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The Handbook of Peer Production

Chapter 27 – Peer Production and State Theory:

Envisioning a Cooperative Partner State

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1. Introduction

Anything regarding the state will be immediately regarded with suspicion by most of the protagonists of peer production and, indeed, of the cooperative movement. For both share an implied distrust and opposition against hierarchy, bureaucracy, or anything above and beyond the people, including or pertaining to the state. So, to make a case for a positive, let alone *necessary* role for the state, however transformed and reduced for peer production, even at the level of discussion, would be an uphill battle.

As we explain later, across a broad spectrum of diverse political interpretations and ambiguities of peer production, one thing that appears to be common is this almost ingrained view of the state as antagonistic, repressive or obsolete. However, it is exactly the absence of state-like structures or institutions – in the sense of a regulating, ordering principle outside of the immediate economic sphere of peer production – that seems to inevitably lead to all kinds of disasters, both theoretically and in experience. From the Facebook Cambridge Analytica scandal¹ to the precariousness of Uber drivers (Scholz, 2016) and the population displacement in cities evoked by AirBnB², and from the discourse on the ecological costs of Bitcoin (Krause & Tolaymat, 2018) or the failure of “The DAO” experiment (DuPond, 2017; Mehar et al., 2017) to the Deletionists vs Inclusionists dispute in Wikipedia (Kostakis, 2010) or the issue of gender discrimination in Free and Open Source Software communities (Terrel et al., 2017), numerous examples

¹ For a concise overview see: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/mar/17/the-cambridge-analytica-scandal-changed-the-world-but-it-didnt-change-facebook>.

² Indicatively some studies referred here: <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-45083954>.

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illustrate this tension. Hence, though this may be an uphill battle, it is most probably one we cannot avoid.

Yet, contradictory as this may seem, peer production is far from being the only case of state support to alternative or emergent economic structures. Many historical instances come to mind, including the role of the state in the early Israeli kibbutz movement and the subsequent formation of the State of Israel (Tsuk, 2000); the formation of the Italian cooperative network in the Emilia Romagna region (Adeler, 2014; Corcoran & Wilson, 2010; Zamagni, 2006); or the contemporary policies for the social and solidarity economy amidst the ongoing degradation of the Welfare State in Greece (Adam, 2012, 2016; Kalogeraki et al., 2018; Vathakou, 2015). In all these cases, state-led policies have consciously created emancipatory environments for civic action, which in turn influenced the political agenda and even state reform. Likewise, peer production evinces new forms of economic and social organization, accompanied by a shared morality coalesced around the P2P administration of social affairs.

But how can the contemporary state support peer production? To answer this question, we interrogate the notion of the Partner State, as a new form of symbiosis between state and civil society, based on the principles and practices of peer production. Recent experimentations such as Ecuador's Open Knowledge Society project (Bauwens et al., 2015), and the urban commons policies in cities like Barcelona, Bologna and Naples (Bauwens & Niaros, 2018), allow us to sketch out the prefigurative contours of the Partner State through current practice and informed speculation. This chapter's aim is to examine and discuss these early theoretical and empirical foundations through the lens of State Theory. Our main objective is to *understand* and *explain* the ontological and functional

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foundations of the Partner State, beyond the myth and in the context of current social and economic transformations.

A tentative glimpse of these elements may be offered through a synergy of peer production with the principles of the cooperative movement, which has been proposed with the concept of “open cooperativism” (Bauwens & Kostakis, 2014; Conaty & Bollier, 2014; Pazaitis et al., 2017). An open cooperative is legally and statutorily dedicated to the creation of commons and shared resources. It adopts multi-stakeholder forms of governance to internalize negative externalities and organizes, socially and politically, around global concerns, while operating locally (Bauwens & Kostakis, 2016; Bauwens et al., 2019).

Acknowledging the common line of critique on cooperativism (Luxemburg, 1899), open cooperatives are presented as an opportunity to revitalize cooperativism in the digital era. But what is particularly important for our inquiry is that they also provide an analytical basis for state theory to approach peer production. They illustrate hybrid configurations incorporating elements from reciprocity- as well as commons-based organization. These proto-institutions gradually create a playing field on the micro and meso level that breeds the democratic means for commoners to pursue their own livelihood, but also broader social and political transformation. Open cooperatives uphold peer production as a learning process of bottom-up political action and influence to forward state reform.

