



Writing the commons to support
citizen struggles in South East Europe

Interview with Tomislav Tomašević
and the Institute for Political Ecology
of Zagreb

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Résumé

Tomislav Tomašević et l'Institut d'écologie politique (IPE) de Zagreb ont entrepris de réaliser un premier inventaire et une mise en narration des expériences de communs dans l'espace territorial de l'ancienne Yougoslavie, publiés en 2018 sous le titre *Commons in South East Europe* (SEE). Parmi les forces de cet ouvrage se trouvent une approche résolument critique des définitions « classiques » des communs héritées de Elinor Ostrom, entre autres, ainsi qu'une mise en perspective historique riche d'enseignements sur l'expérimentation d'une « propriété sociale » et d'autres pratiques de communs dans la Yougoslavie socialiste. Tomislav Tomašević, lui-même porte-parole d'un mouvement citoyen municipaliste nommé « Zagreb est à nous ! », mobilise les narrations produites dans le cadre de ses recherches pour légitimer les luttes politiques citoyennes en faveur des communs, de la préservation écologique et de la démocratie économique. Il explique, dans cet entretien, ce qui se joue entre la mise en mots des expériences de communs dans cette région et le renouveau des batailles politiques en faveur d'une réappropriation des espaces, des services et des politiques publics.

Abstract

Tomislav Tomašević and the Institute for Political Ecology (IPE) of Zagreb undertook the first inventory of Commons initiatives on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, coupled with the formulation of a narrative arising from these different experiences. This work was published in 2018 as a book entitled *Commons in South East Europe* (SEE). The strengths of the book are to be found in the resolutely critical approach to the “classical” definitions of the commons inherited from, among others, Elinor Ostrom, and in the historical perspective providing valuable knowledge about the experiments of “social property” and other practices of the commons in socialist Yugoslavia. Tomislav Tomašević, representative of the municipalist citizen movement named “Zagreb is Ours !”, mobilizes the narrative produced by his research as a tool to legitimate the political struggle led by citizens in favor of the commons, ecological conservation and economic democracy. In this interview, Tomašević explains the dynamics between the “formulation” of the commons experiences in the region and the revival of political struggles supporting the re-appropriation of spaces, services and public policies.

Mot-clés : Communs, Yougoslavie, Mémoire, Balkans, Socialisme, Luttés sociales, Services publics, Dominations, Émancipation, Ostrom

Keywords: Commons, Yugoslavia, Memory, Balkans, Socialism, Social struggles, Public services, Dominations, Emancipation, Ostrom

Contents

Author's note	5
Cultural dominations and solidarity in the Commons	6
Interview realised in September 2018	7
The commons in South-East Europe : who, where and what for ?	7
Commons as resources... or not	10
Embracing political battles for social justice with a commons' discourse	13
An economic democracy at stake	15
Bibliography	18

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Author's note

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The strengths of the book are to be found in the resolutely critical approach to the “classical” definitions of the commons inherited from, among others, Elinor Ostrom, and in the historical perspective providing valuable knowledge about the experiments of “social property” and other practices of the commons in socialist Yugoslavia. Tomislav Tomašević, representative of the municipalist citizen movement named “Zagreb is Ours !”, mobilizes the narrative produced by his research as a tool to legitimate the political struggle led by citizens in favor of the commons, ecological conservation and economic democracy.

In this interview, Tomašević explains the dynamics between the “formulation” of the commons experiences in the region and the revival of political struggles supporting the re-appropriation of spaces, services and public policies.

I met Tomislav Tomašević in Zagreb, in the context of organizing the Green Academy, a summer school bringing together movements from the green left in the Balkans. I found it important to share with the francophone public

these words and this singular experiment of the commons experienced in the former Yugoslavia.

Collective and social property of public spaces and industrial and natural production was legal and widespread in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, governed by Josip Broz Tito from 1945 to 1981 and dismantled during the dramatic civil wars in the 1990s. Intimately linked to this political past, the commons in South East Europe remain today a symbol of a distinctive ideological identity, deeply anchored in emancipatory and anti-nationalist thought. This symbol became a political marker of the struggle for social, environmental and spatial justice against the irresistible forces of privatization and the austerity policies induced by the “transition towards liberalism”. Indeed, precarious living conditions generate political claims that are substantially out of step with the existing institutions, which foreclose public decisions and refuse changes induced by social groups.

