

Carrozza, C. and Fantini, E. 2016. The Italian water movement and the politics of the commons. *Water Alternatives* 9(1): 99-119



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## The Italian Water Movement and the Politics of the Commons

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**ABSTRACT:** The article contributes to the debate on the commons as a political strategy to counter the privatisation of water services by focusing on the experience of the Italian water movement. It addresses the question: how has the notion of the commons – popularly associated with the Global South – been understood, adopted and translated into practice by social movements in a European country like Italy? We identify three different understandings of the commons coexisting within the Italian water movement – emphasising universality, locality and participation. We describe the political claims and the initiatives informed by these understandings, and the actors which promoted them. Our analysis underlines that the polysemy of the notion of the commons, its complementarity with the 'human right to water' and its overlapping with the idea of 'public' not only proved to be effective in the Italian case, but also posed challenges when it came to translate the notion of the commons into specific governance and management frameworks. The politics of the commons defines the space where these dynamics unfold: it is more articulated than a mere rhetorical reference to the commons, but less homogeneous and coherent than the idea of a 'commons movement'.

**KEYWORDS:** Commons, water, social movements, privatisation, Italy

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### INTRODUCTION

Everything began in Cochabamba. We heard about the people's struggle against the privatisation of water imposed by the World Bank with a multinational corporation called Bechtel. That was a real water war! We wanted to learn more about it and later we met those people in the World Social Forums. Through Cochabamba and Porto Alegre we became part of a global movement fighting privatisation in Africa, Latin America and Europe, and, even in Asia. We built a transnational movement that joined in Florence for the First Alternative Water Forum in 2003. The Italian Water Forum originated also from that experience, adapting global ideas such as the commons to specific local contexts. It has been a real cultural revolution.<sup>1</sup>

In Italy the idea of the commons is now a recurrent theme in water activists' narratives. In spite of the existence of a longstanding tradition of *commoning*<sup>2</sup> natural resources such as land or woods, commons as a political notion or as an 'activist package' (Tsing, 2005) has been imported through the encounter with Global South experiences. This article addresses the question of how the notion of the commons – popularly associated to the Global South – is understood, adopted and translated into practice by social movements in a European country like Italy. While 'commons' evokes users' direct participation in

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<sup>1</sup> Mariangela Rosolen, Turin local Water Committee and ATTAC activist, interview with the authors, Turin, 4 June 2012.

<sup>2</sup> We use the word *commoning* to refer to the process involved in 'making common' cultural and natural resources. See, for example, Fattori, 2013.

resources governance and management, in countries like Italy water is mostly managed through knowledge and capital-intensive industrial services and thus 'de-socialised', namely transformed "from being contiguous to 'hidden', invisible, in its journeys and in its 'production' (management systems and technical systems), a symbol of the other 'nature', which must remain quite separate from the social life of the city" (van Aken, 2015: 2010).

The relevance and originality of the Italian case lies in three main factors. First, the Italian water movement represents one of the most inclusive and resilient mobilisations in contemporary Italy (Carrozza and Fantini, 2013). It articulated its struggle in terms of water as human right and commons, framing the fight against water privatisation as a paradigmatic battle for democracy. 'You write it water, you read it democracy' was the movement's motto during the 2011 national referendum. The referendum brought water issues to the attention of the wider public opinion and its main legacy has been a renovated emphasis on the notion of the commons in Italian politics. Second, the reference to the commons seems a peculiarity of the Italian movement compared to other European countries, where anti-privatisation struggles have been mainly framed in terms of re-municipalisation – such as in France or Germany (Kishimoto et al., 2015) and the human right to water, as in the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) for the Right to Water launched in 2013 by the European Federation of Public Service Unions (Bieler, 2015). Third, thanks to the symbolic value of water and to the referendum victory, the notion of the commons has inspired other social movements, standing out as the dominant way to express grievances on a plurality of heterogeneous issues (labour, knowledge, internet, culture, education, soil, occupation of theatres and other public spaces) deemed under attack or enclosure by neoliberal governance. Activists advanced the idea of 'democracy of the commons' (Bersani, 2011) and 'water commons movement' (Fattori, 2013) to promote a broader alliance between these different mobilisations. Scholars have described the emerging 'commons movement in Italy' (Mattei, 2013), and "the constituent" nature of "the Italian struggle for the commons" (Bailey and Mattei, 2013), considering "the commons as an alternative to capitalism" (Ricoveri, 2011)

By referring to these phenomena as 'the politics of the commons' we focus on the political processes behind making water and other resources common. These processes are saturated with broader political ideas, agendas, repertoires of contentions and cultural representations. They are driven by political contingency, shaped by actors' subjectivities and in turn (re)shaping the movement's identity. Our Italian case study offers theoretical and practical insights relevant to the debate on the appropriateness of opposing privatisation of water services in the name of 'water as human right and commons' (Bakker, 2007; Miroso and Harris, 2012; Perera, 2015; Sultana and Loftus, 2015).

Our thesis is that, in Italy, the notion of the commons by virtue of its polysemy has proven effective in legitimising and holding together three different political claims. These claims are informed by different understandings of water as a commons, which emphasise the dimensions of universality, locality and participation in water governance. The reference to the commons is not a mere rhetoric or a narrative expedient, since it practically contributed to influencing the trajectory of Italian water policy – in particular with the referendum – and to shaping the movement's identity. At the same time, these claims are more fluid than coherent political strategies or explicit agendas. They share several key elements – the refusal of water privatisation and commodification, a complementary reference to water as human right *and* commons, the overlapping and blurring between the commons and the public – but they are also permeated by contradictory meanings. We highlight some of the tensions arising from this polysemy, which also contributed to the difficulties of translating the notion of the commons into an effective public governance framework in the context of capital- and knowledge-intensive industrial water systems. Thus rather than establishing a unitary and wholly coherent 'water commons movement', the reference to the commons informs and legitimises a plurality of political claims, encompassed by a more elusive 'politics of the commons'.

Our analysis is historically and locally grounded in order to offer a thick description of a specific case. It draws mainly on data and materials collected within a broader research project on the Italian water

movement (Carrozza and Fantini, 2013): i) the review of the Italian water movement's official documents, manifestos, audio and video material, press releases and minutes of meetings, collected from its official website and mailing list; ii) the published accounts of the movement's experience by its protagonists (Petrella 2001, Molinari, 2007; Jampaglia and Molinari, 2010; Zanotelli 2010; Bersani, 2011; Mattei, 2012); and iii) 22 semi-structured interviews with water activists conducted in different Italian regions (Piemonte, Lombardia, Veneto, Lazio, Molise, Puglia, Campania) between April 2012 and March 2013). Towards the end of that research we were confronted with the growing popularity of the notion of the commons within and outside the water movement. Therefore, we felt the need to explore this issue further, by looking retrospectively at our material in order to retrace the genealogy of the notion of the commons within the Italian movement, highlighting when, by whom and under which circumstances this notion has been mobilised. We identified and grouped a plurality of actors, meanings, scales, ideological references and political practices associated with, and informed by, the notions of the commons. Subsequently, by looking at the historical trajectory and evolution of the Italian water movement, we ascribed this plurality to three main understandings of the commons, emphasising the dimensions of universality, locality and participation in water governance. We found confirmation of the validity of this interpretative framework in the meanings that water activists associate with the commons in the semi-structured interviews, as well as in seven public seminars organised to discuss the results of our research with activists and scholars.<sup>3</sup>

Through this interpretative framework we do not want to reify the three political claims and the understandings of the commons beneath them, since they coexist and overlap throughout the experience of the movement and even within individual activists' narratives. Rather we wish to present and reinforce our main point: even within the same country and the same social movement the commons does mean different things for different people and informs a plurality of political claims. This polysemy holds both advantages and limitations for political mobilisation. We believe that a more critical and reflective analysis on this issue by scholars and activists advancing the idea of the 'water/commons movement' and the 'democracy of the commons' might ultimately benefit both water struggles and their analysis.

