

Social Movements, Markets and a Commons-based approach in the Digital World



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The various crises that our planet and societies face have raised questions regarding the legitimacy and desirability of the current economic systems and modes of organizing. In this workshop, titled “Social Movements, Markets, and a Commons-Based approach in the Digital World”, various academics and activists shared their insights to showcase the intersection between social movements, moral markets, digitalization and a commons-based approach. The takeaways from this workshop are critical in understanding and enabling alternative forms of organizing that address emerging challenges, responsibly leverage digital technologies and contribute towards more desirable futures.

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Thursday, 10/06 3:00 - 7:00 pm (CEST)

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Social Movements, Markets, and a Commons-based approach in the Digital World

- 3:00 PM - Welcome & introduction
- 3:05 PM - Session 1: "Social movements and moral markets"
- 4:30 PM - Session 2: "Alternative forms of organizing in the digital world"
- 6:00 PM - Session 3: "Opportunities and challenges of putting a commons-based approach to practice"
- 6:45 PM - Takeaways

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Social Movements and Moral Markets

In contrast to the profit maximization focus of free markets, moral markets are created with the purpose of generating social value, while addressing social and environmental concerns through the market. They are driven by strong moral considerations of their actions. Given the growing negative externalities that stem from the dominant economic system, social movements have emerged as important actors in relation to moral markets. Social movements emerge from dissatisfaction towards the status-quo and challenge the prevailing logics to imagine a different future. Hence, they can play an important role in the development of moral markets, an aspect that has captured the attention of many scholars.

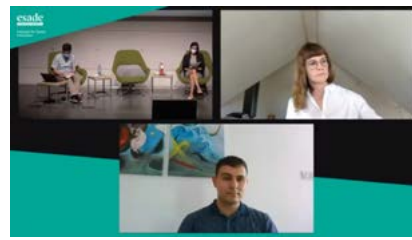
Social movements have been credited for creating and shaping various markets as they encourage search for alternative solutions and new business opportunities, while also shaping consumer preferences. Additionally, social movements can play a vital role in sustaining markets by influencing policy frameworks that are favourable to growth.

Social movements as shapers of moral markets: Encouraging entry to moral markets

While the impact of social movements on moral markets is clear, less attention has been paid to why some firms enter moral markets while others do not. According to Professor Panikos Georgallis, **organizational identity** is a critical factor that can explain this heterogeneity between different firms. Generally, the decision to enter a market is related to how closely the identity of the organization is related to the market opportunity – the greater the symmetry, the higher the chance of market entry and likewise, the lower the symmetry, the lower the chance of market entry. However, this trend is disrupted in moral markets due to the presence of social movements. Those organizations which have oppositional identities to the market opportunity also become aware of them because they become the targets of social movements' criticism. Consequently, social movements are able to shape the configuration of the moral markets because by encouraging entry by both oppositional and congruent identities, they lead to greater organizational diversity in moral markets.

This diversity has important implications. The presence of diverse organizations brings diverse resources in moral markets, which help its development. However, it also leads to difficulties to develop a strong collective identity in the markets, as well as establishing tight coordination between the producers to create the market. It is important to think about the interdependencies between firms in moral markets, the tensions that may exist therein, and how the different actors work together over a period of time.





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Social movements’ influence is shaped by the industry ecology

While the role of social movements in shaping moral markets is vital, they themselves are shaped by the very industry settings they support. Professor Desirée Pacheco discussed that the ecology of the industry determines how influential social movements are in stimulating the entry of new firms in established markets. Social movements are more effective at inducing firm entry in a market especially when the industry ecology is less favourable to firm entry. This is because in such adverse industry settings, where firm entry is generally hindered, social movements can generate challenges to the industry’s sociopolitical legitimacy and create tensions therein, resulting in new organizational actors coming to the fore. Resultantly, the **structural conditions** matter in determining social movements’ effectiveness in influencing industry growth – an aspect which is often ignored in social movements scholarship.

Entrepreneurship and cultural movements: Generating change through embedding economic activities in cultural practices:

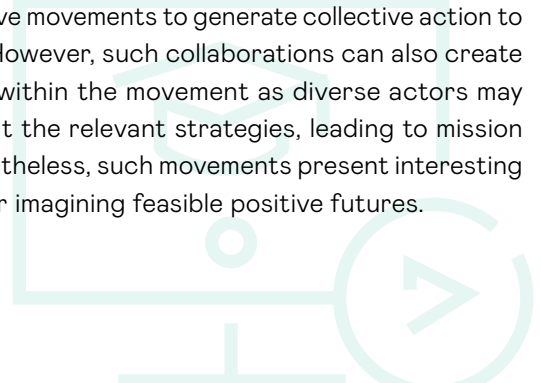
In addition to social movements, entrepreneurs are also uniquely positioned to advance change in an industry through relying on trends such as cultural and lifestyle movements – veganism, responsible consumption, etc. Professor Pacheco encourages the study of such movements in generating change in the industry. Utilizing these **cultural movements**, entrepreneurs are able to leverage the concepts of authenticity and craftsmanship in place of the economic logic, which allows them to criticize the major players in the industry. Practices such as participating in community festivals, fashion shows and

art exhibits, along with celebrating their work as being of cultural value, allows them to not just leverage the cultural movement but also reinforce them through such activities.

