

# Building the digital commons

# The digital commons

- Commons: sharing of resources which are held in common.
- people, resources, governance
- The digital commons = non-commodified spaces on the internet
- Examples of digital: Wikipedia, open-source software, open access publishing, Creative Commons

# DC and natural commons

Key differences to traditional commons (material and immaterial):

1. The digital commons is not just about sharing of resources, but about building them. Benkler (2006): commons-based peer production
2. Shared resources in the digital commons are non-rival goods or abundant
- 3.
4. So the problems we may anticipate with the building of the DC are not about governance but about labour

# DC – observation 1

- Political economy of digital commons
- Not a gift economy but an economy of one-sided contributions
- Not based on reciprocity or mutuality, but asymmetric contributions
- Contributions are a gift to humanity (like art at its best)
- Consequence: self-sustainability by the community of contributors is tricky

# DC – observation 2

- Uneven development of the digital commons
- Nice and growing development in the knowledge commons and the software commons
- Arrested development in the art commons and the cultural commons and in the design for material goods (cars, architecture etc.)
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# DC – observation 2

- Knowledge commons and software commons is developed with paid labour (mostly)
- Cultural commons is not developed with paid labour
- How to unlock commons based peer production for all areas of cultural and economic activity
- The key problem is not free labour but not enough free labour; the problem is exhaustion

# The problem

- The DC is not an autonomous political economy. It is like a little island in a big sea (of capitalism). It very much depends on its context and its environment.
- Its economy of contribution makes sustainability difficult
- It's reliance on wage labour makes an overall development difficult

# Another problem: the crisis of wage labour

- Rise of unemployment and surplus populations (the reserve army of capitalism) due to
  - Digital technologies (automation, robotics, artificial intelligence, 3D printing and DIY production), lead to reduction of wage labour in ALL industrial sectors. Rifkin 2014; Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2011
  - Primitive accumulation (precapitalist workers turned into wage labour, e.g. China and the doubling of the global proletariat (Srnicek/Williams 2015))
  - Exclusion of specific populations from wage labour (slavery, prison populations, slums, refugees etc)

# The crisis of wage labour

- From the replacement of unskilled labour to skilled labour (mostly immaterial labour)
- Extreme reduction of wage labour
- Extreme devaluation of wage labour
- law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall (Marx)
- No more growth, no more capitalism

# The solution?

- For both, the arrested development of the DC and for the crisis of wage labour the state is needed as an actor
- A global basic income scheme, in: Wittel 2013, Counter-commodification,
- [https://www.academia.edu/3740895/Counter-commodification\\_The\\_Economy\\_of\\_Contribution\\_in\\_the\\_Digital\\_Commons](https://www.academia.edu/3740895/Counter-commodification_The_Economy_of_Contribution_in_the_Digital_Commons)
- Maybe more realistic: funding (national and international) to build the DC
- Corbynomics (Richard Murphy): quantitative easing for the people (to fund infrastructure projects)

# The question

- Let's assume Corbyn will become PM in the UK and QE for the people will happen.
- Let's assume further he will reserve something of this sum, say £1 billion, to invest into the internet.
- How should this money be spend? Or with Lenin:  
“What is to be done?”

# The activist turn

- Can be observed in all disciplines in social sciences and in humanities
- Perhaps most evident in areas related to media and communication
- Activism:
  - Reaching out to wider publics
  - More than critique: engagement with the objective to influence and change
  - Proposals for change
  - Anti-capitalist position

# The activist turn in media and communication studies

## 1. Direct action language

- Critical Art Ensemble, *Electronic Civil Disobedience*
- Joss Hands, *@ is for Activism*
- Todd Wolfonson, *Digital Rebellion*
- Alain Badiou, *Philosophy for Militants*
- Richard Barbrook, *Class Wargames*
- Jerome Roos and ROAR Magazine
- Pluto, *Digital Barricades* book series

# The activist turn in media and communication studies

## 2. Platform cooperatives

–Trebor Scholz 2015

## 3. Rebuilding the web

–Astra Taylor and 'The people's Platform'

–Douglas Rushkoff and ContactCon 2011

## 4. Copyright and intellectual property

–Larry Lessig and the Creative Commons

–Dmytri Kleiner and copyfarleft

# The activist turn in media and communication studies

## 5. Open access publishing

- Ephemera, tripleC, JOPP, nettime
- Leicester Business School vs Taylor&Francis
- Activism against academia.edu and researchgate
- Open Library of Humanities

## 6. Building the commons

- P2pFoundation
- Heinrich Boell Stiftung
- The FLOK society transition project in Ecuador

# The activist turn in media and communication studies

7. Social media and finance (debt, money, currency etc)

- Andrew Ross and debt strike
- David Graeber and debt amnesty
- Dmytri Kleiner and venture communism
- MoneyLab at the institute for Network Cultures
- Brett Scott (The Heretic's Guide to Global Finance) and the London School of Financial Activism

# The activist turn in media and communication studies

## 8. Building education commons

- Social Science Centre in Lincoln
- Free University of San Francisco
- Leicester People's University
- Free University of Liverpool
- The Free University of Brighton
- London Free School
- Cardiff's People University
- The Ragged University, Edinburgh

# The activist turn: moving forward

- So many great initiatives, but so far we have not figured out a strategy to develop a new mode of production; how to expand the commons based peer production
- My take: state funding or UN funding is needed, this is a global project and 'folk politics' (Snricek/Williams) won't succeed. So:
  - How do we get this funding?
  - What should we do with it?
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# The activist turn: moving forward

- Learning from the making of the neo-liberal hegemony, which did not arise inevitably from the logic of capital (a thought collective)
- Focus on the activist network
- Meet (conferences, workshops)
- Get the story straight, construct an ideology
- Disseminate, lobby, make allies
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- Let's get the ball rolling