

On the future development of the digital commons and the need for a global basic income

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Abstract

This is an article about digital production and the crisis of capitalism. It is about production in the digital commons and its implications for the building of alternatives to a commodified world. As digital production is at the very heart of cognitive capitalism, the digital commons is not just any other disruption of the process of commodification. This is the field of a fierce struggle over the future of the Internet and the future of capitalism itself. It is potentially the moment which moves back the frontiers of measurement, value and quantification towards qualities, values and an expansion of the gift economy. For this potential to unfold, it is vital that those who are giving, sharing, and contributing or the benefit of humanity are supported by global policies that enable them to do so. They have to be supported because their gifts are not based on reciprocity and the obligation to return the gift. This is an argument about the future of digital labour. The article concludes that this could be achieved through a global basic income scheme.

Keywords: political economy; gift; digital commons; digital technologies; labour; commodification

1. Commodification

Commodification is a term that describes the transformation of something, a good or a service that does not have an exchange value, into a commodity, into something that can be bought and sold on the market. Before this transformation, the commodity might have been a public good or a common good, or something that did not have any property relations at all. Commodification is a process that originates with, and is driven by, capitalist economies. Commodification turns gifts into commodities. It turns both material things (objects) and immaterial things (services) into goods with a very specific and measurable value.

In social theory, the commodification process has received much attention from both Marxist and non-Marxist commentators. There seems to be a broad consensus that commodification is a fact, the capitalist market has become increasingly powerful, pervasive and hegemonic, the logic of the capitalist market colonises and destroys the logic of community, and that the market swallows more and more areas and aspects of life that hitherto have not been regulated by monetary measurement and monetary exchange. We find first theorisations of this view in the work of Lukács (1967, first published in 1923), Polanyi (2001, first published 1944) and Debord (1994, first published in 1967), and more recently in the work of Wolfe (1989), Jameson (1991), Giddens (1998), Thrift (2000),

Gudeman (2001), Harvey (2005, 2007), Hochschild (1983, 2003, 2012), (Illouz (2007), Boltanski and Chiapello (2007), Zelizer (1994, 2007), and many others.¹

In the neo-liberal age the process of commodification has expanded considerably. But it has also turned severely sour. It has become both more brutal and more absurd. In this article, I wish to argue that this might not be just another stage, it might be the final stage of commodity glorification. It might be the moment where commodification is reaching a dead end.

There are not that many things left that have not been commodified. Furthermore, the pathologies which are produced by a commodified world are becoming increasingly obvious. When capital replaces human relationships, houses which could shelter the homeless remain empty, food which could feed those who are starving rots in silos, care, love and friendship are replaced by services, trust gets replaced by quality control, connectedness is replaced by a network sociality, and the diktat of measurement transforms whatever was unique at some point into modular building blocks that become comparable, exchangeable and replaceable. If everything can be bought the gift loses its value. If everything can be bought human relationships lose their value. It is common sense that this is not a desirable future. Arguing from a geopolitical perspective Harvey (2010, 217) makes a similar point:

What spaces are left in the global economy for new spatial fixes for capital surplus absorption? China and the ex-Soviet bloc have already been integrated. South and south-east Asia are filling up fast...What new lines of production can be opened up to absorb growth?...At some point quantitative changes lead to qualitative shifts and we need to take seriously the idea that we may be at exactly such an inflexion point in the history of capitalism. Questioning the future of capitalism itself as an adequate social system ought, therefore, to be in the forefront of current debates.

It is obviously impossible to back up a claim such as the end of commodification with any evidence. This is the territory of prognosis. However, I want to offer more than pure speculation or wishful thinking. I would like to develop two arguments that demonstrate why the process of commodification might indeed be hitting the wall. The first is about digital technologies and the crisis of capitalist production. It is about the classic Marxian argument about the internal contradictions of capitalism. The second argument which really is at the core of this article is about the digital commons as an emerging process of countercommodification.

2. Digital technologies and the end of work

For Karl Marx, capitalism is characterised by an inherent concentration of capital. The accumulation of capital creates competition, which in turn leads to monopolies, the concentration of means of production in the hands of fewer and fewer producers, and more generally to the concentration of wealth. The more capital becomes concentrated in the hands of fewer and fewer capitalists, the less the working classes can afford to buy the goods they produce. Ultimately the growing polarisation of the class structure produces social instability and class struggle. This analysis is famously known as what Marx calls the inherent contradictions of capitalism. There is also an inherent contradiction between the forces of production (the tools and technologies, but also the knowledge and the organisation of labour that are used for the production of goods) and the social relations of production (the class structure, the distinction between those who own the means of production and those who do not). This is about the consequences of technological innovation.

