

Peerless: The Ethics of P2P Network Disassembly

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Enmeshed with a global economy, every bit of 'free' information carries its own microslave like a forgotten twin. —M. Pasquinelli, Animal Spirits (2009), p. 75

In theory, peer-to-peer (P2P) networks embody a model of collaboration that, we are told, spells out the end of the monopoly and heralds a new era of equality and creativity. At its most idealistic, discourse on P2P describes a paradigm where all participants are equal and where they voluntarily and freely cooperate with each other in the production of common goods that can be appropriated by anyone, replacing inflexible top-down hierarchies with open modes of production and communication that value cooperation and reciprocity over maximization of profit. While the positive impact of successful P2P projects is evident, here I want to contest the status of P2P as an alternative and question some of the norms or values behind the model. The larger thesis of my work is that a network is a machine for increasing participation while simultaneously maintaining or deepening inequalities between its participants (due to network laws such as preferential attachment). The question, then, is how P2P networks replicate or contradict the logic of non-P2P networks (specifically, digital technosocial scale-free networks). For instance, while P2P networks may indeed democratize access to cultural contents, we still need to ask: Whose culture are they making accessible? Is P2P part of the same network processes that normalize monocultures? And if so, what kind of resistance to hegemony might be embodied by the peerless, those outside P2P networks?

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The rise of the Digital Commons

While, technically speaking, P2P is just a particular form of network structure, it has come to represent a revolutionary (some would say anti-capitalist) mode of production and social organization. What exactly makes this structure so revolutionary? Most digital networks are set up as a system of *servers* that transmit data to *clients* so that the distribution of resources is centralized, the production of goods is organized hierarchically, bandwidth is allocated according to one's means to pay for it, and ideas are considered intellectual property protected by law. In contrast to this centralized architecture, there are no servers and clients in P2P networks because all nodes can simultaneously play the role of server and client as needed. Because there are no dedicated servers, a P2P network has no center.

Because P2P networks still rely on the Internet's basic infrastructure of servers and clients to operate, P2P can be described as a decentralized network structure *superimposed* over a centralized network structure (I will return to this later). What this decentralized structure achieves is the horizontal or 'open' production and dissemination of resources, the redistribution of bandwidth according to one's needs through ad-hoc connectivity, and the free exchange of ideas unconstrained by intellectual property laws. One consequence of eliminating the distinction between server and client is that peers can engage each other on equal terms: all peers own their own means of production, they can all access the network in the same way and have the same chance to cooperate, and they all have the same opportunities to derive value from a good. Reward is measured not by profit, but by the opportunities to increase one's knowledge, exercise one's creativity, and increase one's reputation among peers. The result is a commons-based peer production system in which goods can be allocated with no need for monetary compensation: proponents of P2P recognize that digital goods, unlike material goods, can be effortlessly and infinitely reproduced, and it is therefore useless to try to create an artificial scarcity to regulate their exchange.

According to supporters of P2P, the power of collective intelligence

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behind this model is significantly redefining society at large. Its influence has expanded beyond the Open Source and Open Content movements to areas like governance, education, science and spirituality. These changes—we are told—are nothing short of a revolution in moral vision, a “breakthrough in social evolution, leading to the possibility of a new political, economic, and cultural 'formation' with a new coherent logic” (P2P Foundation, 2006). Furthermore, P2P is not just ephemeral theory but an actual social practice that signals a major transformation to come:

At a time when the very success of the capitalist mode of production endangers the biosphere and causes increasing psychic (and physical) damage to the population, the emergence of such an alternative is particularly appealing, and corresponds to the new cultural needs of large numbers of the population. The emergence and growth of P2P is therefore accompanied by a new work ethic (Pekka Himanen's *Hacker Ethic*), by new cultural practices such as peer circles in spiritual research (John Heron's cooperative inquiry), but most of all, by a new political and social movement which is intent on promoting its expansion. This still nascent P2P movement, (which includes the Free Software and Open Source movement, the open access movement, the free culture movement and others) which echoes the means of organization and aims of the alter-globalization movement, is fast becoming the equivalent of the socialist movement in the industrial age. It stands as a permanent alternative to the status quo, and the expression of the growth of a new social force: the knowledge workers. (Bauwens, 2005)

There are, however, some serious limitations behind the idealistic sentiments expressed in this rhetoric. The P2P network is a heterotopia in the sense in which Foucault uses the term: an ‘Other Space’ with a dual meaning—at once an alternative and a confirmation of the impossibility of alternatives. When the curtain is lifted, we can see that the ‘breakthrough’ in social and economic evolution that P2P is said to represent is built on top of the same old capitalist structures: while peers can redistribute bandwidth amongst themselves, they must first rent it from an ISP; the production of common goods still depends to a large extent on goods that only some can afford and whose

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production usually entails exploitation (the production of electronic circuitry, for instance, is at some level still dependent on the surplus labor of the Congolese miner or the maquiladora worker, etc.).

