



# Footprint: A radical workers co-operative and its ecology of mutual support\*

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## Introduction

This note aims to explore examples of co-operative ways of organizing work and life that are rooted in a desire for radical eco-social change. We look at and unravel the politics of work and the *ecology of support* of Footprint, a worker-owned printing co-operative, which is located in Leeds (UK). The first part places special attention on the values and value-practices that inform the co-op's daily activities, while the second part explores how the sustainability of Footprint's radical working methods are interlinked with their participation in a (trans)local ecology of social and environmental activism. These notes are based on two semi-structured interviews with four of the worker-owners (one made in 2011 and the other in 2016) and participant observation that took place between June 2015 and February 2016 when we lived at the housing co-operative that also hosts the printing co-operative in its basement.

## Footprint and its value-practices

We want to see a world based on equality and co-operation, where people give according to their ability and receive according to their needs, where work is fulfilling and useful and creativity is encouraged, where decision making is open

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\* We want to thank Footprint for the time spent with us to explain their ecology of support, showing us around their print shop, putting together materials on Radical Routes, commenting on a draft version of these notes and making us many cups of tea while patiently answering our questions.

to everyone with no hierarchies, where the environment is valued and respected in its own right rather than exploited. (Footprint Workers Co-operative, 2015a)

Footprint is a small ecologically-minded print shop specializing in the production of zines, posters, books, leaflets and CD wallets up to the paper size of A3. Its five worker-owners proudly state on the co-op's website that as they have no bosses they run the business as they want, 'doing interesting jobs for interesting people' and aspire to be

Straightforward, friendly, responsible and responsive, rather than aiming to deliver comprehensive, multi-platform printing solutions to clients in the voluntary and vocationally challenged sectors. (Footprint Workers Co-operative, 2015b)

The co-op was established in Leeds in 1997, a former industrial city in the north of England that today has approximately 770,000 inhabitants and a large student population. Footprint was initiated by a group of four environmental and social activists from a white, British, middle-class background. Starting up the printing co-op was a way for the founders to live independently of state benefits and to create a form of regular employment through which they could contribute in a meaningful way to the environmental and social direct-action movements with which they were involved. When considering how to get off state benefits, the founders were clear that a co-op would be their ideal form of action, but it was almost by chance that they decided on opening a print shop: at the time the group was looking for what kind of activity they could engage in, one of the founders was offered an old printing press for very little money (Footprint, 2004) and they decided to buy it despite the fact that none of the founders had any experience of working in the print industry. So, in 2000, after having learnt how to print, they began producing printed matter for activist campaigns and local community groups, thus inserting themselves in a long tradition of anarchist printers who rely on second-hand or slightly out of date machines to produce effective campaign materials (Ferguson, 2014).

Today, only two of the founding members are involved but the co-op remains structured in a level hierarchy, where all worker-owners are able to do all jobs the co-op requires to keep going and where all of the co-operators have the same say over how things are done. The principles and desires that Footprint emerged from and is committed to are still closely linked to what its founders valued (e.g. co-operation, self-organization, solidarity, the environment, direct action) and what they despised (e.g. competition, exploitation, hierarchies, oppression, environmental destruction). By acting upon this selection of principles and assembling working processes that (re)produce, reinforce, and spread what they value, Footprint have over time managed to create a set of 'value-practices', i.e.

‘actions and processes, as well as correspondent webs of relations, that are both predicated on a given value system and in turn (re)produce it’ (De Angelis, 2007: 24-31), that can be considered radical for a printing business while also enabling its members to sustain effectively their livelihoods. In the next section we introduce and discuss key elements of these value-practices.

*Antiwork politics: Valuing insubordination*

The way the co-op is structured is driven by the worker-owners’ conviction that work should be fulfilling but should neither take over life nor activism. They thus commit themselves to only work part-time, taking up a stance that challenges work as an individual moral practice and a collective obligation. With their commitment to part-time work the co-op members want to challenge what feminist theorist Kathi Weeks describes as ‘the willingness to live for and through work’ as this willingness renders subjects ‘supremely functional for capitalist purposes’ (2011: 12).

