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Political Economies as Moral Economies
Commodities, Gifts, and Public Goods

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Goods and the Good Life

Economics, as it emerged as an academic discipline at the turn of the twentieth century, claimed to offer a scientific basis for the study of economic affairs. Its dominant form presented capitalism as a network of markets, regulated by rational self-interest, whose organization and outcomes could be modeled mathematically. Empirical inquiry was fenced off from questions of value, cutting the links to moral philosophy that had been central to the project of political economy launched in the late eighteenth century as part of a more general search for a secular basis for moral action. The catastrophic financial crash set in motion by the collapse of the Lehman Brothers bank in September 2008 has now forced questions of ethics back into discussions of economic affairs in the most brutal way.

This "moral turn" is particularly marked in Britain where, for over a decade, the City of London has been uncritically celebrated as one of the key hubs of the new capitalism and left to compete in the global marketplace with the minimum of oversight. The social and human costs are now being counted in rising unemployment, decimated retirement savings, and savage cuts in public provision as funding for essential services is diverted to pay for the unprecedented scale of government borrowing required to bail out failing banks. Despite the havoc visited on countless working lives, many bankers have continued to display a callous disregard for public misery and to pay themselves huge bonuses. Faced with this selfishness and self-regard several notable celebrants at the altar of finance have

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been moved to recant, or to voice major doubts about their former faith. Stephen Green, the Group Chairman of HSBC, one of the world's largest banks, has been moved to argue that "capitalism for the 21st century needs a fundamentally renewed morality to underpin it," one that asks again "what progress really is. Is it the accumulation of wealth, or does it relate to a broader, more integrated understanding of well-being and quality of life" (Green 2009, 35). Gordon Brown, who as Chancellor, and then Prime Minister, presided over a radically deregulated financial sector, belatedly concludes that "we have discovered to our cost, without values to guide them, free markets reduce all relationships to transactions [and] unbridled and untrammelled, become the enemy of the good society" (Brown 2010).

This admission would have come as no surprise to Adam Smith, born like Brown, in the town of Kirkaldy in Scotland, and one of the founding figures in developing a political economy of complex societies. From the outset, political economists saw questions about how the production and circulation of goods should be organized as part of a more general philosophical inquiry into the constitution of the good society. Smith's promotion by neoliberals as a militant apostle of free markets conveniently elides the strong moral basis of his thought. His lectures as Professor of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow University were the basis for his first book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), in which he famously argues that although the rich may only be interested in "the gratification of their own vain and insatiable desires … They are led by an invisible hand," which without them intending it or knowing it leads them to "advance the interest of the society" by dividing "with the poor the produce of all their improvements" (Smith 1969, 264–5). This, as the radical political economist Joan Robinson tartly noted, was the "ideology to end ideologies" (Robinson 2006, 76), an act of intellectual alchemy that turned the base metal of self-interest into the gold of social equity. By assuming that accumulation always produced benign outcomes, it abolished exploitation with the stroke of a pen. But as Smith acknowledged elsewhere in the text, while commercial calculation provided a practical basis for social order, it did not produce the good society. This required generosity and mutuality. Societies, he argued, "may be upheld by a mercenary exchange of good offices according to an agreed valuation," but "not in the most comfortable state" (Smith 1969, 125). For Smith: "All members of society stand in need of each other's assistance [and] where [this] is reciprocally afforded from love, from gratitude, from friendship and esteem, the society flourishes and is happy [and] all the different members of it … are, as it were, drawn to one common centre of mutual good offices" (p. 124).

In Smith's view, however, since egotism was a stronger motivating force than altruism, the spirit of beneficence and reciprocity could not be relied on to take the weight of a complex society. It was "the ornament which embellishes, not the foundation which supports the building" (p. 125). Order required an effective justice system to punish wrongdoers.

Putting the "Political" into Political Economy

In 1776 Smith published his second major work, *The Wealth of Nations*. Within months of its appearance, the American Declaration of Independence accelerated the struggle for full popular participation in the process of government. The American and French Revolutions announced the death of the subject and the birth of the citizen. People were no longer to be subjected to the unaccountable power of monarchs, emperors, and despots. They were to be autonomous political actors, with full and equal rights to participate in social life and in the political decisions affecting their lives. From that point on, the terms of debate changed irrevocably. Discussion about how best to respond to the expansion of capitalism, and its transition from a mercantile to an industrial base, was bound up with debates on the constitution of citizenship and the state's role in guaranteeing the concrete resources that supported full participation. Analysis of the economic order could not be separated from considerations of extended state intervention, its nature, rationale, and limits. Questions of political economy were more than ever questions about the political.

Smith saw a clear role for the state in addressing market limits, arguing that: "When the institutions or public works which are beneficial to the whole society … are not maintained by the contribution of such particular members of the society as are most immediately benefitted by them, the deficiency must in most cases be made up by the general contribution of the whole society" (Smith 1999, 406).

Which institutions qualified for public subsidy, however, became a focus for heated argument. Smith himself was cautious. He saw a role for public money in supporting universal basic education, but argued that the state could best support general cultural life, "painting, music … dramatic representations and exhibitions" by "giving entire liberty to all those who for their own interest" would provide them (1999, 384). As the struggle for full citizenship escalated, however, increasing doubts were raised over the market's ability to guarantee cultural rights.

It was clear that some of the essential resources required for full participation – minimum wages, pensions, unemployment and disability benefits, holiday entitlements, housing, and healthcare – were material and these became the site of bitter struggles over the terms and scope of collective welfare. But it was equally clear that they were not enough in themselves. They had to be matched by essential cultural resources; access to comprehensive and accurate information on contemporary events and to the full range of opinions they have generated; access to knowledge, to the frameworks of analysis and interpretation that place events in context, trace their roots, and evaluate their consequences; the right to have one's life and ambitions represented without stereotyping or denigration; and opportunities to participate in constructing public images and accounts and contribute to public debates (Murdock 1999).

Delivering these resources on an equitable basis shifted the state from a minimalist to a more expansive role. As well as deterring crime and guaranteeing the orderly social and financial environment required for commercial transactions, it was increasingly expected to deliver on the promise of citizenship. As part of this process, the management of cultural provision and mass communication, pursued through varying combinations of regulation and subsidy, became very much part of public policy. Regulation aimed to ensure that the public interest was not entirely subordinated to the private interests of media owners and advertisers. Subsidy addressed the market's perceived failure to deliver the full range of cultural rights by financing cultural institutions organized around the ideal of "public service" rather than profit generation.

These initiatives constructed a dual cultural and communications system. On the one side stood a dominant commercial sector, either selling cultural commodities (books, magazines, cinema tickets, hit records) directly to consumers or selling audience attention to advertisers and offering the product (commercial radio and television programming) free. On the other side stood a less well-resourced public sector providing a range of public cultural goods and services: libraries, museums, galleries, public broadcasting organizations. This was the landscape that the political economy of communications in western capitalism encountered when it emerged as a specialized field of academic study after World War II.

