




Commons Transition and P2P: a primer

Commons Transition and P2P: a Primer

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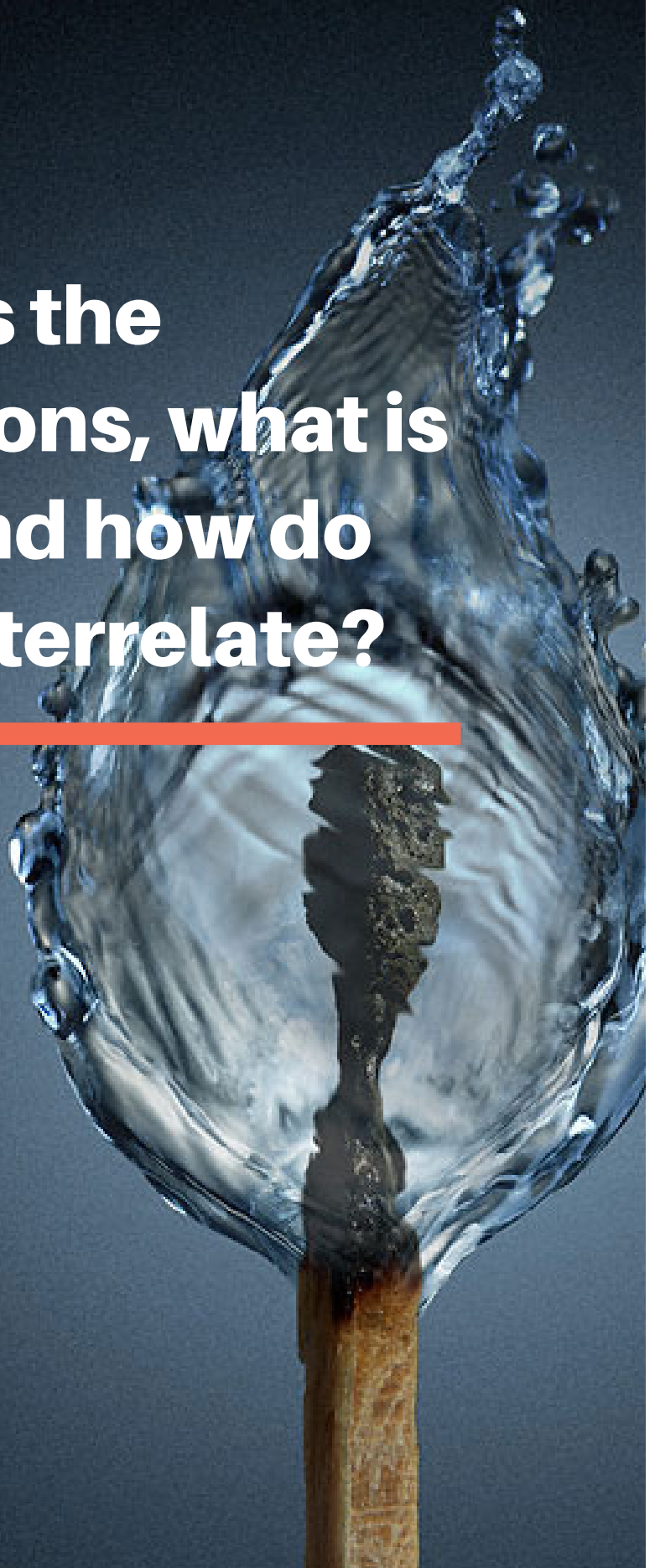
The Commons is a concept and practice that has been steadily gathering increased attention and advocates. Deeply rooted in human history, it's difficult to settle on a single definition that covers its broad potential for social, economic, cultural and political change. The Commons is now demonstrating its power as a "key ingredient" for change in diverse locations and contexts around the world.

The P2P Foundation, with its particular focus on the relationship of the Commons and P2P practices, is supporting this Commons transition by helping to share knowledge and develop tools to create common value and facilitate open, participatory input across society. This short primer explains the Commons and P2P, how they interrelate, their movements and trends, and how a Commons transition is poised to reinvigorate work, politics, production, and care, both interpersonal and environmental.

For more than a decade, the P2P Foundation has been researching, cataloguing and advocating for the potential of P2P and Commons-based approaches to societal and consciousness change.

1.

What is the Commons, what is P2P, and how do they interrelate?



What is the Commons, what is P2P, and how do they interrelate?

The Commons, as an idea and practice, has emerged as a new social, political and economic dynamic. Along with the market and the state, the Commons is a third mode of societal organization. The Commons and Peer to Peer (P2P) together form a system based on the practices and needs of civil society and the environment it inhabits, evolving away from obsolete, centrally planned systems or the competitive dictates of market economies.

But what are the Commons and P2P, and how do they interrelate? We will explore these concepts in the sections below.

What are the Commons?

Commons, as described by author David Bollier, are a shared resource which is co-governed by its user community, according to the rules and norms of that community. Commons include the gifts of nature, such as the water and land, but also shared assets or creative work, such as cultural and knowledge artefacts.

The sphere of the Commons may contain either rivalrous goods and resources, which two people cannot both have at the same time, or non-rival goods and resources, which are not depleted by use. These types of goods or resources are either inherited or are human-made.

The Commons, according to commons scholar and activist Silke Helfrich, can be understood from at least four different perspectives. As a whole, they can be perceived and acted upon as:

- 1. Collectively managed resources**, both material and immaterial, which need protection and require a lot of knowledge and know-how.
- 2. Social processes** that foster and deepen thriving relationships. These form part of complex socio-ecological systems which must be consistently stewarded, reproduced, protected and expanded through commoning.
- 3. A new mode of production** focused on new productive logics and processes.
- 4. A paradigm** shift, that sees commons and the act of commoning as a worldview.

It is said, “There is no commons without commoning”. The Commons is neither the resource, the community that gathers around it, nor the protocols for its stewardship, but the dynamic interaction between all these elements.

An example is Wikipedia: there is a **resource** (universal knowledge), a **community** (the authors and editors) and a set of community-harvested **rules** and protocols (Wikipedia’s content and editing guidelines). The Wikimedia Commons emerges from of all three. Another example, but in a radically different context, is the Siuslaw National Forest, in

Oregon, USA. Managed as a commons, we also find a **resource** (the forest) a **community** (the loggers, ecological scientists and forest rangers comprising its ‘watershed council’) and a set of **rules** and bylaws (the charter for sustainably co-managing the forest).

No master inventory of commons exists, as they arise when a community decides to manage a resource collectively. The Commons as a whole thrives on the vast diversity of individual commons worldwide, ranging from fisheries to urban spaces, and many other forms of shared wealth.



SILKE
HELFRICH
*Commons
Strategies Group*

“Every commons, also ones that revolve around land or water, are knowledge commons, because the commoners must learn and apply knowledge in managing them. And all “knowledge commons,” even ones based on digital systems and intangible creativity, are based on natural resources – the minerals needed for the computers, the electricity generated from fossil fuels, and so forth. The common denominator among commons is that each one is first and foremost a social commons – a social process.”

What is P2P?

If “commons” is the “what”, “P2P” could be considered the “how”.

P2P —“peer to peer”, “people to people”, or “person to person”— can be called a relational dynamic through which peers freely collaborate with one another to create value in the form of shared resources, circulated in the form of commons.

To start, P2P describes computing systems characterized by consensual connections between “peers.” This means the computers in the network can interact with each other. In this context, audio and video file sharing came to be popularly know as P2P file-sharing. Similarly, part of the underlying infrastructure of the Internet, like its data transmission infrastructure, has been called P2P.

Let’s assume that behind those computers are human users. These users have a technological tool which allows them to interact and engage with each other more easily and on a global scale, person to person.

A linguistic confusion about P2P terms and definitions sometimes arises from the interdependence of the technological infrastructure (computers communicating) and the relational dynamic (people communicating). However, a technological infrastructure does not have to be fully P2P in order to facilitate P2P human relationships.

For example, compare Facebook or Bitcoin with Wikipedia or free and open-source software projects: they all utilize P2P dynamics, but they do so in different ways and with different political orientations.

P2P collaboration is often permissionless, meaning that usually no one needs the permission of another to contribute. P2P systems are generally open to all contributors and contributions, but the quality and inclusion of the work is usually determined “post-hoc” by a layer of maintainers and editors, as in the case of Wikipedia.

