"All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace"[1]? Information technology, in-person relationships and normative regulation in an "integral cooperative"

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Introduction

Cooperativa Integral Catalana (CIC) is an "integral cooperative", founded in 2010, that aims to develop a comprehensive, self-managed infrastructure for community development within Catalonia that satisfies basic needs outside the state and the capitalist market. It is considered the template for other "integral cooperatives" that were founded throughout Europe in the 2010s. Based on a case study analysis of the CIC, this article explores how the use of online platforms to build and regulate a regional-level non-capitalist economy unintendedly accentuates the tendency for the concentration of power among skilled "professional activists". This is not dependent on platform design as such, resulting instead from centrifugal forces that emerge from the mobilization of participants with a wide range of class and political backgrounds, without an adequate socialization mechanism for the construction of a common "habitus". It also explores how such **a** tendency is counter-acted by face-to-face interactions at local-level assemblies that play the role of "micro-public spheres". These direct engagements build trust and promote forms of normative regulation that influence power dynamics and internal cohesion within the project. The analysis is based on fieldwork carried out between July and November 2017, consisting of interviews, archival research and participant observation in events that took place in meeting spaces of the CIC.

The methodology used combines aspects of the Grounded Theory Method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, Charmaz 2006, Czarniawska 2014) and the Extended Case Study Method (Burawoy 1991). The inductive dimension of the Grounded Theory Method supported the preliminary coding of data directly from the triangulation and comparison of inputs from field notes, interview transcripts and archival material. The extension beyond the here and now and into the social context and trajectory of the case studies is the hallmark of the Extended Case Study Method (ibid.). It helped to identify contexts and processes of evolution and change on the basis of a dialogue between preliminary codes from fieldwork data and existing scholarship. All the quotes from fieldnotes and interviews were transcribed from the original language of communication and, whenever necessary, translated to English in a way that attempted to retain as much as possible of the original meaning. For privacy purposes, this article does not include the real names of interviewees,

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[1] Title of a poem by Richard Brautigan.

nor pseudonyms, as these could help identify the gender or other aspect of the identity of the person in question.

Cybernetics, collective action and "community-led initiatives"
Recent waves of environmental and anti-capitalist mobilization led to the multiplication of forms of collective action focusing on the promotion of community-based livelihoods (e.g. Lockyer & Veteto 2013 (eds.), Della Porta 2016, De Angelis 2017, Flesher Fominaya 2017, Kousis & Paschou 2017, Lucas dos Santos 2019). For Forno and Graziano (2014), this results from the decreased ability and disposition of public institutions to mediate new claims for the expansion of rights and redistribution of public goods, as well as the "highly individualized structure of contemporary society" (p. 139), which makes it increasingly difficult to build the lasting bonds that are needed to support long-term mobilization and protest. Community-based livelihoods are therefore pursued as a strategy to rebuild social bonds and solidarity, as well as "re-embed the economic system within social relations, starting with the local level" (ibid.).

According to Turner (2006), the roots of this phenomenon can be traced back to the cybernetics and systems-thinking research of the **'60s** and **'70s**, which in later decades inspired not only neoliberal policies and entrepreneurial culture, but also social movements aimed at orienting economic activity towards democratic deepening through the promotion of "community-led initiatives" (CLIs) (Laville 2016, De Angelis 2017). Central to these counter-movements is the promotion of social and ecological resilience by re-embedding human activities in territories and their resources, de-commodifying fictitious commodities and re-localizing supply chains, with the support of participatory politics (Estivill 2018, 15; Hillenkamp 2013, Laville 2016, Bauwens & Niaros 2017, Eynaud & França Filho 2019).

