

The illusion of the digital commons: 'False consciousness' in online alternative economies

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Abstract

Digital commons such as Wikipedia, open-source software, and hospitality exchanges are frequently seen as forms of resistance to capitalist modes of production and consumption, as elements of alternative economies. In this article, however, we argue that the digital commons cannot by themselves constitute genuine forms of resistance for they are vulnerable to what we call 'the illusion of the digital commons', which leads to a form of 'false consciousness' that Sloterdijk designates as deep-rooted cynicism. This cynicism, we argue, ties in with the contemporary discontent with practices in the 'sharing economy', in which we pay particular attention to the practice of hospitality exchange on platforms such as BeWelcome, Couchsurfing, and Airbnb. We utilize Georg Simmel's theory of money to explicate how exchange relations are mediated by technologically enabled explicit and implicit price mechanisms. Accordingly, we argue that the technologically mediated practice of digital commoning can constitute the 'illusion of the commons', an apparent form of commoning through digital exchanges that is inherently vulnerable to foster non-emancipatory practices. We argue that this results in a form of cynicism: of commoners that are disillusioned by 'the power of things'. Only a 'politics of the digital commons', a democratic governance that keeps a check on the vulnerability of digital exchanges, and a free relation to technologies can help in avoiding the illusion of the digital commons.

Keywords

Alternative economies, capitalism, cynicism, digital commons, false consciousness, post-capitalism

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Introduction

Since the publication of Gibson-Graham's (1996) *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)* in 1996, a substantive scholarly discourse on 'alternative economies' has emerged (Fickey, 2011). Gibson-Graham (2008) explains that one of the major aims of studying alternative economies is to find ways to 'maintain and expand the commons' (p. 623). The digital revolution in particular seems to have facilitated the development of novel kinds of commons, in the sense that it has enabled low-cost online sharing, production and use of goods and services, and the consequent development of 'digital commons' (Hamari et al., 2016). The notion of the digital commons is central to our discussion, in particular because of its intimate connection to the—seemingly alternative—economic practices of the emergent 'sharing economy'. Alternative, pre-capitalist economic practices of 'sharing'—like the sharing of living spaces with strangers as a gesture of hospitality (O'Gorman, 2007)—have been digitalized, and expanded, in the post-capitalist forms of exchange platforms such as BeWelcome, Couchsurfing, and Airbnb. In this article, we discuss such platforms for 'hospitality exchange' as illustrations of economic forms belonging to the sharing economy.

The aim of our article is to reveal how the digital commons in the sharing economy can produce an 'illusion of the commons' and how this illusion in turn gives rise to cynicism among digital commoners. Such cynicism can be understood as a contemporary form of false consciousness. We initially approach the digital commons as a source of resistance directed at the capitalist economy. In a capitalist economy, workers and consumers are destined to develop a 'false consciousness' because their consciousness is imposed on them by the hegemonic ideology of the capitalist ruling classes who collect the fruits of both their capital and the workers' labor (Ascione, 2017; Sklair, 1997; Walby, 2015). 'False consciousness' renders workers and consumers powerless in effectuating post-capitalist transformations. Instead of resisting the capitalist world, workers and consumers are bound to contribute to enforcing its hegemonic rule. Scholars such as Negri (2008), Hardt (2010), De Angelis (2010), and Esteva (2014) argue that commons contain a particular potential for negating false consciousness. They stress that commons are an important source of resistance for commoners against appropriation of resources (including natural resources, parks, or urban spaces) by capital. Through commoning, alternative social forms (marked by sharing) and worldviews (marked by pluralism) come to development.

The 'spread of the commons discourse in recent years' that Bollier (2007: 29) discerns has to be understood in connection with the ubiquitous application of digital technologies in everyday life. Digital technologies facilitate novel forms of 'commoning'—the practice of producing, using, and managing of commons—performed by 'commoners' that in their producing, using, and managing practices are not subjected to disciplinary markets, enclosures, and profit-seeking ventures (De Angelis, 2010; Esteva, 2014; Stevenson, 2015). Digital information is turned into a key resource that allows for near-to unlimited collective sharing, production, and consumption. Commons, as De Angelis (2003) explains, 'suggest alternative, non-commodified means to fulfill social needs, e.g. to obtain social wealth and to organize social production' (p. 1). They provide what Healy (2015: 345) calls a 'postcapitalist corrective': commoners *take care* of the commons to the point that 'economy' is no longer synonymous with capitalism. We define capitalism as a modern world organized by a free market economy (appropriation and growth of resources, trust in the future, reinvestment of profits in production and new technologies, and consumerism) and work in exchange for money (De Angelis, 2010; Kahan, 2010: 5). In the past decades, capitalist worlds have been marked by neoliberal hegemony. The neoliberal hegemony rests on overall consent concerning the dominant (or dominating) paradigm of global capitalism in various strata of society achieved by powerful organizations (cf. Lazzarato, 2009). This consent is marked by the post-Keynesian doctrine that the globalizing free market economy will generate efficient use of scarce resources, economic growth, and technological progress, through entrepreneurial selfhood and

austerity politics. Commons contradict capitalism in the sense that they confront capitalist practices of enclosure and privatization of resources; they provide a basis for resisting the capitalist ethos of appropriation (De Angelis, 2010; Stevenson, 2015).

However, the question arises to what extent the digital commons are indeed emancipatory; to what extent they are carved out of technological systems that can resist or negate 'false consciousness' (cf. Brighenti, 2016). On one hand, Greaves (2015) observes that users of digital forums act like 'digital proletarians' who attempt to transform their cooperative activities into economic value, without becoming revolutionary subjects who think beyond the confines of their present condition in a capitalist world. Digital technologies, Greaves explains, contribute to the displacement and dispersion of critical energy to the point that even as inequality and domination intensify in capitalist worlds, no revolutionary resistance is organized. Accordingly, digital platforms and forums recuperate radical energy and render it passive. On the other hand, Negri (2008) explains that cooperation through commons today must be understood as 'a new force implicit in today's living labor' (p. 184) that is not imposed from outside the workforce. By means of the commons, he maintains, 'false consciousness' is negated as 'production manifests itself as the productive expression of the common' (Negri, 2008: 181), against capitalist appropriations.

