

**Transcript of Podcast Episode #52 with
Safouan Azouzi,
Tunisian scholar of the commons and social design
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OPENING QUOTATION

One local told me we are exporting our water in the form of fruits and dates. So what we lost when we lost water, when locals were dispossessed by French and then by the independent state from the management of water, the whole system around commoning that were disrupted, not only around water, all the mutual aid solidarity thing disappeared or is disappearing. So it's a memory of the commons, a memory of the water. So it's no longer there. I'm talking about commons in crisis, not the tragedy of commons.

SPEAKER

This is Frontiers of Commoning, with David Bollier. [00:46]

BOLLIER: Today we'll be talking about desert oases in Africa as commons, the global south search for a new vision of development, and the role of commoning and design in shaping new futures. My guest, an expert in all of these topics, is Safouan Azouzi, a Tunisian scholar of the commons and design who focuses especially on global south perspectives and decolonial thinking. Raised in Tunisia amidst traditional farming and water commons, Safi has witnessed the destructive power of extractivist capitalism and water dispossession in his country. So in his doctoral studies at Sapienza University in Rome, he explored the potential of participatory design and commons to help revive ancient common practices in the oases of Northern Africa.

He has also studied how capitalist development policies are causing ecological collapse and social disruption in many parts of the Global South. Safi is now completing a year-long postdoctoral fellowship at the Harvard Center for Middle Eastern Studies and the Graduate School of Design. Welcome, Safi. I'm really thrilled that you're joining me.

AZOUZI: Well, thank you for the invitation. I'm happy to be here.

BOLLIER: From your upbringing in Tunisia and your research, you know quite a bit about oases in the desert of Africa. And I suspect that most Westerners regard oases simply as natural havens of water in a very dry, expansive desert. Tell me more about how oases really should be considered commons.

AZOUZI: Oases are artificial, cultivated spaces in arid zones. That's right. But they adopted for millennia complex social organization of solidarity and mutual aid with common practices, not only

around water. So water from an Australian point of view is the common pool resource, but it's not the only common. So it's much more ah like a relational thing. So we had practices of mutual aid with specific words for each practice. We have, for example, the word *Raghataa*. In other oases, it would be *Maaouna*. *Maaouna* is from the Arabic word aid, like help. So *Raghataa*, I don't know exactly the word origin. Maybe it's Berber. [03:11] The original population of North Africa actually...because these oasis, like I said, they have like 2000, 3000 years old.

What they used to do is, for example, if I rebuild my fence, my neighbors would gather and rebuild my fence with me. In my plot, that is a private property, but it's a private open property. It's both a closed and an open space in a way between each plot. We have these *seguias*, these canals. distributing the water and this space is in a way a public space. It's a common space where many things happen. So we have wild vegetables that would grow around and we have insects in there and we have birds that would go in there. So the distribution of the water would happen before from a water chief.

The water chief is a chosen person, elected person between the community that would distribute on an hourly rate the water. [04:10] between the plots depending on how much the plot is big. So they would submerge the plot with this water and each plot is also divided in rectangles and different areas. We have the three layers in the oasis. We have the palm tree layer that would shade the fruit trees layer that would in its turn shade the vegetable layer. Why do we have this? It's like in permaculture, we talk about the maintenance of the evapotranspiration.

So we talk about an oasis effect. If it's 40 degrees Celsius [104 degrees F.] in the desert, in the oasis, it would be like 30 C. [86 degrees F.], for example. And we just feel it whenever you go into the oasis, like from the first or second row of countries, you feel this ah humidity in a way. The idea is to maintain the moisture. The local word used for moisture [05:03] is the Arabic word for richness. So locals, we have we have the word humidity or moisture, but locals use another word in Arabic that means richness – *thra*, or *al thara*, that is richness So it's all about that moisture.

BOLLIER: Obviously you're sketching a ah vision of property that's very different from Western ideas of yeah absolute individual ownership and you can do whatever you want within the boundaries of your property because you're talking really what I've often thought about as relationalized property where it's kind of a porous boundary because there's a recognition that there's an interdependence that people have to honor to precisely, I love the idea of moisture as richness, yeah which of course is in a desert, what are you going to do with money?