To set the scene for the 'politics of the commons' we start by recalling the main features of the reform of the Italian water sector and the historical trajectory of the Italian water movement. Subsequently, we describe the three political claims informed by different understandings of the commons that coexist and overlap within the Italian water movement: water as a commons of humankind, water as a commons of the territory, and water as a commons beyond the state and the market. In the conclusion, we recapitulate the elements of commonality and of divergence of these political claims, and discuss the theoretical and practical implications for the broader debate about opposing water privatisation in the name of human rights and the commons.

## **WATER SERVICES REFORM AND WATER MOVEMENTS IN ITALY**

Reform in the Italian water services started in the 1990s. It aimed to overcome problems perceived to be associated with the traditional local public management model, which was grounded in a strong relationship between municipalities and local water firms, operating mainly as agencies of local governments. The model was to be changed through an incremental adoption of a market-oriented mode of governance, based on competition and on local public regulation. The reform process has been very complex because of overlapping between sectoral (specifically related to water management) and general (related to all local public services) regulation. Moreover, the European Union has been very active in this policy area since 1990; and Italy's national legislation has passed through several

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<sup>3</sup> Seminars were held between October 2013 and February 2014 in Turin, Milan, Reggio Emilia, Florence, Rome and Termoli.

contradictory changes for at least two decades (Carrozza 2011). For some insight in Italy's water policy-making without lingering into the complexity of the process we recall the periodisation into three periods proposed by Carrozza<sup>4</sup> (2011, 2013).

In the first period (1994-2000) the main concerns of national policy-makers were the efficiency and size of the Italian water utilities. The EU aimed at promoting competitiveness in the markets of the local and national public services, such as energy, transportation and communication. Italian legislation was mainly aimed at stimulating the industrialisation of the water sector by encouraging the vertical and horizontal integration of utilities, framing a rather soft type of regulation as for water governance (Carrozza, 2013). The reform widened the traditional municipal scale of water planning and management and unified the activities of supply, distribution and sewage treatment – which were previously often realised by different utilities operating in the same municipality – in order to comply with the paradigm of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM). The financing of the sector switched from general taxation to the 'full cost recovery' model. The legislation of this period introduced a distinction between the property of water and infrastructures – remaining public – and the water services, which had to be operated by a limited company, whether publicly or privately owned. This left ample space for local government choices in terms of the delivery models of the services.

A second phase (2001-2010) coincides approximately with the local implementation of the reform, and with a wider public debate on the governance of the water sector and on service delivery models and regulation. Within this debate, a central role was played by the local and regional governments, in charge of the implementation of the reform. A key concern for the national government in this phase was fostering competitiveness within the sector, also in order to align national practices to the mainstream political orientation of the European Union.<sup>5</sup> However, local governments managed to resist the national guidelines, perceived as a way to promote the gradual privatisation of the sector, by adopting contrasting local guidelines. In this respect, the reform stimulated a number of conflicts between jurisdictions operating at different scales, with recurrent judicial actions from 2000 onwards. At the heart of these conflicts is either the wish of local governments to preserve their previous autonomous control of the sector or to create new spaces for action in the water sector.<sup>6</sup>

The establishment at the national level of a popular movement opposing the privatisation of water services was the key element marking the water policy-making in this period. While a movement of opinion around water started to emerge in Italy in the late 1990s (see the following section), it was during the first decade of the 2000s that the popular opposition became stronger and more organised. This movement, coming to be organised in the Forum Italiano dei Movimenti per l'Acqua (Italian Water Movements Forum, hereafter the Forum) in March 2006, encompasses a wide social coalition of alter-globalisation networks, development NGOs, environmental groups, trade unions, civic committees, local authorities, consumers associations, missionaries and parishes. The Forum's very first activity was the promotion of a citizen's initiative bill for the re-publicisation of the water services, signed by more than 400,000 citizens and presented in Parliament in July 2007. The Parliament did not follow up the proposal. However, the draft bill was instrumental in defining and consolidating the movement's discourse on water, becoming its official manifesto (Bersani, 2011). It also developed the Forum's

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<sup>4</sup> For other analyses on the Italian water reform see, for example, Massarutto and Ermano, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> During the same years, the Directive on services in the internal market (commonly referred to as the Bolkestein Directive), aiming at establishing a single market for services within the European Union (EU), was under discussion.

<sup>6</sup> The Constitutional Court has been frequently involved by Regions contesting national legislation as interfering in the regional exclusive competences, as well as by the national Government against episodes of regional legislations in conflict with the national regulations.

organisational capacities, which later proved crucial in the complex institutional process needed to propose questions for a national referendum.

A third phase (2011 onwards) covers the events around the national referendum held in 2011 (Carrozza 2013), as well as the subsequent gradual disappearance of water issues from the national public debate. The two questions proposed by the Forum related to 1) the abolition of the obligation to use the call for tenders as ordinary procedure to contract out the local public services included in the so-called 'Ronchi Decree'<sup>7</sup> and 2) the abolition of the 7% profit rate in the tariff of the water service.<sup>8</sup> These questions were aimed at opposing the tightening of regulations concerning local public services that occurred during Berlusconi's fourth cabinet.

While in the weeks before the vote mainstream media neglected or explicitly silenced the information about the referendum's topics, in the end the turnout and outcome were exactly what promoters of the referendums had hoped for. The turnout of 54.8% was enough to secure the victory of the 'yes' campaign on the issues proposed, with 95.3% in support of the local public services contracting out question, and 95.8% on the water tariffs question. In terms of participation, the referendum represented a largely unforeseen success. In the 24 referendums held in the country since 1997 the required quorum of 50%+1 of the voters had not been attained.

The 2011 referendum was held in rather intricate political circumstances (Carrozza, 2013) and attributing the great turnout just to the water issue is therefore simplistic. Nevertheless, it has been widely recognised that the discourse on 'water as human right and commons' as proposed by the Forum during the campaign<sup>9</sup> – facilitated popular identification with the water movement (Mazzoni and Cicognani, 2013). It turned the struggle for water into a paradigmatic battle for democracy in Italy. According to a survey conducted by Demos in July 2011, a month after the referendum, the expression *bene comune* – which in Italian expresses both the idea of 'commons' as resources and 'common good' as the goal of political action – ranks at the fourth place among the most successful words in the Italian political vocabulary, while it did not appear in the ranking of the previous years (Demos and Pi, 2011).

Following the experience of the Forum, the reference to the notion of the commons has inspired other social movements and mobilisations (Bailey and Mattei, 2013). The reference to the commons has been adopted also by local institutions, appointing for instance 'commons councillors' such as the municipalities of Naples, Venice and Messina, and by political parties, referring to the commons in their very names or in their official electoral programmes. Moreover, a growing body of literature by scholars and activists on the topic has emerged (Mattei, 2012; Rodotà, 2012; Pennacchi, 2012; Marella, 2012; Vitale, 2013; Lucarelli, 2013).

