Digital commons, the political and social change: Towards an integrated strategy of counter-hegemony furthering the commons

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abstract

The peer-to-peer (P2P) or digital commons school has propounded a 'socio-centric' view of historical transformation by advancing a far-reaching argument which delves into long-term innovations in the economy, technology and the mode of production, beyond digitally facilitated political mobilization. This paper reflects on the appearances of the political in the digital commons literature and puts forward an argument with three main planks. First, the prevalent understanding of social change in this body of thought, particularly at its earlier stages, is misguided by a technocratic conception of historical transitions. In a second, recent stage, proponents of the peer-to-peer 'revolution' acknowledged the decisive role of politics in instigating structural shifts and sketched out a political project for the commons. Yet the reintroduction of the political is still wanting, calling for a fully-fledged strategy of hegemony which deeply integrates technology, political economy and political activity proper. The paper sketches out such a counter-hegemonic strategy by drawing on the political thought of Antonio Gramsci.

Introduction

At the dawn of the new millennium, certain theories of digital commons and peer production – or 'commons-based peer production' (Bauwens, 2005a,

2005b, 2009; Benkler, 2006, 2011; Benkler and Nissenbaum, 2006; Bollier, 2008) – made the case that new digital technologies are capable of eliciting structural social change, which would profoundly reshape the dominant modalities of social organization in the economy, culture and politics. They would give rise to an entire new social configuration, in which organizational patterns of free collaboration, sharing, openness, plurality and collective self-government will occupy center stage. From the outset, these early accounts of digital commons and peer-to-peer bear significantly on the politics of social organization along three dimensions. First, they argue that an epochal shift is underway, fostering radical democratic values across all social fields: individual autonomy combined with enhanced collaboration, participation, collective self-rule, pluralism, mutuality and openness. Second, they outline a certain political process of societal transformation and historical change, which is powered by digital technologies. Finally, they envision a refoundation of the political system in the narrow sense and of prevalent modes of governance, more broadly.

The present paper sets out to shed light on these appearances of the political – the politics of organizing production, self-governance and historical transition – in specific fields of the digital commons literature and puts forward an argument with three main planks. To begin with, the prevalent understanding of social change in this particular body of thought, especially at its earlier stages, misses out on the political in crucial respects, misguided by a technocratic conception of epochal shifts. The emergence of a new mode of digital, networked production, legal reforms and 'social entrepreneurship', i.e., technological, legal, and managerial fixes, are considered the mainsprings that occasion historical transformation on a large scale. Typically, political processes of collective dis-identification with hegemonic relations and new identification, movement-building, issues of political organization, political struggles around the state, intense conflicts with political and economic elites receive less consideration.

In a second, recent stage, salient proponents of the peer-to-peer 'revolution' (Bauwens and Kostakis, 2014; Bauwens et al., 2019; Bollier and Conaty, 2014; P2P Foundation, 2017) have come to acknowledge the decisive role of political organization in instigating structural shifts and they have sketched out a political project to underpin the expansion of the commons. Yet – this is the

third and key plank of the argument – their reintroduction of the political in the envisioned process of system change is still wanting, calling for a fully-fledged strategy of hegemony, which deeply integrates technology, political economy and political activity proper. The paper sketches out such a counter-hegemonic strategy of organizing for societal transformation by drawing on the political thought of Antonio Gramsci. Besides any specific policy proposals which are now put forward in abundance by several proponents of digital commons, what is required for broader transformations towards the commons is a potent collective actor, a new *hegemon*, which will be able to reverse prevalent policies which serve dominant elites and powerful interests by plundering and privatizing the common and the public.

There is a large body of research into the impact of new digital technologies on political mobilization and organization (see e.g. Castells, 2012; Feenstra et al., 2017; Forestal, 2021; Gerbaudo, 2012, 2017, 2018; Tufekci, 2018). This has shown how digital media upgrade the communicative power of people to speak for themselves and to take political initiatives. New social software and distribution systems have sparked an autonomous formation of social networks, increasing connectivity in our societies and enabling leaderless and horizontal, non-hierarchical movements to get off the ground. However, most political action through the digital commons has not crystallized in enduring forms and has not attained systemic socio-political effects or even the egalitarianism and flat hierarchies that it claims (Tufecki, 2018). Even 'digital parties' (Gerbaudo, 2018) do not seem to escape the conventional molds and limits of 20th century parties (see e.g. Kioupkiolis, 2016, on Podemos).

The peer-to-peer (P2P) school has advanced, in effect, a broader argument which is not focussed on digitally facilitated political mobilization but delves into long-term innovations in the economy, technology, the mode of production and social relations in these fields (see e.g. Bauwens, 2009, 2011; Benkler, 2006; Bollier, 2008), propounding a view of historical transformation which is 'socio-centric' and 'immanent'. Political 'revolutions', in the sense of a radical re-institution of political systems, are held to be conditional upon earlier, economic, technological and social trends. In certain respects, their line of thought is akin to Hardt and Negri's (2004, 2009, 2017) reading of our era, according to which 'immaterial labor' and the 'common' produced by a self-organized 'multitude' across the world are increasingly hegemonic and

potent, laying the groundwork for an epochal leap beyond the empire of capital. This contention has come in for heavy criticism by several theorists and analysts (see e.g. Caffentzis, 2013; De Angelis, 2007; Rancière, 2010), who have castigated the idea of an already organized 'multitude', countering that the political force of struggle for the commons remains yet to be properly constructed, as the laboring strata of the population are still deeply caught up in capital's regimes of domination and exploitation.

The 'digital commons' or P2P theory of an imminent transition to a new, freer and more collaborative mode of social organization rests on more empirical detail and has received less attention from political theory, despite its political implications and its pronounced 'political turn' in recent years. The present paper contributes to the critical discussion of this particular account of world-changing processes in our times by arguing that attention to the social micro-physics and the actual tendencies of historical mutation can further the cause of democratic empowerment. Technological and economic innovations (P2P), the gestation of new schemes of organization in the womb of existing social systems are components of a multi-layered strategy of counter-hegemony for democratic renewal. But they do not suffice. They need to be inscribed into a more nuanced and complex scheme of political strategizing. A hegemonic activity of collective subject-formation, all-round struggle and political organization is the decisive supplement. By critically considering a digital commons' take on 'revolution', we will set out this argument, which is also relevant for Hardt and Negri's grand historical thesis and any other contemporary aspirations to deep social renovation which bet a lot on new technologies and developments in the political economy of late capitalism.