Although everyone in the co-op works part-time, the hourly wages for all Footprint members as well as people who occasionally help out is set at £8.50 an hour, regardless of expertise or experience. Moreover, for every hour they work, they also pay 50p into a common pot from which activist projects are supported, either by donating to them directly or by using the accumulated money to cover the cost of printing jobs for campaigns that find it hard to gain support from other places (such as those for the rights of gay and queer prisoners). This low-wage economy is amongst others made possible because all ‘Footprinters’ – as the co-op members refer to themselves – are committed to lead low consumption lifestyles with lots of DIY making infused and mixed with activist, anti-consumerist frugality. With their frugality, Footprinters do not inscribe themselves or the co-op into a movement of ‘voluntary simplicity’ as this seems too focused on *individual* choices of consumption and spirituality (McDonald, 2014), they are instead interested in creating the time and space for themselves and others to engage in joyful, angry or mischievous anti-capitalist activities and campaigns, both at a local and translocal level.

*Efficiency usurped: Striving for variety*

For the members of Footprint working collectively in a co-operatively-owned business is all about making their working practices fit their values, needs and desires. As we have seen, this translates into working part-time, but also into having the flexibility to go off and throw one’s time and energy fully into a campaign without losing one’s job. In terms of organizing between themselves, these two aspects represent quite a challenge in terms of keeping the print shop

running as this implies that printing jobs and machines continuously need to be handled by different constellations of people.

Being able to constantly rotate tasks means that all worker-owners need to know how to take care of each part of the business – from producing estimates for customers, to fixing parts of the machines to laying out graphic work and so forth. To deal with the complexity of tasks required, the co-operators try to keep detailed step-by-step guides for each printing job so that others can carry on where one has left the job. In addition, they rely on keeping their various skills up to date by continuously teaching each other. The time this peer-to-peer learning takes and the errors or misunderstandings that are inevitably generated, reflect the fact that efficiency in itself – as a means to streamline work processes in order to make more profit – is not something that is valued in this co-op. In fact, Footprinters vehemently state that for them being efficient is boring and that – though efficiency is on their radar as a necessity they cannot completely ignore – it is not a priority to them: the goal of the co-op is not to maximize its profits but to do a job that its members find politically worthwhile, enjoy doing and as activists they can be satisfied with. So, while it is not efficiency that makes Footprint viable as a business in the long run, it can be said that its resilience comes about through shared anti-work politics and the friendships and shared goals these create when put in practice.

#### *Environmental activism: Putting 'nature' before profit*

The disregard for efficiency also comes through in Footprint's environmental activism as trying to reduce their environmental impact often means choosing more laborious processes or costly materials over quick and cheap fixes. Substantial commitment, for instance, is given to activities such as choosing printing machines that are known for their low energy consumption, sourcing machinery second-hand and learning how to fix it, getting phone, electricity and bank contracts with ethical companies and making sure to only source paper made from 85-100% post-consumer waste from paper mills that are as close by as possible. Moreover, the co-op decided to reduce its range of services on offer by never printing on glossy papers as these are either coated with plastic or china clay – both of which heavily impact on the environment. Besides these choices around machines, materials and energy, considerable time and effort goes into reducing, recycling and re-using their waste in the most appropriate ways. Small non-printed offcuts are for instance composted just outside the print shop, while printed off-cuts are put aside for packaging and larger off-cuts are inserted into conventional recycling streams. While Footprint's activities clearly impact on the environment, this impact is never justified purely for profit or a need to outdo competitors.

Besides their ecological commitments within the co-op, its members dedicate time and resources to environmental activities outside their business. They for instance support both financially and physically tree-planting actions in Yorkshire, the county in the UK where Leeds is located. They do so knowing that planting a few trees cannot really ‘offset’ or counteract their carbon usage, but because they see it as part of a larger ecology that helps to reforest local areas and thus to prevent floods and erosion while also increasing bio-diversity and stabilizing old slag heaps from coal mining.

