

# **Commons : a Ukrainian left-wing collective intellectual**

Thursday 18 May 2023, by [Commons](#), [LE TRÉHONDAT Patrick](#) (Date first published: 14 May 2023).

**One of the paradoxes of the war in Ukraine is that some of us have discovered the existence of an active left and a critical and creative thinking in Ukraine that we have ignored for too many years (and of which the author of these lines is a part). Amongst our revelations, the Commons, journal of social criticism is certainly one of the most important and productive places for us to understand the situation in Ukraine [and in the world]. It publishes its articles in Ukrainian, English and Russian. Today Commons is a reference website for critical thinking on the European left. While the site deals with issues specific to Ukraine, it is open to the world. One of its recent initiatives is the “Dialogues of the peripheries” that it wants to open, the objective being that “resistance to the capitalist system should be a way to find alternative solutions for all countries of the global periphery. To this end, we are initiating a common independent dialogue with activists from different regions, from Latin America to East Asia.”**

**Commons was founded in 2009. Under what circumstances, by whom and why was it founded?**

At that point, Ukraine already had a certain ecosystem of left-wing organisations, ranging from anarchists to various kinds of Marxists. Their activities included, e.g., a campaign against the new Labour Code or protests against real estate developers illegally seizing public space. There were also a number of left-wing online resources. Founders of Commons, for the most part, belonged to or sympathised with one or several of these initiatives. However, they were not satisfied with the quality of political analysis that was typical for the leftist milieu in Kyiv at that time. Many of these people were students or researchers, some already exposed to Marxist discussions and texts through Western universities, which were much more sophisticated and up-to-date than the texts discussed by activists in Ukraine. So, initially these people launched a mailing list that they called “leftist thought” to hold informed politically engaged discussions. Soon they decided to start a website that would popularise global socially critical thought among a wider population. First publications were almost exclusively translations. Gradually, we started producing our own texts as well, and soon we launched a paper journal. The idea behind it was to have something akin to a proper academic journal, with peer review and high intellectual standards, but independent from all academic bureaucracy. Some of these founders are still in the team, with others we have parted ways. The paper journal does not exist anymore. But the general idea is still the same: to produce and distribute high-quality, politically engaged social analysis.

**More generally, in addition to denouncing the damage of the global capitalist system, it seems that you are seeking to highlight the alternatives that are being built here and now and in the more specific context of colonised societies on the periphery of the capitalist system. Is this concern an effect of the situation in Ukraine? Why ?**

It is clear that Ukraine is a peripheral country, and that this fact cannot be ignored in developing social analysis and political strategies. While the initial impulse behind Commons was to familiarise the post-Soviet public with Western thought, we never intended to stop at this unidirectional transmission. We learn a lot from our Western comrades, but we feel that they also have a lot to learn from peripheral locations of knowledge production. We also feel that we need an independent exchange of experiences and perspectives with other peripheral countries. Same goes for the revolution vs the “here and now” perspective: the two need to be combined, otherwise the anticapitalist rhetoric remains shallow and general, just as “practical solutions” do not lead us anywhere without a wider radical perspective.

**And so you are very interested in the situations and experiences of social movements in Latin America, Africa, Asia? This may seem paradoxical for a European country?**

After the start of full-scale war, we realized that what we knew and published about peripheral countries was often written by Western left-wing authors, or those from the Global South who have long lived in the West. The same played out in the Ukrainian case - when attention suddenly focused on our society, those were often Western people whose perspective on the Russian invasion was the loudest and often the most valued. Even if they have never dealt with Ukrainian context before. Unfortunately, this was also true for the leftists discussion, though leftists are supposed to care about hierarchies, power relations, context and representations. At the same time, the war contributed to the emergence of new contacts with leftists all over the world. We decided that a more direct dialogue with progressive forces in the “Global South” was needed.

Ukrainian society has been repeating the slogan “Ukraine is Europe” for a decade. The insistency with which it is being constantly repeated makes one wonder whether those who keep proclaiming it are not trying to convince themselves of something not really evident. It is of little interest to state handbook facts, according to which the European continent stretches until the Urals and the Caspian Sea. In the social reality that we live in, “Europe” stands for one of the richest regions of the world, dominating much of the rest of the planet politically and economically. There are also numerous inequalities inside the imagined “Europe”. Claiming that Ukraine is a part of this prosperous and powerful bloc would be presumptuous. Hence, a reality of Ukrainian society, built into and global capitalist hierarchies as a periphery, lament for materialist analysis, instead of idealistic, and sometimes racist proclamation of Ukraine being the part of “European civilization”. Europe remains of course an important point of reference, as we are anyway situated in the region and Ukrainian history and current events are deeply related with the neighboring countries. But it is useful to reflect on our place in “European hierarchies and to decenter our optics and look for productive comparisons or shared experiences elsewhere, in equally peripheral places, to find our common ways and to challenge the existing exploitative system of global inequalities.

**On the situation in Ukraine, many articles are published. What are the specificities of your publications on this subject? What are the main concerns of your choice of articles? What do you say that others do not?**

Well, we differ from foreign left-wing publications in that we are a Ukrainian media, and from Ukrainian ones in that we are one of the few left-wing media in Ukraine. As any progressive leftists would agree - it is important to give voices to the people on the ground and, hence, we are voicing our perspective and are trying to give voice to different groups and experiences from Ukraine. Unlike many other media from Ukraine, we, as a left media, consider the topics of current inequalities, exploitation and path to a more egalitarian and just society to be the most important.