Introducing digital commons, P2P and new democratic revolution

The 'commons' or 'common-pool resources' (Ostrom, 1990: 30, 90) or 'commons-based peer production' (Benkler and Nissenbaum, 2006: 395) comprise goods and resources that are collectively used, shared and produced. The common good is managed in egalitarian and participatory ways by the communities which manufacture or who own it. Crucially, what marks off certain goods as 'commons' is the collective and near-egalitarian mode of

self-organizing their production, management and distribution.

There are many different types of common goods, from natural common-pool resources (fishing grounds, irrigation canals etc.) to common productive assets, such as workers' co-operatives, and digital goods, such as open source software (Ostrom, 1990; Benkler and Nissenbaum, 2006). Their common denominator is precisely that they involve shared resources which are governed, produced and distributed through collective participation, on terms which break with the logic of both private-corporate and state-public property (Benkler and Nissenbaum, 2006; Hardt and Negri, 2012; Ostrom, 1990).

In her breakthrough in the contemporary research on the commons, Elinor Ostrom (1990) dwelled on natural *Common Pool Resources* (CPRs), which are small-scale and located in a single country. Their communities have worked out collective norms of proper conduct, which secure their long-term interests. The homogeneity, the close ties and the boundedness of the relevant communities underlie the effective self-organization of the commons in these cases (Ostrom, 1990; Ostrom, 2008). Since the turn of the century, however, with the spread of new digital technologies and the Internet, a large body of thought and action has shifted attention to the 'immaterial' commons of culture, information and digital networks (Bauwens, 2005b; Benkler, 2006; Bollier, 2008). Technological change has originated new modes of production and collaboration, which realize novel patterns of association and self-governance. These new modes reinvent and disseminate the commons as a culture of co-creation, social sharing and pooling productive knowledge and other resources on a global level, beyond their traditional settings of fisheries, forests and grazing grounds (Bauwens, 2005b; Bauwens et al., 2019: 3; Benkler, 2006; Bollier, 2008; Frischmann 2013, 2014).

The new digital commons display considerable affinities with the 'traditional' ecological commons explored by Elinor Ostrom (1990). They constitute a tripartite system which is made up of a self-governing community of users and producers; a common good, ranging from free software and music to encyclopaedias and social communication platforms; and equitable, self-legislated norms of access, use and collective self-management (Bauwens, 2005b; Benkler, 2006; Bollier, 2008). They likewise nourish a culture of decentralized collaboration, co-operative nonmarket production, sharing or

'pooling', creativity, concern with the common good and collective autonomy. They stage thus an alternative to both the profit-driven, competitive practices of the market and the top-down, hierarchical command of the state (Bauwens, 2011; Benkler, 2006, 2011; Bollier, 2008).

However, they radically depart from the historical commons of nature highlighted by Ostrom in politically salient ways. The goods that they manufacture and use are not depletable and rivalrous (Bauwens, 2005b; Benkler, 2006). Their consumption by one person does not make them less available for consumption by others (Benkler, 2006). In effect, they are often antirival, that is, their increasingly shared use yields increasing benefits to all users (see Olleros, 2018). Second, their communities appear to be internally heterogeneous, open, inclusionary and potentially global rather than local, homogeneous and bounded (Bauwens, 2005b; Bauwens et al., 2019). Finally, and foremost from the standpoint of democratic politics and change, 'digital commoners' claim that the networked information commons revolutionize the commons paradigm. They actually incarnate a new, emergent mode of peer-to-peer production, which promises to install decentralized nonmarket co-operation at the core of contemporary economy, society and government, reconstructing a wild diversity of fields, from music to business, law, government, education and science, after the logic of open, plural, creative, collaborative and participatory commons (Bauwens et al., 2019; Benkler, 2006; Bollier, 2008).

Hence, advocates of digital commons and peer production visualize a broader system change or historical paradigm shift. This is presumably facilitated today by the rise of the network society and new technological developments around the Internet, which open up the horizon of a more democratic, commons-based society. Their thesis is that the activity of instituting new social orders, which is political in a fundamental sense (Arendt, 1998; Lefort, 1986), can lean today on advanced peer-to-peer (P2P) technologies in the contemporary machinic infrastructure and economy.

Yochai Benkler (2006, 2011) has been among the first prophets of the new socio-economic system, which is allegedly taking shape in digitally networked environments. His style of reasoning is echoed in the earlier writings of Bauwens (2005a, 2005b, 2009) and Bollier (2008). In sum, new digital

commons pioneer an alternative mode of collective organization whereby strangers collaborate, interact and self-manage their activity on a global scale. This new modality has been spawned by the latest technologies of the Internet, the distributed digital networks in which individuals can collaborate directly without passing through obligatory nodes. The new, digital mode of production generates knowledge and other cultural goods by mobilizing patterns of co-ordination that do not rely on market pricing and managerial hierarchies. At the same time, digital commons fashion new forms of social relationship, interaction and virtuous subjectivities (Bauwens, 2005b; Benkler and Nissenbaum, 2006; Bollier, 2008).

Peer-to-peer (P2P) captures, more specifically, the new, digitally enabled systems in which any human agent can participate in the making and the maintenance of a shared resource, while benefiting from it. Signature examples include *Wikipedia*, open source and free software projects, open design communities and community currencies (Bauwens, 2005b; Bauwens et al., 2019). Through P2P practices, people voluntarily and cooperatively construct a commons according to the communist principle: 'from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs' (Bauwens, 2005b).

P2P projects produce use value which satisfies directly specific needs and wants, rather than exchange value, that is, the value of commodities in market exchanges through which profit can be made. They do so through free cooperation, rather than by coercing the producers. They constitute, thus, a 'third mode of production', which diverges both from market/profit-driven production and from public/state management. P2P systems are self-managed by the community of peers itself rather than by state or market hierarchies. Hence, they also practice a 'third mode of governance'. And users on a global scale have free access to the use value that is being created, through new regimes of common property. This is a 'third form of property', distinct from both private and state property (Bauwens, 2005b, 2014).