It produced a preoccupation with capital–state relations that spoke to the shifting organization of capitalism at the time. The project of reconstruction in Europe produced varying forms of welfare capitalism in which the state took on an increasing range of responsibilities for cultural and communications provision. Decolonization struggles created a proliferating number of newly independent states, many of which opted for "development" strategies that relied on concerted state intervention in major sectors, including culture and communications. The global ascendency of American capitalism and the growing power and reach of the media majors raised pressing questions of regulation at home and cultural imperialism abroad. As centrally planned economies with no legal countervailing private sector, the two major communist blocs, controlled by the Soviet Union and China, remained largely outside this debate, however. Consequently, though they were of intense interest to political scientists, they were largely ignored by political economists of communication.

This landscape changed again in the late 1970s, as the balance between capital and state shifted decisively in favor of capital. The collapse of the Soviet Union, Deng's turn to the market in China in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, and India's break with Gandhi's ethos of self-sufficiency, reconnected three major economic regions to the circuits of global capitalism after decades of isolation or relative distance. At the same time, concerted neoliberal attacks on the inefficiency and unresponsiveness of the public sector ushered in an aggressive process of marketization in a number of emerging and established economies, including Britain (Murdock and Wasko 2007). Against this background, it is not surprising that critical political economists of communication have given priority to challenging the key tenets of "market fundamentalism" and defending public sector institutions.

This binary mindset abolishes almost entirely any sustained consideration of the economy of gifts and the many ways that mutual assistance and reciprocity have been expressed in a variety of practical forms throughout the history of modern capitalism. Gifting is the central organizing principle of civil society. Whenever people mobilize spontaneously to protect or pursue their shared interests, we see labor given or exchanged voluntarily with no expectation of monetary payment. "Civil society is where we express 'we' rather than just 'me', where we act with others rather than only doing things for them or to them" (Carnegie UK Trust 2010, 148). With the rise of the Internet, and the proliferating range of collaborative activities it supports, this neglected economy has been rediscovered and its "most radical parts … from the open source movement and creative commons to the activists innovating around social networks" hailed as a new basis for civil society (p. 148). Unfortunately, rather than seeing it as a necessary third term, its most ardent enthusiasts have constructed another binary opposition in which online social sharing is locked in an escalating battle with corporations intent on extending their reach by commandeering unpaid creative labor and developing new revenue streams. This struggle is real enough, but it is not the whole story. It omits the ways that the expansion of the Internet has also revivified public cultural institutions.

Competing Moral Economies

Whenever we engage in transactions involving the consumption or exchange of goods and services, we enter a chain of social relations stretched over time. Looking backward poses questions about the conditions of production and the social and environmental costs incurred, forcing considerations of justice and equity to the forefront of debate. Looking forward raises issues of waste, disposability, sustainability, and shared fate. These concerns are underpinned by fundamental questions about our responsibilities and obligations toward all those people who we will never meet but whose life chances and opportunities for self-realization are affected by the modes of production and forms of exchange we choose to enter into. This is the central moral question facing modern societies, but it immediately bumps up against the militant promotion of the ethos of possessive individualism that underpins capitalism.

If we trace the fate of the demands for liberty, equality, and fraternity announced by the French Revolution, we see the rhetoric of individual freedom annexed by the champions of the minimal state and the "consumer society," equality transmuted into the chance to enter structurally unequal contests for personal

CAPITAL	STATE	CIVIL SOCIETY
Commodities	**Public Goods**	**Gifts**
Prices	Taxes	Reciprocities
Personal Possession	Shared Use	Co-creation
Consumers	Citizens	Communards
Liberty	Equality	Mutuality

Figure 1.1 Contested moral economies

advancement, and mutuality as a sadly diminished third term. As Richard Titmuss reminds us, capitalism constantly prompts us to ask: "Why should men not contract out of the 'social' and act to their own immediate advantage? Why give to strangers? – a question provoking an even more fundamental moral issue: who is my stranger in relatively affluent, acquisitive and divisive societies …? What are the connections if obligations are extended?" (Titmuss 1970, 58). How we answer, or sidestep, this central moral question will vary depending on the nature of the transactions we engage in. Each of the three main ways of organizing exchange relations in contemporary societies – commodities, public goods, and gifts – invites us to assume a particular identity, to balance private interests against the public good in particular ways, and to recognize or deny our responsibilities to strangers. These three political economies are therefore also moral economies. Figure 1.1 sketches out the main differences between them. In the rest of this chapter I want to elaborate on these contrasts, to explore their consequences for the organization of culture and communications, and to examine how the relations between them are shifting in the emerging digital environment.

Commodities: Possessions, and Dispossessions

A commodity is any good or service that is sold for a price in the market. A range of economic systems contain elements of commodity exchange. Command economies have "black" markets in scarce goods. In colonial societies, commodities have coexisted with barter and gift exchange. But only in a fully developed capitalist system is the production and marketing of commodities the central driving force of growth and profit. Writing in 1847, observing the social order being reshaped in the interests of industrial capital, Marx was in no doubt that the process of commodification, which sought to convert everything into an article for sale, was at the heart of this process. He saw the new capitalism ushering in "a time in which even the things which until then had been communicated, but never exchanged, given but never sold, acquired but never bought – virtue, love, conscience – all at last enter into commerce – the time where everything moral or physical having become a saleable commodity is conveyed to the market" (Marx 2008, 86–7).

A number of commentators have seen the onwards march of commodification as a generalized form of enclosure extended to more and more kinds of resources (see Murdock 2001). The first enclosure movement began in Tudor times when agricultural entrepreneurs fenced off land previously held in common for villagers to graze sheep and collect firewood and wild foods, and incorporated it into their private estates. It is a useful metaphor because it highlights the fact that capitalist accumulation always entails dispossession (see Harvey 2005, 137–82).

By stripping villagers of access to many of the resources that had enabled them to be mostly self-sufficient, the original enclosure movement forced them to become agricultural workers for hire, selling their labor for a wage. Then, as they moved to the new industrial cities, their vernacular knowledge and skills in building, self-medication, growing and preserving foods, gradually atrophied as they were beckoned to enter the new consumer system in which the powers of self-determination taken away by the industrial labor process were returned in leisure time as the sovereign right to choose between competing commodities. Against a backdrop where routine industrial and clerical work was repetitive and alienating, and offered little intrinsic satisfaction or opportunity for self-expression, it was essential to promote consumption as the sphere where one was free to be fully oneself. By hailing people as first and foremost consumers, making personal choices in the marketplace, rather than workers making common cause, commodification helped to underwrite social stability while at the same time ensuring that rising levels of production were met by increased levels of demand.

