

## Some comments on the "Fundamental Text" proposed by S. Merten and S. Meretz

First of all, I think it is a good thing to have more texts reflecting the "Oekonux ideas", even if by the nature of the list itself it is impossible to write something on which every participant would totally agree. Here are some comments on several questions, some of them were already dealt with by Michel Bauwens.

1- The possibility of applying the peer production principles to the "material sphere"

In part 1, the text reads:

"Whether or not the principles of peer production can be transferred to the material sphere or what that even means is an open research question."

Michel Bauwens commented:

"It is not just a research question, there are some general things that can be said, apart from already observing existing open design communities." (1/4/08)

I agree with Michel that this is not "just" an "open research question". Especially for Oekonux whose main fundamental idea is summarized in the 3d part of the text: "We claim that peer production is a germ form of a new society based on a mode of production beyond exchange, market and money."

Such a claim would be a sheer piece of wishful thinking if "exchange, market and money" could not be eradicated from most of the production (and distribution) of material goods. A "new society" would not be really "new" if pp principles remained restricted to numerical goods.

The main argument the text gives to explain the doubts about the possibility of material peer production is based on the idea that, contrary to numerical-information goods, material goods are "rival".

Part 4 reads: "Material goods, however, differ significantly from information goods. Information can be easily copied while material goods have to be produced piece by piece. The use of material goods is rival while use of information is non-rival. Material goods are used up while information is spread when shared."

It is true that information-numerical goods are "non-rival", "by nature", ie. they "may be consumed by one consumer without preventing simultaneous consumption by others." (Wikipedia). As they can be copied without (or insignificant) cost they are potentially abundant. It is also true that material goods do not possess that capacity. But that does not mean that they can not be abundant, non-rival. Water is a material good, it cannot be "copied", but it may be a non-rival good in places where it is abundant.

Rivalry is a concept that expresses (and, for ideological reasons, insists on) the old reality that scarcity of a good tends to generate rivalry between people wanting to have it. But, as such, it is a very relative concept. It depends on the relation between two quantities: the quantity of the good and the number of people desiring that good. Even sea water, if taken in small quantity and considered in a place where it is scarce (a bottle of sea water in the Sahara, for example) may become rival. Two apples for 200 persons are rival, but 200 apples for two people are not.

Material goods cannot be freely reproduced, but most of them, those that are commonly produced by humans, may be made abundant, enough to satisfy the human needs/desires, (if the will and the power to do it exists - as it may in a "peer society") and become non-rival goods.

Of course, some material goods cannot be made abundant: a Van Gogh painting or an exceptional geographical site, for example. Also, products requiring very naturally scarce material, at least for some time, (the time to invent a way to produce them in a different manner or to find substitutes). How to deal with goods that remain rival in a new (peer) society is indeed an "open research question". But, it is not the same for all the goods that can be made abundant. And these are the overwhelming majority of the goods commonly needed by humans. (In addition, human needs/desires in a society not based on the absurd commercial-profit logic of capitalism will be different from present ones).

To say that "the use of material goods is rival" is not correct. Even from a strict neoclassical approach, some material products can be non-rival, public. But, above all, it ignores the fact that most of material products can be made abundant, thus non-rival.

This is not a secondary question when considering the possibility to apply peer production principles to material production. Whatever serious definition of peer production principles you take, their application to material production requires the abundance, the non-rivalry, the free/open/gratis reality of most of material means of production and consumption. If we take, for example, the Michel Bauwens' definition of peer-production principles, (which, as he noted, correspond "using other words" to Christian Siefkes' ones) they all relay on that requirement.

Michel Bauwens writes:

"peer production needs to include the input (open raw material), the process (voluntary self-aggregation) and the output (universal availability)." (5 apr 08)

Christian Siefkes:

1. Peer production is based on contributions (not on exchange).
2. Peer production is based on free cooperation (not on coercion or command).
3. Peer production is based on commons and possession (not on property)." ( 7 apr 08)

"Open raw material", "universal availability", "no exchange", "commons and possession, not property" require free/gratis access to material means of production and consumption. "Voluntary free aggregation" and "free cooperation" require (if universalized) free/gratis access to material means of consumption.

How to reach that level of abundance? What may the transition process be ? These may be "open research questions". But it must be said clearly that the material abundance is a real possibility. The scarcity of material goods which makes today the majority of the world-population to live in misery is not natural, but induced by the capitalist logic. The ecological problems are not the consequence of natural limits but of capitalist management of the planet resources. If we can escape the capitalist logic, we are still very far from reaching "natural limits". We only use 1/10 000 of the energy we permanently receive from the sun; experts say that there is enough spring water for many times the present human population, if we only can use it in rational ways, especially by a transformation of methods of agriculture.

## 2 - Can we imagine what could be peer material production?

Part 3 of the text reads:

"Today it is hard to see how material production can be organized according to the logic of information goods... It is perfectly possible that in a dominance or restructuring step the problem on how to embed material production in the peer production mode of production is on a basis which can not be imagined today."