In the following sections we briefly explore the economic dynamics of peer production and their socio-political implications. Afterwards, we provide an overview of the state as the agent for social reform and change, drawing from the philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel and the critical analysis of A. Gramsci, to conceptualize the role of the Partner State

in enabling and strengthening peer production within and beyond the current system. We then follow with an exposition of these transformative elements through open cooperativism. Finally, we discuss a tentative political agenda towards a commons-centric society.

2. With or Without the State: Peer Production from the Economic Sphere to the Political, and Back Again

Stemming from the enhanced capabilities of Information and Communication Technologies and the rapid expansion of the internet, peer production embodies the diversities and ambiguities of its socio-technological background. We, thus, have different political objectives and interpretations pursued through various socio-technological frameworks of peer production (Bauwens et al., 2019).

On one side of the spectrum, we have generative, civic-driven economic forms of localized commons, such as transition towns or ecovillages, and global digital commons, like Free and Open Source Software and Wikipedia. Despite the deviance in scale or impact, both local and global commons-based communities are celebrating self-management and autonomy over control and coercion; decentralization over concentration of power; and ad-hocracy over planning and execution, which goes almost by definition against most contemporary views of state institutions. Moreover, the main theoretical underpinnings around the commons, from Ostrom (1990) to Harvey (2011), Hardt and Negri (2011) and De Angelis (2017), to Bollier and Helfrich (2012, 2019), would rather speak for a dynamic shift contra to the state or, at least, away from– and around it.

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In addition, many practitioners and activists of commons-based peer production, often with a Marxist or Anarchist background, are socialized into thinking that the state must and, eventually, will perish, having always been more of a problem than an answer to social questions. Likewise, those with a green, urban, peace-oriented or other activist background have personally experienced the state as the physical enemy, in the form of riot police or state prosecutors. In this perspective, under the current system, peer production will be doomed to remain subject to massive co-optation, providing yet another medium for precariousness and exploitation to feed capitalist growth. And admittedly, these critical views have merit, but taken as absolutes, they risk, as we will see, fighting a paper tiger.

On the other side of the spectrum, the dynamics of peer production are exploited by centralized platforms such as Facebook and Uber, or distributed rent-driven networks like Bitcoin (Bauwens et al., 2019). Here a widespread techno-enthusiasm, from Silicon Valley to the crypto-economy would hold any type of state intervention, regulation or oversight as impediment to innovation and progress. Technology and the state are deemed statutorily antagonistic and technological progress is often assumed to advance towards a condition that would simply engineer the state away. Hence, if the state delays the advance of technology, it is seen as something bad or, at best, inefficient rather than as a creative friction in human affairs that opens a space for discussion and negotiation (Drechsler & Kostakis, 2014).

At the extreme of this outlook, there is often the idea that the state, often simply conflated with the nation state, would simply wither away via new forms of technologically-enabled sovereignty (e.g. Manski & Manski, 2018). The discussion around

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the so-called blockchain or distributed governance has since the introduction of Bitcoin (Nakamoto, 2008) reached the size of a fashion item of global intellectual significance, into which peer production can seamlessly be situated. A highly economized understanding of politics is also at play here, where a distributed form of money issuance surpassing the need for a central bank – other than of course financing everything related to the existence of the said distributed system – is equivalent to state-less freedom.

Finally, peer production is often conflated with the promises of distributed production and a post-scarcity or post-capitalist society (e.g. Mason, 2015; Rifkin, 2014; Tapscott & Williams, 2006). Yet these views lack a serious analysis of the social and political ambivalences of such a transition, holding strongly utopian views of societies that would perhaps be nice to have, but to which very few bridges are leading. After all, can a change of production alone really transform society and politics? Conversely, peer production has a strongly reformist element, though often this is not admitted. A lot of the discussion is based on the exploration of seed forms that are transforming what we currently have, working within the system. Even more, conflicts and division very often burst out between groups, where one would normally expect unity and complementarity.

And this is so, because, in the end, peer production is an economic theory, as the name already implies. It is often the case that state, legal, and political-philosophical matters are relatively downplayed and many things merely assumed. But the relationship between economics and politics is not linear, i.e. a radical change in the former is not necessarily followed by correspondent ones in the latter. Things can go many ways and, as Werner Sombart (1932) already pointed out, the question of which economy to choose is primarily a political rather than an economic one.

