

A Commons-Based Peer To Peer Path to Post-Capitalism:

An Interview with Michel Bauwens

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Introduction and Context

The interview presented here is an effort to expose critical geographers to the work of Michel Bauwens and the P2P Foundation he co-founded in 2006 (<https://p2pfoundation.net>). Bauwens and his associates have long been promoting the idea of an emerging “commons-based peer production” economy (CBPP), which is posited as a nascent mode of production that could eventually supplant capitalism as we know it. More precisely, the P2P Foundation theorizes and supports a technologically enabled socio-economic turn, rooted in the productive and liberating potential of a collaboratively shared and managed material and digital commons, in which

extractive, capitalist social relations and rationales are replaced by cooperative, generative ones (see Bauwens et al. 2019).

While the work of Bauwens and the P2P Foundation has made inroads in some academic, media, and government circles in continental Europe, it has gone largely unnoticed in the field of human geography (for exceptions, see Gerhardt 2019; Lynch 2019). Perhaps one of the reasons for this is that the CBPP framework embraced by Bauwens does not fit squarely within any single academic discursive current. Yet it could be argued that the CBPP analysis has value precisely because it does not cling to given analytical boundaries, rather it combines aspects of various approaches to offer a compelling vision for a transition out of capitalism. The P2P Foundation is also worth noting because they combine their analysis with hands-on approaches and efforts that seek to support CBPP endeavors and policies around the world. The combination of analysis, vision, and action is refreshing and something critical geography could potentially learn from.

Academically, the commons-based peer to peer production presented by Bauwens is framed in contradistinction to a systemic capitalism; the Marxian concept of “mode of production” is embraced and the need to create a macro economy that moves beyond “exchange value” in favor of “use value” is espoused. In this way Bauwens’ focus may be critiqued for being too capitalocentric. At the same time, however, Bauwens and the P2P Foundation are adamant about the existence of economic spaces and processes that fall outside of the realm of a

rigid, overarching capitalist system. Indeed, in line with diverse economy and anarchist approaches, CBPP efforts are seen largely as intentional, prefigurative initiatives that transcend capitalism.

A second important and related issue pertains to the conceptualization of the commons. Bauwens and the P2P Foundation are undoubtedly part of the current effort seeking to debunk the tragedy of the commons “myth” in support of the notion that people are fully able to govern resources intentionally and morally without the need of privatization, markets, or big government. An important part of this effort has entailed expanding the notion of the commons to the digital, or informational, commons associated with shared data, knowledge, and open-sourced computer code. Indeed, it is this informational commons that is seen as forming a critical impetus for achieving an alternative peer to peer economy on a global scale.

Yet Bauwens and his associates are also well aware that the digital commons is double edged; while it contains within it the possibility of capitalism’s demise it also offers the opportunity for capitalism’s next expansion, what De Angelis and Harvie (2013: 91) refer to as “[t]he ‘ambiguity’ between commons-within-and-for-capital and commoning-beyond-capital”. In line with several other scholars focusing on the commons, Bauwens and his associates often return to the active aspect of the commons (commoning), driving home the notion that the creation and maintenance of a true commons in the service of a generative economy is rooted in

the intentional actions of a community (for similar process oriented approaches to the commons in geography, see Gibson-Graham et al. 2016; McConchie 2015; Springer 2017).

The emphasis on process also quickly takes us to the crux of the matter, which is the question of how best to affect progressive change and ultimately overcome capitalism. Bauwens and the P2P Foundation seem to walk a fine line between classical Marxist and anarchist approaches. On the one hand capitalism is indeed recognized as the dominant mode of production, which continuously seeks to coopt and undermine alternative forms of economic rationales and organization. In this sense Bauwens and his associates do not shy away from addressing the larger political-economic forces that stand in the way of a blossoming commons-based peer production. Yet, by the same token, Bauwens does not call for a united labour front to capture the levers of state power. Instead, as with contemporary anarchists, transformative societal change is seen to come about prefiguratively, as more and more people embrace the commons-based peer to peer economy. And, as the P2P Foundation is eager to point out, this prefigurative work is already well under way. But it would also be incorrect to label Bauwens an anarchist. Indeed, while a CBPP transition is in many ways viewed as the coming to power of civil society over the market and the state, Bauwens ultimately does promote the desirable evolution, and possibly even the necessity, of a benign trans-local “partner state” that would serve to foster generative value creation on a trans-local scale.

