Self-organised online ridesharing as a "transport commons"

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During the last five years, Facebook-based ridesharing has gained popularity as a way of coordinating shared car trips from one city to another. Amid the widespread hype and political expectations around ‘the sharing economy’ (e.g. Sundararajan 2016; John 2017) and ‘the platform economy’ (e.g. Parker et al. 2016), this model of shared mobility stands out as strikingly homespun. While commercial services such as Uber are slowly gaining ground as an alternative for short-distance trips, there are few commercial services to date in Finland for individuals wishing to share a car for a longer journey. Thus, the self-made alternative that utilises Facebook as a noticeboard poses an attractive alternative for passengers seeking the cheapest way of getting around within the country, or for drivers seeking persons to split their fuel costs. On top of the economic benefits, ridesharing offers the possibility to meet interesting people, have someone to chat with, and to promote ecological values.

Ridesharing has also become topical because of the rising awareness of the drastic changes needed to tackle climate change in the transport sector in wealthy welfare states. In governmental
reports, ridesharing is mentioned as an example of the emerging ‘sustainable travel services’ that are expected to provide alternatives to owning and driving a private car (e.g. MoTC 2018b). In this respect, the case for self-organised ridesharing is interesting not only because of its current and potential role in the travel system, but also as a broader cultural form that enacts ideas about reconfiguring the relation between individually and collectively oriented mobility practices. While being a more social way of travel than driving alone, ridesharing bears an ethos of individualism and self-reliance, which sets it far apart from the ‘traditional’ modes of public transportation.

In this chapter, I will analyse whether, in which sense, under what conditions and to what extent the formation of self-organised ridesharing could be understood as a transport commons that challenges and transforms the former role of the welfare state in coordinating and overseeing public transport. I understand the transport commons not as a mere pool of ‘resources’, but an assemblage of social practices, common objectives, culturally shared values and material constituents required for pursuing a particular task: in this case, the task of getting from one place to another. As David Bollier (2011) writes, ‘a commons arises whenever a given community decides that it wishes to manage a resource in a collective manner, with a special regard for equitable access, use and sustainability’. While online self-organised ridesharing, in some senses, is a very illustrative example of a commons, it also has characteristics that do not easily fit into Bollier’s definition and could even lead to questioning whether it makes sense to use the term or not. For example: Is there a ‘community’ that has intentionally ‘decided’ something? Or, how ‘collective’ or ‘collectively managed’ are the privately-owned cars used in the practice? And, last but not least, how important are ‘equitable access’ or ‘sustainability’ as values motivating the practice?

Commons-based peer production (Benkler 2006; Papadimitropoulos 2018) has been proposed as a way to transcend
the dichotomy between the market and the state in providing essential services (e.g. Bollier and Helfrich 2013). Building upon the overarching topic of this volume, here I examine how the model of self-organised ridesharing systemically relates to the roles of the state and commercial entities in providing transport options. In the analysis, I will highlight the conditions, potentials and tensions of ridesharing vis-à-vis the responsibilities of the welfare state in providing a sort of ‘backstop’ of mobility services that ought to be equally accessible to everyone throughout the country. I will also debate the ambivalent ecological implications of ridesharing. The analysis is informed by ongoing research on the Finnish ridesharing system as an ‘interface’ to the debates about the sharing economy and its political connotations. The research utilises both qualitative and quantitative data, including statistical data about the ridesharing groups, individual conversation threads, and an online survey.17

The emergence of self-organised ridesharing in Finland
Ridesharing is a phenomenon with multiple social and cultural histories. From the perspective of transport alone, it is a contemporary variation of the age-old practice of travelling together. A different view is that ridesharing in its current online-mediated form is a relatively recent and a qualitatively distinct phenomenon that was only rendered possible after the breakthrough of digital technology, global communications networks, social media, and the online peer-to-peer marketplaces as a socio-cultural form.

In the course of history, different political contexts as well as different technological innovations have given shape to ridesharing (Chan and Shaheen 2012). Even in a particular moment, there are myriad reasons and forms of the practice. For example, taking

17 The research was carried out as part of the project ‘Rights, excludability and the social production of value in the models of the new economy’, funded by the Kone Foundation 2016–2018.
a neighbour’s kid to a hobby is a common type of *informal ridesharing*. Commuting rideshares, for their part, are typically based on continuous, contractual arrangements. The subset of ridesharing analysed in this chapter is slightly different: the trips are occasional, and the most common purpose is to visit a friend or a relative who lives in another city.