In a nutshell the argument goes like this: innovations in science and technology increase

productivity. But they also replace labour power – at least to some extent. Technological innovations throw people out of work. Marx writes about a ‘disposable industrial reserve army, which belongs to capital quite as absolutely as if the latter had bred it at its own cost’ (Capital, Vol. 1, Chap. 25). As technological innovations do not create surplus value, the replacement of labour power with machinery leads ultimately to a decline in the profit rate.

Recently, Kliman (2012) published an analysis of the underlying causes of the contemporary crisis. He argues against the conventional wisdom that this is a crisis of financialisation or a crisis of neoliberal capitalism. Marx’s law of the tendential fall in the rate of profit is at the heart of Kliman’s argument. His analysis of statistical data demonstrates that capitalist economies never fully recovered from the recessions of the mid-1970s and early 1980s. In fact, he has gathered an overwhelming set of data to support his claim. The rate of profit did indeed decline after the post–World War II boom. Kliman argues that there is no such thing as good capitalism which needs to be protected against bad capitalism:

Thus the contradiction within capitalism and the effects of the contradiction do not stem from any particular form of capitalism, and they cannot be overcome by replacing one particular form of the system with a different one. To overcome them, it is necessary to do away with capital, which requires, as we see, doing away with commodities and the production of commodities. (Kliman 2012, 27)

If Marx is right and technological innovation has the tendency to save wage labour, then we must get seriously worried if we apply this logic to digital technologies. Castells (1996) was probably among the first theorists to outline how digital technologies fundamentally transform work and society. Digital technologies provide the basis of what Castells calls the information age. What characterises the current technological revolution is not the centrality of knowledge of information, but the application of such knowledge and information to knowledge generation and information processing/communication devices in a cumulative feedback loop between innovation and the uses of innovation. (1996, 31)

It is this relation between knowledge and information on the one hand and digital technologies on the other hand and their feedback loops which has produced technological change at such an accelerated pace. Castells argues that in the digital age, information is becoming a product. So the fundamental difference between industrialism and informationalism is that now all industrial sectors (agriculture, manufacturing, the service industry, finance) operate with digital technologies. Thus, if technological innovation has labour-saving effects, digital technologies are capable of producing labour-saving effects on an enormous and unprecedented scale as these technologies are now at the very heart of all productive activities.

In a recent study, Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2011) explore the exact impact of digital technologies on productivity, employment and wages, analysing statistical data about jobs growth in the USA. This is a rigorous analysis, with a convincing conclusion that rejects conventional explanations about the rise of unemployment such as cyclicity or stagnation and puts forward instead an ‘end of work’ argument. The end of work argument, developed by Rifkin in a book with the same title, makes a case for a development in capitalist economies ‘in which fewer and fewer workers will be needed to produce the goods and services for the global population’ (Rifkin 1995, quoted in Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2011, 6). This, they argue, is a direct consequence of the rapid progress in the development of digital technologies.

Brynjolfsson and McAfee make a compelling case about the rapid inroads of computers. Referring to exponential developments in artificial intelligence, they demonstrate how pervasive and unexpected innovations in the development of computers turned out to be. Translation programmes and fully automated cars that perform in traffic without any human

involvement are good examples to support this case. Brynjolfsson and McAfee make similar claims about innovations in medical diagnostics and voice recognition. Increasingly computers are able to demonstrate skills and abilities that used to belong exclusively to humans. 'Of course, these are only a small sample of myriad IT-enabled innovations that are transforming manufacturing, distribution, retailing, media, finance, law, medicine, research, management, marketing, and almost every other economic sector and business function' (22). Lanier (2013) makes a similar argument and hits home the message with some compelling figures. Kodak, says Lanier, employed 140,000 people, Instagram employs just 13.

So how is it possible that innovations in digital technologies have accelerated on such an unprecedented scale, while incomes are stagnating or even declining? Brynjolfsson and McAfee see a clear correlation between technological innovations and disappearing jobs. They also see a correlation between growing productivity and growing inequality. 'Recent technological advances have favoured some skill groups over others, particularly "superstars" in many fields, and probably also increased the overall share of GDP accruing to capital relative to labour' (51). It is the feedback loops between the production of knowledge and information on the one hand and information processing software on the other hand which are so crucial for Castells that make digital technologies ever-more pervasive, create unimaginable accelerations in technological innovations and lead at the same time to a decline in employment and an acceleration of inequality.