Thus, many questions emerge when thinking through the nuances of a nascent CBPP mode of production. In the interview of Michel Bauwens below, I have tried to get to as many of the key questions as possible.

The Interview, September 2019

Hannes Gerhardt: *Could you briefly explain what commons-based peer production (CBPP) is and how your use of that concept differs from that of Yochai Benkler (2006) who is credited with coining the term? Also, why do you refer to CBPP as an emerging “mode of production”?*

Michel Bauwens: Commons-based peer production occurs wherever and whenever people can freely associate and create commons together, which we define as shared resources that are maintained by a community or a group of stakeholders, managed through their own rules and norms. The peer aspect refers to the capacity of networked human beings to join these open networks of value creation, “without permission”.

There are two differences I believe between the original definition of Benkler and our approach. Benkler looked exclusively at the open-source communities producing knowledge, software and design, and not specifically at how it was still embedded in the cycle of capital. On

our side, we believe it can only be a true mode of production if it becomes part of the cycle of the commons, and not the cycle of capital. It has to be associated with value realisation and distribution. If you can't make a living and reproduce yourself, if you cannot produce the products and services needed for maintaining human communities, it is not yet a mode of production.

The commons can serve capital, or they can serve the commoners and the societies they are embedded in, but without going into a caricature of this polarity. Most commons are hybrid and exist with capital in a situation of co-dependency. What we believe is productive is to look not only at how capital coopts the commons, but also how commoners can use capital for their own uses and needs. We equate CBPP with a triple prefigurative transformation which can lead to a societal change at the macro-level: citizens and inhabitants of our world become commoners co-creating commons as peers; these commons-oriented communities use non-market mechanisms but also create generative post-capitalist market forms that work for them; and finally, they build or transform territorial and networked public or common good institutions into institutions that work for them.

Using an analogy, if capitalism was the result of the original market players and capitalists transforming society in their image, then the role of the commoners is to create an economy and society in their image. So for the moment, CBPP is a proto-mode of production (or a form of mode of exchange if you want to look at it like Kojin Karatani (2008, 2014), who

called it “associationism”, while Alan Page Fiske (1993) called it “Communal Shareholding”, which seeks to become a fuller mode of production through the expansion of its own control of the value cycles that it generates (Nick Dyer-Witheford [2015] calls this the “circulation of the common”). Think of it as a choice between Proudhonian capitalism, in which new forms of capital extraction directly exploit human cooperation through private platforms (rather than exploiting paid labour in factories as Marx had posited), and collaborative eco-systems of material production, which seek to control their own surplus.

HG: Your work takes the approach that transformation will evolve from within.

“Building a new world from the shell of the old”, as the Wobblies would say. So, if CBPP is a proto-mode of production, how do P2P communities, i.e. commoners, navigate and ultimately overcome an economic reality in which most land is privatised and our access to basic necessities like food and shelter are denominated in a currency based on exchange value? How do you achieve an increasingly independent “cycle of the commons”?

MB: I am partially influenced by the visions of Peter Pogany (2006, 2015) in his two books on world system transitions (i.e. *Rethinking the World* and *Havoc*) in which he sees periods of painful societal chaos between systems. Second, our ideas are also rooted in the relational

grammar of Alan Page Fiske (1993), and their historicisation by Kojin Karatani (2014) in *The Structure of World History*. The central point is that there is a historical succession of systems that is always a combination of modes of exchange and the institutions that support these modes. Hence, what we see is a steady shift from capital and extractive markets to commons and generative markets, from a market state to a partner state, from the imagined community of a territorial nation to a networked, cosmopolitan community with no boundaries. In the former, exchange markets dominate, and the state and civil society serve the market; in the latter the commons dominate, and the state and the markets serve the commons, which becomes the locus of value accumulation.