In terms of its political implications, Benkler (2006) has argued from early on that networked peer production broadens the horizon of the feasible by nurturing pivotal democratic values of individual autonomy, democratic participation and social justice. Bauwens (2005b) has likewise affirmed that the 'third mode of governance' in peer production is 'characterized by flexible

hierarchies and structures based on merit that are used to enable participation'. Digital commons promote transparent processes, consent, direct access, participation, individual freedoms and respect for community norms. We can imagine these values infusing 'conventional politics' with an 'ethic of open accountability' and consent. Their political sensibilities can further 'freedom without anarchy, control without government, consensus without power' (Lessing quoted in Bollier, 2008: 9).

To draw out their political effects, we should notice, first, how the new digital commons of information and culture embody and cultivate other forms of community, which tend to be more open, free, diverse and egalitarian. Peer production is situated 'in a libertarian and abundance-oriented global network with equipotential rights of participation of everyone in every field of human endeavor' (Bauwens, 2005b). No one owns the collective project, and no one can exclude others from its use or its co-production (Bauwens et al., 2019; Benkler, 2006; Bollier, 2008). It should be noted, however, that in recent years this celebration of openness, egalitarianism, inclusion, diversity and flat hierarchies in digital commons has been increasingly questioned in the case of *Wikipedia* and more broadly (see e.g. Lerner and Lomi, 2017; Tkacz, 2015; Tufekci, 2018).

Wikipedia illustrates the new communities of the digital commons which have sprung up at an advanced stage of Internet development, branded 'Web 2.0', which 'amounts to a worldview that celebrates *open participation* as a way to create valuable collective resources' (Bollier, 2008: 133; emphasis added). The building blocks of these digital commons are a shared sense of common purpose, free interaction, transparency, collective judgement, and mutual peer review, which account for the efficiency of collaborative activity and the quality of the common good (Benkler and Nissenbaum, 2006).

The bounds of such digitally enabled communities are permeable, and hierarchies tend to be flatter and reversible. As opposed to the local eco-commons, collaboration and interaction in the digital context can spread across social and national boundaries, across geographical space and political divisions. The digital commons can thus fruitfully couple translocal cooperation and commoning with diversity, individual autonomy, singularity and creativity (Bauwens et al., 2019; Kostakis and Ramos, 2017).

The second political force of new digital technologies lies in the democratizing effects that they can induce within the wider public sphere today, despite their several limitations. The Internet provides individuals with access to global publics, affording multiple outlets for the public expression of individual views, for critical and diversified information, for investigative journalism, for extensive, continuous debate among citizens, and for political organization. Fundamentally, the new communication technologies enable many-to-many communication to an unprecedented extent. They can catalyze, thus, massive self-organization up to a global scale, a potential that has been realized in many late mobilizations, including the Arab Spring and the Spanish 15M movement in 2011 (Bauwens et al., 2019; Castells, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012).

The third political dimension of commons-based peer production (CBPP) lies in the core political values of democracy which CBPP itself enacts, such as participatory government, free collaboration, equal freedom in the co-production of collective processes and projects, individual autonomy and creativity (Bauwens, 2005b). Peer projects themselves are self-managed by the community of peers. Authority to act lies with individual actors. There is no fixed authoritative center – of a state bureaucracy or firm managers – which dictates and co-ordinates action. Hence, the 'third mode of governance' in digital commons is directed by open input and a participatory process of coordinating work (Benkler, 2006; Benkler and Nissenbaum, 2006). Peer governance may also involve a 'transparent heterarchy', whereby maintainers or 'editors' undertake quality control and refuse contributions which imperil the integrity of the system (Bauwens, 2005b; Bauwens et al., 2019).

This appears to be, in a nutshell, the political thrust of commons-based peer production according to its champions. The peer production of digital commons is suffused with radical democratic values and practices, which it both presupposes and it further cultivates: individual autonomy (self-selection and self-reliance), collaboration in and through diversity, reciprocity, active participation and creativity in decentralized settings which are free of rigid hierarchies (Benkler, 2011; Benkler and Nissenbaum, 2006).

The techno-politics of digital commons: missing out on the political

Benkler (2006) and Bauwens (2005b, 2009, 2014) have assigned to technological developments a pivotal role in veering the course of history towards the commons. As Benkler (2016: 18) has put it: 'I place at the core of the shift the technical and economic characteristics of computer networks and information'.

The expansion of the digital commons since the turn of the century is grounded in the widespread access to networks and personal computers, which have made possible a decentralized, free collaboration in the production of information and cultural goods. Furthermore, the Internet and peer-production processes were built upon deliberately designed architectures, which allow them to pool diverse individual efforts. At the basis of these technical and organizational architectures lies 'modularity', the capacity to integrate many small and specific contributions through the technical infrastructure, through social and legal norms, and even through meritocratic hierarchies which enjoy a voluntary respect (Benkler, 2006; see also Kostakis, 2019).

Yet neither Benkler nor Bauwens are naïve believers in technological determinism. It is the interaction between technological-economic 'feasibility spaces' with social responses to them, in the guise of institutional regulations and social practices, which configures the prevailing structures and modes of life in a certain period (Benkler, 2006). For Bauwens (2005b), transformative practices that will carry peer production beyond the 'immaterial sphere' in which it was born, will not spring forth automatically. They call for the deployment of concrete tactics and strategy (see also Bollier, 2008).

Currently, moreover, Bauwens explicitly holds on to a 'mild techno-determinist' view, according to which technology is not fully deterministic or univocal in its effects. The Internet has widely distributed three paramount capacities. First, a capacity for many-to-many communication. Second, a capacity for massive self-organization that rests on permissionless communication. Finally, the creation and distribution of value in new ways,

which stem from the enhanced ability to self-organize. These amplified capacities are claimed and contested by capital, governments and civil society, which can employ them for different purposes. Bauwens has outlined, thus, a deliberate project of social change, which would promote a commons-based political economy (Bauwens et al., 2019).

