

The Digital Commons

Contributed by Michel Bauwens and Tiziana Terranova
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Michel Bauwens: The Digital Commons : interviewed by Tiziana Terranova. (2010.) This article is licensed under the Creative Commons. Source: P2P Foundation. TIZIANA TERRANOVA: Michel, you started the Foundation for P2P alternatives some years ago to create a 'pluralist network to document, research, and promote peer to peer alternatives.' How would you define such peer alternatives? How do you reconstruct the emergence and the various meanings given to p2p? MICHEL BAUWENS: The key moment for me, I was then an internet entrepreneur and strategist for a large corporation, where the few months after the dotcom bust in April 2001. What seemed very clear to me then (and I have since read the moment was also pivotal for Clay Shirky in setting him up to writing Here Comes Everybody), was that internet innovation, instead of slowing down after the exit of capital, was instead speeding up.

Michel Bauwens: The Digital Commons : interviewed by Tiziana Terranova. (2010.) TIZIANA TERRANOVA: Michel, you started the Foundation for P2P alternatives some years ago to create a 'pluralist network to document, research, and promote peer to peer alternatives.' How would you define such peer alternatives? How do you reconstruct the emergence and the various meanings given to p2p? MICHEL BAUWENS: The key moment for me, I was then an internet entrepreneur and strategist for a large corporation, where the few months after the dotcom bust in April 2001. What seemed very clear to me then (and I have since read the moment was also pivotal for Clay Shirky in setting him up to writing Here Comes Everybody), was that internet innovation, instead of slowing down after the exit of capital, was instead speeding up. This was a great paradox, as we usually think of innovation as an entrepreneurial activity, and of entrepreneurial activity as capitalist. But here we could witness a form of social entrepreneurship that was only loosely tied to the need for capital. So, I had to ask myself the question, what is happening here, what is driving this social innovation? And my answer was: it's the peer to peer self-aggregation of individuals around projects for common value creation, using their access to the internet as affordances, and entering into 'permissionless' modes of production. For me, this ability for self-aggregation immediately struck me as having an extraordinary radical potential for changing the logics of our economy and civilization. I started to see peer to peer 'isomorphically' as the underlying common form, an intuition later confirmed by reading Alan Page Fiske's fourfold categorization of the grammar of social relationships, and his notion of non-reciprocal 'communal shareholding', that exists alongside hierarchical allocation, market exchange, and the gift economy. Of course at the time, peer to peer was used almost exclusively for filesharing, occasionally it was extended as a definition for point to point technical architectures. I recall that in the November 2006 Re-activism conference in Budapest, even an eminent movement leader as Lawrence Lessig had no concept of peer to peer outside of filesharing. What I want to stress is that my concept of peer to peer is not technological, it is rather the underlying social form, which primarily is a human logic, enabled only by technology. Peer to peer occurs whenever we can self-aggregate and produce value without permission or dependence on obligatory hubs. For example, we can have very imperfect technical p2p implementations, as the internet and the web undoubtedly are, but socially, they still enable this self-aggregation to occur, and this is the essential core of what I monitor and try to understand. What's peer to peer shifts to the sphere of human (inter)subjectivity and desire, it can use even very imperfect (even the total absence of technological empowerment) p2p infrastructures, for its own benefit. Where I live in Thailand, I now see the emergence of p2p-learning efforts amongst farming communities that have almost no access to the internet for example. Another example are the oversized effects of only intermittent internet access for the working conditions and resistance capabilities of migrant workers in southern China. TIZIANA TERRANOVA: So you are saying that the 2001 dot.com crash was enlightening in as much as it showed to you, an internet entrepreneur and consultant, that social production and innovation does not necessarily need capital to produce value, neither to fund it nor to organize it. You are also saying that p2p production is an anthropological capacity of the human species which technological infrastructures enable to occur, but which can occur independently of it. There are several important implications in your argument which we can discuss during this dialogue. But first I would like to ask you what, in your opinion, triggers the p2p 'logic' to occur, that is what are the conditions that enable a p2p logic to emerge and persist. You seem to imply that the emergence or appearance of p2p does not even need what neoliberal economists would call a certain level of 'human capital' (technical skills for example) or what Marxists would call a high level of autonomous socialization of labor such as you would find in the most advanced sectors of the economy (as in open source with software programmers for example). Why p2p now, then, and under what conditions? MICHEL BAUWENS: Let me unpack some of your summaries, in order to clarify what I'm trying to say. Social production and innovation does not necessarily need capital to produce value. Yes, that is the tendency that I'm trying to pinpoint. I'm suggesting that many phases of innovation, because they are 'immaterial', in the sense of cooperating brains, can use the existing communal capital base for the design and invention phases. For example, Bittorrent and many other internet inventions seem to have been developed with only limited or no formal capital. It is only when these projects are successful that capital influx is needed, if you do not want your servers to crash for example. So capital is intervening a posteriori, and is no longer a priori convention for the innovation to occur. On the other hand, such occurrence needs a high level of generally available social and technical capital, a common infrastructure if you like. I also believe that free software, open design, or peer production generally, will be more sustainable in the long run, if they can successfully associate with an ecology of businesses. Almost all maintainers/committees in free software projects need to be paid at some point. So the whole process is not entirely divorced from capitalism and private enterprise, but is nevertheless a radical reformulation of the relationship between community, corporation, and public authorities, and furthermore, nothing prevents us from wishing and thinking about

