

# COMMONS-BASED POLITICAL PRODUCTION: OPEN SOURCE TO AN ALTERNATIVE SOCIETY?

Holmes, Brian

Holmes, Brian

## Commons-based political production: Open source to an alternative society?

Excerpt from a forthcoming essay: "The Revenge of the Concept: Artistic Exchanges, Networked Resistance"

On-line version: [http://www.constantvzw.com/transmedia\\_archive/000101.html](http://www.constantvzw.com/transmedia_archive/000101.html)

...It is well known that the Linux operating-system kernel, and free software generally, is made cooperatively under the provisions of "copyleft," or the General Public License, without any money changing hands. This is something that quickly caught the attention of artists and culture critics, with the result that in the early days of the Nettime mailing list, for example, there were a lot of discussions about what Richard Barbrook called the "high-tech gift economy." The expression recalls the work of the anthropologist Marcel Mauss, the author of the famous essay on The Gift. His essential contribution was to underscore, at the very heart of modern economic exchange, the presence of motives irreducible to the calculation of the value of material objects, and also of the individual interest one might have in possessing them. As Barbrook points out, the heritage of Mauss was very much alive in alternative circles, his ideas having inspired the Situationists, who passed them on to the do-it-yourself media ethic of the Punk movement. But mostly what fueled the discussion of the Internet gift economy was not theory, but the simple practice of adding information to the net. As Rishab Ghosh explained, "the economy of the Net begins to look like a vast tribal cooking-pot, surging with production to match consumption, simply because everyone understands – instinctively, perhaps – that trade need not occur in single transactions of barter, and that one product can be exchanged for millions at a time. The cooking-pot keeps boiling because people keep putting in things as they themselves, and others, take things out." By placing the accent on the overflowing abundance and free nature of the available content, Ghosh responded implicitly to one of the most contested themes in Mauss's essay, which cast each gift as the deliberate imposition of a debt on the receiver, instating hierarchies which were quite foreign to the practice of networked information exchange.

Today, with the popular explosion of Kazaa, Morpheus, and other peer-to-peer file-sharing systems, these notions of the high-tech gift economy have begun to form part of common sense, which seems will to admit at least a few new things: that the coded creations circulating on the Internet are never "consumed" like a cigarette would be; that use by some people in no way limits their availability for others; and that certain kinds of exchanges have nothing to do with rarity and are quite possible without money. What is less often remarked, because of a denial which is characteristic of free-market rhetoric, is the fact that non-monetary models of exchange have been operating on a very large scale for as long as one can remember, for instance in the realm of academic publishing, where information is shared not for monetary value but for the recognition it brings – which itself is at least partially dependent on the feeling of contributing something to humanity or truth. In fact there exists quite a large movement in the domain of scientific publishing aiming for online release of all the articles currently carried by specialized journals, in order to make the results universally accessible, in the face of the increasing and unjustifiable access costs of many print publications. Recently, an author by the name of Yochai Benkler has taken the twin examples of free software and academic publishing as a foundation on which to

build a general theory of what he calls "commons-based peer production," by which he means non-proprietary informational or cultural production, based on materials which are extremely low cost or inherently free. This voluntary form of self-organized production depends, in his words, "on very large aggregations of individuals independently scouring their information environment in search of opportunities to be creative in small or large increments. These individuals then self-identify for tasks and perform them for complex motivational reasons." His first aim, however, is not to explain peoples' motivation, but to simply describe the organizational and technological conditions that make this cooperative production possible.