However, to glimpse a *lack of the political* – as massive mobilization, political organization and struggles in and over the state – in the earlier digital commons literature, it is worth plunging into some details of Benkler's and Bauwens' picture of the political field where the battle of the commons is fought out. This 'political arena' stages 'the making of copyrights, patents and similar exclusive rights' (Benkler, 2006: 456). It pits mainly rent-seeking private industries, such as Microsoft and Walt Disney, lobbyists, governments and courts, against individuals and groups developing or using open-source material. On the commons side, the battle is waged through public advocacy, the introduction of commons licences (Creative Commons etc.), open source material and peer-to-peer networks, and the disregard for exclusive property rights through file sharing etc. (Benkler, 2006). In the closing remarks of Benkler's seminal tract-manifesto on CBPP, we are told that 'Perhaps these changes will be the foundation of a true transformation toward more liberal and egalitarian societies' (Benkler, 2006: 473). So, in the end, the key motors of the transition towards a commons-based society are technology and the economy, assisted by law and the initiatives of groups in civil society which disseminate their alternative practices.

Bauwens concluded one of his earliest accounts of a 'Common-ist' evolution of P2P (Bauwens, 2005b) with a list of the key conditions that will enable the new commons to flourish more broadly. All these terms are technological and economic or financial. Despite allusions to 'Common-ist' movements, we are left completely in the dark as to how these will be built, how they will reach a critical mass, how they will topple the 'neoliberal dominance' and how they will reform the state and the market (Bauwens, 2005b). Hence, Benkler and Bauwens (along with Bollier, 2008) converge on *a techno-legal and economic approach* when they envision a historical shift in the direction of the commons. Any 'political and social phase transition' can occur only when a sufficient number of 'digital knowledge workers' will revolt against the limits foisted on the hyperproductivity of peer production by outmoded capitalist

practices (Bauwens, 2011).

This is the epitome of the technocratic framing of the commons which has prevailed from the beginning of the millennium in the digital commons discourse. Its motto has been 'change things by producing a new model which makes the existing model obsolete' (Bollier, 2008: 294), not by fighting existing reality. Historical transformation is seen mostly not as deliberately political, rebellious and oppositional, but as incremental, immanent – arising from within actual social relations and heightened productivity, and prefigurative – transcending the old social order by foreshadowing a new world to come (Bauwens, 2009; Bollier, 2008). If one takes away the revolutionary flame and the vanguard role of the industrial proletariat, the idea of an immanent transformation which issues from technological and economic evolution and is attributed to rising productivity is, actually, a very classic Marxian one, summarized in the famous 1859 preface to *A contribution to the critique of political economy.*

A narrowly techno-economic perspective on historical transformation is likely to lose sight of the power politics of hegemony, through which dominant values, concepts and power relations construct a wide-ranging system which pervades an entire social formation and would require collective counter-hegemonic contestation to challenge and reconfigure it. Critical theorists and analysts (see e.g. Berlant, 2011; Dardot and Laval, 2013; De Angelis, 2010), have noted how individualist, competitive, consumerist and a-political or conservative values exert their grip on the mind of broad social sectors of the middle and the working classes, impeding thus the formation of majoritarian social blocs and alliances that can act to transcend the present hegemonic order. The hold of neoliberal capital on both the activity and the minds of commoners is now recognized explicitly by Bauwens et al. (2019), preventing commoners from turning towards new, commons-centered social systems.

In a deeply relevant way, critics have shown how the alternative practices, relations and values of digital commons are vulnerable to co-optation or corrosion by hegemonic values, forces and institutions, underscoring thus the need for deliberate collective orientation, organization and action. For instance, 'sharing platforms' relying on digital technologies, such as

Couchsurfing, have introduced explicit or implicit price mechanisms, which corrode the 'alternative' commons values of pooling and sharing for mutual benefit (Ossewaarde and Reijers, 2017). Opposition to such practices drives commoners to alienate themselves on a personal basis and to migrate to new niche platforms without collectively resisting and affecting the broader value system and practices of 'neoliberal hegemony in a meaningful way' (Ossewaarde and Reijers, 2017: 618). Likewise, the hacker ethos, which opposes proprietary software and associated intellectual property rights, surveillance and censorship, has been partly 'hacked' itself by corporate forces and state institutions which integrate hacker products and processes (modular software codes, mesh networks etc.) in capitalist infrastructures that lie outside their control (Delfanti and Soderberg, 2015).

Hence, a techno-economic imaginary of social change is likely to show little concern for the challenge of organizing broad-based socio-political movements in robust *counter-hegemonic* blocs and patterns of collective action which could effectively counter the power relations and values of vested interests and state elites, and would strategically forward an alternative project of social reconstruction. The impotence of both technology and law in reshuffling the order of power in contemporary societies has been partly grasped by 'digital commoners' themselves (see Benkler, 2006; Bollier, 2008).

The next sections will argue, thus, that furthering social transformation with the aid of digital commons would require a broad-ranging politics of counter-hegemonic contest, which would integrate but also exceed what critics and advocates of digital commoning have so far envisaged as 'the creation of a politics of digital commons: a political process of organizing digital commoners in ways that would allow them to democratically govern the digital platforms through which they interact' (Ossewaarde and Reijers, 2017: 623). This conception of a politics of digital commons has been endorsed by Kostakis in his 'In defense of digital commoning' (Kostakis, 2018).

Recent political awakenings in digital commons and the need for an integrated strategy

In recent years, a growingly political drive has inflected the thought of Bauwens, the P2P Foundation and their fellow travellers. To illustrate, Bauwens and Kostakis (2014) have come around and seen that the free software and culture movements lack the political philosophy that would set them on the course of a commons-based social order, and they are often prone to the start-up business model. Accordingly, 'The question is whether Commons-based peer production...can generate the institutional capacity and alliances needed to break the political power of the old order' (Bauwens and Kostakis, 2014: 357).

In the latest work of Bauwens and his partners, antagonisms between commons and capitalism itself, and the ensuing necessity of a counter-hegemonic struggle to pave the way for a commons-based society, come into sharp relief. Commoners should strive for their autonomization from the capitalist economy in order to reverse the current balance of power (Bauwens and Kostakis, 2014; Bauwens et al. 2019). This is the definition of a politics of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971; Laclau, 2000a, 2000b) which raises its head in the horizon of current commons thinking.

Significantly for the 'politicization' of the P2P technology, Bauwens and his collaborators have taken pains to more sharply disentangle capitalist from common-ist orientations in the contemporary muddled landscape, where peer production is intertwined with capitalist firms and markets in complex ways. 'Adopting this or that form of P2P technological infrastructure [e.g. the models of *Bitcoin* or *Wikipedia*] is the locus of social conflict because the choice between them has consequences for what may or may not be possible' (Bauwens et al., 2019: 6).

