

MAKING LOVEMARK: EDITORIAL NOTES FOR THE JOPP ISSUE ON PEER PRODUCTION AND WORK

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Editorial Notes for the JoPP issue on Peer Production and Work

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The increasing production of value by entities which are not compensated for their labour – social media users, financial algorithms, robots in factories, etc – mean the ranks of unemployed people keep growing. We often confuse being 'unemployed' with being 'unworked', but what it really means is that we are 'unwaged'. There is a lot of work to be done, but for that to happen it needs to be separated from employment. As a case in point: the peer-reviewed articles in this tenth issue of the Journal of Peer Production examine volunteers in commons-based and commons-oriented production. In all these case studies – whether contributing to an online encyclopedia, to a herbarium, to a scientific project, to mathematical schoolbooks, or engaging in 'maker' activities – their labour was unpaid. This raises a number of questions. Why do they do it? Who can take part? What does this mean for work and society? And finally: why does this matter, and should anything be done about it?

MAKING COMMONS

Why contribute? The question of motivation has been explored at length in the original instances of massively distributed peer projects: Free and Open Source Software (FOSS). Self-governing voluntary associations such as Debian as well as many GNU/Linux distributions, or the GNOME and LibreOffice projects differ from capitalist firms in terms of the predominant logic which animates participants, and in terms of their governance structure. As regards governance, voluntary associations are characterised by a 'distributed' or 'modular' structure. Baldwin & Clark (2000), using the example of the development of the IBM System/360, have shown how decomposition into logical blocks with a standardised interface allows for a reduction in complexity and increase in flexibility. Ethical-modular organisations or EMOs (O'Neil, 2015) adopted this central computational characteristic of being broken up into distinct autonomous components which can be developed in parallel, allowing asynchronous investments of distinct individuals with varying competencies; projects are also granular (modules must be fine-grained) so that they can be performed by people in little time, and motivation can be very small (Benkler, 2006). EMOs are deemed operationally superior to capitalist-centralized organisations: proponents stereotypically argue that ethical-modular organisations are more effective than proprietary systems at achieving correctness, because of the flexible manner in which massive numbers of reviewers can address, in the case of FOSS for example, defects or 'bugs' (Benkler, 2006; Moglen, 1999; Raymond, 1999). In addition, a key quality assurance mechanism of peer production is to eliminate errors in shared intellectual properties by putting into practice the notion that 'open critical discussion' moves us 'closer to the truth' (Popper, 1989, p. 262). The process of peer review enables participants to accrue reputational capital by creating useful solutions and by making sound critical evaluations of the work of others. Criticism serves as a signal to individual developers and to the development community about what is socially and technically valuable.

As regards organisational logic, participants in voluntary associations contribute their time and energy for 'ethical' reasons: they are motivated by self-fulfilment which is validated by a community. In other words, they labour for love, not money. In peer production, labour is communal and outputs are orientated towards the further expansion of the commons; while the commons are the chief resource in this mode of production (Söderberg & O'Neil, 2014). This stands in stark contrast to the dominant system in which 'all livelihoods depend on getting and spending [so that] insufficiency of material means becomes the explicit, calculable starting point of all economic activity' (Salhins, 1972: 4). Capitalist firms produce commodities or services whose value depends on scarcity, artificially maintained if need be, and the acquisition of financial rewards is the main motivation of participants. The co-existence of these two organisational logics forms the subject of the first three peer reviewed articles in this issue. It should be pointed out that in all these examples the purpose of the work is scientific or educational, which clearly facilitates participation.

In '[Producing a Knowledge Commons: Tensions between paid work and peer production in a public institution](#)', Lorna Heaton and Patrícia Dias da Silva examine the non-monetary benefits volunteers receive when classifying plants under the guidance of paid professionals in a public institution.

In '[Crowdsourcing citizen science: Exploring the tensions between paid professionals and users](#)', Jamie Woodcock, Anita Greenhill, Kate

Holmes, Brooke Simmons, Gary Graham, Joe Cox, Eun Young Oh, Karen Masters, and Chris Lintott analyse the collaborative production of scientific knowledge in a research setting.

In '[Communal work and professional involvement: The balance of open source projects](#)', Clément Bert-Erboul documents the tensions arising from paid teachers contributing to a collaborative project.