In line with Gibson-Graham and Negri, we welcome the post-capitalist shift to alternative economies and a renewed focus on the commons. Yet, in accordance with Greaves, we seek to emphasize the capitalist dynamics of economic practices of sharing that are conducted through global digital platforms of organizations such as Airbnb and Couchsurfing. Such organizations tend to present themselves as facilitators of 'sharing', but at the same time act as capitalist players that focus on profit maximization. As Eskow (2015) stresses, this remarkable tension leads to the revealing of the 'lie' of the sharing economy. Do these organizations misuse the word 'sharing'? Or can we discern a more fundamental ambiguity in the very meaning of the digital 'sharing economy' and its relation to the digital commons? We seek to illustrate how the 'deception' of post-capitalist practices of sharing that we call the 'illusion of the digital commons' comes about and how this illusion generates a form of false consciousness. We want to show how the neoliberal hegemony is preserved by embedding acts of resistance in the culture of 'acceleration' of 'new media technologies' (Hoofd, 2009: 221–222).

To develop our argument, we first explain how the digital commons relate to the overall notion of alternative economies. Second, we construct a conceptual account of how the practice of 'digital commoning' is technologically mediated. We do so by situating Simmel's notion of exchange and the regimes of value it affords in the broader context of technological mediation. Third, we utilize this conceptual understanding of the digital commons to ground the notion of the 'illusion of the digital commons'. The illusion of the digital commons refers to the apparent commoning through digital exchanges that is violated by explicit and implicit price mechanisms embedded in the formal architecture of these exchanges. Fourth, we seek to explain how the illusion of the digital commons results in a form of 'false consciousness' that Sloterdijk (1984) identifies as deeply rooted cynicism. We seek to illustrate that such cynicism is not only fueled by the neoliberal hegemony but also by a particular 'alternative' economic practice, that is, by digital commoning. We claim that a reconceptualization of the digital commons through the lens of a critique of technology can assist in reorganizing the forms of post-capitalist resistance to neoliberal hegemony and hence contribute to explicating ways of overcoming the 'illusion of the digital commons' and the 'false consciousness' (cynicism) it generates.

Commons and digital technologies

Originally, the academic debate on the commons emerged from an increasing awareness of ecological destruction due to limitless privatization of resources and the destructive externalities of

capitalist production and consumption. When Hardin (1968) wrote his ‘Tragedy of the Commons’, he wrote as an ecologist concerned with overexploitation in shared resource systems such as oceans, rivers, fish stocks, forests, parks, and graze lands that, as Healy (2015: 353) emphasizes, are traditionally cared for by local communities. Commons have always existed in abundance: because no scarcity was experienced, commons could be used freely, in accord with an ethos of hospitality (Esteve, 2014; Negri, 2008: 102–107; O’Neil, 2015; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). Hardin (1968), however, stressed that commons can become overexploited and, accordingly, the law of scarcity is being felt. Therefore, he argued that open access to commons must be restricted for ecological reasons. Ostrom revisited Hardin’s tragedy of the commons dilemma. She argued that the main threat to commons arises from commodification or enclosure. This threat can be held in check if local communities manage to develop managerial capacities—that is, develop ‘common pool resource institutions’, including rules, self-monitoring, sanctions, low-cost conflict resolution, and so on—to protect commons (Hess and Ostrom, 2007: 7).

As a result of the introduction of digital technologies in our everyday lives, the scope of the commons has been expanded to include technological constructs that Hess (2000) designates as ‘digital technology commons’ and ‘information exchange commons’ (p. 14). In contrast to the ‘ecological commons’, the risk of overexploitation does not exist for digital commons, which are fueled by an abundance of digital information. No local communities take care of such digital commons but, instead, loose global networks of users who are driven by collective production of information and knowledge, and open or non-exclusive access (Anheier and List, 2005; Cahir, 2004; Hardt, 2010; Roggero, 2010; Wittel, 2014). As Helfrich and Bollier (2015) explain, ‘the center of the commons and of commoning is not a “common pool resource,” but the practice of “pooling common resources”’ (p. 102). Digital commoning can be defined as the practice of pooling digital resources, for instance, as digital commoners who individually contribute knowledge (e.g. Wikipedia entries) to a pooled knowledge database that is accessible to all participants of the respective digital commons. The paradigm case of digital commons is illustrated by services that exclusively consist of information exchanges, such as Wikipedia and Linux. However, many forms of digital commoning are not purely informational but are entangled within an organizational network of concrete (non-digitalized) economic practices. For instance, the sharing of a room through an online hospitality exchange is only partly a digitalized economic practice, in the sense that it includes both the practices of sharing material space and online exchanging of the digital representation of these material spaces that enables the ‘sharing’.

One can object that services such as hospitality exchanges are not really digital commons. Hospitality exchanges form a sort of ‘hybrid’ between practices conducted through cyberspace in which there is an abundance of information and actual, concrete, and material interactions that include economic objects that are private properties (houses, cars). Apart from the fact that such hybrid forms of digital commons—including hospitality exchanges (Schöpf, 2014), peer-to-peer three-dimensional (3D) printing (Kostakis and Papachristou, 2014), and car-sharing platforms (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012)—are typically characterized as commons-based services, two compelling arguments can be brought to the fore in support of understanding hospitality exchange platforms as digital commons, at least initially.

First, the common-pool resources in question, namely, the openly shared digital representations of actual living spaces, to a large extent adhere to the two characteristics of the commons as offered by Ostrom (1990). These resources have the property of rivalness, meaning that a person who opts for using the resource subtracts from the ability of someone else to do the same. The material goods and services involved in the practices of digital commoning are intimately linked to their digital representations. This means that such representations cannot be indefinitely reproduced, as is the case with exclusively informational commons. For instance, an advert of a shared living space

refers to a particular material resource and can therefore not be indefinitely ‘copied’ and ‘offered’ to different commoners. Furthermore, beneficiaries are able to ‘free ride’ on the service (Dolsak and Ostrom, 2003: 7–8), implying that they can make use of hosting possibilities without providing hosting services themselves. This, however, mostly applies to hospitality platforms that do not include monetary exchange in the interactions between hosts and guest—a point that we will return to in section ‘The promise and illusion of the digital commons in hospitality exchanges’.

Second, even if Ostrom’s definition can be questioned, a strong case can be made for the idea that users of hospitality platforms are engaged in a practice of ‘commoning’ as characterized by the active process of ‘pooling resources’ (Helfrich and Bollier, 2015: 102). That is, one can defend the claim that resources are taken care of by a community of digital commoners. These digital commoners actively engage, through discrete individual efforts (Benkler and Nissenbaum, 2006: 401), in the pooling together of digitalized living spaces that would have otherwise remained inaccessible to them. The community aspect of this practice can be illustrated with an account of engagement of both hosts and guests in local ‘meetups’ (which are organized for Airbnb, Couchsurfing, and BeWelcome) and by online connections made between hosts and guests (each member being part of her own online ‘community’). For the remainder of the article, we focus on hospitality exchanges as paradigm cases to illustrate the hybrid form of ‘digital commoning’ that is central to our discussion.

Technological mediation of digital commoning

How do digital technologies mediate the practice of commoning and consequently constitute the practice of digital commoning? To answer this question, Simmel’s *Philosophy of Money* provides us with relevant theoretical insights. As Appadurai (2003: 77) explains, Simmel offers a valuable basis for thinking about the conditions for certain *regimes of value*. We approach both the capitalist economy and the commons as such regimes of value. Yet, in contrast to Simmel, we do not position them as two extremes of a dichotomy but instead as concepts that assist us in interpreting differences in organization of the economy. Simmel’s notion of exchange is based on the conceptualization of a dialectical movement that according to Lash (2005: 9) belongs to an overall ‘vitalist’ philosophy that looks at the *tensions* that arise out of certain forms of intersubjectivity (such as monetary exchange or commoning). Simmel (1978 [1900]: 78–79) explains that economic practices are not based on ‘objective’ economic conditions (such as scarcity of resources) but rather on (inter-) subjective conditions for the exchange of objects of value. The subjective valuation of an object is ignited by the desire of a subject to overcome the distance that separates her from the desired object of value—a distance that can only be overcome through a sacrifice (such as the sacrifice of labor power to enjoy the value of grazing lands; Simmel, 1978 [1900]: 88).

The overcoming of distance defines the practice of ‘exchange’, in the sense that this movement constitutes the economic practice that brings about value (and, consequently, objects of value). A useful insight that we gain from Simmel’s approach is a basic distinction between exchange of economic value (Simmel has a narrower understanding of ‘economy’ than Gibson-Graham) and other types of exchange. We take the exchange of economic value, as defined by Simmel, as basic for the monetary economy in which the paradigm of global capitalism thrives. Exchange of *economic* value only comes about when both an object of value *and* sacrifices are exchanged (Shilling and Mellor, 2013: 238). Economic value is thereby distinct from other types of value involved in the practice of exchange because ‘its validity transcends the individual subject’ (Simmel, 1978 [1900]: 85), tying it to the inter-subjective standards and measurements of the monetary economy. Exchange of economic value requires a mediating inter-subjective measurement—a price—to be realized (Simmel, 1978 [1900]: 100). In economic practices, prices are, accordingly, the practical

expressions of economic values. Prices express the mutual exchange of sacrifices that coincide with the exchange of objects of economic value.

All exchanges within the monetary economy, such as exchanges of stocks, real estate, and commodities like gold, silver, and so forth, are mediated by the inter-subjective measurement of value that we designate as price. Conversely, in commoning practices (commoners who collaborate to co-create, co-produce, and co-manage commons), exchange mostly manifests itself in two alternative ways. First, there can be exchange between the commoner and the commons (the pool of resources). In this exchange, a one-sided sacrifice is needed from the commoner to overcome the distance toward the object of value; for instance, a fisherman who exchanges his labor power to catch fish from open seas. Second, there can be an exchange *between* commoners without the requirement of an exchange of sacrifices. A gift exchange between family members is an example of such a form of exchange, or the exchange of a speech between an orator and his public (Simmel, 1978 [1900]: 86). Platforms for the exchange of information such as Wikipedia can be seen as paradigm examples of these forms of exchange in the regime of value of the digital commons (a commoner adding information to Wikipedia or one subtracting information from it does not need to engage in a mutual exchange of sacrifices). However, we do not propose any absolute dichotomy between economic practices: between those involving a mutual exchange of sacrifices and those that do not. In line with Gibson-Graham, we acknowledge that economic practices are essentially diverse and that they cannot be categorized according to simple oppositions. Rather, we use Simmel's theory to argue that whenever a mutual exchange of sacrifices is involved in practices of economic exchange, these practices are *drawn toward* the monetary economy, which itself is also diverse and imperfect as scholars such as Zelizer (1989) have shown. Accordingly, taking into account that capitalist exchange is performed in the monetary economy (Lapavistas, 2000), the more an economic practice is *drawn toward* the monetary economy, the more it becomes vulnerable for being subsumed in the system of global capitalism.

Simmel's theory of money sheds light on how economic practices in the monetary economy involve a mutual exchange of sacrifices that can be practically expressed by means of prices. In commoning practices, as well as in other alternative economic practices such as household work, no mutual exchanges of sacrifices take place to constitute the exchange relationships between commoners. Thus, we emphasize that the practices of exchange that involves a mutual exchange of sacrifices are drawn toward the monetary economy while the forms of exchange in commoning belong to what Gibson-Graham designates as the alternative economies. Simmel's conceptual lens enables us to interpret why certain online practices of 'digital commoning' are seen in similar ways as ecological forms of commoning, such as the sharing of grazing lands. When commoners share a certain ecological commons, they appropriate it as they would appropriate a natural open space (e.g. an open sea) that each commoner would be able to enjoy without having to weigh her sacrifice against that of another commoner.

Similarly, the appropriation of digital commons for collective production (such as downloading music samples from an open-access database to create a song) happens *as if* a commoner enters in an exchange relation with an ecological commons. In other words, such an exchange of digital information can be seen as the 'mirror image' of ecological commons like grazing lands and rivers (Curien et al., 2006: 2). Moreover, digital exchanges of information on digital platforms like Wikipedia seemingly are freed of the condition of mutual exchanges of sacrifices. Although a contributor to Wikipedia sacrifices her labor in order to exchange information with others, no sacrifice is directly offered in return. However, it is precisely this condition that is present in the 'hybrid' forms of digital commoning, which create the illusive aporia of the sharing economy. Practices of digital commoning through platforms such as hospitality exchanges cannot be free from the condition of the mutual exchange of sacrifices and are for this very reason drawn toward the monetary

economy, which brings about the risk of being appropriated in the hegemony of the global capitalist economy.

Before turning to the issue of the ‘promise’ and ‘illusion of the digital commons’, we first situate Simmel’s notion of exchange in a broader understanding of technological mediation of economic practices (Garcia, 2005). We do so to introduce a crucial difference between ecological commons that can be openly accessed and used freely by commoners and the digital commons. The rules embedded in the technology design of digital platforms mediate the social interactions that belong to the practice of digital commoning. Such formal rules in the context of digital environments do not only regulate but also constitute a certain virtual reality that is organized by coded or law-like patterns of interaction (Lessig, 2006; Søraker, 2012). In the context of digitalized exchange practices, human relationships are thereby always to some extent formalized and abstracted. Accordingly, informal practices of commoning through digital platforms are always to some extent resisted by the technology design of digital exchanges. As Roscoe and Chillas (2014) argue, commoning understood in its original sense is an essentially informal practice that resists the technological rationality of formalization, standardization, and quantification. Therefore, exchange practices of digital commoners cannot be taken as the equivalent of ‘offline’ commoning at face value since digital environments enforce formalized, law-like relationships in their architectures. Examples of such law-like relationships are as follows: ‘agreeing with terms of service’, ‘providing such-and-such profile information’, ‘validating your identity’, and ‘rate your stay’. In order to find out how this tension between the practice of digital commoning and its mediation by the technological environment in which it takes place unfolds, we discuss in more detail an illustration of hospitality exchanges.