In Finland, the history of online ridesharing dates back to the early 2000s, when the first website for ridesharing was established by an individual who wanted to find people to share driving expenses (Helsingin Uutiset 2010). Two decades later, Facebook has become the leading platform for organising long-distance peer-to-peer ridesharing in Finland, with about 160 independent ridesharing groups and an estimated total member count around 100,000 (ca. 2% of the Finnish population). The reason for the popularity of Facebook as a noticeboard for ridesharing is obvious: with the massive user base and the fact that many people have learned to organise various aspects of their social lives through social media, it is much easier to find one’s way to ridesharing there rather than by browsing on a separate website.

An essential contextual factor for understanding long-distance ridesharing in Finland is that the distances between major cities in Finland are rather long. For example, the distance between Oulu (the fifth largest city) and Helsinki (the capital) is about 600 kilometres, which means an approximately seven-hour drive. Journeys of this scale, with the associated fuel costs, offer a tempting

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18 The cumulative member count for all the groups analysed was 250,000, but clearly, there is a substantial overlap between the groups, i.e. that one person belonging to more than one group. In the survey conducted, respondents reported being a member of 2.5 groups on average. Thus, using this figure would lead to the estimate of 100,000 unique members, but as the survey was self-selected, it is likely that the survey sample represents the more-than-averagely active users who would also belong to more groups than an average user. Another point to consider is that only a relatively small part of the membership is active in the sense of posting ride announcements. In a sample of 7,281 posts analysed from a medium-large group, only 26% of the members had posted something within the last year.
incentive to split travel costs through ridesharing. Typically, a ridetaker pays a small fee, from 5 to 20 euros. While not a pure gift, the arrangement is still a win-win situation: the passenger gets an affordable ride, and the driver gets an opportunity to reduce their driving expenses.

Whereas the main routes like Helsinki–Oulu are also well served by trains, buses and flights, ridesharing serves a slightly different purpose in routes where public transport options are limited – for example in the ‘transverse’ itineraries from eastern to western parts of the country, or the routes in the sparsely populated areas in northern Finland. There, the role of ridesharing is not so much to compete on price but to offer a complementary travel option to driving one’s own car for the ones who do not have a car, and for routes where there are few public transport options available.

Globally, the ‘secondary market’ (Benkler 2004) of ridesharing has invited so-called sharing economy businesses to create commercial platforms to facilitate the exchange. Mobile app based BlaBlaCar, for example, operates in 22 countries and has more than 35 million members, and has turned ridesharing into a ‘multi-million-euro business’, charging a service fee between 10–34% of the price of the ride (Cowan 2015). So far, BlaBlaCar or other major ridesharing services have not begun to operate in Finland, which has left room for the self-organised alternatives.

In contrast to commercial ridesharing services, the Facebook-based ridesharing groups have been established and are maintained by voluntary moderators who do not seek financial gain. A ridesharing group for a particular route or area is born when someone feels the urge for such a forum to exist and is motivated enough to establish one. Those groups that reach the critical mass to become a feasible noticeboard grow into much more than the personal projects of their establishers: they become institutions and de facto monopolies for coordinating the rides for a specific geographical location.

The spontaneously born quality of the groups is reflected in their
geographically dispersed structure. Although there is also a relatively large nation-wide ridesharing group (ca. 50,000 members), it is often more convenient and effective to post an announcement to a local group instead. This dispersed group structure contributes to the organisational resilience of the system: even if one group closed down, this would not threaten the ridesharing system as a whole, as there would be an opportunity for another group to occupy its role.

**Ridesharing as a commons?**

When the ridesharing groups are conceived as a whole, they can be depicted as a system where the individual and relatively autonomous groups together constitute a whole ‘transport commons’. A *commons system* is a social arrangement where resources (here, the car seats) are pooled and redistributed in a self-organising process. Analytically, the notion of a commons system brings together material assets (cars, roads, means of communication), people (the ones offering rides and the ones looking for them) and the particular practices of *commoning* ‘through which commonwealth and the community of commoners are (re)produced together with the (re)production of stuff, social relations, affects, decisions, cultures’ (De Angelis 2017, 119).

There are, however, several aspects which quite fundamentally question the status of ridesharing as a form of ‘commoning’. First of all, if commons are understood in terms of *decommodification*, it is disturbing to observe how prominent a role money plays in the practice: for a large majority of the rides, at least something is expected to be paid; and for a large majority of the people involved, paying for a ride is self-evident. The idea of paying for 19 In the survey data, only 8% reported that they did not pay anything for the last ride; 42% paid 10 euros (n=271). When asking explicitly about the understandings of a just price, only 8% selected the option ridesharing is about helping others out – money is secondary, whereas the 92% chose options suggesting that at least something should be paid for a ride (n=370).
a journey is not surprising if ridesharing is compared to taking a bus or a train, but if it is compared to hitch-hiking or other more informal types of shared mobility, it might actually appear as commodifying the conventions of mutual aid rather than enlarging the non-commodified space.