Keep in mind that P2P can also be a way of allocating resources that does not involve any specific reciprocity between individuals, but only between the individuals and the collective resource. For example, you may develop your own software based on an existing piece of software distributed under the widely used GNU General Public License, but only if your final product is available under the same kind of license.

P2P networks of interconnected computers used by people collaborating can provide vital shared functionalities for the commons, but P2P is not solely related to digital realms and high technology. It is about non-coercive, non-hierarchic relations, and its qualities have the potential to profoundly change human society.



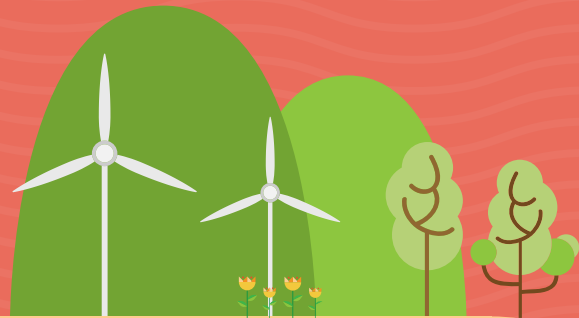
WHAT ARE THE COMMONS AND P2P

THE COMMONS ARE:



A social system for the long-term stewardship of resources that preserves shared values and community identity.

A self-organized system by which communities manage resources (both depletable and replenishable) with minimal or no reliance on the Market or State.



A sector of the economy (and life!) that generates value in ways that are often taken for granted – and often jeopardized by the Market-State.

The wealth that we inherit or create together and must pass on, undiminished or enhanced, to our children. Our collective wealth includes the gifts of nature, civic infrastructure, cultural works and traditions, and knowledge.



THERE IS NO COMMONS WITHOUT COMMONING!

A commons is characterized by:

a **resource**



a **community** gathered around it

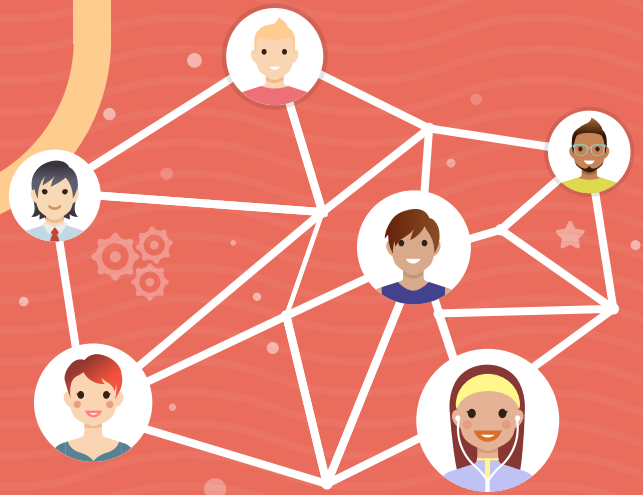


a **set of rules** to care for the resource (and community!)



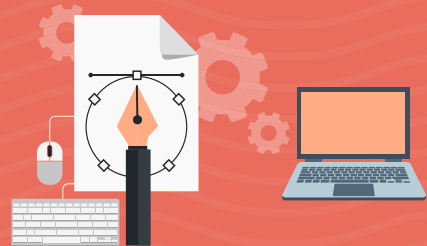
P2P IS:

A type of **social relations**, non-hierarchical and non-coercive, taking place in human networks.



The **technological infrastructure** that makes the scaling up and widespread use of these relations possible.

P2P enables a new **mode of production** building on the first two aspects.



P2P creates the potential for a **transition** to an economy that can be generative towards people and nature.

HOW DO COMMONS AND P2P WORK TOGETHER?

The relation of P2P with the Commons is one of **enabling capacities for contributive actions**. P2P creates the conditions to optimize the specific **what** (resource), **who** (community) and **how** (rules) of commoning.



P2P and the Commons, how do they interrelate?

The relationship of P2P with the Commons is one of enabling capacities for contributive actions. P2P facilitates the act of “commoning,” as it builds capacities to contribute to the creation and maintenance of any shared and co-managed resource (a commons).

In brief, P2P expresses an observable pattern of relations between humans, while the Commons tell us the specific **what** (as in *resources*), **who** (*the communities gathered around the resources*) and **how** (the protocols used to *steward the resources ethically and sustainably for future generations*) of these relational dynamics.

Basing civil society on P2P dynamics and Commons practices could enable a more egalitarian, just, and environmentally stable society; this is the aim of a Commons transition.



2.

What is commons based peer production and how does it inform the P2P economy?

What is commons-based peer production and how does it inform the P2P economy?

The original Greek etymology of the word “economy” describes the management of household resources. How can we extend the care-oriented interactions we find in healthy homes to the larger economy, where networked communities steward the resources of our common home, planet Earth?

The history of P2P as a mode of production

The relational dynamic of P2P is not something new. It has existed since the dawn of humanity, and was the originally dominant form of relationship in the nomadic hunter-gathering societies. It then lost its dominance in the clan-based arrangements of alliances of tribes, where reciprocity was dominant, and later to the hierarchy-based distribution of resources that characterized pre-capitalist states and empires. Throughout these developments though, the Commons and their P2P logic retained very important functions, as was the case in the European feudal systems or the Asian empires.

Once we get to industrial capitalism (and later in the state-socialist systems), P2P and Commons dynamics were effectively marginalized. But the story doesn't end here. Today, thanks to the profusion of P2P-based technologies, the Commons and P2P are experiencing a rebirth which could scale their combined dynamics to a global level. In this vision, they would be able to create complex social artefacts that transcend the possibilities of both state and market-based models alone.

P2P-enabled relations via the Internet have given rise to the emergence of “**commons-based peer production**” (CBPP), a term coined by legal scholar Yochai Benkler describing a new way of creating and distributing value. P2P infrastructures allow individuals to communicate, self-organize and, ultimately, co-create non-rivalrous use value, in the form of digital commons of knowledge, software and design. Think of the free encyclopedia Wikipedia, free and open-source projects such as Linux, the Apache HTTP Server, Mozilla Firefox or Wordpress, and open design communities such as Wikihouse, RepRap and Farm Hack.

KEY CONCEPT: Commons-Based Peer Production

In **commons-based peer production**, contributors create shared value through open contributory systems, govern the common work through participatory practices, and create shared resources that can, in turn, be used in new iterations. This cycle of open input, participatory process and commons-oriented output is a cycle of accumulation of the commons, in contrast to a capital accumulation.

Commons-based peer production as a new ecosystem of value creation

Commons-based peer production shows us the emergence of new ecosystems of value creation comprised of three institutions: the productive community, the commons-oriented entrepreneurial coalition(s), and the for-benefit association.

While an all-inclusive description is impossible for this rapidly evolving mode of production, the table below describes five of the oldest, most well-known examples of commons-based peer production ecosystems.

Productive community	Linux	Mozilla	GNU	Wikipedia	Wordpress
Entrepreneurial coalition	e.g. Linux Professional Institute, Canonical	e.g. Mozilla corporation	e.g. Red Hat, Endless, SUSE	e.g. Wikia company	e.g. Automatic company
For-benefit association	Linux Foundation	Mozilla Foundation	Free Software Foundation	Wikimedia Foundation	Wordpress Foundation

We will now describe each of these institutions and their identifying characteristics.

1: The Productive Community

The **productive community** consists of all the contributors to a project, and how they coordinate their work. Members of this institution may be paid or may volunteer their contributions because of some kind of interest in the use value of this production, but all of them produce the shareable resource.

2: The Entrepreneurial Coalition

The commons-oriented entrepreneurial coalition attempts to secure either profits or livelihoods by creating added value for the market, based on the common resources. Contributors can be paid by the participating enterprises. The digital commons themselves are most often outside the market, because they are abundant and not scarce.

Crucially important in the relation among the entrepreneurs, the community and the commons on which they depend, is whether their relation is generative or extractive. These terms are polar extremes, but in reality all entities will present some degrees of each. Good examples of the difference between extractive and generative relations are industrial agriculture and permaculture. In the former, the soil becomes poorer and less healthy, while in the latter the soil becomes richer and healthier.