AZOUZI: Exactly. So it is beyond romanticism and nostalgia. It wasn't a completely fair system with justice all around, like social justice. We had slaves for centuries, an essential part of the economy of these oases was slavery. But what we need to understand is that the idea of a heavenly place of greenery in the middle of the desert, the idea of an oasis as an island of greenery in the middle of nowhere where you could relax and have a good time is a colonial idea. It's a French colonial idea because [06:35]

And oasis is not like Battesti – Vincent Batesti is a geographer – who talks about oasis as nodes in a network. It reminds me of the concept of cosmopolitan localism. It's a hyper-productive node in a network. So like I said, it reminds me so much about permaculture. Also locals, they could use the word *Waba*, the Arabic word for oasis. They use in another word, *Ghaba*, that means forest.

That reminds me of the idea of food forests promoted by permaculturists. So they see it as a food forest where from an ecological, agricultural level, we should maintain the moisture, have the three layers, and produce more in the smallest area possible because of the scarcity of the water.

BOLLIER: In some ways, this is an engineered system, but not in the modern sense of engineering. It's more of a co-development, co-stewardship with the dynamics of nature itself. Because who would have thought that the desert could host a super node of moisture and luxuriant growth when it seems to be so dry?

AZOUZI: Yeah. But the problem is when French came, they said, this is a backward system. So they liked it in a way, many things. They liked the diversity of the production. All of this was for them something to maintain. But the problem was this customary traditional division of the resource and management of the resource.

So what happened is they replaced the water chief with an appointed person from the central state and they created this [08:17] AICs. That's an Association d'Intérêt Collectif (AIC), an Association of Collective Interest. And the water chief was no longer chosen by the community from the community. It was some someone else that would divide the water and the water was no longer a natural spring. It was, we were digging for water in the deep aquifer. And here's what, when all starts.

So private property and extractivism. This is what what happened with French. And so, of course, the priority becomes more productivity, more extraction to make more money as opposed to the sustainability and the natural dynamics of the of the ecosystem. Yeah, exactly. The idea is to have a more productive farm, but then they chose, for example, one breed, one variety of countries, not because it produced the best variety of dates, but it was because the date that this date is called Deglet Nour, so the date of light. It's produced both in Algeria and Tunisia, and it's one of the most appreciated breeds of dates, but I think it's much more of a imaginary promotion marketing happening for a centuries for a century now. But it was the easiest to stock and the easiest to transport because the whole Tunisian economy was an export economy toward the Metropolis, France.

So what happens is after independence we continue with the same system. One local told me we are exporting our water in the form of fruits and dates. The thing is after independence [10:01] we lost the three layers. We lost the three layers and we had only monocultural variety, so we had the need to use chemicals, the need to use fertilizers, because we disrupted the whole thing around moisture maintenance and that resilience. This is one thing.

The second thing is, like I said, There is always a focus on the agricultural level and the ecological level whenever we talk about oasis. And we are always overlooking the socio-economical part that is around commoning. So what we lost when we lost water, when locals were dispossessed by the French and then by the independent state, from the management of water, what we had is the whole system around commoning that were disrupted. [10:46] Not only around water, all the mutual aid solidarity thing disappeared or is disappearing in a way. So it's ah a memory of the commons, a memory of the water. It's no longer there.

So for example, in my hometown, Gabes, we have many oasis, three principal oasis that were sharing one river. So the oasis of Gabes is a coastal oasis. I think it's the only one. It should be like

a UNESCO heritage thing, but it's the only coastal city in Tunisia that is perpendicular to the sea, the shoreline. And why? Because it's it followed the river. It followed the *Wadi* (or *Ouadi*) that is a dry river prehistoric river where we have water sources going out naturally and the locals would divide this water. We had three different oasis. So three different communities sharing this water. [11:38]

A little story I would love to tell you is that once a year before the monsoon the three communities would gather and clean the bed of the river so it would be like a festival with women cooking for everybody and adults going in there with a shovel and if the adult can't go he would send two of his sons and they would clean the bed of the river going from an oasis to the other following backward, the river, until they arrive to what they call *Ras Laayoun*, the head of the sources. So we have two big sources in there and they would rebuild what they call the falling dam. It has to fall. And this system has been there for 2,000 years. It's from the Roman times.