*Economy as ecology: Challenging notions of community and belonging*

Considering the way Footprinters pay attention to social dynamics and their interrelation with ecological issues, we like to think that they are gesturing towards what feminist geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham and Ethan Miller call ‘economy as ecology’, i.e. ‘a web of human ecological behaviors no longer bounded but fully integrated into a complex flow of ethical and energetic interdependencies: births, contaminations, self-organizing, mergings, extinctions, and patterns of habitat maintenance and destruction’ (Gibson-Graham and Miller, 2015: 8). A flow in which values radically different from those fostered by capital are being enacted and interdependencies with more-than-human others are acknowledged. Admittedly, this enacting and acknowledging comes with all sorts of difficulties and contradictions, but nevertheless with a commitment to challenge capitalist notions of what counts as valuable and with an approach that cares also for more-than-human actors. Moreover, Footprinters foster, fine-tune and spread value-practices that enact pre-figurative eco-social politics, while being themselves transformed through these practices. In fact, the co-op is a training ground for a non-capitalist practice that takes into account ecological interdependencies and for many of the worker-co-operators passing through Footprint the co-op substantially contributes to re-shaping their subjectivities.

According to Footprint’s own experience, enacting and experimenting with a commitment to post-humanist, anti-capitalist practice requires tenacity as almost every little change or deviance from how a printer operates ‘normally’ requires extra effort: from dealing with paper in the most environmentally friendly way, working with second- (third- or fourth-) hand machinery and working out ways to rotate tasks. For working through (and against) the viscosity of capitalist infrastructures and modes of doing that they encounter daily, they gain their strength from an engagement in/with local and translocal, social and environmental solidarity struggles: these help them to keep their values and politics embedded in what they do, acting as a constant appeal for making their activities contribute to eco-social change even if at times this feels like walking

through a swamp. As it seems clear that no one is able to walk through a swamp without allies and without places of firm land, in the next section of these notes we will unravel some of the elements of Footprint's ecology of support.

## Footprint and its ecology of support

Equity cannot exist in a vacuum.

(Janelle Orsi, co-founder of the Sustainable Economies Law Centre<sup>1</sup>)

We want to take control over all aspects of our lives. However, as we are not all in a position of control we are forced to compromise in order to exist. We are working towards taking control over our housing, education and work through setting up housing and worker co-ops, and co-operating as a network. Through gaining collective control over these areas we aim to reduce reliance on exploitative structures and build secure bases from which to challenge the system and encourage others to do so.

(Radical Routes, 2013)

Footprint's existence as a radical co-op from its beginnings to today would not have been possible without it being embedded in an ecology of mutual support – materially, socially and intellectually – and without the benefits of the welfare state which previous generations have arduously fought for. So here we want to introduce the key actors Footprinters have identified when mapping the ecology of which they are a part. In choosing to speak of an 'ecology of support' rather than of a network of support, we refer to the work of feminist philosopher María Puig de la Bellacasa, who has for us convincingly argued that ecology refers to a form of relating intent on holding things together resiliently rather than intent on continuous expansion, while also invoking cyclicity as well as life and death (2016). This notion of ecology is close to how Footprinters consider the functioning of their co-operative business. Moreover, when speaking of Footprint's ecology of support, we also think of the 'ecology of practices' (Stengers, 2005) they contribute to and which, in the words of feminist philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers, brings up the question of belonging: what practices, modes of doing and thinking do I/we belong to? Together with this question, thinking of Footprint as an active part of an ecology of practices also speaks of an 'experimental togetherness amongst practices' where practitioners (or in this case, radical co-operators) learn together what works and

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1 This quote comes from a talk Orsi gave at the conference Platform Cooperativism: The internet, ownership, democracy at The New School in New York on 13-14 November 2015.

what does not. Through this mutual learning together, they create a ‘milieu’ that enables them to challenge and experiment with change, while unfolding their own force (2005: 195). What is more, they direct the force they unfold also towards sustaining – both materially as well as socially – other people who want to set up radical co-operative businesses or housing co-ops, thus creating relations of mutual support. So, over the next few pages, we will explore what kind of actors are coming together and how in this way Footprinters create a milieu in which non- and anti-capitalist values can be sustainably experimented with.