Secondly, the deep reliance on a commercial platform – Facebook – makes ridesharing vulnerable in many ways. It is uncertain whether the platform will retain its popularity and whether it will have similar functions in the future to support self-organised exchange. On the other hand, depending on a platform whose profit logic is based on capitalizing social exchange through targeted advertising (Fuchs 2012) does not fit easily to the notion of building collective practices outside of the capitalist market.

Thirdly, the communal aspect of ridesharing – the sense of community, but also the concrete social practices related to commoning – is somewhat thin and tends to be a form of a dyadic, contractual relationship between the ‘buyer’ and the ‘seller’. This is reflected, for example, in the widespread understanding that negotiating a fair price for a ride is a ‘private affair’ between the two counterparts,20 and also in the explicit and implicit codes of conduct in the groups that strongly discourage any ‘political’ debates about pricing. Evidently, also the fact that the ridesharing system is completely dependent on private cars owned and managed by individuals renders it dubious from the perspectives of equity and inclusiveness, as there are no effective means for the ‘community’ to collectively decide about the use of resources.

Fourthly, the conditions of reproduction and resilience of this system are precarious and devoid of planned safeguarding mechanisms. To be sure, the dispersed group structure is an advantage from the viewpoint of resilience, but still, the system

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20 ‘What is your opinion about these arguments related to the price of a shared ride: Negotiating about the price is a private affair between the ridegiver and the ridetaker: 58% completely agree, 31% somewhat agree.'
as a whole could be easily disrupted by even a minor change in the terms and conditions of the platform or the regulative environment, not to mention the possibility of a commercial ridesharing operator conquering the field. The lack of common commitment or a well-articulated common objective – which in a way is a natural consequence of the much underlined ‘practical’ and individualistic character of the practice – leaves the system vulnerable to various kinds of internal and external perturbations. Further, from the perspective of ecological reproduction, the strong reliance on private cars, mostly fossil fuel-powered, is a short-sighted solution, as tackling climate change would require a rapid transition towards net emissions-free traffic modes.

In the discussions about the commons, there is sometimes a tendency to idealise their self-governance and, vice-versa, to downplay the ways in which they depend on and interact with the ‘non-common’ social systems (see Lund and Venäläinen 2016). The commons of ridesharing, while being spontaneously born, self-organised and self-managed, are far from being completely *autonomous*. Rather, they rely in manifold ways on the resources of the state, market, and household actors (Figure 1). However, ridesharing can still challenge the formal transport system, or at least the ways how we *think* about transport, by introducing an alternative organisational logic and incubating alternative notions of ‘value’ (see Chapter 2).
The tendency of commodification

‘After begging, hitching is the most elementary point of contact between those who have and those who have not. It is a basic exchange between need and ability to provide.’ (Perkins 2016)

In a column for The Guardian, journalist Anne Perkins laments the decline of hitch-hiking as a ‘modern tragedy’. Hitching depended, she writes, ‘on a sense of solidarity, and the sense of trust and mutuality’, but also on serendipity, ‘the happy accident of the unexpected place or person’, which in the current form of ridesharing has been reduced into dull predictability. (Perkins 2016.) These affective encounters – the ‘happy accidents’, unexpectedness, and the senses of togetherness – at least partly explain why hitch-hiking once was popular even in a welfare state like Finland. In hitch-hiking, there is an ‘excess of exchange’
(Eskelinen and Venäläinen forthcoming) that goes far beyond the bare calculative rationality of measuring euros against the distance travelled.

Hitch-hiking and ridesharing bear some interesting similarities and differences. Exactly like hitching, ridesharing fosters non-market practices for fulfilling elementary mobility needs but – in contrast to some other forms of community economies – mostly without an explicit ethical or political agenda. Instead, sharing is motivated and explicated by the notion that it is simply ‘reasonable’ to harness the surplus capacity of cars. This sort of ‘reasonableness’, which seems to counterpoint the spontaneous and unpredictable character of hitching, may be seen as a step towards the commodification of mutual aid into ‘services’ that need to be compensated by paying the price.

While the informal ridesharing practices such as hitch-hiking, travelling with a family member or taking a neighbour’s kid to football training are typically based on the logic of a unilateral gift (see Mikołajewska-Zając 2016), ridesharing and even its self-organised subtype leans heavily towards the logic of the market: selling and buying, asking for a price, negotiating about the price, and finally making a monetary transaction or withdrawing from it. What this kind of commodification implies is that a person who is not able or willing to pay the price would be excluded from this commons.