EXTRACTIVE OWNERSHIP	GENERATIVE OWNERSHIP
1. Financial Purpose: maximizing profits in the short term	1. Living Purpose: creating the conditions for life over the long term
2. Absentee Membership: ownership disconnected from the life of the enterprise	2. Rooted Membership: ownership in human hands
3. Governance by Markets: control by capital markets on autopilot	3. Mission-Controlled Governance: control by those dedicated to social mission
4. Casino Finance: capital as master	4. Stakeholder Finance: capital as friend
5. Commodity Networks: trading focused solely on price and profits	5. Ethical Networks: collective support for ecological and social norms

1

Extractive entrepreneurs seek to maximize profits, usually without sufficient re-investment in the maintenance of the productive communities. An example is Facebook: they do not share any profits with the co-creating communities they depend on for their value creation and realization. Uber or AirBnB tax exchanges, but do not directly contribute to transport or hospitality infrastructure creation. These entities do develop services that take advantage of unused resources, but they operate in an extractive way. What's worse is they create competitive mentalities. For example, it's not uncommon for participants in this system to construct new buildings for rent, in an effort to maximize profits. Plus, extractive enterprises may free-ride on a great many social or public infrastructures (e.g. roads as in the case of Uber).

On the other hand, generative entrepreneurs create added value around these communities and commons that they co-produce and upon which they are co-dependent. In the best of cases, the community of entrepreneurs are actually the same group of people as the productive community. The contributors build their own vehicles to create livelihoods while producing the commons, and re-invest surplus in their own well-being and the overall commons system they co-produce. Healthy, generative communities can then coalesce around **meta-economic networks**.

1. Graphic: THE DESIGN OF ECONOMIC POWER — The Architecture of Ownership by Marjorie Kelly. See <http://www.marjoriekelly.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Kelly-OOF-PR-Final.pdf>

KEY CONCEPT: Meta Economic Networks

From community-oriented business to business-enhanced communities, **meta economic networks** are affinity-based networks combining new forms of labor with supportive and commons-generating solidarity structures. Imagine a confederated system combining mutual credit systems, childcare coops, a community bank, fresh produce distribution centers, education and legal advice, and more. Some notable examples of people working together on socially oriented projects include the Catalonian Integral Cooperative or CIC (Catalonia, Spain), The Mutual Aid Network, (Madison, Wisconsin USA, now expanding transnationally) and Enspirial (New Zealand, now being replicated elsewhere). Find out more about Enspirial in the case study below.

3: The For-Benefit Association

The third institution is **the for-benefit association**. Many commons-based peer production ecosystems not only consist of productive communities and entrepreneurial coalitions, but also have independent governance institutions to support the infrastructure of cooperation and empower the capacity for commons-based peer production.

These institutions, often nonprofit organizations, do not direct the commons-based peer production process itself. For example, the Wikimedia Foundation, as the for-benefit association of Wikipedia, does not coerce the production of Wikipedia producers. Nor do the free and open-source software foundations that often manage the infrastructure and networks of the projects.

In contrast, traditional non-governmental and nonprofit organizations operate in a world of “perceived” scarcity. They identify problems, search for resources, and allocate those resources in a directive manner towards solving those issues. **For-benefit associations operate from a point of view of abundance**; they recognize problems and issues, but believe that there are enough contributors who want to help solve them. They maintain an infrastructure of cooperation that allows contributive communities and entrepreneurial coalitions to engage in commons-based peer production processes that provide solutions to the problems at hand. Not only do they protect these commons through licenses, but may also help manage conflicts between participants and stakeholders, fundraise, and assist the general capacity-building necessary for the commons (for example, through education or certification).

● THE NEW ECOSYSTEM OF VALUE CREATION

Commons-based peer production enables new systems of value creation. Around **shared commons** of knowledge, code and design we find three institutions: **the productive community**, **the commons-oriented entrepreneurial coalition(s)**, and the **for-benefit association**. This ecosystem can be visualized as a plant pollinating a rich environment.

DIGITAL COMMONS

The flowers and stems of the plant can be thought of as commons, representing non- and even anti-rivalrous resources (the more people who draw from the resource, the more the resource is strengthened). These commons can be expanded upon, re-purposed and modified for specific situations and contexts.

COMMONS ORIENTED ENTERPRISES

The community of bees, pollinating from digital commons of knowledge coalesce into Commons-oriented Entrepreneurial Coalitions. These create added market value around the common resources to secure livelihoods for the commons-producing communities while enriching the soil through generative (as opposed to extractive) practises.

PRODUCTIVE COMMUNITY

The productive communities are the rich soil that feeds the ecosystem. The nutrients are all the contributors nourishing a project and their systems for coordination. Whether volunteer or compensated, they all produce shareable resources.

FOR BENEFIT ASSOCIATION

The for-benefit associations are the robust vase that contains and protects the ecosystem, but does not direct its growth and development. These are abundance-oriented independent governance institutions that empower the contributive communities and entrepreneurial coalitions to engage in commons-based peer production, protect the commons through special licenses and fundraise for their development.

Together, this ecosystem of value creation helps create vibrant free, fair and sustainable economies which are not only based on the Commons, but actively stewards them and protects them for future generations.

10 ways to accelerate the P2P and Commons Economy

So, how can commons-based peer production change our current economy for the better? The following ten ideas for action are the result of our research on the emerging practices of new productive communities and those ethical entrepreneurial coalitions that can create livelihoods on top of shared resources. They emphasize the emerging practices that can bolster the resilience of a new ethical economy. These 10 ideas already exist in some form, but need to be used more widely and integrated. The chart below contains three sections: **Free** (as in open and shareable and with equitable access), **fair** (as in socially solidarious with all humans) and **sustainable** (as regarding ourselves as part of nature, not its dominator and accepting our responsibility in its stewardship and restoration).

<p>1. Practice open business models based on shared knowledge</p>	<p>FREE</p>	<p><i>Share what can be shared; only create market value from resources that are scarce; create added value on top or alongside of these commons.</i></p>
<p>2. Practice Open Cooperativism</p>	<p>FAIR</p>	<p><i>Cooperatives are one of the potential forms that commons-friendly market entities could take. The key is to choose post-corporate forms that can generate livelihoods for contributing commoners.</i></p>
<p>3. Practice open value or contributory accounting</p>	<p>FAIR</p>	<p><i>Contributory accounting and similar solutions avoid situations where only a few contributors — those more closely related to the market — capture the value co-created by the much larger community. Open book accounting also insures that the (re)distribution of value is transparent for all contributors.</i></p>
<p>4. Insure fair distribution and benefit-sharing through CopyFair licensing</p>	<p>FAIR</p>	<p><i>The use of CopyFair licenses, which allow knowledge sharing while requesting reciprocity in exchange for the right of commercialization, would help create a level playing field for ethical economic entities presently internalizing social and environmental costs.</i></p>

<p>5. Practice solidarity and mitigate the risks of work and life through “commonfare” practices</p>	<p>FAIR</p>	<p><i>Vital solidarity mechanisms once embedded in the welfare state models are being dismantled. It is imperative that we reconstruct distributed solidarity mechanisms, a practice called “commonfare”.</i></p>
<p>6. Use open and sustainable designs for an open source circular economy</p>	<p>SUSTAINABLE</p>	<p><i>Planned obsolescence is a feature, not a bug, for profit-maximizing corporations. Using open and sustainable designs for producing sustainable good and services is highly recommended for ethical-entrepreneurial entities.</i></p>
<p>7. Move toward mutual coordination of production through open supply chains and open book accounting</p>	<p>SUSTAINABLE</p>	<p><i>There is no need for overproduction when the network’s actual production realities become common knowledge through open supply chains.</i></p>
<p>8. Practice cosmo-localization</p>	<p>SUSTAINABLE</p>	<p><i>“What is light is global, and what is heavy is local” is the new principle animating commons-based peer production. Knowledge is globally shared and production can take place on demand, based on real needs, through a network of distributed coworking spaces and microfactories.</i></p>
<p>9. Mutualize physical infrastructures</p>	<p>SUSTAINABLE</p>	<p><i>Our means of production, including machines, can be mutualized and self-owned by all those that create value. Platform cooperatives, data cooperatives and “fairshares” forms of distributed ownership are tools to help us co-own our infrastructures of production.</i></p>
<p>10. Mutualize generative capital</p>	<p>SUSTAINABLE</p>	<p><i>Generative forms of capital cannot rely on an extractive money supply based on compound interest payable to extractive banks. What the world, humanity and the environment needs is an economic system driven by free, fair and sustainable practices.</i></p>



CASE STUDIES: ENSPIRAL, SENSORICA AND FARM HACK

In addition to the well-documented ecosystems of free and open-source software projects, Enspiral, Sensorica and Farm Hack offer new perspectives on the rich tapestry of the increasing number of commons-based peer production ecosystems.