Contemporary 'cognitive capitalism' appropriates and commodifies information, data, design and knowledge for private profit and capital accumulation. On the contrary, the global and local commons are 'generative'. They create added value for communities and the environment by mutualizing resources, knowledge and products. *Wikipedia,* for instance, builds a global knowledge resource open to all. *GNU/Linux* yields a global

alternative to proprietary operating systems (Bauwens et al., 2019). Yet, CBPP is still only the prototype of an emergent mode of production, which now depends on capital that takes advantage of P2P for its own gain (Bauwens et al., 2019).

'Transvestment' is a strategy of 'reverse co-optation' that Bauwens and Kostakis commend in order to transfer value and resources from the capitalist market to the sphere of the commons (see Bauwens and Kostakis, 2014; Bauwens et al., 2019). Another key prong of their broader strategy for a commons transition turns on the development of commons in the domain of the services and 'physical' production, in which free, non-reciprocal sharing is impossible or unfair. Hence, reciprocity rules should be established and fostered through open cooperativist schemes of production and allocation. As a full mode of production, commons-based peer production allies the free and open 'new' commons of digital technologies with cooperativism (Bauwens et al., 2019). A third new component is 'cosmolocalism', which knits together local commons in translocal networks of collaboration and harnesses the open resources of global digital webs (knowledge, software and design) for more localized manufacturing. The objective is to enhance ecological sustainability and to assemble global counterpowers by weaving transnational networks of local commons (Bauwens et al., 2019; Kostakis and Ramos, 2017).

Transvestment, open cooperatives and cosmolocalism are still predominantly economic, technical and technological practices. But they are politicized insofar as they integrated into a *conscious struggle for a new hegemony* of the commons. Noticeably, however, the latest writings of Bauwens, his P2P Foundation and his collaborators (see e.g. Bauwens and Kostakis, 2014; P2P Foundation, 2017) evince an explicit appreciation of political mediations in a narrower sense. They affirm that 'a successful commons transition strategy requires tackling the issue of political organization and influencing the form of the state head on' (Bauwens et al., 2019: 42). Such a strategy aims at a radically reformed state that will become the steward of the commons, and it pursues progressive coalitions on the urban, regional, state and international level. These alliances will push for policies that boost the capacity of citizens and commoners for autonomous life and self-government (Bauwens et al., 2019: 65). The spreading enclosures of neoliberalism, the authoritarian policies of alt-right governments, precarity and austerity compress the space

which remains available for commoning by productive communities. Hence, it is imperative to combine technological and economic commoning (the pooling of resources, open cooperatives, open-source design etc.) with institutional engagements (P2P Foundation, 2017).

The 'partner state', which would end its subservience to the capitalist markets and would devolve its top-down, centralized power, will be forced by social movements and progressive political coalitions in alliance with the commons and CBPP. These movements and coalitions will gain a real leverage on the state through radical democratic practices, grassroots participation and public-commons partnerships. But, in order to take on global challenges such as climate change, the reformed state should be complemented with transnational institutions and networks (Bauwens et al., 2019; P2P Foundation, 2017).

While this political strategy for social renewal is multi-scalar, it singles out the city context as particularly apt for initiating commons transitions. Citizens-led municipal coalitions in cities like Barcelona enact the commons politics of the future as they are keen on citizen participation, transparency, open-source technologies and the forging of international networks (P2P Foundation, 2017). Moreover, city administrations can help set up commons-based platforms, such as *Fairbnb* (in Amsterdam). They can build commons repositories of knowledge, software and design, they can 'commonify' urban services, and so on. Hence, in recent years, P2P researchers and activists have put together detailed institutional proposals for the advancement of digital commons with the aid of city administrations, which would set up 'Commons city labs' fostering commons initiatives, legal support services, physical incubator infrastructure, a bank for the commons, and so on (see Bauwens and Onzia, 2017). In turn, transnational coalitions of cities can put in place translocal and global pro-commons institutions (Bauwens et al., 2019).

At the local and regional level, 'Chambers of commons' and 'Assemblies of the commons' could fuel the switch towards a commons-centric economy, society and polity. The Chambers would bring together various commoners, would give voice to commons-oriented enterprises and would provide a forum to exchange experiences and ideas. The Assembly would advance a political agenda for the commons, it would work for public-commons partnerships, it

would accrue civic power and would bolster social and political forces which further a commons transition. Assemblies and chambers of the commons could assemble the required translocal and transnational networks by forming federations at higher scales. The pro-commons movements and institutions would coalesce with new political organizations, such as the *Barcelona en Comú* platform, and new or older political parties, such as the *Pirates* and the Greens. The objective would be to weld together majoritarian commons-oriented coalitions of specific forces of the commons and existing political actors, who would converge over a commons agenda at all levels up to the global scale, in order to amass counter-hegemonic power and to effect global systemic change (Bauwens et al., 2019; P2P Foundation, 2017).

What is sketched out through these political guidelines is, in effect, a strategy of counter-hegemony that configures a new collective agency for change. In the classic manner of Gramsci's and Laclau's hegemony (Gramsci, 1971; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), we are called upon to diffuse a new discourse and vision in order to push forward a 'commons transition'. Woven around the nodal point or signifier of the 'commons', this innovative discourse will articulate three core signifiers of progressive political trends today: 'openness', 'fairness', and ecological 'sustainability'. The strategy will also compose practices of grassroots participation, institutional reform and the expansion of the commons (P2P Foundation, 2017). In order to advance the cause of the commons today, the strategic objective would be to craft convergences and synergies between pro-commons actors in the economy, political expressions of these actors and cognate emancipatory movements or political forces (P2P Foundation, 2017).