Cultural dominations and solidarity in the Commons

Whoever visits the European semi-periphery knows the debate about the legitimacy of knowledge and about the recognition of the region’s history. Commons fall within a latent, historical tension present among the European leftist parties, which consists of the application of Western vocabulary on practices experienced for a very long time in Europe and especially in the Eastern part of the continent. While this article does not aim to claim the origin of an emancipatory policy, it seems nevertheless relevant to re-embed some parts of the social history of the Commons in collective knowledge. This approach can help identify the recent experiences and the large-scale legal and territorial experimentations carried out in cultural spaces generally experiencing little impregnation of the “at all cost” liberalism from the Anglo-Saxon world.

Indeed, it is politically rich and necessary to take into account a plurality of experiences and discourses in order to assert the legitimacy of the Commons paradigm.

Municipalist experiences in Serbia and Croatia suffer from low international exposure, even though they have been destabilizing the political landscapes in the capitals Belgrade and Zagreb. This weakens the political struggles

and makes the risks faced by the leaders of these mobilizations invisible. It thus seems essential to link the different commons initiatives and projects in favor of municipalism in Europe and in the world as a means of asserting international solidarity and strategically strengthening mobilization capacities, media exposure and political analyses of concrete experiences.

Interview realised in September 2018

The commons in South-East Europe : who, where and what for ?

Valentine – How did the project *Commons in South East Europe* that you coordinated (published in 2018 as a book) start ? How was it prepared, by and with whom ?

Tomislav – We started to think about it a few years ago at the Zagreb-based Institute for Political Ecology, a think-tank working on environmental and social justice. There, we try to build bridges between academics and activists, especially in Croatia but also in South-East Europe. We wanted to propose a book about the commons that would investigate the different theories existing today, while applying the theoretical frameworks that - we think - is the most useful to Croatia and SEE. At the same time, we wanted to do research on the commons' governance and practices in SEE. We therefore wished to describe and analyse different examples, and identify the struggles and social movements which use the commons' discourse in their fight for resources.

Last but not least, we aimed to communicate with this book with the SEE audience, composed of critical researchers and activists, about the commons' theories and perspectives. At the same time, we had the ambition to communicate with an international public, located outside of the SEE region, about what is happening here regarding the commons. Based on different experiences in international conferences on the commons for example, in Europe and outside of Europe, we realized that most of the people do not know much about this region in the Balkans peninsula. Therefore, our purpose was to show that there are initiatives and practices that exist on the commons, whereas researchers work in the region on this topic.

We started this project with IPE, in cooperation with the Henrich Böll Foundation (HBF), considering that this would be a useful book for different initiatives with whom they are cooperating in the SEE region. We initially wanted to work on Croatia, however we soon decided with the HBF office in Sarajevo to include also cases from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia. We decided that this would be the first phase, and that a second phase would cover the other countries of former-Yugoslavia, namely Slovenia, Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo. During a third phase, we also planned to cover Albania. For this purpose, we developed a network of researchers who work on the commons in the region.