But realistically, for the moment, and this is true in the North and South, there are no revolutionary movements that have the power to abruptly change the dominant logic in terms of access to land and capital. Yet that doesn't mean there is nothing that can be done. What we cannot do is just wait for a potential red dawn. As the world is decomposing, we need to recompose it, wherever we can.

We are not discounting the occurrence of future political and institutional revolutions, our point is that if these occur, they occur at the end of a long process of change within the old system. So we believe that when societies are beset by a series of profound systemic crises – a signpost that a particular arrangement is no longer able to change through its own basic logic –

seed forms of alternative organisation emerge, experimenting with new logics, and these seed forms coalesce in subsystems combining various patterns of thought and practice.

There is a specific history to commoning in the modern capitalist system. The first phase is triggered by enclosure, which privatises the means of production. The reaction to this was the creation of “social commons” by the working class who mutualised risk and gave us the welfare state mechanisms, which were a nationalisation of the working class commons. The second phase was the creation of knowledge commons, in which vast swathes of the cognitive working class learned to create shared knowledge, facilitating countless initiatives of mutualised free software and design. After 2008 we have seen a remarkable wave of expansion of the urban commons, a tenfold increase in a decade, with examples of commons-based forms of redistribution within every urban provisioning system, from transportation to housing. But in fields like organic agriculture and renewable energy, we are reaching the new phase of actual physical production. We are now at a point where various cities have initiated public-commons processes for institutional cooperation between city agencies and commons-based communities.

So, the answer to expanding the cycle of the commons is simple; commons-based alternatives must accumulate various forms of power. First, the initiatives must consolidate themselves, and build networks of support that express such power. In the period when the new commons-based logic is marginal, we have to start with low-hanging fruit, work from the

interstices of the system, and create defense systems that protect the new value logic from interference from the old system.

We have a series of proposals to achieve this. First and foremost is to create a protective membrane. This essentially means that the income collected from the external “capitalist” system, and which only recognises market value, must go through a filter to be “re-distributed” according to the new criteria of commons-based contributions, at least to a degree. This is the role of what we call “contributive accounting”; you can find details in our report, *Value in the Commons Economy* (Bauwens and Niaros 2017). Second, the new commons must attempt to create generative livelihood organisations, i.e. work with market entities that are generative towards their commons. To this end, we have proposed “reciprocity-based licensing”, in which economic allies must abide by a minimal social charter, ensuring reciprocity with the commons on which they also depend (Bauwens and Niaros 2017). The basis rules of these peer production licenses are that knowledge can be freely shared, but that commercialisation is dependent on reciprocity.

The next step for us will be to develop what we call cosmo-local production (Bauwens and Pazaitis 2019). This is neither neoliberal globalisation nor nationalist protectionism, but the combining of global open-source communities with actual cooperative production initiatives at the local level. In food and energy, this transformation has already started. At the P2P Foundation, we are currently looking at socio-technical systems that can further such

transformations. For example, we are currently working on shared supply chains and shared accounting systems, which can embed new value systems in their operations. We look for critical intervention points and propose solutions that empower these new forms of control over the value cycles. See our latest report on this issue, *P2P Accounting for Planetary Survival* (Bauwens and Pazaitis 2019).

In all of this we must look for political allies and extensions, as we need a lot of regulatory adaptation. The red-green parties of the left still seem natural allies for this, even as they still stick to neo-Keynesian views. However, at the local level there is a measure of productive adaptation and cooperation around urban commons.