As Marx noted in his famous discussion in the opening chapter of the first volume of *Capital*, commodities conceal the secret of their production, and present themselves as magical objects, endowed, like religious fetishes, with the power to change lives. In common with evangelical preachers who persuaded believers that they could be "born again," commodities held out the perpetual promise of a better, more comfortable, more satisfying life. The transition from generic to branded goods, which took off only after Marx's death, consolidated this appeal. Brands either bore the name of the manufacturer (Colman's Mustard, Lipton's Tea, Gillette Razors) and appeared as the exclusive products of invention and entrepreneurship, or like Kodak, assumed imaginary names that removed them from mundane discourse. The effect was to abolish any talk of labor processes, of exploitative working conditions or environmental degradation, and focus attention solely on the object itself and the projected pleasures and gains of possession. Brands were presented not simply as external markers of quality or distinction, but as badges of personal identity, ways of announcing who one was and wanted to be. Consumers were encouraged to brand themselves, to contract out of the "social" and focus on the transformative power of personal purchases. Commodity transactions carried no social obligations. They supported a moral economy rooted in disengagement and self-regard in which the freedom of individual choice was the sole and sovereign value. They were inhospitable to all mutualities other than communities of brand users.

Cultural and communications goods have a unique triple relationship to commodity culture. Firstly, a number of media products and cultural services are commodities in their own right. This has two consequences that have been major areas of investigation for critical political economy. It cedes enormous potential control over public culture and debate to private ownership and the dynamics of profit maximization, and creates substantial inequalities in capacities to participate by tying access to communication to ability to pay. Secondly, media provide the primary platforms for advertising and promoting general commodities. As the only ideological position that secures continuous access to the heartlands of public culture, through payments to place self-created publicity, this gives consumerism a unique advantage. Thirdly, the dominant genres of popular media extend this naturalization of commodity culture by filling expressive space with images of locations and people that present it as the taken-for-granted backdrop of social action. Their dominant aesthetic is "capitalist realism" showing "life and lives worth emulating" (Schudson 1984, 215). Soviet "socialist realism" displayed heroes of production, steel workers marching into a future bathed in light, smiling tractor drivers bringing home a record harvest from sunlit fields. "Capitalist realism" celebrated heroes of consumption living lives grounded in a plenitude of goods and a heightened awareness of fashion and style, wives caressing the rounded doors of their new refrigerators, husbands admiring the swooping lines of their new saloon cars.

As D. W. Griffith complained in 1923: "Motion pictures have received, and merited, much criticism about the type of rooms they photograph to represent the homes of the rich. … Persons of wealth, family and education flash their jewels in the atmosphere of a furniture shop or an auctioneer's showroom. The rooms are crowded with objects …" (Griffith 1923, 13). A decade later, Max Horkheimer, founder of the influential Frankfurt School of critical cultural analysis, argued that even the background landscapes of popular films had become assimilated into a promotional aesthetic, noting that: "For a long time now, Raphael's blue horizons have been quite properly a part of Disney's landscapes. The sunbeams almost beg to have the name of a soap or a toothpaste emblazoned on them; they have no meaning except as a background for such advertising. Disney and his audiences … unswervingly stand for the purity of the blue horizon" (Horkheimer 1972, 281).

This promotion of commodity culture did not go uncontested, however. It was countered by the long struggle to provide cultural and communicative resources for full citizenship by reclaiming the idea of the commons.

Public Goods: Reclaiming the Commons

The battle to construct a public commons in the new industrial cities was waged on two fronts: for shared public space and for public cultural provision. Both were essential resources for full citizenship. Political expression required public spaces where people could gather to discuss issues and attend rallies and demonstrations. As the *Saturday Review* observed in 1856, however, the helter-skelter expansion of central London was driven by "the simple unchecked competition of rival estates sent into the market to hustle against each" (quoted in Minton 2009, 19). The new developments were controlled by private landlords led by members of the old aristocracy (the Earls of Bedford and Southampton and the Duke of Westminster), who resorted to the tried and trusted practice of enclosure, erecting fences and gates patrolled by ex-servicemen and prison officers. Faced with mounting skirmishes over access and growing opposition to what one contemporary characterized as the "disgraceful" behavior of government "in allowing these squares and places to be closed to the public," control over urban space was progressively transferred to local authorities and public access guaranteed from 1864–5 onwards (Minton 2009, 20). The following year, 1866, saw another turning point, when a crowd protesting the defeat of the Reform Bill to extend the right to vote arrived at Hyde Park intent on holding a rally, and, finding the gates locked, removed part of the railings and entered a space that up until then had been seen and used as a pleasure garden for the well-to-do (Murdock 2001, 444–5).

These reassertions of rights of access to a shared physical commons were accompanied by the rapid expansion of collective cultural resources – museums, galleries, libraries, and adult education facilities – administered by central and local government. These facilities were public goods in three senses. Firstly, in contrast to commodities, which were private possessions, they were available for shared use. Secondly, because they were financed collectively out of taxation, they countered the exclusions generated by the unequal ability to pay the prices demanded by market systems. People might not be able to buy all the books they wanted for their personal pleasure and self-development, but they could borrow them from a public library. Thirdly, they were intended to advance the common good by promoting a commitment to equality of entitlement and encouraging a sense of belonging to a shared imaginative world confronting common problems.

The promise of open and equal access, however, remained bounded by the confines of location and pressure of numbers. To borrow books from a public library, users needed to travel to a building that was only open at certain times. Once there, they might find the book they wanted already on loan to another borrower. Similarly, public art galleries and museums could only display a fraction of their collections in the space they had available, leaving many items in store, and viewing the most popular exhibits often entailed jostling with crowds for a favorable position.

In addition, public cultural institutions were the site of power struggles from the outset. There were insistent pressures from state and government to employ them as instruments of social control. By hailing users as members of national and local communities, they displaced solidarities of class. At the same time, they were administered on an everyday basis by the rapidly expanding ranks of cultural professionals – curators, archivists, librarians, and lecturers – who saw themselves as missionaries bringing the great achievements of human knowledge and expression within the reach of all. Their claim that decisions about what books should be stocked, what art should be shown, and what ideas should be taught, should be governed by professional judgment rather than political considerations, created permanent tensions around the notion of the "relative autonomy" of cultural workers paid out of the public purse. While this insistence on the primacy of intellectual expertise and cultivated taste offered some protection against political encroachment, it also operated to largely exclude lay knowledge and vernacular cultural expression. The culture promoted by public cultural institutions was overwhelmingly spelled with a capital "C" and identified with the works of the thinkers, writers, artists, and musicians who had passed into the pantheon of intellectual and creative heroes selected by cultural elites. It was informed by the entirely honorable motive of wanting to expand people's intellectual and imaginative horizons, to say to people "try this first and then that, then come back and ask us what you ought to read next" (Williams 1989, 25). But for many at the receiving end, it smacked of paternalism.

Audiences, however, were far from being blank sheets waiting to be written on by copperplate messages, penned by cultural professionals. "In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, after the achievement of mass literacy but before radio and television, working-class culture was saturated by the spirit of mutual education … Knowledge was something to be shared around" (Rose 2002, 83–9). Newspapers and novels were read aloud and discussed in a range of social settings from workplaces, pubs, and street corners to classes organized by the Workers' Education Association. This commitment to sharing and cocreation also characterized myriad forms of collective cultural expression, from brass bands and choral societies to "Sunday painters."

