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# Relational Ecosystems: Sustaining Prefigurative Change by Creating Conditions for Mutual Learning and Change

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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## ABSTRACT

This article coins and develops the notion of relational ecosystems to address the existential paradox cutting across theories and practices of prefigurative change. Innovative ways of relating, thinking, and acting that aim to transform hegemonic state powers struggle to sustain themselves in interaction with governance systems that stimulated such prefigurative change. This paradox has given rise to cross-disciplinary calls to reimagine our political-economic ecology and devise frameworks and strategies to transform it. A popular line of thinking is to sustain prefigurative change through 'ecosystems', but this will remain wishful thinking if we do not clarify what their anchoring assumptions about reality and political institutions are and explain how these could be transformed. This article creates untapped cross-disciplinary synergies by developing conceptual and empirical understanding of why and how to coproduce relational ecosystems in hegemonic contexts. Based on an innovative interpretive analysis of the ecosystem of Liverpool (UK), I articulate four original propositions about the real-world consequences and creation of relational ecosystems that can guide future research and practice. My main argument is that relational ecosystems could sustain prefigurative change by creating conditions for mutual learning and change, reciprocal ethics and relationships, shared responsibility, and supporting innovative practices on their own terms.



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## INTRODUCTION

This article addresses an existential question that cuts across the myriad of approaches pursuing prefigurative change: "how can we imagine and build a radically different system while living within an incumbent system that aggressively resists transformation?" (Bollier, 2020, p. 348). Over the past decades, we have witnessed a global proliferation of commoning (Bollier & Helfrich, 2015): communities managing a resource by self-organising innovative ways of practising collective ownership, mutual support and stewardship of 'common wealth'. At the same time, social innovation (SI) has become widespread as new ways of relating, thinking, and acting to address unmet social needs turned into a staple of grassroots activity and policy discourse (Moulaert et al., 2013). Along with other grassroots approaches concerned with radical change (Speth & Courrier, 2020) that emerged in community self-organising (Atkinson et al., 2018), participatory democracy (Bua & Bussu, 2023), and new municipalism (Russell et al., 2022), a perennial struggle has been how to sustain prefigurative initiatives in relation to governance systems that called for or created the need for their existence.

The paradox at the heart of this struggle is that prefigurative initiatives cannot survive and achieve their hoped-for change without engaging with governance systems ill-designed to recognise and support them (Seyfang & Smith, 2007; McCabe & Phillimore, 2017; Wagenaar, 2019). Driven by a sense of what Lichterman & Eliasoph (2015) call "nowtopianism" (p. 846), people come together to manage common spaces and resources by coordinating "interaction around a mission of improving common life" (p. 810). Their prefigurative practices seek to go beyond the existing system while not simply rejecting it, but by creating new possibilities at its margins and in interaction with it. Even when governance systems actively encourage prefigurative change, they continue to exercise "state powers" (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019, p. 286) that resist innovative ways of relating, thinking, and acting to sustain themselves and transform engrained power relationships and institutions (Bartels, 2017). The unresolved question is how to engage with state powers in ways that reimagine their purpose within the political-economy and transform their modes of supporting prefigurative change (Scott-Cato & Hillier, 2010; Bollier & Helfrich, 2019; Bua & Bussu, 2023). Numerous barriers and resistances emerge in these relational dynamics of change and resistance, as extensively documented in research on the commons (Huron, 2015; Thompson, 2015; Feinberg et al., 2021) and SI (MacCallum et al., 2009; Moulaert et al., 2010; Galego et al., 2021). This recurrent finding has led to calls for bridging different theoretical frameworks and literatures to extend "insights into broader dynamics at play in attempts to create a sustainable participatory ecology" (Bussu et al., 2022, p. 141).

The main purpose of this article is to address untapped synergies between the commons and SI[1] by conceptually and empirically advancing our understanding of how 'ecosystems' could sustain prefigurative change. Ecosystems are rapidly gaining ground as a theoretical foundation for SI (Howaldt et al., 2021) and a vital precondition for developing and sustaining SIs in practice (OECD, 2022). The central idea is that SIs are created, developed, and sustained in complex environments of a multiplicity of actors, relationships and institutions that provide both drivers and barriers for transformative change (Kaletka et al., 2016; Domanski et al., 2020). At the same time, despite recent analytical efforts to reduce its conceptual fuzziness, there is widespread agreement that more needs to be done to take ecosystems beyond the 'wishful thinking' (Tummers & MacGregor, 2019) commonly invested in such appealing metaphors.

My contribution is to explain why and how to co-produce *relational ecosystems*. While a range of purposes, elements, and types of ecosystems have been identified, surprisingly enough, their underpinning worldview has not received any attention. Bollier and Helfrich (2019) argue that the first step to profound change is to unpick our understanding of the world and develop a new language to describe it and guide action within it. They call for an 'Ontoshift' of our anchoring assumptions about reality and the political institutions that affirm these (i.e., our political ontology). The political ontological nature of the Ontoshift extends the existing focus in SI research on the ontological space in which innovative ideas and practices develop (Longhurst, 2015) and the transformation of engrained power relationships and institutions (Moulaert et al., 2013). It offers a cross-disciplinary opportunity to extend the relational approach to SI (MacCallum et al., 2009; Bartels, 2017; Pel et al., 2020) by clarifying how ecosystems could be transformed based on "a recognition that relational categories of thought and experience are primary" (Bollier and Helfrich, 2019, p. 49). While SI scholars agree that ecosystems are relationally reproduced, it has not been studied how a relational worldview can create conditions for sustaining prefigurative change.

Therefore, the main research question of this article is: *How can relational ecosystems sustain prefigurative change?* It is divided into three sub-questions:

1. *How do ecosystems create conditions for sustaining prefigurative change?*
2. *How does the political-ontology of ecosystems influence possibilities to sustain prefigurative change?*

*3. How can relational ecosystems be created?*

I answer these questions based on a case study of the ecosystem in Liverpool (UK), which has been recognised for its double-sided nature (Thompson, 2015, 2019). The rich texture of its civil society has generated trailblazing SIs and commons but continues to be weighed down by highly antagonistic relationships with an austerity-struck local authority with a contested track record of addressing stark inequalities. I explore Liverpool's ecosystem with an eye on Blossom,[2] a SI with unprecedented impact on the wellbeing and assets of local people and spaces (Bartels, 2019) that "decided to moth ball the organisation" after five years because they "could not sustain it without any real help from, (or even the comprehension of?), or partnerships with, mainstream services or the council".[3] After two years of action research, they asked me to help understand what it was in their local environment that made sustaining their SI so difficult and how, if at all, this might be possible.