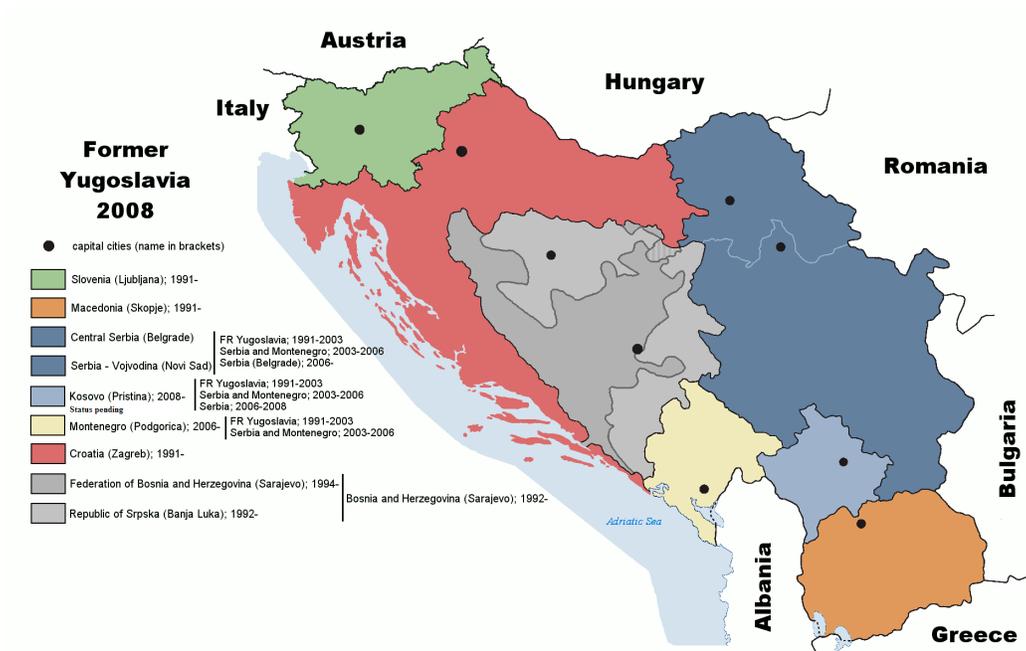


Figure 1: Former Yugoslavia 2008

V. – Did this network already exist before the project ?

T. – Yes, to some extent. The network evolved during the project. In the beginning, we had a couple of researchers in mind, including some of them who finally did not write the book, and some others who joined us later. We met and worked with all these people before, but some of them were not researching specifically on the commons. Some of them are specialized in this topic, such as Alma Midžić from Bosnia-Herzegovina, but others represent

rather the activist side of the commons. Miodra Dakić is for instance leading the social movements in Banja Luka (Bosnia-Herzegovina) and uses the commons' discourse. This is the same case with Ivana Dragšić from Macedonia, who was an activist on the commons in the first place and who became later a researcher. The other people who did not participate directly in the research are quoted in the acknowledgments of the book.

V. – What was the aim of the book ?

T. – First of all, we wanted to do a book with a theoretical part that could be used as a manual. It thus had to be easy to read and to understand, even for someone who does not know much about the commons' theory, in order to address a large audience of activists in South Eastern Europe. Second, we wanted to dedicate a part about the region, in order to impel a mere import or a download of a concept of the “commons”, which comes from the West. Otherwise, it would mean that there is no rich history of the commons and community self-management in the region ! Therefore, we wanted to see how this Western concept applies to the theoretical and practical background of the commons in the region. It also led us to reflect on which commons-related theoretical framework is the most useful for the struggles located here.

That is also why we use Ugo Mattei's theory for cases of commons' struggles, to show that the commons are not only an institutional design but also a very political tool against privatization and nationalization. This tool is created via political acts that claim that some resources should be used and managed in common.

V. – How is the book organized ?

T. – The idea from IPE and HBF Sarajevo was a book with a theoretical part, that first presents theories of the State and theories of the market. Then, it provides a theoretical framework on the classical commons' theory, derived from classical economic, legal and political theories. The next part bases on more critical theories of the commons, derived from critical social sciences that aim to transform society towards more emancipatory and less exploitative forms of living.

After the theoretical part, the book focuses on a historical presentation of the commons, with the etymological origin of the word “commons”. It thereafter aims to apply the concept to the SEE context, highlighting the history of the commons and the community experiences in SEE since the Ancient times. It

paves the way to the most important historical development of the commons until today : the experience of self-governance and the socialist regime of Yugoslavia after the Second World War until the 1990s. This period crucially shaped and influenced to a great extent the negative, as well as the positive discourses on the commons in the region nowadays. A short history of the last fifteen years in the region regarding the commons' struggles and initiatives follows, including those of Serbia, Slovenia, Bosnia, Montenegro and Kosovo as former-Yugoslavia.

Following the first two parts of the book that I wrote, the third part is an analysis of the commons' governance practices in Croatia, Bosnia and Macedonia, written by different authors, namely Vedran Horvat, Alma Midžić and Miodra Dakić. The fourth part of the book covers different examples of local claims for commons and is drafted by Vedran Horvat, Alma Midžić and Ivana Dragšić. We used two concepts of the commons to frame these cases' analyses : one is more related to governance, mostly based on the theoretical framework of Elinor Ostrom ; and the second one is related to the work of Ugo Mattei, in which commons are framed as acts of political struggles. In this case, it means claiming resources in common, fighting against privatization on the one hand and nationalization on the other hand.

Commons as resources... or not

V. – I was surprised by the critical perspective adopted towards Ostrom's work, which is less tackled or critically considered in France. Is it a common attitude regarding the commons' classical framework in the SEE region ?

T. – What I wrote in the theoretical part is indeed broadly shared by IPE researchers and other commons' scholars that we collaborate with closely, like Danijela Dolenc. We share the same appreciation of Ostrom's work as a real and comprehensive "social theory", which is not often the case in the other authors' work. Moreover, she provided an important criticism of Hardin's theory (1968) and she was very empirical in her critique.