Enspiral is a network of professionals and companies that are “working on stuff that matters”, i.e. socially oriented projects. It encompasses a broad community of diverse professionals (productive community), including developers, legal and financial experts. They pool their skills and creative energy to create a commons of knowledge and software. Around these commons a web of business ventures (entrepreneurial coalition) offers open source tools and services that enable creative communities like their own to address certain challenges related to democratic governance and the digital age. For example, Loomio is an open source platform for participatory decision making, while Rabid is a company offering expert services on web development.

The picture is completed with the Enspiral Foundation (for-benefit association), a cooperatively governed nonprofit that facilitates collaboration and supports the network as a whole. The Foundation is the entity with which all professionals and companies have a formal relationship. It maintains the network’s infrastructure, holds the collective property and guarantees its culture and mission.

At the time of this writing, there are about 300 people contributing to one or several of over 15 business ventures linked to the Enspiral Foundation. The ventures generate revenue by offering their software solutions and services to clients. In turn, they distribute this revenue back to the contributors and a part of it (usually 20 per cent) is contributed to the Foundation. Almost half of these funds cover the operational costs of the Foundation, while the rest is invested through collaborative funding in projects proposed by the community.

The Enspiral culture is dedicated to the creation of value for the society rather than for shareholders. It is statutorily oriented towards the common good and is pro-actively developing the conditions to serve this purpose. One of its core elements that illustrate this approach on value is “capped returns”. The general



idea is to introduce an upper limit (a “cap”) on the total returns which investors may receive on the equity of a business. For this, the shares issued by a company are coupled by a matching call option which would require the repurchase of the shares at an agreed upon price. Once all shares have been redeemed by the company, it is then free to re-invest all future profits to its social mission. Through this mechanism, external and potentially extractive capital is “subsumed” and disciplined to become “cooperative capital”.

Sensorica is a collaborative network dedicated to the design and deployment of sensors and sense-making systems. It offers an open platform for interaction among individuals, with any type of skills or expertise (e.g. engineers, researchers, developers or lawyers), and organisations from the business and public sector and the civil society. It is partially a commons-based community and partially an entrepreneurial entity. On one hand, the individuals and organizations (productive community) pool resources and organize around projects that produce open hardware technological solutions. For instance, one of the most successful Sensorica projects is Mosquito, which is a force/displacement sensor device with numerous applications in biotechnology.

On the other hand, a group of independent business entities (entrepreneurial coalitions), often launched by the community, introduce the innovative solutions in the market. All revenue is distributed back to the network and in particular to the people that have been involved. For this, Sensorica has developed a system that facilitates value accounting and resource management in the network. This system records and determines every member’s input in every project and redistributes revenues in proportion to each contribution. Simultaneously, it tracks all activities in the network with the relevant resources that are either used or generated by a project, as a project’s output can be another project’s input.

All the agents participating in the network are affiliated with a custodian (for-benefit association), which manages the common infrastructure and resources. It is a nonprofit organization holding all assets and liabilities of the network, based on a “non-dominium” agreement. “Non-dominium” reflects the fact that no agent or combination of agents may have dominant control over the shared resources. It illustrates the dynamic and highly

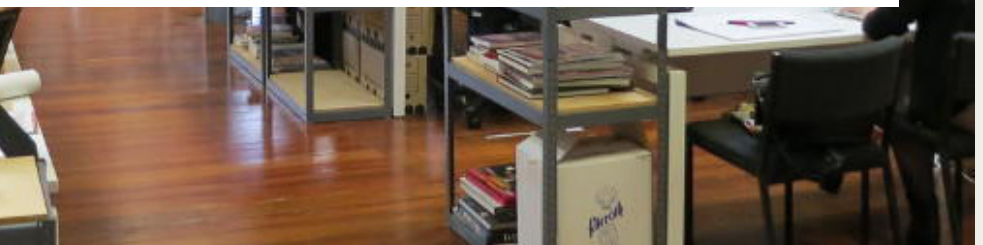


adaptable structure of Sensorica that strives to combine open, large scale collaboration with fair distribution of the co-created value.

Last, **Farm Hack** is a community of farmers that build and modify their own machinery. The central node is its digital platform, where the productive community shares designs, know-how and ideas. Currently the platform features more than 500 pieces of machinery and the community has members from all over the world. The tools are made available under Creative Commons licences and may be accessed by everyone. A non-profit (for-benefit association) monitors, maintains and improves the platform according to the ethos and desires of the community.

At the same time, some of the most active inventors/farmers contributing to the platform invest a considerable amount of time and resources to prototype tools. The community enables them to engage into entrepreneurial activity (entrepreneurial coalitions) in order to continue enriching the community commons and sustain themselves in the process. The business model they adopt is up to them as long as the basic principle of openness is maintained. They may manufacture and sell the tools or components of them. They may sell partially assembled kits or simply conduct workshops to teach other farmers to build their own tools. This ongoing process is challenging and is a major point of discussion within the community. Yet the creation of sustainable commercial activity benefiting from and at the same time empowering the community is clearly desired.

Enspiral, Sensorica and Farm Hack fit within the parameters of our description, like many free and open-source software projects, Wikipedia and an increasing number of open design projects that build new post-capitalist ecosystems of value creation. These ecosystems of various commons-based peer production projects are interrelated through their digital commons (the output of one project can be the input of another) and, thus, commons-based peer production can be seen as a grand ecosystem consisted of diverse smaller ecosystems.



In the following sections, we will explore how the logics of the Commons, P2P and commons-based peer production can provide tools for a Commons transition that may be applied to economic, political and social relationships and goals. In particular, we will explore new movements in cooperativism, production and citizen-led politics. These materials will give readers an overview of the key points researchers and practitioners are exploring, and what role these peer to peer developments can play in the Commons context.



3.

**What are the
politics of the
commons?**

What are the politics of the Commons?

How can the Commons and P2P address the converging social and ecological crises of our time, while restoring our social and ecological wellbeing?

Why do we need P2P Politics?

Nearly 40 years of neoliberalism has recently been upended by a contemporary Western politics steering hard to the right, represented in events like Brexit and the election of Trump. Austerity politics, the pillaging of the welfare state and increasing alienation of citizens has resulted in an understandable frustration, which right-populism has banked on. For many, political engagement seems limited to a choice between the slow death of the familiar (late-stage neoliberal capitalism) and the rapid rise of the unpredictable (the alarming Alt/Far-Right.)

What now? The electoral arena and the structural constraints of statist politics impose extensive limitations on changemakers within the system. At the same time, affinity based networks and communities employing P2P dynamics and building commons are increasing in numbers and visibility. Small-scale innovations are modeling true, sustainable resource management and grounded social cohesion, in fields like governance, agriculture, service provision, science, research and development, education, finance and currency. Many of these place-based efforts are documented and replicated worldwide through the use of the Internet, enriching the knowledge commons from which they draw.

But while such prefigurative approaches are key components for the construction of sensible alternatives, they typically develop within the constraints of existing systems. Whether through the **enclosures** brought on by neoliberalism or the increasingly authoritarian and exclusionary politics of the *further right*, the expected “normality” (job security, pensions, unemployment supports, fair working hours and conditions) that citizens have experienced or aspire to will likely continue to erode. As an effect, the space assumed available for the operations of those productive communities described above will inevitably compress.

This is why the Commons movement must engage in the political field, not only to protect the best qualities of the welfare state model, but to transcend it with a radically reimagined politics that facilitates social value creation and community-organized practices. (“Political” here refers not only to political representation but also to the actionable rights of those affected by political decisions, i.e., the citizenry.) This breaks down the false dichotomy between those wanting to build alternatives, and those working to enable change through hacking existing political channels. Both prefigurative and institutional lines of action are necessary to build a balanced polity, and fortunately, this political approach is already in progress, as we will see in the sections below. But first, let’s examine how the characteristics of commons-based peer production can inform the organization of civil society and totally revolutionize our methods of governance and the role of the State.

