinators of the international *Yes to Life No to Mining* coalition when asked in Frojám about their *raison d'être*.<sup>4</sup> In

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<sup>1</sup> See Cabana (2009). Specifically on the Frojám 2016 fire, see YLNM. Attack to Common Woodland in Galicia. 2016-05-05. URL: <http://www.yestolifenotomining.org/que-hai-detras-do-lume/>. Accessed: 2018-01-10. (Archived by WebCite at <http://www.webcitation.org/6wNRoeLt5>)

<sup>2</sup> CENEAM. Frojám is first ICCA to go through national peer-review process in order to be added to WDPA. 2017. URL: <http://www.mapama.gob.es/es/ceneam/grupos-de-trabajo-y-seminarios/conservacion-comunal-en-espana-ICCA/conservacion-comunal-espana1.aspx>. Accessed: 2018-01-10. (Archived by WebCite at <http://www.webcitation.org/6wNKmukdM>)

<sup>3</sup> Protected Planet. Frojám is first ICCA to go through national peer-review process in order to be added to WDPA. 2017. URL: <https://twitter.com/protectedplanet/status/917312982740238336>. Accessed: 2018-01-10. (Archived by WebCite at <http://www.webcitation.org/6wNKUXz0L>)

<sup>4</sup> YLNM. Resistance, exchange, (post)extractivism: YLNM coordinators meet in Galicia. 2017. URL: <http://www.yestolifenotomining.org/ylnm-coordinators-meet-in-galicia-in-photos/>. Accessed: 2018-01-10. (Archived by W

recent years, Galizan rural communities have spearheaded some of the largest movements and protests that have echoed around the country, and have also built new bridges with global alliances. Dairy farmers, fishing and mussel gathering communities and entire areas affected by destructive projects such as the Corcoesto gold mining project or the Touro copper mining project have shredded the cliché about the passivity and contempt of Galiza's rural population that had been developed since the 1936 Civil War. From cracks in the political architecture that perpetuates local *cacique* power brokers (immortalized by Vicente Risco's *O porco de pé*) such movements have also emerged to contest the sometimes veiled and sometimes overt authoritarian populist lords of the Galizan hinterlands.

Although the results of the 2015 municipal elections displayed signs of such contestation in the arena of institutional politics, the most radical transformations seem to be taking place well under the radar of conventional political struggle. The strong authoritarian grip over the entirety of State institutions in Spain—globally evidenced in the last quarter of 2017 through the crisis in Catalonia—has greatly shifted emancipatory rural action (Scoones et al., 2017) away from the mirage of taking over local councils and into creating and revitalizing new foci of popular power. New community platforms, movements, associations and other formal and informal collectives have mostly liberated themselves from political instrumentalization by ruling and opposition parties, becoming broad and independent political agents self-managed by communities themselves.

Most interestingly, such a shift has also revitalized Common Land Communities, a remnant of non-State community self-managed institutions that has surprisingly survived into the 21<sup>st</sup> century Galizan society. Common Land was once the most extensive form of property—or rather land stewardship—in Europe and elsewhere in the world but has almost disappeared in most regions after centuries of enclosures and usurpations. Galizan “*montes vecinhais*”, Portuguese “*baldios*”, Italian “*partecipanzas*”, Norwegian “*allmenning*”, and similar figures present to some extent in almost every European country, evidence the historical continuity of such an institution. But it is in the NW corner of Iberia where its vitality and extension appears to have better survived the transition into capitalist modernity.

About ¼ of Galiza's total land mass (29,574 km<sup>2</sup>) is officially classified as Common Land that belongs to 3,300 Common Land Communities (*Comunidades de Montes Vecinhais*). Commons vary in size from a few hectares to several thousand—the average being around 200 hectares—and from just one or two “open houses” (“*casa aberta*”)—with people living in them—to hundreds or even thousands, the average being around 40 houses. All in all, approximately 15% of Galizan population lives in commons “open houses”. There are also considerable differences in terms of how “alive” Communities are. A fair number have been dormant for decades, abandoned as the land they are entitled to, or under the direct control of the government or extractivist companies under contractual arrangements or factual occupation. Others suffer the same chronic corruption and authoritarian control that is endemic in the local structures of the State, often becoming subservient to the latter.

However, because of their relative freedom from the political control of the State, common land communities have also become fertile ground for the development of emancipatory alternatives that challenge rural depopulation, suppression of public services and extractivist dynamics. Most Common land communities maintain traditional practices of direct assembly democracy and are also responsible in many cases for basic services such as water supply, playing an important role in distributing forest commodities and income among commoner “open houses”. Frojám fits in this context, even if it falls under the average sizes both in terms of population and territory, managing 1 km<sup>2</sup> of common land—about the size of the Old City of Jerusalem—while an additional 50 hectares of privately owned land forms an inner circle with family homes, food gardens, fields and smaller patches of woodland.

Frojám is considered in this paper as a case-study of emancipatory rural politics in Galiza. The study was carried out between June 2017 and January 2018 on the basis of Participatory Action Research, an approach to understand change by becoming engaged in bringing it about (Reason and Bradbury,

2008). Participatory Action Research (PAR) fosters collective and community involvement in the process of (self-)experimentation and (self-)reflectivity with an emphasis on social and intrahistory of lands and lives. Following such approach, commoners and other villagers have acted as co-researchers in the “*Frojám Commons Co-Laboratory*”. Experiential developments during the study period are presented in the paper in connection with past events and future perspectives offered by participants.