While I am far from claiming that technological development is the only cause for the current crisis of capitalism, it is certainly one important factor and a factor that is often neglected by those who focus on finance and neo-liberal capitalism. It is also important to emphasise that the decline in employment is not a decline in labour in general, but merely a decline in wage labour. There is enough work for everybody. Unemployment is not caused by (digital) technologies, it is caused by capital, by the use of technology in a very specific political economy and a very specific organisation of work. This brings me to my second argument regarding why we might not exactly be 'living in the end times' (Žižek 2011), but perhaps more hopefully, in the end times of an increasingly commodified world.

3. The digital commons as counter-commodification

The realm of production is where social inequalities are clearly revealed and, moreover, where the most effective resistances and alternatives to Empire arise. (Hardt and Negri 2000, xvii) Obviously there is no such thing as commodity determinism. Like all processes, the process of commodification has been accompanied by resistance and the search for alternatives. Not everybody seeks happiness through purchasing power, appreciates a branded life, likes celebrity culture, and values commodities more than social relationships.

Not everybody gives in to the pressures that accelerate commodification. This has always been a contested field and a field of struggle. In every period in the history of capitalism, the processes of commodification have been accompanied by social practices of counter-commodification such as the late 1960s counter-culture or the back-to-nature movements at the turn of the twentieth century. While these processes of counter-commodification have articulated a powerful critique of capitalism, they were never strong enough to develop alternative practices that pose a serious threat to capitalism.

Over the last three decades, the digital commons, a new movement and space of counter-commodification, has emerged and continuously gained in strength. I want to argue that the digital commons is not just any other disruption of the process of commodification, it is the field of a fierce struggle over the future of the Internet and the future of capitalism. It is potentially the moment that pushes back the frontiers of measurement, value and

quantification towards qualities, values and an expansion of the gift economy.

The commons refers to natural and cultural resources that are shared by a community of commoners. These resources are not privately owned, they are owned and shared by the community of commoners. These resources can be such different things such as land, language, music or software. They are either created or administered by the commoners. Every commons consists of three elements: (1) people who share the commons (the commoners), (2) resources that are being shared, and (3) a normative framework that sets out how the common resources should be created, shared, maintained and developed further. Underestimating this normative framework and the possibilities of establishing rules that are accepted by all commoners might have been the crucial weakness in Hardin's (1968) analysis of the tragedy of the commons. His arguments, which have been highly influential over several decades and which were used by neoliberal politicians to transform various commons into private property, are rooted in an assumedly unsolvable conflict between the individual interests of the commoners on the one hand and the interests of the commoning community on the other hand. For Hardin, the individual interests of the commoners tend to destroy the common good eventually.

However, Hardin did not take into account that the commoners are able to communicate, establish normative frameworks and to manage possible conflicts over individual interests in a productive way. Much of the political economy of Elinor Ostrom is dedicated to this issue. Her work, which received the Nobel prize for economics in 2009, inspects the governance of a great number of commons in the material world (land, air, water, etc.) that achieve sustainability and avoid destruction. Without getting into too much detail, Ostrom (1990) argues that a range of principles need to be in place for the commons to function properly. I want to mention two of these principles. Firstly, any commons in the material (natural) world has to establish a set of rules. Secondly, those who do not obey to these rules have to be sanctioned by the community of commoners.

Over the last few years, the commons has had an enormous revival. Surely this is also a consequence of Ostrom's work, but it has a lot to do with the astonishing rise of the digital commons. The digital commons does not refer to the material world and the realm of nature, but to the immaterial world and the realm of culture. It refers to 'results of social production that are necessary for social interaction and further production, such as knowledges, languages, codes, information, affects, and so forth' (Hardt and Negri 2009, xiii). It does not refer to things that are already there used and maintained by humans (e.g. the land), but to things that are being created. It refers, as discussed ahead in more detail, to immaterial labour. Furthermore, the digital commons refers to those areas of the Internet that are not built on market production. This is a new form of production, which Benkler (2006) calls variably 'non-market production' or 'social production' or 'commons-based peer production'.