The promise and illusion of the digital commons in hospitality exchanges

The promise of the digital commons revolves around the idea that practices of digital commoning can be conceived as mimicking the practices of commoning in the ecological, non-digital form because both forms are seemingly free from the condition of the mutual exchange of sacrifices that draws economic practices toward the monetary economy. In response, and in contrast, to this promise, we define the illusion of the digital commons as the apparent online ‘sharing’ of community resources and services while such objects of value are in reality governed by technologically mediated price mechanisms, embedded in formal rules that govern the exchange practices. Accordingly, digital commons run the risk of being ‘illusory’ forms of actual commons that people relate to in their everyday lives. Changes in their technology design can move certain online platforms, such as Couchsurfing, away from the alternative economic practice of digital commoning toward commodification of the ‘digital commons’ that the platform manages. This shift toward marketization does not need to become immediately apparent for subjects exchanging and sharing through these digital platforms.

We seek to illustrate the illusion of the digital commons by discussing the hospitality exchanges Couchsurfing, BeWelcome, and Airbnb. BeWelcome is an online non-profit hospitality exchange platform that enables its users to offer and receive the opportunity to have open access to a sleeping place somewhere around the world, free of charge. Couchsurfing offers a similar platform, although it has become a for-profit organization (since 2011). Airbnb is a for-profit organization that explicitly prices and exploits the exchanges of living spaces. Although Airbnb is usually not designated as a ‘real’ hospitality exchange platform (cf. Tagiew (2014: 3), who characterizes Airbnb as a ‘travel service’), for our purposes it illustrates the move toward marketization that is implied by the illusion of the digital commons. Additionally, Airbnb is an important case to consider because it

does 'resist' and 'disrupt' the 'old' capitalist logic of centralized services that separate worker exploitation and selling their services to consumers. In contrast to this old logic, Airbnb offers a platform through which users can identify themselves voluntarily as workers, consumers, or both at the same time. It thereby very successfully 'resists' capitalist services such as those offered by commercial hotels and thereby creates a debate that revolves around the extremes of either being a 'pathway to sustainability' or a 'corrosive form of unsustainable, neo-liberal economics' (Martin, 2016: 149).

The identification of the illusion of the digital commons follows from an initial observation that many of the technologically mediated economic practices found in alternative economies, particularly the sharing economy, of companies, such as Airbnb and Couchsurfing, and more 'genuine' digital commons, such as BeWelcome, are remarkably similar to each other. Each platform offers services that are enabled by a digital network of members who socially engage with one another through digital profiles and reviewing mechanisms. Three crucial technologically mediated activities are present in each platform, which are (1) the creation of a digital profile, (2) the creation of a digital representation of ones living space, and (3) participation in reviewing mechanisms. Therefore, at face value, it seems that the economic practice of sharing resources manifests itself in similar ways through the digital platforms of Airbnb, Couchsurfing, and BeWelcome. The main differences between these platforms are found in the ways in which price mechanisms are embedded in their technological infrastructures and not in any radical difference between the actual practices of digital commoning.

With Airbnb, price mechanisms are explicitly present, in the sense that users directly pay to 'rent' a shared living space. In contrast, price mechanisms are seemingly absent in exchanges that are facilitated by the BeWelcome and in the Couchsurfing platforms. Nevertheless, as Schöpf (2015) explains, although BeWelcome and Couchsurfing may seem similar, Couchsurfing reformed itself from 'a commons into a commodity' (p. 29) by attracting investments from venture capitalists in 2011. Accordingly, the Couchsurfing community has witnessed a 'commodification of the couch' (Schöpf, 2014), meaning that the practice of commoning in the context of hospitality exchange (turning the household into a commons) is made undone by the decision of the Couchsurfing platform to exploit the activities of the digital commoners *through* its platform (e.g. by performing analytics on the behavior of the digital commoners that is consequently 'commodified'). The question then arises how such an illusion of the digital commons can be made explicit. For the unmasking of the illusion associated with 'illusory commons' such as Couchsurfing, two aspects of the digital commons must be taken into account.

First, price mechanisms can be subjected to transformations in exchange practices mediated by digital technologies. For instance, instead of pricing separate musical expressions (songs or albums), the access to digital pools of music can be priced, as is the case with some online music services. Digital exchange platforms increasingly detach price from payment, which implies that payment can be designed as a voluntary choice (as is the case with online donations) or that the mere activity of users can be used as the 'price' to pay for a service (commodifying user behavior by means of online analytics). In hospitality exchange platforms, both explicit and implicit pricing mechanisms are present. Airbnb uses explicit pricing mechanisms: guests have to pay their hosts a specific price for the shared living space they can use. Couchsurfing has developed a different commercial, capitalist model in which the exchanges of the users are tracked and analyzed to offer advertisements. As is stated in its privacy policy, the platform tracks among other 'location information', 'device information', and 'log information' of its users and uses these among others to 'communicate with' the user 'about products, services, offers, promotions, rewards and events and provide other news and information about Couchsurfing and other third parties' (Couchsurfing, 2017). These notions imply operations that are embedded in the technology design of the platform.

Also, in its commercial model, paid services are offered to enable users to increase their level of trustworthiness (Billock, 2015). By doing so, Couchsurfing implicitly prices the activities of users on its platform and thereby goes against the post-capitalist logic of digital commoning.

Second, although these prices can be expressed in the conventional way, as measures of state-issued money like euros or dollars, some alternative mechanisms of exchange can bring about expressions of prices as well—mechanisms that are more implicit. In the case of online hospitality exchange platforms, such price mechanisms are connected with the extensive reviewing mechanisms that are present on both non-profit and for-profit platforms. Users who exchange services through such platforms are nudged toward reviewing their experiences with other users, to comment on their experiences or even to rate them in a quantitative, measurable manner. This provision of acknowledgment, or reputation, constitutes what Offer (2015) calls the ‘economy of regard’. In certain digitalized economic practices, including hospitality exchanges, the measurement of reputation is typically treated as if it were an actual currency (Dingledine et al., 2003). This is what draws the online economy of regard very close to the monetary economy of market-exchange relationships, since both explicit prices and reviewing mechanisms can be said to have a strong ‘pricing’ effect. Especially when communities become overcrowded, and members have to ‘compete’ with each other to engage in the sharing practices, reviews and ratings become increasingly important for members to become ‘trustworthy’. Such a transformation makes that digital commoning practices become increasingly selective, which may, for instance, lead to discrimination of users (Ikkala and Airi, 2015). For instance, members of certain ethnic groups may receive less or worse reviews than others, due to pre-existing racial biases of platform users toward people that do not belong to their direct communities (Condliffe, 2016), which thereby cause a decrease in the ‘price’ of their offers or demands. Similar to the money-economy, the economy of regard can thereby magnify differences between the ‘haves’ (those with a solid reputation) and the ‘have-nots’ (those without a good reputation). To summarize, by incorporating explicit and implicit price mechanisms in the technology design of online platforms, practices of sharing can be distorted. The resulting ‘illusion of the digital commons’ does not have an emancipatory effect, but, instead, lead to the dominance of certain individuals or groups and accordingly to a strengthening of the neoliberal hegemony.