An initial historical and socio-political contextualization is offered at first to provide a wider understanding of the Galizan commons landscape. Although some recent developments may seem peculiar or extraordinary, Frojám can still be considered a valid example of the challenges, shifts and possibilities currently underway and Galizan rural common communities. This particular community was selected solely on the grounds of in-depth access, which is frequently the greatest barrier for research in generally refractory small collectives. Other common land communities with commensurable emancipatory processes were identified, and are good candidates for future research: the Rebordechán Commons, in Crecente, that established a pioneer cooperative called “*O tempo da aldeia*” (“the time of the village”)<sup>5</sup>, following other cooperative initiatives in Common Land communities, such as those of Ernes, Negueira (*Cooperativa Ribeira do Navia*);<sup>6</sup> or the Vilar Commons, in Triacastela, that became the first member of the ICCA Consortium in the Spanish state in 2014 after adopting ground-breaking by-laws that have been placed as example (Abella, 2016), are equally relevant.

## 2 A (Pre)History of Emancipatory Politics in Galiza

A usually understated fact is that—as in most of the world’s regions—98% of human history in what today is Galiza (if we use the 118,000 year old *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis* remains in Cova Eirós) or 93% (if we use a more conservative 30,000 record) is that of societies actively engaged in preventing hierarchization and sustaining egalitarianism. It can be assumed that during most of this period human communities lived as simple hunter-gatherers or nomadic foragers (Giorgi, 2010; Fry, 2013) in relatively small groups with non-segmented and non-hierarchical forms of social organization based on self-sufficiency, personal autonomy, absence of formal leadership and egalitarian and cooperative practices (Fry, 2006).

Transitions from non-segmented hunter-gatherer societies to new forms of social organization begun between 4,500-2,700 BCE, although group size remained small. Parcero Oubiña and Criado Boado (2013) suggest that since the early Neolithic up to the period just prior to the Roman invasion, social dynamics that limited or inhibited the development of hierarchical/non-egalitarian forms of socio-political organization were firmly in place in Galiza. In a shift on how the Galizan Iron Age is understood, an alternative explanatory model (Currás, 2014; González García et al., 2011; Sastre 2011, 2008; Parcero et al., 2007; Parcero Oubiña, 2002) has come to challenge the traditional view that characterized societies during this period on the basis of hierarchization, stratification, increased inequality and proto-state forms of political-territorial organization. Inspired by Clastres (1989 [1974]), historians and archaeologists explain how the articulation of Gallaecian communities during the Iron Age was sustained by an active mechanism against the emergence of hierarchization and social inequity, preventing the development of segments within the population that could take over the means of production and surplus. In other words: a society against the state. Currás (2014: 256) characterized communities in this historical horizon as a social system structured on the basis of segmentation in self-sufficient and independent agricultural collectives. Each community within itself is composed of autonomous domestic units that exercised control over the means of production and had no differences in terms of class inequality.

The Galizan landscape was divided in such a way that each community had an equivalent access to resources, which guaranteed independence, self-sufficiency and non-hierarchization. The pattern of

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<sup>5</sup> See <<http://otempodaaldeia.com/>>. For a news account, see *Praza*, September 16. Available at: <<http://praza.gal/movimentos-sociais/12607/rebordechana-a-aldea-que-se-organizou-para-ter-un-futuro/>>.

<sup>6</sup> <<https://ribeiregas.wordpress.com/>>.

Gallaecian socio-political organization was a myriad of small, autonomous, equidistant units, which had its parallel within each unit, where an equivalent access to the means of production was determined by common land ownership, while access to resources was conditioned to community membership. According to Currás (2014: 535) such a decentralized and egalitarian population structure was the concrete manifestation of an “active strategy to construct socio-political equality and its history is that of a struggle to prevent the seeds of hierarchy”.

The non-existence of a political centre, class or institution that appropriates power and the means of social control, explains why communities remained small with an average of 200 individuals distributed in some 4,000 settlements, and decision-making direct and collective “on the basis of consensus, interaction and interpersonal relations determined by face-to-face communication” (Currás: 2014: 603). When a community surpassed its demographic threshold, fission occurred and a new community, equivalent to those in existence, was created. Currás (2014: 444) offers a population estimate of 750,000 for the whole of Gallaecia that, if compared with the estimate of 729,600 for 1552 CE—two millennia later—evidences an astonishing continuity and also the capacity of the territory to hold a large population without the need for hierarchical state structures.

This political-territorial model is shaken with the initiation of Roman military action between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BCE, opening the doors for hierarchization, stratification, social exploitation, the emergence of native warrior elites and large settlements of over 1,000 individuals. A snapshot of this later period of decomposition of traditional Gallaecian structures has usually been presented by historians as a characterization of the whole Iron Age. Although such changes were slow, with greater influence in the southern Atlantic area and greatly diluted in the hinterlands and northern areas, they eventually lead to the formal integration of Gallaecia into the provincial structures of imperial Rome in the time of Augustus.

This first subjection of Galiza’s territory into a state structure is indeed an extraordinary period, as no such structure will re-emerge until centuries later. Effective Roman control is pronounced in areas of direct influence of the imperial road system but looser in more remote areas that remain to some extent isolated from romanizing influences. Examples include the Bocelo highlands where settlement continuity is evidenced in the archaeological record from the Iron Age to the High Medieval period (Criado, 1992: 254). Although the Roman colonial period fostered the development of an indigenous aristocracy that was crucial to imperial extractivist aims (including extensive gold mining in the whole region), the pre-existing segmentarian dynamics fostered internal population shifts towards areas where Roman control was weaker allowing the continuity of non-state societies.