The concept of "solidarity economy" is used to refer to a plethora of CLIs that prioritize social value over financial return on capital, namely by promoting the scaling and political organization of economic practices based on reciprocity, redistribution and householding (Laville 2016, Hillenkamp & Lucas dos Santos 2019, Lucas dos Santos & Bannerjee 2019). At the core of "solidarity economy" is the orientation of non-capitalist/post-capitalist modes of economic action towards the development of "autonomous and intermediary public spaces" (Laville & Eynaud 2019, 60) where "socio-ethical and counter-cultural practices" are experimented with, enacted and coordinated (Fois 2019, 108). These spaces are "micro-public spheres" (Keane 1998) where economic activity is pursued as a form of prefigurative politics based on the construction and performance of non-capitalist identities and forms of relating with humans, nature and the material world, as well as engaging the state in transforming structural power relations. They are based on "democratic solidarity" that challenges and transforms social relations, both within their organizational boundaries, as well as in the public domain (Laville 2016, Laville & Eynaud 2019, Lucas dos Santos & Bannerjee 2019).

On the vulnerabilities of "community-led initiatives"
The appropriation of cybernetic discourse and technology by "solidarity economy" initiatives and movements led to the emergence of "open cooperativism", which for Bauwens and Kostakis (2014) "represents a synthesis of the governance models and practices of the "solidarity economy" with "Commons-based Peer Production" (CBPP).

Benkler (2006) defines CBPP as a logic of collaboration between networks of people, mediated by the use of peer-to-peer online platforms, who freely organise around a common goal using shared resources. CBPP is focused on the development of a mode of production based on the pooling of resources, self-managed by "stable communities of individuals interacting on a regular basis and knowing each other" (Papadimitropoulos 2018, 14). Such goals are pursued by non-proprietary, membership-based cooperative governance structures, aimed at shaping a community that produces, manages and/or consumes common-pool resources (Benkler 2006, Fuster-Morell 2014, Bauwens & Pantazis 2018, Fuster-Morell & Espelt 2018).

Bauwens & Kostakis (2014) distinguish "open cooperativism" from more traditional forms, given its adoption of multi-stakeholder forms of governance, which includes "workers, users-consumers, investors and the concerned communities" (p. 358). Its approach to economic governance combines the property regimes and mechanisms of the institutionalist approach to the commons (Ostrom 1990, 2010; Bar-Yam 2002, Poteete & Ostrom 2010) with the horizontalist ethos of the alter-globalization and anti-austerity movements of the **1990s** and early **2000s** (Juris 2008, Coriat 2015, Fuster-Morell 2018, Fuster-Morell & Espelt 2018, Flesher Fominaya 2020, Eynaud & França Filho 2019). This ethos is based on an anti-hierarchical and participatory praxis of decentralized coordination and consensus decision-making (Juris 2008, Pleyers 2012, Arvidsson et al 2016), as well as a reimagining of information technology as a tool of countercultural change (Turner 2006).

Turner (2006) argues that the application of cybernetics to the promotion of CLIs makes them particularly vulnerable to factionalism and conflict, resulting from "their exposure to the social and material pressures they had hoped to escape" (p. 256). Such pressures include the tendency for bureaucratization and the concentration of power (p. 33). This happens because basing their governance on **in-person** or online practices of peer-to-peer collaboration, instead of publicly sanctioned laws, ends up giving "norms that the communards had brought with them from mainstream society an extraordinary governing force" (p. 256). These include the emergence of bonding and distinguishing practices based on class, "habitus" and the interchangeability of economic, cultural and social capital (p. 257, Harvey 2011: 103, Schor et. al. 2016).

Turner's analysis didn't take into account how the reproduction of mainstream norms results from internal practices within CLIs. It is also limited by its methodological individualism, as it studies individual CLIs as homogenous, self-contained units. It does not consider the existence of smaller units of governance within CLIs, nor their inclusion in wider networks based on anything more formal and binding than "a network of shared beliefs" (Turner 2006, 33). Analysing CLIs that contain in themselves a network of federated CLIs helps to understand how synergies between processes of normative regulation happening at these two different levels of analysis impact the tendency for concentration of power and the centrifugal pressures detected by Turner. The following sections apply this frame of analysis to the synergies between the two dimensions of governance of *Cooperativa Integral Catalana* (CIC): its functioning as an overall network, as well as well as that of its local nodes. They analyse how **in-person** relationships at the local level contribute to counteract tendencies promoted by online platforms.