Why is it a falling dam? Because when the monsoon happens, the water, if it was a dam with concrete or with something stable, not with mud, the water would overflow and go and destroy all the oasis below. But then if we had the falling dam, the water would go into another river that is always shared by the three communities. So this ingenious management of water maintained the social fabric not only between one community and one oasis, but between three of them.

And this, when we had in the '70s, the Tunisian chemical group producing chemical fertilizers for the agro-industry worldwide. So the phosphate is extracted and in another oasis, Gafsa, a mountain oasis, and it is transported, it's the French that did this, and it's transported from Gafsa, this mountain oasis, to the coastal oasis of Gabes [13:27], where it is transformed into fertilizers. But in the whole process, they need to extract water, huge amounts of water, millions and millions of cubic meters of water. But then it's not only that, they're extracting the water.

So they're dispossessing locals from that resource. But then they're polluting the air and they're dumping like 18,000 tons of phosphor-gypsum in the sea.

BOLLIER: Wow.

AZOUZI: So it's a big ecological catastrophe in there. And for decades, because of the dictatorship, we couldn't talk about it. We couldn't discuss it. We couldn't question it in any way. So you have these old traditional oasis, Gafsa and Gabes, that are struggling because they are pumping the water, the little amount of water that remains for them. But then the division of the water -- that [14:26] scarce water is happening no longer in a common way because they're paying for that. So I need to pay five dinars or 10 dinars to have that water going to my field. So we're no longer talking about agriculture, really. We are much more talking about gardening in these oases.

But in the middle of the desert, in two other regions, the Jerid and the Nefzawa region, we have two other issues. In Nefzawa, for example, we passed from water commoning to water contest to a race for water between the locals. And it's a huge area of like 60,000 hectares. So it's a big, big, if you so see it from satellite, you see we're greening the desert. It's like, it's becoming green.

Is it positive? No, not at all. because [15:16] what's happening is we have these illicit extensions made by small farmers and big capitalist investors. What's happening is, like I said, the French came in and they said, 'Oh, the old ways of doing with the three layers is good, but not good

enough. So we need to have like one tree, one palm tree every ten meters. So we would have like 100 palm trees in one hectare. When you consider traditional oasis, we have like 200, 250 palm trees in one hectare to maintain the moisture. But then we have this [15:52] division like this, and we need to use fertilizers, we need to use chemicals, and we need to pump the water from the water ground.

But what happened is, who's dividing this water? Like I said, the AIC guy. But after independence in the '60s, we had a socialist experiment in Tunisia. The state made these cooperatives and these new extensions, all state initiatives, dividing the land and distributing it to the locals. Why did they do that? It's a process that started with French people and continued with a modern, independent Tunisian state. They wanted to fix nomads, because locals in there were semi-nomads living six months in the oasis and six months into the desert. But then we cannot control them. So we need to fix them.

BOLLIER: It sounds like this whole regime is about creating a regimented market regime for maximum monetization and output. Yeah. And of course, done mostly [16:52] in disregard for the natural ecological imperatives that had created oases in the first place. And here we are today with a global capitalism, even supercharging what colonialism had done before.

AZOUZI: Exactly. Exactly. That's what's happening. And the thing is in the other oasis zone, that I'm talking about, it's tourism. So if it's not agro-industry, if it's not chemicals, it's then tourism.

And the final thing is we're dispossessing the locals from the management of their resource. But then the extreme response to this are the illicit extensions. I'm digging my own well and I'm searching for my own water. But then it's like a French gruyere, the cheese thing. [17:40] The water table has many holes.

Imagine each one having a straw and we're pumping all together the water. So the water table is going down in Nefzawa by three to five meters every year. And we're talking about fossil water, like prehistoric fossil water that is in common between Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. And everyone, they had an agreement to not dig in that water, but everyone is digging in it, you know?

BOLLIER: By converting everybody into an individual player, competing against each other, of course, that's always called the tragedy of the commons. But really, it's the tragedy of the market, because the commons was perfectly sustainable in having social agreements, social solidarity, even festivals to support the whole process.