We suggest that such popularity has been fostered by the coexistence of different understandings of the commons, rooted in the political agendas and backgrounds of the components of the Italian water movement. In the following section we discuss these understandings and the plurality of claims.

### THREE UNDERSTANDINGS OF WATER AS A COMMONS

Table 1 presents in a synthetic fashion the main elements of the three understandings of the notion of the commons that coexist and overlap within the Italian water movement. The following subsections describe each of them in detail, while the concluding section discusses the commonalities and ambiguities among them.

<sup>7</sup> Art. 23 bis of the Law 133/2008 modified from the art. 15 of the Law 166/2009.

<sup>8</sup> Art. 154 of the Legislative Decree 152/2006, the so-called Environmental Code.

<sup>9</sup> Synthesised by the motto 'Si scrive acqua si legge democrazia' ('You write it water, you read it democracy').

Table 1. Different understandings of the commons in the Italian water movement.

	Water as a commons of humankind (universality)	Water as a commons of the local territory (locality)	Water as a commons beyond the state and the market (participation)
Main actors	International development NGOs, Italian Committee for the World Water Contract, alter-globalisation groups, missionaries and other Catholic groups.	Local authorities, trade unions, consumers' associations, local sections of national parties, local political movements, and civic committees.	Social movements and radical left groups (formerly alter-globalisation); Left-wing jurists belonging to the Rodotà Committee.
Political claims	Promoting a 'new water culture' and international solidarity against water commodification.	Upholding local governance of water services.	Advocating new forms of democracy and citizens' participation.
Theoretical/ ideological references	International democracy, representative democracy, human rights.	Local democracy, decentralisation, subsidiarity.	Participatory/direct, post-representative democracy.
Initiatives	Information, education and cultural campaigns International solidarity projects for access to water in the Global South. International advocacy.	Legal and political struggles against national and regional laws fostering privatisation and scaling up of water services governance and management. Campaigns in defence of local public water (springs, local aqueducts) against bottled water/ commodification.	Participatory water management in the context of re-municipalisation (Naples). Civil obedience campaign to self-reduce the water bill.
Influence on the movement's structure and identity	Participation in transnational networks and international events.	Emphasis on autonomy of local water committees	Networking with other commons movements. Emphasis on horizontality and consensus in the Forum's internal organisation.

### Claiming universality: Water as a commons of humankind

The first understanding of the commons emphasises universality. The reference to water as a commons of humankind represents a central element in the discourse of the Italian water movement since its very beginning. This formula implies a reference to the idea of universality which resonates the human

rights discourse and goal of "universal access of every individual to a sufficient amount of clean and safe water to live a healthy life, regardless of ability to pay" (Miroso and Harris, 2012). It speaks to the actors traditionally engaged at international and transnational level such as development NGOs, alter-globalisation activists or missionaries. These ideas are influenced by critical readings of development and neoliberal globalisation (Klein, 1999; Shiva, 2002), and echo other formulas adopted by international water activists such as Maude Barlow, considering water as "common heritage of all humans and other species, as well as a public trust that must not be appropriated for personal profits or denied to anyone because of inability to pay" (Barlow, 2008). The movement's first steps were inspired by the Water Manifesto promoted by Riccardo Petrella (Petrella, 2001) an Italian economist working at the European Commission in Brussels and teaching at the Université Catholique de Louvain-la-Neuve. The Manifesto called for the establishment of a World Water Contract inspired by the recognition of water as a "commons of humankind" (Petrella, 2011: 105). The Manifesto began to circulate in Italy in the late 1990s, becoming the main cultural reference for the Italian water movement. It inspired some international development NGOs, alter-globalisation groups and a few left-wing and environmental activists that, in 1998, gave birth to the Italian Committee for the World Water Contract (CICMA) (Jampaglia and Molinari, 2010). CICMA's document echoes Petrella's Manifesto by acknowledging water as a "commons of humankind, for the right to life" (Petrella, 2001: 132) or "a public common good, a world heritage" (Petrella, 2011: 134). Since its foundation the Italian water movement has emphasised the global dimension of water issues, claiming the universal right to access to water, and contesting the market-oriented policies of World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, as well as the controversial large dam projects in the Global South. As an alternative, by referring to water as a commons of humankind, the movement advocates for a model based on "the principles of solidarity and international cooperation", symbolically assigning to humankind "the responsibility for the protection of both the ecosystems and of the rights of present and future generations" (ibid).

The universalist understanding of the notions of commons led the Italian water movement to initially focus on global issues, rather than explicitly engaging in the national debate about water sector reform in Italy. By calling water a human right and commons of humankind, the movement initially situated its activity in the cultural and pedagogical spheres, with the goal of promoting 'a new water culture' to counter neoliberal globalisation and privatisation. In the words of Rosario Lembo, former spokesperson of an NGOs' network and among the CICMA founders:

Our main goal was to promote a new water culture (...). We wanted to raise awareness about the big issues that as NGOs we were witnessing in the Global South: big dams, privatisation, lack of access to clean water for millions of poor. We wanted to promote international solidarity on these issues (...) While attending the Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2001, we established a relation with the social and indigenous movements fighting in defence of their commons – land, water, forest... particularly in Latin America. Those struggles for the commons inspired our struggle in Italy too. In fact, through this cultural operation, we also wanted to put the issue of water at the top of the political agenda in Italy.<sup>10</sup>

The idea of 'a new water culture' inspired by the notion of water as a commons of humankind has been translated in two main strands of activities, reflecting specific interests, knowledges and repertoires of contention of the main actors initially involved in the movement: international development NGOs and alter-globalisation groups.

First, the movement promoted cultural, educational and pedagogical initiatives – such as video and photo exhibitions and educational campaigns and publications – targeting schools, associations, youth groups, parishes and other institutions. CICMA and the NGO CEVI (International Volunteers Centre, Udine) in 2001 launched the national education campaign 'Water commons of humankind' and a photo

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<sup>10</sup> Rosario Lembo, CICMA, interview with the authors, Milan, 7 April 2012.

exhibition of the same name with the photo agency Contrasto in 2003. The campaign advocates for the acknowledgment of water as human right and commons, emphasising the symbolic, spiritual and cultural dimensions of water, and promoting practices of active citizenship and international solidarity for the access to water for all (CEVI, 2003). Many other Italian NGOs have undertaken similar activities on the same topics, including missionaries' groups and specific institutions such as the University of the Common Good and the Faculty of the Water created by the CICMA (Ciervo, 2009).<sup>11</sup>

In this context, Catholic groups and institutions that, in the past, contributed to the alter-globalisation movement, such as missionary Alex Zanotelli or a few faith-based NGOs, were particularly active. They emphasised the cultural and spiritual dimensions of water issues, including ethical issues linked to privatisation and international solidarity, also by virtue of the resonance between the commons and the notion of the common good that is one of the pillars of Catholic Social Doctrine (Fantini, 2014). The moral dimension associated with the notion of commons and the perception of privatisation as violating a basic human right have also been identified among the main motives behind active participation in the Italian water movement during the 2011 referendum campaign (Mazzoni and Cicognani, 2012). These cultural and education initiatives were considered instrumental in fostering support to international solidarity and cooperation for access to water in the Global South.