Before, Hardin's work was used as a justification for many privatizations - especially of natural resources - but also for nationalization measures imposed on self-management practices. These practices were back then considered as very old fashion and archaic. As a result, Hardin's "tragedy of the com-

mons” participated actively in destroying these practices via over-regulation or nationalization. In other words, it was a capture of these resources by the governing elite against the communities that have been governing them successfully since centuries.

She very successfully managed to destroy this myth, and for this reason, we are really grateful for her work. She also managed to bring the commons’ discourse and theory in more mainstream debates, within the scientific and political spheres. Winning the 2009 Nobel Award in economics was especially important, because it was at the very moment of the financial and economic crisis of 2008. At that time many questions were raised, and alternative paradigms were investigated to go beyond the tragedy of the State and the tragedy of the market. The concept of the failure of the State was particularly accurate during the Copenhagen Climate summit in 2010, and in the aftermath of the economic and financial crisis – the biggest since the Great Depression in the 1930s. Therefore, her commons’ theory showed the possibility of a new governance regime, embracing critical theories of the State and the market, and bringing it to the mainstream.

However, we are also very aware of the limits of her theoretical framework, which is mainly focused on the micro-level of social contexts. Her theory is thus completely social structures and limitations, whereas regarding these topics, other social theories are more relevant. Ostrom’s work is to some extent apolitical, as it mobilizes mainly an institutionalist ontology and derives from neoclassical economic and political science. This is problematic for any social theory that wishes to promote progressive thinking. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to think that she was just a continuation of the Public Choice theory or other neoclassical theoretical frameworks, because she developed something new. Of course, she adopts a quite individualistic approach based on the rational choice of the actors. She is however not a real rational choice theorist, but rather a methodological individualist. As a result, it is far more complex than a black and white story, which I often find in the commons’ literature : Ostrom is either depicted as a problematic theorist, or as the only valuable commons’ theorist. The truth lies somewhere in the middle.

V. – About the cases studied in the book, were they already famous and analyzed before ?

T. – It depends on the cases. Regarding governance’s cases, some of them had already written narratives like the pasturing community Eko-Gajna [p. 76] in Eastern Croatia. There are texts about it, because it is an emblematic and famous commons’ case of self-management of natural resources and pasture. Indeed, it is a direct response to Garret Hardin, who talked about the pastures, and the new commons’ theory is based on imagining the pastures’ self-governance. It is an empirical evidence that there is a commons’ governance of this pasture and that there is no tragedy about it. This case, however, was not analyzed and described before in the way we did it, meaning : what are its institutions, community and resources.

Some cases were completely new, as the one of Luke water supply system [p. 95] in Bosnia-Herzegovina. This case was never analysed before, nothing had been written about it and no texts had been published. Even many people in the region don’t know that there are so many cases of water infrastructures and water pipes being managed as commons - without the State and the market. This applies both to Bosnia and Croatia. In Croatia, there are around 80 000 people who get water services through self-management practices, and people don’t know about it.

Regarding cases of struggles, I would say that all of these cases are already known because they embody public fights. However, they were never analysed in this way, with a direct commons’ approach. That is why we have chosen these examples, to figure out whether or not there were continuous uses of the words “commons”, “our”, “common goods” in these struggles. They actually use the words and terminology, even in some cases when they are not aware of the existing commons’ theory and literature.

V. – The book was therefore an occasion to identify usages of these terms, and bring them in a larger conceptual frame.

T. – Exactly, we wanted to show that even though these struggles might seem very disconnected, they are actually connected, similar and use the same language. Not only the language of fights for social justice in SEE but also the exact same language that is used by similar struggles in the whole world. That is why we consider the concept of commons as clearly useful for social transformation ; we do not work on commons only for intellectual purposes, rather because we think that this is a useful concept to unite different struggles, and to experiment different governance institutions.

Embracing political battles for social justice with a commons' discourse

V. – You are personally involved in “Zagreb je Naš !” (“Zagreb is Ours !”¹), a green-left municipalist platform formed in 2017 in Zagreb. On that same year, you have personally been elected as a representative in the parliament of the municipality of Zagreb. Do you happen to use these studies and findings on commons’ cases in the region to nourish your political speeches in the City Parliament, on the streets and in your general political claim of democracy ? Do you mobilize these researches in your political engagement ?

T. – Well, I must say that one fight for the commons described in the book as the “struggle for Varšavska” [p. 117], which aimed at defending Varšavska street in Zagreb as a common space, was quite important for the formation of “Zagreb Is Ours !” as a municipalist platform. It is probably the most important social struggle of this type, both for the commons’ discourse to expand in Croatia but also for the formation of a municipalist discourse. For us, Municipalism is connected with the commons’ discourse and theory ; there are many similarities.