Maybe that statement is a consequence of the doubts about the possibility of making common material goods non-rival. In any case, I think it is far from obvious. Of course we cannot imagine the concrete details or even important aspects of such a mode of production, but we can imagine what a general framework could be. The development of peer production in the information-numerical sphere allows us today to be much more concrete than could have been any anti-capitalist dreamer even 20 years ago. I even think that is an important theoretical task today. Christian Siefkes' book, for instance, is part of that effort.

The germ-form theory, for example, relays on the idea that peer production principles can be applied to material production and are superior to capitalistic ones. It is difficult to make such a statement without giving at least elementary concrete visions, even if theoretical, of what that could look like.

From a human point of view, the "efficiency" of a mode of production is measured by its capacity to allow the human material needs to be satisfied. Capitalism has created an extraordinary network (the world market) allowing existent needs to find, some times at the other side of the world, the means to be satisfied. Demand and offer are confronted and interrelated through the market mechanisms. But it is a relation distorted by commercial exchange and the capitalistic logic based of profit.

In the capitalist market, the needs considered are not all the real human needs. These are limited by the necessity to be solvent. If you don't have money, your needs/desires do not exist in the market, they are not taken into account.

The offer is also limited, restricted: if production can not be sold, sold with profit, it is not done. Non profitable production does not exist in the market. Without profit perspective, fields are left fallow, factories (even modern ones) closed, workers unemployed.

Only the logic of the capitalist market can explain that to day a child dies from malnutrition every 5 seconds in the world.

A peer society is the only way to interrelate the real (and not the solvent) demand with the real (and not the profitable) potential forces of production, human and material.

We can imagine some general aspects of what could be the cycle of material production, that is including the distribution and consumption aspects (I'll come back later on that inclusion) according to peer production principles. Since production is orientated exclusively towards the satisfaction of human needs/desires (instead of profit) and the final user is the source of innovation, let's start by "the end", when the user gets the product.

For most of commonly needed products, we could imagine sorts of "super-markets" (we should say "super non-markets") where goods are free/gratis. These might also be Internet sites. The nature and quantities of the products taken (instead of bought) would be instantaneously registered and the data sent by Internet to centers at different levels (villages, local, regional, worldwide).

That data would be permanently processed at different levels by a set of softwares in order to generate a list of consumption requirements, including as much information as possible: geographical localization, quantity, qualities, etc. The softwares would be constantly developed and improved integrating the final-user desires, systematically collected, elaborated, processed at all levels. That list would be made available to anyone in the planet, giving an instantaneous and permanent list of all the common consumption "itches" that humans "need to scratch".

On the productive side, any center of production would thus have a real and large choice to decide what it prefers to produce, having the security that its product will be useful and used/consumed. It could also make propositions of new solutions to present or future needs/desires.

Every production center, in his turn, would express permanently its needs in order to realize its projects and, as for consumption, through Internet, these would be instantaneously collected, processed and put at public use.

These needs/desires include raw material, machines and, of course, human work (not labor). Raw material and machines needs would be processed as the consumption "itches" and put at disposal of the centers of production. Human work needs would also be permanently and instantaneously put at disposal of all human beings. Any person wishing to participate in social production has thus the possibility to choose what she wants to do, or something close to it, as in Free Software. (voluntary self-aggregation).

At that level, the first necessity to create a peer society is the capacity to transform any productive task in a pleasure for the person who does it. (Pleasure does not exclude "effort": playing soccer is exhausting, for example). Automation is here a key element in order to eliminate or transform what today are repulsive tasks. As producers are the "end users" of the means and ways of production, they should be the permanent masters of innovation at that level, orientated towards Selbstentfaltung development.

Even if many questions remain open, as the distribution on goods which can not be made abundant or "governance" systems, for example, some fundamental aspects of what could be the application of peer production principles to the material sphere can be seriously imagined, and their superiority to capitalist ones easily demonstrated.

One may object that, even if such a vision may seem coherent and materially feasible, it does not say what would be the transition to that full-developed peer society. That is true. But, if you want to imagine a transition you need to know from where to where it goes. If you don't have any idea about the end of it (or at least a very advanced point), you cannot even think it.

The old formula: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs/desires" may summarize what a full-developed peer society should be based on, since it also summarizes what the peer production principles are. Today we can and must give to that abstract goal a more concrete image.

### 3 - Production and distribution

The text reads, in part 3:

"Though there are a lot of peer phenomenons, peer production is primarily about production and not distribution."