What effects do these developments have on the ‘resistance’ that is supposed to be directed through the practice of digital commoning? At face value, platforms such as BeWelcome largely seem to retain the emancipatory character of the ‘promise’ of the digital commons. Volunteers that develop and maintain the BeWelcome exchange platform actively keep it free from the condition of mutual exchanges of sacrifices by (1) basing it fully on open-source software, (2) making all the crucial decisions about the technology design and the organizational structure in a democratic way, and (3) maintaining user-friendly terms of use that respect the user’s privacy and security (Schöpf, 2014: 50). However, since reviewing mechanisms remain part of the service and a difference is made between volunteers (those developing and maintaining the service) and members (those using the service), it remains questionable whether the condition of mutual exchange of sacrifices is fully negated. Additionally, we need to turn to an even more pervasive effect of the illusion of the digital commons on forms of resistance. That we should not underestimate the problematic forms of resistance that arise out of the sharing economy can be illustrated by the fact that not the members of ‘genuine’ digital commons such as BeWelcome but instead those of the capitalist sharing platform Airbnb are gathering on the streets in order to protest against the attempts of governments to protect the integrity of cities and local economies (Hickey and Cookney, 2016). This confronts us with the irony that not the digital commoners, but the champions of the ‘new global capitalism’ seem to be able to mobilize resistance. In New York, Airbnb hosts protested against housing regulations, while local house owners, living in the ‘old’ economy of personal property,

engaged in an anti-protest (Purbasari, 2016). This illustrates how Airbnb successfully mobilizes its users, through their dependence on the sharing economy, to counter both conventional government and those defending the ‘old’ capitalist economy.

A certain resistance results from the illusion of the digital commons, though not all digital commoners are activists. A distinction between digital commoners in general and ‘activist’ digital commoners must be made. Bellotti et al. (2015) have conducted an empirical study of motivations of people for engaging in digital commoning in the sharing economy. By means of interviews with users of 43 different for-profit and non-profit platforms, they came to two insightful observations. First, they found that the generic motivations of the users of peer-to-peer platforms diverge strongly from those expressed by the developers of these platforms. Developers tend to name the values of the digital commons such as sustainability, altruism, and egalitarianism as the main motivations for using their platforms (even though the sincerity of these claims is not warranted), while users of the platforms generally turn toward much more pragmatic, non-altruistic motivations to justify their activities. Second, they found that this misalignment persisted *across platforms*, and therefore counted in the cases of for-profit and non-profit platforms (Bellotti et al., 2015: 1088). At the same time, Schöpf shows in a different empirical study that for a certain group of members the genuine character of digital commons is conclusive for the motivations that guide their behavior. By interviewing community members of Couchsurfing and BeWelcome, he shows that the change of the Couchsurfing platform from being a non-profit to a for-profit platform was decisive for certain members to leave the platform and use BeWelcome instead (Schöpf, 2014: 69). Moreover, he shows how the acceleration in growth of the platform and the new ‘digital commoners’ it attracted with different motivations made members who were motivated by the intrinsic values they attached to the platform leave (Schöpf, 2014: 95).

We do not intend to use these empirical observations as conclusive evidence for our argument. Yet, we do believe that they shed some light on the dynamic of resistance that results from the illusion of the digital commons. On one hand, activist digital commoners lead the way in appropriating and organizing new forms of digital commoning, followed by digital commoners with pragmatic motivations. On the other hand, as soon as the acceleration of new digital technologies leads to a transformation of the technological design of the digital commons that includes explicit or implicit price mechanisms in the platform, the activist digital commoners are confronted with the illusion of the digital commons and turn toward a different platform that does respect their values of digital commoning. Doing so, they leave the vast majority of digital commoners behind. Because of this dynamic, the promise of the digital commons is increasingly re-localized in niche applications such as BeWelcome. Whereas with the ecological commons resistance to the capitalist appropriation has to be directed at protecting *that* particular commons—and Illich (1992: 51) explains that the mistake of what he calls ‘anticapitalist politics’ has thus far been to bolster the legitimacy of transforming commons into resources that are appropriated for ideological purposes—the digital commons allow for the migration of digital commoners from one platform to another. This results, among other things, in frustrations triggered by changes in the Couchsurfing platform that are not resisted. Instead, commoners turn to an online alternative. Post-capitalist resistance is thereby averted. In other words, the illusion of the digital commons results in a form of ‘false consciousness’ that keeps the digital commoners from resisting neoliberal hegemony in a meaningful way. In the following section, we explain that as a result, we are faced with a form of ‘false consciousness’ that Sloterdijk typifies as cynicism.

Cynicism as the ‘false consciousness’ of the digital commons

So far we have constructed the following theses: (1) implicit and explicit price mechanisms are embedded in the technology design of digital commoning platforms and (2) draw these platforms

toward the monetary economy, not being capable of being freed from the condition of the mutual exchange of sacrifices, (3) which results in forms of resistance that do not meaningfully negate the neoliberal hegemony or even support it. Hence, it seems that the illusion of the digital commons produces a form of 'false consciousness', which evaluate in this section. The term 'false consciousness' was first coined (but not theorized) by Friedrich Engels in a letter to Franz Mehring in 1893, in which he stated that in bourgeois ideology (liberalism) is a thought process carried on with the 'false consciousness' of an unreflective 'thinker' who fails to grasp the motives that direct his thoughts (Gabel, 1975). 'False consciousness' was first conceptualized by Lukács (1971), for whom 'false consciousness' referred to a reified, compulsive identification of the world as an acceptable condition. In the context of a class struggle battled with workers, capitalist rule institutionalized the 'false opinion' that capitalism was an unalterable, or even natural, condition. Thereby, reality, and the political (revolutionary) role of dominated workers and consumers in the shaping of reality, was obscured (Gabel, 1975: 119, 134; Meyers, 2006). For Gramsci, 'false consciousness' referred to being dominated by a hegemonic paradigm marked by the illusion of widespread consent; the resisting or revolutionary subject emerges to develop a counter-hegemonic paradigm, through class struggle (Noaman, 2015). For Mannheim (1954), the very vocation of social science was to un-do the 'false consciousness' that he defined as an incorrect representation of the world. Social science served to unmask hegemonic ideologies, so as to defeat the lies, errors, and distorted thinking. In his hands, social science was ideology critique and could be set into motion to negate 'false consciousness'.

