

Visions of a full-scale peer production - Part 2

Incentives to produce in a Peer Production based society

I. In a peer production based society, may a gap exist between social needs and social production?

Stefan Merten wrote (10nov09):

*"I think the fundamental problem is that *societal needs may differ from volunteer needs*."*

Two historical situations: A full developed peer production based society, a society in transition to it.

In a full-developed PP based society, a "peer-gratisist" society, the gap between societal needs and societal production may exist, but it should be an exception or something easy to solve quickly. For the following reasons:

- all productive tasks are pleasant since they have been for years developed, adapted in order to be so. The time they require, the forms of organization, the machines and infrastructures to realize them have all been conceived to make vanish the old distinction between labor and leisure activity. In Marx's words: "labor has become not only a means of life but life's prime want" (1) , even if the term labor loses here its original meaning;
- social needs/wants (for goods of consumption but also for means of production) are instantaneously known, centralized and processed at all levels, including worldwide and small villages - and producers directly informed about them;
- social needs evolution is also permanently forecast (at all levels) incorporating new needs/wants expressed by people.

Under such conditions, a gap, if it appears, can easily be fulfilled. (I leave aside the problems related to natural limits, which, I think, any rational management of the relation with "nature" can allow to overcome).

Things are different in what could be called a period of transition, when a "significant" share of material production is made following peer-production principles, because a "significant" share of material means of production have become commons-possessed, but a still important share of these means remain under private property and principles. Here the gap between social needs and production is inevitable, even if it should permanently decrease. All that depends on the way the social metamorphosis will develop.

Two sides of the problem: the needs of the consumers, the needs of the producers.

I had written (10oct08):

"As far as there is still not a sufficient amplexness of goods and capacities of production in order to allow free and unlimited distribution, how to restrict the consumption to the prevailing possibilities of production?"

You, Stefan, commented:

*"I think this is basically the same as I said above "*societal needs may differ from volunteer needs*"*.

Yes, we both consider a gap between needs and production, needs being greater than production, but you consider the case where the cause of the gap is basically an insufficiency of volunteer producers, and thus you deal with solutions to increase "labor" input, whereas I consider the limits of production in a period of transition as given, depending on "external" (historical) conditions, and thus I talked about solutions to adapt consumption to the social possibilities.

Anyhow, the two issues are real and not contradictory: the gap may be filled by adapting societal needs and/or increasing the production power.

II. Can coercion (2) be a way to increase production in a PP based society?

You wrote:

"The standard answer of capitalism or Christian's model is to use abstract coercion by rewarding people with benefits they are only allowed to enjoy if they somehow contribute to the societal needs."

It is true that Christian's model is based on a sort of individual economic coercion, as in capitalism, even if it is not based anymore on capitalistic (wage system) rules. Christian's book reads: *"If you refuse to cooperate with others, you can hardly expect them to cooperate with you."* But he softens the rule with a strange proposition: *"This does not mean that you would have to starve if you refuse to cooperate. People might well be (consciously) lax in controlling who has access to basic foodstuffs (...); they might grant free access to lodgings that are being reauctionned or that fail to attract anybody willing to live there; and they would certainly not refuse basic health care to anybody who needs it."* (*From Exchange to Contributions*, p.91-92). Instead of the principle "if you do not produce, you do not eat", we have: "if you do not produce, you eat little and bad", aggravated by the dependence on the mood of the persons who control "the access to foodstuffs".

You continue:

"I agree that this is one sort of coercion and we are all sooo used to it. However, obviously this sort of abstraction introduces all kinds of alienation and the problems accompanied by this alienation. In particular it is an automatic system which is beyond the control of mankind."

I think I understand what you mean. You probably refer to the fact that in capitalism the production-distribution process escapes to human control, or, to put it (again) in Marx's terms: *"man's own deed becomes an alien power opposed to him, which enslaves him instead of being controlled by him."* (3) But I don't think it is a question of automatism per se. The problem is that production-distribution is made through commercial rules, based on exchange value and not use value, which have their own logic, independent and often antagonistic to human needs/wants.