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For instance, in its early stages Industrial Capitalism and the state were enemies, as the latter was feudalistic-agrarian in all early-capitalist systems. It was in fact only relatively late in the former's development that they became aligned, with their synthesis best embodied in the form of the Welfare State (Reinert, 2019). And that is a key point: the classic Welfare State, in the form of the Social Market Economy, assumes that the market can efficiently allocate scarce resources and this is, for significant parts of the economy, a sensible *modus operandi*. Incidentally, the Welfare State also seems to be the main context for any form of real-existing peer production today, i.e. peer production really exists, to the extent that it does, mostly within systems that are Social Market Economies.

However, the results of economic operations are not necessarily congruent with what society in a given context prioritizes and desires (Drechsler, 1997). In peer production, if we assume an absolute situation, where market-based operations are absent or heavily reduced, doesn't this question remain? Even under the best of circumstances, even optimally and with the best of well-minded people, what reason do we have to assume that peer production will lead to a society that is as we desire? What about those who cannot co-produce? What about those who do not do it well? What about, indeed, those who do not want to? If this is not managed ad-hoc and arbitrarily, we need someone or something to generalize the commonweal in an institutional, predictable, and systematic way. And even if we call this committees, colleges or assemblies, of course that is the state.

Moreover, peer production discourse, by and large, assumes that humans are naturally better than they actually are. Already William Morris (1890) conceded that his classic, indeed archetypical, commons-based, peer-productive utopia *News from Nowhere*

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needed a big cataclysm, a new human race, to exist. Similarly, Ursula Le Guin's (1974) communal society of *Anarres* took a massive settlement (or rather exile) of all the utopian anarchists to emancipate themselves from their "propertarian" society. And there is ample historical evidence for this in the real world, from the challenges of the cooperative and revolutionary movements to today's free vs open-source software discourse³. This illustrates that so far, even in the peer production sphere, people are just not as "nice" as they should be for the theory to work, at least not always or not in identical ethical manners. The assumption that people have an intrinsic tendency to perform in a P2P manner is just too bold to be acceptable.

The famous fresco by Ambrogio Lorenzetti in Siena Town Hall, from the early 14th century, one of the great art works symbolizing and interpreting government and its effects on the economy, indirectly makes this point in the "Allegory of Bad Government" (Drechsler 2001b). Just like Good Government is surrounded by Faith, Hope and Love, on another wall its opposite, Tyranny, is respectively encircled by three vices: Greed/Avarice, Arrogance, and Vanity⁴. Now, if the peer production transformation removes Greed, the other two vices still remain, and as we often enough see, they are powerful as well. But because they are not economic motives, they are often neglected, which partly explains why there may be surges of such bitter fighting about precisely what kind of Fab Lab should be established, and where.

Of course, one does not have to follow anthropo-psychological speculations such as these, based on novels or Italian frescoes. Yet, it is a reminder that, as we observe in our

³ <https://www.gnu.org/philosophy/open-source-misses-the-point.en.html>.

⁴ Arrogance and Vanity in today's discourse are often lumped together as Pride, but there is a difference between thinking that I am incredibly beautiful and thinking I am better than anyone else.

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own world again and again, and indeed as the entire point of peer production being “commons-based” is, materialistic matters are not everything. And the idea of the ideal state in this context is that it is the institution that fulfills the necessary role *outside* of the economic sphere and, to a certain extent, also inside.

As it becomes clear that the state is not threatening peer production as an economic form, it is, in fact, most often than not state institutions that support P2P projects, labs and spaces where peer production experimentations take place. Respectively, some of the most modern and richest states (on all three levels – country, regional, and local), are increasingly displaying their interest to support peer production to a significant extent, while a significant number of P2P activists find themselves on the state payroll, either in public universities or state-funded Makerspaces, and not by accident, but by design.

3. On the (Partner) State as Agency for Social Transformation

Peer production has been advocated as a new mode of value creation that encompasses seed forms of post-capitalist scenarios. These hold the potential to permeate and transcend the current global order of markets and states (Bauwens et al., 2019). Even though this is taking place in a world administered by hierarchical bureaucracies and competitive market agents, these new forms of self-management and mutual coordination are gradually moving from the periphery to the center.