Following Bollier and Helfrich's (2019) claim that the starting point for giving shape to the Ontoshift is "looking closely at the language and metaphors that we use, and the stories we tell" (36), I conducted an interpretive analysis of qualitative interviews, newspaper articles, policy documents, and websites. This led me to identify how local narratives upheld either dominant political-ontological beliefs about the existing ecosystem or imagined alternative foundations. To offer further analytical depth, I did a counterfactual analysis to abductively develop four propositions for how relational ecosystems could sustain prefigurative change:

- Facilitating mutual learning about prefigurative change;
- Driving collaboration by reciprocal ethics and relationships;
- Enabling shared responsibility for mutual support and transformation;
- Supporting innovative practice on their own terms.

These counterfactual propositions specify how relational ecosystems *could be* co-produced. The case shows the harsh reality and constraints of prefigurative change in a neoliberal ecosystem. Counterfactual analysis is an innovative method to reveal possibilities for change (what could be) to move beyond a critical stance to neoliberalism (what is wrong) and a normative vista on an ideal future (what should be).

These propositions offer a novel, communicative and actionable perspective on the real-world consequences of the political-ontology of ecosystems, and pathways to co-produce relational ecosystems. Ecosystems create conditions that determine the scope for prefigurative change to thrive and spur transformation of state powers, the kind of ethos and relationships that drive interactions, the nature and locus of responsibility, and the extent to which prefigurative change is supported on its own terms. Political-ontological beliefs embed rules of the game that shape how local actors communicate about how to 'play the game' and where power lies for changing the rules. For instance, in Liverpool, SIs were evaluated in business language based on the dominant neoliberal belief that if it is valuable it will pay for itself. The four propositions demonstrate how relational ecosystems could foster reciprocal relationships, responsibility, and support for learning how to sustain prefigurative change.

I proceed by discussing the notion of relational ecosystems in the context of the debate about the relational dynamics between prefigurative change and governance systems. Next, I explain my interpretivist methodology of examining narratives and formulating counterfactual propositions. The third section discusses and empirically grounds my propositions. In the final section, I return to my research questions and discuss how future research and practice could sustain prefigurative change by co-producing relational ecosystems.

## RELATIONAL ECOSYSTEMS

The institutional environment and dynamics with state actors are a longstanding concern for those pursuing prefigurative change. As noted in the introduction of this article and special issue, a prevalent finding across research on the commons and SI is that interactions with state powers are inevitable for but often unconducive to sustaining prefigurative change. For example, the need for financial support and legal permissions creates opportunities for both collaboration and control. Scholars are divided about the extent to which prefigurative actors ought to engage with state powers and 'play the game'. While often used colloquially, Bourdieu (1998) developed this notion to critically analyse power inequalities. By examining how social actors follow dominant rules and norms, we can uncover the influence of the rules of the game on their abilities to achieve their goals and improve their relational status. Bianchi et al. (2022) usefully contrast how some scholars point at possibilities for transforming relationships with state powers through co-production while others argue that co-optation is inevitable when playing the game.

Studies are increasingly exploring the middle ground between transformation and co-optation by analysing how prefigurative initiatives can seek state support while pursuing profound change in the face of hegemony (Bianchi et al., 2022). For instance, Thompson's (2019)

analysis of SI in Liverpool reveals scope for reconfiguring institutional logics by 'playing with the rules of the game'. Pikner et al. (2020) demonstrate how urban gardening in Finland embedded informality in governance systems. Dey and Teasdale (2016) argue that 'tactical mimicry' is a common strategy for UK social enterprises to survive and pursue progressive goals in a neoliberal system. Crucially, both Wolfram (2018) and Radywyl & Bigg (2013) show that cultivating processes of experimenting and learning around, respectively, grassroots SI in Seoul and small-scale urban commons in US cities, created foundations for transformative change. The analytical implication of these studies is to focus on the relational dynamics of resistance and change that shape the ways in, and extent to, which prefigurative ideas, practices, and impacts are sustained (Bartels, 2017).

An array of frameworks has been developed that conceptualise "the reconfiguration of the interfaces of cross-sector co-operation and the establishment of governance structures to support collaborative action for social innovation" (Domanski et al., 2020, 468) or commons.[4] These frameworks evidence that new citizen-state relationships can be co-produced whilst embedding prefigurative practices and imaginaries of a new political-economic system. However, they are all highly contingent, i.e., dependent on place, time, and various conditions, so much so that even within a local context we can have radically different experiences in the same context (e.g., cf. Thompson (2019) and my analysis of the Liverpool case).

Within the SI literature, the notion of ecosystems has rapidly become a prevalent theoretical foundation for cohering the extensive evidence base on the challenging relationships between SIs and state power. SI ecosystems are defined as "the comprehensive organisational, institutional and cultural setting in which the SI is embedded" (Kaletka et al., 2016, p. 85). Some studies focus on categorising governance policies, institutions, and strategies that can create conditions for SI to flourish. Others take a normative stance by framing SI ecosystems as vessels of a new political-economic order of collaborative networks of grassroots activities driven by shared purposes and participatory values (e.g., Sgaragli, 2014). While appealing, such 'wishful thinking' is prone to false promises about achieving radical change (Tummers & MacGregor, 2019). As Bollier (2020) puts it, "[o]ur challenge is not just articulating attractive alternatives, but also identifying credible strategies for actualizing them" (p. 350).