 Anthropologist David Graeber (2014) argues that even the notion of the gift conceals three ‘fundamentally different moral logics’ or ‘categories of economic transaction’ that can be found in every society, including the one in a welfare state: hierarchy, communism, and exchange. These logics operate closely together, and even in a single occasion of economic reasoning, people might resort to multiple (and potentially conflicting) combinations.

Hierarchy and communism are both based on the notion of giving a gift without expecting anything specific in return. The difference between the two is that hierarchy, such as a charity
donation, assumes and establishes an unequal and asymmetric relation between those helping and those receiving help. In contrast, communism subscribes to a strong understanding of mutuality: a sort of permanent ‘indebtedness’ of everyone to everyone.

The logic of exchange differs from hierarchy and communism in its pertinent strive for commensurability and equivalence. Within the logic of exchange, a gift should be always counterbalanced by an equally valuable counter-gift now or later. Consequently, there can be no real gifts, since they only appear as transitory moments in the endless cycle of credit and debit.

Graeber’s analysis shows that the introduction of money as such does not determine how ‘commercial’ or ‘non-commercial’ a practice is. Giving money to someone implies different things in different contexts: not all economic forms involving money are commodified, nor do all commodified activities involve the use of currency as a medium. Thus, it is important to examine how the economic activity is discursively framed both in the self-understandings of the participants and in the socio-technical structures and cultural forms sustaining the cooperation, but also how the price as a barrier of entry to the service includes some persons and excludes others from using the commons.

Yochai Benkler (2004) notes that ‘social systems of sharing’ are categorically different from ‘secondary markets’. While secondary markets rely mostly on the price mechanism in redistributing the surplus capacity of a system, sharing systems are more deeply intertwined with the ‘tacit, learned, and culturally reproduced capacities to read and interpret social settings’ (ibid., 304). In commons-based sharing, price may play some role, but it typically is not a factor that dominates the practices of exchange or determines the access to resources. Ridesharing, in the context of this dichotomy, has properties from both worlds: it is not only an ordinary marketplace, as the conceptions of about the role of money are more varying and complex than in an ordinary market.
transaction, but it is also an ordinary marketplace, and ever more often so, which is exemplified by that fact that many groups today allow selling and buying train and bus tickets as well as organising shared rides, thus positing ridesharing as a just another marketised travel mode among others.

A commons system or a ‘commons fix’?
Ridesharing, as well as any other form of commoning in a welfare state context, is at a continuous risk of becoming a commons fix: a source of ideological justification for the privatisation of public services. Throughout Europe, public services that were once established as part of the welfare state regime are first being pushed into the logic of new public management, and then gradually privatised or semi-privatised (see Introduction). This transformation comes along with a discourse that stresses factors such as ‘diversity of producers’ and the role of the third sector. The discourse of ‘freedom of choice’ has populated the political spectrum in many sectors from health care to family policy. The implicit criticism embedded in this discourse is that in providing public services, the welfare state has been too paternalistic and rigid, imposing a top-down view on what its citizens need instead of actually listening to their varied wishes. The concrete conclusion for implementing this ‘freedom of choice’ is then to increase the role of businesses and other private entities in service provision by outsourcing tasks and opening markets. This process of ‘diversifying’ service production might entail quite different outcomes in different regions. In the context of transport, those living in bigger cities and densely populated areas already have more ‘freedom of choice’ between the different ways to travel, whereas the ones living in more sparsely populated areas tend to feel that they have no choice to having and driving a car.

Examining ridesharing in the context of a welfare state might easily bring about a tacit assumption that the role of ridesharing in relation to the state and market would be uniform throughout
the country. However, both the survey data and the quantitative analysis of the group structure lead to a conclusion that from a functional perspective, there is not a single system of online ridesharing in Finland, but actually two slightly different constellations that reflect the different economic-geographical circumstances in different parts of the country (see Figure 2). Roughly put, the ridesharing groups in the sparsely populated areas of eastern and northern Finland seem to be born out of a very practical necessity — as a way of getting around and getting by in the first place —, whereas the groups serving the southern routes are more directly competing with the existing public transport options.

Figure 2. Estimate of the ten most popular ridesharing routes based on the groups’ member counts. Dashed line routes are scarcely served by public transport. Base map: Google Maps.
In northern and eastern Finland, the distances between major cities are typically in the range of hundreds of kilometres. While there typically are a couple of bus connections per day between most cities, the offerings can be quite limited, lengthy in terms of travel time, and even relatively expensive in comparison to driving a car. These circumstances have been fruitful for the emergence of ridesharing groups: of the 20 largest ridesharing groups, 7 are situated in these sparsely inhabited regions.

In the more densely populated southern Finland, many of the popular ridesharing groups target the same high-traffic main routes that are also operated by bus companies, some routes also having frequent train connections. In those situations, the function of ridesharing is very different in comparison to the northern/eastern context: it might either push down the price even further than the low-cost bus lines, or it might partly attract people who prefer the experience of ridesharing in comparison to riding a bus.