AZOUZI: Yeah. [18:25]

BOLLIER: I love this whole story because it's such a clear parable for what's happening in so many other places around the world. Conversions of commons into competitive markets, capitalist markets.

AZOUZI: I think it's much more than that. It's also premonitory, a microcosm of what will happen for humanity in the next decades. We're talking about collapse, the perspective of collapse. The MIT researchers Donella and Dennis Meadows, in the 70s, they did this work called *The Limits to Growth*, and talking about the perspective of collapse in different scenarios. We're talking about the imminent collapse of Tunisian oases, not only Tunisian oases in the next 10, 15, maybe 20

years. So it's, like I said, pre-monitory. Collapse is not a sudden event that happens like that. It's a slow process. [19:24]

And so that's what we are witnessing in the oasis, if I go to locals in there and I talk about resilience, they would think we are already resilient. 'We are already resisting in a way. We are already surviving. So what are you talking about?' So it's essentially a system that I'm talking about commons in crisis, not the tragedy of commons.

BOLLIER: This is maybe a good moment to pivot towards your own scholarship and studies in Italy to learn about participatory design and commoning, all of which is kind of a different vision or at least a reinvention of an old vision for Tunisia and a lot of places. Tell me about how you got into design and what some of the lessons you learned from design and some of the limits of that whole discipline.

AZOUZI: It all started when I was a teenager. I loved drawing [20:23] and sketching. That was my passion. And I was passionate about cars, like many young boys. And what I did want to do is an automotive designer. So I went and studied in Tunis product design. There was no Bachelor's degree for automotive design, but it was about product design. And it coincided with the revolution in Tunisia.

I was 20, and there was much more in the street than at school. Then we had big discussions, political discussion, deep, deep dialogues around many issues in Tunisia and outside Tunisia. We had the World Social Forum happening there. That's when I had a direct confrontation with colonial studies and the colonial theories. [21:12]

In my school, we had this workshop made by the French network of research designers. So I didn't know about research in design, you know, and they were talking about the social design. That was a discovery because I read also Victor Papanek. Victor Papanek, he studied at the MIT, and he taught at the Rhode Island School of Design. He's an industrial designer, and he wrote a book called *Design for the Real World*. And essentially what he's doing is he's criticizing industrial design and graphic design, saying it's maybe the most dangerous job in the world because we're pushing people to consume, we're creating false needs. [21:55] And people would buy objects they don't need to get fancy with people that don't care. He's essentially the maybe the father of eco-design and social design, in a way. But what he recognized is stopping doing design.

I also read [Tomás] Maldonado. He's an Argentinian designer. He taught in Italy. He talks about the *Speranza progettuale*. That's 'hope through design,' maybe, if I want to translate. So they wrote the books in the same years, in the 70s, as the Meadows' *The Limits to Growth*. It all happened with the so-called oil crisis that we call something else in the South, you know? It's the war between Israel and Palestine and the Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. Think the second oil crisis is for us, the Iranian Revolution.

So it's the only [22:52] maybe in our modern history, the moment where the Arab countries or Muslim countries say 'no' to the West. And that's when the West says, 'Okay, this is not working. We need to change something. We need to change how we deal with the resource.' And that's where we had these eco-movements going all over the world. That's when I discovered that I have ethical issues with design and social design was kind of a response. [23:23]

So I was, okay, that's the one I want to do that. And why did I go to Italy? Because I wanted to go to, where Ezio Manzini, let's say the guru of design for social innovation. Italy has a long history with political design. We're talking about movements in the Sixties called 'anti-design' and 'radical design' – very politicized visions of design. And that's what I liked.

So I went to Sapienza [University of Rome]. I was accepted in different schools, but I chose Sapienza because of Rome, but also because there was a focus on design for social innovation. So what I did is, I studied product and service design, but with a focus on this social aspect. And my thesis was about migration, irregular migration between Tunisia and Italy, coincident with the rise of the far right parties in Italy. [24:19]

Working on this, the question was what design can do dealing with social problems like these. So what Manzini says is, design for social innovation produces responses to problems that neither the market nor the state has resolved. So that's what I like. That's what exactly what 'irregular migrants' are. So let's work on it. And I did my master's on this issue and went to the Netherlands, working for a social enterprise called Makers Unite that essentially deals with the social inclusion of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands. What they do is they take the life jackets [worn by migrants while on boats] from Lesbos. Yeah. So my Syrian migrants would throw these life jackets on, on the Greek islands when they arrive.