In short, the decentralization of resources and the deregulation of property is made possible only through the centralization and regulation that profit maximization requires. While there are no dedicated servers in P2P networks information must still flow through a dedicated server at some point, because P2P networks are built for the most part (with notable exceptions) on top of the same Internet we all rent from corporations, not a separate Internet. *The only reason this world without money is possible is because it is built on top of a world where money is everything.* Thus, P2P is at once a success and a failure, both a self-sustaining organism and a parasite that cannot live without its host. Baudrillard's observations about simulacra become highly applicable here: just like the absence of freedom in a prison functions as a convenient way to conceal the fact that the whole of society is carceral, the Digital Commons that P2P networks create serves to conceal the fact that online sociality was from the beginning—and is only increasingly becoming—subordinated to the logic of capitalism.

P2P and the 'new socialism'

The desire to believe that P2P networks are functional alternatives to capitalism is an expression of a rather romantic view of technological progress called *digitalism*. According to Pasquinelli, digitalism is “a basic designation for the widespread belief that Internet-based communication can be free from any form of exploitation and will naturally evolve towards a society of equal peers” (2009, p. 66). To the extent that proponents of the Digital Commons (Free Software, Open Source, Creative Commons, etc.) believe that digital reproduction can supplant material production in a way that engenders more equality and is better for the environment, they are adhering to a form of digitalism. In the process, unfortunately, they are obscuring the fact that a

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horizontal democracy of nodes still relies on the surplus labor of an unequal Other.

Politically, digitalism believes in a mutual gift society. The Internet is supposed to be virtually free from any exploitation, tending naturally towards a democratic equilibrium and natural cooperation. Here, digitalism works as a disembodied politics with no acknowledgement of the offline labour sustaining the online world (a *class divide* that precedes any *digital divide*). Ecologically, digitalism promotes itself as an environmentally friendly and zero-emission machine against the pollution of older Fordist modes of industrial production, and yet it is estimated that an avatar on Second Life consumes more electricity than the average Brazilian" (Pasquinelli, 2009, pp. 72-73, emphasis in original).

We are all familiar with digitalism arguments that portray Web 2.0 companies like Flickr and Twitter as the heralds of a new form of socialism (see Kelly, 2009, on *Wired Magazine*, for instance). If nothing else, this glorification of the equality-producing qualities of corporate-controlled sociable media serves to remind us of Paolo Virno's observation that, as a way to assuage the revolutionary flames it tends to fan by creating so much inequality, capitalism "keeps providing its own kind of 'communism' both as a vaccine, preventing further escalation, and an incentive to go beyond its own limitations" (2004, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, p. 18). P2P is part of this process, functioning as an internal communism that makes capitalism seem less savage, as well as a laboratory for the proto-capitalist modes of production of tomorrow.

Not for nothing did Virno call post-Fordism the "communism of capital" (ibid, p. 110). Post-Fordism is not about the production of material goods in the assembly line, but about the creative production of knowledge and culture through social relations outside the factory. It is the privatization of the public domain. This new form of exploitation, according to Hardt and Negri, translates into "the expropriation of cooperation and the nullification of the meanings of linguistic production" (2000, p. 385). We see it as much in the commercialization of hip-hop as in the adoption of P2P or open models by

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corporations. Big companies have recognized a business opportunity and are plucking the fruits of P2P collaboration in order to reinsert them into the market as commodities. In the name of ‘social collaboration’ and ‘gift economies,’ the users are put to work for corporations. While there are attempts to protect immaterial labor under new collective forms of ownership or ‘peer property’ (GNU, Creative Commons, etc.), the fact that these models carry within them the ghosts of exploitation cannot be escaped. New models of sociability emerge, but they become organized under a structure where every aspect of the public is owned, hosted, or powered by private interests. A quick look at the Terms of Use of any Web 2.0 company will reveal as much. And yet, although in essence it is just an experimental expression of private property, peer production is accepted because it gives the illusion (which might be correct superficially) of being more equitable and inclusive. By furthering a capitalist technologizing of sociality peers are not exactly engaged in the formation of a pure commons, but promote a trend where—to paraphrase Vandenberghe (2002)—the social is increasingly subordinated to the economy, as opposed to the economy being only one dimension of the social.

