

“The Commons: Past and Present”
Crete – Lodz – Lyon partnership
BIP 2025 Crete

Scientific and educational proposal
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The Blended Intensive Programme partnership between the Universities of Lumière Lyon 2, Lodz and Crete has successfully organised two BIP editions in Lyon, in 2023 and 2024, under the pedagogical coordination of Monica Martinat, Professor of Modern History at Université Lumière Lyon 2. The themes, “European Citizenships” (2023) and “Mobilities and Migrations through Time” (2024), always pertinent to contemporary European societies, but with emphasis on a distinct historical dimension, were chosen with the aim to promote interdisciplinary interaction between both teachers and students.

In 2025 the relay will pass to the University of Crete and the third edition of this BIP partnership will be organized by the Department of History and Archaeology of Crete University at Rethymno in February-April 2025. The theme of the 2025 programme, “The Commons, Past and Present”, adheres to the interdisciplinary approach and to issues of particular relevance for contemporary societies, which can only be understood in all their complexity if investigated over time, in a historical perspective.

In a general way, we can define the commons as the natural (and, in contemporary times increasingly also cultural) resources belonging and/or accessible to the members of a society, to varying degrees independently of whether they are owned privately or publicly. The difficulty of a comprehensive definition arises from shifting notions of the commons through time. Attention to the emergence and change of commons in the long run unavoidably calls for historians to work together and to join their methodologies with scholars from other social sciences in a concerted analysis of resilient collective action. By laying emphasis on development over the long run, and the overall context in which collective action unfolds and individuals interact, the historical perspective is essential to the knowledge of how the commons and their governance evolve through time. Interdisciplinary dialogue with colleagues from the social sciences – sociology, economics, political science and law – is indispensable for building an analytical structure, leading to novel interpretations of the commons, the common and public good, their affinities and differences and their pertinence in a changing world.

The Commons have a long pedigree. They are a familiar notion to historians of medieval and early modern Europe, encompassing the exploitation of common farmland, pastures, forests, waste, watercourses and irrigation systems, fisheries, rights of passage, multi-layered land possession; but also the coordination of collective action for the protection of common interests in self-governed institutions that ranged from guilds to communities; and notions such as social harmony and consensus. The *raison d'être* of the commons was strongly contested by Enlightenment philosophers and political economists, who saw them as examples of backwardness that hindered the ideal of a social contract, of secure property rights and free trade, of the abolition of protectionism and monopolies. In the nineteenth century, in the wake of Romanticism and emerging nationalisms, European historiography displayed a renewed interest in the commons, but kept them captive of an idealising ethnographic approach. As a result, their potential towards resource redistribution and conservation for future generations was temporarily set aside.

Unquestionably, thanks to their criticism, Enlightenment intellectuals ushered European societies and politics into the modern and contemporary era, and the reproof of the commons culminated in the central decades of the twentieth century, with convincing arguments borrowed from biology, as encapsulated in Hardin's famous 1968 essay *The Tragedy of the Commons*. In subsequent years, numerous studies opposed this approach, the main argument being that specific norms and rules can safeguard scarce or finite resources for future generations. In the first two decades of the third millennium, the subject has aroused interest with renewed intensity. In the era of climate crisis and the Internet, the notion of the commons expands to include, besides conventional natural resources, common-pool resources such as fish stocks, great infrastructures, utilities such as electricity and water, welfare and education, the landscape (natural and urban) and more generally the environment, and last but not least knowledge – to include the Internet and related technologies (“digital commons”). The extension of the term's scope, which tends to overlap with the concepts of common, public and state goods, has led many contemporary thinkers to see it as instrumental to a better understanding of participating and responsible democracy.

We will approach the commons in different ways, with the overall objective to inform a group of predominantly undergraduate students from four different countries (the three countries of our partnership – France, Poland, Greece – and Italy).