Several studies have therefore taken SI ecosystems beyond the metaphorical level by developing analytical frameworks. Kaletka et al. (2016) classify roles, functions, structures, and norms at different layers of governance that can function as barriers or drivers. Terstriep et al. (2020) identify a mode of governance that integrates actors, intermediary institutions, and transformational innovation strategies as key elements of SI ecosystems. Pel et al. (2020) discern five network constellations with divergent levels of 'empowering capacity' depending on local embedding, transnational connectivity, and discursive resonance. These frameworks enable systematic analysis of context-dependent multi-level conditions and multi-actor interactions. Theoretically, they follow the relational turn in SI, which conceptualises SIs as dynamic and situated processes co-produced in interaction between multiple actors and institutional environment. Pel et al. (2020) propose a relational approach to understand SI ecosystems as networks of socio-material relations with embedded, emergent, and interactive capacities for co-producing the shape, impact, and longevity of SIs.

Bollier & Helfrich's (2019) 'Ontoshift' extends this relational understanding of ecosystems with a focus on the assumptions that anchor our understanding of the world and the language we use to frame the ways we relate, think, and act. Longhurst (2015) already drew attention to the importance of an 'alternative milieu': "a localised density of countercultural institutions, sub-cultures, practices and businesses" (p. 186) that creates socio-cognitive space for developing new ideas and practices and confidence to experiment with these. The unique contribution of the OntoShift is that it is a shift in *political ontology*: i.e., how our ontological assumptions prescribe what political institutions we believe are most appropriate, which in turn, reproduce the kind of world we assume (Stout & Love, 2016, pp. 24–55; Bollier & Helfrich, 2019, ch. 2). The currently dominant neoliberal worldview is that we are discrete, autonomous individuals that (ought to) compete over scarce resources to achieve individual property and liberty protected by the state. This hegemonic worldview embeds state 'power-over' as it has become taken for granted as the way the world works (ontology) and should be governed (political). Stout & Love (2016, p. 42) call this form of hegemonic power "ontological colonisation" because it marginalises and suppresses alternative worldviews.

The Ontoshift helps to articulate the underpinning worldview and values of ecosystems and clarify how to prefiguratively change them. What I call *relational ecosystems* are grounded on the assumption that we exist through innate connections and interdependencies with one another and the world (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019, ch. 2; Stout & Love, 2016, 2018). Looking "at things not as entities but in relation" (Follett, 1918/1998, p. 13) enables us to see state power not as a monolith but as a configuration of power relationships in ongoing flux. This takes us beyond *describing* how ecosystems are relationally reproduced into *transforming* how power is exercised in their relational

dynamics. Follett (1942/2003) contrasts 'power-over' with 'power-with' to conceptualise how multiple actors can share their powers in mutually beneficial ways. This implies a relational ethics of understanding what is the right thing to do in concrete situations. Without anybody dominating or being coerced, we engage in a reciprocal process of integrating individual views and issues into a mutually beneficial agreement (Follett, 1942/2003). By fostering relationships of mutual understanding, learning, and adaptation, we can co-produce shared change of hegemonic institutions that inhibit transformation (Bartels, 2022). In other words, relational ecosystems would be co-produced through ongoing mutual learning from everyday prefigurative practices and relational dynamics (Radywyl & Bigg, 2013; Wolfram, 2018).

Bollier & Helfrich (2019), call for "collaborative social ecosystems" (p. 355) that would offer a network of relationships, resources, and space "for people to devise their own solutions to problems" (p. 291). Resonant with Deleuze's micropolitical thought and notion of the rhizome (Scott-Cato & Hillier, 2010), a popular foundation of the relational approach to SI, they mobilise the image of the mycelium – the underground network of fungal threads that creates symbiotic relationships between trees and soil and is fundamental to their resilience and survival. They concretise this image into 'commons-public partnerships' which would offer legal recognition and a principle of noninterference to prefigurative initiatives as well as "many novel forms of administrative coordination, legal support, infrastructure development, and public education" (p. 305). While this gives us an idea of what relational ecosystems could look like, it remains unclear how they could be actualised in hegemonic political-economic contexts. In the next section, I explain the interpretive analysis I conducted to develop conceptual and empirical understanding of how relational ecosystems could be co-produced to sustain prefigurative change.

## INTERPRETIVE ANALYSIS

I conducted an interpretive analysis to reveal how the narratives local actors in Liverpool used to interpret and legitimise their experiences with prefigurative change upheld engrained political-ontological beliefs or imagined an alternative foundation for their ecosystem. Narratives are the stories and language used to make sense of complex situations, communicate interpretations, and express beliefs about what should happen (Wagenaar, 2011, pp. 208–222). Bollier and Helfrich (2019) argue that "a semantic revolution of new vocabularies (and the abandonment of old ones) is indispensable for communicating this new vision" (p. 7). "The first step in this journey is language. We must reflect on how the words and logic of our everyday language convey old habits of thinking and limit our sense of what is possible" (p. 50). Such an interpretivist approach is widely mobilised to examine how prefigurative practices are enacted and resisted while affirming a radically different political ontology (Stout & Love 2018, p. 260; Silver, 2018). Interpretivism examines intersubjective processes of interpreting everyday situations in socio-cultural contexts to analyse how taken-for-granted assumptions, habitual communicative patterns, and underlying values guide the social construction of reality (Wagenaar, 2011). Interpretivist research critically analyses the political implications of these sense-making processes by revealing hegemonic dynamics and pathways for transformation (Blanco et al., 2014).

This article is based on the final phase of my action research with Blossom Liverpool. Action research is a key approach to supporting prefigurative change by co-producing learning and change (Moulaert et al., 2013; Bartels, 2020a; Russell et al., 2022). Despite a co-produced evaluation (phase 1) and experiential learning process (phase 2), Blossom suspended its activities. We co-designed an interpretivist study (phase 3) to examine how, if at all, Blossom could be sustained in its local environment (February-October 2018) and reflected together on its findings and implications. Ethically, I positioned myself as a 'friendly outsider' (Greenwood & Levin, 2007) responsive to the needs and interest of my collaborators and committed to joint reflection and learning (Manzo & Brithbill, 2007). To participants, I disclosed my relationship with Blossom yet emphasised that all information was treated in confidence and anonymised, analysed, and edited before sharing findings with Blossom.