Beside NGOs' traditional development projects, the understanding of water as a common good of humankind inspired several local authorities to promote international solidarity initiatives on water, funded through the devolution of one cent of euro per metre cube of water tariffs. Financial schemes such as these have been adopted by the *Autorità di Ambito Territoriale Ottimale (AATO)*<sup>12</sup> of Turin, through the School of International Training on water management Hydroaid, the AATO of Venice and the AATO of Florence, through the Foundation Right to Water. The citizens' initiative bill launched by the Forum for the re-municipalisation of the water service (2006) proposed the application of a similar mechanism at national level, with the creation of an International Solidarity Fund aimed at supporting international cooperation projects funded through a levy of 1% on the water tariff and one cent on every bottle of mineral water sold (Article 11). Similarly, the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) on the Right to Water and supported by the Forum affirms that "water is a public good and not a commodity" and calls for the EU, inter alia, to "incorporate into its development policy the achievement of universal access to water and sanitation" through an increase of the public aid funds and the promotion of public-public partnerships, "according to the principles of non-profit and solidarity between utilities and workers in the water sector in different countries".<sup>13</sup>

A second strand of practices associated with the claim of water as a commons of humankind is related to the participation by the Italian water movement to international and transnational alter-globalisation networks. Representatives of the Italian water movement attended the periodic meetings of the World Social Forum and promoted international water marches in the Balkans (2003), Central America (2008), Turkey (2009) and the Palestinian territories (2011). The Italian water movement played a key role in organising the first Alternative World Water Forum in Florence in 2003 to boycott the official World Water Forum organised every three years by the World Water Council and supported, among others, by the World Bank and national governments and multinational corporations with significant stakes in the global water market. Through these initiatives, the Italian water movement joined the international advocacy activities in favour of the recognition of water as human right, within

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<sup>11</sup> A non-exhaustive review of these publications compiled by CEVI accounts for 23 books, 12 educational booklets, three role games, eight videos and five photo exhibitions produced between 2001 and 2008 in support of the campaign 'Water commons of humankind' by NGOs (CEVI, n.d.).

<sup>12</sup> The *Autorità di Ambito Territoriale Ottimale* is the administrative body, composed by local governments, that is in charge of planning water management in each of the local areas in which the national water system has been reorganized since 1990s.

<sup>13</sup> More information can be found at [www.right2water.eu](http://www.right2water.eu) (accessed on 27 May 2013).



the UN system, the World Water Forum and by European Institutions, and for the exclusion of water services from the competence of the World Trade Organisation. For instance, CICMA lobbying activities at the European Parliament led to the adoption in 2006 of a resolution on the fourth World Water Forum of Mexico City, acknowledging water as 'commons of humankind'<sup>14</sup> and calling for public management of water services. They also facilitated the creation of parliamentary networks and associations of elected representatives for water, such as the World Assembly of elected representatives and citizens for water which gathered in Brussels on 18-20 March 2007. These efforts contributed to paving the road for the explicit recognition of the right to water by the United Nations, with the 2010 General Assembly and Human Rights Council resolutions.

The idea of water as a commons of humankind is mainly associated with a governance model that is essentially public. Public authorities, both at national and international level, are considered the main duty bearers to ensure the right to water. Here the notion of commons overlaps and tends to be conflated with the idea of public water governance and management. Petrella's Manifesto, for instance, affirms "water should be acknowledged by law as a common public good. Water should be publicly owned and managed" (Petrella, 2001: 136). Along the same lines, the final declaration of the Alternative World Water Forum in Florence states first that "water should be considered as a commons belonging to all human beings and living creatures" and later that "property, governance and political control of water (in particular of water services) should be and remain public, under direct responsibility of public authorities" (Alternative World Water Forum, 2003). Besides national governments, emphasis is laid upon international institutions, promoting the idea – both within the movement and in the public opinion – that local-level actions are not enough to ensure the protection of the commons, and that these struggles should have a supranational and transnational perspective and scope as well. Proposals are launched for the establishment of international authorities with powers to impose sanctions on the violations of the human right to water, such as the 'World Water Court', the 'World Forum on Economic and Social Water Rights' (Petrella, 2001) or a 'World Observatory for Water Rights' (Molinari, 2007). International public institutions are entrusted with the responsibility to provide access to water on a global scale, and particularly in developing countries. The final declaration of the Florence Forum calls for a reform of multilateral financial institutions like the World Bank and the regional development banks, and the promotion of public-public partnerships.<sup>15</sup>

To sum up, by claiming water as a commons of humankind, the Italian water movement promotes patterns of re-socialisation of water as a natural resource and source of life, emphasising its cultural and moral dimensions, and looking at the global scale of the problems, with particular reference to the issue of access to water in the Global South. This formula also contributed to reinforce the self-representation of the movement as a transnational actor, importing the idea of the commons from other experiences – particularly those of the indigenous struggles in the Global South – and adapting it to the specificities of the Italian context.

### **Claiming locality: Water as a commons of the territory**

A second understanding of water as a commons develops around the practices, values and discourses focused on the idea of 'local territory'. This understanding was particularly relevant, on the one hand, in the water struggles among local governments and organised local groups (civic committees, consumers' associations, environmental associations, trade unions) that were worried about the consequences of

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<sup>14</sup> The resolution can be found at [www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&language=EN&reference=P6-TA-2006-0087](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&language=EN&reference=P6-TA-2006-0087) (accessed on 30 January 2016).

<sup>15</sup> The final declaration of the first alternative forum is available on the CICMA website. <http://contrattoacqua.it/documenti/forum-alternativi-mondiali-sulla-acqua/firenze-2003/> (accessed on 25 November 2015).

outsourcing water management to private companies and, on the other, in the struggles that opposed local governments to national and regional ones.

Water as a commons of the local territory is presented as an antidote to the widespread perception of expropriation of local sovereignty by strong, non-local actors (national or regional governments, multinational water utilities, banks and so on) through the processes of privatisation and commodification of local resources (including water springs). Local territory is identified as the most suitable scale for water management, and promotes local communities' ownership of water. The notion of the commons is combined with more traditional discourses about localism, self-government and subsidiarity, giving new life to federalist political projects inspired by participatory local democracy ideas and aiming at generating forms of production and consumption based on conviviality, solidarity and sustainability (Magnaghi, 2006). This emphasis on the local community fostered unprecedented coalitions against the privatisation of water services (Fantini, 2013) since both centre-right and centre-left politicians joined the struggle. At the local scale, water issues started to be identified as non-partisan or, at least, beyond the traditional left-right opposition and, in some cases, even beyond the public vs. private dichotomy. This position has been expressed, for example, by the founder of the International Slow Food Movement, Carlo Petrini (Petrini, 2010), as follows: "the management of the commons should be accomplished by actors locally rooted, aiming at the development of the territory and at the protection of its people's interests and rights".