Neither of the constellations gives the impression of ridesharing functioning solely as a ‘commons fix’ that would justify the under-supply of public transport or legitimise the withdrawal of the welfare state from safeguarding essential mobility services. In the northern/eastern context, a flexible transport system such as ridesharing may actually be a relatively efficient and convenient solution in comparison to the scarce supply and fixed schedules of the public transport options, whereas in the south the flows of traffic are so high that it is unlikely for a distributed practice like ridesharing to actually compete with the public transport to any significant extent. However, between the two polarities there is a large area of borderline cases: for example, routes and places where a functional public transport would be realistic to provide but lacks operators, funding, and political support, and also routes where the public transport options are already reasonably good, yet where sharing a car is still conceived to be more affordable, convenient or otherwise desirable than travelling by bus or a train.

The systemic risk of commons-based ridesharing compensating
for insufficient public transport infrastructure is problematic not only in terms of regional policy but also in terms of constitutional rights. The ‘right to choose one’s place of residence’ as defined in the Finnish constitution is not only a negative right (i.e., that the government should not restrict a person’s choice of place of residence) but also implies that public authorities should ‘implement positive measures through which the choice actually becomes possible’ (Government proposal to the Parliament on the amend the Fundamental Rights Regulation of the Constitution, HE 309/1993 vp., 51, translated here).

The constitutional rights’ perspective exemplifies the stark contrast between the logic of public service provision and the one of peer-to-peer provision: in the latter, there is no way to require nor a reason to expect any specific service form to prosper, as the arrangement is based on spontaneous voluntarily cooperation, the longevity of which rests on multiple precarious factors: the personal motivation of the providers, the social dynamics of the sharing community, the conditions imposed by the platform(s), along with other technological necessities, the regulative framework imposed by the governmental, transnational and local actors, etc. A service functioning well today can break down tomorrow, or gradually decline without anyone taking responsibility for the change of course.

In addition to doubts over longevity, another aspect that sets the public services apart from peer provision is their universalism: the premise of offering a service to everyone entitled to it. Public service provision is based on the requirement to serve all customers, so no discrimination between difficult and easy customers can be made, whereas the peer-to-peer model exemplified by ridesharing relies on the ability of the counterparts to reach an agreement, as well as having an adequate social ranking and reputation within the platform (see Hearn 2010). It is indeed a strange paradox that the peer economies are so often portrayed as embracing ‘communal values’, while in fact they may promote
an extremely individualistic and excluding political ontology: a survival of the fittest (or popular) where the different forms of structural discrimination are being swept under the rug of ‘personal preference’. This stems from the notion that sharing a personal space – such as one’s car – still leaves all control to its owner rather than the ones who participate in other roles. Even if the person seeking a ride is excluded for racial or socioeconomic discrimination, there is no way to appeal against it.

The ecological implications of carsharing
From the perspective of resource use, private car traffic is a hugely wasteful system. In Finland, the average rate of occupancy in cars is 1.7 persons, which means that only one-third of the registered seating capacity (5.1 seats per car on average) is utilised (National Travel Survey 2012; Trafi 2017). This equation sets the theoretical upper limit to how much the carbon footprint of private car traffic could be decreased by sharing: if the same amount of passengers would be transported with one third of the number of cars, as is technically possible, the greenhouse gas emissions from private car traffic would decrease from 5.9 million tons to under 2.0 million CO₂-eqv tons, a reduction of about 7% in Finland’s annual greenhouse gas emissions (based on LIPASTO 2018 and Statistics Finland 2018a; calculated from 2017 figures).

Having all cars full of passengers is obviously impossible, but even a slight increase in the occupancy rate would have a notable impact on the national carbon footprint. According to the survey conducted by the author in Finnish ridesharing groups, the average distance of a ridesharing trip was 290 km, and the occupancy rate 3.1 persons per car. These figures suffice to show that ridesharing as a mobility practice could have a significant impact on reducing the overall carbon spend of the transport sector: it could supplement the decarbonisation of transport in reducing overall CO₂ emissions, if it would be upscaled to broaden the user base. This potential is tacitly expressed in a report from
the Ministry of Communications and Transport that describes MaaS (Mobility as a Service), including ‘shared trips’, as one of the three possible pathways to a carbon-free transport system for Finland by 2045 (the other two being the use of biofuels and the shift to ‘alternative driving power’ such as electricity and biogas) (MoTC 2018a). However, the report also notes uncertainty over the extent, to which the novel mobility solutions will decrease car traffic, and the extent that they will compete with public transport (ibid., 43). This reservation is very important in the context of ridesharing. In effect, only 11% of the respondents in the ridesharing survey conducted for this study reported driving a car as the alternative option for their last trip if they would not have found a shared ride – whereas 52% would have taken the bus and 30% the train. A large majority of ridesharing today does not seem to substitute car driving, but rather it substitutes the (potential) use of ecologically more efficient modes of public transport. Thus, the overall ecological impacts of ridesharing are ambivalent: while ridesharing evidently increases the eco-efficiency of a single ride, it might also have contrary effects at the level of the transport system if it decreases the demand for public transport and increases private car traffic.