CIC as an "integral cooperative"

> *Overcoming capitalism implies getting rid of middlemen. The internet, the information technology grants us that opportunity: To take the exchange of goods and services out of the hands of middlemen and of corporate power and into the hands of producers and consumers. (…) That's how we dismantle corporate power. (…) It also gives us the opportunity to take the* **creation of money** *out of the hands of the state and to put it in the hands of the people. More than that: It gives us the opportunity to make money redundant and obsolete.*

These words of a founding member illustrate the core vision of the CIC: Mobilizing information technology to emancipate livelihoods from capitalism and place community development in the hands of self-organizing groups. CIC was founded in May 2010 upon an autonomist narrative of change that animates a cooperative culture with deep roots in the Catalan anarchist tradition (Dafermos 2017, 6). This narrative was reframed by the context of the late '00s, marked by the erosion of the legitimacy of the state and the financial system by corruption scandals, economic crisis, austerity politics and the rise of the "precariat" (Standing 2014). A group of hackers involved in the local anarchist and anti-capitalist scenes capitalized upon the political capital gained during the previous decade, as organizers for the anti-globalization movement, to mobilize supporters for a plan of transition to post-capitalism, based on the creation of an "integral cooperative" (Duran 2009). This would represent the application of the model of "open cooperativism" to the development of an autonomous livelihood and regional-level model of community development outside the reach of the state and the market. The emergence of the 15-M movement in Catalonia in 2011 strengthened the CIC by attracting a lot of new members, largely due to the active participation of its core activists in the collective processes of the movement, both within the *acampadas* (occupied squares) and beyond.

CIC can be categorized as a technocentric response to a social emergency: That of the unemployment and housing crisis of the late '00s and early '10s in the Iberian Peninsula, which increased the visibility of an expanding "precariat" due to the downward social mobility of a significant parcel of a then still-emerging middle class. This response was the result of a convergence, during the **mid '00s**, between activists of the anarchist and squatter movements of Barcelona and regional nodes of the Transition Network[2]. This convergence was facilitated by *Infoespai*, a media lab, workshop space and café created by members of Barcelona's hacker movement and located in the city's Gràcia district. In 2011, urban public square occupations of the 15-M movement created opportunities for further exchanges and convergence between the urban activist scene, as well as with rural and peri-rural nodes of the Transition Network and other grassroots initiatives**.** Creating an alternative institutionality to that of public bureaucracy and the market was regarded as fundamental **to develop a viable livelihood** for people and initiatives that were marginalized by the labour and housing markets, as well as the credit system. It is also regarded as essential for the transition towards a decentralized, grassroots-managed "solidarity economy". While the Transition Network contributed to the CIC with the vision of creating co-housing and co-working communities, as well as using online alternative currencies to promote the

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[2] https://transitionnetwork.org

relocalization of supply chains, the hacker movement's technocentric approach ended up predominating in the cooperative's overall structure.

CIC is framed as an "integral cooperative". This concept refers to the creation of an "open cooperative" with the purpose of de-linking the satisfaction of basic needs of participants, such as food and housing, from the state and the capitalist market (Dafermos 2017). Registering the CIC as a cooperative was part of a strategy of "economic disobedience", based on the institutional hacking of the regulatory tools of the state and the capitalist market, with the goal of promoting the gradual de-linking of its members from their structures. There are three forms of membership in the CIC:

a) As a "self-employed member" or "productive project", who produces independently as an individual or a small group and pays a monthly fee to the financial commons of the cooperative;
b) As a participant in a "collective unit of production" or co-housing community, which can take the form of a cooperative or association;
c) As a consumer who exchanges Euros for the basket of alternative currencies used in the cooperative, in order to purchase goods and services from "self-employed members", "productive projects" and "units of production".

Besides buying and selling products, members can get additional income and resources by selling goods or services within the mainstream economy, without having to pay the taxes required by Spanish law for microentrepreneurs and self-employed workers. Instead, they pay a financial contribution to the cooperative, which is managed as a common-pool resource.