As the neoliberal hegemony is embedded in a capitalist culture through technological mediation, the new 'false consciousness' is exposed through technology critique. Ellul (1967) and Marcuse (1968) were the first to unmask technology, rather than bourgeois ideology (liberalism), as the force of lie, error, and distortions in the reified capitalist world. Ellul emphasized that in the technological environment of the capitalist world, reality is arbitrarily fixated, without the dialectical possibility to alter that reality and shape alternative realities through post-capitalist practices. Industrial technology, Ellul explained, is not a neutral or 'automatic' force: it is an operation of determinism and necessity. It constitutes a collection of orders, schemas, and mechanisms, programmed and conditioned by the values and interests of those in power. Marcuse stressed that a technological environment, characterized by simplifications, codifications, and objectifications, is rooted in, and reproduces, 'one-dimensional thought' that he defined as a systematic arrangement of a sphere of 'false consciousness' (Gouldner, 1976: 139; Marcuse, 1968: 27, 53).

This line of thinking has produced a number of illuminating technology critiques of 'false consciousness'. For instance, Gabriel (2008) shows how PowerPoint is a technology that in a capitalist world typically tends to facilitate programmed, uncritical learning that replaces arguments with lists and graphs. He emphasizes that potentially, in a less dominated and less programmed cultural environment, PowerPoint may well be used as a tool for generating creative performances. Likewise, Knudsen (2011) observes that in a dominated, programmed environment, technologies of observation or visibility devices generate blindness, invisibility, in-transparency, and obscurity. In a similar vein, Roscoe and Chillias (2014) provide a concrete example of how the dominating formality of orders, schemas, simplifications, codifications, and objectifications dictate a systematic arrangement of love matches. The technology of online dating services suggests love matches for its users, couches users in relationships, and suggests how to manage relationships in the 'best' way. Online dating service platforms, Roscoe and Chillias (2014) explain, generate a 'systematic deception, provoked by the economizing nature of the online interfaces' (p. 812). The phenomena of domination that Gabriel, Knudsen, Roscoe, and Chillias describe can be understood as systematic arrangements of 'false consciousness' in the sense that they enforce one-dimensional thought: as a systematic arrangement of orders and schemas is imprinted, critical and creative and radical thought withers away.

In line with such critiques of technology, the unmasking of the illusion of the digital commons makes it possible to uncover a particular type of technologically mediated ‘false consciousness’ that can be characterised as follows. The activist digital commoner uses digital exchange platforms to resist capitalist modes of production, management, and consumption, but moves between alternatives in the digital environment when confronted with the illusion of the digital commons, absorbed by the potential and power of new digital technologies. As such, the activist digital commoner displays a form of false consciousness that Sloterdijk discusses as *cynicism*. Simmel had already come to the diagnosis of cynicism as being endemic to the movement of economic practices toward the monetary economy. Simmel (1978 [1900]) stated that the mood of the cynic ‘can be most effectively supported by money’s capacity to reduce the highest as well as the lowest values equally to one value form and thereby to place them on the same level, regardless of their diverse kinds and amounts’ (p. 275). Accordingly, the explicit and implicit price mechanisms in platforms for digital commoning lead to cynicism through the reduction of the particular social values (such as sharing, empathy, and solidarity) involved in concrete, situated practices of commoning to homogeneous, formal, and quantifiable rules and measurements.

Sloterdijk, who explicitly positions cynicism as a form of false consciousness, acknowledges Simmel’s analysis, stating that ‘the Philosophy of Money reveals the phenomenon of cynicism in the fact that it seems to be an inherent power of money to entangle in *exchange* deals goods that are not commodities as if they were such’ (Sloterdijk, 1987: 316; emphasis added). Cynicism, as Sloterdijk (1984: 202) explains, is a particular type of ‘false consciousness’ that must be contrasted with ‘the classical series of false consciousness’—that is, ‘lie, error, ideology’. In contrast to the ‘false consciousness’ reified in industrial capitalist structures, cynicism cannot be unmasked through ideology critique (of liberalism) in the style of Lukács, Gramsci, or Mannheim. Instead, a critique of technology is called for.

In contrast to technology critiques such as the ones provided by Ellul and Marcuse, Sloterdijk targets the individual, the cynic ruled by ‘false consciousness’. Originally, the cynic—Diogenes the Hound—was the ‘provocative, stubborn moralist’, who unmasked ‘false consciousness’ through the mockery of social conventions. In the ancient world, the cynic, with his ‘crudely unmasking gaze’ (Sloterdijk, 1984: 191), was an eccentric figure that uncovered the noble lie invented by the ruling classes. The ancient cynic resisted the prevailing social order, its hierarchies, and institutions and pointed at the hypocrisy of civilized morality (Munro, 2014). According to Sloterdijk (1984: 191), the ancient cynic was ‘the earliest example of a declassed or plebeian intelligence’—a forerunner of Marxist scholars like Lukács and Gramsci. In contrast to this ancient cynic or the Marxist of the first decades of the 20th century, Sloterdijk (1984: 191, 192) explains, in today’s new culture of capitalism, the cynic appears as a ‘mass figure’, an ‘embittered loner’ and an ‘average social character in the elevated superstructure’. Accordingly, digital commoners, unlike Diogenes or the revolutionary subject, have become agents who, by their very act of enforcing cynical dispositions as an ‘average social character’, are incapable of engaging in meaningful forms of resistance.

Such cynicism of the ‘embittered loner’ is the ‘false consciousness’ of activist digital commoners, whose needs and means for fulfillment are reconfigured to suit the demands of the technological dictates of a capitalist world (Greaves, 2015). It is a ‘false consciousness’ because such digital commoners falsely identify their own disillusion, alienation, and obsession with new digital technologies as a personal trouble and, accordingly, fail to see how such an existence is the result of being dominated by the hegemonic paradigm of neoliberal capitalism. In the words of Hoofd (2009), the fantasies of new media technologies blind digital commoners for the fact that the logic of acceleration that is embedded in their technological environments replicates the neoliberal hegemony they try to resist through digital commoning. By relying on digital forms

of commoning, digital commoners are overtaken by ‘the power of things’ in their digitalized environments, which displaces and disperses their critical and radical energies (cf. Greaves, 2015). Alvesson and Spicer (2012) stress that such displacement and dispersing of critical and radical energies—which they typify as ‘functional stupidity’—is an important resource for capitalist enterprises. ‘False consciousness’, marked by the lack of critical and radical energies, provides a sense of certainty that allows organizations to function (or managers to rule) smoothly in the monetary economy.

