

## A name for a peer production-based society ? *Part 1*

Christian Siefkes wrote (13aug09):

"So we're still faced with two very different futures, which Rosa Luxemburg contrasted as "socialism or barbarism" almost hundred years ago. Though nowadays, seeing that the reopening of the commons is an essential precondition for the positive alternative to appear, we might prefer to call it commonism instead."

The issue of giving a name to a "system" based on peer production principles has been dealt with recently, more or less directly, in the Oekonux list and also in a larger sphere. Especially through the discussions about the Kevin Kelly's article: "The New Socialism: Global Collectivist Society Is Coming Online", (22may09) (1)

About this article Stefan Meretz wrote (28may09):

"Btw: Kevin Kelly used the term 'socialism' too – crazy."

And Stefan Merten (4jun09): "Well, really an interesting article. Indeed, very Oekonuxian in spirit."

At another level, Mathieu O'Neil wrote (27may): "In general I have been thinking about what Oekonux is for. My short answer: Oekonux aims to disseminate the idea that peer production is a valid alternative to capitalism." And Diego Saravia answered asking (27may): "Esclavism, feudalism, capitalism, p2p-ism?"

There are three interesting questions raised by these interventions:

- 1 The meaning of the words "socialism" and "communism" (both words had a similar evolution).
- 2 The pertinence to call socialist or communist a society fully based on peer production principles.
- 3 The need and possibility to find a new word to name such a society.

A few words about these issues.

### 1. The meaning of the words "socialism" and "communism"

A whole book could be written (and that has probably been done) about the evolution of the meaning of these words. In short one can say that they appeared as expressions of a dream of a post-capitalist society and ended as synonymous of totalitarian forms of capitalism, state capitalism.

Even Hitler used the word socialism for his cause.

At the origin, as a negation of capitalism, the different meanings of these words had in common to be opposed to the two most specific characteristics of capitalism: capital profit as the goal of production and wage-labor as the way to mediate the participation of the majority of producers.

The project, even if often nebulous, was generally identified with a society without classes, without exploiters and exploited, without private property of the means of production, where production would be oriented exclusively towards the satisfaction of human needs and where the participation of the population and the distribution of goods would follow the principle: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs".

Other important characteristics of the original concepts of socialism or communism were the ideas that workers have no fatherland, ("The workers have no country", says The Communist Manifesto; "The International will be the human race", says the famous song), and that in a classless society there would be no State. Marxist and Anarchist could strongly disagree about the need or not of a State apparatus in a period of transition, but they agreed on its absence in a full-developed non-capitalist society.

For many reasons, some relating to weaknesses and defeats of the workers movements, some relating to the manipulation skills of the ruling classes, the understanding of these words evolved dramatically until they could be used to name different forms of state controlled capitalism. (2) It was the opposite of the original meaning.

Instead of production oriented towards humans needs, production remains oriented towards accumulation of capital, even if it is State capital, a huge share of the product being generally devoted to maintaining an

unusually important military apparatus and a rich and powerful bureaucracy which controls and possesses collectively the means of production; instead of eliminating the wage system, this is generalized and the level of wages for most of the population is "equalized" to minimums; instead of internationalism and worldwide brotherhood, nationalism is exacerbated till its most absurd extremes ("Patria o muerte!").

Horrors like the Cambodian genocide under the Pol-Pot regime were made in the name of "socialism" or "communism".

Some "critical supporters" of that kind of regime argue that they were/are not really socialist or communist, but "steps towards" them. But historical evidence has violently showed that it has never been the case.

If one sticks to the original definition of socialism and communism, it is obvious that none of them has ever existed or even begun to exist. The identification of these terms with state-capitalist regimes appears then as one of the greatest and most poisonous lies of the 20th century.

It must also be underscored that since the beginning of the corruption of the meaning of these terms, there have always been currents of Marxists or anarchists (generally minorities) which remained faithful to the original meanings of these words and permanently denounced the mystifications. Rosa Luxemburg, quoted by Siefkes (above) was one of them.

In any case, it is obvious that nowadays using the words socialism or communism without specifying the meaning given to them is source of important confusions.

2. The pertinence to call socialist or communist a society fully based on peer production principles.

Kevin Kelly's article reads:

"When masses of people who own the means of production work toward a common goal and share their products in common, when they contribute labor without wages and enjoy the fruits free of charge, it's not unreasonable to call that socialism."

If one respects the original meaning of the word "socialism", and if one leaves apart the political aspects of the question, K. Kelly is correct. He could also have called that "communism".

Peer Production has developed in a universe where abundance prevails for most of its products. Digital goods being freely reproducible, the principles of private/excluding property and symmetric exchange are not only useless but also counter-productive. Original socialist/communist principles are also based on the possibility of abundance (of material goods in this case) and are thus basically the same. "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs", for example, is a common practice in digital peer production. Peer production has in addition the specific quality of being international, without fatherlands and naturally worldwide oriented since the beginning.