Capitalism is not totally "automatic", and the more it is confronted to its own contradictions and difficulties and the more "human" intervention is necessary to keep it running, in particular under the form of State intervention, as the last financial crisis testifies. Christian's model is neither completely "automatic", as we have seen with the role of persons in charge of the allocation of resources for people who do not want to produce, or with the role played by "auctioning" at all levels for allocating tasks and goods.

I think that in a PP society, automation of "decisions" concerning the productive social process will be much more frequent than in capitalism where the exchange-profit logic distort the much simpler logic of use value. Between the need and the production to satisfy it, the relations in terms of use value are simple, direct: children need milk, the producers of milk are informed, they produce it, the transporters and distributors bring it to the children. In terms of exchange value the same relation is made much more complex at every step by the need to check the conditions related to the logic of trade, money, profit: can the children or their parents pay? Are the producers able to make profit producing that milk at the price of the market? Are the banks giving sufficient credit to the transporters? Etc. To that must be added the complexity of the bureaucratic control of the economic life by the State, in particular in the Stalinist regimes: is the ration card

for the children valid? In modern capitalism, at every step of the process of production, the State machine controls every transaction, counts and taxes it. Even if the new technologies allows to reduce the number of people necessary to accomplish that work, it implies a mass of human interventions which would be unnecessary in a society based on PP principles, which produces for the usefulness of things and not for their exchange value.

That does not mean that human intervention disappears. But instead of dealing with alienated problems it concentrates on the real issues: the usefulness of things and not their exchange value.

Software and Internet allow an incredible degree of interactivity, allowing in real time multiple human interventions and centralized results. The example of the software used by airlines corporations, allowing any one, anywhere in the world to book a flight at any other part of the planet gives only a pale idea of what could be done.

"Peer coercion"?

You wrote:

The alternative IMHO is to create an explicit governance scheme where people are coerced to execute societal necessary tasks as part of their normal lives. The big advantage of such an explicit governance scheme is that it is subject to political decisions. Contrary to blind automatism as just outlined political decisions are able to take into account different situations of people. I think this is something useful to strive for."

(...)

"Yes. I think that no automatic system is able to produce justice in a human sense. You need human control (aka politics)."

If I read you well, what you criticize in Christian's model is not the fact that it implies coercion but that this is an "automatic" coercion. And you propose an "explicit", political coercion.

You write at the end of your mail: *"Sorry for rambling. May be my thoughts ring a bell or two, nonetheless."* To be sincere, I am rather puzzled by that part of your rambling. But it may be an occasion to try to deepen some questions.

You seem to accept as a fatality the idea that in PP based society a gap between social needs and social production can be fulfilled using coercion, political coercion on producers. That is equivalent to say that PP principles, and particularly the principle of effort based on voluntary self-aggregation is finally not applicable to material production. Peer production excludes coercion as a motivation to produce, if not, it is not peer production. And the same must be said for a full-developed PP society or a society in transition to it. We had in this list, last spring, a discussion which dealt more or less with that question. I agree with what Stefan Meretz wrote at that time about it: *"Yes. That is the goal: replacement of extrinsic motivation with intrinsic motivation. A free society can only be a non-coercive society."* (29apr09)

One of the biggest historical contributions of the reality of peer production is the practical demonstration, at a complex and worldwide scale, that people may be happy, passionate, giving their efforts "for free" and without any coercion. Contrary to what is often objected, the fact that PP has developed in the realm of freely reproducible numeric goods and the fact that most PP producers do not make their living from it do not restrict the validity of that demonstration. Material production, foodstuffs, houses, hospitals, etc. are also made with human effort, and can thus be also produced with "free efforts". The difficulty is not in the material nature of goods but on the present private, excluding property of the material means of production. If the material means of production become part of the commons and are used according to human needs and not capital profit, producing "for free" material goods becomes perfectly possible too.

IMHO, it is all that perspective that you seem to forget in your "rambling" saying that in a PP based society people may be "coerced to execute societal necessary tasks". The same could be said for Christian's model. A term like "peer coercion" would be as meaningless as the term "peer money".

Would a PP based society be a "political" one?