Technocentric normative regulation of network governance
The following testimony of a long-time member of the CIC, who works full time in its central administrative structure at *AureaSocial,* is illustrative of the mainly online process of normative regulation that is at the core of the cooperative's network structure:

> *(…) By regulating exchanges through technical, impartial means, and by putting the control of that technology in the hands of assemblies of members, we put individual interests and agendas between brackets (…) we lay the foundations for a future economy based on relationships of trust between people, instead of a fiat, like money, which makes it hostage of the whims of the banks and the ups and downs of the financial market.*

This reliance on the rules and procedures of information technology to regulate the functioning of the CIC is the basis of what is hereby called a technocentric form of normative regulation. At the core of this process is the development of an online financial system that allows money to be produced, circulated interest-free and managed collectively as a common good by assemblies of users. Such **a** goal is pursued by using information technologies to build an alternative, solidarity-based financial and commercialization system through the development of translocal linkages within Catalonia, as well as internationally. Such linkages are promoted by a concentric system of financial and exchange mechanisms that connects and transfers resources between nodes of the cooperative, as well as

between members. The financial mechanism is constituted by a basket of local alternative currencies, developed by bioregional groups of exchange and self-organization known as *ecoxarxas*[3].

A core rule for the constitution of *ecoxarxas* is the availability of a physical space, known as *rebost*, that is used for the storage and commercialization of goods produced by the CIC members, as well as for assembly meetings. The *rebost* are also spaces of socialization, where lateral interactions among participants are coordinated so as to promote practices of effective communication, internal trust and reciprocity. Besides, they are sites of translocal political mobilization, hosting a range of political gatherings, educational and training offerings and performative events, both from members and like-minded external actors, that frame the CIC as part of a transnational anti-capitalist movement. The earlier *ecoxarxas*, such as that of Montseny and Olot, are predominantly rural and peri-rural networks that preceded the creation of the CIC, dating back to the **mid '00s**, and were set up by people later associated with the Transition Network. Both the earlier *ecoxarxas* and those created after the foundation of the CIC in 2010 were integrated in its governance as part of four wider "bioregions" (North, East, West and Barcelona), which are regional nodes of the cooperative with their own assembly and local currency.

The currencies developed by each *ecoxarxa* are connected through Integral Community Exchange System (*IntegralCES*)[4], a platform featuring social currencies managed by CLIs. It was developed as an open-source alternative to the original CES**.** This platform makes each community-level platform interoperable and its local currency equivalent through the ECO, the CIC's common currency, which is equivalent to the Euro in value. It also publicizes offers of goods and services and congregates demands from individual members of the cooperative, as well as affiliated projects. *IntegralCES* is complemented by *Central de Abastaçiment Catalana* (CAC)[5], which is an online system that coordinates the collection of products from providers, as well as transportation and delivery to **the rebost** collection points across Catalonia known as *rebosts*. These can be social centres, assembly spaces, co-housing or co-working projects. In their turn, *IntegralCES* and CAC are complemented by the use of online messaging apps for decision-making on everyday aspects of the management of the CIC that requires immediate response. The **in-person** assemblies, taking place at the physical premises of *ecoxarxas,* are used for decision-making on structural and strategic topics. *AureaSocial,* a social centre in downtown Barcelona that hosts *ecoxarxa El Poblet*, as well as the central administrative structure of the CIC, is the premises of the confederal-level assemblies of the cooperative.

At the time of fieldwork, there was an overlap between three banking and credit mechanisms that connected participants and initiatives throughout Catalonia and abroad. *Cooperativa de Autofinançament Social en Xarxa* (CASX)[6], an interest-free deposit and credit system for productive projects developed by individual members' collectives or assemblies, made the possibility of having a bank account and receiving loans available (in Euro or ECO)

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[3] https://cooperativa.cat/xarxa-territorial-2/ecoxarxes/
[4] https://www.integralces.net
[5] https://commonstransition.org/the-catalan-integral-cooperative-an-organizational-study-of-a-post-capitalist-cooperative/#section17
[6] https://cooperativa.cat/apoya-a-casx-desde-la-cic/

even to those members who didn't have a tax identification number (NIF) or were refused credit in the mainstream banking system. CoopFunding[7] complements and expands the functions of CASX by serving as a platform for crowdfunding **by, and for,** "solidarity economy" initiatives around the world. The Bank of the Commons[8], created by an international network of free software/free culture projects led by the team that created the CIC, plays a complementary role by connecting productive projects within Catalonia and across the world. It uses FairCoin[9], a cryptocurrency, using green blockchain technology and guarantees of equivalence in Euros and ECOs, to implement decentralized financial structures for commons and cooperative productive initiatives. In contrast with other cybercurrencies, FairCoin is a currency of low capitalization, based on a "proof of exchange" instead of a "proof of work". According to the coordinator of an *ecoxarxa* that accepts FairCoin for exchanges among its participants, this cybercurrency is framed as a temporary tool to build relationships of trust among participants. The goal is that, as such relationships are built and solidified, the use of currency will be phased out and replaced by barter:

> *The goal is to develop productive projects that reduce the use of Euros and ECOS to a minimum. (…) The goal of FairCoin in not to generate capital. It is to build trust. We look forward to the day when currencies will not be necessary anymore. (…) Generating currency in the computer as a 'proof of exchange' of goods and services is not the same as 'mining', which is to generate money in the computer out of nothing.*

The core goal of FairCoin is to interconnect participants by simplifying their exchanges through decentralized technologies and a payment system without interest or middlemen. Bank of the Commons is managed through English language open online assemblies via Telegram, as well as through the **in-person** assemblies of FairCoop. It also counts with the technical support of the CIC's administrative structure. The goal is not only to promote decentralized financial structures for the development of a livelihood outside the realm of the state and the capitalist market, but also to extend these goals beyond the borders of Catalonia.

> *The goal is for us to have a system ready so that, in case there is a successful Unilateral Declaration of Independence[10] in Catalonia and there is a collapse of the economic system based on the Euro, we can have regional-level exchanges, we can continue producing and exchanging at the regional level, but in a cooperative, non-capitalist way.*

This claim was made by a long-time member of the CIC during a blended (**in-person** and online) regional-level assembly that took place at *AureaSocial* in the days that preceded the

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[7] https://coopfunding.net
[8] https://bankofthecommons.coop/about-us/
[9] https://faircoin.world
[10] The declaration did not receive recognition from the international community. A few hours later, Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy invoked Article 155 of the Constitution of the Spanish Constitution. This action dismissed Catalan President Carles Puigdemont and his cabinet and called for fresh Catalan elections on 21 December 2017.

Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) by the then President of the *Generalitat de Catalunya*, Carles Puigdemont. The goal of achieving, in the words of another participant, "regional-level autonomy without the state" is embedded in the vision, structure and functioning of the cooperative since its foundation in 2010. At that time, the massive breakdown of private economies during the subprime crisis attracted to the cooperative many members of the "precariat". For Standing (2014), this social category is composed by salaried or autonomous workers in situations of unemployment, underemployment or contractual precarity.

Absence of socialization mechanisms for the construction of a common "habitus"

> *Community. That's what we're trying to do here. That's what we should be doing, not because we're 'posh' and want a 'cleaner lifestyle' in beautiful surroundings, but because we don't have money. If you get together through class consciousness, you move forward.*

These words of a founding member of **the CIC** are illustrative of the understanding of the "precariat" that underlies the alternative institutionality developed by the CIC: That of a homogenous category with a political outlook similar to that of the founders of the cooperative. There is also an implicit understanding that joining the cooperative, regardless of membership status, is an expression of class consciousness, as well as a means by which an individual member of the "precariat" affirms her or his political identity as a member of a class-for-itself. The same founding member of **the CIC** claims

> *People came because they wanted to live in a cooperative system, to change their lives, because they were going to be evicted from their homes, or because they could only afford to rent outside the market. (…) I knew of many people, who recently acquired a middle-class status, who were even contemplating suicide when they were evicted from their homes. They couldn't just return to their villages of origin after having 'had everything' in the eyes of their peers. It would be too humiliating. However, when you become an activist, you emancipate yourself from that goal of 'having everything'. You realize that, with the right support and solidarity, it is possible to reoccupy the house where you were living, or to live in a cooperative manner.*