HG: Clearly, the capacity to shift how “value” is operationalised within the mechanisms that determine the flow of resources is critical here. You mentioned contributive accounting systems and have also recently written about the potential of cryptocurrencies and smart contracts when they are based on trust, cooperation, and generative value. These potentially transformative tools are based on quite new technological developments, particularly distributive ledgers, or blockchains. You have also pointed to the possible dangers in these technologies, for instance their use in creating a state-corporate Leviathan of control and surveillance or the monetised contractualisation of everything, i.e. neo-liberalism on steroids. How important do you

think alternatively calibrated distributive ledgers are in creating the mechanisms needed to achieve a cycle of the commons? And how can this technology best be harnessed for the commons, while at the same time preventing it from bolstering the extractive capabilities of neo-liberalism?

MB: So, our basic idea is that peer producing communities both need the market to create livelihoods, but they also need to protect the commons that they are contributing to. For instance, I mentioned the need to give credit to commons-based contributions that lead to exchange value. Such contributions, for instance, could be monetised using smart tokens that are distributed to the contributing participants on the basis of the social charter of that particular commons community.

Next, imagine a collaborative ecosystem of value production and distribution, i.e. the entrepreneurial (or entre-donneurial as we call it) coalition of generative enterprises and communities building and overseeing the commons. What kind of socio-technical infrastructure would such an ecosystem need in order to be operational within commons-based ideals? The first condition would be shared supply chains and the second would be shared accounting ledgers. Such ledgers, which are already functional in the collaborative coordination of “immaterial” production, can productively be employed to translate the various processes and transactions of material production into digital form. Don’t forget that what accounting does is to give a

knowledge representation of every physical interaction in a production system. Once we have shared accounting, everybody can see the actions of all other participants in the collaborative ecosystem, leading to a potential for free, mutual adaptation. Please also note that large capitalist enterprises, functioning within integrated networks of key players, already have this, so there is nothing utopian about it.

In our last report, we describe three types of emerging shared accounting systems (Bauwens and Pazaitis 2019). The first one is contributive accounting, which recognises a new value regime based on contributions (as recognised by the community, not the market); the second is flow accounting, which eliminates the good/bad dichotomy of double entry accounting by engaging in a more holistic and open registering of the many collaboratively combined actions involved in the creation of value (Resources Events Actions accounting); and finally, thermo-dynamic accounting systems track our material and energetic resources within the necessary planetary boundaries.

The blockchain was the first technology to enable such shared distributed ledgers and though blockchain ecosystems are open-source and based on open community dynamics, they have fundamental flaws, as they were originally designed to be extractive of people and resources, especially as their design was inspired by right-libertarian Austrian economics. But they can be transformed by value-sensitive, commons-centric design, as is the aim, for example, of the holochain, a project using biomimetic, contributive logics to shape the blockchain. Some

concrete examples of how alternative value-sensitive design principles contrast with the libertarian designs of the bitcoin-blockchain include: 1) replacing commodity currencies with mutual credit and asset-backed currencies that reflect ecological and material realities; 2) substituting individual smart contracts with collective social charters, which we call Ostrom contracts; 3) exchanging incentives based on competitive game theory with those based on cooperative games; 4) replacing oligarchic consensus procedures (one dollar, one vote) with distributed and contributory proofs. I could go on, but you get the picture. Technological design is not neutral, but depends on the values and interests of the communities and stakeholders in the system, and so we can favour commons outcomes in our design practices.

Of course, we advocate doing this not just on the micro-level but at the macro-level, by developing commons-centric economics that focus on generalising win-win outcomes for the whole society. In doing this, commoners should seek two types of allies; first, the substantial sector of ethical finance, i.e. the cooperative, solidarity economy; and second, cities that have a material interest in supporting the mutualisation of key provisioning systems and that could create global, open-design depositories to support these systems, what we call “protocol cooperatives” (Bauwens and Pazaitis 2019).