KEY CONCEPT: Enclosures

From 1776 to 1825, the English Parliament passed more than 4,000 Acts that served to appropriate common lands from commoners, chiefly to the benefit of politically connected landowners. These enclosures of the commons seized about 25 percent of all cultivated acreage in England, according to historian Raymond Williams, and concentrated ownership of it in a small minority of the population. These “lawful” enclosures also dispossessed millions of citizens, swept away traditional ways of life, and forcibly introduced the new economy of industrialization, occupational specialties and large-scale production. Nowadays we use the term “enclosure” to denounce heinous acts such the ongoing privatization of intellectual property, the expropriation and massive land grabs occurring in Africa and other continents, the imposition of digital right management digital content, the patenting of seeds and the human genome, and more. This modern tendency towards enclosures and turning relationships into services and commons into commodities, has been described by Commons scholar David Bollier as “The great invisible tragedy of our time”.

How are the principles of commons-based peer production reflected in Commons politics?

In the previous section (“**What is commons-based peer production and how does it inform the P2P Economy?**”) we saw that the ecosystem of commons-based peer production typically manifests itself through three institutions: productive community; commons-oriented entrepreneurial coalitions; and for-benefit associations. Imagine how these three elements would appear if scaled and applied to the larger society:

CBPP	Productive Community	Entrepreneurial Coalitions	For-benefit association
SOCIAL LIFE	Civil Society	Market entities	State

As we’ve seen, the for-benefit associations serve the common good of their ecosystems. They take care of the infrastructural needs and can impose binding rules on the relevant domains. These associations are not based on contracts between individuals, but are autonomously governed institutions that represent the different stakeholders. At the micro level, they are a kind of snapshot of the state of commons-based peer production.

Applying this at the macro-level, we can see the evolution of the state in a commons-centric society as a “partner state”, in which public authorities would empower and enable the direct creation of value by civil society at the scale of a territory, by creating and sustaining infrastructures for commons-based contributory systems.

Facilitating actions from the state today could be considered prefigurative of a future full partner state. Citizen-commoners and their social movements would drive the existing state form into partner state forms. These would recognize the individual and collective autonomy of citizens, just as the civil rights, suffrage, labor and women’s movements forced the state to adapt to new social demands.

As long as we live in an unequal class-based society, a state-based mechanism is arguably needed. Social movements, in this case those emerging from the shift towards commons-based peer production, will exert pressure on the state. If these social movements become majoritarian, this could lead to a transformation from the present “market state” to a “partner state” form representing the interests of the commons sector. Ideally, as this state and commons-based civil society would create the conditions for a re-emergence of human equality, the state would gradually be “commonified” as opposed to privatized, and radically transformed.

This is not an all or nothing proposal, and could occur at all kinds of scales, but real systemic change at the macro-level of global society would eventually require societal reorganization under this new configuration. Whilst this strategy is reformist, as it works within existing configurations, it is also revolutionary. It is based on an understanding

that the current extractive system must at some point undergo a phase transition to a new configuration. A “revolutionary reform” may be acceptable to the existing system, but it also creates conditions for its transformation. Basic income may be a good example of this, as it could break the necessity for labor to be commodified, and liberate time and effort towards self-chosen, commons-producing activities.

Our vision of a commons-enabling partner state is based on existing social and economic trends. To identify these, here is a short review of the present political realities, and how commons-based peer production logics are evolving into new networked political movements that present fresh, viable alternatives.

The Rise of the Urban Commons

Progressive cities worldwide are empowering the act of commoning. Rather than directing what the citizenry can do for itself and its environments, these “Rebel Cities” are listening to commoners’ voices and creating spaces for ordinary people to manage matters which most directly concern themselves as citizens. Cities like Ghent, Bologna, Amsterdam, Barcelona, Belo Horizonte, Naples, Montreal, Lille, Madrid and Bristol are increasing transparency, enabling participatory budgeting, facilitating the creation of social care co-ops, turning empty lots into community gardens, co-creating skill and tool sharing programs, among many other locally relevant actions.

Perhaps most consequential are the new **citizen-led municipalist coalitions**. A number of these have emerged in Spain’s towns and cities, and triumphed in all the major population centers (see below). Taken together, these efforts demonstrate that the logic of the Commons, coupled with the democratic, participatory relations enabled by P2P systems, can reinvigorate and instill a new sense of purpose in today’s political field. The challenge ahead lies in developing this emerging political movement at higher levels of complexity: the regional, national and transnational level, while preserving the characteristics of local dynamism.



CASE STUDY: SPAIN'S MUNICIPALIST COALITIONS

In May 2015, the new municipal coalitions which had emerged from the street-level movements in Spain were successful in a number of large municipal elections including victories in some of Spain's largest cities, such as Barcelona, Madrid, Valencia, and A Coruña. The path of these citizen-led parties traces back to reactions against the failures of Spain's post-Transition bipartisanship, and their victories indicate a shift in mindset, culture, and power. These new, municipalist "non-parties" are outgrowths of the 15M indignado movement and "las mareas" (tides), citizens' initiatives around housing, health, education and culture. They build on prior political traditions of self-management and governance, while also drawing influences from the degrowth, commons, ecology, free/libre and P2P movements, and applying mindful use of technology and media.

But these municipal platforms are not solely designed for local citizens. They must form part of a multi-level structure capable of operating at the national and transnational levels. To make this happen, the municipal platforms coordinate among themselves and beyond. They aim to present viable political alternatives that channel the rising resistance to recent right-populist political developments such as Brexit and the election of Trump.

Keenly aware of the masculine style of typical political rhetoric and its implications, the movements in Spain have been working to feminize their discourse and encourage more and better participation. Bringing others into the platforms depends on an ethical code, designed for open participation and the encouragement of real politics with people creating their own platforms – implementing radical democracy. Participatory conversation creates political change, and the feminization of politics is not only about the political work itself; it also means a change of style.

Crucially, each of these new municipalist coalitions has based their work on their "codigo etico", the ethical code which shapes everything they do in the platforms' participation in institutions. This ethical code is developed from existing experiences, and acts as both the glue and the attractor for participants.



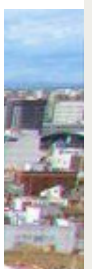
Its main principles are:

- No revolving doors (no cycling through public/private positions)
- Salary cuts
- Participative program
- Open primaries — no party quotas, and open to anyone
- Voluntary/citizen self-financing, and rejection of institutional or bank financing

Much like Open Cooperativism demands a statutory orientation toward the common good, ethical codes like this can form the kernel of a set of political guidelines to be hard-coded into commons-oriented coalition principles, bringing fresh accountability to contemporary politics.

All the municipalist players from the Spanish territory are working multi-scale (local, national, regional, and now in international dialogues). These coalitions are non-partisan, though inclusive of established political parties, turning them into more multi-stakeholder structures rather than verticalist parties. They all want to end the isolation presently perceived at the city level, merging more towards an ideal of the “networked rebel cities”, mirroring again the locally embedded but globally networked practices of P2P economics.

The lexicon and practices of commoning are evident in how the coalitions have formed and are articulating their governance. With a focus on transparency and citizen participation, and taking advantage of open-source P2P technologies, they prefigure many aspects of the politics of the future. The challenge ahead is applying the network logics which have been so successful in Spain to recover the intrinsic power of Occupy and build resilient, feminized and ethically coherent, transnational political movements.




Commons Transition: Building the political lexicon of social governance from below

By engaging the creativity and input of those communities most affected by political processes, the imaginary of the Commons advances a sense of identity that can be harnessed for effective political action. The integrative narrative of the Commons invites citizens' direct political engagement outside the restrictive bureaucracies of the market state and economies.

As with ethical markets, applying a Commons transition to the field of politics entails creating a new *free, fair and sustainable* political narrative that harnesses the best practises of three distinct progressive trends: **Openness** (e.g. Pirate parties), **Fairness** (e.g. New Left) and **Sustainability** (e.g. Green parties). The optimal game plan for building a new political vision fit for the challenges of our time involves building bridges between these three trends.

Inclusive by nature, the Commons as applied to politics can enable grassroots political participation by affected individuals and communities. But, as explained above, it is essential that this new narrative be grounded in scalable, existing best practices which are accessible to changemakers and civil-society organizations, not only to existing institutions. Following are some pointers on how to extend and improve upon these practices to provoke lasting cultural change.