I conducted 8 interviews (7 face-to-face, 1 phone) with local stakeholders (see Table 1), and identified 60 newspaper articles, 4 policy documents, and 6 websites about SI in Liverpool (all referenced in footnotes in the next section). Through open interviewing, I elicited

| | PHASE 1 | PHASE 3 | TOTAL |
|---|---|---|---|
| Members Blossom | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| Community organisation managers | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Councillors | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Public service managers | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Intermediaries | 1 | 3 | 4 |
| **Total** | **7** | **8** | **15** |

**Table 1** Interview participants.

detailed narratives about everyday practices to understand participants' views, experiences, and values on their own terms (Weiss, 1994). Interviews lasted about one hour and were transcribed ad verbatim. In addition, I drew on relevant data collected in phase 1: 7 (out of 12) open interviews with local actors, participant-observation in local activities, social media posts, and a co-produced qualitative survey with 16 participants in Blossom's activities.

I analysed the data in three rounds. First, I conducted a grounded theory analysis by coding transcripts and writing memos to identify emergent themes and conceptualise these through an iterative dialogue with relevant literature and findings from phase 1 (Charmaz, 2006). I created 14 new codes (3 main, 11 sub), highlighted in **bold** in the next section, which I used to structure a 40-page report. I discussed the report with Blossom in September 2018 and then shared it with interviewees.

Second, a narrative analysis deepened understanding of underlying values, tensions, and patterns. I analysed how narratives made a 'normative leap' (Rein and Schön, 1994, p. 26) from description to prescription by selecting salient aspects of experiences and organising these in a compelling and seemingly coherent way around 'causal beliefs' about what created and could change the situation. Specifically, I analysed the use of plotlines (course of the story), characters (e.g., villain, hero, victim), metaphors (comparison of one thing to another), synecdoche (part represents whole or vice versa), and language (frequency and meaning of words) (Stone, 2002). Then, I distilled a meta-narrative, dominant narrative, and counter-narrative (Roe, 1994) to construct an initial story of the case.

Third, I did a counterfactual analysis to transcend the level of the case and develop four propositions to shape an agenda for future research and practice. A methodological contribution of this article is to adopt counterfactual reasoning to analyse innovative practices that prefigure radically new ways of imagining and being in the world. In the Liverpool case, a relational ecosystem was absent, but Blossom's practices helped to imagine it. Going beyond speculation ('what would have happened if…'), counterfactual analysis is an abductive process of theorising findings. Abduction involves developing conjectures about puzzling phenomena through an iterative back-and-forth between findings, literature, and assumptions (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014). Following Avelino & Grin (2017), I avoided a critical framing ('what is wrong or not there') that does not enable change, or a normative outlook ('what should be') that might be hard to realise, to specify concrete practices to create a relational ecosystem ('what could be').

## SUSTAINING PREFIGURATIVE CHANGE: FOUR PROPOSITIONS

My propositions about relational ecosystems are grounded in Liverpool (UK), an "illuminating case as a laboratory of innovation" (Thompson, 2019, 1169). The city has a dense ecosystem of voluntary and community organisations – an estimated 8,638 in the City Region, of which 3,102 registered and 5,536 'below the radar' (Wilks-Heeg et al., 2011; Jones and Meegan, 2015) – some of which were recognised as the most ground-breaking SIs of the country.[5] At the same time, conflict and mistrust have characterised relationships with the local authority since the 1980s, when its unemployment rates were amongst the highest in the UK (Andersen & Munck, 1999; Sykes et al., 2013). The effects of its major urban regeneration schemes (Couch, 2003) have been highly uneven and contested (Boland, 2010). Liverpool was identified as "the most deprived city in the IMD [indices of multiple deprivation], [which] has experienced the largest reduction in central government funding of all eight core cities" (Kennett et al., 2015, 629).

Within this ecosystem, Blossom aimed "to create something which was unlike anything else we had ever been part of" (anonymised report). By organising yoga, philosophy discussions, child-led play, street art, film screenings, litter picking, gardening, and tree planting in and around the local park, they sought to create conditions for "people to connect to themselves, to each other, and through a shared purpose to a wider world" (ibidem). As the innovative approach and profound impacts of Blossom are explored elsewhere (Bartels, 2019), the focus here is on what we can learn from their struggle to sustain these prefigurative changes in Liverpool's ecosystem.

### FACILITATING MUTUAL LEARNING ABOUT PREFIGURATIVE CHANGE

The double-sided nature of Liverpool's ecosystem illustrates the opposing positions in the literature about 'playing the game'. The meta-narrative of this case was that prefigurative initiatives had a distinct ability for **making a difference** in the **gloomy situation** Liverpool faced. The city had a budget 68% lower than a decade earlier, a notoriously small local tax base, and disproportionately high and complex problems, putting it at risk of bankruptcy. The City Council and public services were repeatedly depicted with the synecdoche 'having their hands tied' (interviewees N, R, V, W):[6] they were doing the best they could to mitigate adverse outcomes of imposed funding cuts in a highly centralised system. All interviewees shared examples of prefigurative initiatives **making a difference** because they had innovative ideas driven by the assets and needs of their community and relationships needed to

reach and mobilise the right people.[7] However, underlying this meta-narrative was a tension between a dominant narrative that SIs ought to be **playing the game** and a counter-narrative of **looking different** at the ecosystem.

The dominant narrative is exemplified by this local councillor's story:

> *"And that's the kind of sort of public sector reform agenda that I think we should be exploring. … So from the City Council's perspective we're delivering our budget and we are getting better outcomes. From the community's perspective, they can come up with a tailored outcome which is right for the needs of that community. So this is a win-win. … we're getting better outcomes by doing something differently, and it's more cost-effective to deliver it. That's the progressive response to this. … So it's looking at: how do you change some of the ways we deliver things. So, some of the money that's being spent will be spent in different ways. There's a smaller share of the pie to go around, but the impact is even bigger." (Interviewee R, councillor)*

Several interviewees told a similar *story of helplessness and control*: "The situation is bad. We have always believed that the situation was out of our control, something we had to accept but could not influence. Now, however, let me show you that in face we can control things" (Stone, 2002, p. 142). "[T]he eighties were nowhere near as bad as what they are now. And we're still got more cuts to come" (interviewee W, voluntary organisation manager) and "the position people in our communities are finding themselves in is worse." (interviewee T, intermediary). However, there is a "progressive response to this" (interviewee R): a "public sector reform agenda" in which the City Council collaborates with prefigurative initiatives to develop tailored responses to local needs. This is framed as a **"win-win"** for both sides: "you get the most out of the money that's available and leave people better off at the end" (interviewee T, intermediary).