The immaturity and limited extent of cities and *villae* and their *latifundia*—spearheads of feudal society—stands in sharp contrast with the dynamism of free rural communities during the imperial period. In much of the territory these communities preserved pre-Roman forms of social organization relatively intact, including collective land ownership and low levels of social differentiation. During the Low Roman Empire period (3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries CE) the reality of cities such as *Lucus Augusti* (today’s Lugo) is not that of focal points for centralized control but rather enclaves under siege by a surrounding and hostile stateless rurality (the “*bagaudas*”), leading to the construction of its famous walls (López Carreira, 1997: 100). The emergence of Priscilianism—a deviation from state-sanctioned Christianity based on rural and community spirituality that minimized hierarchies and accepted the full liturgical participation of women also condemning slavery—is a significant manifestation of the confrontation between antagonistic systems of values.

Galiza enters into the Middle Ages with a second, and also partial, attempt of creating state structures: the Kingdom of the Suebi. Although the establishment of this ‘kingdom’ by new Germanic settlers has frequently been presented as the fulfilment of an independent state in Galiza—indeed the first of its kind in Western Europe after the fall of Rome—in reality it was initially a limited jurisdictional monarchy with powers over the newly arrived Suebi settlers, but not over the autonomous rural communities (or over Romanized *villae* enclaves) that stuck to their own socio-political systems, especially in the more isolated *Conventus lucensis*. Suebi rulers exercised control exclusively over a

discontinuous fraction of territory and a minority of the population. The idiosyncrasy of the Suebi, that promptly converted from swords to ploughshares, led to the establishment of newly created rural communities that did not alter the territorial structure of Galician Iron Age settlement, based on equivalent access to resources and community autarchy. Abundance of Germanic place-names is an evidence of such newly established rural settlements aside from persistent native communities.

The virtual disappearance of the incipient State after the 8<sup>th</sup> century gives these autonomous communities—*respublica ingeniorum* or free peasant republics—*de facto* control over most of Galiza's territory and population (López Carreira, 1997: 109; 131). Umayyad conquest leads to the disorganization of *villae* and the destruction of emergent local aristocracies, in turn fostering the political development of community social organization:

(...) farmers remained in *villae* but were no longer dependent on the authority of nobles. There were no more lords but collective problems still had to be solved (...). Small matters that concerned everyone but nobody had more authority than the others to solve them. That is how people's assemblies are born and the collective authority of dwellers established (Saraiva, 1978: 37).

As Saraiva explains, the term '*vizinhos*' (neighbours, dwellers of a common place) comes from the Latin *vicus* (small populated place) in its genitive form *vici* evolved to the vernacular *vizinho*. This was first applied to those working in the Roman *villae* (*vilanus*, *servus*; meaning slave) but the new vernacular use reflects the membership of an emancipated rural community that again self-organizes around its *conventus publicus vicinorum*—rural public assembly. Although most historians recognize that in both political and economic terms, free peasants are not only the most active but even the hegemonic actors in Galician society until the turn of the millennium, scarce attention is given to them in history books, that fill up pages with the battles and litigations of bishops and monarchs that are prominent in the written record. But the continuity of Iron Age social structures in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries CE is evidenced through these *respublicae ingeniorum* and the numerous fortifications of the Early Middle Ages associated to this form of political organization (López Alsina, 2013 [1988]). Communities even build alliances with viking raiders to hostile local lords as the *Orkneyinga* saga describes in relation to a 1165 incursion (Almazán, 1982: 9; Ferreiro Alemparte, 1999: 68).

The Late Middle Ages is a period of intense conflict in which the power and freedom of egalitarian rural communities is progressively lost to the feudal proto-state. Two parallel realities coexist in tense conflict: a manorial reality that strives to impose the feudal proto-state; and the commons, that struggles to maintain the autonomy of thousands of agrarian republics based on assembly governance (López Carreira, 1997: 264-265). The breaching point of the conflict takes place in the 15<sup>th</sup> century during the "*Irmandinhos*" Wars (1467-1469), in which manorial relations are unilaterally broken by communities that declare their will to live without lords or castles ("*no tengamos sobre nos señor ni fortaleza ninguna*" ["to have above us no lord nor castle"]). The "dream of dispensing the feudal regime" earned the *Irmandade* (a term meaning both brotherhood and sisterhood) the nickname of "insane" (Barros, 1993), a consideration eventually shared by moderates within the movement (namely the low nobility and bourgeoisie) in the face of "total anti-manorial action" by rural communities that wanted to become "lords". But these communities "did not conceive being lords of vassals, but rather lords of themselves", reflecting the antiauthoritarian nature of the *Irmandade*.

In spite of the ultimate defeat of the movement and subsequent repression from the returning lords and the emergent new State, rural communities never abandoned the vision of becoming "lords of themselves". Three centuries later, the Floridablanca 1787 census reveals how at the end of the Early Modern period some 26,500 peasants remained self-governed ("*de senhorio próprio dos seus vizinhos*"), including 53 parishes in 20 jurisdictions and the town of Caldas de Reis (Eiras Roel, 1997: 17). For the less fortunate majority, the continuity of the parallel institution of the communal assembly minimized the negative impact and effective direct control of the manorial jurisdiction and the increasing pressure from the state (Saavedra Fernández, 2007: 364). The authority of communal assemblies ("*concelhos*", from *conventus publicus vicinorum*, a term later usurped by the State to label

closed municipal councils) sustained the rural ethos of solidarity and egalitarianism, for example, by reassigning taxes in relation to each house's means regardless of the State's criteria (Tenorio, 1982 [1914]; vid. Saavedra, 1994: 74), and often placed it in direct conflict with the new powers and interests. The 1798 revolt and destruction of the Sargadelos ammunitions factory by 4,000 peasants in reaction over the depletion of communal forests—to be converted into coal—is one significant example. The Marqués de Sargadelos survived the 1798 uprising but was publicly slaughtered by peasants in 1809 during the confusion following the French Napoleonic invasion.