And yet, as long as it disputes the state as an apparatus, a method and organization, peer production reinstates the relevance of the state as an *object* of scientific inquiry, best examined by the classical Continental State Theory embodied by the German term *Staatswissenschaften* (Drechsler, 2001a). For it is exactly the task in hand to examine the

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state as a form of structured human living-together. Much like the way medical doctors study the human body by grouping different fields of expertise, classical State Theory deals with the state as the primary focus of an inter-disciplinary synergy, including economics, sociology, political science, history and law.

And this is particularly relevant for the concept of the Partner State. The current discussion of the Partner State has been mainly offered as an approach for a state-like structure, which is oriented towards self-defined civil action (Bauwens et al., 2019; Kostakis & Bauwens, 2014; Pazaitis & Bauwens, 2018). Despite this ontological contradiction from a narrow definition of the state, as far as classical State Theory is concerned, if it walks like a state and talks like a state, the Partner State can, and should be, studied as one.

More specifically, the Hegelian (1995 [1821]) understanding of the state as the sphere of genuine Freedom, including individual Freedom (Ritter, 1957) is of major importance to analyze this enabling function of the Partner State. While markets are driven by individual greed or, at best, desire, the state serves as the sphere of civil negotiation concerning society's processes and priorities and the rights and obligations of citizens towards the administration of social life. It is a process that makes individual persons real by incorporating them into a larger whole, which, then, only exists because of individual action.

One of the first serious attempts to frame peer production vis-à-vis the state has been a report produced by the Commons Strategies Group titled “State Power and Commoning” (Bollier, 2016). As the title already implies, the aim has been to reformulate the discussion, marking a shift from a static view of the state and the commons as entities,

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to a dynamic, process-based understanding of the underlying social and power relationships. This conceptual shift is useful to identify the role of the Partner State as one serving to define the rules of *commoning*, i.e. the quality of contributing to, and benefiting from, shared capacities. It is an integral process of every P2P community, which differentiates them from networks of loosely-affiliated self-interested individuals. The idea of the Partner State sublates⁵ this process on a higher level, allowing the diverse communities to operate in harmony and guaranteeing prosperity for the system as a whole.

Commoning as a process is often discussed as synonymous with P2P, which is mainly a relational dynamic, now amplified by a counterpart technological infrastructure (Bauwens et al., 2019). P2P relations reconfigure the perceptions and aspirations of the political community by defining a new interpersonal rationality and coordination of its constituents (Bollier, 2016; Pazaitis & Bauwens, 2018). It is hence in tandem with commoning that peer production asserts a certain political connotation that becomes interpreted through the Partner State. Simply put, if peer production creates and optimizes the conditions for shared capacities to operate, commoning answers the questions of *what* is being shared (i.e. the resources); *who* is engaged (i.e. the community); and *how* (i.e. the rules and norms of collective stewardship).

This may be understood as an extension of the global-western Welfare State. The underlying rationality of the Welfare State goes hand-in-hand with capitalist production and is subsequently focused on the redistribution of wealth and benefits to alleviate its

⁵ Sublate derives from the latin *sublatus* (past participle of *tollere*, i.e. to take away, lift up), from *sub-* (i.e. up) + *latus*, past participle of *ferre*, i.e. to carry. As a philosophical term it is often used as a translation for the German Hegelian term *Aufheben*, which means to assimilate a smaller constituent entity into a larger one. It connotes the dialectic process of negating or eliminating an element, while preserving it as a partial element in a synthesis.

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externalities, such as income inequalities and ecological degradation. Similarly, the Partner State moves from redistribution to pre-distribution, harnessing peer production to mobilize productive capacities around the commons. It internalizes externalities by embedding productivity within social and ecological limits, defined by the rules of commoning. However, even though peer production is the driving force of this political outcome, peer production alone cannot guarantee it, just like industrial production alone cannot guarantee social justice.

On a historical note, many of the ideas underpinning the Welfare State in the form of the Social Market Economy date back to the late nineteenth century German Historical School of economics (Drechsler, 2016). Contrary to mainstream economic ideas, social reform champions realism and relevance, as opposed to abstraction and precision. Peer production arguably provides an alternative rationality for social reform, centered around contributory action and the self-aggregation of shared capacities. The Partner State is then the agent that makes this action possible to begin with. It nurtures and guides individual liberty to encapsulate the totality of social and ecological life through commoning.