alternative modes of linkage between open design and physical production. P2P production is an anthropological capacity of the human species which technological infrastructures enable to occur, but which can occur independently of it. Communal shareholding, i.e. voluntary participation and non-selective availability, has always existed, but very much limited in space and dealing with physical resources. Whenever a certain level of complexity occurred in the social structure, thinking of the Dunbar number which basically says human egalitarian relations break down over 120 people, human organization seems to switch to hierarchical modes of allocation. But what if coordination and transaction costs diminish to such an extent, that people can aggregate in small groups on a global scale, and coordinate such activities without central allocation of resources. I think this is precisely what distributed technologies enable: the global coordination of small groups. This is what I suggest is happening. The next step is that humanity, which sees this possibility, then starts desiring it without having necessarily access to the whole technical infrastructure, and finds creative ways of organizing in that way, despite physical limitations. But of course there are limits to that. Hierarchy, markets, and democracy are three ways to allocate scarce resources, which can be "designed away" through instantiating abundance to the self-aggregation of distributed resources. Of course, not everything is non-rival, so this value-conscious design must learn to distinguish where we need self-aggregation, and where we need democratic allocation of rival goods. I don't know if that makes my argument subtle or befuddled? But essentially, I want to escape any technologically determinist explanation. Every technology, before it comes into existence, already has to exist in the social imaginary of at least a minority, but, once a particular type of affordances gets broader usage, it starts affecting human consciousness of much larger groups. So of course, I do not dispute the necessity for human capital, but don't want to reduce the whole phenomena to it either. If you ask me what triggers it, it is the "taste" of unalienated working, of intrinsic motivation, of passionate engagement and of collective meaning making outside of authoritarian structures. Once you have tasted it as a realizable human mode, it's hard to accept the ordinary limitations and frustrations of authoritarian structures. In terms of conditions, I would like to posit some general rules. I do personally believe there are structural developmental phases in both individuals and societies; at the same time, there are also cultural DNA systems which are different. These phases are mixtures of objective social structures, and of subjective social mentalities. Full "peer to peer" systems may only be able to emerge and used to full advantage in certain sectors of society; they may act as chaotic attractor of the ideals of a much larger group, and finally, they act as an underlying constitutional code, a crystallization of values that will influence even those least ready to accept the whole system in its totality. In addition, the history of technological diffusion and the resulting social revolutions show that while advanced technologies are "invented" in the core countries of the dominant system, it is in the periphery that the greatest relative advantage is obtained, and where it is most likely to expect radical social reorganizations that are able to harness the new potential. The merchant capitalist revolutions did not take place in Spain or Portugal, and neither did the workers revolutions take place in the advanced western countries. For the moment, in the emerging phase, p2p can fully flower in the "advanced" countries; but this is a temporary state of affairs. It is not in the West that I expect to see the full flowering of open design communities with relocalized production, but outside of it, as they have so much more to gain from hyperproductive peer production and dramatically lower investment requirements for distributed physical infrastructures.

TIZIANA TERRANOVA: It seems to me a very pragmatic position. It opens up a number of interesting issues, as well. The first one is obviously its relation to existing economic structures, such as business and its various means to measure economic value. What happens, in your experience, when a p2p project meets/needs capital influx, even a posteriori? Does such encounter induce any changes in the p2p modality of organization? Or, on the other hand, does the encounter between capital and p2p causes any substantial changes in the way capital itself operates? I am thinking for example of the rhetoric of Web 2.0 business speak, as in Tim O'Reilly's web 2.0 manifesto, where he insistently uses the word "harnessing" to describe the nature of the operation that a web 2.0 business needs to perform on the power of social networks in order to produce economic value. O'Reilly for example maintains the importance of maintaining control (which means intellectual property) over core data generated by users of web 2.0 platforms.