HG: The various tools you mention here all share in the effort to create a space, or membrane, for the commons to function within the larger context of a market driven,

capitalist economy. Such a membrane is necessary given, as you say, our dependence on the market for our livelihoods. But at what point do livelihoods start to become achievable, on a larger scale, fully within the commons themselves? Is this ever fully possible if the state demands taxes denominated in the fiat currency of the capitalist economy? And what would happen to the commons-based cryptocurrencies or tokens if the economies they are intended to support grow increasingly self-sufficient, i.e. powerful. Is the increasing interaction and competition between fiat market-based currencies and well-regulated, commons-based cryptocurrencies an inevitable process that will have to be navigated in the path to a post-capitalist world?

MB: I don't know if you are familiar with the work of my friend, the researcher Adam Arvidsson, who has written an important book, *Changemakers: The Industrious Future of the Digital Economy* (2019), in which a particular historical episode has been summarised in the essay "Capitalism and the Commons". What he shows is how instrumental the rural and urban commons were as a reaction to the crisis within feudalism. He shows that the rural escapees to the new medieval cities used social commons, in the form of guilds, to create solidarity for the urban dwellers. These guilds became a real governance force in the free medieval communes, creating both an ideology of "ethical" markets (the moral economy as described by E.P. Thompson [1971] who focused on its disappearance) and a regulated economy that worked for

the commoners. Related to this, there was an explosion of commons accords in different regions of Europe, such as the Low Lands. Faced with the crisis of the global neoliberal market today, Adam Arvidsson predicts a similar role for the new commons in fostering a revival of “petty production”, and he gives examples to show that this is already happening.

We work on a similar scenario, which we see unfolding in a number of pragmatic steps. First we need to create stable seed forms of alternative socio-economic organisation and interconnect these, and this process is well underway. As I argued earlier, we are now seeing the emergence of redistributive urban commons, but also the first steps in commons-based cosmopolitan production ecosystems in food and energy. The second process is to find a political expression of the interests of the commoners. In Belgium for example, the French-speaking Greens are quite sympathetic to the commons, and they are now coalition partners in two regional governments as well as in different municipalities in the Brussels region. There is therefore a conduit for commons-oriented policy making. A third step would be to have active commons-friendly governments.

So how would that work with currencies? In the first step we would need to expand the value regime in the seed forms, i.e. actual commons projects, and to validate through experience that these tokens can be used to represent new “value” that is presently un-recognised within market society. In the second step we want to conduct officially recognised experimentations in the context of public-commons partnerships. I can confirm that different public-commons

negotiations are currently underway in some cities. For example, both Amsterdam and Seoul have declared that they are looking into becoming commons-oriented cities. In the third step we would need political parties and movements that are no longer post-Keynesian, but actually focused on the commons. There is at present little movement in this direction, but more and more European politicians are sympathetic to such a move.

Let me give you an example of how this would work. Imagine a city wants to promote decarbonisation. Instead of doing a competitive public procurement, it decides to do this through a circular finance mechanism. Every citizen or collective would be empowered to have its decarbonisation efforts measured and recorded on a shared civil ledger and then tokenised. These tokens can be made exchangeable for fiat currency, or they can achieve value by being accepted as legal tender for particular goods or services. The value of these tokens is thus linked to financing, which can occur not only through public funding but private as well, given that these tokens represent a positive social externality from which market players benefit (call it a civic tax, like IBM co-funding the Linux Foundation because it recognises the benefits it gains from the open-sourced commons being produced). With such a mechanism you have established a positive linkage between the smart token, which represents a new regime of hitherto unrecognised value, and the public fiat currency.

As you know, we argue for reverse cooptation. So the question is always: does this mechanism effectively support the accumulation of commons, rather than the accumulation of

extractive capital. The answer to this generic question will always depend on the concrete circumstance, and the balance of power operating in a particular context. There are always plenty of interstitial spaces where progress can be realised.

HG: The need to build a transnational, i.e. cosmo-local, “counter economy”, rooted in non-capitalist values that can stand up against global capital is a recurring theme in your work and in your answers here. With regard to prefigurative, counter-hegemonic economic relationships, what is it, concretely, that can only be achieved through transnational connectivity that cannot be achieved at the local, municipal, or even national level?