Nevertheless, as commoning is by no means immune to the pitfalls generating inequalities and unfair outcomes, the role of social reform also entails the art of perceiving problems, ameliorating them through policy measures and simultaneously employing the relevant scholarly discipline to understand and demonstrate what is wrong (Drechsler, 2016). As opposed to revolutionary approaches, social reform may *prima facie* seem conservative. But as a methodological approach in economic policy it presents a viable, problem-based, context-specific approach that vastly differs from current practice. Likewise, it exemplifies the agency of the state in fostering social change, rather than

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creating a reality in which change is delegitimized. In a globalized order driven by the brute economization of social life, the state stands as the one agency that has been, and could be, built against it, with social reform providing its main diagnostic and treatment tools.

But does the identification of problems and social reform alone suffice to transform contemporary predatory capitalist states into Partner States? The common line of critique from the Marxist and anarchist tradition asserts that the state, here foremostly seen as an apparatus, exists to serve the needs of the dominant class and suppress change, whilst ensuring its own survival.

Antonio Gramsci (1971) is arguably the key Marxist thinker offering an alternative view of the state. More specifically, the concept of the “Integral State” suggests a dialectical unity between the political society (i.e. the state) and the civil society (D’Alisa, 2019). The two parts are seen as engaging in a struggle to fulfill divergent visions through the means of, respectively, domination and hegemony. Domination is related to enforcement and the legitimate use of power, typically associated with the state, though not exclusively confined to it. Likewise, hegemony implies consent on behalf of the people, usually informed by ideology.

Gramsci methodologically differentiates the spheres of civil and political life, but acknowledges them as ontologically inseparable and organically interwoven. There is as much coercion exercised in civil society as there is consent accrued by the state. Hence, domination and hegemony are operating as mutually reinforcing processes of the state over- and through- the people. This struggle is then reflected in “common sense,” i.e. the generally, often unconsciously, accepted perceptions of the world at a given time.

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Hegemony thus defines the spectrum of commonsensical perceptions rendered acceptable to people, largely through consent and, if needed, coercion (D’Alisa & Kallis, 2016).

Simultaneously, alternative or marginal ideas outside of this spectrum mobilize counter-hegemonic groups, which strive to create new common senses for social change.

In this view, peer production, and particularly its commons-based variation, is approached as the locus where counter-hegemonic ideas and practices are cultivated, seeking to challenge and transcend current institutions. Respectively, commoning serves as a new common sense in understanding political and civic life. In turn, social groups may be mobilized to exert consent and pressure towards new institutions. This mutually reinforcing process creates what De Angelis (2017) calls “enabling environments” for individual emancipation.

Therefore, the Partner State can be simultaneously examined in two ways: ontologically as a Hegelian State, i.e. it encapsulates and sublates individual self-aggregation in an administered totality, along with its institutions; and instrumentally as a Gramscian Integral State, i.e. it dialectically operates upon and through civil action to establish counter-hegemonic ideas, to define new institutions.

The Partner State, thus, marks a strategy that is, on the one hand, reformist, as it works within existing configurations, but, on the other hand, it is also revolutionary, as it cultivates the conditions that could potentially lead to a new configuration. As a revolution is usually perceived as anti-state, the concept of “revolutionary reform” by Gorz (1968) is particularly useful in the case of the Partner State. A revolutionary reformist approach is one that is acceptable by the dominant system, but simultaneously gestating its transformation. A common example of such a reform in relation to peer production is a

universal basic income. It can be seen as a form of welfare benefit provided through the current system, but it marks a break in the commodification of labor, emancipating workers to contribute to self-identified commons-oriented activities.

4. On Cooperatives as Vehicles of Economic and Political Agency

Traditional cooperatives, with their numerous variations, have been presented as viable alternatives to dominant capitalist organizational forms since the 19th century. Their contribution to the economy is still substantial, with an annual turnover of more than € 1bn and 180,000 cooperative enterprises employing about 4.5 million people in Europe (Cooperatives Europe, 2016). Furthermore, they foster a reconfiguration of the work environment oriented towards the reduction of precariousness and inequality, increased worker and social welfare.