MICHEL BAUWENS: If we examine the modalities of mutual adaptation between peer projects and business entities, I think we can distinguish various models already. The first and most "capitalist" one is crowdsourcing. In this scenario, a platform is created by a business entity, which uses voluntary contributions that are offered to the market. In these scenarios, the process remains under the overall control of the platform owner, the voluntary contributors are weaker because they are motivated by their own individual financial gain. This resembles most to the critiques of simple digital sharecropping as the risk is externalized to the free agents, who may or may not, be able their monetize their contribution. Nevertheless, because the contributor communities are nevertheless collaborating over open platforms, they have a common informational power. The issue of exploitation is nevertheless tempered because such free agency is often a deliberate and useful lifestyle choice for many participants. The second format, the sharing economy, sees individuals creating for their own creative expression, for aesthetic use value if you like, and are not primarily motivated by monetary gain. In this scenario, the proprietary platforms sell their attention to the advertizers. The issue of exploitation is more complex here, because there is no expectation of monetary gain by participants, who see the platforms as enablers of the sharing. But of course a price is paid, because while openness creates value, it is the various enclosures that create marketable scarcity, and participants lose control over their data etc. The third format is peer production proper. This occurs where there is a common intention to create a social artifact, and because such communities have stronger links within, they are often able to create their own infrastructures of cooperation. What we have here is often a triune structure between self-governing community, a for-benefit association managing the infrastructure of cooperation, and an ecology of business profiting but also contributing to the commons through benefit-sharing. Businesses can either create added value for the marketplace, but often contribute directly through the commons because it benefits them strategically. What are the effects when a

majority of peer producers start to get paid? The record so far, is that the open development process and values of the community are being preserved, though of course the corporate influence will determine more of the direction of the efforts. This third format, most independent of the corporate role because it relies on stronger communities with their own infrastructure, can face different issues, such as the power struggles within Wikipedia for example. I'm still hesitating to add a fourth category, the adventure economy, which takes place entirely through non-monetary means, like for example hospitality exchange. What does all of this accomplish? On the one hand a strengthening of peer production and non-monetary logics, and on the other hand an integration in capitalist logics, both at the same time. The issue of peer producers is how to preserve their interests, i.e. the community vs. platform owner replaces the worker vs. capital owner logic; and how to invent and promote social forms that can create more autonomous space for peer production? So I invite people to look at this neither as a process that gives victory to one party over another, but rather as a mutual adaptation, just as new capitalist forms were originally integrated in a society dominated by feudal forms. What we see is a mutual reconfiguration of classes: all workers will gradually increase the peer production aspects of their lives, with some knowledge workers achieving a full logic of peer production (for example through forms of patronage, which can be corporate, public, or through cooperative work arrangements); at the same time, sections of the existing elite are reconfiguring themselves into a position of netarchical capitalism, become enablers of the new participatory modes, because it benefits them. Such netarchical capital no longer has to rely on intellectual property and is compatible with open, participatory and commons-oriented modalities, even as it seeks to control and harness them. Let's not just give agency to capital, who wants to harness participation, but also to the peer producers, who are striving to create common value through passionate production. Netarchical capital has some common interests with the peer producing communities, as they are co-creating the infrastructure of cooperation, and has differential interests as it tries to unilaterally profit from that value creation. I think that Eben Moglen was right on target when he said that free software, and we can extend this to peer production generally, was the wet dream of both capitalists and communists! I want to add a provocative thesis here: that peer production is hyperproductive, especially when it can rely on a triune combination of self-governing community, for-benefit association, and business ecology. And second, that this model will increasingly morph into physical production, where open communities can combine not just with built-only capitalism, but eventually with new cooperative modes of physical production.

TIZIANA TERRANOVA: All of this sounds very appealing, smooth and almost inevitable! I am going to play devil's advocate and ask about some possible issues hindering the affirmation of an economy whereby peer-to-peer would be the dominant economic ethos. Obviously, I consider such affirmation as very desirable, but, in the first place, considering the active role played by governments, international financial actors such as the IMF or World Bank, etc in imposing an economic model which tends to promote further accumulation of capital even by means of permanent warfare if necessary, do you expect the peer-2-peer economy to be smoothly accepted? What for example if a government decided to promote at all costs the construction of enormous nuclear power stations rather than a p2p solar power network, actively boycotting the public appeal, funding and sustainability of the latter so that the first might be built (as it is happening in Italy)? Another example is the push in Naples to build huge, expensive incinerators to solve the rubbish problem. In order to do that the construction of cheaper, decentralized networks of cooperatives engaged in door to door rubbish collection and recycling is actively boycotted in a number of ways (from the media to the actual policy-making bodies to organized crime). It seems to me that when it comes to the real big money, the p2p solution tends to be actively obstructed in order to favour an old-style economy of large profits. I am not resigned to that, of course, but I wonder about how, when faced with such obstructive and repressive tactics, a p2p network might find the political strength to impose its model. Furthermore, I always wondered about the degree of sociality involved in a p2p network. The literature on p2p tends to stress a kind of spontaneous sociality emerging among abstract cooperating individuals. You place the desire for a different mode of production, of life really, at the heart of the drive to build p2p networks. But sociality can be something very turbulent, involving relationships of affinity and belonging as well as conflict and antagonism between cultures, perspectives, ways of living, interests, histories, even identities. Cooperatives and groups of all kinds often fall apart because of all kinds of issues among their members. How do you account for the conflictuality and partiality of human sociality in p2p networks?