MB: We are in a Polanyian moment, with the proviso that the double movement Polanyi (1957) predicted no longer functions at the nation-state level, so it must be made to work on the transnational level. The basic idea of Polanyi’s lib-lab pendulum is that there is a periodic swing between high-growth, pro-labour periods, which end in a supply-crisis of capital, and low-growth, pro-business periods, which end with demand-crises. The problem is that the swinging back in labour’s favor no longer works as long as labour is focused on the national level. No matter how much we change at the nation-state level, capital is thoroughly trans-national (even if still preferentially bound to nation-state protections).

Yet this national focus is exactly what we see after 2008, i.e. a mobilisation of the people, the imaginary community (“fraternity”) of the nation through left and right wing populist movements. Both have pretty much given up on Empire, and none has convincing international or transnational proposals.

In our view we now have, basically, a three-class division between right-wing merchants, the populist political movements which cater to the traditional working classes, and the progressive cognitive classes, which tend more and more to cultural (if not identity-driven) politics. In my opinion, capital can live more easily with right-wing populism than with the redistributionist policies proposed by the left-Keynesians, but national protectionism is also a dead-end, which incidentally has no answers to the profound ecological crises either.

So where do we go? Macro-level socio-economic change can no longer be based on socialist revolutions appropriate to the industrial capitalist world, and the main subject cannot be the nationally oriented, industrial working class. For me, the most interesting promise is the growth of trans-national communities, i.e. the open-source communities, and the organisations and entrepreneurial communities growing around them.

The important thing to see is that a shift to cosmo-local production systems, i.e. all that is light is shared globally, all that is heavy is relocalised to the extent possible, is in our opinion not just an objective necessity to drastically lower ecological footprints, but it is also grounded in

objective data, such as the exponential growth figures we see for open-source code, urban commons initiatives, and the like.

So imagine this: faced with weakening nation-states that are unable to solve planetary emergencies and their local effects, city-based commons movements ally themselves to instantiate new global infrastructural projects to mutualise provisioning systems; then imagine, the nation-state follows their example by instituting commons-supporting initiatives that align states with these cosmo-local flows. After a period of chaos following the often ecologically self-destructive policy options of the populist right, I imagine there will be a growing clamour for transnational institutions to act as global solutions networks aimed at tackling the growing planetary emergencies. It is to be noted, finally, that many movements dealing with the climate, such as the climate strike movement, or extinction rebellion, but also many reconstructive movements such as transition towns or the permaculture movement, are now coordinated at the global scale.

HG: When espousing a cosmo-local (“design global, manufacture local”) counter economy, emphasis naturally falls on the global digital commons and the cognitive workers required to build and maintain these commons. Yet, given the skewed global distribution of economic development, including a digital divide that leaves large swathes of the world’s population with limited access to, or control over, the internet,

how does the transnational counter economy you envision deal with not only the unbalanced access to digital content, but also the massive discrepancies in resources and manufacturing capability that would be needed even with access to free industrial digital designs and information?

MB: First, let me correct the point of view that the commons are only for geeks, i.e. that they are just digital. Imagine a commons-centric ecosystem to provide healthy organic food for public school children. For this, you need agreements with bioregional farmers, you need a solid zero-carbon transportation system, for example with cargo-bikes, and you need cooks in the schools. You can translate this approach to the other provisioning systems to realise how much meaningful employment can be generated through such commons-based policies.

Second, though I do not expect a fully equalised world at all, I think that the very logic of distributed manufacturing is of enormous potential to the Global South. One, they have access to lots of material resources, of which they have to retake political control, say, in a second wave of decolonisation of the material economy. Two, they have much greater access to cosmo-local digital knowledge commons than ever before in history, even in a context of unequal access.

Third, the capital requirements for policies in favour of distributed manufacturing are several levels of magnitude lower. All of this, of course, also requires political will, as much as popular mobilisation. There is nothing easy or automatic about this, but in terms of access to

resources, a cosmo-local centered economy is much more favourable to the Global South than the current form of neoliberal globalisation.