This seemingly mutually beneficial **win-win** storyline acted as a veil for dominant neoliberal political-ontological assumptions. The "smaller share of the pie" (interviewee R) metaphor implies that prefigurative initiatives were expected to accept the **gloomy situation** as it was and do their part in achieving 'more with less'. Elsewhere in the interview, interviewee R used the metaphor "step up" to suggest that prefigurative initiatives ought to accept their responsibility and increase their ambitions for making an impact. Such responsibilisation to carry out a "public sector reform agenda" and "cost-effective" service delivery is how prefigurative initiatives are co-opted into **playing the game** of a neoliberal ecosystem (Dey & Teasdale, 2016).

The counter-narrative of **looking different** at the ecosystem suggested the need to "change the assumptions about how organisations work" (interviewee U, councillor) and pursue "deeper changes in what we value[,] … a different type of relationship at community level[, and] … sustainability … [as] part of whole-system change".[8] This intermediary's narrative illuminates how such profound change implies **re-rooting** the ecosystem in radically different principles, values, and relationships:

> *"What they're all actually doing is essentially just finding ways to keep their own organisation shipping along. So radical thought isn't allowed. So what you get is sort of empty-hearted projects that are sort of deemed to be nothing more than a, a sort of 1–2 year project that never go anywhere. So what's happening is public funding is being wasted and it is not leading to a more radical model. … We're just going round and round and round without any real change." (interviewee Q, intermediary)*

Interviewee Q was one of the few intermediaries who supported prefigurative initiatives pursuing transformative change. His conviction in the need for **looking different** went hand-in-hand with deep-seated frustration about how this was not happening. He told a *story of change-is-only-an-illusion*: "You always thought things were getting … better. But you were wrong. Let me show you some evidence that things in fact are going in the opposite direction. … [I] mprovement was an illusion" (Stone, 2002, p. 142). Even though there are opportunities for prefigurative change, interviewee Q mobilises the metaphors "empty-hearted projects", "shipping along", and "going round and round" to argue that change processes "never go anywhere". Because "nobody is genuinely committed" and "radical thought isn't allowed", "public funding is being wasted and it is not leading to a more radical model".

Bollier and Helfrich (2019) argue that while **playing the game** might make sense for individual survival, it is ultimately a dead end if it feeds the status quo rather than imagine an alternative system. Neoliberal ecosystems close off possibilities for joint inquiry into ways to pursue change by responsibilising prefigurative initiatives to do more with less in a competitive struggle for survival. While relational ecosystems cannot simply wish away a **gloomy situation**, they would bring prefigurative and state actors together to recognise their interdependence for changing it and engage in mutual learning about how they could start **looking different** at their relational dynamics. Hence,

relational ecosystems would facilitate mutual learning about prefigurative change.

## DRIVING COLLABORATION BY RECIPROCAL ETHICS AND RELATIONSHIPS

A "culture of shouting and lies" (interviewee U, councillor) and "bullying" (interviewee Q, intermediary) was "built into the nature of" (interviewee U) Liverpool's ecosystem. This led to numerous pathologies, including reports of systemic bullying in the NHS[9] and Prison[10] and an investigation of fraud and corruption in the Council around dubious multimillion-pound property development schemes.[11] Interviewee U shared examples of contracted companies who showed no interest in improving service delivery because they received a management fee for the fixed sum of their contract. If the value of the contract would go down because of evidenced problems, they would get paid less. As a member of Blossom explained, **playing the game** of this ecosystem risked **compromising** prefigurative purposes, ethos, and impacts:

> *"So, constantly trying to get support while not compromising on Blossom's principles. Focusing on qualitative practice rather than constantly trying to play the game of the quantitative side of things. Like for example, … when we got, um, help from [a charity]. So one of the external organisations … they dropped out at the last minute, um, and we ended up hosting the … event. And it was great, … 60 people turned up, we all had lunch together. … But subsequent to [the external organisation] dropping out, [the charity], um, needed a certain number of asylum seekers in order … for them to be accountable for the money they'd already given us. And then, we ended up putting on a winter picnic to counter for that. And we were standing there in the teaming rain and it was forced. And … it was pushed towards what they expected of us, it wasn't … what Blossom is about. And … I said 'I never adhere to any type of external funders' conditions'. Because … it just didn't work, it wasn't authentic." (interviewee A, member Blossom)*

The conflicted 'hero' in interviewee A's narrative does not want "to play the game" because the second event they had to organise was "forced" and not "what Blossom is about". The causal belief here is that getting "support while not **compromising** on Blossom's principles" is the only way to make activities "authentic" and "work". Interviewees A and P shared other stories about funding applications where they got informal feedback that the funding had already been allocated and there was nothing they could have done to make their application successful. In their reports to funders, they no longer wanted to be made to "completely [change] how things were done and how things went" (interviewee A). Interviewee P (member Blossom) used the metaphor "a web of deception" to envisage how in Liverpool's ecosystem it was about who you knew and how skilled you were at "spinning" (interviewee A) your approach and impact, misappropriating money, manipulating people, protecting each other from accountability for failure, and fudging up reports to hide, ignore, or lie about difficulties and complexities.

Blossom was **sustaining** itself by doing things in **the right spirit** according to its worldview and values.