He has coined these terms to describe a new model of socio-economic production, in which large numbers of people work towards common goals without any financial compensation for those who contribute to the common good. The digital commons is an Internet repository of code, information, knowledge, and culture that is collectively produced and freely available to everybody who wants to use or modify these resources. While the digital commons is often associated with the social web (for very good reasons though), it has emerged nearly two decades earlier with the rise of hacker cultures. It started in the 1980s with free software and the open-source movement. But it has widened and accelerated on an astonishing scale only during the last decade, with the emergence of the social web. It has spread from the peer production of software and code to text, sound, images, and moving images, with Wikipedia, WikiLeaks, Pirate Bay and the Creative Commons as some of their iconic websites.

The digital commons consists of a multitude of Internet-based commons such as the software commons, news commons, information commons, knowledge commons, art commons, entertainment commons and many more. The digital commons does not have to deal with the problems outlined by Hardin. There is no conflict between the interests of individual commoners and the interests of the community of all commoners. This is due to the nature of the resources which are being shared. Material things being shared become reduced. An apple being shared between two people leaves each of them with half of an apple only. The more people share a house the smaller the house gets for everyone. The sharing of digital things does not reduce these things, but multiplies them. A file being shared with others becomes many files. For a more in-depth analysis of the qualities of sharing in the digital age see Wittel (2011). Clearly, Hardin's assumed conflict between individual commoners and the community at large does not make much sense in the digital world.

There is another conflict, however, that needs to be theorised carefully – the conflict between the practices of counter-commodification by the community of digital commoners and capital's attempt to capture the digital commons. This is a struggle about open access to digital resources, access to knowledge, copyright and intellectual property, the freedom to connect with others without surveillance and data mining, and about capital's push for new laws and policies such as Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA), Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA), and PROTECT IP Act (PIPA) to restrict the digital commons. This is a fierce struggle indeed, and the case of Julian Assange, the lawsuits against activists such as Bradley Manning and Jeremy Hammond, as well as the suicide of Aaron Schwartz are personal testimonies of what is at stake.

'What is possible in the information age is in direct conflict with what is permissible,' writes Kleiner (2010, 7)

The non-hierarchical relations made possible by a peer network such as the internet are contradictory with capitalism's need for enclosure and control. It is a battle to the death; either the internet as we know it must go, or capitalism as we know it must go.

Obviously this is a rather simplified analysis which does not take into account the various developments and forms of co-operation and new models and arrangements between both sides. Nevertheless, it is a pointed and condensed outline of the political economy in the age of digital media and distributed networks. There is a technology that opens up new productive forces, there is a political-economic system with established relations of production. There is struggle between those who want to conserve existing relations of production and those who attempt to overcome them. And there is an indication of how to create a better world. Could the digital commons teach us how to think about society at large?

Over the last decade, the digital whirlwind has created havoc in the so-called creative industries. Non-market production is now competing with cultural goods produced for a market. However, the threat that the non-market production of the digital commons poses to market production does not have to be limited to copyright industries only (music, film, publishing, software, etc.). As explained earlier, digital technologies are now embedded in all productive activities. Therefore the digital commons has the potential to disrupt market production on a much broader scale, deeply affecting sectors such as finance or manufacturing. We can already see the seeds of such developments in various open manufacturing projects as well as in peer-lending initiatives and new digital currencies such as Bitcoin. Undeniably the digital commons has an enormous potential as a space of counter-commodification. At the same time, this is a rather fragile and vulnerable space. To understand this, we need to explore in more detail the notion of free labour. We also need

to explore the rather specific political economy of the digital commons.

4. Free labour?

The free labour debate has been initiated by autonomist Marxists close to the Italian Operaismo school. It is connected to the writings of Maurizio Lazzarato and Michael Hart and Antonio Negri on immaterial labour, which is situated with the turn towards a post-Fordist mode of production and its related processes such as the transformations in the organisation of work (the organisation of the labour process), the production of subjectivity and social relations in work environments, and biopolitical capitalism where capital ultimately captures life. Immaterial labour is both intellectual labour and affective labour.

The concept of immaterial labour is inspired by a few pages in the Grundrisse, where Marx (1973) writes about wealth creation and the production of value which is increasingly independent of labour.

(T)he creation of wealth comes to depend less on labour time and on the amount of labour employed...but depends rather on the general state of science and on the progress of technology...Labour no longer appears so much to be included within the production process; rather the human being comes to relate more as watchman and regulator to the production process itself...It is, in a word, the development of the social individual which appears as the great foundation-stone of production and of wealth. (Marx 1973, 704f.)