However, more often, the notion of the commons is used in conjunction with that of human right to legitimate primarily public management of water services at the local scale. The latter observation emerges both from the official declarations produced by local governments and from the observation of the practices of resistance put in place by the same actors particularly during the reform implementation phase. For example, the Declaration of Rome<sup>16</sup> of December 2003 (signed by the city of Rome and the mayors of several other Italian and European cities, as well as from representatives of civil society and of the political elite at the end of a gathering jointly promoted by the Italian water movement and the city of Rome), water is defined as 'an inalienable human right', and as a 'commons' whose management and governance need to be kept public. The same document also mentions the aim of fostering a local democracy for water, with committees of citizens with the role of supporting and strengthening the institutions of representative democracy. The materials and initiatives<sup>17</sup> around the definition of the National Coordinating Committee 'Local Authorities for Water as a Commons and for the Public Management of Water Services', whose creation was formalised during a national event organised in Palermo on May 14th, 2009, also refers to water as a commons and as a public service, and expresses support towards local management.<sup>18</sup>

Local authorities – particularly small and medium-size municipalities and elected representatives in local assemblies – often found local movements as important allies in opposing water legislation and policies perceived as detrimental to local prerogatives, coming both from national regulations for the sector and, in some cases, from regional ones. An example of a conflict of this kind is the struggle between local municipalities and the Region Lombardia after the regional legislation of 2006 (Regional Law 18, 2006), forbidding in-house provision for water services in order to favour the scaling up of local utilities (Carrozza, 2010). Led by the municipality of Cologno Monzese, the regional committee 'Water as a commons', composed of a number of local governments in the Region, was established and started to campaign for a regional referendum against some articles of Law 18/2006. Eventually, after lengthy

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<sup>16</sup> See [http://contrattoacqua.it/public/upload/1/2/tab\\_elms\\_docs/1327829932dichiarazione-roma.pdf](http://contrattoacqua.it/public/upload/1/2/tab_elms_docs/1327829932dichiarazione-roma.pdf) (accessed on 19 November 2015).

<sup>17</sup> See [www.acquabenecomune.org/spip.php?article=211](http://www.acquabenecomune.org/spip.php?article=211) (accessed on 19 November 2015).

<sup>18</sup> See for example the 'statute of the association' at <http://bit.ly/1o2eYFY> (accessed on 19 November 2015).

negotiations with the Region, the regional law was modified by reintroducing the choice of public governance of water services in the Region,<sup>19</sup> in the form of in-house provision.

In this and in other episodes of resistance led by local authorities, the notion of water as a commons is closely linked and combined with that of public management of water services, as for example in initiatives related to re-municipalisation. 'Re-municipalisation of water services' was the central aim of the citizens' initiative bill drafted by the Forum in 2006 (see section one). Subsequently, in 2009, the Forum invited the elected local councils to take a stand against the Ronchi decree and to take the commitment to 're-municipalise from below', by amending the Municipal or Provincial Statute with the declaration that water services are 'local services without economic relevance'. Several municipalities started this process, including major cities such as Turin and Venice.<sup>20</sup> In the case of Venice, for example, a new article '2 bis' has been inserted into the Municipal Statute in 2010, defining water as 'a commons and a public good', reaffirming 'the principle of the public management and governance of water'.<sup>21</sup>

The relevance of water services for local governments in Italy needs to be read in historical perspective. The key role of municipalities in the area of local public services may be considered a structural feature of the Italian economy of the twentieth century. It spread through the initiative of municipalities and provinces of the time, and found consolidation in legislation in the beginning of the previous century. There was convergence of the different political parties of the time (socialist, catholic and liberal) in a decision to exclude the private enterprises from the provision of essential services. The opposition of the local authorities to implement European regulation promoted in the early 1990s can, in the Italian case, be explained by the rooted consideration of water management as a constitutive component of local governance and identity.

In this respect, the notion of water as a commons provides a simple and direct way to highlight the intimate connection between water and local government. Thus in several initiatives local public fountains, springs and independent aqueducts have been celebrated as symbols of resistance to neoliberalism and privatisation reforms by virtue of their capacity to provide solutions both efficient and local to the problem of water management. An example is the case of the Associazione dei consorzi delle acque libere (the Association of the consortiums of the free waters), in the northern province of Biella.<sup>22</sup> Campaigns have been also launched to encourage the consumption of tap water – in Italy colloquially called 'the mayor's water' – regarded as good and safe, against the consumption of bottled water, regarded as expensive and not sustainable. Examples can be found in the campaign 'Imbrocciamola' ('Let's put it in the jug'), launched by the magazine *Altreconomia*, promoting the consumption of tap water in public places, such as restaurants, cafes and canteens. Another example is the initiative promoted by some municipalities to install public dispensers of natural and sparkling water coming from the local aqueducts in different points of the city in order to enhance the understanding of water as a commons – according, for instance, to the Mayor of Parma, Federico Pizzarotti.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Documentation and materials on the campaign can be found at <http://bit.ly/23GJ9Db> (accessed on 31 January 2016).

<sup>20</sup> Materials from, and the list of, the local governments that joined the campaign can be found at [www.acquabenecomune.org/spip.php?rubrique246](http://www.acquabenecomune.org/spip.php?rubrique246) (accessed on 30 January 2016).

<sup>21</sup> Statuto del Comune di Venezia, Deliberazione del Consiglio Comunale n. 25, 25 March 2013.

<sup>22</sup> The story can be found at <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2009/11/15/il-paese-dell-acqua-ribelle.html> (accessed on 30 January 2016).

<sup>23</sup> [www.parmareport.it/inaugurata-la-quarta-fontana-del-sindaco-al-bizzozero/](http://www.parmareport.it/inaugurata-la-quarta-fontana-del-sindaco-al-bizzozero/) (Accessed on 23 November 2015). Pizzarotti belongs to Movimento Cinque Stelle (Five stars movement) an anti-establishment political group funded by comedian Beppe Grillo. Public water is one of the 'five stars' of this group, whose members have been also active in the water movement at local and national level.

At the local level, and particularly among the local authorities, a pragmatic kind of concern emerges in relation with the issue of local public finance constrained by the provisions of the Stability and Growth Pact,<sup>24</sup> that is actually crucial for the maintenance of public management at the local scale. Some of the key actors associated with the water movement have recently launched the campaign for the socialisation of 'Cassa Depositi e Prestiti',<sup>25</sup> a bank created in 1850 to finance investments of public bodies and institutions, including local governments, using postal savings deposits as the main source of funds and partially privatised in 2003. Reclaiming the original purpose of this institution is framed as a precondition for funding an alternative way out of the crisis based on the collective management of commons such as water, and to fully implement the outcomes of the June 2011 referendum.

The water movement itself has strong local specificities and despite the existence of a national secretariat (the Forum), it has the character of a grassroots and decentralised mobilisation. Local committees preserved their autonomy vis-à-vis the Forum, and occasionally vibrantly reclaim it, fuelling the internal debate. The emphasis is on water as local commons facilitate the emergence of new – local – political identities and political communities, as highlighted by this activist.

For us there should not be a national and a local level within the movement. The Forum is a space for sharing, discussing and coordinating within a network of local territories. There should not be a single national referent for the whole movement. Everybody could speak in the name of the Forum as long as he/she is legitimated by being active in and representing a local territory. A specificity of our regional water committee in Puglia is that membership is based on geography and not on previous political belongings. We wanted to avoid previous experiences of mobilisation such as the Social Forum, where people participate in the name of their previous identities: communists, ecologists, Catholics, trade unions... Here people represent their territory of origin. They could also have other affiliation, but what is important is that they are rooted in their territory. Interesting political dynamics are happening: for instance people initially joining the water committee as representative of a political party, Sinistra e Libertá, later abandoning their original political affiliation to become 100% water activists.<sup>26</sup>

Water as a local commons confirms the power of water in terms of production of locality (Mosse, 1997), facilitating the creation or the strengthening of local social relationships and enabling pathways of rediscovery and reinvention of concepts such as 'territory' and the 'local community'.

### **Claiming participation: Water as a commons beyond the state and the market**

A third understanding of the commons, emphasising the dimension of democratic and direct participation by citizens, informed the idea of water as a commons beyond the state and the market. This formula implies not only the rejection of neoliberal policies of water services privatisation, but also the request of new forms of political participation and self-government, beyond the traditional public governance systems and beside the classical institutions of representative democracy. These ideas gained relevance and primacy during the 2011 referendum campaign and its aftermaths in response to a perceived crisis of democracy, as affirmed by water activists Tommaso Fattori while commenting on the referendum results.