Despite the public image of ridesharing as an especially environmentally conscious form of travel, ecological motivations were not very pronounced in the survey data. In the survey, only 24% of those who had offered rides considered environmental friendliness as ‘very significant’ or ‘moderately significant’ factor in their decision to offer a shared ride. The share was higher amongst those who had participated in ridesharing as a passenger, yet far behind the more ‘practical’ motivational factors (low price 88%, flexible schedules 73%, shorter travel time 56%, lack of public transport 56%). The same pattern can be seen in the description texts of the ridesharing groups, of which only one in seven mentions environmental motivations, usually combining them with the economic ones: ‘Let’s travel together – saving money and
The attitudes of the people involved in ridesharing do not determine the environmental footprint of the practice, but the ideas and opinions of the ridesharers can still be considered as proxies in trying to understand the dynamics of how the travel mode is chosen. If the price of travel is at least *somewhat* important for more than 95% of the ridesharers, as suggested by the survey, then the popularity of ridesharing is extremely dependent on factors external to the ridesharing community: namely, the price of the alternative transport options and the participants’ ability to pay for them. Some respondents of the survey mentioned that the increased supply of affordable bus tickets (and to a lesser extent, train tickets) had decreased the use of ridesharing, either in their own choices or in their observations more generally.

In debates about the sharing economy, it has occasionally been argued that services like Uber are sabotaging or at least disrupting the public transport system by outcompeting it with a less eco-friendly alternative (Light and Miskelly 2015; Lindsay 2017). With the current level of competition in the low-cost coach supply for the high-volume routes in Finland, this trajectory is mostly hypothetical. What is more contestable is the medium-term ecological impact of ridesharing in areas where ‘there is no alternative’ to owning a car: would a too strong ridesharing arrangement signal that developing public transport is not needed, as people can already cope with sharing their cars? Or would a government-issued financial incentive to promote ridesharing encourage people to shift from buses to cars rather than from solo rides to shared rides? From the perspective of a sustainable and climate-conscious welfare state, it is crucial to thoroughly assess this kind of environmental dilemma, related to alternative economic practices, and take them properly into account when devising strategies of regulation.

The insights from the ridesharing practices are useful in putting into context the prospects as to how large an extent technological
change, especially the development of autonomous vehicles, help to tackle climate change. It is too often taken for granted that the domain of mobility-as-a-service will automatically decrease the environmental footprint of driving because it becomes technically easier to share cars, borrow them for short periods and to combine them with other modes of transport. However, these technical possibilities alone, without well-targeted incentives and regulation, do not have a strong influence on travel preferences. With the automation of car traffic, we might actually see a growing number of cars driving a growing number of kilometres: Trommer et al. (2016) estimate that the introduction of autonomous vehicles will result in a 3–9% increase in vehicle-kilometres travelled by 2035.

Decommodifying public transport
Self-organised online ridesharing can be seen as a form of peer production that challenges the traditional public transport services typical in developed welfare states as well as the more commercially oriented platforms of sharing. For ridesharing to function as a transport commons that would help to decommodify the domain of public transport, three major caveats have to be addressed. Firstly, there is a risk of ‘commodification from within’, it is, the users gradually assuming more and more instrumental values regarding the meanings of ridesharing, it thereby becoming just another (niche) product in the transport market. Secondly, there is the risk of ridesharing functioning as a ‘commons fix’ to legitimate the deterioration of state-supported mass public transport solutions that would be more equitable and environmentally-friendly than sharing a private car. Thirdly, the relevance of ridesharing as a commons system is radically limited by the ways through which it depends on ‘non-common’ systems (such as private cars and a corporate platform). These three aspects will be discussed in the following section.