According to Marx, at some stage in the development of capitalism, knowledge, technology, and the general intellect firstly become somehow decoupled from labour and secondly replace labour as the source for the creation of value. These observations in the Grundrisse sit uneasy with Marx's (1996) analysis in Capital, Vol. 1, where he develops the labour theory of value and categorically insists that labour is the only source for the creation of exchange value. It is not hard to see why these pages in the Grundrisse become so crucial for the concept of immaterial labour.

Terranova (2004) is perhaps the first theorist who thoroughly engaged with the concept of free labour. In an essay, which was first published in 2000, before the arrival of the social web, before Wikipedia and social media platforms, she conceptualises free labour as the 'excessive activity that makes the Internet a thriving and hyperactive medium' (73). This includes 'the activity of building web sites, modifying software packages, reading and participating in mailing lists and building virtual spaces' (74). Consistent with the operaismo discourse on immaterial labour, she situates the emergence of free labour with post-Fordism. 'Free labour is the moment where this knowledgeable consumption of culture is translated into excess productive activities that are pleasurably embraced and at the same time often shamefully exploited' (78).

Undoubtedly the 'free labour' concept has proven to be highly productive for an illumination of new developments in the social web. It is one of the key challenges in digital capitalism to rethink labour for those human activities that blossom outside wage-based relations. However, the concept suffers from a severe lack of analytical rigour. Elsewhere I have argued that the frequent pairing of free labour with both exploitation and alienation is rather unsubstantiated. The claim that free labour is being exploited by capital has never been convincingly supported, either with any empirical evidence or with a plausible theoretical argument (Wittel 2012). Here, I want to focus on the problem of free in free labour. Or to be more specific, on the notion of free labour as unpaid labour.

It is usually assumed that free labour is labour which is not financially compensated. Things are more complicated, however. The digital commons is created through a variety of forms of labour with respect to cross-subsidisation. Let us look at the production of

open-source code. There is a growing tendency towards the funding of open-source projects by companies such as IBM's support of the Linux foundation with subsidies and the financial support of some Linux developers. Furthermore, it is important to point out that an open-source software developer is usually not a shopkeeper during the day, who starts producing code in her spare time. The overwhelming majority of open-source programmers are employed programmers, who work for software companies. Often, open-source code is produced anyway but then made available to the open-source community (Weber 2004). So the labour that goes into the development of open-source software is often indirectly paid for. A similar argument could be made for the knowledge commons. A Wikipedia entry on, say 'modernity' is likely to be written by a specialist on this topic, a philosopher perhaps. It is likely written by someone who is or has been employed by a university.

This is the reason why some areas within the digital commons have developed with mind-blowing speed, whereas other areas remain largely underdeveloped. The open-source commons and the knowledge commons are spearheading the digital commons for a good reason, as those who invest in building it often do get an income for their work. Other areas, for example the arts commons, remain largely underdeveloped as labour invested here is not paid for by other parties. These commons grow indeed with unpaid labour only, they rely on the passion, the love, and the enthusiasm by those who contribute and invest in it without any financial compensation.

5. The digital commons as economy of contribution

Handa wants to surprise her friend Akeyo with a gift. She puts seven delicious fruits in a basket, a banana, a pineapple, a guava, an orange, a mango, an avocado, and a passion fruit. She carries the basket on her head and walks towards Akeyo's village, wondering which of these fruit her friend would like best. Without Handa noticing it, the fruits in her basket are taken by animals. A monkey helps himself to the banana, a zebra eats the orange, an elephant picks the mango, a giraffe goes for the pineapple, and so on. Eventually the basket on Handa's head is empty. While she keeps walking towards Akeyo's village she passes a tangerine tree. At this moment, a goat cuts loose from a rope and runs straight into the tree. As a result of this jolt a good amount of tangerines fall off the tree. Many fall straight into the empty basket, thereby refilling it. When Handa eventually meets Akeyo, she tells her friend that she has brought her a surprise. She puts the basket down. 'Tangerines!' shouts Akeyo with joy and excitement. 'My favourite fruit'. Handa replies: 'Tangerines? That is a surprise.'

'Handa's surprise' by Browne (1994) is a famous children story. It is a beautiful tale of friendship and gift giving. The children featured in her book are from the Luo tribe in south-west Kenya. This narrative in a very rural setting in Africa, I want to argue, is also a narrative about the economy of the digital commons. This economy is largely based on the principle of gift giving.