So we have these huge amounts of plastics on the shores. What they proposed here is to take these life jackets and they created this sharing space between locals, Dutch people, and Syrians. They would together cut up these life jackets and create new products – laptop sleeves, backpacks that would be sold on their platform online. And this money would finance the inclusion program. So they they learned Dutch. They have a social network. They [got to] know people. [25:37] They shared their stories and in a way, they were accepted by locals.

BOLLIER: So was it was a worthwhile project so far as it went, but of course you saw limitations in what it was doing.

AZOUZI: Exactly. What they call this design is 'design for the other 90%.' I am coming from the other 90% and I didn't like this idea of the helper and the helped that Fals Borda talks about, this idea of creating this hierarchy between the two.

For example, there are big NGOs using design thinking tools to go into Africa and South Asia, and help these poor population to show them the way, let's say. And my problem with sustainable development is that is not sustainable, it's development. I grew up in a country for 23 years of my life. I had one president. [26:29] and one TV. And everything was in purple because our president liked the purple color and everything is with the seven because he took power during the 7th of November 1987.

So the whole idea is that the West is the model to follow. The promise is that there is a train we should take to go to this development imaginary. Now we know with the Anthropocene, with the perspective of collapse, with the Sixth [mass] extinction perspective that the IPCC [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change] is talking about. Now we know that that train is going into a wall, that we shouldn't take that train. [Walter] Mignolo talks about "epistemic disobedience."

BOLLIER: What's meant by that term? How do you understand that term? [27:20]

AZOUZI: I understand it like this: We have three levels of crisis, what Asmanova calls metacrisis. So we have the ecological crisis that is, for me, coming from a value crisis -- not only the moral philosophical understanding of value, but also the Marxist understanding of value, value in an economical way.

We designers, we always talk about value chain, value creation, all of this, but then we never discuss about economy. And economists, neoclassical economists don't care about us because for them, we only are...

BOLLIER: Cleaning up the messes that created by The System.

AZOUZI: Exactly. So what we are doing is producing commodities. As I see it, design is an essential part of the commodification process done by design. And then we have researchers, Bianca Elzemberger and [Joanna] Boehnert, talking about design as 'symbolic violence.' [28:15]

So what design does is selling these ideas, selling these futures. That's why we talk about now 'smart cities.' So why, to adapt to climate change, should we have smart cities? Maybe we should have *low tech* cities. Maybe we should have troglodyte cities. Maybe we should have a mix of them, but why are you selling me Green Capitalism? Why are you telling me that we are all in the same boat? Yes, we are all in the same boat. But Tunisia, for example, participated in gas emission. We're talking about 0.02% of greenhouse emissions. So why should *we* [29:00] be implementing mitigation solutions, you know?

BOLLIER: You're sketching both a depressing and insightful picture. I guess the question facing us, and I think many people in the West share this with people in the South, is How can we break the yoke of this whole situation in which we're trapped in different ways? Some, as capitalists or policy people, others as dispossessed and colonized. Do you have any ideas for the pathways forward in which design or commoning can break out of the grip of this vision?

AZOUZI: I don't have any solutions outside design, because I'm a designer. But how I see it is Slavoj Žižek says it's easier to imagine the end of the world than imagining the end of capitalism. And I think that's where design comes. John Heskett, he's a [29:55] design historian. He talks about design, not a commodification process as seen by neoclassical economists, but as a process of opening futures. That's what designers do.

So I think it all started with a migration, irregular migration. Youngsters like me leaving the country because there is no perspective. It's about blocked imaginaries. So how can we as designers unblock these imaginaries? Like economy as a science of growth is a narrative. So how can we sell another narrative? Commons could be this narrative. What I've been doing during my PhD is identifying these new narratives. And [David] Schlossberg talks about these New Materialist movements that are anticipating the end of fossil fuels, anticipating the disruption of food circuits.