A person is holding a globe of the Earth. The globe is the central focus, showing continents and oceans. The person's hands are visible at the top and bottom of the globe. The background is a wall covered with various maps and papers. The text '4.' is written in a large, bold, red font on the left side of the globe. A red L-shaped bracket is positioned around the text, extending from the '4.' to the start of the main question text.

4.

What is the strategy for a commons transition, and what would be the result?

What is the strategy for a Commons transition, and what would be the result?

The post-capitalist future requires commoners to be change agents, and to have commoners, we must expand the sphere of the commons. Mentioned earlier, this includes engaging with state politics, which has been the strategy of all successful social movements to date (the labor movement, universal suffrage movements, women's and gay rights movements, etc). For this, we must find synergies and convergences among prefigurative forces creating the new economy, and find political expressions for them so they may act in alliance with other emancipatory social and political forces.

Five Practical Guidelines to Achieve a Commons Transition

1. Pool resources wherever possible

Commons-based peer production communities and their contribution-based technical systems of production can be characterized as open contributory systems, mediated through a number of filters to ensure high quality contributions. This allows commoners to freely contribute to one or more commons of their choice.

Pooling both immaterial and material resources is a priority. This capacity to pool productive knowledge is a key characteristic to obtain both “competitive” and “cooperative” advantage. Pooling – or in other words “the commons” – should be at the heart of the productive and societal system.

2. Introduce reciprocity

The mutual coordination characteristics of commons-based peer production have proven quite successful in the production of digital commons, but their inherent non-rival status (i.e. non-depletable, easy to reproduce and distribute) does not carry over to physical production, which is characterized by depletable assets (including human labor). To ensure the wellbeing and continuation of these assets, material production demands the principle of reciprocity, and the way to ensure it is by advocating for **Open Cooperativism**.

STRATEGIES: Open Cooperativism: Six Strategies to foster generative economies

Can we transform the renting economy of Uber and AirBnB into a genuine sharing economy worthy of that name?

A new digital feudalism of centralized network data seen on platforms such as Facebook, Google, Uber and AirBNB, threatens to deregulate the gains of the labor movement while accelerating the ubiquity of precarity. There are solutions: **Platform Cooperativism** aims to democratize the ownership and governance of the digital platforms which increasingly mediate our daily lives. Meanwhile, **Open Cooperativism** explores the synergies between commons-based peer production and the cooperative movement to create agile, resilient economic entities that actively co-create commons while providing livelihoods for commoners. Here are six strategies to frame such a convergence:

1: RECOGNIZING ABUNDANCE: Closed business models are based on artificial scarcity. Open Coops recognise the natural abundance found in digitally shareable knowledge and shares it transnationally

2: DIVERSITY IN CONTRIBUTIONS: Instead of enforcing the division of labor or specialization, Open Coops provide the tools for dynamic and flexible participation. Using open value accounting they enfranchise all types of contributions in the economic value chain.

3: FAIR, RECIPROCAL DISTRIBUTION: Copyleft licensing allows multinationals to commercialise content of the commons, putting cooperatives and social and solidarity enterprises at a competitive disadvantage. CopyFair licensing bolsters the economic resilience of commoners by allowing them to capitalize content, while maintaining full sharing and demanding reciprocity from for-profit entities.

4: OPEN DESIGNS FOR SUSTAINABILITY: In contrast to the closed-sourced designs of for-profit enterprises and their need for rampant commercialization and planned obsolescence, commons manufacturing is geared towards modularity, durability and customization.

5: REDUCING WASTE: In contrast to the opacity of “green” capitalist business, Open Coops are fully transparent about their production. This allows them to mutually coordinate production for maximum adaptability, based on real conditions. The result is networked productions for actual needs, not capital demands.

6: MUTUALIZING PHYSICAL INFRASTRUCTURES: Not-for-profit co-working, ridesharing are some of the many ways we match and share idle resources. Co-ownership and co-governance can help create a true Sharing Economy with more efficient use of resources such as shared data or manufacturing facilities.



Like an ecosystem, an economy does not work in isolation. Open Cooperativism seeks to enfranchise all participants in the economic value chain, not just those within the cooperative's membership. This includes affective and reproductive labor, the creation of commons, and other forms of currently "invisibilized" work. This can be achieved through open contributory accounting systems, **open supply chains** and collaborative planning, as well as through the pooling of physical resources, mediated through special property regimens (where all contributors are participants in, and owners of).

KEY CONCEPT: Open supply chains

What decision-making is for planning, and pricing is for the market, mutual coordination is for the commons. In a circular economy, the output of one production process is used as an input for another. Closed value chains won't help us achieve a sustainable circular economy; neither will non-transparent negotiations for any form of cooperation. But through open supply chains, entrepreneurial coalitions that are interdependent with a collaborative commons can create ecosystems of collaboration. Here, production processes become transparent, and every participant can adapt his or her behaviour based on the knowledge openly available in the network.

In short, we must distinguish between commons-centric models that work for rival resources and those that work for non-rivalrous resources, and create hybrid combinations for each particular case.

3. Shift from redistribution to pre-distribution and empowerment

We need something beyond the welfare state's logic of redistribution; we need a state that would create the conditions for the creative autonomy of its contributing citizens. This would require **pre-distribution** of resources rather than redistribution after the fact.

The commons-based peer production ecosystem, as described above, comprises productive communities, coalitions of entrepreneurs, and for-benefit associations as the "management" or "governance" institutions. Broadened to the wider society, this structure gives a vision a productive civil society which contributes to the commons. This would be supported by a predominantly generative market creating added value around the commons and protected by a partner state, where public authorities play a sustaining role in the direct creation of civil value.

The partner state, as well as being the guarantor of civic rights, would also facilitate the contributory capacities of all citizens. It would empower and enable the direct creation of value by civil society through creating and sustaining infrastructures for commons-based peer production ecosystems. Such a state form should be one that would gradually lose its separateness from civil society, by implementing radical democratic and even rotational procedures and practices.

KEY CONCEPT: Pre-distribution

A term coined by Yale political scientist Jacob Hacker, **pre-distribution** focuses on market reforms to stimulate a more democratic distribution of economic power *before* government enforces redistributive strategies through taxes or benefits. While capitalism takes inequality as the cost of doing business and leaves its mitigation to an inefficient state, a commons approach builds in fairness from the start. The aim is to incorporate distributive actions in the generative enterprises and through their direct relation to the commons.

A partner state approach would transcend and include, not oppose, the welfare state model. It would retain the solidarity functions of the welfare state, but eliminate bureaucracy in the delivery of its services to citizens. The social logic would move from ownership-centric to citizen-centric, and the state should de-bureaucratize through the commonification of public services and public-commons partnerships.

As noted in previous sections, early examples of the partner state approach can be found in some urban practices, such as the **Bologna Regulation for the Care and Regeneration of the Urban Commons** or the Barcelona En Comú citizen platform.



CASE STUDY: BOLOGNA REGULATION FOR THE CARE AND REGENERATION OF THE URBAN COMMONS

The Bologna Regulation is based on a change in the Italian constitution allowing engaged citizens to claim urban resources as commons, and to declare an interest in their care and management. After an evaluation procedure, an “accord” is signed with the city specifying how the city will support the initiative with an appropriate mix of resources and specifying a joint “public-commons” management. In Bologna itself, dozens of projects have been carried out, and more than 140 other Italian cities have followed suit. This regulation is radical in giving citizens direct power to emit policy proposals and transform the city and its infrastructure, as a enabler for this. The key is the reversal of logic: the citizenry initiates and proposes, the city enables and supports.



4. Subordinate capitalism

Under capitalism, the markets are dominant and everything tends to be commodified. Capitalism is an extractive, profit-maximizing relationship. It exploits workers and gorges on the free labor of free and open-source software and open design workers, while cannibalizing the gifts of nature.

But do we want to get rid of markets altogether? Markets would continue to exist in a commons-oriented society, but they would be predominantly generative as opposed to extractive. By this we mean that markets would serve the commoners. Commons-based peer production participants today struggle to create livelihoods as they produce commons. While they could be supported by a partner state through basic income and subsidies, commoners can also create new market entities to facilitate the sustainability of their contributions and allow them to keep contributing to the commons. One way to achieve this is through the use of **CopyFair Licenses**.

In this approach, the free sharing of knowledge — the universal availability of immaterial commons — is preserved, but commercialization is made conditional on reciprocity between the sphere of the capitalist market and the sphere of the commons. This approach would enable the ecosystems of commons-oriented entrepreneurial coalitions to pool immaterial (and ultimately even material) resources to benefit all participants.