In order to understand the political economy of gift giving, we should turn first to the work of Marcel Mauss. For my line of thought I want to highlight two things about Mauss' (1954) seminal work on the gift. Even though this is research on far-away non-capitalist economies, Mauss makes an important contribution with respect to Marxist concepts of the nature of capitalism. While Marx went to great lengths to demonstrate in his theory of historical materialism the fluidity and the transitional potential of dominant modes of production (like the feudal mode of production already contained some seeds of a capitalist mode of production, every dominant mode of production in history already contains the seeds for what is to come next), his analysis of the capitalist mode of production did not really make an attempt to explore the seeds of a mode of production

that could be a successor of capitalism. With the work of Mauss, we get an idea that these seeds might be forms of gift exchange. We also learn to understand that there never was and never will be a pure capitalist economy where everything is being subsumed under capital. A capitalist economy will always co-exist with a gift economy. In fact, they have an important commonality. Both, gifts and markets are examples of human exchange. Two decades after Mauss, Polanyi (2001) made a similar point, and more recently Hart (2008) and Hart, Laville, and Cattani (2010) originated the term 'human economy', pointing to areas of human economic activity that are not primarily driven by the logic of measurement and the logic of the market.

The second point about Mauss' analysis of the gift economy that is relevant for my argument is his insistence on the reciprocal nature of gift giving. For Mauss, gifts are not just gifts and not just free lunches. They come with obligations. They have to be returned. Each gift is part of a system of relationships between the gift-givers and the recipients. This system is being built over time. For him, gift-giving exchanges are contracts; they are not legal contracts but contracts nonetheless. They are just less visible than the contracts of capitalist markets. The obligation to give and to return the gift is part of a moral framework that structures interactions. This is a moral system that highly values solidarity.

There is something very reassuring in Mauss' analysis of gift giving. We do not need money, we do not need quasi-objective systems of measurement with respect to economic exchange. People will not abuse this system. In fact, there is overwhelming empirical evidence that they will try very hard to comply with it. For if they cannot, they might lose status and respect, and lose face within their communities. They might, or they might not. All this depends on context and circumstances. The gift economy described by Mauss is a system that has a great deal of similarities with Marx's possibly best outline of what communism could mean: 'From each according to his ability to each according to his need' (Critique of the Gotha Programme).

Marx's idea of communism and Mauss' analysis of the gift economy are not about quasi-objective measurement and individual gain, they are about very different values, relationships, community, solidarity, balance and equilibrium. For an analysis of the political economy of the digital commons, I wish to argue that we can only draw on Mauss in a limited way. This is largely due to his insistence on reciprocity and on the obligation to return the gift. Clearly, the gift-giving practices in the digital commons are not based on reciprocity. An open-source programmer does not expect that everybody who uses her code will return the favour and write open-source software themselves. The author of a Wikipedia entry does not expect that those who read the entry will be obliged to write an entry themselves. A teenager who puts a home-made video on a social media platform does not expect that those who watch her video will also upload moving images on this platform. The gifts produced and distributed in the digital commons are not addressed to specific individuals, they are much more unspecific. It is not quite clear who is at the receiving end of this exchange. These gifts, very much like works of art and very much like blood donations, are gifts to abstract communities. Ultimately they are gifts to humanity.

So how can we theorise forms of gift giving and gift receiving that are not being returned? The work of Serres (2007) on the parasite provides rich inspiration for such a task. The parasite is a book about relationships, about human relationships and about relationships between humans, nature and the universe. Very much in stark contrast to Mauss – and for that matter to all structuralists – Serres does not see much tidiness, harmony, and order. For him there is asymmetry, imbalance, noise, interruption, and transformation. There is movement and metamorphoses. He rejects binary models for an understanding of relationships. His concept is ternary and involves the host, the parasite, and an interrupter who shakes things up, reverses roles, and reconfigures relations. 'For parasitism is an elementary relation . . . The relation upsets equilibrium, making it deviate. If some

equilibrium exists, or ever existed somewhere, somehow, the introduction of a parasite in the system immediately provokes a difference, a disequilibrium' (182). These relations are a succession of parasitic chains. He describes how flows of energy between organisms are never symmetrical and equal, but always asymmetrical and unequal. The parasite is feeding on the energy of others, stealing this energy without giving back anything to the host. History hides the fact that man is the universal parasite, and everyone around him is in a hospitable space. Plants and animals are always his host; man is always necessarily their guest. Always taking, never giving.