Small community constituencies (*aldeia*, *couto* or *paróquia*) had up the 20<sup>th</sup> century particular arrangements that made the territories confined by their traditional borders, in one historian's words, "truly a state of their own" (Ferro Couselo, 1952: 53, 60). In Jorge Dias' ethnographic accounts of Vilarinho da Furna—a former village in the Portuguese border that was subsequently flooded to create a dam—and Rio de Onor, a similar comparison is made to explain the nature of community self-governance in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: "Vilarinho represents a kind of independent state, with its own government and laws" (1981: 80); "This kind of small state [Rio de Onor], between Portugal and Spain, adopted what could be called a representative democracy" (1984: 82). The "*Couto Misto*", a territory that maintained de facto independence until the 1864 Treaty of Lisbon that established rigid borders between the Kingdoms of Spain and Portugal, has been considered a singularity by many authors (García Mañá, 2000), but its form of governance was in reality no different to other Galizian *coutos*. Spanish authorities, calling in 1845 for its suppression, argued: "These three miserable villages with no more than 160 houses are currently an independent state within Spain (...) without any kind of dependency or subjection to any superior authority" (id., 69).

Authors described communal institutions as "states" in an attempt to explain the power of rural popular assemblies that could only be compared to the competing state authority. García Ramos (1912), in his account of one such assembly government, the "*Junta dos Homens de Taboadelo*", described its power as "absolute in the sphere of its attributions, territorially defined by the geographic boundaries of the parish and in terms of scope by everything of common interest", with no "laws, ordinances or written rules that could limit its sovereignty". Another Galizian historian, Murguía (1892: 3-4), pointed out how the institution of the rural popular assembly is a continuity of the self-governing bodies of antiquity, although the almost exclusive oral nature of its procedures and the autarchic focus of its decisions—on matters such as common grazing, mutual aid, communal buildings and livestock, irrigation, etc.—has led to generally undermining its legislative, executive and judicial powers. However, in the context of community self-sufficiency, full control over the most crucial aspects of rural life in fact translated as community sovereignty with reduced external interference.<sup>7</sup>

The full extent of the power of Galizian rural communities and their capacity for rhizome articulation (see Vail, 2004) is clearly manifested during the periods of (proto)State fragility, such as the 15<sup>th</sup> century *Irmandinho* revolts, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Napoleonic invasion or the 20<sup>th</sup> century Agrarian movement. In all three cases, coordinated action by rural communities is instrumental to the successes of emancipatory movements. For example, the decentralized Galizian rural guerrilla was ultimately responsible for the defeat of the Napoleonic forces after the collapse of hierarquical political-military structures in 1809. In spite of the crucial role of community rural guerrillas in defeating the invaders, the subsequent emergence of the Spanish Liberal State specifically targeted the autonomy of rural communities, leading to what Balboa (1999: 20) called a "confrontation between a vigorous *traditional rural civilization* and a State that was still in construction during the 19<sup>th</sup> century". An illustrative example is a Royal Order of May 22, 1848 in which it is declared as "inadmissible that rural communities by themselves and with absolute independence of municipalities and the Government can pervasively control lands called commons [*del común de vecinos*]". The fact that today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, these commons land still represent ¼ of Galiza's territory reveals the incredible persistence of rural communities in defending their lands in the face of an encroaching State.

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed account of the powers of commons assemblies in NW Iberia, see Rubio Pérez (2012).

### 3 “One good fattened sow”

Although usually hidden from strangers in the safest compartment of the rural home, in many communities, original parchments of up to 500 years of age are still kept as a treasure that provides testimony of a history of struggles and hardships, but also collective rights fought for hard by generations. Lawyers and judges dealing with civil law cases involving land rights or disputes over Galizan common lands or common buildings such as mills or baking ovens are continuously astonished by how communities can produce as evidence documents that have been kept in villages, within families, for centuries.

During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the renewed plunder of the commons initiated by Franco’s regime, documents that provided testimony of hundreds of years of community rights over the land became a prime target of the State Forest Services that sought to deprive communities of the written evidence of their past and rights. Today, the “war spoil” of that campaign is still scattered across State archives, as Rico (2000: 122) attests, pending an unlikely restoration. Lack of documental evidence often leads to communities losing legal battles over lands usurped over the past century. With an aging and dying population, in many places the erasure of documental history in the 1940s-1960s is followed in the present by the erasure of the oral memory of the history of the land and its indigenous peoples.

Frojám is one community that circumvented the treacheries of State agents seeking to steal its written records, allowing it today to better understand its past and defend its future. One such document reveals that on the 20<sup>th</sup> of May of 1527 the Abbot of the monastery of San Martinho Pinário, in Santiago de Compostela, signed a manorial deed over the *couto et lugar* of Frojám that was under its jurisdiction. A previous deed from the 6<sup>th</sup> of March of 1409 confirmed that Frojám was already under this monastery’s jurisdiction in the turn of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Manorial deeds established certain obligations—including, in the 1527 document, to provide “one good fattened sow” (“...*una buena marrana cebada*”) every year—but to an extent secured the autonomy of the community within its territory. Although considered as irrelevant by most historians of manorial systems, community sovereignty over daily life in the context of Galizan rural autarchic communities is no small achievement. Through this sovereignty, the commoners of Frojám built communal watermills in the 15-16<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>8</sup> established irrigation ordinances, kept communal flocks of sheep, operated an autonomous school (“*escuela de ferrado*”) and sustained a collective system of village solidarity and mutual support.