You write: *"You need human control (aka politics)."*

What is the meaning you give to "politics"? Politics may have a very general definition: *"Politics is a process by which groups of people make collective decisions."* (Wikipedia in English) But historically it has a much more precise meaning. At the origin it comes from the Greek word "polis", the city, and "politikes", "the science of the matter of the city". But the Greek cities were city-states. They were societies divided into classes, where 10 percent of the population lived at the expense of the rest and mainly from the labor of slaves. Since then, humanity has only known class-divided societies and politics has always had the meaning of dealing with the management of the State, made of administrative but also, more specifically, coercion forces in order to maintain the ruling order.

In that sense, "politics" would have no meaning in a full developed PP based society, where classes and exploitation do not exist.

In the period of transition there is a political confrontation between the forces pushing for the new social relationships and the State, guarantor of the old ones. It exist already today on the issue of private property of digital goods, it will be harsher when the question at stake is the private property of the material means of production. It is political because it deals with the State, with relations of forces and power.

When you defend the need of political coercion, who do you imagine would be responsible for it? Who will implement it? A State? An omnipresent bureaucracy controlling the productive activities of everyone, and specialized forces to "punish" those who do not work? In that case, it would be correct to talk of politics. But, is really that what you mean?

III. Incentives to produce in a PP based society

To learn to produce for one's pleasure and the pleasure of the community (Selbstentfaltung) and not under the whip of coercion is impossible using coercion. It would be, at least, counterproductive.

Nor Wikipedia, nor Linux needed any kind of coercion to exist and develop. And yet, writing bibliographic references for articles or writing lines of code is not always immediately fun, and may even be boring in some cases.

In the abstract of your presentation for the Hull conference, "Conflicts and the governance model of Free Software" (1jan10) you refer to a useful concept: "commitment", which I think explains -among others- how this is possible in Free Software. Here you refer to the relations between producers and the maintainers, but it applies to the relation between producers and a project with all its tasks.

"Maintainership and commitment

** If volunteers are not bond why a project stays together?*

** Volunteers are committed to the goal of the project*

** All volunteers are interested in the goal of the project*

** The individual reasons for this may be different*

** Their own interest makes volunteers commit to the project*

** Following own interests is part of Selbstentfaltung."*

Why shouldn't that work in the realm of a material peer production? Why the commitment to the goal of the project could not be an incentive strong enough to allow us to get rid of coercion also in the material sphere?

Interestingly, at the end of your "rambling" you write: *"Important, however, is the common goal. The question, however, is whether all of society can be a common goal in this sense."* Which I understand as: can the material well-being and welfare of the whole society be a project, a goal to which everyone is committed? And, IMHO, the answer is yes.

The feeling of being useful to the human community

The pleasure to participate in the construction of a new world, based on consciously managed human principles can be a tremendous stimulant to "commitment". That feeling is partially felt by people

participating to improve Wikipedia, Linux or Science Commons, for example, in the digital sphere. It certainly plays an important role as incentive. Why wouldn't it be the same in the material one,

There will be more pleasure in a peer production enlarged to the material realm than in the sheer digital sphere because it won't be an activity confined by its nature to specific human capacities. In a full -developed PP based society, the famous passage of Marx's *German Ideology* may become a reality:

"in a communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic."

Here the pleasure of feeling useful to your community is accompanied with the pleasure of doing what you individually want.

The need to be useful to the community has always been used by the ruling classes and their ideological manipulation machines to justify their order and the sacrifices it imposes to the exploited classes. That is particularly true for the Stalinist regimes.

You wrote:

*"AFAICS the GDR - and may be other so-called real-socialist countries - used the concept of duties and of 'working for a higher goal' like the construction of socialism quite a lot. I know this appealed at least to *some* people. "*

Indeed, in State-capitalist regimes, the image of producers for the "community", building the new "socialist" world and the "new man" is always used as an ideological framework. It is indeed important to say that the perspective of a PP based society has nothing to do with that monstrous mystification, where reality was (and still is in some places) the opposite of what the propaganda pretends it is.

The "community's" interests are in fact the interests of the State capital and its bureaucratic *nomenklatura*. Instead of abandoning the slave condition and spirit, where you only work under coercion and because of coercion, these are exacerbated changing the "private" bosses and foremen by the one-party bureaucrats; the old traditional religions by an ultra-nationalistic-style ideology, the whole imprisoned under a strict totalitarian political control. In addition to that, economic scarcity is not only not overcome, among others because of usually very high military expenditure, but it is used and often organized in order to keep people completely obsessed by the daily struggle to find basic goods. That helps preventing them to think more globally.