The ubiquitous and largely unquestioned role of money in ridesharing gives an impression that even without the pressure
from commercial ridesharing platforms, the model of ridesharing is already relatively commodified. The social context of operating in ‘buying and selling groups’\textsuperscript{21} creates a tacit expectation that a ride not only may have a price but also should have a price. A free ride might raise doubts in any case – like a free lunch –, but with the user interface now explicitly querying for the price tag, the user is strongly encouraged to ask for at least a few euros. Certainly, promoting a critical discourse of ‘surplus resources’ (such as underutilised car seats) and creating marketplaces for trading those is preferable from the perspective of resource efficiency. But while the practices of commoning might often be resource efficient, all ‘resource efficiency’ is not commoning, but even on the contrary. As commoning attempts to find ways out from the hegemonies of market valuation and state control, the process of creating markets for previously non-commodified things under the rubric of being ‘smart’ or ‘resource-wise’ could be even seen as enclosing the commons – limiting the access to the previously uncommodified surplus (as it still was understood in the golden era of hitch-hiking, i.e. 1960s and 1970s, see Stewart 2011). The institutionalisation of ridesharing as a ‘service’, however peer-produced it be, renders the practice more permeable by the conventional market logics and downplays its potential as an alternative to market-based valuation or the universalistic ethos of the welfare state. Already accepting money as an unproblematic medium to organise social relations implies that the current ‘commons’ or ‘semcoms’ of ridesharing would be difficult to defend against deepening commodification if a commercial platform with reasonable pricing and convenient user interface would enter the field.

In relation to the state-level transport politics, self-organised ridesharing poses an alternative and a challenge to established

\textsuperscript{21} In 2015, Facebook introduced a ‘buy and sell group’ feature that allows structured data such as the price asked for a product to be written in a separate field (to be presented to the user in a different colour) for group posts. Many, if not most, of the ridesharing groups adopted this new feature almost immediately.
forms of transport, and especially to public transport. It operates in the grey area and at a blind spot of the state bureaucracy, where the transactions are small enough not to arouse interest among the tax officials (cf. the case of timebanks in Chapter 2). While highlighting the potential of ridesharing, it is also crucial to pay attention to the systemic limits in the peer provision of transport services: what they can do and what they should do, but also on what they cannot do and what functions they should not take. If we take seriously the idea that ridesharing could be ‘scaled up’ (Utting 2015) into a significant mode of travel in some routes, there is a risk that it would render the situation of mass public transport even more difficult and contribute to a vicious circle (fewer passengers, decreasing profitability, decreasing service level, fewer passengers…). In the current scale of ridesharing, this payoff is marginal or almost invisible, but if aiming to understand the systemic relations of ridesharing to other social systems, its effects have to be examined from the perspective of its potential rather than its current popularity.

As a socio-material assemblage, ridesharing is dependent on three foundational infrastructures that are not available ‘in common’ but are predominantly organised within the economic domains of household, state and market (Table 2). Firstly, there is the pool of private cars – about 2.7 million units in use (Statistics Finland 2018b) – and their owners who decide in the first place whether they allow them for shared use, and under which conditions. Secondly, ridesharing depends on the state-regulated traffic infrastructure with the monopoly of maintaining a public road network, mandating traffic regulations and devising different tax schemes and incentives for different modes of transport. Thirdly, online ridesharing currently depends largely on the social and technological infrastructure provided by Facebook, which again is dependent on the global internet infrastructure, and all the computers and smartphones used for accessing the ridesharing groups. Ultimately, all the three infrastructures rely on the supply
of ecological resources: oil, precious metals and different sources of energy. While Massimo De Angelis (2017, 122) maintains that commoning is ‘an activity that develops relations preoccupied by their reproduction and […] the ‘sustainability’ of the commons’, it seems that the capability of the ridesharing system to reproduce itself is limited. Thus, even though the organisational model of online ridesharing boasts features like self-governance and the lack of hierarchies, its autonomy is of a very relative kind: in effect, it is in relation to the surplus or the ‘waste’ that the contemporary way of life – and driving cars as a part of it – produces (cf. Chapter 5).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic domain</th>
<th>PRIVATE CARS</th>
<th>ROAD NETWORK</th>
<th>FACEBOOK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>stock of tools / ‘means of production’</td>
<td>individual household</td>
<td>the state, municipalities, road communities</td>
<td>the (global) market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material basis</td>
<td>stock of tools / ‘means of production’</td>
<td>asphalt concrete from petroleum and mineral aggregates, concrete, steel, paint</td>
<td>telecommunications network, data centres, electricity, users’ laptops, tablets and smartphones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic domain</td>
<td>stock of tools / ‘means of production’</td>
<td>asphalt concrete from petroleum and mineral aggregates, concrete, steel, paint</td>
<td>telecommunications network, data centres, electricity, users’ laptops, tablets and smartphones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stock</td>
<td>metals, glass, rubber, synthetic fibres, electricity (for assembly)</td>
<td>asphalt concrete from petroleum and mineral aggregates, concrete, steel, paint</td>
<td>telecommunications network, data centres, electricity, users’ laptops, tablets and smartphones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expense structure</td>
<td>capital costs, repairs, taxes, fuel, cleaning, vehicle fluids, insurance</td>
<td>maintenance and construction, ca. €0.8 bn per year (2017) [5]</td>
<td>maintenance and development, ca. $20 bn (€17.5 bn) per year (2017) [7]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary funding source(s)</td>
<td>personal income, savings or credit</td>
<td>tax revenue</td>
<td>targeted advertising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profit-seeking?</td>
<td>mostly not</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who can enter</td>
<td>owner decides</td>
<td>anyone (for driving a car, a person with a valid driving license)</td>
<td>(almost) anyone over 13 years old and registered to the service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access fee</td>
<td>owner decides</td>
<td>free of charge (except for road tax, driving license, etc.)</td>
<td>free of charge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conditions of use</td>
<td>owner decides</td>
<td>traffic regulations as specified in the Road Traffic Decree</td>
<td>defined in Terms of Service and several other policies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Towards a public–commons partnership for promoting ridesharing