*Cornerstone Housing Co-op: Rent-free premises*

The print shop is located rent-free in two rooms in the basement of Cornerstone Housing Co-operative in Leeds – the co-op where two of its current members live. Cornerstone, just as Footprint, is committed to eco-social change and most of its members are dedicated to environmental and queer activism. Since its beginnings, Footprint has been located in the basement of this housing co-op, also because its founding members lived there at the time and saw the chance to transform the basement into a space that sustains production inscribed in radical politics. The access to this space at no cost is, and always has been, a key factor in keeping down the running costs of the business. And so Footprint and Cornerstone are closely entangled not just through the overlapping of co-operators and the anti-capitalist values that bind them together: Footprint’s office is also Cornerstone’s office space where physical and digital files are stored; Footprinters contribute to the housing co-op’s work-weekends during which improvements to the house are made; they also make use of the housing co-op’s kitchen and at times transform common areas such as the living room and the corridors into storage and production spaces, especially when their two basement rooms are too small for current jobs. The possibility of this supportive connection was set out at the beginning of the 1990s, when a group of environmental activists established the housing co-op by buying a large Victorian building from people who were sympathetic to their values and actions.<sup>2</sup> The mortgage for the house has since been paid off, which means that Cornerstone as a co-op does not have financial pressure from outside and can decide how best to distribute the material wealth it has accumulated and keeps accumulating through the monthly rent its members pay.<sup>3</sup>

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2 Narratives within Cornerstone say that in the 1980s the radical feminist magazine *Spare Rib* was produced in the house that now hosts the co-op.

3 The monthly rent at Cornerstone is calculated according to 1/3 of one’s income, with a minimum of £50 a week. This means that there is a wide range of rents coming in.

*Radical Routes: National mutual aid federation*

Footprint and its hosting co-op are both part of the wider UK-based mutual aid federation Radical Routes, which currently brings together 26 housing co-ops (with 186 individual members), three workers co-ops (with 13 individual members) and three social centres (with 49 core members active in running the centres). This federation has grown from a small group of independent co-operatives established in 1986 who wanted to create a structure that would enable them to pursue their collective aims in a more effective way and that would allow them to raise funds for its member co-ops to become viable in the long-run. The initial ecology of co-ops – which had many more workers co-ops than it has now – was made up of hard-line co-operators and social change activists who shared the common goal of taking control over the means of production and removing landlords, bosses and managers in their and other people's lives. This shared stance means that within the federation a legacy has been built up of housing co-ops hosting worker co-ops rent-free in order to make them viable without the need to seek maximum profit (for more details on Radical Routes see also Gradin, 2014).

For Footprint being part of Radical Routes means belonging to an ecology of activist practices that encourages as well as enables them to stick to their radical value-practices: they can rely on the federation's support in economically difficult times, they can get advice on legal and technical issues, can discuss difficult issues around modes of non-hierarchical organizing with like-minded co-operators, and are encouraged to continuously problematize their value-practices, for instance through discussions and workshops at the four yearly Radical Routes gatherings. Moreover, the federation gives work to Footprint as they carry out the majority of Radical Routes' printing jobs – ranging from training booklets to flyers. In turn, each member of Footprint (just as any co-operator as part of a Radical Routes co-op) needs to commit him-herself to 15 hours per week to activities that foster radical eco-social change – whether at work or outside of it.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the co-op makes a quarterly service payment of £20 to Radical Routes to ensure the costs of keeping the federation going are covered.<sup>5</sup>

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The decision of setting rent at 1/3 of one's income is a way to experiment with wealth distribution amongst the member-owners and beyond.

- 4 The 15-hour rule is a constant point of discussion within Radical Routes as in its current formulation it is not clearly stated if what you do at work counts towards these hours and what constitutes activities that contribute to radical social change.
- 5 The service payment rates vary between the different members of Radical Routes and are about ten times higher for established housing co-ops than for workers co-ops as they have a much larger monetary surplus each year.



Like in any ecology of practices, belonging does not come without conflicts and tensions. At Footprint, for instance it is acknowledged that being part of Radical Routes is an important part of keeping radical politics embedded in the co-op, but this does not automatically mean that contributing to the federation is something that all co-op members enjoy or take up eagerly. This might be because contributing entails extra meetings, during which the tactics and politics of often very tricky organizational issues need to be agreed upon. Getting a grasp of the complexity of these issues takes considerable amounts of engagement throughout the year, as, since 1988, the federation holds four weekend gatherings per year, to which each member co-op needs to send at least one delegate that can contribute to the consensus decision-making process. So the time commitment is no small deal for Footprint.

However, those who do engage thrive through Radical Routes: the gatherings become not only a place of collective strategizing, decision making and supporting new radical co-ops, but also a space to get a sense of personal fulfillment by sharing one's expertise, plotting future activities and spending time with other activists who you have become friends with – thereby getting a real sense that the ecology that they are all part of is making a difference and supports the experimentation of non- and anti-capitalist value-practices.