The goals for the community are of course decided by the ruling bureaucracy centers of power. All is organized top-down, following a strict and rigid hierarchy, where every one, and of course specially the basic producers, are requested to be passive, obedient, submitted.

All that has nothing do do with peer production and that must be highlighted.

Rationale for automation

But let's return to the question of unpleasant tasks.

Christian's book reads:

"There appear to be at least three strategies peer projects can use in regard to unpleasant tasks:

- 1. Automate them away;*
- 2. Make them more fun (more agreeable, more interesting, safer, easier);*
- 3. Make them shorter (by weighting them higher).*

We suppose that all of these strategies would be employed in a society that relies primarily on peer production." (p. 22)

And I suppose that we are dealing mostly with a transitional society, where, as I noted before, contrary to a full-developed PP based society, unpleasant tasks still exist.

With the exception of the "weighting" system proposed by Christian to make the unpleasant tasks shorter, (4) I agree with these three strategies. They were already proposed in the 19th century by pre-Marxist communists, as Théodore Dézamy (5).

I only want to answer the Paul Cockshot's remarks about a previous text of mine on these issues.

I had written (24nov09):

"I think that the transformation of the unpleasant productive tasks, that cannot 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."

Paul commented:

*"One has to be very cautious indeed about assuming that one does not have to count the actual labour cost of doing things if you want to accelerate automation. (...)
If one wants to accelerate technical progress it is essential that in a future society the entire labour cost of an activity is taken into account, otherwise there can be no rational basis for discovering if a new automating technology actually saves work effort." (24nov09)*

But, in a PP based society, the rationale for saving human effort differs qualitatively from the capitalist one. In capitalism, the "work effort" is measured in exchange value as the price (the wage) of the work force, considered as a commodity. The pertinence of automation is decided by the measure of the profit it may allow. In a PP based society, human effort is never considered as commodity and profit, the rewarding of capital, becomes a meaningless concept. The rationale for automation refers essentially to the need to increase the power, the efficiency of human productive effort in order to satisfy more easily human needs/wants, and (but not least) to make more pleasant the productive activity.

The growth of human productivity, which will certainly be a permanent reality in a PP based society, cease however to be a goal per se, for its own sake, as in capitalism. We may decide, for example, to produce a good using more human effort than would be necessary with automation, if conditions and needs allow it, only because we find a specific pleasure in making that kind of effort.

Once producing activities cease to be a displeasure the question of saving "work effort" becomes a completely different one.

Conclusions

A gap between social needs and social production will be a rare and easy to solve problem in a full developed PP based society. It will be more frequent and difficult in a society in transition to it.

Coercion is not a solution to fulfill that gap. Neither in an full developed PP society, where it is unnecessary, nor in transitional society, where it would be counterproductive.

Transforming the atmosphere, the spirit, the organization and the means of the production process are the most efficient and fertile ways to deal with the problem.

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02feb10

Notes:

1. *"Coercion is the practice of forcing another party to behave in an involuntary manner (whether through action or inaction) by use of threats, intimidation, trickery, or some other form of pressure or force."* (Wikipedia in English)
2. *Critique of the Gotha Programme.*
3. *The German Ideology.*

4. "Weighting higher" the unpleasant tasks, is part of the Christian's "auctioning" system: *"I spend 20 hours a week writing software or five [weighted] hours a week removing garbage."* (p. 24) That relates to his vision of a sort of "exchange", which is not the classic market mechanism, but remains based on a symmetric reciprocity, which, IMO contradicts peer production principles.

5. Of course, Dézamy does not use the term "automation", but he clearly defends the idea that the development of modern technologies (of his time) will allow to get rid of the tasks that men will not want to do. I cannot resist the pleasure to quote a passage of his book, *Code de la communauté*, 1842, where he answers, with his flowery style, to the objection that in a communist society nobody will want to do the dangerous and unpleasant tasks. *"But why should we worry for fanciful apprehensions? Won't the community have the prodigious resources of mechanics and chemistry to destroy all the obstacles? Would it be a temerity to foresee the day (very near, in my opinion) when a machine and a horse will do by themselves all the jobs that men won't wish to do, without any other effort than steering the first and spurring the second."*