HG: I would like to follow up a little on this. You were involved in a collaborative research project on the ground in Ecuador, exploring a far-reaching collaborative commons transition for the country based on “free, libre, open” knowledge (FLOK). What was particularly striking about this effort was that you had the support of various Ecuadorian governmental institutions, where the attractiveness of the P2P model seemed to be based on a desire to switch the Ecuadorian economy from a failed dependency on limited material resources to one based on the promise of limitless, immaterial knowledge. I understand there were several challenges involved in this project, including the hierarchical/patriarchal approach taken by some state actors and a still underdeveloped local civil society. So, while Ecuador seemed to be a promising example of a state interested in supporting a commons transition, it’s attitude towards civil society was largely contrary to the idea of a partner state. So, in hindsight, do you think the developed world is in a better position to start building the foundations for a partner state, with municipalities possibly taking the lead? And what would you say is the best way forward in ensuring that people in the developing world, such as Ecuador, become an active part and beneficiary of cosmo-local developments?

MB: The experience in Ecuador was in 2014, and you are right that the situation was not very mature to advance the proposals. First of all, we were invited by one faction in the government, which lost the battle of influence while we were working on the project, seriously diminishing the uptake of our propositions. In fact, it was the extractivist faction which got the upper hand. And you are also right that the kind of urban commoners that usually support these projects, were still a relatively underdeveloped part of the local civil society. Paradoxically, we were most enthusiastically received by the indigenous communities, and one of our researchers, John Restakis (2017), who also has written about the partner state concept since, developed several cooperative projects in the Sigchos district, with full support of the local mayor.

We were still happy to have been able to think through national policies and push the envelope. Since then, our focus has moved to city-supported commons policies, where the context is much more favourable. But I will have to disappoint you in your expectations for the Global South. I participated in an in-depth study, organised by Christian Iaione of LabGov, where we compared 1,000 urban commons projects, half being from the Global South (Iaione 2015). The conclusions: Many of the “northern” projects receive substantial support, cooperation, or encouragement from the local bodies, but in the Global South the reality is the opposite. Urban commons projects there are mostly on their own, either ignored or actively opposed by the local elites, which still believe in narrow developmental goals and neoliberal

strategies. So, while we are actively working with city governments in the Northern cities, where there are now even formal protocols for public-commons cooperation, in the South, things are happening, but exclusively through civil society and bottom-up initiatives.

Our priority for the moment is to create “leagues of cities”, which can operate transnationally, and collectively support “protocol cooperatives”, our concept for global, open-design depositories which can support the mutualisation of local provisioning systems. We call this the “cosmo-localisation” strategy. At the same time, commons-based movements like the Generative Justice project of Ron Eglash are working directly with local urban and indigenous communities, but they are largely on their own in terms of “state” support. As mentioned earlier, cities like Amsterdam declared their intention to become a commons city, and so did Seoul, which wants to move away from the sharing economy model it had previously adopted.

There are also various inter-city collaborations underway, in which functionaries from different cities share their experience in commons-based policy making. Interesting is also the work of the Sharing Cities network in promoting the self-organisation of post-disaster communities, which are increasing in number due to climate change. As of now, I am not directly aware of formal commons-oriented policies by cities, let alone states, in the Global South. In that sense, we are still in a post-colonial context, where local elites first want to see validation in the First World. But local people are not waiting, because they need to do this for their own provisioning in difficult circumstances.

HG: As we approach the end of this interview, I would like to ask an activist oriented question. Will the future, post-capitalist commons be assembled haphazardly, through a multitude of coalescing but largely disconnected prefigurative efforts? Or does there need to be some sort of political program aimed at mobilising efforts to impact the decision making that ultimately shapes the context within which the commons is trying to unfold? You mention the importance of transnational communities, the aim of achieving a partner state, and the key role played by municipalities. Where is political activism best applied?