BOLLIER: What are some of these New Materialist movements? Could you name some of them? [30:56]

AZOUZI: Yeah, sure. For example, permaculture is considered as both a common movement and a New Materialist movement. Slow Food, Transition Town networks, both in North America and Europe. In the South, Arturo Escobar, the anthropologist, is one of the big figures of the colonial studies. And in 2020, he writes a book about design. And he talks about autonomous design – how the subaltern communities of the South are creatively re-appropriating design, and designers are there to support the struggle of these communities to protect their communal lives and their livelihoods. And for me, it was like, 'Oh, that's what I'm talking about!' So that's what I wanted to do in the oasis. So in the South, we have, for example, like I said, Eco-Swaraj in India, we have *Buen Vivir* [31:49], that is inspired from Amer-indian Indigenous and South American philosophies. We have food sovereignty movement with La Via Campesina.

So all of these, the link according to Escobar, is the commons. I was identifying the alternative design movements and I saw that there were interconnections between these movements and the alternative ways of doing design. For example, Slow Food in Italy inspired Slow Design. Permaculture, developed by Bill Mollison, a biologist. He did his book after reading Papanek, a designer, and in his introduction he says this is not a gardening book, this is a design book, and he talks about permaculture as [32:38] designed agriculture.

So permaculture after several years inspired the Transition Town movement that Rob Hopkins in England, he's a permaculture designer. After several years, the Transition Town Network inspired a new theory in design at Carnegie Mellon University in US, 'Transition Design' that is essentially criticizing design for social innovation, which I am interested in. It's saying that climate change issues are long-term issues and that we cannot go as the 'designer savior', going into communities from the South and proposing solutions, because we have already problems in the West. So autonomous design, according to Escobar, is the Global South's answer, or the Global South's mirror of Transition Design. [33:30]

BOLLIER: Just for the record, Escobar's book is titled, *Designs for the Pluriverse, Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*, 2018. I find that fascinating because it does provide a vision and template for North and South players to collaborate around a united non-capitalist vision. And the idea of a pluriverse, of course, is very different from the global economy that the people at Davos talk about, where it's one integrated single system with the same metrics of value and so forth. Maybe you could talk a little bit about the very idea of the pluriverse, which seems to be popping up in design as well.

AZOUZI: Escobar, like I said, talks about social movements, eco-social movements from the South. And designers are supporters, not helpers.[34:20] of a certain process that is already in there. When we talk about my hometown, Gabes, we have from the revolution a movement against pollution. We're talking about stop pollution, I want to live movement. We're talking about food sovereignty movements there, maintaining local seeds. We're talking about many other movements in many other rural areas of Tunisia, but many of them happen in the oasis.

Another oasis, Jemna, is called the oasis of the revolution, because during the revolution locals, youngsters, took back land that they considered theirs. They were being dispossessed from that land from French colonizers but then the modern state continued privatizing this land. During the revolution they took back that land, but they didn't know how to divide it so they said, 'Okay, let's do a land-commoning experiment. [35:17]

And what happens is that the army comes out and the central state protests and says, we have no legal framework for land commoning, but we said, Create it. And they didn't want to create that legal framework. So we had a fight for ten years. These little communities, all the locals fighting to maintain the land commoning experiments. And the central state with the different ministers and new presidents, each time changing their ideas. But it inspired the law on the Social Solidarity economy.

I went there and I saw that it remained an experiment. It didn't become a project. And I think this is the essential hypocrisy of the state. They don't want this experiment to expand. It's a bad example for the rest of their political commitments. Exactly. We have contradictory inputs to that territory because in a way we want them to reduce their consumption of water to be sustainable, but then we want them to produce more and we want them to do that with monoculture, using chemicals. But then, oh no, we have a traditional heritage to maintain, or the three-layer traditional thing. And, you know, the state is overlooking always the socio-economical part. So what happens is we have this imaginary [36:41]. We have this memory of the commons.