KEY CONCEPT: CopyFair Licenses

Commons Based Reciprocity Licenses (or “CopyFair” licenses) provide for the free use and unimpeded commercialization of licensed material within the Commons while resisting its non-reciprocal appropriation by for-profit driven entities, unless those entities contribute to the Commons by way of licensing fees or other means.

Copyleft licenses allow anyone to re-use the knowledge commons they require, on the condition that changes and improvements are added back to that commons. This is a great advance, but should not be abstracted from the need for fairness. Physical production involves finding resources or raw materials and making payments to contributors. Extractive models benefit from the unfettered commercial exploitation of these commons. Therefore, while knowledge sharing should always be maintained, we should also demand reciprocity for the commercial exploitation of the commons. This would create a level playing field for the ethical economic entities that presently internalize social and environmental costs. The use of CopyFair licenses, which allow knowledge sharing while requesting reciprocity in exchange for the right of commercialization, would facilitate achieving this balance.

A first working example of a CopyFair license is the Peer Production License, in effect a fork of a Creative Commons Non-Commercial License which permits worker-owned cooperatives and other non-exploitative organizations to capitalise the licensed content, while denying this possibility to extractive corporations.

5. Organize at the local and global levels

Progressive coalitions at the urban, regional and nation-state levels should develop **policies and laws** that increase the capacity for the autonomy of citizens and the new economic forces aligned around the commons.

These pro-commons policies should be focused not just on local autonomy, but also on the creation of transnational and translocal capacities, interlinking the efforts of their citizens to the global commons-oriented entrepreneurial networks currently in development.

KEY CONCEPT: Policies and Law for the Commons

Historically, commons have had a problematic relationship with conventional law, which generally reflects the mindset and priorities of the sovereign (monarch, nation-state, corporation) and not the lived experiences and practices of commoners. Still, in grappling with political, economic and legal realities, commoners often find ways to secure control over their common wealth, livelihoods and modes of commoning. It is also what is spurring many commoners today to invent creative new types of policy and law – formal, social, technological – to protect their shared interests, assets and social relationships.

The number of civic and cooperative initiatives outside the state and corporate world is rapidly increasing. Most of these are locally oriented, and that is absolutely necessary. Today, there are movements operating beyond the local, using global networks to organize themselves. A good example is the Transition Town movement, and its use of networks to empower local groups.

But this is not enough. A further suggestion is the creation of translocal and transnational structures that would aim to have global effects and change the power balance on the planet. The only way to achieve systemic change at the planetary level is to build counter-power, i.e. alternative global governance. The transnational capitalist class must feel that its power is curtailed, not just by nation-states that organize themselves internationally, but by transnational forces representing the global commoners and their livelihood organizations.

In the market sphere, generative, transnational ethical entrepreneurial coalitions can work together to strengthen the commons while establishing a viable economy for their

contributory communities. As there is chamber of commerce for orthodox enterprises, the new commons-oriented coalitions could be locally represented by territorial Chambers of the Commons. The chamber would advocate on commons issues, congregate interested actors and help shape the sector by giving voice and lobbying power to those who are co-creating commons and livelihoods for commoners.

These would not work alone, though, as the burgeoning commons-oriented political movements described above can also self-organize in analogous Assemblies of the Commons. These assemblies would bring together all those who contribute and maintain common goods and serve as a forum to exchange experiences and bring commonality into diversity, organize events, support the social and political forces who uphold the commons and engage in public-commons partnerships. They would be connected to the Chamber of the Commons, as well as to other assemblies, allowing operations at a larger scale and form regional, national, transnational federations. **The European Commons Assembly** is an early example of this.



CASE STUDY: THE EUROPEAN COMMONS ASSEMBLY

In November 2016, a group of 150 commoners from all over Europe gathered in Brussels to lay the foundations for a united and strong European commons movement. The European Commons Assembly was born. Building on collective work on policy proposals in the preceding weeks, the Assembly took over the European Parliament for a 3.5 hour session exploring the ECA as a platform and the commons as a powerful paradigm for policy making.

Beyond this historic event, the European Commons Assembly is an ongoing process that facilitates pluralistic debate regarding the strategy and agenda for a united political vision. Its goal is threefold:

1. support the decentralised activities of commoners and their engagement in concrete, collaborative and bottom-up actions
2. give a voice to and increase the visibility of the commons movement
3. channel the needs and demands of socially and ecologically sustainable initiatives to the political arena.

Plans for the Assembly in 2017 include expanding and strengthening the community, ongoing policy work and a number of more decentralized assemblies in various European cities.



STRATEGIES: From A to B: a step-by-step Commons Transition Strategy

These commons-oriented networks and their local and regional chambers, whether political or entrepreneurial, can start to find mutual recognition at the global level, thanks to pervasive digital networks, and organize at higher levels of complexity. The goal is to build “counter-hegemonic” power through continuous meshworking at all levels. This is what will build the basis to create systemic change: power to change, at the level where the destructive force of global capital and its predation of the planet and its people can be countered.

The following strategies (economic and political) are not sequential: commoners must build economic power as they aggregate political power.

GOAL 1/ECONOMIC STRATEGY: To counter the extractive activities of profit-maximizing entities and redistribute wealth commons and its allied economic entities. This is achieved by:

- Mutualizing digital (e.g. commons of knowledge, software and design) and even physical resources (e.g. shared manufacturing machines): We need *pooling* wherever it is possible.
- Establishing economic entities by and for commoners, in order to create livelihoods for the productive communities: We need *open cooperatives*.
- These economic entities use commons-based reciprocity licensing to protect from value capture by capitalist enterprises: We need *CopyFair*.
- Open cooperatives are organized in participatory business ecosystems that generate incomes for their communities: We need *commons-oriented entrepreneurial coalitions*.

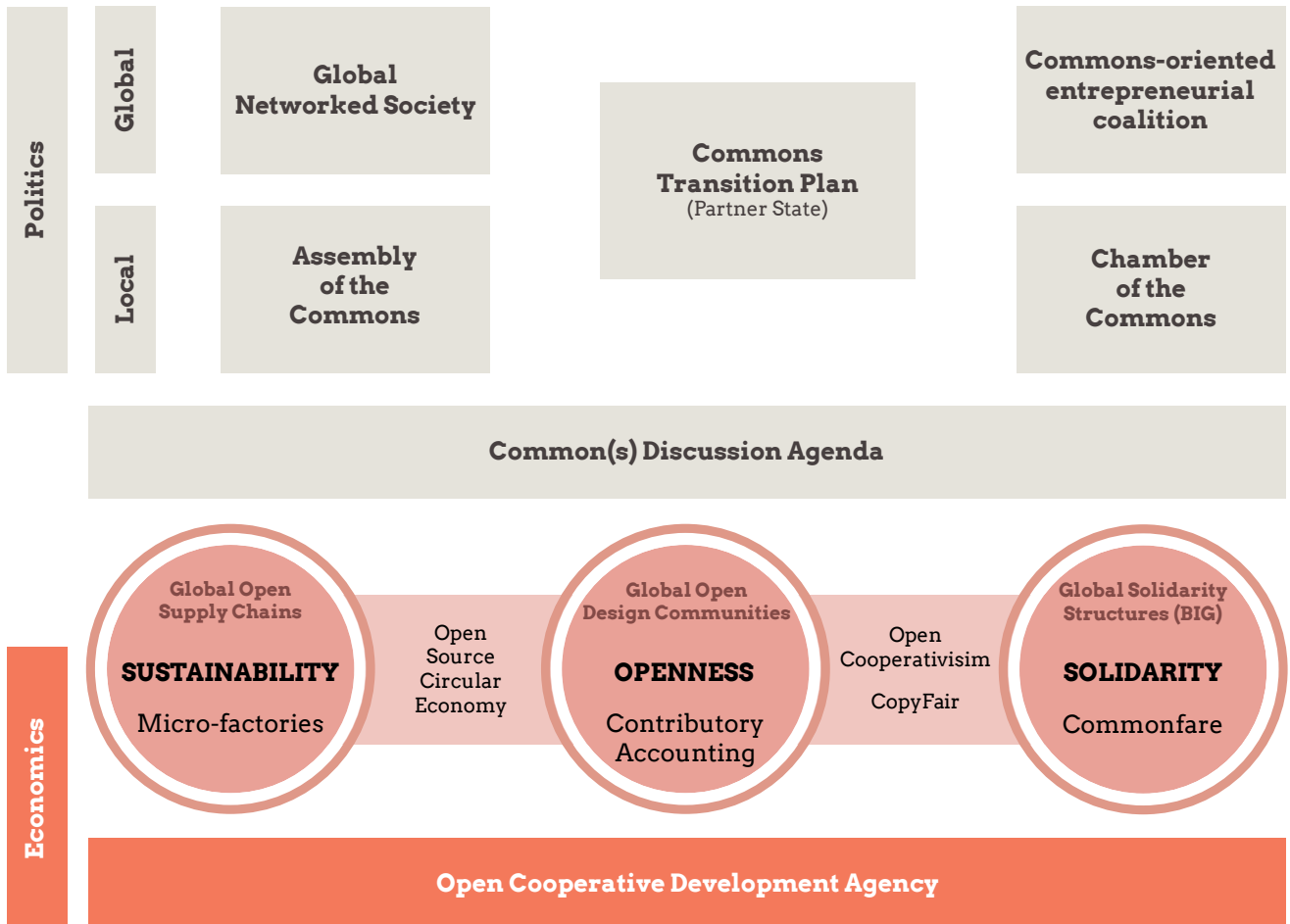
GOAL 2/POLITICAL STRATEGY: Build a counter-power at the city, regional and global level. This is achieved by:

- Creating local institutions to give voice to the commons-oriented enterprises that build commons and create livelihoods for commoners: We need *Chambers of the Commons*.
- Creating local or affinity-based associations of citizens and commoners, bringing together all those who contribute, maintain or are interested in common goods, material or immaterial: We need *Assemblies of the Commons*.



- Creating a global association that connects the already existing commons-oriented enterprises, so that they can learn from each other and develop a collective voice: We need a *Commons-oriented Entrepreneurial Association*.
- Creating global and local coalitions between political parties (e.g. Pirate Parties, Greens, New Left) in which the commons is the binding element: We need a *Common(s) Discussion Agenda*.

The goals are clear and the elements are already in place but the question remains, when will this Commons transition take place? The last section of this primer addresses this question.



A photograph of a vast landscape of terraced tea fields on a hillside. The tea plants are arranged in neat, curved rows that follow the contours of the land. The color of the tea is a vibrant green. In the background, there are more hills and a large mountain peak under a sky filled with dramatic, grey and white clouds. The overall scene is a mix of natural beauty and human agricultural activity.

5.

**When does the
commons transition
begin?**

When does the Commons transition begin?

As we have seen, the hollowing out of the welfare state has resulted in an increased mistrust in political parties and representative democracy in many parts of the world. On one extreme, the void is being filled by far-right narratives that satisfy the disillusioned by offering over-simplified analyses and demonisation of the “other”, the most vulnerable and least privileged among us, often refugees and marginalized peoples. In contrast, a barely reinvigorated left has seen many of its potential solutions proven unworkable, whether through bureaucratic excess, institutional blockages, or a simple lack of popular commitment. Meanwhile, the institutional crises of our time persist.

Our current world system also suffers from a deeply counterproductive logic. This system, based on infinite growth within the confines of finite resources, was enabled by the false concept of abundance in the limited material world. A second false concept of scarcity in the infinite immaterial world gave rise to legal and technical restrictions on social innovation through the use of copyrights, patents, etc. Overturning these false principles will be key priorities for a sustainable civilization. To this end, we must recognize that our natural resources are indeed limited, and base our physical economy in this recognition to achieve a sustainable, steady-state economy, and at the same time facilitate free, creative cooperation by reforming copyright and other restrictive regimes.

The livelihoods of roughly two billion people worldwide depend on some form of commons, yet many of these commons remain unprotected and vulnerable, in danger of privatization or sale. Similarly, it is not unconceivable to expect that an analogous number of individuals are co-creating shared resources online. These potentially massive affinity networks lack a common identifier or unifying vision, yet we recognise the logic of commoning as a shared thread. How to create a sense of mutual recognition?

We use the phrase “Commons transition” to describe a process of facilitating open, participatory input across society, prioritizing the needs of those people and environments affected by policy decisions over market or bureaucratic needs. The protection and enablement of existing commons, along with the creation of new ones, are keystones. A Commons transition will also require the creation of a prefigurative, commons-centric economy within the existing capitalist system, but seeking to transcend it with commoners at the helm. This implies uniting the forces which support the commons, generative and ethical markets, and the development of an enabling and empowering state which enables the social production of value, ie: “commoning”. It also means discovering synergies among the prefigurative forces that create the new economy, finding political expressions for them, and enabling them to act at the political level along with other emancipatory social and political forces.



MICHEL
BAUWENS
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“Big waves of social revolution have been unsuccessful, like for example the wave of 1848 in Europe, or the wave of 1968; and as for the successes, ‘be careful what you wish for’.

Therefore today, what matters is the reconstruction of prefigurative value-creating production systems first, to make peer production an autonomous and full mode of production which can sustain itself and its contributors; and the reconstruction of social and political power which is associated and informed by this new social configuration. The organic events will unfold with or without these forces, ready or not, but if we’re not ready, the human cost might be very steep.

Therefore the motto should be: contribute to the phase transition first; and be ready for the coming sparks and organic events that will require the mobilization of all.”

A broad societal transition, different from the classic left narratives of previous centuries, is possible through the integrative strategy of a Commons transition. Why would this strategy be effective?

History shows that political revolutions do not precede deep reconfigurations of power, but rather complete them. New movements or classes and their practices precede the social revolutions that make their power and modalities dominant. How does that relate the idea of a Commons transition? There is ample data to support the kind of prefigurative existence of a growing number of commoners who could form the basis of a historical subject at the forefront of this phase transition – a very strong start.

Factor in the changing cultural expectations of millennial and post-millennial generations, and their requirements for meaningful engagements and work, which are hardly met by the current regime. The precarization of work under neoliberalism drives the search for alternatives, and the cultural force of P2P self-organizing and corresponding mentalities fuels the growth of commons-oriented networks and communities.

Also, commons-based peer production is a model that could create a context of truly sustainable production. It is almost impossible to imagine a shift to sustainable circular economy practices under the current intellectual property driven, privatizing regime. The thermodynamic efficiencies needed for sustainable production may be found in the systematic applications of the principles inherent in the commons-centric economy. The watchwords are free, fair and sustainable, the three interrelated elements needed for a shift to more reasonable economy, polity and, ultimately, culture.

Finally, the crisis of the left itself, now relegated to the management of the crisis of neoliberalism itself, points to the vital need of renewing the strategic thinking of the forces that aim for human emancipation and a sustainable life-world. All of the above form a strategy for a multi-modal commons-centric transition, offering a positive way out of the current crisis and a way to respond to the new demands of the commons-influenced generations. The Commons and the prefigurative forms of a new value regime already exist. The commoners are already here, and they're already commoning; in other words, the Commons transition has begun.

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About the P2P Foundation

The P2P Foundation was founded in 2005 as a non profit registered in the Netherlands by author and speaker Michel Bauwens. We are a global, self-organized community building an information commons ecosystem for the growing P2P/Commons Movement. We examine both the digital and the material worlds, their freedoms and restrictions, scarcities and abundances. Our distributed network of researchers, activists, and citizens monitor and promote actions for a transition to a Commons-based society. We operate as an incubator and catalyst linking the “missing pieces” and building a wider movement.

Find out more at www.p2pfoundation.net

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The Commons is a concept and practice that has been steadily gathering increased attention and advocates. Deeply rooted in human history, it's difficult to settle on a single definition that covers its broad potential for social, economic, cultural and political change. The Commons is now demonstrating its power as a “key ingredient” for change in diverse locations and contexts around the world. The P2P Foundation, with its particular focus on the relationship of the Commons and P2P practices, is supporting this Commons transition by helping to share knowledge and develop tools to create common value and facilitate open, participatory input across society.

This short primer explains the Commons and P2P, how they interrelate, their movements and trends, and how a Commons transition is poised to reinvigorate work, politics, production, and care, both interpersonal and environmental.



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For more than a decade, the P2P Foundation has been researching, cataloguing and advocating for the potential of P2P and Commons-based approaches to societal and consciousness change.

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