Through the illusion of the digital commons, digital commoners share the same kind of ‘false consciousness’ as employees, consumers, and managers acting in the monetary economy. Cynicism is the enlightened ‘false consciousness’ that manifests itself in the programmed environment of a contemporary type of capitalism. This is a capitalism that is largely shaped by new digital technologies that facilitate speed of response and non-hierarchical organizations like peer-to-peer networks. Not only digital commoners but also companies such as Airbnb reject the forms of bureaucratic organization that defined the ‘old’ forms of capitalism and are engaged in a quest for permanent technological change. Both digital commoning and economic practices in the capitalist economy are marked by the same cynicism—the internalization of the new spirit of capitalism—and accordingly by the replication rather than the resistance of neoliberal hegemony. In fact, neoliberalism has succeeded in turning the ideology critique of industrial capitalism (alienation, domination, bureaucracy) to the advantage of the market (cf. Hoogenboom and Ossewaarde, 2005; Kazmi et al., 2016). Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) stress that capitalist systems have turned out to be highly robust, despite ideology critiques. Moreover, Crouch observes that even the global financial crisis, which inaugurated widespread ideology critique of global capitalism and worldwide protest movements, has not affected neoliberal hegemony. In fact, Crouch (2011) notes that ‘neoliberalism is emerging from the financial collapse more politically powerful than ever’ (p. viii). Cynicism, as Fleming and Spicer (2003) explain, does not weaken but strengthens the neoliberal hegemony. Cynical dispositions, a negative attitude toward the status quo, marked by a fundamental mistrust of rulers’ intentions and the conviction that fairness is sacrificed to further the interests of rulers (cf. Brown and Cregan, 2008; Kim et al., 2009) ultimately manifests itself in conformism to the neoliberal hegemony. In other words, like employees, digital commoners continue to practice corporate rituals, worship corporate symbols or brands, and reach productive levels.

The question concerning commoning and digital technologies

What then is the post-capitalist potential of digital commons? As Negri has shown, there are many reasons to believe that through commoning ‘false consciousness’ may be negated and transcended. In his view, commons negate ‘false consciousness’ because commoning practices are not imposed from outside the commons, as is the case in the monetary economy. In pre-capitalist societies, commoners were often rebellious, as they sought to defend their traditional rights to leisure, bread, religious festivals, and so forth, which were threatened by capitalist rule (Illich, 1992; Stevenson, 2015). Negri claims that, today, commons provide the workers’ platform for acts of post-capitalist resistance. The production of digital commons requires a degree of sharing that does not sort, select, or class people according to ranks and scales, but, instead, remains open and provides alternative venues for commoners to settle in (Brighenti, 2016). Negri (2008) claims that ‘today, labor, in order to be creative, must be “common,” in other words, produced by networks of cooperation’ (p. 107). Through such practices, the basis for post-capitalist class struggle surfaces, with workers representing common cooperation while capitalists represent multiple ways of appropriation. Negri also sees in the widespread protests against global capitalism, such as the Seattle protests of 1999 and later the

post-9/11 movements like Occupy Wall Street, the post-capitalist struggles in resisting the world of endless enclosure of commons (like public parks and squares, schools and libraries) and for ‘the total transformation in the nature of work and in the organization of society’ (Negri, 2008: 163).

Even though we share Negri’s commitment in the context of the ecological, non-digital commons, we emphasize that there is a lack of critical and radical potential for resisting hegemonic power structures through the practice of digital commoning. In a controlled and programmed environment, digital technologies help foster capitalist worlds (in which brands such as Apple, Microsoft, and Google represent great corporate value and appear as popular employers). Digital technologies can provide open access to information for all and can furnish citizens with communication links across distances that hitherto did not exist. Yet, in capitalist worlds, cultural environments are dominated by these technological systems that enforce their own schemas and codifications, and critical energies are dispersed. It is true that with digital communing, labor is produced by networks of cooperation as Negri explains—for instance, by means of voluntary review activities of members of hospitality exchange platforms. Yet, the networking digital commoners have limited reflexivity because they operate within the bounds of digital exchange mechanisms. Thereby, they do not embody the pre-capitalist ethos of the informal solidarity economy, with its notion of *communitas* (Bittencourt Meira, 2014). Similarly, they do not embody the ethos of workers’ cooperatives and local exchange trade systems (Kokkinidis, 2015). Such non-capitalist practices are grounded in a negation of the capitalist ethos of autonomy, emancipation, and self-reliance (cf. De Angelis, 2010). Digital commoners, by contrast, embody the ethos of bourgeois individualism, but without the sense of eccentric inner-directedness or deeply rooted principism and affirmation of critical thinking that liberal values like individual autonomy require. Activist digital commoners work alone, as cynical ‘average social characters’ or even ‘embittered loners’, from behind computing devices; they are thereby caught in an oscillation between praise and condemnation of new technological developments that make their digital commons thrive. Yet, such thirst for new digital technologies is a manifestation of the new spirit of capitalism, which keeps such a-political desires going (Contu, 2008: 373–374).

Illich (1992) points out that ‘the sickening effect of programmed environments show that people in them become indolent, impotent, narcissistic and apolitical’ (p. 47). This is indeed the dilemma of the digital commons as a potential force of post-capitalism. The main ideals of the digital commons are grounded in a-political principles and typically resonate as technical terms: open source, peer-to-peer, decentralized applications, network neutrality, and so forth. Like the workers, consumers, and managers in the monetary economy, digital commoners do not constitute revolutionary subjects who are able to think beyond the present condition or to unsettle current ruling desires (Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Greaves, 2015). This is not to say that digital commoners show no signs of resistance. Rather, their resistance does not meaningfully affect the neoliberal hegemony in which they operate. Dystopian deceptions such as those of the illusion of the digital commons extend beyond the examples of blatantly ‘false commons’ like Airbnb and Uber.