MICHEL BAUWENS: I understand there are two issues in your question, so will reply to them separately. The first is whether the p2p ethos is going to be embraced smoothly and you cite many examples where they are being actively combated and sidestepped. I completely agree with you that this is likely to happen. In fact, it is precisely the situation today. Today, we have on the one hand a thriving scene of peer to peer cooperation and innovation, see for example the underlying principle of the site wordchanging.org, and its continuous reporting of social and technological innovations that offer real solutions to our pressing problems. But we can clearly see the problem you describe. They are only being used marginally, they are being ignored, and they don't scale for lack of any support, leading many inventors to live lives of scarcity. But I see this denial as being a first stage reaction. I presume that the Roman leadership at first neglected the Christians. The problem with denial is that the present social logic has become hyperdestructive for the survival of the biosphere. The elite camp will therefore be divided into two camps. On the one hand those that want to actively oppose the new mode of production and sociality, and we can see this at work in the generalized war against filesharing. The question is: of course they can win battles, but can they ultimately win the war? The worst case scenario of this mentality we have already seen with the Bush administration. It represents those privileged that hope that even amongst general chaos and dislocation, they can survive as an elite, and they are furiously buying up real estate in the regions of the world they think will escape catastrophe. A good historical example I think is again Rome, where the elite never accepted to compromise with the Roman population, and preferred destruction of the Empire above compromise. But I'm presuming another type of reaction, as currently visible in the opinions of Gore, Soros, Stern and others. This segment of the elite sees clearly that there is no future, and that the global structure of Empire needs deep reform: they want a combination of global Keynesianism, a green capitalism.

They will naturally gravitate towards the new netarchical capitalists and green investors. For the latter, an alliance with the peer to peer forces is a natural necessity. Yes, they want the market to prevail and retains its dominance, yes they want to control participation and integrate into their own value chains, but they also know that participation is essential for sustainability. So the choice here is descent into biospheric destruction and financial collapse, or a global reform of capitalism. I believe we have a real chance of achieving this, and that we are in a new period of social history, where the dislocations of global capitalism will give rise to massive social movements that will challenge the present status quo and give a chance for that global compact to emerge. For me, this is where peer to peer transforms itself from a germ form, to an essential part of the new system, but to which it is as yet subsumed. Let's call it the parity phase, because participation will inevitable become a central part of the new type of political economy. So we arrive at stage three, which centers around the question: will green capitalism ultimately work? If the answer is negative, then we have to envisage an ultimate turnaround to peer to peer becoming the mainstay of society, with the market subsumed as a specialized system for non-essential rival goods. This is the positive scenario. The negative one is the one you can glean in the blog of John Robb of Global Guerillas. In this scenario, the ruling classes do not compromise, the system inevitably breaks down, and what you get is some new kind of chaos centered around the survival of strong cities and their hinterlands, co-existing with global ideological networks and weak states. But even in this scenario, he predicts the surviving communities will be those that achieve what he calls 'resiliency' and this can only happen by the incorporation of substantial elements of the peer to peer logic. Now to your challenge concerning conflicting socialities. I think that peer to peer offers ways of dealing with conflict. First of all, the big innovation is to distinguish the non-reciprocal self-aggregation from the management of scarcity. This has never been done before. It was always the case that those who controlled the infrastructure of scarcity, also controlled the productive processes. This is no longer the case, we now distinguish between the processes of production, with a posteriori control and permission-less production of the abundant immaterial goods, and the management of the scarce infrastructure of cooperation, under the form of either for-benefit institutions (usually 'Foundations'), or proprietary platform owners. This gives many different conflictualities: 1) between peer producers and the core leadership, usually taken the form of 'benevolent dictators' being balanced by exit-based empowerment; 2) democratic conflict within the for-benefit institutions; 3) social conflict between users and platform owners. Cultural conflict is in my view solved not internally, but through differentiation. This means that the affinity principles avoids conflict through the specialization of initiatives. I also believe that peer to peer is an object-centered sociality and that it is the object which is the disciplinary factor which cuts across culture. The meritocracy trumps cultural identities that are not related to the object, or, different cultural sensitivities create different objects and peer projects. It is around the object that different p2p projects develop their immune systems against disruption. Peer to peer does not solve cultural difference or conflict, but 'routes around them' where possible, and where it cannot, it is subject to the same kind of disruption as other modes. Peer governance does not replace democracy, but creates a sphere of self-aggregation and autonomy wherever abundance is possible, leaving democracy or hierarchy to deal with the remaining conflicts around scarcity.