The public broadcasting organizations that emerged in a number of countries across Europe and elsewhere in the 1920s, however, largely ignored these initiatives. By releasing public cultural intervention from the constraints of physical space and allowing the same material to be accessed simultaneously by anyone with the appropriate reception equipment, the technology of free-to-air broadcasting reinforced prevailing maps of cultural worth by universalizing them. By valorizing the home as the center of cultural encounters, it also accelerated the domestication of popular culture activity. By that time, however, observers had already begun to look elsewhere for expressions of mutuality.

Gifts: In Search of Generosity

The emergence of public broadcasting coincided with the rise of anthropology as an academic discipline based on extended first-hand observation and interviews with native informants. From the outset gift exchanges emerged as a central focus of concern for two reasons: firstly, because they combined the economic, social, and symbolic domains, they offered a convenient point of entry into understanding the overall organization of native systems. Secondly, in a context where commodity relations and calculations of personal advantage were entering more and more areas of social life, the gift, freely given, appeared "as the last refuge of a solidarity, of an open-handedness" (Godelier 1999, 208) that seemed to be disappearing from capitalist societies. "One of the main functions of the theory of the gift has accordingly been to provide an account of … non-exploitative reciprocity as a basis of community" (Frow 1997, 104). As the fieldwork evidence accumulated, however, it became clear that far from displaying an absence of calculation, gift exchange was central to the competition for personal advantage.

This conclusion was stated in its most influential form by Marcel Mauss in his 1925 book, *The Gift*, in which he argued that "All in all, gifts are not … disinterested [but] made with a view to … maintaining a profitable alliance" (Mauss 1990, 73). The value of the gift lay in its ability to cement social connections and reaffirm prestige. Mauss's most striking evidence for the incursion of calculation came from his reading of Franz Boas's studies of the potlatch (a Chinook word for "give away") practiced by the Kwakiutl people in the area around Vancouver. Boas arrived for his first fieldwork visit in 1886, just as the new law banning the potlatch was coming into force. His respondents were recalling a system that had changed radically during their lifetimes as a result of encounters with capitalist modernity.

Kwakiutl society was headed by nobles who claimed to be reincarnations of the founding ancestor animal spirits. By staging ritual ceremonies centered around the distribution of property, they legitimated both their social status and their claim to the supernatural powers believed to be essential for the regeneration of the natural realm (Masco 1995, 44). The gifts given included animal skins, a tangible link between the material and spiritual worlds. From the 1750s onwards, furs, particularly sea otter pelts, the "soft gold" of the fashion industry, became the basis of a lucrative trade. Although this brought the Kwakiutl into increasing contact with British merchants and their envoys, they remained relatively autonomous culturally, incorporating Hudson Bay blankets, the main form of payment for furs, into potlatch ceremonies but investing them with ritual meaning as proxies for animal skins. Then, in 1849, the British occupied Vancouver Island and embarked on a concerted effort to incorporate indigenous residents into the social and moral order of capitalism. The new commercial opportunities opened up by colonization led to an escalating competition within the native population. For the first time, native notables other than chiefs could amass sufficient resources to stage a potlatch. The resulting competition for status led to bigger, more frequent, potlatches in which more and more objects were given away, many of them commodities purchased from the British. The paradoxical result was that "maintaining the cosmology" that supported native identity increasingly depended on "participation in the colonial economy," so that "capitalism came increasingly to lie at its centre" (Saunders 1997, 143).

It is tempting to read this as a classic instance of incorporation, but here, as in other colonial contexts, the entanglements of native moral systems with capitalist trade had more complex outcomes (see Thomas 1991). A prospector, who had arrived in 1862 for the Gold Rush on the Fraser River, initiated a smallpox epidemic and "within three years, two-thirds of the total indigenous population … were obliterated" (Masco 1995, 55). Against this background, the escalation of potlatching can also be seen as "the effort of dying people … to regain control over their lives" (Masco 1995, 57). It was precisely this symbolic resistance to incorporation that led to the Statutes of Canada being amended in 1884 to make potlatching an imprisonable offense.

Mauss does not touch on this alternative explanation but there are strong parallels with the situation he himself faced when writing *The Gift*. Observing France in the early 1920s, he saw a society decimated by the terrible slaughter of World War I and becoming increasingly commercialized, with Paris still claiming to be in the vanguard of consumer culture, having pioneered two of the most influential mechanisms of promotion, the department store and the cinema. But he argued strongly that commercial enclosure was not yet complete. As he noted, "fortunately, everything is still not wholly categorised in terms of buying and selling … A considerable part of our morality and our lives are still permeated with the same atmosphere of the gift, where obligation and liberty intermingle … We possess more than a tradesman morality" (Mauss 1990, 65). The question was how best to protect and support this ethos of "reciprocating generosity" (Mauss 1990, 83) against the incursion of "icy, utilitarian calculation" (p. 76).

Mauss was a convinced socialist, and although he was a gradualist rather than a revolutionary, he was initially attracted to the social experiment set in motion by the Bolshevik's seizure of power in Russia. However, he soon became disillusioned, publishing a fierce attack in 1925 (Mauss 1992). He was particularly critical of the Soviet centralization of state power, arguing that it taught "nations who want to reform how not to do it" (Mauss 1992, 203). Casting around for an alternative, he drew on his long involvement in the co-operative movement to insist on the urgent need to strengthen civil society by developing a range of "intermediary institutions" that would be relatively independent of both the state and the market (1992, 191). At the same time, he assigned a key role to government, "representing the community," in acknowledging that "the worker has given his life and labour to the collective" as well as to the employer and in honoring the social obligation "not discharged by the payment of wages" (Mauss 1990, 67). The guarantees of "security against unemployment, sickness, old age" (p. 67) that he had in mind were basic building blocks for a new kind of welfare state which he thought Britain, "where municipal and administrative socialism have been in vogue for a long time," was most likely to develop (Mauss 1992, 206).

Mauss's politics have been almost entirely deleted from later anthropological work on gift exchange, which has preferred to search "every act for the degree to which it could be said to mask some hidden selfishness" (Graeber 2010, 5). One notable exception is the Swiss anthropologist Gerald Berthoud, who, together with the French sociologist Alain Caille, launched the Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste dans les Sciences Sociales (MAUSS) in 1981 to oppose the instrumental view of social democracy and the constant exhortations for France to adopt a more market-oriented model of the state. Their core proposal revived the idea, originally proposed by the eighteenth-century revolutionary Tom Paine, for the government to pay every citizen a social wage to underwrite their social participation.

This proposal was not part of the program instituted by the Labour government elected in Britain after World War II, but the new administration pursued the provision of collective resources for citizenship with vigor in a variety of other ways. The social provision offered by an expanded national insurance scheme, an ambitious program of social housing, and a new national health service, was accompanied by a series of cultural initiatives. Compulsory schooling was extended up to the age of 15. The BBC monopoly over broadcasting was confirmed and extended to television. An Arts Council (the idea of the political economist John Maynard Keynes, the principal architect of the new orthodoxy on managing capitalism) was launched to fund creative activity. Observing this flurry of activity in 1951, the young social policy analyst Richard Titmuss saw it driven by "the war-warmed impulse for a more generous society" (Titmuss 1950, 508). Two decades later, his vision was altogether darker. Watching neoliberal economic ideas steadily gaining ground throughout the 1960s, he imagined the bastions of the welfare state – "hospitals, schools, universities" – steadily exposed to "the forces of economic calculation and to the laws of the marketplace" (Titmuss 1970, 213). With Margaret Thatcher's arrival as prime minister, Titmuss's prophecies were confirmed, as government embarked on a concerted push to roll back the state and expand the scope of market relations, selling public assets to private investors, opening up restricted markets and protected areas of activity, shifting regulation to a more business-friendly mode, and urging public institutions to think and behave like commercial corporations and "monetize" their assets.