The dream of the 15<sup>th</sup> century *Irmandade*, “to have above us no lord nor castle”, was momentarily achieved in 1928, when the commoners of Frojám collectively extinguished the manorial ties that obliged them to provide the Viscount of San Alberto every month of September with 12 *ferrados* of wheat, 72 *ferrados* of rye, 2 rams, 2 kids (goat juveniles) and 6 *cuartillos* of lard (all valued in 23 pesetas of the time). After paying 6,049 pesetas, Frojám finally belonged to its commoners, including the then over 100 hectares of common lands. The joy did not last long as in 1930 the State Forestry Services issued a notice declaring all common lands of the municipality as “Public Utility Forests”, i.e., exclusive property of the State.

The consequences were soon to follow. The Western portion of the Commons is split between two mining companies extracting tin and tungsten ores that fuelled the rearmament of Europe leading to the Second World War. Extensive operations transformed the whole area into a lunar landscape of pits and shafts, producing acid mine drainage that devastated river life. Mining operations came to a standstill in 1990 and it was left to the Frojám commons community to carry out restoration work, filling up pits and shafts and reforesting the area.

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<sup>8</sup> The “Avelán Mill” of Frojám already appears in a 1565 document (*Arquivo Histórico Universitario de Santiago*, Protocolos, N- 50, N.º 41) and remained in operation until the 1930s, when it was replaced by a new mill called “New Mill” or “Ínsua Mill”.

## Land Registry Maps over 1950s aerial photography



Source: Arquivo do Reino da Galiza

The Eastern portion of the commons was taken over by the the State Forestry Services in November 1940 as “*Patrimonio Forestal del Estado*” and forcibly reforested following industrial forestry practices from 1947 onwards. Commoners were forbidden to take the village sheep flock and feral horses (“*bestas*”) to the newly planted areas, effectively ending thousands of years of traditional communal silvopastoralist practices—in 2017 a 5 hectare stone enclosure to keep cattle dating back to the Early Middle Ages was identified by archaeologists in Frojám. Heavy fines were imposed by forest officers due to continuous breaches of prohibitions by villagers that even had to pay the State to allow them to build their own fresh water supply from a spring in the usurped common lands. As a resistance strategy, certain areas of common land were enclosed by villagers pretending it was individual private property in an attempt to keep the State away.

On April 14, 1975, seven months before the death of Francisco Franco, the heads of all the houses of Frojám signed a petition to the Civil Governor of the Province of Corunha requesting that the common lands usurped by the State be returned under the provisions of Law 52/1968. This petition and similar ones from neighbouring villages infuriate the Municipality—that formally holds the legal property of usurped lands on behalf of the State. On June 21, 1977, the whole municipal council approves a motion to be sent to the Civil Governor expressing that returning the commons to the villages is “very harmful in economic terms and extremely dangerous in social and political terms” and asking “Why should they now be returned and their dividends distributed among the villagers?”—later on described as “poor and ignorant people”. “The devolution of the property of these lands to the villagers will find them without organization, capacity, or experience, many egoisms and passions; the resources, prestige [sic!], and authority of the Local Council cannot be improvised by such village communities, and without such resources the administration [of the commons] will prove catastrophic”.

In spite of municipal resistance, the Frojám Commons is formally recognized as being collectively owned by the village on March 4, 1977, but direct control would take years to be achieved. Mining operations continued until 1990 and even after closure mine directors threatened to cut down trees planted over former mining grounds (“You plant them, but we’ll see who fells them”, as commoners

recall). The 1940 State Forestry “*Consortio*” contract was replaced in 1995 by a formally consensual agreement with the Galizan Forestry Services, repealed on May 8, 2002. Full control did not prove catastrophic as the municipal council foretold in 1977. But commoners regained control in 2002 of a land very different from the one usurped from their grandparents in the 1930s. Communal pastures were now forested with exotic Monterrey pine and Eucalyptus, both highly pyrophyte species that bring fear of forest fires every dry season. Old growth native forests were reduced to a few dispersed threes and their memory in the names of the land (microtoponymy): “*Devesa*” (forest), “*Carvalhal*” (oak forest), “*Castinheiros*” (chestnut trees), “*Carvalhinhos*” (small oaks), etc.

#### **4 “An oak forest lies under the Eucalyptus”**

Gazing on a clear day from the top of the Frojám Commons range, at mount Gironha, the view is impressive, stretching out to the Cies and Ons islands to the South and the “Costa da Morte” to the North. Most of what is in sight looking at the Barbança peninsula is common land managed by hundreds of small communities. In fact, in most of the surrounding municipalities approximately half of the territory is commons (i.e, Porto Doçom, 54%; Boiro, 48%; Lousame, 45%; Muros, 42%; Dodro, 41%; Rianxo 39%; ...). But if we stare closely at the different shades of green, the landscape appears to be dominated by Eucalyptus forest monocultures. Many of these are forestry plantations, but an increasing percentage is attributed to uncontrolled expansion after successive waves of forest fires. This exotic pyrophyte species, introduced to feed the industrial cellulose pulp mills, now dominates much of the Galizan landscape expanding over 725.000 hectares and being a key driver for waves after wave of fires. It has also become a symbol of the environmental and spiritual destruction of Galiza by capitalist modernity, both in terms of biodiversity and indigenous rural socio-cultural practices, crippling collective imagination in terms of alternatives. Eucalyptus is a visible outcropping of half a century of a colonial extractivist economy that ignores the social and environmental effects of depriving a land of its traditional carers and taking away carers from the land.

At a closer look, under the canopy, the effects of this species are evident, with layers of fallen bark turning the soil infertile for other forms of life (Becerra et al., 2018). But walking through patches of Eucalyptus trees in Frojám one cannot avoid spotting native oak species (*Quercus robur*, *Q. pyrenaica* and *Q. suber*) that struggle to survive, seeking to reclaim their territory. Commoners in Frojám realized that if logging was done carefully and selectively, instead of the usual clear cutting, Eucalyptus trees could be felled while keeping most of the small native trees in the understory intact. And that if Eucalyptus sprouts were repeatedly trimmed from stumps, the trees would eventually dry out or rot by fungi attack, leaving way for a thriving oak forest that helps to retain water on the ground, provides refuge to an immense biodiversity of creatures and opens up new opportunities for multifunctional use by commoners and society. During the second half of 2017 this forest succession based approach was applied in Frojám in 5 hectares of land, including riparian areas with high ecological value, with notable success.