I discovered that because I was happy to talk about permaculture and commoning and Ostrom to my grandmother. And she said, OK, permaculture is only a fancy word to describe how agriculture is done in in the oasis. You don't need the Nobel Prize in Economic, your Ostrom, to talk about commoning because that's what we did for centuries. [37:10]

The whole thing is, How can I, as a designer, go and so support the struggle of the communities in there, in Jemna Oasis, the oasis of the Revolution, and the Gabes Oasis, to resist water dispossession and land-grabbing processes? How can we do that?

I think where the designer can intervene as a first step is that imaginary thing. So what I did, I was with my bike, with my hat, and going from plot to plot, meeting locals, doing ethnography, doing interviews, meeting the local farmers, municipalities, local activists, and living with them essentially. Speaking the local dialect [37:53]

And knowing the place helped me a lot, but I convinced locals to do a two-day workshop, a future workshop: "Let's imagine the oasis as we would like to have it through the lands of commons and do a retrospective thing, go backward and fix steps and objectives."

We had one day of fighting, you know, around water issues and stuff like that. But then the second day was much more participatory and collaborative and communal in a way. We had different scenarios. We were talking about smart oasis, but through the lens of commoning, not through the lens of Green Capitalism. We talked about an ethical charter between the locals, and they talked about pooling the land. And they talked about creating a local coordination platform of the different initiatives already happening. [38:50]

The promise of the commons wasn't something weird for them because elders knew exactly what commons are and what commoning is. And youngsters do know Wikipedia, new commons, open source, but they forgot or they didn't know about old commoning processes. So we had these elders telling youngsters, women and men, and we had this intersectional perspective in that workshop. But we need to implement something and inspire the locals to do that.

BOLLIER: Where are some of these efforts going? You've succeeded maybe in some individual contexts, but is there a larger sense of the commons as a shared imaginary for moving forward?

AZOUZI: So when I started my PhD six years ago, I didn't remember Indonesia knowing that people talk about commoning and commons. [39:44] But we met in Tunisia in a conference on commons, actually. So what I know, I might add, --

BOLLIER:hosted by the Heinrich Ball Foundation of Tunisia.

AZOUZI: Exactly. That's when we met. So I notice now that many more people are talking about commoning, commons. So the whole state solution didn't work. The private market solution isn't working, obviously. And our democracy of Tunisia, the experiment around democracy after the Revolution is slowing down, in a way. Now we have trouble in Tunisia with the looming perspective of dictatorship turning back. [40:23] maybe.

But I feel like we have two big narratives in Tunisia. One that is depressed and [people] leaving the country, and the one that in a way wants to stay and change things. But I wouldn't make a division between these two narratives. The same person could have the same two narratives, you know. So we know commons. It's part of our culture, we just need to remember. So as a designer, we always talk about, for example, innovation. Why should we talk about innovation? Maybe should we should talk about remembrance, remembering processes. [41:00]

In French, they talk about durable development for sustainable development. Why should an ecological solution be durable? It could be ephemeral, like our culture is the culture of ephemeral. We have less impact, like the falling dam is ephemeral. Many things are in our culture ephemeral, so we have a lesser ecological footprint.

So I think we can mix the solutions between the indigenous, ancient, traditional solutions that are easy to implement and mixed with Internet of Things solutions and smart object solutions, but adapted to the local context. And we always should think about these solutions through the lens of [41:47] commons and commoning, not through the lens of growth and profit.

I think there is a lot already happening. We have the local association of permaculture in Tunisia. We have many individuals doing off-grid houses living in an ecological way. We have the Tunisian Forum for Social-Ecological Rights, which is a big actor dealing with all these issues. We're noticing the beginning of a political ecology in Tunisia. And Martinez-Alier talks about the environmentalism of the poor. So essentially, it's people from the Global South resisting the plundering of their resources, the destruction of their environment. [42:32] and resisting these extractive capitalist processes to save their livelihood.

The social and the ecological and the political are all in the same ball, let's say. We cannot talk about social movements in Tunisia without talking about ecology. Even if they're not putting it in front of a struggle, it's in there. So what locals do in Gabes or in the Jemna or in other areas of Tunisia is, they're just fighting to save their livelihoods. That's the environmentalism of the poor. And that's what we were already having all around the Global South.