MB: It is a difficult question since a phased transition will be marked by peculiarities and the new class relations that are instituted. The feudal transition was marked by military invasions, and the capitalist transition also came about largely after social and political revolutions which took many different forms (the French and Russian revolutions being outliers rather than the norm). We know that the “commoners”, i.e. largely the precarious networked classes that are working in the “social factory”, are able to organise themselves on a massive scale, but that they also lack the staying power of the largely territorially based industrial working class. Their development and power is less dependent on an a priori “taking of power”, and much more on the prefigurative construction of new economic and political institutions.

So for me, the first question is, to what commons do we contribute, and how do we create livelihoods based on these engagements? The second question is, how do we project social power by interconnecting these commons at various scales – territorially (in a geographic sense with the creation of assemblies and chambers of the commons) but also trans-nationally, by creating new systems of solidarity which are no longer exclusively linked to nation-state realities but rather are expressions of the cosmo-local trans-nationality of commons-based ecosystems. Finally, how do we express this social and institutional power in political and other institutions? This means working with social and political movements that are sympathetic to a commons transition and building public-commons protocols so that the commons society can develop within the shell of the old.

Now we are in the seed stage, but we have rapidly moved from digital commons to redistributive urban commons, and we are only beginning to move into the direction of cosmo-local ecosystems. At the political level we have public-commons protocols in Bologna and 150 other Italian cities, and Commons Transition Plans have been produced for Ghent and Sydney, with similar intentions in Amsterdam. In this chaotic in-between period, a time of monsters as Gramsci would say, we are moving from seed form emergence to, hopefully one day, some kind of parity between capitalism and post-capitalism. This would bring us to the equivalent of the 18th century stalemate that gave rise to the absolutist regimes. Since the P2P Foundation is very

pragmatic in its approach, I cannot say we have thought through this ulterior revolutionary phase yet.

So, there is plenty of work for activists who have to choose some kind of balance between the local, territorial work, and collaboration in the emerging transnational networks. It is not a question of a vanguard party directing the struggles, but of creating a maximum amount of mutual coordination between these various efforts. The P2P Foundation sees itself as one of the potential collective “organic intellectuals” of this emerging movement, and we strive both to render visible the efforts of the multitude, make sense of it through our analyses, and give recommendations where we are confident that we can. But much is still unknown.

HG: One final question: Do you have any advice or suggestions for geographers who are interested in studying and furthering a commons-based peer to peer transition out of extractive, neo-liberal capitalism? Are there any geographical aspects of this effort that could use further study?

MB: The key question for me is the following: it seems clear to me that the nation-state system, i.e. the inter-national system, is no longer sufficient to deal with planetary emergencies. At the same time, we see more and more trans-national, perhaps post-national networks emerging. If you believe, like me, and like Frédéric Lordon (2015), that humanity is not entirely capable of

creating a “circle of care” that encompasses the whole planet, then one possibility is that we will have two parallel systems for a while. On the hand hand there will be the actors of the international system, i.e. regions, nation-states, supra-national entities (EU), and global inter-state organisations. On the other hand we will have new “virtual territories”, the currently emerging communities that are organising around global open-source projects, often within cosmo-local forms of organisation.

These latter efforts will create trans-national ecosystems of collaboration and will eventually become more powerful, while also creating a useful counter-power to the increased functional governance of the new corporate sovereigns. So, tracing these interplays between the territorial and the networked seems crucial.

Related to this is the study of the new nomadism, both the nomadism of the digital knowledge class which has been busily creating common global infrastructures which can host them, but also the nomadism of the poor, as described by Alain Tarrus in his study *Poor to Poor, Peer to Peer* (2015). National administrations are entirely blind to this, and too few researchers are paying attention to it.

Finally, in the industrial field, I would recommend more study on the interplay of economies of scale, which may be declining in parallel with the energy crises that are coming, and the economies of scope, i.e. the cosmo-local model of “doing more with less” through the



intense sharing of knowledge flows. Studying old and new supply chains and networks seems extremely important in the context of diminishing thermo-dynamic flows.

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