Titmuss did not live to see the ascendancy of marketization, but in his last book, *The Gift Relationship* (Titmuss 1970), he mounted a strong counterargument in defense of generosity as the foundation of the good society. Taking voluntary blood donation as a limit case of giving with no prospect of return or advantage, he demonstrates with great elegance and force that compared to selling blood, donation is both more efficient and morally superior. Not only does it cut wastage by reducing the chances of contamination, it confirms, in the most intimate way, the essential role of generosity in sustaining a democratic society anchored in mutuality.

This concern with gifts that circulate with no assurance of anything in return was taken up by the critic Lewis Hyde in his analysis of relations between the "inner" gift of creativity and the "outer" cultural forms through which it is expressed and circulated. For Hyde, "the spirit of the gift is kept alive by its constant donation" and "where commerce is exclusively a trade in merchandise, the gifted cannot enter into the give-and-take that ensures the livelihood of their spirit" (Hyde 1979, xvi). For many cultural workers trying to support themselves from the returns on their work, however, economic livelihood takes precedence. Mauss was sympathetic to the case for authors' rights, arguing that although everyone wishes artistic and literary works "to fall into the public domain … as quickly as possible," laws defending creators' rights to benefit financially from the continuing uses of their labor are entirely justified (Mauss 1990, 67). With the rise of the Internet and the unprecedented ease with which works can be copied and circulated, this clash between the defenders of extended intellectual property rights and advocates of unrestricted sharing has become a central fault line running through current debates. Although it has generated a substantial specialist literature, it is more usefully seen as one element in the escalating conflict between the competing moral economies of gifts, commodities, and public goods, now rippling out across the range of digital technologies, but concentrated particularly on the Internet.

The Internet's power to disrupt established structures and institutional divisions lies in its simultaneous promotion of top-down and bottom-up systems of exchange. On the one hand, it offers established commercial and public cultural organizations more efficient and flexible ways of distributing their output and tracking audience reactions and responses. On the other, it supports multiple networks of peer-to-peer sharing and collaboration. The battle now in progress is over the way relations between these vertical and horizontal dimensions should be organized.

Kevin Kelly, the founding executive editor of *Wired* magazine, speaks for many digital utopians when he claims that the new collaborative social technology is forging a "socialism uniquely tuned for a networked world" in which "masses of people who own the means of production work toward a common goal and share their products in common [and] free of charge" (Kelly 2009, 122–3). His argument, that this new "third way … renders irrelevant the old … zero-sum trade off between free market individualism and centralized authority" (p. 124), ignores both the concerted corporate push to enclose digital gifting and the central role of government in guaranteeing access to cultural resources for social participation. As we argued earlier, "A social democratic vision of the good society entails from the outset a greater role for the state and the public sector" (Judt 2010, 2) in building and defending a genuinely open and diverse cultural commons. Despite the recent assaults on public cultural institutions generated by the onward march of marketization, the Internet offers an unprecedented opportunity to revivify this project.

Digital gifting: net returns

Digital gifting outside the price system operates at three basic levels. Firstly, there is sharing where individuals circulate self-produced or found material using their own website or web space. This can range from posting photos on a personal social network page or video clips on YouTube, to exchanging downloaded music files. At the next stage up, there is co-operation, where individuals contribute to making a shared domain more useful, for example, by labeling the photos they post on Flickr with key words to make the archive more easily searchable. Finally, there is collaborative activity designed to create a new cultural product or resource that can be freely shared. The freely downloadable add-on "Home Front," produced by dedicated fans of the successful action-adventure video game, *Battle Field 1942*, based on events in World War II, offers one example (Postigo 2007). Another, more ambitious instance is *Born of Hope*, the 70-minute prequel to the highly successful *Lord of The Rings* trilogy, made by the independent film-maker Kate Madison. The budget was raised by donations. Actors gave their time free and technical support drew on a global network. "Costume designs were sent from the Netherlands. The hero's sword was designed in Ontario … footage of trees sent from Germany, and lightning added by an effects wizard in Greece" (Lamont 2010). Released free on three video streaming sites, the film attracted almost a million viewers.

As these examples make clear, in the domain of genuine origination, to talk about the Internet as a site of expanding "amateur" activity is to use the term "not in the sense of inexperienced but in the sense of not paid" (Lessig 2004, 44). Even where projects are open to a wider constituency, the majority of active contributors remains concentrated among a small group of dedicated enthusiasts. Fewer than 2 percent of users of the online encyclopedia Wikipedia ever contribute (Shirky 2008, 125). Similarly, "By far the highest number and quality of innovative ideas" to the website Niketalk, dedicated to suggesting modifications to the shoes used by basketball players, are proposed by 20 or so contributor "designers" out of a total membership of 34,000 (Fuller et al. 2007, 66).

Observing the time and commitment devoted to these interventions, it is tempting "to assume that for most peer producers, voluntary peer production [is] central to the identity and meaning-making aspects of their lives, as the place in which passion, community and creativity can be applied in a way almost impossible to achieve with the corporate context" (Bauwens 2009, 131). "Socially recognized self-realization," extending one's skills, and developing an elegant solution to a problem that earns respect and status within one's community of peers, are certainly major sources of motivation (Arvidsson 2008, 332). But voluntary participation can just as easily be a precursor to work within a "corporate context" as a compensation or counter to it. The "designers" on the Niketalk site "dream of becoming professional basketball footwear designers for one of the major brands," and some, like "Alphaproject," who was taken on by Nike, succeed (Fuller et al.

2007, 66–7). Similarly, the most active games "modders" studied by Hector Postigo, saw creating add-ons as "a good way of exhibiting/increasing skills and adding content" to their résumés (Postigo 2007, 310).

In a situation where labor in the creative industries is becoming increasingly casualized and more and more functions are outsourced, "network sociality" and the maintenance of networks and connections, Mauss's "profitable alliances," becomes a central resource (Wittel 2001, 51). "In the digital economy of ideas that the web is creating, you are … who you are linked with, who you network with" (Leadbeater 2008, 6).

In the linked and very visible arenas of action created by the Internet, participants hoping for employment, or simply wanting to express themselves and earn the respect of their peers, are actively solicited by corporations bent on commandeering their skills and engagement.