> *So then you start thinking 'Okay, well this is a different thing, this is an entirely different thing than the way that we think it is'. And you don't save people, people save themselves. So what is it that helps people save themselves? … an acknowledgment that if you're gonna do anything at all you had to kind of start the other way around. You had to start where people were, how they felt, what they, what their experiences, what their perceptions were, and you had to do it that way around. And if they found a professional structure difficult then … you had to acknowledge that and respect it and try and find a way in which you can do… it's not about niceness, safety, it's about congruence. (interviewee P, member Blossom)*

Interviewee P uses the 'directional' metaphor of doing things "the other way around" to posit Blossom's worldview as an "entirely different thing than the way that we think it is". This narrative prioritises operating in **the right spirit**: "start where people were" and "acknowledge" and "respect" their feelings, experiences, and perceptions by being congruent. Blossom rather "risked failing to meet the contractual requirements of the funders brief" than impose "a professional structure" because they valued that "[f]orm filling, logos and interventions from governing bodies are met with suspicion" by local people (anonymised report). Support and funding had to be based on "a commitment to what we're trying to do" (interviewee O, member Blossom). In this narrative, it is not because it was insufficiently **enterprising** (see final sub-section) that Blossom did not manage to secure funding and support, but because they refused to be seen a mere savings measure for the Council to 'run the park' for free: "if people don't pay for things it means they don't *value* them" (interviewee O).

As Bollier and Helfrich (2019, p. 36) observe, the "visible pathologies" of neoliberalism, including ineffectiveness, harmful impacts, and distrust, derive from its "faulty

premises about human beings". When deception and bullying have become cultural norms, relationships and prefigurative change are **compromised**. Relational ethics (Follett, 1942/2003) mean that interactions between prefigurative and state actors are driven by **the right spirit**. By cultivating relationships of mutual understanding and trust, they can eschew domination in favour of reciprocal support and outcomes. Thus, relational ecosystems would let collaboration be driven by reciprocal ethics and relationships.

## ENABLING SHARED RESPONSIBILITY FOR MUTUAL SUPPORT AND TRANSFORMATION

Liverpool's ecosystem responsibilised prefigurative initiatives for taking ownership of local problems and solutions, securing funding, and evidencing visible and significant impact that would continue post-funding. Following a shift from grant funding to commissioning, many funding opportunities had been discontinued, such as the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) community grants scheme (£3.2 million from 2014–2017 for supporting local health and wellbeing).[12] Interviewee S (intermediary) explained that, the "new way of working" is "on an individual basis … working with organisations" to "use the small budget that we've got to try and pump prime things". As demonstrated in more detail elsewhere (Bartels, 2020b), intermediaries were mostly supporting prefigurative initiatives with **fitting in** with the ecosystem's rules, structures, and policies. Interviewee S's story illustrates that accepting the situation was **the only game in town**:

> *"and we kind of thought that … we definitely, obviously should be advocating for [SIs], but we also need to play the long game in terms of future relationships with statutory partners, like the CCG. So, although we sympathised a lot with the organisations who were saying 'What are we gonna do? We've got no money', um, we also thought that, kind of, you know, giving the CCG a lot of grief about that was probably not the way forward. So we thought the best thing to do is kind of get some dialogue going and to try and minimise the damage this causes to future relationships and make sure that… Um, we can't do anything about the wider economic circumstances. If the money isn't there, the money isn't there. But what we can do is make sure that in the future, when, when service design is happening, that [prefigurative initiatives have] an appropriate level of involvement, and a seat around the table, and that their views are taken into consideration." (interviewee S, intermediary)*

Interviewee S depicts their organisation as the 'hero' of the story, who found themselves torn between the "grief" expressed by austerity-struck prefigurative initiatives they "sympathised a lot with" and their desire to "minimise the damage this causes to future relationships" with "statutory partners". In contrast to interviewee A's narrative in the preceding section, interviewee S makes a normative leap to "play the long game": accepting "we can't do anything about the wider economic circumstances", "get some dialogue going" and secure "a seat around the table". Shared decision-making is crucial to relational ecosystems, but this will not happen on equal terms if the priority is securing "a place within the system" and trying to procure a contract that puts prefigurative initiatives in a "more secure and safe" position (interviewee T, intermediary). When **fitting in** is seen as **the only game in town**, ecosystems exercise power-over rather than power-with prefigurative initiatives.

Prefigurative initiatives lacked time and capacity for shared decision-making because they were under constant pressure to secure funding. A member of Blossom used the synecdoche **"little bits and pieces"** to characterise their funding record. Over the course of five years, Blossom attracted £81,506.50 in grants and donations, which, combined with an estimated in-kind contribution of £67,570, 'paid' for 3688 hours of gardening by 377 unique individuals, 204 yoga sessions and 204 child-led play sessions (anonymised report). They "never [got] that core funding that we would … ideally like in order to really take a big run at what we're doing" (interviewee O, member Blossom). Larger, established community organisations with a history of grant capture were equally struggling. With their annual turnover of £750,000 nearly halved, interviewee W's organisation was "at full capacity", "had to make some staff redundant", and "financially sustainable for about another two years". Table 2 offers an overview of *all* the funding support Liverpool's ecosystem offered. It demonstrates that amounts were limited, mostly ring-fenced or for seed funding, and subject to competitive bidding. Hence, "little bits and pieces" is not a mere cry for money, but a political-ontological criticism of the "struggle within the system … to get respect, understanding and to be actively valued within the wider political and funding context" (anonymised report).

Neoliberal responsibilisation was so pervasive in Liverpool's ecosystem that **the only game in town** was for prefigurative initiatives to take responsibility for obtaining support and resources in a barren and competitive funding landscape of "little pockets" (interviewee S, intermediary). Relational ecosystems would instead foster 'power-with' (Follett, 1942/2003) by creating conditions for prefigurative and state actors to recognise and give

| FUNDER | FUND | PURPOSE | BUDGET |
|---|---|---|---|
| Liverpool Charity and Voluntary Services (LCVS) | Community Impact Fund[13] | Community health, education, income stability or arts and culture | Max. £ 3000 (single, annual application date) |
| Liverpool City Council 'Community funding and grants'[14] | Community Resource Grant | Community legal advice, domestic violence, capacity building, stronger communities | In 2018–2019, 43 grants offered; average £16,836 (total £727,105)[15] |
| | Mayoral Active Sports Fund | Community sports | Max. £500 (total of £10,000 funding) |
| | Covenant Fund | Community support for armed forces | Max. £20,000 (total of £10 million p.a.) |
| Liverpool City Council – local councillors | Mayor's Neighbourhood Fund[16] | Ward-based initiatives | Max. £15,000 (total of £1 million p.a.) |
| Liverpool City Council Highways and Public Spaces Representation Committee | Section 106 funding[17] | Public green space | Variable at Committee's discretion |

**Table 2** SI funding in Liverpool.

shape to their shared responsibility for change. By jointly developing and experimenting with ways of **fitting in** existing rules, structures, and policies with prefigurative practices, they could co-produce new modes of mutual support and transformation. Hence, relational ecosystems would enable shared responsibility for mutual support and transformation.