This vote was against privatisation but also against the old public model, which has at this time been completely subjected to, and aligned with, private and market reasoning. (...) This vote not only demands that private profit be thrown out of the commons but it also demand for the re-publicisation of the public

<sup>24</sup> The Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) is an agreement, among the 28 Member states of the European Union, to facilitate and maintain the stability of the Economic and Monetary Union. A primary objective of the fiscal regulations of the Pact is the control of the net indebtedness of local authorities (the so-called 'internal stability pact').

<sup>25</sup> See [www.perunanuovafinanzapubblica.it](http://www.perunanuovafinanzapubblica.it) and the book published by Luca Martinelli and Antonio Tricarico (2013) "La posta in gioco", Altraeconomia.

<sup>26</sup> Margherita Ciervo, Puglia Water local committee, interview with the authors, April 2013.

realm and its *commonification*. (...) Commonification is the introduction of elements of self-government of the good by the citizens within public management bodies (Fattori 2013: 377, 382 and 385).

This trend in Italy recalls the broader theoretical and political debate taking place at the global level – mainly inspired by the work by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt (2000, 2004, 2009) – affirming the urgency to counter neoliberal globalisation and capitalism by shifting 'from the public to the commons' (Dardot and Laval, 2010, 2014: for the Italian debate see Marella, 2012). Negri and Hardt use the expression commons referring not merely to natural resources – air, water, lands and so on – but also to everything produced from, and used for, social relationships such as "the languages we create, the social practices we establish, and the modes of sociality that define our relationships" (Negri and Hardt, 2009: 8). In the perspective of Negri and Hardt, the 'commons' basically surrounds us, even if neoliberal policies make it difficult to acknowledge that (ibid). New ways of governing the commons, based on collective forms of production and consumption and on self-government, should therefore be experimented to overcome the dichotomy between the public and the private, forms of social organisation that have actually oppressed and almost made the commons ungraspable.

These ideas matured within the Italian water movement also through the encounter with a group of lawyers that participated in the Committee chaired by Stefano Rodotà (hereafter Rodotà Committee), appointed by the national Minister of Justice of the centre-left cabinet led by Romano Prodi in June 2007. As recalled by Ugo Mattei, one of the Rodotà Committee's members, "its task was to propose a reform of the provision on public property contained in the Italian Civil Code, in order to establish some principles governing the possibility and the limits of the privatisation of public assets" (Bailey and Mattei, 2013) with the main idea of 'reversing the trend' of the privatisation processes started in Italy in the 1990s (Mattei et al., 2007).

The Rodotà Committee proposed to reorganise the status of public property in the Civil Code by elaborating on the following

first technical definition of the commons, as a legal category and form of property different from both private and public ownership, deserving special protection at the constitutional level. In the definition of the Rodotà Committee, the commons are "goods that provide utilities essential to the satisfaction of fundamental rights of the person" and access to such goods remains no matter if the formal title of ownership is public or private and in all cases must be protected also in the interest of future generations (Bailey and Mattei, 2013).

The category would include natural resources, such as rivers, streams, lakes and other waters; the air; parks and so on: resources whose nature escapes the logic of property, and whose management is incompatible with the logic of the delegation to the state or to the market.<sup>27</sup>

While the Rodotà Committee proposal was never followed up and implemented on an institutional level, its theses found a receptive and fertile political ground in the water movement, and later inspired also other social and political struggles. Lawyers from the Rodotà Committee – in particular Stefano Rodotà, Ugo Mattei and Alberto Lucarelli – drafted the water referendum's questions and offered their expertise to comply with all the legal procedures to set up the referendum and to monitor its implementation in the aftermath. Thus these lawyers become points of reference for the movement, from both the theoretical and the legal/technical points of view. Their ideas were particularly influential among left-wing individuals and groups willing to adopt water as an 'entry point' to pursue a broader political strategy: exploring new forms of political engagement alternative to traditional left-wing

<sup>27</sup> Report accompanying the bill drafted by the Rodotà Committee, available at [www.giustizia.it/giustizia/it/mg\\_1\\_12\\_1.wp?facetNode\\_1=0\\_10&facetNode\\_2=0\\_10\\_21&previousPage=mg\\_1\\_12&contentId=SPS47617](http://www.giustizia.it/giustizia/it/mg_1_12_1.wp?facetNode_1=0_10&facetNode_2=0_10_21&previousPage=mg_1_12&contentId=SPS47617) (accessed 24 November 2015).

parties and trade unions, after the pulling back of the alter-mondialisation season, as autobiographically noted by the activist Tommaso Fattori:

The water movement is largely the child of the 'alter-mondialist season'. The choice, of focusing for years on one theme and on one specific campaign was sometimes looked on with suspicion and smugness if not openly criticised for its partial nature. Many of us, on the contrary, have been convinced that water – as a material substance but also symbolically – was the cornerstone on which to rebuild the broadest possible horizon of democracy and commons. (...) There was also a need, after that terrible defeat of the mobilisation for peace and against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, to regain trust in collective action.<sup>28</sup>

The reference to water as a commons 'beyond the state and the market', implying greater spaces for political participation and self-government by the citizens, became hegemonic within the movement in the aftermath of the referendum. This was a reaction to the fact that the referendum outcomes were only partially implemented by national and local authorities. In August 2011, a few months after the referendum the national government led by Silvio Berlusconi tried to reintroduce by decree the norms repealed by the first question of the referendum. Only a year later the Constitutional Court declared that decree unconstitutional. Similarly, the second question of the referendum has never been fully implemented. The independent Authority for Gas and Energy was given the mandate to elaborate the new method to calculate the water tariff, but the Forum has dismissed the outcome of its work, because it does not eliminate the remuneration of capital from the water tariff.

Thus national and local institutions of representative democracy were deemed in collusion with, or subjugated to, the interest of financial capital and the neoliberal austerity plans imposed by unrepresentative and undemocratic institutions such as the EU troika.<sup>29</sup> By referring to the commons, the Forum denounces this situation and elaborates an alternative.

It is precisely the ancillary role of the public institutions and public property with respect to private capital that now explains the desire of the movements to rebuild the commons realm as the opposite of the property, that is, to set it outside the binary logic of public-private property (Fattori, 2013: 383).

The idea of commons beyond the state and the market implies also a critique of the institutions of representative democracy, as denounced by Paolo Carsetti, member of the Forum's secretariat.

What we have seen after the referendum is a crisis of democracy, a crisis of the representative democracy, like the Parliament, which could not, or most probably, would not, implement the popular will expressed through the referendum. Therefore, as Water Forum we had to play a substituting role, acting as the stewards of the referendum results and of the commons.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, Bailey and Mattei describe the struggle by the Forum for the implementation of the referendum's results as 'a constitutional movement'. They see in this process the evidence of "a major clash between representative and direct democracy" with the commons movement "filling a crucial vacuum where representative politics has failed by offering alternative channels for political engagement" Bailey and Mattei, 2013: 977).