According to Serres, man is always a parasite to the sun and the sun is always a host for all living beings on the earth. This is a vitalist perspective that also applies for social relationships and economic relationships.

In the natural world, it is sometimes not easy to distinguish hosts from parasites. Bees and flowers need each other, both give and take, but they give and take different things. In the digital realm, it can be equally difficult to distinguish parasites from hosts. We have to take a situational approach. Depending on the circumstances users and producers, hackers and pirates can be either hosts or parasites. Like the parasite the pirate is imaginative, creative, and innovative. Like the parasite the pirate remixes, interrupts and disturbs things, creating disequilibrium and metamorphoses, thereby turning into a host to give new life for new parasites or new pirates. The digital commons partly gets built through social exchange or collaboration, through people who are – in love or in hate – working together on a Wikipedia entry, who exchange knowledge, ideas, information and affect. However, the digital commons also works in asymmetrical, one-way flows described by Serres, where some people just give and others just take.

Serres' vitalism also applies to the realm of work, which 'undoubtedly . . . is a struggle against noise'. (86).

Life works. Life is work, energy, power, information. It is impossible to translate this description into an ethical discourse . . . The work of life is labour and order but does not occur without borrowing from elsewhere (88).

At a first glance, Serres' parasite sounds dark and dystopian. However, this is only true if we focus on the parasite. It is important to note that Serres focuses his attention on both, the parasite and the host. His book might as well have been called the host. There is no parasite without host, no taking without giving. Also, what might be seen as a dark undertone in Serres' philosophy sounds beautiful in 'Handa's Surprise'.

Handa makes a big effort to carry her gift (the basket filled with different fruit) to her friend. On her way to Akeyo's village, different animals behave like parasites. They steal fruit from the basket without giving anything back. Fortunately a tree comes to Handa's rescue. The tree is the host who is interrupted in its calm existence by the goat who bumps into it. Due to this interruption, the tree gives its tangerines to Handa without taking anything back from her. In the end all the interruptions of the original plan turn out to be just perfect as tangerines are Akeyo's favourite fruit.

Or in Serres' words:

What travels along the path might be money, gold or commodities, or even food – in short, material goods. You don't need much experience to know that goods do not arrive so easily at their destinations. There are always interceptors who work very hard to divert what is carried along these paths. Parasitism is the name most often given to these numerous and diverse activities, and I fear that they are the most common thing in the world. (11)

The difference between Mauss on the one hand and Serres and Browne (the author of Handa's Surprise) on the other hand is not a moral difference. It is a conceptual difference

only. Where Mauss sees reciprocity and therefore equilibrium, balance, mutualism, and exchange, Serres and Browne see asymmetry, imbalance, interruption, and transformation. For an understanding of the digital commons the asymmetric relationships of Serres might be conceptually more productive than the reciprocal relationships of Mauss. In this respect, the digital commons is not so much a gift economy but an economy of contribution. The contributions made for the digital commons surely are gifts, but these are gifts to humanity, not to specific and selected people. They are gifts without an obligation to return the favour.

Distinguishing peer production as a new mode of production from market-based production (with an emphasis on equivalent exchange) and firm production (with an emphasis on hierarchical organisation) Siefkes (2007, 9) writes: 'Peer production (. . .) is based on contributions. People contribute to a project because they want it to succeed, not because they need to earn money or have to realise some previously established plan.' Those who want to contribute to the digital commons will do so. It is their own choice, there is no coercion.

The difference between a gift economy based on reciprocity and a non-reciprocal economy of contribution is not just an academic subtlety. It matters and has profound implications for the development of the digital commons. A gift economy does not need to be regulated from outside or from above. It regulates itself in bottom-up processes as balance and equilibrium are an integral part of such a system. It sorts itself out. But an economy of contribution is uneven, with some people contributing more and others less.

So we need to ask if uneven contribution poses a problem for the development of the digital commons. The problem obviously would be about compensation for contributions.

6. Basic income

As argued by Ostrom (1990), the commons can work and does work. This is even more true for the digital commons where scarcity of material resources is not an issue. When everything is available to everybody we do not have to worry much about human selfishness. Therefore the conclusion is straightforward: If the digital commons can work, it needs to be supported. It is vulnerable, however, as it develops unevenly. Thus we have to think about ways that support especially those areas of the digital commons that so far remain underdeveloped.