While ridesharing has several issues that severely question its eligibility to be considered as a commons system, it still has traces and ‘germs’ (Merten and Meretz 2008) of ‘non-market’ or ‘alternative market’ economic principles such as subsistence, care, conviviality, and the redistribution of surplus. Ridesharing not only pushes towards the commodification of mutual aid, but also towards the commonification of the basic services provision; and to the practical experimentation of trying to rethink, reframe and re-experience ‘the economy’. For the welfare state, then, the crucial question is: How to coordinate peer production fruitfully with the public, universal service provision? Answering to this involves stepping into a logic that Michel Bauwens (2012) calls the one of a partner state (see Chapter 1), which would appreciate the self-determination of the ridesharers, but simultaneously fine-tune the regulation so that the peer-produced services would in the best possible way support the state’s broader objectives within a specific policy sector. In transport, the objective would be to harness the massive fleet of private cars to extend the notion and the capability of public transport as much as possible without competing with the existing services.

For supporting ridesharing, it seems unlikely that the state could provide a platform that could become as popular as the self-organised but Facebook-dependent version is today. However, there are other options – from the small and immediate to the broader and strategic – as to how the public sector could form fruitful alliances with the ridesharing community and with the different schemes of peer production more generally. This would, however, require a fundamental change in the discourse that currently approaches the phenomena of sharing/platform/gig economy from a relatively instrumental perspective of ‘providing business opportunities’.

A partner state would respond to the emergence of non-profit-
seeking economic practices at least as actively and positively as it does to the commercial entities of the platform economy. This would imply breaking away from the narrow understandings of ‘economic activity’ (as something indicated by the GDP) and ‘employment’ (as either wage labour or high-growth entrepreneurship) in order to build the understanding about how the self-organised economies in tandem and in a strategic coordination with the welfare state policies could contribute to the overall well-being and sustainability of a society (see Chapters 1 and 3). As Ann Light and Clodaugh Miskelly (2015) argue, the sharing economy is after all not so much about ‘the economy’ in the sense of making profit, but about enabling co-operation in a variety of new cultural forms.

A partner state could support self-organised ridesharing both through ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ routes. ‘Negative’ support would imply a deliberate choice to prevent overregulation (the ‘Inaction’ path in Chapter 1), since it easily damages self-organised economic communities by interpreting them as conventional economic actors and by imposing requirements that were crafted with a completely different context in mind. A more positive approach would imply recognising how various forms of the sharing economy promote social well-being and ecological sustainability and providing incentives that actually encourage the expanding the scope of such activities (the ‘Creating background conditions’ path in Chapter 1). Naturally, taking one or both of these routes would require a deeper understanding of the different forms and functions of ‘sharing’ (Schor 2014; Martin 2016; Kennedy 2016), articulating the need to draw boundaries between the ones that should be supported, the ones that should be opposed, and the ones that are neutral or ambivalent in their likely social and ecological outcomes.

Ridesharing has the potential to upscale old practices of ad hoc mutual aid to a level where they might have significant impacts in reorganising transport and reducing its carbon footprint. This
extent of upscaling, and especially the wish that ridesharing would attract new users from car drivers instead of public transport passengers, is unlikely to occur spontaneously but would require government intervention to discourage the habit of driving alone. An example of incentivising ridesharing would be a taxation scheme where driving a car would be taxed with a different per kilometre price depending on the rate of occupancy: ridesharing would then provide the possibility to share not only the direct expenses of driving (the cost of electricity or gasoline) but also its emissions footprint expressed in the driving tax. Without strategic intervention, and without a more conscious objective setting from within the ridesharing community itself, the more probable path is that self-organised ridesharing becomes challenged or even outcompeted by commercial mobility-as-a-service operators.