

The Model of Open Cooperativism: The Case of Open Food Network

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Abstract : This paper is part of the research program “Techno-Social Innovation in the Collaborative Economy”, funded by the Hellenic Foundation for Research and Innovation (H.F.R.I.) for the years 2022-2024. The paper showcases the Open Food Network (OFN) as an open-sourced digital platform supporting short food supply chains in local agricultural production and consumption. The paper outlines the research hypothesis, the theoretical framework, and the methodology of research as well as the findings and conclusions. Research hypothesis: The model of open cooperativism as a vehicle for systemic change in the agricultural sector. Theoretical framework: The research reviews the OFN as an illustrative case study of the three-zoned model of open cooperativism. The OFN is considered a paradigmatic case of the model of open cooperativism inasmuch as it produces commons, it consists of multiple stakeholders including ethical market entities, and it is variously supported by local authorities across the globe, the latter prefiguring the mini role of a partner state. Methodology: Research employs Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s discourse analysis -elements, floating signifiers, nodal points, discourses, logics of equivalence and difference- to analyse the breadth of empirical data gathered through literature review, digital ethnography, a survey, and in-depth interviews with core OFN members. Discourse analysis classifies OFN floating signifiers, nodal points, and discourses into four themes: value proposition, governance, economic policy, and legal policy. Findings: OFN floating signifiers align around the following nodal points and discourses: “digital commons”, “short food supply chains”, “sustainability”, “local”, “the elimination of intermediaries” and “systemic change”. The current research identifies a lack of common ground of what the discourse of “systemic change” signifies on the premises of the OFN’s value proposition. The lack of a common mission may be detrimental to the formation of a common strategy that would be perhaps deemed necessary to bring about systemic change in agriculture. Conclusions: Drawing on Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory of hegemony, research introduces a chain of equivalence by aligning discourses such as “agro-ecology”, “commons-based peer production”, “partner state” and “ethical market entities” under the model of open cooperativism, juxtaposed against the current hegemony of neoliberalism, which articulates discourses such as “market fundamentalism”, “privatization”, “green growth” and “the capitalist state” to promote corporatism and entrepreneurship. Research makes the case that for OFN to further agroecology and challenge the current hegemony of industrial agriculture, it is vital that it opens up its supply chains into equivalent sectors of the economy, civil society, and politics to form a chain of equivalence linking together ethical market entities, the commons and a partner state around the model of open cooperativism.

Keywords : sustainability, the digital commons, open cooperativism, innovation

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