Forest succession based ecosystem restoration in Frojám (Eucalyptus [above], Monterrey pine [below])



But the idea of the Frojám commoners that “*Sob o eucalíptal está a carvalheira*” (“an oak forest lies under the Eucalyptus”) is also a metaphor of community reawakening to the land and an ancestral relation that was interrupted by State usurpation and State-sanctioned degradation during most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is also a strategy that connects the struggle of small villages like Frojám with the wider society, much of which feels outraged with the environmental and social destruction of rural Galiza. If the Eucalyptus has become a symbol for such destruction, the Oak is its antagonist. And just as Murguía explained how ancestral oaks provided shelter for communal outdoor assemblies, oaks have again become a meeting point for those seeking to articulate emancipatory resistance in rural Galiza. It remains to be seen if those igniting fires such as the one set in Frojám on May 1, 2016 are outmanoeuvred by those who are restoring fire resistant native forests. Extractivist corporations have a veiled interest in ‘liberating’ rural Galiza from its native population, which is often the sole obstacle preventing their projects from having the smooth development promised to investors. “*Galicia es una mina*” (“Galiza is a mine”) was the slogan of a governmental PR campaign to attract destructive mining prospectors under promise of a “friendly” administration and “relaxed” regulations.

The Spanish 1973 Law for Mining dates back to the dictatorship period and enshrines the “right” of usurpation. The subsoil belongs to the State and the State, if asked to do so by corporations, can forcibly evict communities from the land above the subsoil to extract the so-called “resource”. Ancestral rights or “Free, Prior and Informed Consent” are irrelevant. Forced eviction for “public interest” purposes is not restricted to mines, but has been repeatedly used in Galiza to deprive communities of their lands allowing electric power corporations to erect dams and wind farms, and investment funds to build shopping malls. The same regulations prohibit communities from installing microhydro facilities for electric self-sufficiency (even operating the 1565 Frojám water mill would today be illegal) or accessing wind farm concessions. While the three wind turbines installed in the Gironha range under threat of forced expropriation generate an annual income of over a million euros, the Community receives an annual compensation under 8,000. Manorial ties may have broken in 1928, but the subsequent submission to the State has almost extinguished community sovereignty.

Corporations and government alike are aware that small, aging, economically deprived populations present very little or no resistance, while local caciques political power-brokers pave the way for social contempt. The history of Galizan emancipatory rural politics is a history of rhizomatic networks that enabled dispersed and geographically isolated communities to work as a whole in the face of a political antagonist. Keeping communities socially isolated and unconnected to each other and the wider society while fostering internal conflict and conflict among neighbouring communities has been a prime strategy to minimize social contestation. And so, the green Eucalyptus monocultures, open mine pits and landfills take over the land that was once a mosaic of shifting seasonal tones and shades. When the last flames of the May 2016 fire in Frojám were put out, a decision needed to be made: contempt or contestation.

## 5 “To change mountains we must first change the minds”

On January 20, 2018, the view from mount Gironha looking at Frojám’s Eastern boundary is no longer that of a burnt land full of Eucalyptus sprouts. Hundreds of volunteers with hoes and spades fill the landscape with holes bearing oak trees and other native specimens that will grow into a dense temperate broad-leaf forest. They come from all walks of life: fifty 3 to 6 year olds with sixty of their parents, from a nearby city; a women’s rugby team from another city, 145 km away; a dozen environmental activists from an environmental NGO; and the list goes on. Most of them donated in a flash crowd-funding campaign that gathered over 10,000 euros in just two weeks from more than 300 benefactors. The campaign sought to replace areas dominated by Eucalyptus in the Frojám Commons with native trees, but also—perhaps more importantly—to create a place for people to assemble and work together.

The main perceived obstacle of small rural communities facing large, sometimes multinational, corporations is “it’s only us against them”. The feeling of impotence and fear of reprisals is often paralyzing. By choosing contestation immediately after the May 2016 fire, Frojám sought to reconnect and rebuild the rhizome. Several strategies were followed under the guiding vision of “broadening the circle of concern”. Towards late 2016 the idea of opening the commons to schools and families from around the area was raised, seeking to engage children and their parents with how Galizan communities feel and relate to their land. The interruption of intergenerational continuity in the land stewardship relation of common land communities is as threatening as dispossession, and eventually leads to the factual extinguishment of communities. In March 2017 the first two schools (approximately 150 people) initiated the “Montescola”<sup>9</sup> programme in Frojám, restoring an area previously degraded by Acacia and Eucalyptus trees and mining shafts. Each child and his or her parents planted a tree and were provided with a map indicating its precise whereabouts, so that it can be easily located in future visits. Children and their families returned in January 2018 to tender their trees and suppress Acacia and Eucalyptus sprouts while proudly wearing a badge with the phrase “*Levo no coração uma árvore*” (“I have a tree in my heart”). Most of them knew the location of their tree by heart, and also related it with the trees of other children around it. Several children had already left the school after completing the last year, but still returned with their parents to keep the connection with the trees, the land and their friends.

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<sup>9</sup> “*Montescola*” is a made-up word uniting “*monte*” (mountain, but also forested and pastoral lands in general) and “*escola*” (school). The chosen designation also resonated with the well-known “Montessori” educational approach, that also emphasized child-nature interaction.