Additionally, self-professed promoters of the peer-to-peer economy of the digital commons, Wikipedia and Couchsurfing, as well as champions of the open-source movement like Linux have recently received fair amounts of cynical responses from digital commoners (Fosfuri et al., 2008; Greenstein and Zhu, 2012; Molz, 2012). The alleged resistance of the contemporary cynic in production, consumption, management, or communing—such as online protests targeting large firms (Van den Broek, 2016)—is what Contu (2008) calls ‘decaf resistance’: it is a fake resistance to capitalist power structures that is enjoyed, typically as an outlet for a cynic’s resentment, without affecting the dominating neoliberal hegemony. The activist digital commoner, influenced by the illusion of the digital commons, is ready to engage in alternative forms of digital commoning

without politicizing the underlying contradictions of the technological schemas and mechanisms of the programmed environment of a global capitalist world in which they operate.

We would like to end on a positive note, after having spelled out a rather dystopian critique of the digital commons. For this, our investigation resonates with Heidegger's work on technology, which according to Dreyfus (2007) is 'both darker and more hopeful' (p. 26) than common instrumental critiques of technology. If alternative economies in general and digital commons in particular can be thought of as branches of post-capitalist practices, they require alternative *thought*, that is, a radical rethinking of alternative economies through a critique of technology. The 'real danger' of the digital commons is not to be found in the destructive power of the technological systems themselves, 'but in a restriction in our way of thinking' (Dreyfus, 2007: 27) when engaging with the digital commons. Thus, a real act of resistance would mean to negate the internalization of the new spirit of capitalism through 'radically changing things as we know them' (Contu, 2008: 374). The real act of resistance, then, implies the negation of cynicism and its technological roots. And this is a *political* act that cannot be expected from a lone wolf digital commoner who is, in the words of Sloterdijk, dragged down by the power of technological things and whose consciousness is profoundly a-political. As a first step, this would require the creation of a politics of digital commons: a political process of organizing digital commoners in ways that would allow them to democratically govern the digital platforms through which they interact. This means that the technological designs of digital exchanges, such as review mechanisms, rules of interaction, and user-profiling, are to become elements of a political debate that would shape the organization of commoning practices that these exchanges mediate. The BeWelcome platform can be considered a good example of a platform that might well be able to counteract the illusion of the digital commons, for it incorporates democratic procedures that govern its architecture—such as voting procedures for members to decide on certain features of the website (BeWelcome, 2016). However, no meaningful resistance emerges as long as activist digital commoners retreat to their niche platforms while leaving the World Wide Web in the grasp of the neoliberal hegemony that perpetuates the illusion of the digital commons. Even though a politics of digital commons is necessary, it cannot be seen as sufficient for solving the illusion of the digital commons.

More fundamentally then, activist digital commoners should pay heed to Heidegger's suggestions for gaining a free relation with technologies. This implies that we should not condemn technologies and long for a pre-technological world, and neither should we turn toward technologies as the vehicles for resistance to neoliberal hegemony. Instead, we should affirm the unavoidable use of technologies while denying them the right to dominate us (Dreyfus, 2007: 28). This implies a 'transformation of our sense of reality' by which we overcome the calculative thinking that is implied in the technologically mediated practice of digital commoning and that is warned against by both Simmel and Sloterdijk. This can only be achieved through being sensitive to our relation with technologies and reflect on the way they 'order' our lives, which result in a *releasement* of technology as a way of thinking (Dreyfus, 2007: 31). This sensitivity can be fostered by questioning technological practices such as digital commoning, through a consideration of their purpose in our lives and by taking a critical stance toward their tendency to force us into conceiving of the world as standing reserve, as an efficient order. Finally, we should find a way in which the digital commons can provide space for the practices embedded in the ecological, non-digital commons that represent a different, multi-dimensional, critical, and radical way of thinking. Only a symbiosis of the old and new ways of commoning without the domination of technological systems can lead to a 'free' relation to technologies in our alternative economic practices.

Concluding remarks

How can it be that, as Celata et al. (2014) put it, the sharing economy is such a Janus faced phenomenon, which simultaneously allows for experiments with non-capitalist practices *and* is the new center of interest for venture capitalism? In this article, we claim that the answer can be found in the deceptive role of technology. Many 'digital commons' cannot be regarded as reliable forms of resistance to capitalism, because they tend to trigger an illusion that results in 'false consciousness' that we identify as cynicism. Hardt (2010) explains that commons constitute the very heart of post-capitalism, in the sense that through the alternative economies of the commons, concentration of property in the hands of large organizations is overcome (cf. Healy, 2015). The digital commons seemingly offer opportunities for rethinking contemporary capitalism. 'Economies', including those that are constituted by digital commoning practices, as Lee et al. (2008) emphasize, 'are circuits of value and any suggestion that their materiality and sociality can be discounted is unworkable' (p. 1113). Digital commoning in or through cyberspace must be understood in its own right, with its own structures of social relations that we have identified as arrangements of 'false consciousness'. The underlying politics of the process of digital commoning, including the technological bluff and arrangements of 'false consciousness', remain uncontested. Instead, digital commoners, in their resistance to large organizations, tend to engage in the lone wolf endeavors of what Sloterdijk calls 'embittered loners'. That is to say, technologically mediated 'commoning' leads to cynicism that alienates commoners from the very practice of commoning (cf. Gabriel et al., 2015: 634).

The illusion of the digital commons is illustrative for a capitalist world that is marked by adaptive reasoning and functional stupidity rather than radical questioning and reflexivity (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Ungar, 2003). Contemporary capitalism is such that 'false consciousness', as Sloterdijk understands it, can no longer be overcome via ideology critique. The critique of the neoliberal hegemony is very widespread but has not affected its domination. In fact, ideology critique has enforced neoliberal hegemony, embraced by right, left, and third ways, as the ideological expression of cynicism. Today, 'false consciousness' can only be overcome if technology critique is translated into post-capitalist acts of resistance to the dominating technology design. As Naughton (2000: 272) explains, the very architecture of the Internet has given rise to centrifuging powers, such as the global data conglomerates and—as we have discussed—commons-like platforms like Couchsurfing and Airbnb. According to Lessig (2006), this means 'that the invisible hand of cyberspace is building an architecture that is quite the opposite of what it was at cyberspace's birth' (p. 4). Our analysis ties into such critiques of cyberspace. The technological architecture of digitally mediated commoning practices can negate the very idea of digital commoning. The Internet is a free, open space by design—a digital common in itself—and for that reason it is very vulnerable for rule-based regulation and control that negates open standards, universal access, flexible copyright rules, and decentralized Internet infrastructures. Such tendencies toward rule-based regulation violate the process of digital commoning (Boyle, 2008). However, many of these tendencies are highly opaque because they are often implicit and part of a formalized design for digital interaction that is in itself an arrangement of 'false consciousness' (cf. Knudsen, 2011; Roscoe and Chillias, 2014). Therefore, in order to address the problem of the illusion of the digital commons, digital commoners first need to strive to gain a 'free' relation with technologies, which requires new imagination and radical organizational change.

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