However, a fully-fledged politics of counterhegemony would require a deeper politicization of the commons than contemporary P2P advocates seem willing to promote. The constitution of a new massive political actor vying for hegemony, whose need is now vocally acknowledged by Bauwens and his partners, should be consistently pursued as a decisive activity and should not be expected to occur as a more or less 'spontaneous' outcome of the growth of CBPP. Such a spontaneity is still intimated in some moments of their argument, in ways which tend to underestimate the strenuous political effort that still needs to be put into shaping a collective subject for the commons:

> The expansion of the commons…in turn forms a new basis for more powerful movements… Therefore, social movements, which emerge from the shift towards CBPP will exert pressure on the state. (Bauwens et al., 2019: 52)

> There is ample data to support the kind of prefigurative existence of a growing number of commoners who could form the basis of a…subject at the forefront of this phase transition – *a very strong start*. (P2P Foundation, 2017: 47; emphasis added)

Hence, the rudiments of a counter-hegemonic strategy for assembling collective power, which are drawn by Bauwens and his P2P partners, should be further worked out and amplified by tapping into political theories of hegemony and the formation of hegemonic collective subjects. In this process, the current P2P strategy for historical transition should be further politicized, bringing counter-hegemonic politics to bear on CBPP, social forces and prefiguration. Today, Bauwens and his partners (Bauwens et al., 2019) subscribe to Kojin's Karatani theory of epochal transformation, according to which political and social revolutions occur in the aftermath of structural changes rather than being prior conditions of such changes. In the same manner as the growth of capitalist markets within feudalism antedated social and political revolutions and enabled eventually capitalism to gain ascendancy,

> [there] have to be commoners for the commons to become the core of the next system… The current form of transition, therefore, entails strengthening the autonomy of the commons modality…and makes it differ from the previous approaches that were (and still are) based on the conquest of state power by classical 'labour movements'. (Bauwens et al., 2019: 50)

This strategic premise translates more specifically into a prioritization of economic and productive activity around the commons (Bauwens et al., 2019*).* This is a lop-sided perspective which underrates the part of intellectual, cultural and political agency in bringing about paradigm shifts. It also misleadingly extrapolates from a singular historical incident – the rise of capitalism – to human history in general and the future. Even if it accurately renders the rise of capitalist society out of the womb of feudalism, there can be no certitude about the historical reiteration of the birth of capitalism. This mindset fails also to catch sight of political activity beyond the formal political institutions and classic political revolutions or mass movements. In an enlarged sense, politics implies social action upon existing social relations

and interactions, which is not confined to the narrower sphere of the 'political system' of government or the state and can take place in any social field and on any scale.

Importantly, the perspective in question deflects attention away from the conscious political activity that must unfold within any social space, including the economy and technology, to reconstitute subjectivities, relations and practices so as to effectively swerve them towards deeper democracy and game-changing objectives. Without such political agency it is unlikely that subjectivities, economic practices, relations and technologies, which remain attached to hegemonic structures and suffused with ruling values and ideas will 'spontaneously' act to erode hegemonic systems.

Nurturing such a consciousness and a new social imaginary around the commons is a precondition for actual commoners to commit themselves to objectives and modes of organization which would occasion the transition towards to a commons-based society. Otherwise, the current hegemonic grip of neoliberal capital on both the activity and the minds of commoners, recognized now explicitly by Bauwens et al. (2019), is likely to maintain its hold and to prevent commoners from turning towards new, commons-centred social systems. Propagating a commons-centric imaginary and re-edifying subjectivity are quintessential political endeavours, which call for a dedicated collective agency and political organization to orchestrate them. The recent work of P2P proponents and other advocates of digital commons (see e.g. Wittel, 2013, on the basic income) has advanced detailed policy plans and specific political or economic measures which could effectively contribute to a broader social transition towards a commons-centred society. But to realize such pro-commons policy agendas what is essentially required is currently lacking: a collective, powerful agent of change to alter the balance of forces and to push for significant state reforms which would promote the commons against and beyond bureaucratic, top-down state logics, neoliberal privatization policies and predatory markets.

Towards an integrated, political-material strategy of counter-hegemony that furthers the commons

Antonio Gramsci was among the first to outline such a comprehensive, truly 'multi-modal' strategy of (counter-)hegemony. His first insight is that concrete and many-sided political action holds the key to a new social formation. This political action should also take on the state, but it should be firmly anchored in civil society and begin from there (Gramsci, 1971). In this respect, Gramsci displays close affinities with Bauwens (2005a, 2005b, 2011) and Hardt and Negri (2004, 2009), who place the main accent on socio-economic transformations, but with a crucial twist. In addition to work on new economic practices and technologies in civil society, a properly political agency is in order, which will skew social activity towards a broader direction of radical change, will co-ordinate dispersed, heterogeneous forces and initiatives, and will put together a broad-based socio-political front by configuring new, inclusive collective identities (Gramsci, 1971). In all these respects, Gramsci's strategic reasoning can remedy the lacunae of strategic thought brought out above.

For Gramsci, the historical formula of revolution must extend to 'civil hegemony', which intervenes in social relations to realign the balance of forces in a multiplicity of social spaces before taking state power. In these dense and multi-layered social structures, the morality and the worldview of hegemonic groups have deeply infused the values and the common sense of subaltern social strata. According to Gramsci, then, in socio-historical contexts of increased differentiation under a given hegemonic structure, a bloc of social forces can set in motion a process of radical social renewal only by becoming first the moral and intellectual leader of kindred and allied groups, before gaining governmental and coercive power. Social 'leadership' is given priority over state power in the politics of hegemony. Consequently, this is a composite strategy for revolution, in which rupture is subsumed under a long-term process of contention, opposition, ongoing social reformation and the organization of counterpowers. Hegemony is not bent primarily on a grand revolutionary event and the conquest of state power (Gramsci, 1971).

More specifically, a certain social group can rise and start reconstituting society in line with its worldview only when it transcends the 'corporate limits of the purely economic class' (Gramsci, 1971: 181). A group aspiring to hegemony generalizes its interests so as to recruit other subaltern groups, to weld together a massive force and to figure a collective will which tends 'to become universal and total' (Gramsci, 1971: 129). This is the starting point of the hegemonic struggle and the 'most purely political phase' (Gramsci, 1971: 181). At this moment, the ideology of the aspiring hegemon must be propagated throughout society and must concoct a unity not only of economic and political objectives, but also of morality and ideas. It is such a 'self-transcendence' of contemporary commoners, who will go beyond the narrow horizon of their specific activity and will also assume broader political tasks, that provides the launching point of counter-hegemonic contest and can yield the basis for a counter-hegemony of the commons.