## The first “Montescola” action in March 2016



Source: Semente Compostela

Also in March 2017, Frojám had other visitors from around the world. The international *Yes to Life No to Mining* network was interested in visiting communities in conflict with encroaching mining operations, and delegates from Australia, Finland, Philippines, New Zealand, Nigeria, Colombia and the UK exchanged views and facilitated a discussion among a dozen groups in the Lousame area. As in the traditional Hawaiian *ahupua'a* mountain-to-sea ecosystems, a sense emerged that a watershed rhizome needed to be nurtured, from the headwater forests as Frojám to the beaches and mussel gathering sand banks in the estuary. The circle of concern had already widened significantly, exercising pressure and support.

“*Para mudar os montes há que mudar primeiro as mentes*” (“to change mountains we must first change minds”) is a statement by one of the villagers in Frojám that is full of meaning. The “re-education” of society in the quest for contempt and collaboration was one of the crucial battles of the Francoist regime that emerged out of the 1936-39 Civil War aiming at the political infantilization and political sterilization of communities that had struggled for centuries and that had learnt to organize replicating the innovations of trade unions and other social organizations. The success of developmentalism and extractivism were dependent on the rupture of traditional dynamics of autarchy and solidarity: to spare the rod is to spoil the child. In this sense, Eucalyptus monocultures are also a silent outcropping of decades of cultural conditioning to shift intergenerational solidarity and land stewardship for quick cash gains. Not only did State Forestry Engineers direct the plantation of thousands of hectares of usurped forest lands with this species, but also struggled to cram the eucalyptus=progress association into rural mentality—in parallel to its oak=backwardness counterpart. The same can be applied to the radical transformations of agriculture through the forced introduction of agrochemicals and industrialized processes that created critical dependencies and impoverished the land; or to the proliferation of dams and mines destroying rivers, valleys, mountains and whole communities, that literally disappeared from maps.

Such transformations were instrumental for the advancement of the State and to make up for the tardiness of Galiza’s accession into capitalist modernity. In 1889 the chief mining engineer for the Government’s Mining District of Ourense and Ponte Vedra, Mr. Antonio Eleicegui, complained on the inability of the State to confront natives in their opposition to a British mining prospector: “although

the Civil Governor has addressed the complaints [of the prospector], the truth is the indigenous people are able to foil the mandates of authority” [note the term “*indígenas*” is used in the original Spanish *Estadística Minera* publication]. Two years later the peoples of Carbia set fire to the house of the British miner initiating a campaign of harassment that would continue until 1906, when the roof of his house was blown up—ironically—with dynamite. Popular resistance to this specific mine motivated the first known environmental legal suit in Galiza over river pollution and ecological damage in 1914.

In one of the first known appearances of Frojám in the modern press, a small notice in the May 21, 1901 issue of *La Correspondencia Gallega* indicates that “The majority of the peoples of the villages of Frojám, Silva Redonda and Vilas, in the district of Lousame, are opposed to the water concession requested by Mr. Henry Winter Burburi to use the waters of the Frojám and Silva streams”. Mr. Burbury is of course the same mining prospector that the chief mining engineer referred to in 1889 and the mining concessions granted to him in the Frojám Commons in 1884 are today still in force and under exploitation by a large Spanish corporation. However, over a century of uneasy relations were in the verge of oblivion while new generations become deprived of the collective experience gained through centuries of struggle. In July, every summer and since 2016, people get together in Frojám to remember, retell and share stories of a history which is not in the books but that is crucial to read the present and to write the pages of the future.

Just weeks after the May 2016 fire in Frojám, the Galizan Director General of Mines and Energy was questioned in Parliament regarding common land seizures by mining operations. The *Partido Popular* politician (and creator of the “*Galicia es una mina*” slogan) issued a clear warning, stating that in the face of land claims, mining operators had the “right” to demand as much land as they needed and the State had mechanisms in place to assure forced expropriation. Although there are theoretical limits to conflicting “public interests” (private destructive project vs. biodiversity, cultural heritage, ecosystem services, etc.) the former frequently prevails. Only the State can determine what is to be protected and what can be destroyed and Galizan commons are frequently targeted candidates for destruction and degradation. To turn around this situation, Frojám reaffirmed itself in its right not be destroyed or degraded by pursuing recognition as an Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCA) and to be included in the World Database on Protected Areas (WDPA). Although these incipient instruments are currently non-binding in legal terms, they strengthen and support the position of the Community and its social perception.

The Frojám Commons also joined other groups in developing a concept proposal for a Center for Sustainability Skills that was submitted to the United Nations University in 2017 and that is currently under review. With this proposal and the already existing “Nature Classroom” that houses the *Montescola* educational initiative, Frojám seeks to reclaim its right to generate and convey knowledge in a self-managed and emancipatory approach that reaffirms its own educational institutions of the past (“*escolas de ferrado*”). Compulsory State education and its private counterparts have been increasingly questioned by wider segments of society as a continuing instrument to spread cultural uniformity and contempt. Self-managed initiatives such as the Galizan *Semente* schools—that have been actively engaged in Frojám’s *Montescola* project—and rural homeschooling or unschooling family-based alternatives were collective solutions are not yet viable, illustrate how communities are determined to ending the continuing cycles of infantilization that perpetuate the logics of capitalist modernity and authoritarian populism in Galizan society.