Benkler identifies four attributes of the networked information economy that favor commons-based peer production. First, information must be freely available an inexhaustible raw material for products which, in their turn, will become inexhaustible raw materials for further productions. Second, potential collaborators must be able to easily identify the specific project that inspires them to contribute their creativity and labor. Third, the cost of production equipment must be low, as is now the case for things like computers and related media devices. Fourth, it must be possible to broadly distribute the results, for instance, over a telecommunications net. Under these conditions, quite complex tasks can be imagined, divided into small modules, and thrown out into the public realm where individuals will self-identify their competency to meet any given challenge. The only remaining requirement for large-scale production of cultural and informational goods is to be able to perform quality checks and integrate all the individual modules with relatively low effort into a completed whole – but these tasks, it turns out, can often be done on a distributed basis as well. The fact that all of this is possible, and actually happening today, allows Benkler to contradict Ronald Coase's classic theory, which identifies the firm, with its hierarchical command structure, and the market, functioning through the individual's quest for the lowest price, as the only two viable ways to organize human production. In other words, in the cultural and informational domain there is an alternative mode of production, functioning outside the norms of the state-capitalist economy as we know it, but without any rhetorical need to proclaim a clean break or an absolute division between them.

Indeed, the notion of the commons refers back to the same pre-capitalist history that Karl Polanyi had invoked in his famous work on *The Great Transformation* (1944); and it does so in the context of what some are calling the "second enclosure movement," resulting in the extension of intellectual property rights, or the privatization of information. Benkler also stresses that the word denotes "the absence of exclusion as the organizing feature of this new mode of production." To be sure, the examples he uses to prove the existence of voluntarily organized large-scale cultural production are strictly electronic projects like the Wikipedia encyclopedia, the Slashdot technews site, the Kuro5hin text-editing site, and so on. These are essentially situations where publicly available text plus creativity produces publicly available text. They are also politically neutral examples, appropriate for an argumentation that aims, among other things, to influence the American legislature on the subject of copyright laws. Yet one could apply exactly the same ideas to the growing phenomenon of networked political protests. It is clear that mass access to email and the possibility to create personal web pages – both of which have been quite necessary to the world expansion of liberal capitalism – almost immediately made possible, not only a greater awareness of globalization and its effects, but also the self-organization of dissenting movements on a world scale. And the scope of the projects that have been realized in this sense has been tremendous.

Just reflect for a moment on what all the major "counter-globalization" campaigns have involved: collaborative research on the political, social, cultural, and ecological issues at stake; various levels of coordination between a wide range of already constituted groups, concerning the preliminary forms of mobilization; worldwide dissemination, through every possible channel, of the research and the preliminary positions; travel of tens or hundreds of thousands of single persons and autonomous groups to a given place; self-organization of a meeting and sleeping place; intellectual and political cooperation on some form of counter-summit; the creation of artistic and cultural events in the spirit of the movements; a minimal agreement, worked out beforehand or in the heat of the moment, on the specific forms and places of the symbolic and direct actions to be undertaken; legal and medical coordination in order to ensure the

demonstrators' security; the installation of communications systems allowing for the transmission of precise yet exceedingly diverse coverage of the events; a social, legal, and political follow-up of the aftermath; and a subsequent analysis of the new situation that results from each confrontation.

In this sense one could say that, just like the projects of commons-based peer production, these mobilization begin and end with the fabrication of publicly available texts. For example, the People's Summit held in Quebec City in April 2001 began long in advance, with many different studies of the probably consequences of the future agreement on the Free Trade Area of the Americas. These studies led to the drafting of a remarkable document, "Alternatives for the Americas," which is a counter treaty of great precision, drafted through a process of knowledge exchange and political coordination on the scale of the American hemisphere. Finally, as a direct consequence of the massive demonstration that took place during the official summit, the working draft of the FTAA treaty was made public for the first time; until then it had not even been available to elected representatives of the American peoples, but only to executive negotiating teams and, of course, corporate "advisers." And yet between the fundamental landmarks represented by these text publications, how many face-to-face debates took place, how many exchanges of ideas and thoughts, how many moments of solitary or collective creation, how many acts of courage or solidarity? And how many emotions, images, memories, and desires were created and shared during those days of action?