For Gramsci, intellectual and moral reform, the diffusion of new ideas and values, lays the foundation for a national-popular, or majoritarian, collective will, which can give rise to a new modern civilization, a novel social order (Gramsci, 1971). Under conditions of heightened social diversity, multiple entrenched powers and resistances, structural reconstruction can come about when a certain political agency steps up and becomes a decisive center which composes dispersed social actors, assembling a sizeable alliance of social movements and individuals against the ruling regime. It achieves this convergence of different groups by articulating their grievances and aspirations into a coherent alternative discourse, vision, ethic and program, that is, by shaping an effective collective identity and by co-ordinating their activity. Undertaking intellectual and moral innovation and shaping the collective will are two main tasks of a hegemonic contender in Gramsci's politics (Gramsci, 1971).

Crucially, in Gramsci's integrated strategy, the formation of a collective will, intellectual leadership and moral leadership should be coupled with interventions in the political economy. The political counter-hegemonic operations should be buttressed by a program of economic improvements in the material position of allied social groups. The economic program is, in effect, the concrete form in which the moral and intellectual reform casts itself. Gramsci's hegemony is ethico-political, but it must also be economic,

leaning on the decisive role of the hegemonic contestant in core economic activities. However, he proclaims overtly that the 'two basic points – the formation of a national-popular collective will…and intellectual and moral reform – should structure the entire work' (Gramsci, 1971: 133) of the modern Prince. Hence, hegemony involves at the same time an endeavour to deeply and consciously politicize economic relations, infrastructures and processes themselves for the purposes of social emancipation.

Like Bauwens and Hardt and Negri, Gramsci holds that politics is born on the organic ground of economic life and draws sustenance from an economic plan. But in contrast to all three, Gramsci assigned a leading and irreducible part to hegemonic politics, which not only exceeds the terrain of the economy, but pervades this terrain, too, and sets out to reshape it, to mobilize it politically and to incorporate it in a broader, politically fashioned hegemonic bloc and project. The proper task of hegemonic politics is permanent action, political organization and the construction of collective identities. Politics must bring into play passions and aspirations which overflow any narrow calculus of profit and forge a 'national-popular collective will towards the realization of a superior, total form of modern civilization' (Gramsci, 1971: 133). The concept of hegemony and its corollary theory of the political party are put forward in explicit opposition to economism and in clear recognition of the material force of popular beliefs. Hence Gramsci's concern with the politics of ideology, which furnishes a motor and a glue for counter-hegemonic struggle. No doubt, Gramsci's (1971) identification of the aspirant emancipatory *Hegemon* or *Prince* with a centralized working-class party needs to be deeply reconsidered in our times, holding on mainly to the directive and organizational function and questioning its particular forms (for such a rethink of hegemony, see Laclau and Mouffe, 1985).

Indeed, from this specific angle, the very research activities and publications of the P2P Foundation, including the latest *Peer to peer: The commons manifesto* (Bauwens et al., 2019), appear to belong to the hard core of the ideological politics of hegemony, the dissemination of new ideas and 'intellectual leadership' that aims at re-orienting common sense in a particular, pro-commons direction and propounds a new vision in ways that can appeal to people's passions and aspirations.

Hence, an adequate strategy for democratic change in the direction of the commons will be composite. It will combine autonomous grassroots mobilization, the building of alternative institutions and relations, the constitution of counterpowers, prefiguration, the discursive and affective battle to engage common sense, institutional contestation and reform. A renewed strategy of hegemony would form a massive collective actor by aggregating many social forces, it would lead political action and it would represent general demands and aspirations. A counter-hegemonic agency for the commons will be embodied in a complex ecology of diverse modes of action and organization. Enhanced cohesion and efficacy could be attained by a plural and shifting assemblage of actors if they mobilize around a common vision of another world and around a collective strategic plan which advances a comprehensive agenda of change, while dividing labor and distributing functions – from street protest and accruing counterpowers to tackling existing institutions – according to different capacities and inclinations.

Hence, a political critique of the technocratic vision of the commons need not, and should not, prompt us to discount the significance of political economy and 'seed forms' of productive commons. Indeed, the 'prefigurative' practice of crafting alternative relations and institutions, which inaugurate another world within the old, can help to cultivate alternative values. It can also stage an appealing example that points to another future and serves to win over larger swathes of the population. Moreover, new institutions and techno-economic practices may help to put in place a material infrastructure which reduces dependence on dominant structures and elites, supplying the base for an effective counter-hegemonic bloc. But 'the political' needs to be alive and kicking throughout, even within the techno-economic transformative processes. If, for instance, 'open communities of peer producers are largely oriented towards the start-up model and are subsumed to profit maximization' (Bauwens and Kostakis, 2014: 358), how are they going to rally around the cause of an autonomous and self-sustaining peer production of the commons without a political articulation of a conscious commons vision and a deliberate collective organization around it?

As opposed to the politics of ideological indoctrination and top-down instruction by political vanguards or party armies, the politics of hegemony sets out to win over the consent of social majorities. Therefore, hegemony

weaves actual social demands into 'chains of equivalence' (Laclau, 2000b: 302-302) and strives to connect organically with common sense. The political strategy of hegemony taps into the old *or emergent* elements of people's mind and consciousness which are most akin to its political project, and, starting out from them, it labors to nudge and reframe existing common sense in a certain political direction.

Accordingly, the political operation of infusing digital commons with a distinct political orientation and the vision of a post-capitalist turn should proceed organically by relating to, and building upon, existing trends in the discursive and value-framing of CBPP. Significantly, a rising political consciousness imbues recent fermentations in commons-based cooperativism, confirming the relevance of a counter-hegemonic politics of digital commons. In recent years, 'platform cooperatives' have been championed as an alternative to capitalist online platforms such as *Uber* and *Airbnb*, which underpin the extractive 'sharing economy' or 'platform capitalism' of our times. This is advocated as a deliberate strategy of struggle through which peer producers break their bonds of dependence on the capitalist economy, and weld together digital and labor commons in new schemes of cooperativism that further a new cooperative movement vying for economic hegemony (see Dafermos, 2020; Scholz and Schneider, 2016).