## SUPPORTING INNOVATIVE PRACTICES ON THEIR OWN TERMS

In Liverpool's ecosystem, the game to be played was "to respond to austerity" by "supporting new community-led initiatives" focused on "jobs" and "business" that would create a "sense of normality in some communities" (interviewee U, councillor) and "grow our economy" (Liverpool mayor).[18] An emblematic example is the crowdsourcing initiative Liverpool/Mersey Soup ran by the Social Enterprise Network (SEN). While characterised as "a collaborative event" and "a democratic experiment",[19] it was a competitive process of pitching innovative ideas in four minutes, with the winner getting the evening's takings (sponsor contributions and £5–£10 donations by participants) and a business mentor.[20] If prefigurative initiatives could not be sustained, the dominant narrative ran, it was because they were not **enterprising** enough: "if you want to run a service, if it's viable, then someone will pay for it. And if no-one will pay for it, you need to ask why" (interviewee T, intermediary).

Prefigurative change was talked about in the neoliberal language of **enterprising**. Initiatives were expected to take a business-like approach to (re)structuring themselves, identifying sources of income and customers, and maximising and evidencing impact. For instance, the narrative of interviewee K (community centre manager) was rife with business-like language: "investor save", "long term benefit", "capital spend", "cost(s)", "efficient", "skills". Interviewee K framed their own role as running the organisation like "a businessman" by "marketing", "fundraising", maintaining a "network", "having a financial reserve of six months operating costs", and "doing a loss leader", "sales pitch" and "audit".

The dominance of this neoliberal language meant that most local actors did not appreciate that Blossom was **looking different**. For instance, Interviewee K assessed Blossom based on the **win-win** storyline: taking "some of the financial burden off the Council" by "investing" in the park and "getting volunteers to do work". Interviewee M (councillor) reduced its impact to what was easy to evaluate within 'the game': "just a visual look". Indeed, on the surface it did not necessarily stand out between the great number of wellbeing activities and services in the local area. However, out from the 122 listings in The Live Well Directory (Table 3),[21] only twelve were community activities and Blossom was the *only* to offer regular, free, and accessible community activities.[22]

Only some local actors recognised that it was actually "a very different sort of approach": "if it were … an organisation or a service … [y]ou'd have people in t-shirts who look like the official and you'd have people who look like the customers" (interviewee L, intermediary). The way Blossom was **looking different** is reflected in the relational language interviewee P (member Blossom) used ("connect", "relationships", "shared purpose", "attachments", "common ground", "a focus beyond us", "get out of the ego") to explain how Blossom created "environments where people can connect without being self-conscious about connection". Activities like tree planting created conditions for **growing** people's capacities to see themselves, others, and their environment in a different light. Local people felt more confident in engaging with others at home or at work, more in control of

| WELLBEING ACTIVITIES AND SERVICES | POSTCODE AREA 1 | POSTCODE AREA 2 | TOTAL |
|---|---|---|---|
| Medical practices | 13 | 15 | **28** |
| Pharmacies | 7 | 4 | **11** |
| Nursing homes/sheltered housing | 10 | 13 | **23** |
| Education/skills training centres | 4 | 2 | **6** |
| Special needs services and hostels | 11 | 16 | **27** |
| Sports facilities/activities | 6 | 6 | **12** |
| Community activity projects | 6 | 6 | **12** |
| Other | 1 | 2 | **3** |
| **Total** | **58** | **64** | **122** |

**Table 3** Wellbeing activities and services in a five mile radius of Blossom.

their mental health, and empowered to take responsibility for public spaces (Bartels, 2019). Blooming flower beds, full bags of litter, new trees, and well-attended yoga sessions were tangible visual cues for **looking different** at the budding potential of local people to take collective care of their wellbeing and assets – signals of an emerging wellbeing commons.

After over two decades of infusing ecosystems with neoliberal language of **enterprising** (Day & Teasdale, 2016), prefigurative initiatives often remain 'below the radar' (MacGillivray et al., 2001). Those in positions of power fail to comprehend their innovative practices and impacts and support them on their own terms. Relational language offers a radically different way of describing the world in terms of **growing** connections with each other and the environment (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019). Relational ecosystems would co-produce evaluation systems that would appreciate and help grow the value of prefigurative initiatives in these terms. Hence, relational ecosystems would support prefigurative change on its own terms.

## CONCLUSION

Relational ecosystems offer a way to address the existential paradox cutting across theories and practices of prefigurative change. The prevalent struggle to sustain innovative ideas, practices, and impacts in interaction with state power has given rise to cross-disciplinary calls to reimagine our political-economic ecology and devise frameworks and strategies to effectuate transformative change. 'Ecosystems' offers an appealing framework for conceiving how to create conditions in which prefigurative change can emerge, develop, and thrive. However, we risk that such ecosystems remain wishful thinking if we do not clarify their anchoring assumptions about reality and political institutions, and how these can transform the relational dynamics between prefigurative initiatives and state power. This article has created new synergies between SI and the commons by developing conceptual and empirical understanding of the political-ontological foundations of ecosystems. I coined and developed the notion of relational ecosystems by extending the relational approach to SI ecosystems as complex, emergent, and interactive constellations of drivers and barriers based on Bollier & Helfrich's (2019) OntoShift. Pioneering the use of counterfactual reasoning as a method for prefigurative change, my interpretive analysis of Liverpool's ecosystem generated four original propositions to guide future research and practice on how to create relational ecosystems in hegemonic political-economic contexts.