Prefigurative Social Movements: Enacting alternative forms of organizing for better futures

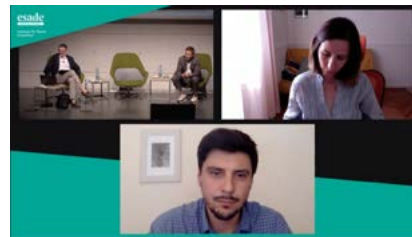
While the aforementioned social movements are focused on generating change within the existing economic landscape and structure, there are also alternative movements that are organizing outside of markets. As Dr. Simone Schiller-Markens explained, referred to as prefigurative social movements, these movements are distinct because their current practices **embody the vision** that they have for the future of society – they live the change they want to see enacted – bringing non-politicized spheres of life to attention.

These actors generally operate in the society’s margins – be it at localized levels or underground – to generate positive imaginaries that can lead to better futures. A pertinent question arises: how can their values, beliefs and practical embodiments of alternative organizing become more widespread in society? While operating at the margins, they can potentially seek support from political arenas and build connections with other prefigurative movements to generate collective action to scale-up. However, such collaborations can also create struggles within the movement as diverse actors may differ about the relevant strategies, leading to mission drift. Nonetheless, such movements present interesting insights for imagining feasible positive futures.



Alternative forms of organizing in the digital world

The ability to organize and create positive change has also been impacted greatly by the advances in technology and the rapid digitalization of all spheres of life. Such digitalization not only brings in different tools which allow activists to pursue new possibilities, but they also generate new social problems, particularly due to the intense datafication that takes place therein.



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Digital technologies and organizing to address for grand challenges

Dr. Ali Aslan Gümüşay pointed to the fact that in response to the grand challenges – such as climate change, rising inequality, and prevalent racism – that afflict our society, we are seeing new forms of organizations and practices as well as new digital technologies that shape the way we organize, such as through platforms, artificial intelligence, etc. Digital social movements have emerged that show how organizations engage with technology and are shaped by the affordances of the technology – for example, Twitter’s hashtags become very prominent to generate momentum for social movements, even if dissenters use these hashtags to propagate against the movement’s message.

Furthermore, due to the digital dimension, organizations face multiple internal and external challenges in their organizing efforts such as not being understood by external stakeholders, which threatens their legitimacy. One way to resolve these issues is by focusing on those digital actors that operate in the periphery to generate insights that challenge the mainstream conceptualization of organizing. Additionally, according to Dr. Gümüşay, scholarship must engage in **disciplined imagination** to think about desirable futures and forthcoming challenges

that can become a reality: such imagination can help societies to be better prepared for ‘unexpected’ crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Digital Prism: Datafication and the management of Visibilities

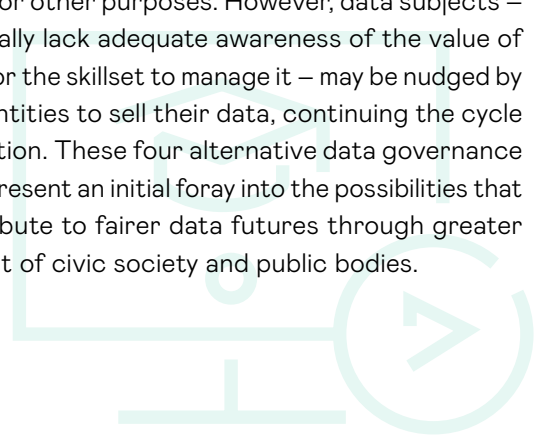
As Professor Mikkel Flyverbom explained in the workshop, due to the datafication processes related to digital transformations, we live in a society where visibility has become the default – all our activities are transformed into data, which are available to major digital platforms and governments for analysis. At the start of the digital revolution, it was envisioned that the availability of more information would render everything visible, generating greater trust and problem-solving opportunities, which would contribute to greater societal progress. However, rather than absolute transparency, people and organizations started to engage in new processes of managing their visibility as they actively make efforts to selectively show and hide things, altering realities and creating new phenomena – this is what Prof. Flyverbom refers to as the **digital prism**. Such decisions shape how we see the world, which is mediated through algorithms and digital tools, raising questions about how knowledge is produced through big data and the types of governance that must emerge.