*Customers: Activists, artists, musicians, community groups*

In terms of the people who keep Footprint going by assigning them print jobs, the co-op started out by relying on activist campaigners, community organizers and radical co-operators. Since then, the range of customers has expanded to include artists, zine producers and bands – mainly reflecting the interests and social networks of the various co-op members that have passed through Footprint (but also Cornerstone Housing Co-op) over the years, many of which were musicians, graphic designers, artists or people active in permaculture. And so, while co-op members might have changed over time, many of the customers that they brought into Footprint's ecology have stayed as they appreciate the balance between print quality, price and work politics.

While for Footprint the aesthetics of their printed products did not play a major role at the beginning, this has changed over time. The advent of online communication made many printed newsletters for activists and citizen groups superfluous and people who want to see their materials in print today do so because they value the aesthetic qualities and physicality of a well-printed artefact. This shift in values and needs led Footprint to put substantial amounts of (mostly unpaid) work into attending zine fairs around the UK and organizing the annual Leeds Zine Fest, where mostly DIY zine producers come together.

During these events they showcase and sell materials they have printed, but also bring along their Risograph printer to produce ‘a zine in a day’ with people attending the fairs. Through the participation in and activation of such events they spread the word about the services they offer and the politics that inform their co-op. In doing so – just as with some of the work with Radical Routes – they rely on contributing to and connecting with the milieu they have affinities with, which allows them to keep printing things they can support rather than needing to rely on random customers and content to keep their business going.

#### *Co-operatives UK: The national co-operative network*

Footprint is also a member of Co-operatives UK, a secondary co-operative bringing together thousands of co-ops across the country. Through this connection it gets business mentoring and expertise related to co-operatives more generally, not necessarily with a focus on radical eco-social change, but still with co-operative values at their core. For a couple of years, one of Footprint’s founders also worked for the Co-operative movement as a consultant for other co-ops and channelled that income – which on an hourly basis was paid much more than the work at Footprint – back into her own co-operative.

The connection with Co-operatives UK seems to function well for Footprint despite the often divergent politics. On the one hand because Co-ops UK mostly brings together people who are genuinely interested in co-operative values and principles, as in the UK there are no direct governmental incentives such as tax benefits for actually running a business as a co-op (as might be the case in other countries). On the other hand, Footprinters value the fact that within the Co-ops UK network they can be a voice that contributes with more radical ideas and approaches, for example making sure issues such as wealth distribution and workers’ self-management are also discussed from a perspective that more substantially challenges established practices of value production and distribution.

#### *Welfare state: Covering the basics*

Since its beginnings, Footprint has also been enabled through benefits paid through the British welfare state: in the early days, the printing training that allowed the co-operators to actually start the print shop had for example been made possible through unemployment benefits and even today several of the worker-owners still rely on housing benefit in order to divide their lives between part-time work and part-time activism. Though members of Footprint might at times feel a tinge of guilt about their reliance on the benefit system, they are well aware that the benefits they rely on are the result of generations of labour activism and that through many of their activities within and outside work they

contribute to defending the various levels of social protection the British welfare state still allows.

*Social and ecological support: No-one is an island*

To keep going as a co-op, each member of Footprint also relies on his or her social bonds and conditions: some are living in other Leeds-based housing co-ops or in places owned by their partners, while all of them rely on their families and friends when things get difficult. Moreover, at present, none of them need to provide care for children or elderly people. Though these kinds of enabling conditions which play out at a personal level might often go unacknowledged within Footprint, they are a substantial part of what enables each member of Footprint to remain a worker-owner despite the low salary they pay themselves. The importance of these bonds and conditions in enabling the co-op might also reflect that it is not by chance that all members of Footprint are white British and at least half of its current members are from a middle-class background – a background whose privileged conditions they now actively work against.

Besides the personal social conditions contributing to Footprint's ecology, we think it is also important to consider that all of it is embedded in a non-human ecology that in the north of England still holds together well enough to not pressingly intrude on a daily basis so it can still be considered as a background for human action (Serres, 1995; Stengers, 2012). However, as environmental activists, Footprinters are well aware that their activities 'rest upon and utilize an earthly base' (Gibson-Graham and Miller, 2015: 7) that is neither infinite nor infinitely resilient. And maybe, so we like to think, the compost heap, the plum tree and the wild garden in front of their print shop's door acts as a daily reminder of this vital, yet easily taken for granted connection.