The idea of the commons as a notion introducing new spaces for democratic participation in the public realm gained support also among social actors supporting traditional public management such as

<sup>28</sup> Tommaso Fattori, Fluid Democracy: The Italian Water Revolution, September 2001, [www.transform-network.net/journal/issue-092011/news/detail/Journal/fluid-democracy-the-italian-water-revolution.html](http://www.transform-network.net/journal/issue-092011/news/detail/Journal/fluid-democracy-the-italian-water-revolution.html) (accessed on 23 November 2015).

<sup>29</sup> The term is vernacularly used in contemporary Europe to label the joint initiative by the European Commission (EC), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in addressing economic and financial issues within the European Economic and Monetary Union.

<sup>30</sup> Paolo Carsetti, Italian Water Movements Forum's secretariat, interview with the authors, Rome, 14 September 2012.



the CGIL (Italian General Confederation of Labour), the biggest Italian trade union, although it never became mainstream in this environment. As acknowledged by Corrado Oddi, a trade union official within CGIL Public Sector section and water activist:

Within CGIL I was among the very firsts to introduce the notion of the commons, although initially within the trade union this notion was seen with scepticism. The encounter between the trade unions and the water movement arose from the reflection that the notion of commons could revive the protection of labour. The commons should be taken away from the market; they can define a new public space. In this sense, we found the discourse about water as a paradigmatic one (...). This new public space is not a mere expression of the state; rather it entails a renovated protagonism by citizens and workers (...). When we talk about water as a commons we talk about a participatory public management. Water services should be managed by an agency under public law, allowing for participatory tools and spaces for the citizens and the workers.<sup>31</sup>

These ideas legitimised and upheld three main initiatives in the aftermath of the referendum. First, 'a civil obedience campaign', in the words of the Forum, for the self-reduction of the water bill: the Forum offered technical and legal support to all citizens for a self-reduction of the water bill equivalent to the profit rate removed by referendum as a symbolic way to denounce the lack of follow-up of the results of the second referendum questions and 'take out the profits from water'.

Second, in the name of the commons, the Forum attempted to introduce spaces and practices of 'participatory governance' (Bailey and Mattei, 2013) within the processes of re-municipalisation of water services. The pioneering and most quoted initiative has been the one promoted by the city of Naples, with the crucial support of the lawyers of the Rodotà Committee. In June 2011, one of them, Alberto Lucarelli, was appointed by the newly elected mayor of Naples as local councillor for the commons of the city of Naples. Ugo Mattei was appointed as the deputy head of the local water utility, a public-private company that was later re-municipalised through its transformation into an agency under public law called ABC Naples (Acqua Bene Comune Napoli, Naples Water Commons). In doing so, the municipal government assumed the responsibility of the protection and promotion of the commons through the introduction in the City Statute of the notion of commons among the main goals and core values of the local government's political action. A specific emphasis was also put on people's direct participation in the local government and in the commons' management. In practice, the idea of 'participatory governance of the commons' has been implemented through the participation in the Board of the new water agency of two members (out of five) appointed by local environmental movements and with the establishment of a Monitoring Committee: a body composed by representatives of citizens, utility's workers and environmental associations, with advisory, control and information functions, in particular with respect to the main decisions regarding the planning and programming of the service (Lucarelli, 2011). In spite of becoming "a hub for commons' activism" inspiring national and initiatives such as "a campaign for a 'European Charter of the Commons', to be proposed as a citizen's initiative to the European Commission" (Bailey and Mattei, 2013), the experience of Naples remained isolated and has not been replicated in the rest of the country.

A third initiative inspired by the idea of the commons beyond the state and the market has been the attempt to link up with other social movements under the banner of the commons. The referendum victory and the experience of Naples catalysed the attention of other social movements, willing to emulate the Forum and replicate its success. In this respect, the most influential and long-lasting experience is the one of the Teatro Valle, a historical public theatre in Rome that was squatted by some workers of the cultural industries the day after the 2011 referendum to prevent its sale to private investors by reclaiming culture as commons (Jop, 2012; Bailey and Marcucci, 2013). Thanks to the

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<sup>31</sup> Corrado Oddi, Italian Water Movements Forum's secretariat and CGIL, interview with the authors, Rome, 14 September 2012.

collaboration with Ugo Mattei, the occupants created the Foundation Teatro Valle as a Commons to self-govern and manage the theatre. In other cases, water activists shared and introduced into different social struggles the experience of the Forum. For instance, Attac and Forum activist Marco Bersani together with Luca Martinelli, a journalist expert on water issues, have been among the main promoters of the Forum for a new public finance. Moreover, within the Forum there have been several attempts to unify these and others struggles under the idea of the 'commons movement' (Mattei, 2013; Fattori, 2013) or 'the democracy of the commons' (Bersani, 2011). Thus previous existing struggles such as the NO TAV/Turin-Lyon high-speed railways opposition were reframed along the commons narrative (Zucchetti, 2013).

Highly disputed within the Forum itself, and less successful, have been the attempts to capitalise on the experience and the consensus around water as commons in the institutional political sphere. For instance, Ugo Mattei has been among the promoters of a new political party/subject for the commons called ALBA – Alleanza Lavoro, Beni Comuni e Ambiente (Alliance for Labour, the Commons and the Environment) ahead of the 2013 national elections, which in the end was not formalised. During the 2013 local elections different water activists joined local parties and coalitions named after the commons, among bitter debates within the Forum as recalled by activist Mariangela Rosolen.

I personally believe that the idea of a Commons Party is foolish. We told them that they would have not gone far and the elections results later confirmed we were right. That was an instrumental use of the commons. But as a movement we are different, we cannot and should not follow the logics and the practices of political parties.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, the understanding of water as a commons beyond the state and the market, with its emphasis on direct participation and "the fundamental claims of the commons movement: sharing, decommodification and self-management" (Fattori, 2013: 383) informed also the internal practices of the movement and its self-representation. Marco Bersani describes, for instance, the Forum internal principles and practices as being radically alternative to other models for collective action – such as the traditional political parties. He points at the decentralised and territorial structure that makes possible a broader participation, at the substitution of the practice of delegation with a process of ongoing consultation among the activists, and at the rule of consensus as the main decision-making method (Bersani, 2011: 100).

## **CONCLUSION: COMMONALITIES, AMBIGUITIES AND THE POLITICS OF THE COMMONS**

The Italian case indicates the commons as a powerful reference for holding together a plurality of actors, ideological backgrounds, political claims and initiatives. This reference proved effective in obtaining the unprecedented victory of the 2011 referendum, in shaping the water movement's identity and in inspiring other mobilisations. Our analysis suggests that this is largely due to the polysemy of the commons. We have identified three understandings of the commons – emphasising respectively universality, locality and participation – which inform different political claims coexisting, overlapping and sometimes competing within the Italian water movement.

In this section we discuss not only the commonalities between these three different understandings and claims but also the ambiguities beneath them, and we conclude by pointing at the theoretical and practical implications of this polysemy.

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<sup>32</sup> Mariangela Rosolen, Turin local Water Committee and ATTAC activist, interview with the authors, Turin, 4 June 2012.



## Commonalities

There are several elements that recur throughout the historical trajectory of the movement and that are shared by the different understandings of the commons. First of all, by referring to water as a commons, the Italian water movement expresses and legitimises the refusal of water commodification and water services privatisation, in line with global water struggles.

Second, in the Italian case, the reference to the commons entails a critique of the traditional understanding and practices of representative democracy, including the expression of distrust *vis-à-vis* the national political elite (Belotti, 2015). By referring to the commons, activists suggest the need to shift the focus from the state/national governments towards other actors, scales and modes of governance: humankind and international institutions, territory and local authorities, citizens and the practices of direct participation.