**What place does Marxism have in your thinking?**

This is probably a question that each member of the editorial board should answer individually. Some of us are Marxists, but not all of us, and among the journal's co-founders and former editors there were people of various views, including anarchists. Though a materialist approach to reality is what unites all the editors.

We have translated the works of many Marxist authors, such as Perry Anderson, Étienne Balibar, Tithi Bhattacharya, Hal Draper, David Harvey, Nancy Fraser, Michael Löwy, Marcel van der Linden, Nicos Poulantzas, Beverly J. Silver, Enzo Traverso, Erik Olin Wright to name a few. At the same time, we translated anarchist authors, such as David Graeber and Peter Gelderloos, and just progressive scholars, such as Randall Collins and Pierre Bourdieu. We also pay special attention to the intellectual legacy of Roman Rosdolsky, one of the most prominent Ukrainian Marxists.

**You have edited the paper magazine Commons. Its last issue was in December 2019. Why did you stop?**

It requires a lot of time and effort, and there is not much benefit from it. Though it allowed us to provide a more holistic approach to a selected topic and to engage the most active people into leftist perspective, online publications allow us to reach out more people and to pursue an attempt to make a more general shift in public discussion. In addition, while our issues were thematic, usually a particular topic was of interest to only a portion of the editorial board, while the rest were less involved. In the end, we are deeply appreciating that experience and some of us have a bit of nostalgic feeling toward printed issues, but at some point we have decided to move forward.

**On your website you offer books for free download (e.g. Who will look after the children? Kindergartens in the context of gender inequality; A future without capitalism; Cybernetics and democratic economic governance for example). Do you plan to publish your own books in the future?**

These books (some of them being rather research reports, others - edited volumes) came into being as a result of a particular interest and engagement of some of the editors in leading the publication or making a research. Some of them were also edited by people outside Commons, but with whom we share common ideas and visions.

We are currently preparing an important book on the results of the special project on [Just Transition](#). It will be available in Ukrainian and adapted for an English-speaking audience.

**In your presentation, you say "The editorial board shares egalitarian and anti-capitalist views. That is why in our publications we discuss how to change society so that there is no room for exploitation, inequality and discrimination." How does this translate in your functioning, and in the choice of your articles?**

Of course, our ideological standing influences the choice of articles. We cannot say that we publish only authors who have the same ideological standing, as we do. Yes, most of our publications come from like-minded people. But we also sometimes publish pieces, with which we agree, though the frame of the article is not necessarily leftist - nevertheless it should, of course, contain nothing contrary to our beliefs, like racism, elitist sentiments, misogyny, market-based approach and so on. The idea to construct a dialogue with peripheral experiences is coming directly from our views. It is important for us to push forward the equal voice of women and give the perspective of workers. In our everyday work we are aware of the different and often unequal situations of editors and external people, with whom we cooperate. We are aware that some of us have full-time jobs to support their living, we take into account that some have care obligations, which have a significant impact on their working time and schedule.

## **Since the start of the full-scale war on 24 February 2022, how have you been working and how has this changed your publishing policy?**

In the first months of the invasion, we switched almost completely to an international audience, although before that we paid little attention to the English version of the site. We felt it important to engage into regional and global leftists debates about Russian invasion, and to promote our perspective on what genuine internationalism and solidarity means in a situation like this. When the discussion about the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine started sometime in summer 2022, we considered it important to promote the idea of just reconstruction. By the end of the previous year we consolidated the idea of the dialogues of the peripheries, though it was under internal discussion for some months already. This makes the English-language publications continuously important for us and we are trying to translate a big portion of our texts and planning to do it further. We also have built and continue building connections with different progressive media and activists from other countries and this helps to increase the variety of authors and perspectives. From a more organizational perspective, we also have to alter a lot. Personal situations of many of our editors and authors have changed because of the full-scale invasion. Some had to move inside Ukraine, some had to flee abroad, some went to the army, some became enforced single mothers (due to Ukrainian government's restriction on border mobility for men). Our work in spring 2022 was a bit chaotic as the general and personal circumstances had been constantly changing. Now the situation is settled to an extent and we work together mostly using online-communication. Paradoxically, the COVID-19 pandemic has prepared us for this from a technical and practical point of view.

## **Do you have relationships with other websites in Europe or internationally?**

We have numerous relationships with different media, mostly in Europe, but also in the US, Latin America etc. We are members of the East European networks ELMO and cooperate with others from time to time. We have far lesser contacts with media from similarly peripheral countries, outside Eastern Europe or Latin America. But we also have some plans and ideas, which we are now working on together with other people in order to facilitate communication and cooperation worldwide.

Since the full-scale invasion began, we have seen a doubling in the number of websites which have translated, reprinted or linked to our publications in their articles. In one year, this number has grown to almost 2,000 sites worldwide. And the number of active backlinks to our publications rose 5 times to more than 150 thousand.

Some of the media have taken our permission and sent us translations of articles. But the majority of them do it themselves. And we welcome this kind of distribution.

So the articles of the journal, especially on the Russian-Ukrainian war, which we started to publish actively in English, started to influence the political discussions in other countries around the world.

## **How many readers do you have? How many people visit your website?**

We have our own stable core audience. Overall, the site is read by about 30,000 readers a month. About half of them are foreign audiences, which have doubled since the invasion began. We also spread our ideas and values through social media, using shorter and more accessible formats. In such a way we are aiming to reach younger people, creating highlights of articles in the [Instagram](#) account and on [Twitter](#), for example.

The website [Commons](#)

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## **Commons**

**Patrick Le Tréhondat**

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