*DIY skills: Making do as a material and aesthetic strategy*

A key element in Footprint's ecology are also the skills of the people involved, be they acquired professionally, passed on by people in their ecology of support or self-taught through DIY making and fixing. When the co-operators started out with the clunky litho printing press they for instance relied on a print engineer to pass by to help them with the intricacies and errors of the machine about once a week – something they could never have afforded to pay for. The same goes with several of their current machines for cutting, printing, folding and stapling: without the fixing skills of the worker-owners themselves and the people in their network the maintenance costs would be overwhelming.

The heavy reliance on DIY skills also reflects itself in the aesthetics of Footprint as a print shop, which in turn pretty much reflects the politics of the ecology they

contribute to. The print shop itself resembles for example more a squatted space or a scene from one of Ursula K. Le Guin's sci-fi novels such as *Always coming home* (1986) rather than a high-street copy shop or a hip artist-run print initiative. There is lots of salvaged furniture, recycled computers and other machinery, self-built shelves cramped into a rather tiny workspace and walls covered with political posters, stickers and art works. Also their website reflects this DIY aesthetics and opens with an illustration of five people in hoodies pushing a printer as if it was a battering ram that is firing off sheets of printed paper in the direction of riot police. In fact, rooted in an anarchist DIY subculture, when Footprint design something they seldom use aesthetic tricks to smooth things over or to make them look slick but rather to underline the radical politics they inscribe their work (and ethos) into. Thus, observing Footprint from the outside, its reliance on DIY skills, expertise held by their allies and the particular aesthetic that tends to come with them, are all important factors to keep the costs low and the business running, but also functions perhaps as a kind of marker that invites some people in more than others.

## Concluding thoughts

Having traced some of the key elements of Footprint's activities and the ecology it belongs to and cares for, we hope that – despite the simplifications we have had to operate in – we have captured a sense of the mutual support necessary in order to make *work and the worlds work creates* a thoroughly political question not only in theory but also in practice. With Footprint it becomes clear that experimentation that challenges conventional notions of the economy and that problematizes in practice the need to work, where to work, with whom to work, what to produce through work and how long to work (Weeks, 2011: 35) needs to be strongly embedded into an ecology of anti- and non-capitalist practices active in the multiple spheres capital tries to dictate: production and reproduction, ecological and social relations, mental conceptions of the world and technologies, institutional forms and organizational arrangements (Harvey, 2008: 123). It is this embeddedness in multiple spheres that allows for holding Footprint's world together resiliently, without an idea of continuous expansion in terms of business turnover but rather a caring for the relations between the different spheres as suggested by Puig de la Bellacasa's reading of ecology. By being embedded in an ecology of ethical non-capitalist practices across multiple spheres, a virtuous circle is created that fosters resistant and inventive subjectivities that together explore what it means to work, to provide for one's livelihood, while also acknowledging a being-in-common across distant geographies and multiple species. This ecology, which at least in part protects those who belong to it from the pressures of the capitalist economy, is then at its

best, when it seeds and supports more radical co-operative activities beyond itself, effectively creating a self-reinforcing ecology of practices that theorists Nick Dyer-Witthford describes as a ‘circulation of the common’ (2006). This is a circulation in which knowledges, material goods and social relations that have been produced and assembled by people taking the matters of work and life into their collective hands are being passed on in order to proliferate sites of non- and anti-capitalist experimentation.

Given the difficulty of starting such an ethical circulation, two aspects seem key for the ecologies of support such as the one lived (and worked) by Footprint: one is the necessity to pass on institutional memory in order not to fall into learnt capitalist value-practices, to protect material commons from re-privatization and to continuously problematize what genealogy of radical practices of production and reproduction one is and wants to be part of. The other necessity is one of continued support for people – near and far – who want to engage in similar value-practices, because starting out can be daunting when the place you live in seems to not even have a glimpse of a supportive ecology in sight. In such a situation, the support offered by an already existing anti-capitalist ecology of practices can constitute a real lifeline.

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