Digital Enclosures

Although the rapid expansion of personal credit over the last decade has intensified consumerism, creating a "turbo-consumer society" (Lawson 2009, 2), mobilizing the Internet to sell cultural commodities has so far proved difficult. Users, particularly younger users who have grown up with the web, expect free access and resent having to pay. This is particularly marked in the field of recorded music where the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry claims that 95 percent of downloads are illegal (Singing a different tune 2009, 79). In response, the music and audiovisual industries have lobbied hard and successfully for the extension of copyright with the average term in the United States tripling from 32.2 years to 95 years since 1973 (Lessig 2004, 135). As with the first enclosure movement, this erection of new fences has been accompanied by penalties for trespass though the original strategy of suing users for illegal downloads has been replaced by a graduated response of warnings followed by disconnection. The argument that free downloads always and everywhere represent a loss of potential income is, however, contestable. The most avid downloaders are often the most avid music fans. When the band Boxer Rebellion had one of their tracks selected as the "Free Single of the Week" on the Apple iTunes paid-for download system, the 560,000 downloads it attracted in the first week helped to make their album the first by an unsigned band to enter the Billboard top 100 list (Topping 2009, 13).

Illegal downloads may operate as a loss leader but because the link is problematic, companies have opted for the more secure revenue stream provided by systems that bundle free access to music in with other services. Internet service providers, such as Virgin in Britain, sell access alongside broadband subscriptions. Mobile phone companies include download systems as part of the price of the handset. Newspapers that, from an early point in the development of the Internet, offered free access to web-based content alongside subscriptions and purchases of the paper version, are pursuing a different strategy. Led by Rupert Murdoch, a number are drastically reducing the amount of free online access and moving content behind newly erected electronic fences, available only to subscribers. This is a version of the "freemium" strategy where "a few paying customers subsidize many unpaying ones" (Anderson 2009, 165). How willing people will be to pay for material that was previously free is, however, an open question. The uncertainties surrounding these business models have increased reliance on the other main option: advertising support. Spotify, which was installed on six million computers across Europe by the end of 2009, and offers users a free music streaming service interrupted by ads, is prototypical. Users who want an advertising-free service are required to pay a monthly fee.

In his path-breaking analysis of commercial free-to-air television, Dallas Smythe famously compared programming to the "potato chips and peanuts given to customers of the pub bar, or cocktail lounge," free incentives to keep them relaxed and ready to buy more drinks (Smythe 1981, 37–8). Commercial television is an attention economy. The price of placing a 30-second slot is determined primarily by the number of viewers watching (the rating). In addition, programming is required to provide a "positive selling environment" by privileging genres that employ the same capitalist realist aesthetic as the advertising that surrounds them. For Smythe, the pleasures of viewing and the activity of audiences are incorporated into the continuous labor of "marketing consumer goods and services to themselves" (1981, 34), and reaffirming consumption as the primary source of self-chosen identity. The massive new field of operations opened up by the Internet and the greater ease of tracking consumer preferences and choices has generalized this "ad-driven business model to an unlimited range of other industries" (Anderson 2009, 143–4). It has also extended the process of commodification. In Smythe's analysis, audience attention is the commodity traded between advertisers and television companies. On the Internet there is an emerging trade in social relations and everyday interactions exemplified by the invitation to young people issued by the British marketing company Dubit:

> Dubit believes that you are the best people to promote brands, products and services … Dubit Insider lets young people aged 7–24 do exactly this … you will work with some of the UK's top brands. You can use this experience to enhance your CV and even earn yourself a little cash, as well as a few freebies along the way. All you have to do is tell your friends about the brands YOU love! (Dubit Informer 2010)

This is one of a growing number of marketing initiatives that commodify personal talk about brands in everyday encounters or on social networking sites, and capitalize on the trust embedded in friendship. It points to a more general incorporation of gift relations into the economy of commodities.

In 1980, the futurologist Alvin Toffler coined the term "prosumption" to describe the combination of production and consumption entailed in the "unpaid work done directly by people for themselves or their community," arguing that it had been virtually excluded from economic analysis because it did not contribute to production for exchange (Toffler 1980, 277). The Internet allows this neglected economy to be comprehensively incorporated, leading recent writers on the digital economy to develop "a new model of prosumption, where customers participate in the production of products in an active and ongoing way" (Tapscott and Williams 2008, 127). Not only does this model smooth over the intensification of exploitation, but its disinterest in corporate control over cultural production supports an analysis of the "creative industries" that presents critical political economy as outmoded and conservative.

Creativity, Convergence, and Exploitation

There is now an emerging consensus that the productive core of the advanced capitalist economies is shifting from a base in "heavy" industries to a new center in the "weightless" realms of information and cultural goods with many commentators assigning a pivotal role to the "creative industries," defined as all those sectors "where value is primarily dependent upon the play of symbolic meaning" (Bilton and Leary 2002, 50). For Melvin Bragg, the crowds thronging Britain's free museums and galleries are "helping to transform [the] country from one based on the toil and wealth of heavy industry to one enriched by the pleasure and equal promise of wealth that comes from the creative industries" (Bragg 2010, 51). For others, cultural engagement is not simply "helping" transformation, it is its primary engine.

In 2006, *Time* magazine nominated "YOU," the "ordinary" woman and man in the street, as "Person of the Year," arguing that the arrival of a faster, more capacious, Internet, Web 2.0, is: "about community and collaboration on a scale never seen before … about the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing …We're looking at an explosion of productivity and innovation … as millions of minds that would otherwise have drowned in obscurity get backhauled into the global intellectual economy" (quoted in Siegel 2008, 129). In the space of this brief passage, the world turned upside down by the power of the "many" is immediately turned right way up again as we move seamlessly from gifting to commodity production, from "helping one another for nothing" to being dragged, "backhauled," into the "new" capitalism.

For John Hartley, one of the leading advocates of the "creative industries" perspective, this sector is not simply central, it is *the* "empirical form taken by *innovation* in advanced knowledge-based economies" (Hartley 2009, 204). This is a very large claim indeed. Firstly, innovation in two other key emerging areas, biotechnology and nanotechnology, remains highly centralized and capital-intensive.

Secondly, "a great deal of the economy," food production, energy supply, transport infrastructures, financial services, "is not susceptible to this collaborative, open ethos" (Leadbeater 2008, 24), at least not yet. Ignoring these obvious caveats and focusing attention exclusively on "creative" production, however, allows Hartley to argue that understanding innovation in the "new economy" requires us to shift our focus "from closed expert process (professional production in vertically integrated firms) and structural analysis to an open innovation system and complex adaptive networks" (Hartley 2009, 217). He castigates "ideologically motivated political-economy approaches" for devoting too much attention to analyzing the operations of media industries and "too little to consumers and markets" (p. 39) and for failing to take seriously their agency "within an overall system in which major enterprises are *also* at work" (p. 49, my italics). Within this new horizontal landscape he sees the social networks supported by the "growing ubiquity of digital media becoming a more dynamic source of productivity than industrial innovation" (p. 216). In which case, "critical analysis need not take sides" since opposing "new-media developments and their marketisation" not only misses the extent and radicalism of the change now in motion, but for economies hoping to compete effectively in the future, it is "industrial suicide" (p. 41).