Commons and Municipalism are indeed interrelated because both talk about the local level as the most important scale for fostering political engagement and decision-making of people. Commons need trust among people, and trust is something you can usually only get on a physical or interface level, with a limited amount of people.

In “Zagreb je Naš !”, even the name “Zagreb is Ours !” show a specific use of commons’ discourse. During the political campaign for the city council, the main claim was that the city’s resources are ours and that we, as people who live in the city, are those who should decide how the city is managed. The city should be considered as a common. It does not belong to developers or investors, nor to corrupted local politicians, it belongs to the people.

We put a lot of emphasis on the smaller levels of governance in Zagreb. Beside the city level, there is a district level and a neighbourhood level, as three levels of governance. I think we are the only local political option who put emphasis on giving more power and autonomy to the district and neighbourhood levels, using tools which are already there but not used for citizens’ assemblies.

¹<http://www.zagrebjenas.hr/zagreb-is-ours/>

These are direct democracy tools, in other words, where and when citizens' gather, discuss and decide, the decision becomes obligatory for the district or the neighbourhood council. In the last one year, we facilitated two of these district levels – each district is about 40 000 to 50 000 inhabitants – and we organized two district levels' citizens' assemblies, mostly about public spaces' claims.

V. – Is there a direct use of the term “commons” ?

T. – I wouldn't say that we are very much using it or not enough, but to some extent, yes. The problem lays with the word itself, because there is no direct translation in Croatian language, contrary to French for instance. “Commons” has to be translated into “common goods” in Croatian, which creates confusion because people think about “things” or “resources” ; but commons are not resources. For us, it is a combination of community, resource and governance regime or institution. Therefore, when we use the Croatian term “common goods”, it is not very much reflecting what we want to say. However, we sometime have to use it. We talk about practices of commons, like civil-public partnerships as partnerships between the local government and the community of users managing some resources. We talk about using commons' principles for the public companies, for their democratization. We do use commons' examples, but we don't use it as our main discourse in “Zagreb je Naš !”.

V. – Did the study of commons in the region allow you to defend more strongly different citizens' fights for common spaces or resources in your political involvement ?

T. – There are many connections between these struggles and cases and there is already a network of scholars and activists, which emphasizes and connects these struggles. As a result, the book was less aiming at connecting these struggles than at giving a common framework for all these struggles, which will hopefully be developed by other authors and researchers in the future. We tried to provide what was missing before, that is a common theoretical framework for these cases and even a political framework. And this is already happening, beside “Zagreb is Ours !” there is also a municipalist platform in Belgrade which was also formed through urban social struggles – “Don't let Belgrade D(r)own”. It is a similar situation, so you basically see that in some cities there is a combination and connection between urban commons' struggles, academic research and civil education on commons. Beside the

Green Academy organized by IPE in Croatia, there is a Commons' school in Serbia. The third aspect which started to appear in Zagreb and Belgrade is the political aspect with municipalist platforms, which are connected both to research, education and social struggles initiatives.

An economic democracy at stake

V. – You work a lot politically on fostering the democratization of public services, railway network, waste management, water supply system, etc. Do you provide a unified narrative for these different issues and claims ?

T. – Indeed, we use a common framework for all these public services that we study in IPE, all related to national resources' management and ecological sustainability. Actually, the most unifying discourse for these topics is the one of the commons. In my mind, the commons as a different governance regime, comparing to the national State and the capitalist market, is something that is useful to be used as a framework to also change the State, towards something which I call “commonization of the State”. Communizing the State means using the principle of commons for a radical transformation and a democratization of the State. I personally believe that if we look at local communities, which are at the same time political communities – even though we have IT innovations etc. - we still have political communities based on territories and interpersonal connections. Zagreb is a political local community composed of people who physically live in Zagreb and have their political institutions ; the same goes for Croatia and the national State, etc. Basically, for these “physical communities”, we will always need some kind of “supra governance regime”. Therefore, if you imagine no national State and only physical political communities, there will always be a need for some kind of coordination mechanisms between these physical communities and also for some kind of redistribution mechanisms between these communities. Now for me, it is the State which has to carry these roles but anyway, there will always be a need for a supra coordination, on a higher level than the physical communities' regime. I think the commons' discourse can be used to change the way the State's governance functions today.