Alternative data governance model: Addressing power asymmetries in the digital sphere

The business model of major platforms has created great power asymmetry in the digital sphere. While citizens – the data subjects – generate significant data footprint from their online activities, this data is appropriated by major platforms for their profit and the social value of data remains largely untouched. Resultantly, data governance becomes critical in the epoch of digitalization. Data governance relates to the decisions that are made over data and the entities that make these decisions. It is the result of a process that develops from the interactions between various stakeholders and creates new power relations for accessing, controlling, and using data. Dr. Marina Micheli aimed to address this issue by presenting four alternative models of data governance.

First, **data sharing** pools involve joint ventures between private entities – mostly companies – to aggregate and share data, in order to create more value. These initiatives operate under the principle that data is a market commodity which must be used to fill knowledge gaps and generate value; however, the data subjects remain uninvolved in the process. Second, **public data**

trusts involve public actors managing their citizens' data on their behalf to provide improved public services and social value. The belief is that data that is generated by the government should be utilized to improve society and citizens' lives. Third, **data cooperatives** have emerged, which involve data subjects voluntarily pooling their data together to manage it for shared value – be it public interest or generating social change – while keeping control over it. While data cooperatives operate in opposition to the capitalistic model, they are currently limited and face difficulties in scaling up. Fourth, the model of **personal data sovereignty** involves data subjects maintaining control over their data through improved self-determination, choosing who they share their data with and for which purposes – be it selling their data or sharing it for other purposes. However, data subjects – who generally lack adequate awareness of the value of their data or the skillset to manage it – may be nudged by business entities to sell their data, continuing the cycle of exploitation. These four alternative data governance models represent an initial foray into the possibilities that may contribute to fairer data futures through greater involvement of civic society and public bodies.



Opportunities and challenges of putting a commons-based approach to practice

In response to the risks and harms posed by our current economic system, several initiatives have adopted a commons-based approach to offer alternative forms of organizing. The commons approach was developed by Ostrom to discuss how natural resources accessible to all members of a community can be collectively held and managed, rather than being privatized or nationalized by the state. It is important to understand the progress and evolution of a commons-based approach in practice, and its extension to other types of goods, to comprehend how they can serve as an alternative form of organizing.



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From a social movement to center-stage: The case of Free and Open-Source Software (FOSS)

Professor Marco Berlinguer explained how the Free and open-source software (FOSS) – a manifestation of a commons-based approach – moved from being a **fringe social movement** to a dominant mode of production, while serving as a source of innovation at each stage of the journey. FOSS began in the margins of the industry, representing a new form of collective ownership driven by non-economic motivations of intellectual workers. It challenged the prevalent landscape by opening up new possibilities of collaboration among strangers. Over time, these practices became adopted by major players in the industry, spreading in contexts which were previously adverse. For example, while Microsoft was one of the strongest opponents of FOSS in its initial stages, later the company has made its patents open source. This represents how social movements can force the adoption of new practices – those of collaboration and the development of common infrastructures – within an industry. As these practices take centerstage, they will garner the attention of public authorities and provoke innovations in public policy regarding their governance and potentialities.

Common internet infrastructures: Believing in and governing the commons

In a similar ilk, Ramon Rocca shared his insights on the Guifi.net’s initiative to provide internet access to rural communities based on shared infrastructures. Internet has now been recognized as a human right and it is critical to ensure its accessibility, especially as the pandemic has driven us to access numerous public and private services online. It is vital to believe that the development of common infrastructures is indeed possible – while big companies often claim that internet infrastructures are very expensive to develop, they are significantly cheaper than what it is advertised. Furthermore, the development must occur at the community level, involving all the relevant stakeholders. Secondly, the governance of the commons is equally important to ensure that beneficial practices are encouraged, and these shared infrastructures are not appropriated by powerful stakeholders. Commons can emerge as a feasible alternative to nationalization or privatization, as they can reduce concentration of wealth and power, without losing the economic efficiency that capitalism is predicated on.

Conclusion

As new challenges emerge due to the externalities of our current economic and socio-political landscape, it is critical that academics, activists and policymakers engage actively in becoming responsible agents of change, utilizing the opportunities presented by digital technologies, by envisioning and enacting those alternative models of organizing that lead towards an improved society. Although such an undertaking will involve various challenges – some of which were discussed in this workshop – they must be effectively dealt with to realize the true promise of generating desirable futures.



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Funding entities:

