

The Economy of Collaboration 3.0

Contributed by Andrew Swenson
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Andrew Swenson: The Economy of Collaboration 3.0. (2010.) This article is licensed under the Creative Commons. Source: Wordpost. Recently, Carlos Miceli argued that the future of collaboration is not in win-win transactions, but in a pay-it-forward type of interaction where one gives for the sake of giving and not for the sake of winning. Miceli states: "The future of collaboration is ego-less... The real test comes when you have the opportunity to help someone with the previous knowledge that that person won't be able to reciprocate. Paradoxically, the only way to do this consistently is to forget about the economic way of thinking." Seeing Collaboration 3.0 in Economic Terms In economic terms, there are typically two types of exchange (Lapavistas, 2004): 1. Market exchange, often equated with "rationality," is a system in which commodities are exchanged for the purpose of material gain. Andrew Swenson: The Economy of Collaboration 3.0. (2010.) Recently, Carlos Miceli argued that the future of collaboration is not in win-win transactions, but in a pay-it-forward type of interaction where one gives for the sake of giving and not for the sake of winning. Miceli states: "The future of collaboration is ego-less... The real test comes when you have the opportunity to help someone with the previous knowledge that that person won't be able to reciprocate. Paradoxically, the only way to do this consistently is to forget about the economic way of thinking." Seeing Collaboration 3.0 in Economic Terms In economic terms, there are typically two types of exchange (Lapavistas, 2004): 1. Market exchange, often equated with "rationality," is a system in which commodities are exchanged for the purpose of material gain. 2. Non-market exchange, often equated with gift economy, is a system in which certain moral norms govern social exchange for nonmaterial rewards. In this system, the act of giving is more important than the gift itself. I think collaboration operates within these economic models. A Problem with "Give-Win" Market-exchange collaboration will always focus on those things that are rationally essential for self-benefit. This is what Miceli says of collaboration 2.0 which is "focused on transactions. A win-win situation. Both give to get something in return." In contrast, however, non-market of collaboration isn't about gain, but gift. Again Miceli: "The only real way to create meaningful bonds and projects is to do it without expecting anything in return." Although the act of giving something away with no demand for reciprocation certainly seems possible, we would be imprudent to ignore Marcel Mauss, who argued that we have a deeply ingrained sense that "gifts" are never free because they always give rise to reciprocal exchange. Nodding to Mauss's work in *Given Time*, Derrida (1992) challenges the concept of "gift logic" specifically because a gift can never achieve its goals. The Gift as Marcel Mauss (2002; original 1950) is "everything but the gift: It deals with economy, exchange, contract (do ut des), it speaks of raising the stakes, sacrifice, gift and counter-gift—in short, everything that in the thing itself implies the gift and the annulment of the gift (Derrida, 1992, p. 24)." This means that as a principle, a "gift" appears as gift, but does not present itself as a gift as such—as Schrift (1997) cleverly explains: a gift "can never be (a) present" (p. 10). Escaping the Gift Economy For Derrida (1992), in order for a gift to achieve its goals, it must be forgotten both by the donor and by the donee. If both parties do not forget, they are both subject to the moral burden of obligation until the gift is reciprocated (the donor waits for the donee to return the favor). Only when the moral obligation for reciprocation is always already forgotten and deferred is the gift able to transcend the confines of economy. And only when we've transcended the confines of economy can we realize Miceli's thesis. [In case you're wondering how this fits with Derrida's larger corpus: because the act of giving is also governed by the divided origin of *différance*, the gift circumvents the metaphysics of presence—it demands to be forgotten and deferred.] I realize what I'm suggesting is radical. The most important point of this post: I'm suggesting that in order to have a true "give-win" situation that demands no reciprocation, we must remove all economic considerations from collaboration. This would mean that after a gift has occurred in a collaborative partnership, both parties must forget the transaction occurred entirely. It must be as if the donee has inherited something: the donor has died and the beneficiaries are free to act as they wish with their new resources. This is the only way that a gift can escape the moral confines of the gift economy. This aneconomic collaboration makes asks for no favors, but produces only possibility—provided we forget. What we can do realistically The problem it would seem, is with the forgetting. Human relationships just don't work that way. Not to mention the logical impossibility: it's like telling the recipient of a letter, "do not read me, burn what I am writing you" (Derrida 1987, p. 59). Although I believe in Collaboration 3.0, and although I want to practice it in my own life, the concept seems to be based on personal ethics (perhaps even on faith in benevolence as such) that lacks a solid pragmatic backing. If only Plato was right: if we could just see the good, then we'd do it. But human history tells us another story. Even when we manage to see the good, we tend to do what's best for us as individuals instead. How do we make it work? So now that we've heard Miceli's case for Collaboration 3.0, and my (perhaps esoteric and rambley) deconstruction of the concept with a correspondingly bleak outlook, how do we make it work? If you have any ideas, please share. I believe in the concept, I'm just uncertain that we can get there.