Avoiding this outcome has been a major concern for Henry Jenkins, who, like Hartley, has been a long-standing celebrant of audience activity. He sees a new convergence emerging between the "top-down decisions made in corporate boardrooms by companies wishing to tap their cross-media ownership and bottom-up decisions made in teen's [sic] bedrooms" (Jenkins 2006b, 1). Faced with the "new participatory folk culture" created by "giving average people" the digital tools "to annotate, appropriate and recirculate content," he argues that companies need to "tap this culture to foster consumer loyalty and generate low-cost content" (Jenkins 2001). To aid them in this task, while at MIT he set up the Convergence Culture Consortium, to provide "insights into new ways to relate to consumers, manage brands, and develop engaging experiences to cut through the increasingly cluttered media environment and benefit from emerging cultural and technological trends" (Convergence Culture Consortium 2009, 1).

There are two major problems with these attempts to replace the critical political economy of culture and communications with an analysis of "creative industries" or "convergence culture." Ethically, they reproduce corporate ideology by presenting the public interest as synonymous with business interests and privileging consumer activity over citizen involvement. From this perspective, a critical analysis of capitalism appears as a barrier rather than a resource for change. As John Hartley argues: "to maintain a *structural* model (of inequality, struggle and antagonism) in the face of *dynamic* disequilibrium (change and growth) is … to deny an open future" (Hartley 2009, 202). Empirically, they fail to confront the full cultural consequences of increased corporate power. The enlarged scope for commodification opened up by marketization has not only accelerated the formation of multimedia conglomerates of unprecedented scale and scope (including

Time-Warner, the champion of "YOU"), it has fostered concentration rather than dispersal on the Internet, with dominant firms emerging in each major sector of use and new conglomerates forming. Google has used the profits from selling advertising on its main search site to expand into a variety of other areas, creating new de facto monopolies and new enclosures. Its project of digitalizing the holdings of some of the world's leading libraries is a case in point. Of the seven million books processed by the end of 2008, one million were in the public domain and available for anyone to use free of charge. The rest were still covered by copyright and accessible only as extracts. Anyone wishing to read the full text is obliged to buy it or borrow a physical copy from a public library. Added to which, the rights agreements that Google have signed give it "what can only be called a monopoly … since no new entrepreneurs will be able to digitize books within that fenced-off territory, even if they could afford it" (Darnton 2009, 6). The result is not simply the loss of any chance of creating a comparable public digital collection, but the transfer of control over an essential cultural resource to a private company.

Unlike Hartley, who presents consumers as equal participants in value creation, Jenkins, who puts his analysis at the service of the media majors, is well aware of the continuing structural skew in the balance of power, acknowledging that "Not all participants are created equal. Corporations – and even individuals within corporate media – still exert greater power than any individual consumer or even the aggregate of consumers. And some consumers have greater abilities to participate than others" (Jenkins 2006a, 3). Or as Jimmy Wales, the cofounder of Wikipedia, put it without a trace of irony, "In part Wikipedia is anarchy [but] there is also an element of aristocracy: people who have acquired a reputation have a higher standing in the community. And then there is monarchy – that's me" (quoted in Leadbeater 2008, 16). In a comment that he fails to pursue Hartley acknowledges the continuing power of ownership, noting that even in "a complex open system in which everyone is an active agent … Individuals originate ideas; networks adopt them; [but] enterprises *retain* them" (Hartley 2009, 63, my emphasis). The easy rhetoric of coproduction and cocreation conceals a reality of exploitation.

This applies even where the basic raw materials for self-generated production are provided by the corporation as they are in the virtual world, *Second Life*. The site's owners, Linden Lab, actively encourage participants to use the basic digital building blocks they provide to "create anything you can imagine" (Second Life, 2007) by granting them intellectual property rights over anything they produce. This has created a thriving internal economy as the site's residents trade the objects and buildings they have made with each other for a virtual currency convertible into US dollars. It is this creative labor that builds the environments that constitute the site's attraction. Without it there would literally be nothing there. The company benefits in two ways. Participants pay a monthly subscription for the privilege of doing most of the work and their labor saves the owners an estimated $410 million a year in programming and development costs (Hof 2006).

This case is prototypical. As one influential business commentator candidly admits "through co-production, consumers relieve manufacturers and retailers from performing various activities along the value creation chain," and absorb the costs not only of the time and effort involved, but also of the knowledge and skills deployed, which may often require years of personal and public investment to acquire (Etgar 2009, 1–2). Fans' work on the smaller add-ons to the computer games studied by Hector Postigo, for example, saved the companies an average of $2.5 million in labor costs (Postigo 2007, 305). By offering new features and providing free marketing through fan websites, they also help sustain interest in the original commodity and allow companies to identify and track consumption patterns that "are increasingly disjointed, heterogeneous, and less amenable to corporate categorization and control" (Bonsu and Darmody 2008, 357). And, crucially for products aimed at the youth market, they help bolster a brand's image as fun and in touch. The result is that working consumers are opened to double exploitation. Firstly, they are "not generally paid for the know-how, enthusiasm and social cooperation they contribute" to commodity production. Secondly, as customers they may pay a "price premium" for the "fruits of their labor" as the use-value of cocreated products is often higher than those generated by standardized production systems (Cova and Dalli 2009, 327).

The added value of vernacular production is also evident in the sphere of marketing. In 2007, the corn chip manufacturer, Doritos, launched their "Smash the Superbowl" competition, inviting consumers to submit self-made advertisements for the product, the best of which would be screened during the Superbowl, the climax of the American football year and the premier television advertising slot. The winning entry was made using a standard camcorder and computer software. As one of the executives of the agency that helped launch the competition noted, "We saw how technology is helping consumers create things to the point where you don't know what's consumer-generated and what's not" (Jones 2009). At the same time, amateur productions still seem "rawer, less polished, and somehow more 'real' or true than ads prepared by a professional agency" (Keen 2008, 61). This appearance of authenticity is central to retaining the trust and loyalty of youthful consumers.

Don Tapscott and Anthony Williams, leading advocates of cocreation, argue that critics who suggest that they are promoting an economy "where unpaid volunteers are exploited by corporations" have failed to notice that "the majority of people who participate in peer production communities are profiting, sometimes monetarily and other times by using their experience to further their careers or expand their networks" (Tapscott and Williams 2008, xi). It is true that some labor is paid for, albeit almost always at a lower rate than would be paid to professionals. The T-shirt manufacturer, Threadless, for example, pays $2,000 for any design submitted to their website and chosen for production on the basis of votes from the site's members (Threadless 2010). It is also true, as we noted earlier, that a number of the most active peer producers harbor ambitions of becoming full-time cultural workers. Volunteer labor online is no different from the unpaid internships that are now a standard part of many media companies' employment practices and which recent British research condemned as "the outright exploitation of emerging workers" (Arts Group 2010, 2). In both cases, the balance of power lies overwhelmingly with the companies.