## **6 “If you don’t like Eucalyptus being set on fire in the forests, burn them in your fireplace”**

In June 13, 2015 the municipality of Lousame held its constitutive session after the May local elections. Among the newly elected members was a 30 year-old woman from Frojám, who refused to sit with the other 10 councillors in an elevated podium, arguing she was no more important than any of her fellow neighbours. She refused to swear allegiance to King and Constitution—swearing allegiance to the communities of Lousame instead—and also for the first time refused to earn any wage in serving as councillor. Her political platform had run on a libertarian municipalist agenda defending

community sovereignty and won over 12% of the vote.<sup>10</sup> However, when asked what they hoped to achieve, she responded: “the most important actions that strive for self-governance and self-sufficiency can be done from outside the council”. And indeed, emancipatory politics in Galiza are today not cloistered into the closed chambers of State institutions but springing up in the openness of common lands.

Far away from Galiza, in India, Gandhi had labelled the socio-political structure that would support his envisioned society as “Village Republic” or “Village *Swaraj*” following the traditional *Panchayat* local government (see Gandhi, 1962). Gandhi’s definition of *Swaraj*, self-government, involves a “continuous effort to be independent of government control, whether it is foreign government or whether it is national” as no government should take care of the regulation of every-day life (1988 [1925], vol. 32: 258). This is something most Galizan communities learnt after the so-called “manorial redemption” when they ceased to have a lord just to have their previous lords replaced by the State. Following Gandhi, in the face of renewed State authoritarianism: “Independence must begin at the bottom. Thus, every village will be a republic or *panchayat* having full powers. It follows, therefore, that every village has to be self-sustained and capable of managing its affairs even to the extent of defending itself against the whole world” (1998 [1946], vol. 91: 325). Emphasis on the rural village as a platform for emancipation is not based on an idealistic representation of communitarian existence, but on a deep understanding of the extractivist logics of capitalist modernity.

Gandhi argued that two divergent schools of thought challenged each other to move the world in opposing directions: that of the rural village, based on handicrafts, and that of cities, dependent on machinery, industrialization and war (1998 [1944], vol. 85: 233). Gandhi considered modern cities an “excrescence” with the sole purpose of “draining the life-blood of the villages”, being “a constant menace to the life and liberty of the villagers” (1998 [1927], vol. 38: 210). As Thoreau and Tolstoy marked Gandhi’s vision of politics, his correspondence with Edward Carpenter, author of *Civilisation, Its Cause and Cure* (1921), influenced the opposition established by Gandhi between *Satyagraha* and industrial civilization, understood as a “malady which needed a cure”. Industrialism, developmentalism and extractivism are based on the “capacity to exploit” and the “cure” for such maladies is to “become truly village-minded” (1998 [1946], vol. 91: 390): “The blood of the villages is the cement with which the edifice of the cities is built” (1998 [1946], vol. 91: 56-57). When in Frojám focused in “changing the minds”, perhaps Gandhi’s emancipatory prescription was being followed.

We currently confront some of the most complex problems that we have faced as a species. With the confluence of peak oil (also applicable to coal, gas, phosphorus and other crucial resources for the industrial society), climate change, economic instability, and a global population of 7,6 billion, the magic wand of capitalist modernity has again turned to enhanced extractivism over the “blood of the villages”. Civil society efforts, such as the Transition Towns, Degrowth, Permaculture, or Integral Revolution movements, have called for the need to radically shift the way we relate to the environment and fellow humans. Current emerging forms of intentional rural communities can be illustrative of future arrangements. But besides these predominantly urban movements (or at least originating in urban areas), Galizan common land communities illustrate a different kind of reawakening by rural collectives that no longer replicate the fads of the cities but instead reengage in the politically significant roots, histories and forms of governance and self-management of their own emancipatory past.

When confronting political, social and economics dynamics—be it direct political control from distant municipal, provincial, regional or state capitals; rural depopulation and demographic desertification; or control of economic resources by multinational corporations digging for gold, copper, tin or tungsten—emancipatory rural movements in Galiza have also come to see today’s cities as part of the problem. In a recent occasion a dweller of Compostela’s suburbia visited Frojám. When complaining of the ubiquity of Eucalyptus in the vicinity, the rarity of old growth oaks, and the responsibility of rural communities for the continuous forest fires, he was asked by a villager what kind of wood he

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<sup>10</sup> See <<http://new-compass.net/articles/sitting-public>>.

burned in his fireplace. After a moment of doubt—and perhaps self-inquiry on the traceability of the neatly packed pallets of logs—he responded “oak”. The villager concluded: “If you don’t like Eucalyptus being set on fire in the forests, burn them in your fireplace and leave the oak trees for your grandchildren”.

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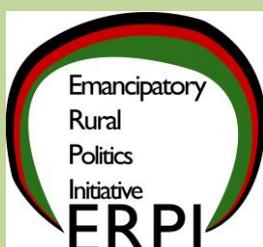
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The Hague, Netherlands

## About the Author(s)

**Joám Evans Pim** is a smallholder living with his family in Lousame, Galiza (Spanish state). He is also an activist in political, environmental, cultural and human rights issues, particularly focused on revigorating rural direct assembly democracy, defending and restoring Common Lands, and confronting destructive mining and other environmentally degrading projects. He is member of the Advisory Council of the Transnational Institute of Social Ecology and a doctoral candidate in Social Sciences at Åbo Akademi University (Finland), where he seasonally lectures on civil disobedience and nonviolent action at the Master's Programme on Peace, Mediation and Conflict Research.



**The Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI)** is a new initiative focused on understanding the contemporary moment and building alternatives. New exclusionary politics are generating deepening inequalities, jobless 'growth', climate chaos, and social division. The ERPI is focused on the social and political processes in rural spaces that are generating alternatives to regressive, authoritarian politics. We aim to provoke debate and action among scholars, activists, practitioners and policymakers from across the world that are concerned about the current situation, and hopeful about alternatives.

For more information see: <http://www.iss.nl/erpi>  
or email: [emancipatoryruralpolitics@gmail.com](mailto:emancipatoryruralpolitics@gmail.com)