Michel Bauwens has already made some criticisms to that statement:

"I don't see how you can equate privatized output with peer production, that would be very contradictory, as the output necessarily requires conditions that affect both input and process." (5 apr 08)

I agree with Michel. I just wanted to remind what Marx, in the same sense, wrote about that question:

"The relations and modes of distribution are thus merely the reverse aspect of the factors of production. An individual whose participation in production takes the form of wage-labor will receive a share in the product, the result of production, in the form of wages. The structure of distribution is entirely determined by the structure of production. Distribution itself is a product of production, not only with regard to the content, for only the results of production can be distributed, but also with regard to the form, since the particular mode of men's participation in production determines the specific form of distribution, the form, in which they share in distribution. "

("Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy")

### 4 - Is contemporary industry perfect in working with matter?

In part 4, the text reads:

"Capitalism improved working with matter and the means employed are material means. Contemporary industry is perfect in producing material things."

"Perfect" ? From what point of view? Probably the authors' pen slipped.

The only point of view from which "contemporary industry" (ie. capitalist industry) is "perfect" is efficiency in exploiting labor force and cumulating capital.

According to the International Labor Organization last year there were 2 200 000 mortal work accidents in the world. The number of injured is almost 1000 times bigger. And this is not only in the poor countries. In Italy, for example, there were 1 300 death and 900 000 injured.

Even excluding that human aspect, even putting aside the fact that contemporary industry destroys the ecological equilibrium and the humans' health, from a sheer quantitative or qualitative point of view "contemporary industry" has nothing to do with perfection. Quantity is enormously limited by the profit imperatives ; quality is corrupted by commercial and profit constraints and by the alienated nature of work (paradoxically these last points are very well demonstrated in part 4 of the text).

The text also says: "And alienation was personally acceptable, because the 'dependence' was highly outweighed with good wages." Is that "perfect"?

### 5 - The germ-form theory (or the five-step model) and the power over the means of production

In part 4, the text reads:

"This, however, is a quite different transition image than old style types of conquering the power to control the (old) means of production. The new conception of a transition bases on changing the productive basis by establishing new social relationship, which are originally free of valorisation and alienation. It is not about taking the old power, but building a new one, which then cooperates-out the old one. This is the fundamental change of the perspective of emancipation the five-step model brought to us."

The five-step model is very interesting. But, as far as I have understood it, it does not pretend to say how concretely the different steps are reached. In particular it does not deal with specific social-political life during the transitions. For example, social life is not the same for fishes (the original example given in the

text) and humans, and the model works for the evolutions of both of them. It also works for the transition from feudalism to capitalism, where class struggle was determinant and where the bourgeoisie, at the same time that it developed new productive relations that "cooperated-out" the feudal ones, had to conquer the political power from the feudal-aristocracy's hands.

Establishing new social relationships, "cooperating-out" the old system is not contradictory with conquering the power over the means of production. They are both interrelated and, at different moments, conditioned one by the other.

By itself, the germ-form theory does not give an answer to the question, for the transition from capitalism to a peer society, of how to transform the private property over means of production into social possession through the commons. One may pretend that, contrary to what happened in all social transitions of the past, the transition to a post-capitalist society will be done without class confrontation and ignoring the questions of political power and control over the means of production (I do not agree with that) but, in any case, that cannot be justified by the germ-form theory.

## 6 - Classes and the transition to a peer society

The text reads, in part 4:

"However, the restriction comes from the enclosure of the valorisation logic, in which workers and capitalists took opposite functions, but which forms a unique shell for both. Neither of them can escape, both of them have function according to their 'character masks'."

We already had that discussion with Stefan Merten and Stefan Meretz. I do not agree with the vision that reduces the workers struggle to the permanent wage bargaining, inserted within the capitalistic logic. This is the case most of the time, but the history of capitalism has shown that in some circumstances that struggle may become something different, trying to crack the "unique shell", opposing the capitalistic logic, leaving the reality behind the "character masks" to appear clearly: the naturally conservative nature of the ruling classes and the revolutionary nature of the exploited class. It is not true that the exploited cannot dream of anything else than being "well exploited". That was already true before capitalism, as showed, for example, by the slave revolts in antiquity with Spartacus or the peasants war in the 16th century in Germany (called in German: *Erhebung des gemeinen Mannes*: the uprising of common men). Historical, social and material conditions were not mature. But to day their maturation is getting over qualitative steps. Peer production development in the most modern part of productive forces is a manifestation of that. "Peer relationships" development is not not opposed to the old dream of the exploited classes: it represents its first concrete realization.

At this level, I find contradictory the position developed by the text considering sterile any class struggle in a peer society's perspective, and what Stefan Merten wrote a few months ago, (see the thread "Labor contradictions", 21dec08):

"Coming from the anarchist side I know there were movements which had different things in mind than 'really existing socialism'. Whether those movements had a chance to overcome capitalism? Let me say it this way: I think (only) today the conditions are mature because the development of productive forces got that far. Universalized digital copy (aka Internet) being one of the technical artifacts here."

Of course, I prefer this last vision of things.

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Well, that was a little bit long. Nevertheless, I hope it helps.

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