The communities of users should be more involved, at least in supervision, in the management of public companies. Because they exist to provide public services for the public benefit. Therefore, the public should define itself

what corresponds to the public benefit and should control whether the public company fulfils its role or not. This role should be exclusively reserved to the public and not, as it is the case mostly now in the representative democracy model, to the politicians ; it is not enough. What we see, is that these public companies are used as ATMs for political parties, and a lot of public money is lost on public tenders of public companies, where they outsource and subcontract with private companies for different operations. As a result, this money goes from public to private companies. These private companies are the ones that are financing the main political parties which are in power. This is not what public companies should do. We thus think that a part of the commons' discourse can be used to put the users more in charge of managing public companies, but also of defining what is the public benefit. Public companies which provide public services, in my mind, have now as a goal to make money and profit. They are particularly politically evaluated in this way. This is a case that I have also in Zagreb Parliament, they give me reports on a public company and say "We did well this year as we managed to get a profit of this percentage..." but you know, this is not what I care about. These are not private companies which must make profit as their only goal ! The public companies should be in the public interest or benefit. But what is the public interest, and who defines it ? I would say that it must be the public and not the politicians. Then we should get an annual report of Zagreb water company for example, which says

we expanded access to water services physically by so much and for that amount of people ; and we expanded access to water services socially for that amount of people who usually cannot afford it ; we increased labour rights of people working in our water company through these and these measures we expanded the ecological sustainability of the water resource extraction through these measures ; we prevented pollution of water through this and this measure ; we managed to prevent the leakage of the water through the pipes of the city with this and this measures...

Now, in Zagreb, 50 % of the water leaks through the pipes ! I hence care more about this than about the profits !

This is something that we discuss in the book, namely to define normative criteria of the commons, because if the commons are only the community, the resource and institutions, we can imagine different commons which are

not progressives ! For instance, we can imagine gated communities of rich people which are managing their area ; we can imagine mafia organizations, which are not State nor market-run ; we can imagine also something which fulfil the principles of the commons' but is very patriarchal... in other words, commons that are not progressive nor democratic, for instance if women do not have a say in the management of the commons. So that is why we develop normative criteria for progressive commons : fair access, collective control and sustainable use. Then, situations where fair access and sustainable use are in conflict can appear, and this happens for example in the public water company. You can say that water is a human right, based on the 2010 UN General Assembly declaration but when it comes to public company, can we say that water is free of charge for everybody, and that water public company should provide as much water as everybody wants ? Then, we are in open access, not fair access, and we have a problem of ecological sustainability of the resource. That is why we must define what is the "fair access" to water. In France for example, some public water companies are developing the idea that water services must be paid in a way that some amount of water is free of charge, per day and per household, and then above that, the water is charged exponentially, not linearly. As a result, if you are a big consumer, you would not pay the same price than the average consumer, but you would pay much more. Therefore, if you want to have a swimming pool, you would be charged very heavily, and it would motivate people to save water. This is why this commons' criteria can be applied also to the public commons, in a way which makes it more progressive.

V. – Some last words to share ?

T. – For French readers, I'd like to emphasize that the French commons' scene is quite important for the commons' theory development because it stands against this parochial approach to commons, as far as I know. As we said regarding former Yugoslavia, the perception of the commons is very connected with the historical legacy of our country. Because the social institutions shape the institutions in the future, our institutional history is influencing how we shape today our current institutions. In this respect, the republicanism of French legal and political history, with the French Revolution principles are very much shaping the commons in France through universalism. There is then a very skeptical approach towards the "parochial commons", claiming that every community should organized be for itself, should do what it wants and should be autonomous. In France, I think that

there is quite a big emphasis on the commons as a necessarily universalist concept. This is how the commons should find a common language with the State, as the guarantee of universalism, that everybody in the society has some universal rights and needs that should be addressed by the whole society and not by the local communities. This framework in France is quite important for us.

It leads us to consider all the experiences in France about the water sector. France is the cradle of water privatization on the one hand - with two of the four biggest water multinational corporations having their headquarters in Paris – and on the other hand, France is also the field of the most exciting experiments in public water companies. Grenoble, for us, was very inspiring in terms of democratization of public water company and changing the way to measure the success of public water company. Grenoble, in this respect, is very a good case. Paris also, at a big city level, shows how some elements of participatory democracy can be put in the management of public water company, if there is a political will to do it.

To conclude, about the commons' theory and communizing the State through the example of public water companies, France is important for us in the Balkans both on the level of theory due to this universalism, and on the level of experiments in democratization of public companies which are happening now in the country.

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