This understanding of class consciousness and political identity is at the core of a strategy of building grassroots linkages that led to an exponential growth in membership during the early years, while leading to a *de facto* concentration of decision-making power and access to common-pool financial resources among a core group of, in the words of a CIC member, "a caste of professionalized activists" that took over the centralized administrative structure of the cooperative. The new "alternative spaces" became "mobilizational commons" that functioned as spaces of recruitment and formal inclusion of the expanding "precariat" into the project. One avenue of recruitment of new members is finding information about the cooperative on the internet. Another avenue begins with meetings and workshops on topics such as resistance against evictions and fraudulent corporate bankruptcies, community-based alternatives to big pharma and mass education, or international solidarity with Rojava, the Zapatistas and other focuses of autonomist resistance to capitalism. The second

stage is the participation of prospective members in weekly "open hours" where they are introduced to CIC, explain their motivation for joining the project and have their needs assessed by the coordinators, who then direct them to the project groups that better fit their needs. In the next stage, the new members are invited to participate in the **in-person** and online assemblies of their respective *ecoxarxa*. There is no process by which new members are socialized into "solidarity economy" practices or the adoption of the political "habitus" of the founders.

A holistic health practitioner who, at the time of fieldwork, was a "self-employed member" who received clients at a social centre affiliated with the CIC claimed that

> *I honestly find this whole story of the 'integral revolution' too convoluted and pointless. In my opinion, real change starts from within. It's the transformation of consciousness that matters. I work here because tourism and gentrification made it nearly impossible for me to continue practicing [reference to activity withdrawn to protect the respondent's identity] where I was before because the rent was too high. The clinic closed down. I didn't have a contract anymore. The only solution was to become self-employed. However, the social security contributions you have to pay every month as a self-employed person were just too much, especially when you do not have a fixed income, when you do not have the certainty of how much you are going to earn next month. (…) It is more affordable for me to pay the monthly contribution to the CIC and to use this room at a price below the market. (…) To be honest, I try to remain aloof from these noisy assemblies, from all this squabbling, from all this complexity around money, from all these egos (…) If I get a better opportunity, be sure I will end up leaving.*

When visiting a rural co-housing and co-working project started by founding members of the CIC, I was told by a member that

> *people come here with a vision but realize others don't share it. (…) People burn out quite fast. (…) Most of them are lower middle class. They come here with their own savings, convinced that they can set up their own productive project and work independently, without bosses. (…) But then you find out that, although you have common working spaces here where you can work and make your product, although the CIC gives you access to IntegralCES, an online platform where you can commercialize your products in ECOs, our virtual currency, although the CIC gives you a book of receipts that allow you to commercialize your products outside of the cooperative, you still have to search for clients. Although you can get a flat for a very low price, you still have to renovate it and that costs money. Besides, you have to participate in the assemblies, to be part of working groups and you are not paid for it. (…) The hardship of life, the lack of a common vision… you really burn out quite fast!*

The result is, in the words of several interviewees, a very high rate of turnover among self-employed members, as well as scant participation on the part of consumers. Paradoxically,

according to the same respondents, this contributed to increased cohesion among the founding group, who felt legitimized to take the lead in the administration of the cooperative. This group, working at *Aurea Social* in Barcelona and in the bioregional networks, receives an "unconditional basic income" from the cooperative´s financial commons in exchange for their full-time labour.

***Ecoxarxas* as "micro-public spheres"**
A source from the administrative structure of the CIC claims that this structure was supposed to be a temporary fix, to be dismantled as soon as the online financing, banking and credit mechanisms would be able to self-manage. However, at the time of fieldwork, that moment was far from arriving. Several factors interfered with the capacity of the system to self-regulate, therefore making this structure more necessary as a source of regulation and stability. The difference in political "habitus" between most members and the core group, plus the privileges that the latter enjoys in terms of "de facto" decision-making power and access to resources, created conflict among members and contributed to turnover among those less connected to the core group. Besides, the volatility of the cybercurrency market and financial demands from the state created difficulties in meeting the financial needs of co-housing, co-working and technology development projects supported by CIC. The enmeshment of the CIC's governance mechanisms with those of FairCoop and Bank of the Commons also added to the complexity. This contributed even further to a concentration of access to the financial commons in the hands of core activists. At the time of fieldwork, there was an equivalent of 53 million Euro in FairCoin in the market. However, 80% of these assets were in the hands of the group of core activists. An interviewee stated that