Throughout the last century, labour has been analysed in the western hemisphere as wage labour only. It was a common perception that there was just no alternative to wage labour. Obviously this theoretical orientation was a reflection of an economic reality characterised largely by wage labour as the dominant form of production. However, the perception that there is no alternative to wage labour is increasingly being challenged. Recently, calls for a basic income have gained momentum which is partly documented and reflected in the journal *Basic Income Studies*, founded in 2006 with two issues per year.

It is not possible here to outline this debate in great detail. Instead, I want to focus on an argument for a global basic income brought forward by the late Gorz (1999). Gorz is one of the most prominent scholars known for inquiries beyond the wage-based society. He begins his argument with the claim that work has lost its magic. It has lost its magic on the road to post-Fordism. It goes without saying that work during Fordism was all but perfect. In Fordism, work was not a source of social cohesion or social integration. However, it gave everybody a sense of usefulness and a sense of entitlement.

Those entitlements were not attached to the person of the wage-owner, but to the function the job fulfilled in the social process of production. Never mind what work you do, what counts is having a job. This was the essential ideological message of

the wage-based society. (56)

In post-Fordism, the ideological message has profoundly changed:

Fear and tremble . . . Never mind what you are paid, so long as you have a job . . . Be prepared to make any and every concession, to suffer humiliation or subjugation, to face competition and betrayal to get or keep a job, since those who lose their jobs lose everything. (56)

In post-Fordism, employment has become a privilege. While we are all taught to think that a wage-based society is all we can hope for, it is in fact already dead. 'They persuade us, it is right, normal, essential that each of us should urgently desire what in fact no longer exists and will never again lie within everyone's grasp' (58).

Gorz goes to great length to demonstrate that the shortage of work thesis is a myth created by capital. Work is not disappearing, what is disappearing is what Marx calls 'abstract labour', labour as a commodity, labour that can be bought and sold in the market. It is correct that capital can not afford it any more to provide secure employment for all members of a society. 'The actual problem is not a shortage of work, but a failure to distribute the wealth which is now produced by capital employing fewer and fewer people' (72).

As work time ceases to be the dominant social time we need to prepare for a multiactive life. 'The issue, in a nutshell, is the development of people's autonomy irrespective of companies need for it' (74). This means, to give people more rights over their own time. On the basis of this argument, Gorz proposes the introduction of a guaranteed sufficient income for everybody. A basic income should not be understood as a form of subsistence, on the contrary, it is a resource to enable new social practices. The aim is to

free them from the constraints of the labour market. The basic social income must enable them to refuse work and reject inhuman working conditions. And it must be part of a social environment which enables all citizens to decide on an ongoing basis between the use-value of their time and its exchange value. (83)

In his earlier writings, e.g. Gorz (1989), he has advocated a formula that ties a basic income to required periods of time where citizens perform work for the community, for society, and for the general production of wealth. Later (Gorz 1999) he has abandoned this position to promote a basic income that is unconditional. He argues with Marx of the Grundrisse that time has ceased to be a measure for value. In post-Fordism, where work is increasingly immaterial and imagination, creativity, and intelligence turn into the main productive force, the value of labour can not be measured any more. Obviously this is also true for emotional labour. If emotional and affective investment in work is beyond measure its commodification becomes nonsensical.

Obviously Gorz does not refer to the digital commons, his argument is more general. However there is a very straight connection between Gorz references to immaterial labour and to the 'general intellect', a term coined by Marx in the Grundrisse, and the digital commons. Whatever is part of the digital commons has been produced with immaterial labour. And most things that are created with immaterial labour, with emotion, creativity, imagination, and intellect, can be made available in the digital commons. This is not just some niche within the real economy, this is the realm where all knowledge production and cultural production can be shared and freely accessed. For this to happen on a large scale, we have to think about policies that compensate contributors and stimulate what is emerging as an economy of contribution.

The digital commons, I have argued, is a new frontier for struggles over commodification. It is a space that enables counter-commodification – not just on a personal but on a global

level. It demonstrates how creative work can flourish without the chains of intellectual property regulations. However, this is also a vulnerable space as it does not flourish evenly, with some areas (in particular the cultural commons and the art commons) remaining rather underdeveloped. The fostering of all parts of the digital commons is a political question. This is about the creation of spaces in which alternative social practices and alternative forms of work can develop in the best possible way. It is a question to be addressed by social movements. With the crisis of capitalist production deepening, there is a real possibility that one day the value of human bonds and the spirit of the gift (Hyde 1979) will outshine the commodity.

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