COMMONS CLASS

Who can take part? Historically hackers, situated at the point of production, have applied significant pressure to capital; however they have not petitioned for better working conditions, but for unrestricted access to the resources they produce. This means that only certain goods are made free, whilst the rest of society is not affected. In terms of labour, programmers increase their favourable position in relation to other workers who encounter ICT-enabled neoliberalism as 'weaker unions, flexible labour markets and deskilling' (Dafermos & Söderberg 2009, p. 67). 'Hardware hacking' purports to extend the abjuration of exclusive property rights beyond information goods, to the physical sphere. The same can be said about the free production of hardware as of software: the passionate labour and abjuration of exclusive property rights over the goods they produce of participants in ethical-modular organisations occur at the expense of less fortunate others, who do not have the disposable income, cultural capital, or family support to engage in unpaid labour (Huws, 2013). In this sense ethical-modular work and organisations, though nominally opposing capitalism, are reproducing existing class hierarchies.

WORKER SHARING

What are the societal implications? From a cost-cutting perspective, capitalism is doing rather well. Beyond even the erasure of traditional divisions between work time and leisure time, the extraction of value from activities which are not even perceived to be labour, such as prosuming social media, is a defining characteristic of 'digital labour' (Casilli, 2017). People really like whatever allows them to be creative, have fun and share resources. How else can we explain the enthusiasm which greeted the arrival of the so-called 'sharing economy'? It was not all hype, but fulfilled a genuine desire for more communality and authenticity in daily life. All the more cruel then that what we were left with in the end was a familiar story: do more with less, dismantle the legacy industry, 'creative disruption'. A textbook illustration of Boltanski and Chiappello's (1999) famous thesis: the artistic critique of capitalism ('liberate me from the inauthentic!') is taken on board by firms in order to evacuate its social critique ('reject egoism and suffering!'). Hyper-connected workers toil and evaluate their performance all the time, whether in their office or on their sentient bicycles.

And yet the cost-cutting logic – the precariat now taking the shape of (a) casualisation, or of workers reinvented as (b) low-paid 'partners' or (c) unpaid 'prosumers' – leads to a contradiction which the Invisible Hand may find hard to overcome. If capitalist development increasingly relies on unpaid free labour, this will have direct consequences on the capacity of people to consume. As Michel Bauwens puts it: 'The knowledge economy turns out to be a pipe dream, because what is abundant cannot sustain market dynamics. [...] Thus we have an exponential rise in the creation of use value, but only a linear increase in the creation of monetary value' (2012).

At the same time, we should avoid an overly singular or 'capitalocentric' view of the economy. If we perceive economic relations as already plural, then the so-called 'project of replacement' can be modified into one of 'strengthening already existing non-capitalist economic processes and building new non-capitalist enterprises', of establishing 'communal subjects' (Gibson-Graham, 2003, p. 157). New forms of solidarity can be imagined. An increasingly large free public goods and services sector could well cohabit in a plural economy with employment in cooperatives, paid independent work, and the wage-earning of the commercial sector. The employment conditions of Italian 'Makers' is the topic of our fourth peer reviewed article.

In '[Makers as a new working condition between self-employment and community peer-production. Insights from a survey on Makers in Italy](#)', Massimo Menichinelli, Massimo Bianchini, Alessandra Carosi, and Stefano Maffei find that Italian Makers, mainly located in traditionally industrial and central and Northern regions, are primarily freelancers and entrepreneurs who exhibit little political or class consciousness.

In '[Peer production's relation to capitalism with Marxism: Complement or alternative?](#)', Arwid Lund, based on a study of Swedish Wikipedians, explores the relationship between the 'insides' and 'outsides' of capitalism. Following Rosa Luxemburg, he argues that peer production threatens capitalism the more self-sufficient it becomes.

EDITORIAL SECTION

We also present an Editorial Section exploring the relationship between commons and capital.

In '[From the commons to capital: Red Hat, Inc. and the business of free software](#)', Benjamin J. Birkinbine explains the relationships between Red Hat, one of the most successful FOSS companies in terms of revenue, and the communal Free Software projects sponsored by the company.

With Molly de Blanc and Mahin Raissi, we present our '[Preliminary Report on the influence of capital in an ethical project: Quantitative data from the 2016 Debian Survey](#)', in which we discuss the results of a large-scale survey of the Debian community that explored the relationships between volunteer and paid work in the Debian project.

Finally, in 'Now, the Commons' members of the Journal of Peer Production's editorial team address the last question we posed at the start of this Introduction: what should be done? We reflect on what the Journal set out to do, what it has achieved, and what it should do next. We argue that it is time to move beyond an exclusive focus on the institutions of the commons, in order to research and develop the ecology, regulations and culture which can grow the commons. We therefore call for both poles (in a nutshell 'partner state' vs. 'DIY') to enter into a debate leading to new strategies for furthering and protecting the commons.

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