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Claiming the commons' value in the context of de-valuation, and the ambivalent role of the state in recognizing it (ethnographic case study from Austria)

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Abstract

About 60% of seasonal alpine pastures in Austria are not privately owned but collective property. Pasture grounds may be owned by communes, that is by public entities, by peasant collectives, or by third parties on whose land farmsteads hold use-rights. The differences between these formalizations come to bear in the context of common pastures' structural de-valuation during the last decades: prices for milk, meat, and wool have dropped; dependency on locally monopolistic dairies has increased; the costs for creamery infrastructure, hygiene testing, and labor costs have risen dramatically. In cases of communal property in alpine commons, public money is spent to fill the widening gap between in-puts and revenue. In cases of peasant co-ownership or use-rights the gap puts more and more pressure on commoners. In order to counter this pressure, commoner groups across Austria have started to claim public spending on a voluntary basis, making explicit the value they are adding to the landscape. On the one hand pastoral use is landscape maintenance for the tourism sector. On the other, it is also the maintenance of more diverse environments (and thus of biodiversity) and of local food supply from well-adapted land-use. In times of climate and biodiversity crises collectives have started to explicitly position themselves as needed alternative to biodiversity loss causing, carbon emitting, industrial food production and land use. While state institutions are the addressees of claims for support – and the donors of funds and subsidies – they also play an ambivalent role in recognizing and backing the commons' contribution to environmental resilience, as nature conservation legislation (including the management of predator species) threatens to restrict the very land-use that commoners' stress to be biodiversity enhancing. This ambivalent role of state recognition of the commons and their role vis-à-vis environmental crises is what my presentation explores in more depth.



Lisa Francesca Rail is currently researching seasonal pasture commons in the Austrian Alps as part of her PhD project at the University of Vienna. Prior to this, during her graduate studies at McGill University, she conducted research on collective pasture use and management in Northern Kyrgyzstan.

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