I remember a discussion in DESI's network -- DESI is the Design for Social Innovation Network. There was a Brazilian designer, and we had all these European designers worried about the

perspective of collapse, that we should rush and do something, you know? And what she said was [43:28] striking for me. She said, Why are you so worried? We are already in co collapse in the Global South and we are good. Like we're living, we're surviving in a way.

That's not a so bad perspective. It's a bad one, but it's not so bad. And maybe we could inspire you [the North]. Maybe you have lessons to learn from us. So that's what Escobar talks about, the collaboration between the Global North and the Global South on these solutions. What I notice here at Harvard is that there is a focus on the mitigation solutions -- geoengineering solutions. We're talking about crystals in the air, shading the sun. We're talking about cloud harvesting. We're talking about solutions like that, when afforestation is just free, you know? [44:16]

BOLLIER: We're talking about strategies that are part of the technical fixed solution of capitalism rather than getting reacquainted with Earth and working with it. I mean, I think that's precisely why the Global South has a lot to teach the North about solving these problems. And to the extent that many people in the South have never left their relationship with ecosystems, they have a deeper well of knowledge to draw upon than some people in the West.

AZOUZI: But to do that, the Global South should get rid of the dogma of development and growth. It should get rid of this idea of development is having air conditioning, having a big window in the in the middle of the desert, having a balcony in the desert. It is completely nonsense. All this nonsense, so we moved from traditional villages [45:11] that are adapted to the local climate to modern houses that are completely unsuited, as in "We need more electricity. We need our air conditioning. We need more water. We need all of this."

This is because for decades, we represented the Indigenous traditional ways of doing as something backward. That's what my grandmother said. "Oh, they colonized us. And for a century, almost, they said we were backward. And they said, we were on the wrong path. But now you [Safouan] went there [western universities], and you studied there and you're coming back saying that we were right."

BOLLIER: She's absolutely right. We need to decolonize our mind from some of these so-called modern ideas and find our way back. [45:59]

AZOUZI: Yeah, so we need to valorize what [Boaventura de] Dos Santos calls "epistemologies of the South." This epistemology, our understanding of the world, should be valued also. For example, here [at Harvard] I'm studying landscape design. I noticed that in Arabic, there is no word for landscape. So how we can we translate 'landscape'? It's like a beautiful vision of nature, maybe. There is a landscape in Arabic and in the Arabic understanding of it, that is not the Western understanding of it, as a problem-solving process, where you have a drawing – *dessin* in French, with IN – that is explaining a *dessein*, with EIN -- that is the project.

So in the Western [46:49] understanding of design, we have a drawing that is explaining a project and it's providing solutions to problems. We are problem solving. That's what I learned doing design in Italy. But in the Arabic understanding of design, the word is *tasmim*. *Tasmim* comes from the root word *sammama*. It's about much more than decision-making. We're humble. We're not solving the problem. We're only avoiding it in a way. So it's a different way of seeing the world. We're not solving the climate change issues. We're only dealing with that. We're making decisions,

wise decisions maybe, to adapt. I think that's the global self-perception of design that I want to bring.

Tony Fry, he's Australian, he's a design theorist. [47:46] talks about a design by the Global South for the Global South, and talks about the 'futuring processes'. What we are doing is the futuring when we continue business as usual; we're taking already years from the future. To reverse this process, to do futuring, I think that we need local solutions from the local communities, so that as designers we are not speculating for the others. As [Carl] DiSalvo says, We are enabling speculation. We are supporting locals to speculate for themselves. That's what he calls 'prefigurative design.' So it's prefiguration in politics. I think that there is something to be done, as I said, at this epistemic level. There is something to be done there, but then I'm struggling as a designer. I'm torn between producing a valuable work [48:42] and being paid for it, and doing engaged, radical design. I didn't find a solution for that yet, but I think in my thesis I talk about a rooted design. We need as designers to put roots in a territory and be part of the community and then we can think about solutions.

BOLLIER: Well, Safi, I want to thank you for sharing your insights about design and the commons and oasis with me. I think it's a really thoughtful, provocative set of ideas that many people in the West and the North need to give greater attention to. So thank you for sharing that with me.

AZOUZI: Thank you. It was a pleasure.