'Open cooperatives', such as *Enspiral* and *Sensorica*, are platform cooperatives which are not only under worker or multistakeholder ownership, but they also mutualize digital platforms and deploy free software. They incorporate thus the principles of traditional cooperativism, but they also upgrade and renew them. Open cooperatives are more strongly attuned to the common good. They internalize negative externalities affecting communities and the environment. They adopt multi-stakeholder models of governance. They manufacture immaterial and material commons, and they are animated by global social and political concerns (Pazaitis et al., 2017). Through their conscious orientation towards commoning open cooperatives aspire to act counter-hegemonically, resisting the forces of competition and entrepreneurialism which threaten to domestic and co-opt platform cooperativism (Sandoval, 2020).

Likewise, *Distributed Cooperative Organizations (DisCOs)* is a highly relevant proposal which couples from the outset the economic, the digital and the political. This is pursued today by the *Guerilla Media Collective*, a commons-centered cooperative, which consists of three nodes: *Guerilla Translation*, *Guerilla Graphic Collective* and *Guerilla Agitprop*, which campaigns for pro-commons activist organizations and projects. A part of the proceeds of the paid work remunerates reproductive and care labor for the community, and it finances the social mission by retroactively compensating translators for their voluntary translations (Troncoso et al., 2019). The collectivity seeks to diffuse and 'turbocharge' politically the principles of traditional and open cooperativism so as to instigate a transition to post-capitalist futures. *DisCOs* clearly define their identities and politics (Troncoso et al., 2019), gearing peer technologies and cooperatives towards core political ends.

These include: radical workplace democracy that distributes power; fight against economic and social inequalities, which is waged from the bottom-up through paradigm-shifting alternatives; feminism; mutual support and care; aggregating political and cultural counterpower against the corporate capitalist economy through transnational collaborations; the scaling-up of cooperative culture to the next level through transnational, digitally enabled networks and large-scale governance; the formation of a new political subject, the 'commoner', encompassing all those who co-manage collective resources according to commonly defined norms.

Technology nerds, commoners, ordinary citizens and political actors should converge, through media and assemblies in physical settings, in order to incubate processes of transformation in concert. To this end, *DisCOs*, the commons and peer production should join forces with post-capitalist movements such as municipalism, ecofeminism, degrowth, anti-austerity protests, which will take political and legislative initiatives, including public-common partnerships, will breed the social and solidarity economy, and will promote bottom-up public provision (Troncoso et al., 2019).

DisCOs purport to consciously politicize digital technologies, and, more specifically, distributed ledger technologies or 'blockchain', while they vocally dismiss any techno-determinism or techno-solutionism. Distributed ledger and peer-to-peer technologies are susceptible to co-optation by profit-

seeking, capitalist factions and corporations, but *DisCOs* seek to harness their potential for prioritizing care and for devising new and radical forms of ownership, governance and production that combat economic inequality (Troncoso et al., 2019). By encoding their principles, from their socio-environmental mission to federation, into secure ledger technologies, they can reinforce their values and they can make transparent their fulfilment in practice.

DisCO commoners hold firmly that cooperative practices should never bet everything on technology, protocols, governance models, legal and institutional forms. These make up a *structure*, which should be deeply informed by a specific *culture*, the vision, the shared motivations and the principles of *DisCOs* (Troncoso et al., 2019). This is the nub of the politicization of digital commons, which is embedded into the *DisCO* model of open cooperativism. Change does not come about randomly or mainly by way of developing a new mode of production. Restoration of the planet and human relationships turn on transnationally networked and radically democratic workplaces. Critical and transformative commoning must be a deliberate project that guides cooperativism (Troncoso et al., 2019).

DisCOs' core objective is to educate, to empower and to partner with those affected by socio-economic inequalities in order to marshal a global, networked counterpower (Troncoso et al., 2019). This is quintessentially a counter-hegemonic intervention, which seeks to put in motion a new bloc of forces committed to historical change, it formulates a unifying vision, and it strives to resonate with the minds and the hearts of broader constituencies. *DisCOs* illustrate, thus, what politicized, counter-hegemonic commons could be in the new digital economy. As such, they are an apt plug-in for any broader counter-hegemonic coalition, in which social movements and political activists close also ranks with institutional actors in the political system.

Endnote on the digital and the political

The initial triumphalism about the revolutionary march of commons-based peer production has wisely subsided and given way to a more prudent reckoning with messy and ambivalent gestations under the hegemonic rule of

capital and state. Peer-to-peer technologies, platforms and digital commons have altered the patterns of interaction and co-production in the digital and cultural realm. But they have not supplanted the dominant capitalist mode of production and allocation -nowhere near it. They are subject to co-optation by the contemporary 'netarchical' capitalism, from *Facebook* to *Airbnb* and *Uber* etc. They have infiltrated and modified 'physical' production -industrial, agricultural etc- but under the ruling regimes of production and allocation. CBPP technologies furnish enabling infrastructures for commoning and cooperativism. But they also serve financialized capitalism, which siphons off the collaboration, the creativity and the free labor of millions.

To set off a social shift towards commons-centric formations, digital commons should actively engage in restructuring material production, more widely. They should be also driven by conscious political choices, vision and action. They would need, moreover, to pursue synergies with social movements, institutions and political actors to hold back market forces of enclosure and to benefit from favourable legislation, infrastructure and the transfer of resources. At the same time, they should form political identities which will steer them away from the reproduction of neoliberal capitalism. Insofar as they aim at commons-based progressive change, peer-to-peer advocates have become increasingly alert to all these points. But they still tend to prioritize the making of peer-to-peer commons over politics, driving a wedge between social innovation, prefiguration and political activation, a wedge which should be dislodged. Political principles, objectives, discourse, vision and identities should permeate prefigurative commons-building itself in order to amplify its scope, to free it from its economic and ideological dependence on capitalism and to sharpen its sense of direction.

Peer-to-peer technologies and digital commons could further social change if they form part of a multi-layered, extensive counter-hegemonic strategy. In the Gramscian view, such a counter-hegemonic agency can refigure civil society, the economy and the state by assembling massive social forces around a shared vision of change, by organizing their diverse, multi-level interventions in the economy, everyday culture, education, state institutions, and by manufacturing a firm material basis. So, in a fully-fledged strategy for a society built around the commons, political economy and material innovation hold crucial keys, but if they are situated in, and oriented by, a

broader political consciousness and alliance, and if the significance of parallel political activity in civil society, the economy and the state is duly acknowledged.

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