1. First and foremost, the aim is to examine the issue in an interdisciplinary manner. We are bringing together students and researchers from the fields of history, economics, sociology, political science and law; they will present and discuss different aspects of the Programme's theme based on their disciplines and academic practices. All participants, students and teachers, will put together and have access to a common body of reference works, which will enable us to build a common base of information and knowledge during the online part of the programme, and to share and discuss during the in-presence week on Crete. As in the previous activities of the partnership, interdisciplinarity and the long-term perspective create added value to this common effort.
2. European policy concerns will figure prominently in our common effort. The challenges of a global economy and of climate change have urged the European Union to adopt policies for a sustainable and resilient use of EU's natural resources¹, and to conclude a partnership on Land, Natural Resources and Conflict Prevention with the UN². These endeavours are of general consideration.
3. Aiming at offering a comprehensive understanding of the topic to a group of international students, we will combine activities that offer an overview in the disciplines mentioned above, with presentations of specific case studies, which will allow students to experiment with how the various aspects of the concept of the commons are articulated, interact with society and evolve over time and across frontiers. A representative example is water.
4. The organisation of a BIP on the Commons at the University of Crete is of particular importance. An island in the Eastern Mediterranean, Crete is at the crux of climate change and finite natural resources, and consequently at the centre of debates about a sustainable and resilient management of resources, the landscape and its heritage. The Programme will be an opportunity to connect with local society, local authorities and their concerns, by

¹ https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/a2a71c6d-1dec-41bb-b2ee-51c1cb35d3f4_en?filename=Communication%20on%20Sustainable%20Use%20of%20Natural%20Resources.pdf

² <https://www.un.org/en/land-natural-resources-conflict/offer/eu-un-partnership-offer.shtml>

organising a discussion on current challenges such as the rural economy, sustainable tourism and the management of natural resources of common interest such as water and the landscape in an era of changing ecological balances.

This Blended Intensive Programme brings together different modalities of educational activities. The main division is between the virtual component and the in-presence week.

1. The virtual component will take place between late February and late March. It will consist of six (6) meetings with a duration of two hours each, to be conducted by the teaching staff of the participating institutions. It will fulfil the following objectives:
 - a. To allow the students to meet each other and to organize their individual and group work. The first online session will be dedicated to building the student teams.
 - b. To offer four lectures, each taught by colleagues from the participating universities, devoted to exploring the Commons from the vantage point of a specific discipline (history, sociology, politics and law, economics), followed by a debate with the participation of students and teachers. This will allow the BIP team to build a common stock of information, knowledge, arguments and bibliography, which will be put in good use during the week on Crete.
 - c. The sixth online session will aim at organizing the students in groups by country and at assigning tasks for a first round of student presentations during the week on Crete. Effort will be made to ensure that students do their homework and are prepared not only for their presentations but also for a discussion when they meet in person.
2. An in-presence week on Crete in early April. This will bring together all participants, students and staff. Various activities will be planned.
 - a. Lectures and discussions by professors, researchers and local authority representatives, to elaborate on specific themes and a variety of viewpoints.
 - b. A first round of presentations by students, of the work prepared in “national” groups in the weeks preceding the in-presence component.
 - c. Guided visits to selected locations of interest with respect to the Programme’s theme.
 - d. Organization of students in new, thematic rather than national groups, following the interdisciplinary interests of the Programme. The students are expected to prepare presentations and hold the final debate on the last day of the week on Crete, with the help of their teachers and of the material accumulated during the virtual component.
 - e. The Programme will culminate with the final debate on the last day. With the assistance and under the supervision of their teachers and other participating researchers, and guided by the specific themes that each team will have been assigned to prepare, the students will be the main participants in a debate on four or five topics related to the scientific disciplines chosen to study the Commons, but also of acute interest to contemporary society. The aim is to train the students to discuss following a concrete methodology, with academic arguments, but also connected to heated contemporary issues such as the finite nature of some natural resources, economic and environmental resilience, participating democracy, issues of development and cultural heritage.