

Visions of a full-scale peer production - Part 1

Stefan Merten wrote (7oct09):

SM: "Thank you for this vision. (1) Indeed it is a very great vision worth spelling out in more detail. And I share that it is about time to create a more concrete image - see the drawing board initiative."

RV: ;-) The board initiative is a good list of issues. To draw a realistic vision, not based on wishful thinking, of what a post-capitalist society could be is IMHO one of the most useful things we can do today, by these times of expanding historical pessimism.

SM: "What came to my mind when reading this was a comparison with the plan based economies in the states of the so-called real socialism. And also a comparison with market based economies would be interesting. I think it would be interesting to create such a comparison in detail."

RV: Yes, I agree. "Determinatio est negatio". To try to know what something is, consists also in trying to know what it is not.

RV (quoted by SM): "For most of commonly needed products, we could imagine sorts of 'super-markets' (we should say 'super non-markets') where goods are free/gratis."

SM: "In German we once had the nice word play of the "kassenlose Gesellschaft" (society without cash desks) instead of the "klassenlose Gesellschaft" (classless society). Unfortunately this doesn't work in English :-(."

RV: A nice wordplay indeed.

RV (quoted by SM): "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)."

SM: "Technically you could solve this in various ways.

The important point is that consumption is registered at the point of distribution. That is a very fine-granular method of gathering this data. In fact nowadays it is probably common in shops where the cash desk recognizes exactly the product you are just buying."

Rv: Yes. With the RFID tags (Radio Frequency Identification) that begins to be made without "cashiers" or any human intervention.

In the capitalist reality there are two accountings: one "physical", counting kilograms, liters, meters, etc., that is the use value of things that have been taken; the other is monetary, counting the money obtained by the sales of them, that is their exchange value.

In a full-developped PP based society, in a "gratisist" society, the second one is no use.

The new technologies allow to fulfill in real time, without having recourse to the exchange and market mechanisms the function of information which the market defenders pretend only the markets can give. In fact, it is a qualitatively different information, since contrary to the market it doesn't take into account the

"solvent" wants, the want of the people who can pay, but the wants of all the consumers. In addition, the gratis-distribution stores could have electronic counters where consumers could permanently express new wants, new ways to improve the products, etc. That data would be, as the data concerning the products taken, collected and processed in real time.

Beyond the accounting aspect, the most interesting here is the fact that the decisions about what and which quantity has to be produced can be made for most of them almost directly by the consumers themselves, according to their wants.

The "final user innovation" takes here all its meaning. In the capitalistic world, where the means of production are in the hands of a minority and the goal of production is profit, the Von Hippel's concept is conceived as a way for corporations to reduce their costs of marketing and R&D, improving their profit. In a PP based society, the end-user's satisfaction is the real and unique goal of production and it is natural that the end-users become, at all levels, the main innovator, the main decision maker.

This is particularly important when dealing with the production of means of production (machines, factories, etc.) for which the individual producers are the final users. (See below).

RV (quoted by SM): "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)."

SM: "Here is a big difference to Christian's vision which requires people to choose. Of course I prefer your vision :-)." ."

RV: I am not sure I understand your sentence. I presume that you refer to Christian's idea that the production of a peer-project is "shared" between the "participants" in the project. Which means that the kind of activity a producer can do is determined by the kind of product she wants. If you need a car (example given by Christian) you need to participate in a "car-producing project" or in a project associated to a "distribution pool" which includes a "car-producing project".

The problem is that the permanent development of the division of labor, the increased complexity of interrelations between producers all over the world makes such a vision unrealistic. Less and less products are made from the beginning to the end in only one place or even one country. Even for simple products, even for agricultural or hand-crafted goods, the seeds, the plugs, the instruments, the electricity, etc. may come from very far and different places.

Globalization, pushed by profitability needs and the lowering of the transportation costs, has pursued that tendency to absurd limits: agricultural products, for example, are often imported from the other side of the planet into places where they could be easily produced. In a full developed worldwide peer society such absurdities would not have any reason to exist, but the worldwide dimension of cooperation in production will certainly remain and even be developed in many aspects.

In these conditions it is meaningless to link the right to have access to a product to the participation in the production of that specific product.

Christian is aware of the problem. In his book, he writes:

"The larger a distribution pool becomes, the better for the participants, since any additional projects increase their choices, both in regard to the tasks to perform and the produced items to select from. Ideally, a single global distribution pool will emerge, comprising *all* the projects that are interested in pooling. (...) It is important to realize that for most people, contributions will just take the form of doing some of the things they prefer doing. No one will be forced to spend time with activities they don't like, aside from doing their chosen work, except in the unusual case that none of the projects they prefer working with should be ready to accept their contributions." (p. 37-38)

That is not very far from what I say, at least about about the possibility for producers, in a full developed PP based society, to chose the kind of activity they like.

In fact, Christian seems to envisage two periods: a first one when an increasing number of projects begin to cooperate through "distribution pools" and distribution pools unify themselves; a second one that starts when

"a single global distribution pool will emerge". In the first one, the kind of activity a producer may do is determined by the kind of products she wants to have access to; in the second one producers have an almost complete freedom on choice.

At least we agree on the results for what concerns the last period.

But, I do not agree on the basis on which these results are founded, that is the idea that products of a project are shared (even in different manners, "flat rate", "flat allocation") between the participants to the project. Peer production means to produce for the commons, not for the specific people participating in a specific project.

One of the problems with Christian's book is that it is not always very clear when it is supposed to describe a society in transition from capitalism to a full-developed "peer society" and when it is describing that last one.

SM: "And seeing it that way the urge of humans to abolish work can be used far better: If you look at these needs you have a strong urge to automate away these needs or at least make them pleasant. I think it is very important to release this power!"

RV: Yes. And I think that the transformation of the unpleasant productive tasks, that can not be automated, into pleasant ones is not a secondary priority, something that can be postponed in the process of construction of a PP based society. As soon as we have any power on the means of production, it is crucially urgent to try to transform any productive activity in pleasure, a source of *Selbsentfaltung*. The "sacrifice for the future" ideologies of the countries of the "real socialism" are the opposite of what is needed here.

That task should be under the responsibility of the producers themselves, since they are the "end-users" of the means of production.

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Note:

1. http://raoulv.pagesperso-orange.fr/080616_on_fund_text.rtf