I now return to my research questions to articulate *how relational ecosystems could sustain prefigurative change*. I identified three conditions through which ecosystems influence whether and how prefigurative change is sustained (question 1): the kind of ethos and relationships that drive interactions, the nature and locus of responsibility, and the extent to which prefigurative change is supported on its own terms. A unique angle of this article is that it uncovers how the political-ontological foundation of ecosystems influences possibilities to sustain prefigurative change (question 2) by embedding the 'rules of the game' that shape how prefigurative and governance actors communicate about what and how to 'play'. Political-ontology is not only a matter of philosophically elucidating our worldview and values; it is the language we use and stories we tell that shapes our power to change relational dynamics. Neoliberal ecosystems responsibilise prefigurative initiatives to sustain themselves in ways that compromise their ethos, entrench power inequalities, and close off possibilities for transformative change. Even in such hegemonic political-economic contexts, relational ecosystems can be co-

produced (question 3) by engaging in joint learning about new ways of mutual support and transformation. So, in answer to the main question, relational ecosystems could sustain prefigurative change by creating conditions for mutual learning and change, cultivating reciprocal ethics and relationships, enabling shared responsibility, and supporting innovative practices on their own terms.

Future research and practice could further develop our understanding of how to co-produce relational ecosystems in diverse contexts as a process of mutual learning and change. While my research is based on a single case in which a relational ecosystem and co-production were absent, other cases included in this special issue illustrate how joint learning and change can be achieved in the face of inherent challenges and resistances. Answering calls to explore how learning could become a systemic property in SI to advance transformative change (Wolfram, 2018; Bartels, 2022; Pel et al., 2023), I have explained why and how relational ecosystems can be co-produced through mutual understanding, learning, and adaptation to collaboratively transform power inequalities. In other words, relational ecosystems can be co-produced through action research. By embedding action research (Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Bartels, 2020a) as a mode of research and practice, we can sustain prefigurative change towards a democratic, socially just, and sustainable world.

## NOTES

1 Literatures on SI and the commons have largely developed in parallel, despite remarkably similar interest in "practices that go beyond the usual ways of thinking, speaking, and behaving" (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019, 6). I understand all commons to be a form of social innovation, but not all social innovations to aspire commoning. In this article, I focus on a SI with the ambition and potential to become a commons that was stopped in its tracks of cultivating commoning. I take this as an example of the existential paradox of prefigurative change.

2 For confidentiality reasons, the name of the organisation has been changed and the names of all those involved anonymised. Only limited details can be provided on their backgrounds and identities.

3 Blossom Liverpool, Facebook post 01–09-2018.

4 These include bottom-linked governance (Moulaert et al., 2019), participatory local governance (Kim, 2021), socially creative milieus (Von Schnurbein et al., 2021), democracy-driven governance (Bua & Bussu, 2023), commons-led co-production (Bianchi et al., 2022), public–common partnerships (Russell et al., 2022), and commons-public partnerships (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019).

5 'This is not about gentrification': the pie shop reviving an Anfield street. *The Guardian*, 19-4-2017. Feat of clay: regeneration project that's bringing a Liverpool street to life. *The Guardian*, 10–09-2017. How one community beat the system, and rebuilt their shattered streets. *The Guardian*, 14-2-2018.

6 Liverpool council faces stark choices as it looks into the financial abyss. *The Guardian*, 10–11-2015. Four more Liverpool libraries face closure in fresh round of cuts *The Guardian*, 20–2-2017. Cuts that squeeze the life out of Liverpool. *The Guardian*, 22-02-2017.

7 'This is not about gentrification': the pie shop reviving an Anfield street. *The Guardian*, 19-4-2017. Feat of clay: regeneration project that's bringing a Liverpool street to life *The Guardian*, 10–09-2017.

8 Liverpool CCG (2017) Strengthening Social Prescribing in Liverpool: Connecting for Health and Well-being. Position Statement. Retrieved 14-02-2018 from https://www.liverpoolccg.nhs.uk/media/2751/42705-smoh-paper-nov-6th-2017.pdf, pp. 4–5.

9 Liverpool NHS trust 'dysfunctional' and unsafe, report finds. *The Guardian*, 08-02-2018. Liverpool NHS scandal shows how culture of denial harms patients *The Guardian*, 10–02-2018.

10 Liverpool prison has 'worst conditions inspectors have seen. *The Guardian*, 19-1-2018.

11 Opponents of new Liverpool tower block are luddites, says mayor. *The Guardian*, 12-10-16. 'Final warning': Liverpool's Unesco status at risk over docks scheme. *The Guardian*, 01–07-2017. Edgy urban apartments, lavish promos – and a trail of angry investors. *The Guardian*, 13-03-2018. Liverpool council may have squandered up to £100m of public money. *The Guardian*, 5-03-2021.

12 https://www.liverpoolccg.nhs.uk/get-involved/healthy-liverpool-community-grants-scheme/ (accessed 14-2-2018).

13 http://www.lcvs.org.uk/grants/community-impact-fund/ (accessed 20–09-2018).

14 https://liverpool.gov.uk/business/finance-funding-and-grants/community-funding-and-grants/ (accessed 20–09-2018).

15 Mode and median are £10,000, with most grants between £3,000–15,000. Significant outliers are grants to large NGOs: Liverpool Charity and Voluntary Services (£55,000), Merseyside Law Centre (£60,000), and Citizens Advice Liverpool (£195,000). (Grant & Performance Team – Community Services. Community Resource Grant. 'What we Fund' 2018–2019. Retrieved 08-05-2018 from https://liverpool.gov.uk/media/8909/what-we-fund-community-resource-grant-2018–2019v2.pdf).

16 The Liverpool money league: Which parts of the city get the most council cash? *Liverpool Echo*, 12–08-2018.

17 https://liverpool.gov.uk/media/9505/section106planningobligations.pdf (accessed 20–09-2018).

18 Liverpool is caring for its heritage buildings. *The Guardian*, 07-02-2017.

19 http://www.sentogether.net/liverpool-soup/ (accessed 14-2-2018); See also: The soup revolution: changing cities over dinner, from Detroit to Liverpool. *The Guardian*, 01–08-2016.

20 The soup revolution: changing cities over dinner, from Detroit to Liverpool. *The Guardian*, 01–08-2016.

21 https://www.livewellliverpool.info; accessed 09-06-2016 and 21–03-2017.

22 Others were a church, two community centres, two centres for elderly activities, a centre for the Irish community, a Scottish country dance group, a theatre company, an occasional family event, and dog walking.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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