The high-end fashion shoe manufacturer John Fluevog, for example, has adapted the title of the most celebrated instance of collaborative production, the Open Source Software movement, and launched the Open Source Footwear initiative, which invites anyone to submit ideas for new lines. The terms of trade are clearly set out in the organizer's answer to the obvious question about rewards. "Will I be rich? Are you insane? Nobody gets paid for designs because nobody owns them. … once you send us your design, it becomes public domain, freely available to all." However, since designs are submitted to the firm rather than being posted directly on a public domain site, it gets first sight of them, giving it a clear competitive advantage. As they explain: "We might use the whole thing or just part of it," and appropriate the whole of any resulting profit. The rewards to the designers are purely symbolic: "if you're chosen, we'll send you a free pair!" and "name the shoe after you" (Fluevog's Open Source Footwear 2010).

In this pastiche of reciprocity, the company gets cost-free research and development and first sight of innovative ideas, the participants get the recognition that comes from having "ideas become actual shoes," and their photo on the website (Fluevog's Open Source Footwear 2010).

Available evidence suggests that opportunities to gain even an unpaid foot in the door of professional cultural production go disproportionately to those who have high stocks of cultural and social capital. The Internet confirms this unequal access by mostly rewarding those "who are already well connected, by allowing them to network together, reinforcing their privilege" (Leadbeater 2008, 2).

The Internet does offer opportunities to equalize opportunities for creative expression and deploy expertise in the service of the public good rather than corporate interests, but realizing them requires a rethink of the moral economy of public goods. If the extension of commercial enclosure confirms Mauss's pessimistic view that gifts are always tainted by the pursuit of personal advantage, the revivification of public cultural institutions holds out the prospect of a resurgence of gifting informed by altruism.

Digitalizing the Commons

The neoliberal project of maximizing the freedom of action of commercial corporations has had two major impacts on the public cultural commons. Firstly, public assets, both material and intellectual, have been privatized and enclosed. For example, an estimated fifth of the genes identified by research, mostly funded out of the public purse, have already been patented, allowing the companies holding the rights to monopolize the market for tests for diseases generated by future discoveries, selling them back to the public at "prohibitive prices" (Sulston 2009, 38). Secondly, faced with cuts and squeezes on public subsidy, cultural institutions have been both encouraged and compelled to turn to commercial sources to make up the shortfall. It is now impossible to mount a major public art exhibition without commercial sponsorship. Leading public libraries have ceded the task of digitalizing their collection to Google because they have been unable to find the necessary funds themselves, raising major questions about future control over access. Public service broadcasters have adopted the strategies developed by multimedia conglomerates and set out to maximize the commercial value of their symbolic assets. The BBC has been particularly active. Its brand has been stretched over a portfolio of magazines linked to programs. Successful program franchises such as *Teletubbies* and *Doctor Who* provide platforms for a proliferating range of merchandise in the valuable child and teenage markets. These commercial activities are justified by the argument that the profits generated are returned to program budgets and boost "public value" rather than shareholder value. By introducing calculations around the potential for commodification into institutional strategies, however, they compromise the moral economy of public goods.

Commercial initiatives in the public cultural sector have been enthusiastically pursued by a new class of entrepreneurial managers who regard public institutions mainly as businesses whose success is measured primarily by levels of income generation. This view of public enterprise has been strongly opposed by employees in public institutions who follow Susan Hockfield, the President of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), in seeing their work "as a public good for the benefit of all" (MIT OpenCourseWare 2010), and insisting that, since it has largely been paid for out of taxation, the public should not have to pay again to have access to it. In 2000 the faculty of MIT put this principle into practice, voting to forgo the substantial profits made from commercial distance learning and to post all their teaching materials online for anyone to access. This decision is the symbolic equivalent of voluntary blood donation in the physical realm. Both acknowledge the needs and rights of strangers and both offer central sources of the self with no expectation of tangible reward.

This movement to democratize expertise is gathering momentum across the range of public cultural institutions as digital storage and Internet delivery abolish the constraints on access imposed by fixed locations with limited space. The Art Collection held by the Arts Council of England, for example, was launched in 1946, as part of the drive to widen access to cultural resources mentioned earlier, but in 2009 only 18 percent of its total holdings were on public display. Now, in collaboration with the BBC, a free digital archive of the entire collection is being created (Doward and Flyn 2010, 18–19). The role played by the BBC is not accidental. There are a variety of reasons why public service broadcasters are best placed to operate as key nodes in a network that links public cultural institutions together and provides the essential search and navigation tools that allow users to maximize the use value of the resources available (see Murdock 2005).

If, however, the Internet is employed only as a distribution system, making the materials created or selected by professional cultural workers more readily available, it will do little or nothing to advance the essential cultural rights of representation and participation. Its radical potential lies in its ability to forge a new relationship between expertise and lay knowledge, amateur and professional creativity, grounded in the convergence of the economies of gifting and public goods.

The outlines are already discernible. Early in 2010, to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the opening of the British Museum, one of the first publicly accessible collections, the BBC launched a series recounting world history through the stories behind 100 objects selected from the museum's holdings. At the same time, it invited audience members to donate their own object to the digital archive. As the invitation to contribute stressed, the project "is all about participation … Adding your object to the site, and telling its story, will ensure that these stories of how we and our ancestors have become part of history will be remembered" (BBC 2010). These vernacular stories of high hopes and hard times are told through mundane objects: ration books, immigration cards, a university degree certificate. This and similar initiatives and the continuing dialogues across professional and cultural boundaries they set in train, hold out the prospect of moving from a "convergence culture" in which decisions taken in company board rooms write the rules of engagement, to a genuinely common culture rooted in an ethos of citizenship and energized by grassroots participation, operating outside and counter to the commodity economy and the culture of consumerism.

This alters the role of expertise but it does not abolish it. Underpinning many celebrations of the new opportunities for participation opened up by the Internet is the figure of the "noble amateur … a digitalized version of Rousseau's noble savage" (Keen 2008, 36). This romantic image operates as both a source of spontaneity and authenticity and a guarantor that choices are democratically arrived at. This has two consequences: it identifies value with popularity and it elevates information and experience over knowledge.

Google's advertising profits are generated by its Page Ranking system (modestly named after the company's cofounder, Larry Page), which ranks web pages by the number and density of links they attract. The sites "most frequently visited by users" are jumped "to the top of the search results" generated by user inquiries (Auletta 2010, 38). It is a measure of popularity, not of value. Expertise, grounded in mastery of bodies of knowledge and the arguments surrounding them, is an essential resource both for sifting "through what's important and what's not, what's credible from what is unreliable" (Keen 2008, 45) and for transforming information into knowledge. Information comprises discrete packages of facts, observations, and experience. User-generated information on the Internet is dominated by "random photos, private blatherings … homemade video diaries," and personal blogs and Twitterings (quoted in Siegel 2008, 52). It is the fulfillment of Jeremy Rifkin's vision of a capitalism "whose product is access to time and mind," where every user's "life experience will be commodified" (Rifkin 2000, 29). Knowledge is an essential guarantee of autonomy, but it requires contextualization, a grasp of causes and consequences, conceptual frameworks. This is why constructing a public digital commons requires the democratization of expertise as well as the expansion of popular participation.

Arguing the case for a public cultural commons for the digital age, examining the institutional arrangements that might anchor it and the forces ranged against it, and engaging in the struggle to realize its full potential, is one of the major tasks now facing a critical political economy of culture and communications.

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