The common line of critique, often deriving from the work of Rosa Luxemburg (1899 [1970]) rebukes the organizational form of cooperatives which oscillates between social and capitalist production. Most often than not, cooperatives end up adopting exploitative mentalities to withstand competition. Moreover, they tend to circle around their local or national membership, which diminishes their role for the broader community. To protect their internal environment, they rely on opaque and exclusive forms of ownership and control, while they fall short in harnessing the capabilities of digital collaboration. All these limitations constrain the transformative dynamic of cooperatives for the broader economy and society (Pazaitis et al., 2017).

Furthermore, peer production, as a new form of value creation, is based on autonomous individual contributions aggregated through distributed collaborative

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relations. This mode of production differs from either hierarchical or market-based forms of coordination in that it is guided by neither central coercion nor price-signaling. There are indeed exciting prospects for the creation of meaningful projects moved primarily, if not solely, by social motives. But simultaneously, peer production poses great challenges to existing organizational forms, including cooperatives, as well as institutions and bodies of representation, such as trade unions. Subsequently, an emerging class of autonomous workers largely falls within the cracks of the current structures, becoming increasingly vulnerable to precariousness and exploitation, sometimes in the form of self-exploitation. Some of the most predatory business models from the giant tech firms of the so-called sharing economy, such as Uber or AirBnB provide compelling evidence for this situation.

In response to these constraints and in the face of the new challenges of the digital economy, open cooperatives call for a synergy between cooperative organization and elements of the commons and peer production (Conaty & Bollier, 2014). Open cooperatives aim for a dynamic balance between maximum autonomy for contributory activities, while maintaining conditions for security and livelihood traditionally enjoyed by employed labor. This can be achieved by investing in the enhanced productive capabilities of peer production, but within a safe space built around trust and solidarity.

In this vision, the commons steer and nourish these two directions, as they provide the premises for both peer production, as well as the solidarity layer. A central aspect is the pooling of resources and productive capacities, which conduces to forms of open, multi-stakeholder engagement in the cooperative organization. Open cooperatives can thereby guide social forms of production to the creation of commons that are further deployed in new iterations by other open cooperatives and commons-oriented enterprises. This way,

they contribute to the expansion of the commons for the broader society, while generating a cooperative advantage to contend with the pressures of the capitalist market (Bauwens et al., 2019).

Bauwens & Kostakis (2016) identify six interrelated strategies, through which open cooperatives may empower these arrangements. First, they embrace abundance for the common good, which is especially relevant to naturally shareable goods and actions, including knowledge and technology. Recognizing abundance rather than artificially imposing scarcity may reduce short-term individual profit, generalizing long-term systemic benefits. Second, open cooperatives support modularity and multiplicity of value forms. They often employ open and contributory value accounting methods (Bauwens & Niaros, 2017), which allows them to interface with the capitalist market, generate revenue and fairly reinvest to their community, based on the community's ethics and value perceptions. Third, and pertaining to the two previous points, open cooperatives encourage reciprocity towards the shared resources, infrastructures and produced value, through "CopyFair" licenses. For instance, hybrid licensing schemes introduced by the FairShares association⁶ include a non-commercial clause for non-members, while allowing commercial use for members, thus requiring reciprocity from external agents (Riddley-Duff, 2015). This protects the shared capacities from predatory activity, while empowering internal collaboration and the expansion of the community in alignment with its values.

The fourth strategy concerns design-embedded sustainability. As the design and production of products and services is not primarily guided by supply and demand, there is no incentive for planned obsolescence, while interoperability, repairability and adaptability

⁶ <https://www.fairshares.coop/>.

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are highly valued. Projects like RepRap or WikiHouse exemplify this design paradigm, where economic entities build their strategic advantages explicitly through “building communities of meaning” (Benkler, 2017). Similarly, fifth, transparent design and productive processes increase resource efficiency and reduce waste. Open cooperatives create realistic possibilities for genuinely circular and sharing economies through open, needs-based design and production across the supply chain. Finally, the sixth strategy pertains to the eventual migration of the above elements, largely originating in the digital sphere, to the physical realm. The pooling of material resources and productive capacities can take place in shared infrastructures, co-working and manufacturing spaces, maximizing meaningful sociality and minimizing externalities.

Hence, open cooperatives coalesce around collective knowledge, tools, and infrastructures to support the commons. They concentrate their productive efforts locally, but organize around global concerns. They thus foster counter-hegemonic ideas and practices around peer production and render social production autonomous and self-sustaining. The community is redefined through trans-local synergies and commoners are able to create new types of vehicles for economic and, eventually, political influence. These consist in democratically governed spaces for sustainable livelihood, self-organization and emancipation from the confines of the dominant system.