The spectacle of these great gatherings, overflowing with freely given creations, could appear like a new form of the potlatch ceremonies described by Marcel Mauss, a gift-giving ritual where the demonstrators try to outdo their adversaries with open displays of generosity. No doubt there is something of that, which explains why the words "free" and "priceless" have been so important in these demonstrations. But what seems more interesting in the reference to Mauss is his way of perceiving gift-giving rituals as "total social facts," bringing all the different all the different aspects of social life together in a system of complex and indivisible relations. Whoever saw the extraordinary symbolic transactions between pacifists, ecologists, unionists, anarchists, spiritualists, thugs, policemen, reporters, by-passers, and politicians at the G8 summit in Genoa, in July of 2001, can find a real resonance in what Mauss says in relation to the Melanesian gift-giving ceremonies, the American Indian potlatch rituals, and the "market-festivals of the Indo-European world":

All these phenomena are at once legal, economic, religious, and even aesthetic, morphological, etc. They are legal, including public and private law, diffuse and organized morality, strictly obligatory or simply praised and blamed, political and domestic at the same time, involving the social classes as well as the clans and families. They are religious: including strict religion and magic and animism and diffuse religious mentality. They are economical: because the idea of value, of utility, of interest, of luxury, of wealth, of acquisition and accumulation as well as consumption and even purely sumptuary expenditure are everywhere in them, even though these are all understood differently than by us today. What is more, these institutions have an important aesthetic side to them... the dances that are carried out alternatively, the chants and parades of all kinds, the dramatic performances that are given... everything, food, objects, and services, even "respect," as the Tlingits say, everything is a cause for aesthetic emotion.

There is no nostalgia for a primitive life in the fact of quoting Mauss here, nor any facile admiration for the "revolutionary fête." Things are much more complex. On the one hand, the contemporary quest for "direct action," indeed, for "direct democracy," finds an initial realization in the collective, cooperative production of these public events, which bring together all the rigorously separated aspects of modern social life. Indeed, the very aim of such events is to criticize certain fundamental separations, like the one that amputates any basic concern for life from the laws of monetary accumulation. But that doesn't mean that the event, the ecstatic convergence, is a total solution: instead it is a departure point for a fresh questioning of the social tie, at times when its deadly aspects become visible, as they are today, in the forms of global capitalism, its expanding inequalities and incessant wars. The protestors' claim, not just to the occupation but to the creation of public space, with all the political conflicts that it brings in its wake, offers society an occasion to theatricalize the real, in order to replay the meaning of

abstractions that are no longer adequate to the needs and possibilities of life, if they ever were. The "total social fact" of the contemporary demonstration is, at its best, a chance to relearn and recreate a language for political debate, which isn't just about money, and doesn't only have "¥€\$" in its vocabulary. And the networked protests we are speaking of, including those of the peace movement in 2003, have produced the first chances to do this at the scale of the globalized economy and of global governance....

#### References

Linux/GPL: [www.linux.org/info/gnu.html](http://www.linux.org/info/gnu.html)

"High-tech gift economy": [www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue3\\_12/barbrook](http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue3_12/barbrook)

"Cooking pot markets": [www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue3\\_3/ghosh](http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue3_3/ghosh)

"Commons-based peer production": [www.benkler.org/CoasesPenguin.html](http://www.benkler.org/CoasesPenguin.html)

"Alternatives for the Americas": [www.web.net/comfront/alts4americas/eng/eng.html](http://www.web.net/comfront/alts4americas/eng/eng.html)

Marcel Mauss, "Essai sur le don":

[www.uqac.quebec.ca/zone30/Classiques\\_des\\_sciences\\_sociales/livres/mauss\\_marcel/socio\\_et\\_anthropo/2\\_essai\\_sur\\_le\\_don/essai\\_sur\\_le\\_don.html](http://www.uqac.quebec.ca/zone30/Classiques_des_sciences_sociales/livres/mauss_marcel/socio_et_anthropo/2_essai_sur_le_don/essai_sur_le_don.html)