> *CIC/FairCoop/Bank of the Commons supports many projects, but they only survive if there is someone supporting them. As a result, many projects end up being kind of 'privatised'. This creates obstacles to communication and social control between the projects and bioregional assemblies, as well as between these and the Confederal Inter-commission coordination assembly. It also makes financial planning and management difficult.*

Such difficulties could have led to the dissolution of the network governance structure of the cooperative. However, the **in-person** relationships within the *ecoxarxas* and the trust that they promote constitute a factor of resilience, despite the predominance of "professional activists" in their management. Such resilience comes from the fact that relationships of proximity create "micro-public spheres" that promote a form of normative regulation that is co-constructed **in** everyday life and facilitates the emergence of a common "habitus" among participants.

At the time of fieldwork, the CIC was undergoing a process of de-concentration of decision-making and administrative responsibilities to four bioregions, each of them confederating *ecoxarxas* in its territory. A founding member of the CIC who lived in Barcelona until the **mid '10s** and then became part of the coordinating team of a rural *ecoxarxa* claims that

> *From my experience and that of my friends and comrades in the cooperative, I realized that this kind of arrangement - the ecoxarxa - works better in a*

*rural setting or a small town than in Barcelona. People meet more frequently. They live close to each other, go to the same places and often work together. People also come here (name of the social centre withdrawn) more often and every meeting, every guest speaker, every workshop or political action we have here has a much greater impact than in a big city. Although people like me, who are neo-rurals, might seem a bit "foreign" to the locals at the beginning, they end up accepting us and even supporting us in a neighbourly way, and we fit in quite easily. Althought most people who take part in the ecoxarxa **are** neo-rurals like me and (names withdrawn), the locals also ended up becoming our clients and we also help them with products.*

The rural and peri-rural *ecoxarxas* and the organic relationships they contain were able to cushion the difficulties experienced in management at the confederate level and absorb the scaling back of decision-making and administrative responsibilities to the bioregional level, including the everyday management of CAC. Besides, at the time of fieldwork, the confederate assembly was considering terminating CASX and CoopFunding, so as to scale up to Bank of the Commons the task of managing payments of administrative costs of the cooperative, including the "unconditional basic income", as well as covering the financial needs of projects.

Conclusions

The previous analysis invites further reflection on the agency of online platforms in collective action processes. While they enhance the co-ordination and organising capacities of activists, they also exacerbate centrifugal tendencies in diverse collectives, as well as the concentration of power among the most committed and technologically skilled. Combining online and **in-person** interactions builds relationships of trust that counteract such tendencies. The vision of community development underlying the CIC is based on the reliance on technical rules, embedded in information technology, as a source of normative regulation, instead of the state and its institutions. At the overall network level, this strategy promotes a technocentric form of normative regulation that uses online platforms and a basket of alternative currencies to bring transparency and trust to transactions, in a way that is interest-free and prevents the accumulation of capital. Although this setup prevents the accumulation of wealth by participants, fieldwork evidence indicated that it did not prevent the accumulation of decision-making power, as well as access to the cooperative's financial commons. Such benefits were accumulated by a core group of "professionalized activists" that founded the cooperative and ended up filling full-time positions in its administrative structure, being paid a "universal basic income" from its common budget. Such accumulation of decision-making and bureaucratic power led to difficulties in the overall management of the cooperative. This results from a lack of socialization mechanisms, beyond political meetings and workshops on social movements and world affairs, aimed at building trust and promoting the emergence of a common "habitus" among members holding distinct identities within the overall class of the "precariat": core members who had an activist background, and people without such a background who joined the cooperative due to financial difficulties.

The multi-layered structure of the cooperative also added to the difficulties in its overall management, preventing the online platforms from becoming self-regulation mechanisms, as initially expected. This contributed to bureaucratization, as well as the concentration of administrative power by "professionalized activists". However, the in-person relationships of proximity built in regional-level *ecoxarxas* created "micro-public spheres" of praxis-based, co-constructed normative regulation that contained the escalation of internal conflicts. They provided a "cushion" of resilience that allowed the CIC to carry out a process of decentralization and bureaucratic simplification, aimed at improving problem-solving within the project. This process was still ongoing at the time of fieldwork.

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