These recurring cycles of material re-composition of the commons may gradually increase the capacity of commons-based alternatives to become normalized in social and political negotiation. On the macro-level, this resembles the role of the Partner State in facilitating the creation of value by direct civic action. The Partner State may guarantee open, permissionless participation by maintaining common infrastructures for commons-

based contributory systems, protecting collective capacities and enabling synergies across various agents.

5. From Counter-Power to Social Reform: The Partner State in Motion

To summarize our argument, open cooperativism serves as the incubator of the emancipatory ideas and practices of peer production. Open cooperatives develop their capacities in tandem with the evolution of new institutions to support this process. Once the prefigurative forms gain influence and social consensus, they can become pronounced on a higher level of abstraction. Commoning and peer production form the new common sense at local, national, and transnational levels that guide the advance of the political community. In this way, open cooperatives empower and nurture civic action. Open Cooperatives provide the necessary emancipatory spaces that cater for the expansion of the commons and the material subsistence of commoners; develop prefigurative institutions; and, eventually, raise awareness from the state to recognize, support and incorporate in reform and transformation.

It should be clarified that our intention is neither to present open cooperatives as an ideal form of economic entity for peer production, nor to restrain the role of the Partner State to simply establishing or funding open cooperatives. In fact, open cooperatives are conceptualized as hybrid forms of organization that serve exactly the purpose of operating within the current political economy, while gestating the social and economic practices that would eventually transcend it. The principles described in the previous section form the basis of the proto-institutions that generalize the merits of peer production and simultaneously build counter-power against the dominant system. They thus embody both

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iterations of the Partner State analyzed in this piece, i.e. the Hegelian sphere of the common good and the Gramscian counter-hegemony.

The sequence or synthesis of these two functions at a given time and context may vary and adapt to the different circumstances. For instance, progressive and pro-commons Spanish municipal coalitions in Barcelona and Madrid have led the city government from 2015 but were put in opposition after the 2019 elections. Several policies put forward in the previous term would most probably need to be adapted and reconfigured to serve their political objectives. Similarly, different obstacles may be put in place by various actors to restrain or reverse such policies, as powerful vested interests are not expected to wither away even in the face of a government consciously forwarding Partner State policies. However, the notion of the Partner State, as analyzed here, extends beyond a cluster of policies supporting civic initiatives. Rather it entails the maintenance of a political community and the institutions coalesced around commoning, along with the struggle to steward its own survival, wellbeing, and, eventually, emancipation.

In terms of historical analogies, open cooperatives can be compared to the emergence of guilds in the twelfth century (Bauwens et al., 2019). Specifically, guilds organized work within the feudal order, under the principles of solidarity and communality. Nevertheless, they were conforming to- and recognized by- the existing power structure (De Moor, 2008). But it was through the evolution of the merchant guilds that the new capitalist class rose to eventually dominate society. It is this combination of seed economic and social forms that enables the expansion to the political sphere, by coalescing a vibrant part of the society around viable alternatives.

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However, as long as society faces the current forms of inequality and exploitation, further forms of coercion and exclusion may evolve in the formation of a commons-centric society as well. The state, in the Hegelian sense, will continue to fulfill its role as the guarantor of society as a whole, through prudent policies and reforms (Goldstein 2006). Diverse political views may assert influence to the state to expand and adapt the sphere of the common good to include even more marginal ideas and social groups, helping them to move from the periphery to the center.

Therefore, the Partner State can also be understood as an ongoing process. As a living organism, it follows the evolution of the community it serves. It adopts, strengthens and further promotes the patterns of political deliberation that serve the common good. Similar to the Marxist notion of continuous revolution, the Partner State is in permanent reform; it continuously restructures itself to encapsulate the whole spectrum of civil creativity, freedom and expression. In this process, peer production exemplifies forms of public engagement and deliberation that dialectically shape the ethics and perceptions embodying the Aristotelian notion of the *Good Life*, at a given space and time. The Partner State does not necessarily need to be itself P2P, rather to incorporate these elements in the system of government.