Third, the systematic reference to water as human right *and* commons within the Italian water movement, with the two notions intermingling and being used to support the same political agenda, reinforce those analyses that understand the human rights and the commons approaches as complementary rather than antithetical in terms of political logics and strategies (Miroso and Harris, 2012; Bywater, 2012; Perera, 2015). In the discourse of the Italian water movement the commons are theorised as a prerequisite for the fulfilment of fundamental human rights such as water (Rodotà, 2012; Lucarelli, 2013). Moreover, activists have been motivated by a moral understanding of human rights, rather than a mere legal or technical one, and considered privatising the commons as a violation of the universal right to water (Mazzoni and Cicognani, 2013).

Fourth, in all the three understandings the commons overlap and mingle with the idea of public governance and management of water services. This is partly due to the specific features of water services in Italy – highly capital- and knowledge-intensive – that seem to limit the options for alternative institutional settings and direct community management. Thus activists acknowledge that

the terrain of the commons and the 'public' are much more interwoven than appears to be the case when one remains hanging in the theory (...) it is also true that in many cases access to basic commons takes place only through public services, which are now being reclaimed by the social movements as commons (Fattori, 2013: 385).

At the same time, while we have underlined that these understandings coexist and overlap in the experience of the Italian water movement, we also suggest that the notion of the commons has evolved throughout the history of the movement according to political contingency and actors taking the lead. The three understandings vary in degree of legitimacy and effectiveness in orientating the movement's strategy and practices and in contributing to its main achievements: the first one being particularly important in laying the foundation of the movement, the second one less structured and visible but equally significant in organising political action at the local level, and the third one highly influential in the aftermath of the referendum and instrumental in transforming water into a 'cornerstone' (Fattori, 2013) or 'paradigmatic battle' (Bersani, 2011) for the commons and democracy.

## Ambiguities

Different understandings of the commons imply also different ways of approaching water as a resource or different stands on the public-private continuum in water governance.

For instance, through the idea of 'water as a commons of humankind', activists prompted patterns of water resocialisation, pointing at the need to rediscover the universality and materiality of water as a natural resource essential for life, together with its socio-cultural dimensions and its centrality in shaping territories, societies and ecosystems. Thus they mobilised a plurality of knowledge and forms of expression, involving artists to make these dimensions more visible by dint of theatre pieces, and videos and photo exhibitions. Activists also collaborated with religious leaders and groups to emphasise

the symbolic and spiritual dimensions of water as God's gift, and thus reinforcing and further legitimising the claims against its commodification and privatisation. The emphasis on the broader cultural and symbolic meanings of water and on the moral issues linked to its governance has proven effective in ensuring popular support among the public opinion (Mazzoni and Cicognani, 2013) and in widening the participation to the referendum campaign by individuals and groups external to the movement (Fantini, 2014).

However, this emphasis coexists with the approach inspiring the majority of the movement's initiatives, which narrow water to the mere issue of water services and understand it mainly from a juridical perspective. The preferred resort to legal frameworks and instruments to organise the struggle marginalised other knowledge and approaches (cultural, ecological, ethical) and ultimately limited the capacity of the movement to develop a more radical critique of the industrial water governance and management system.

A second – more contentious – example of these ambiguities is the tension between the different meanings associated with the idea of privatisation and with the nature of public services. These issues clearly emerged in the aftermath of the 2011 referendum, with the debate on what re-municipalisation entails in terms of the legal status of water utilities. On one side, sections of the movement and particularly the local authorities are mainly concerned with the ownership and control of water, which in most cases can be satisfied with public utilities in houses operating under private law. On the other side, the official position of the Forum after the referendum has been to advocate for a more radical re-municipalisation, implying the transformation of public utilities into special agencies under public law. This was, for instance, the goal of the citizens' initiative bills promoted locally in the aftermath of the referendum in different cities and towns to transform local water utilities from private law companies into public law agencies. While successful in collecting the requested citizens' signatures, the great majority of these bills have not received any follow-up or were rejected by a vote of the local assemblies because the movement failed in finding enough institutional support and allies within local authorities. Similar tensions emerged also in the implementation 'from below' of the cutting of the profit rate in water services tariffs in compliance with the second question of the 2011 referendum. While the Forum strongly advocated for revising the water tariffs, local authorities and public utilities were more cautious in doing that. Here the main divide is whether or not, and eventually up to which extent, water as a commons should be managed according to economic principles and markets logics, even when in 'public hands'. In these episodes, the water movement revealed its variegated nature in terms of political perspectives and agendas of its components.

### **The politics of the commons**

Overall, the notion of the commons has been significant in terms of transforming people's views about water by re-socialising its symbolic and cultural dimensions, and inspiring political struggles such as the one culminating with the referendum. It has, however, had limited practical impact in terms of implementing alternative water services policies, governance and management. This is related to the fact that the initiatives of the water movement clashed with more powerful political agendas and economic interests, as well as with the current legal framework and technical dimension of water management in Italy. Our analysis suggests, in addition, that the polysemy of the commons, allowing to hold together heterogeneous claims, generates some ambiguities within the water movement, reflected in the difficulty to translate those claims into a coherent political project and alternative institutional frameworks for water governance and management. The wave of enthusiasm that followed the referendum victory left little space for a critical assessment of these ambiguities by scholars and activists.

Through the idea of the politics of the commons we aim at stimulating such critical reflection. With this expression we intend a peculiar political strategy fostered by a rather fluid interpretation of the

concept of the commons. Thus the reference to water as a commons legitimises a plurality of claims on various issues – international solidarity, local government, political participation – beyond water governance and management. This is not a mere rhetorical issue of political alignment. The commons' vocabulary allows making sense of different activists' experiences, to (re)invent new collective identities, and to connect them with other national or international mobilisations. At the same time, the ambiguities characterising the politics of the commons challenge the idea of a homogeneous 'commons movement' which in some scholars' analysis (Bailey and Mattei, 2013; Lucarelli, 2013) and activists' aspirations (Bersani, 2011; Fattori, 2013) should unify a plurality of struggles into the 'democracy of the commons'.

Through the idea of the politics of the commons we suggest that water as a commons can mean different things at the same time in the same place. Even within a single mobilisation, the commons can legitimise and hold together a plurality of grievances, cultural backgrounds and political claims, not necessarily intimately coherent, and sometimes recurring to water to advance broader political projects.

From a theoretical perspective, this reinforces the call for more situated analysis of how commons and human rights approaches are used in different water struggles (Sultana and Loftus, 2015). It also suggests the need to think about the commons in more fluid ways, acknowledging the role of contingency and subjectivities in shaping anti-privatisation struggles and in making these struggles not necessarily coherent with the analytical categories usually applied for studying the commons.

From a practical perspective, activists should acknowledge this fluidity too. As pointed also by Karen Bakker (Bakker, 2008), water struggles would benefit from a more critical reflection on the strength and limits of different understandings of the commons. The Italian case shows how the polysemy of the commons has proven not only effective in unifying and holding together a plurality of actors and claims, but also more problematic in terms of identifying and implementing alternative water governance frameworks.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We wish to acknowledge the Italian water activists for participating in our research, as well as the anonymous reviewers and the Water Governance Chair Group at UNESCO-IHE Institute for Water Education for their comments on the previous versions of this manuscript. Chiara Carrozza acknowledges the support of the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (FCT) for the fellowship SFRH/BPD/73278/2010. Usual disclaimers apply.

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