The problem is that the meaning of the word socialism (or communism), for most of the population, is seldom the original one. It rather evokes social-democratic or Stalinist regimes. As Lawrence Lessig puts it in his criticisms to Kelly's article:

"So my argument against Kelly is that it is wrong to use a term (in the context of a Wired essay at least; a philosophy seminar would invoke a completely different set of ethics) that would be so completely misunderstood. We choose our words. We don't choose our meaning." (31may09) (3)

I understand Kelly's concern as I think it is useful to understand how peer production is the beginning of the concretization of an old dream of exploited and poor classes in history, as were the socialist/communist ideas. Even if for the moment peer production concerns essentially the specific area of digital goods, such a recognition can only be a stimulant to strive for its expansion to the rest of social production. Maybe, one day in the future, the meaning of socialism and communism will be again, in most of the world population's mind, the original one. But that would not be for tomorrow. In the meantime, at a "popular" level, when there is not enough time or place to explain, the use of these words, without precisions, is inevitably confusing.

### 3. The need and possibility to find a new word to name a peer production "system".

If socialism and communism are problematical, is it necessary to find a new "ism" to name the system which would prevail in a society based on peer production principles?

As Christian Siefkes (see above), I think the answer is yes. Even if words may become dangerous by the ambiguities in their meaning, as we have seen, we cannot think without them. "In the beginning was the word". For human beings, a collective project can hardly be devised, worked-out without naming it. A name helps to concentrate the wills, the thoughts, the actions of a movement in a given direction.

The word "commonism", proposed by Christian Siefkes (and Stefan Meretz (4)) refers indeed to one of the most specific and post-capitalistic aspects of Peer Production: to be commons based and commons oriented. It also gives the idea of a continuity with the old dreams. But it is obvious that it echoes the word "communism", especially verbally, and has thus the same disorienting effects.

Since some time, I have been thinking that something like "gratisism" could be a solution.

"Gratis is the process of providing goods or services without monetary compensation. It is often referred to in English as 'free of charge'. ", says Wikipedia in English. And it adds: "The term gratis in English comes from the Latin word "gratis" meaning "for thanks". In several languages, including Italian, French, Romanian, Swedish, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Danish, Norwegian, German, Polish, Bahasa Indonesia and Afrikaans it is the equivalent to "for free". (5)

I think that a word based on "gratis" has interesting advantages, but also weaknesses.

The advantages are of two kinds: theoretical and "communicative". >From a theoretical point of view it has the virtue to put the emphasis on the overcoming of the kernel of capitalism: the law of exchange value. You don't sell, you don't buy. Without exchange value, the wage system and the accumulation of capital become nonsenses. Use-value, usefulness as the object of production instead of exchange value is highlighted.

From a "communicative" point of view, I see three obvious advantages:

1. The word gratis has an immediate meaning for every one. Even if you are not familiar with the web and digital goods, you know that your best relationships with others (friends, love, relatives) are, generally, "gratis".
2. The word "gratisism" is new. It does not suffer from the weight of "the tradition of all dead generations". The continuity with the past is reinvented from a new point of view.
3. Last and... least, the word "gratis" has the same meaning in more than a dozen languages.

But I also see a weakness: "gratisism" may be identified with practices that are "gratis" only apparently. Two of them are particularly frequent and remain totally in a capitalistic logic. One concerns the goods financed by commercial advertising, very present in the web (Google is only one of the most spectacular examples). Here, the good is in reality paid by the buyer of the advertised products. Furthermore, advertising relies on one of the darkest aspects of the 20th century mind manipulation: "A lie repeated a thousand times becomes a truth", (Goebbels). The second false "gratisism" concerns the public services which are sometimes said "gratis" but are in fact paid by the tax payer.

This is not the kind of "graticism" we want. Commercial advertising and taxes are meaningless in a world without money.

I don't know how disorienting that can be, but there is here obviously a problem.

But, will we find a perfect term?

One may say that it is a waste of time to try to find a word to name something that can only be the product of the action of billions of people all over the world, that the movement itself will find the most appropriated terms. Which is true. But the problem is that we are also part of that movement.

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1sep09

Notes:

1. [http://www.wired.com/culture/culturereviews/magazine/17-06/nep\\_newsocialism?currentPage=all](http://www.wired.com/culture/culturereviews/magazine/17-06/nep_newsocialism?currentPage=all)

2. Socialism and communism have not always had identical meanings. For example, socialism has some times been associated to a previous step towards communism. During the first World War the word "communist" was used by the left wing of the workers movement to distinguish themselves from the majority of the "socialist" (social-democratic) parties that had called in every country to participate to the war. After the Russian Revolution and the foundation of the Third International, also called the Communist International, the communist parties where in general much closer to the USSR and related regimes than the "socialist". During the "Cold war", the Socialist International regrouped parties associated to the Western (pro USA) bloc against the parties affiliated to the Komintern (Communist International, pro USSR), etc. But the evolution of the meaning of both words suffered an analogous dramatic corruption. To a certain extent, something similar happened to Christianity which started as a "commons based" religion (first christian used to put in common their belongings) and evolved into one of the strongest pillars of the inequality-based systems: slavery, feudalism, capitalism.

3. <http://www.keimform.de/2008/11/08/seven-hypotheses-about-commonism/>

4. [http://www.lessig.org/blog/2009/05/on\\_socialism\\_round\\_ii.html](http://www.lessig.org/blog/2009/05/on_socialism_round_ii.html)

5. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gratis>