From this perspective, the Partner State offers an alternative approach to the current discussion on citizen co-production (Lember et al., 2019). Most conventional co-production approaches seek to engage citizens in functions otherwise implemented by bureaucrats. In many cases, citizen participation is basically crammed in otherwise closed-ended processes to enhance government accountability and legitimization on face value. However, peer production projects do not focus on the process of participation, but more

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on the relational dynamic, i.e. P2P, as well as the outcome, i.e. commons. They thus provide transparency to these two elements to allow autonomously identified, non-coercive forms of participation to take place.

On the policy level, a crucial element in enabling this process is to embrace modularity. By breaking down large-scale processes into smaller constituents, different levels of engagement and motivation are enabled. In public policy, this can be useful in typical wicked-problems, where every inter-subjective view matters. For instance, in the case of unemployment, a pre-distributory approach would entail pooling the relevant resources (e.g. unemployment benefits, subsidies for SMEs, etc.) through open collective infrastructures (e.g. makerspaces, micro-finance, community currency or mutual aid schemes). This would enable unemployed people to interface with functional structures on different levels and based on their personal values. It is then the job of public servants to monitor these signals and direct the relevant support policies accordingly (e.g. from health insurance and taxation to public investment, subsidies, even universal basic income), towards the best outcome for the larger parts of society.

But, as already explained, peer production remains an economic theory. It does not entail specific processes of engagement; rather it only comes to life once people mobilize around common matters. So, even in an ideally zero-marginal-cost reality where networks of autonomous individuals peer produce globally to cater for all their needs, material and psychological, it would arguably still make sense for human beings to pursue more persistent ways to meaningfully administer their social affairs. The political sphere is after all a domain where some forms of “transaction costs” are more of a feature than a bug, i.e. friction creates space for negotiation and social dialogue (Drechsler & Kostakis, 2014).

Hence, peer production signifies a different approach to policy design and interface in the public sphere. It reinstates socially oriented mobilization of people and resources and meaningful collaboration for its own right. The role and function of bureaucracies in the Partner State may not change fundamentally, at least not at once, as long as we still live in an administered world. Further, technological and policy capacity as we know them today are expected to remain crucial. What may substantially differ is the fabric of policy implementation itself, in that it becomes more transparent (in terms of relations and outcomes), open-ended and less centrally coercive.

6. Conclusion

The Partner State with regards to peer production signifies a change of narrative against the state, from an “other” category to one of “us”. This is already a small victory of a new modality of economic production that, even when not consciously, seeks to reverse the civic disconnect from political affairs. However, it is a victory one has to argue about, as most of the prominent movements around peer production have an almost intrinsic predisposition against the state – and not completely unjustifiably so.

However, analytical explorations from state theory reveal that the examination of the state, along with its institutions, actually does offer insights to better understand the position and potentials of peer production. In the Hegelian notion, the state is exactly that condition that allows different social forms, P2P or otherwise, to become meaningful and enable real and complete emancipation. So, the real question for the future of peer production is not whether the state is relevant, but what type of state transformation needs to take place for it to become relevant, and how.

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Furthermore, the Gramscian theory of the Integral State allows us to conceptualize a dialectical unity between the political society of the state and the transitional ethics of peer production. The latter creates the premise for counter-hegemonic ideas to be nourished and expanded, while the latter follows with the institutions that normalize them. This union of the Hegelian and Gramscian thought tells us a story about *why* and *how* the state can, and arguably should, embrace and support peer production. The Partner State provides, then, a less freighted name to focus the necessary intellectual discussion.

Another tentative fusion is one between elements of peer production and the cooperative economy. In particular, Open Cooperatives provide an ambitious, yet realistic framework to form prefigurative institutions that, on one hand, empower peer production, and on the other hand, socio-politically address some of the immediate challenges and implications. Open Cooperativism as an approach offers a potential blueprint for Partner State reform, acknowledging the politicalness of some of the most transformative elements of peer production. It reaffirms the idea that a new mode of production alone does not necessarily lead to a change of politics and society and, simultaneously, lays down a strategy through which it actually might.

Abstract as it may currently appear, the Partner State is a powerful idea for the political community of peer production. It presents a dynamic track for both peer production movements and state institutions to assemble. The current political establishment is not expected to wither away any time soon. Even if peer production manages to outcompete its rival forms in many domains, there it is still no valid reason to think of it as automatically politically decisive. It is exactly if we want peer production *to be* politically relevant that we must examine it as such, and the domain of the state is the place for this to take place.

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