Of course, things are not hopeless and P2P is anything but pointless. There are opportunities for resistance and creation in this process. We can respond, as Virno suggests, by “absorbing the shocks or multiplying the fractures that will occur in unpredictable ways” (2004, p. 18). Despite capitalism’s attempts to expropriate them, the new models of collaboration opened up by P2P can be fruitful if they are converted into authentic political platforms that revitalize the public sphere. P2P does not have to be a “*publicness without a public sphere*” (ibid., p. 40). It does not have to pose as socialism while increasing our submission to a capitalist order. But for that we might need to think beyond nodes and peers.

The decline of cyber piracy

Peers are beautiful parasites. The heterotopias they create expose the

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fissures in the system and are testaments to the fact that other ways of thinking are possible. Today, the image in the mirror of a world without inequality might be mostly an illusion, but at least it reminds us there is a mirror in which such projections are possible. Furthermore, while most P2P projects remain small-scale experiments, one recent phenomenon reminds us that P2P can seriously disrupt and threaten the status quo on a mass scale. I'm speaking of the piracy of digital music. Reliable figures are difficult to come by, but according to the RIAA \$12.5 billion USD are lost every year because of the piracy of music files. But digital piracy has not been merely about the redistribution of wealth by making digital goods affordable to audiences who would otherwise not be able to acquire them. According to Dyer-Witford and de Peuter, "mass levels of piracy around the planet indicate a widespread perception that commodified digital culture imposes artificial scarcity on a technology capable of near costless cultural reproduction and circulation" (2009).

Of course, the rhetoric behind the image of the digital pirate as a cultural and counter-capitalist revolutionary should be questioned. For one, while global piracy continues to rise, in some countries it is drastically diminishing or at least not growing. According to the RIAA, since 2004 the percentage of Internet-connected households that have downloaded music from P2P networks has not increased. Similarly, a survey conducted by the Business Software Alliance reports that the percentage of youth who downloaded music, movies and software without paying declined from 60% in 2004, to 43% in 2006, to 36% in 2007 (Youth Downloading Study Fact Sheet, 2006). I am not praising or lamenting the decline of this illegal form of exchange, but merely pointing out that the largest experiment in P2P adoption seems to be contracting in some areas as pressure to conform to social norms—such as the respect for private property—begin to reassert themselves. Secondly, I want to ask: if P2P was about empowering individuals to participate in the creation and free exchange of culture, whose culture are most pirates reproducing and circulating with their open source P2P file sharing clients? Notwithstanding the litany of counter-cultural practices (hacking, mashing, modding, circuit-bending, speedrunning, etc.) that P2P has facilitated or influenced, the fact remains that for most people, pirating involves the rather uncritical consumption of mass media, the

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downloading of the latest Hollywood blockbuster or teen idol musical hit.

As some have realized, piracy supplies a tremendous boost to the big artists by popularizing their work, making them even bigger players in the market. The logic of the network reasserts itself: the rich nodes are still getting richer through preferential attachment (the linking to popular nodes). Digital piracy cannot escape the dynamics that make the network a machine for widening inequalities, not closing them. True, businesses need to adjust to the new dynamics of the industry, but the smart ones will figure out how to capitalize on this 'communism.' Thus, it is incredulous to believe that P2P sharing for the masses will significantly undermine monopolies by creating a *long tail* of diverse cultural alternatives. In an attention economy where traffic equals wealth (even if it is in terms of reputation, not money), the small-time cultural producer can only aspire to become one of the massively shared commodities. Get rich or die trying. Meanwhile, the pirate has only reaffirmed his or her role as consumer in the process. Unlike the piracy of the 17th Century, this form of appropriation or 'stealing' only serves to increase the value of the good being stolen. The sharing of monocultural goods (and the production of derivatives from these goods) that P2P models facilitate is a form of *ultimate consumerism* in which production becomes the new consumption. It is 'ultimate' because social relations outside the market are now commodified through P2P processes and placed inside (or more exactly, superimposed *over*) the market, and 'ultimate' because by remixing monocultural goods and making them available for others to consume we end up paying for the things we produce. Or as Doc Searls says of user-generated content: "the demand side supplies itself" (2006).

Whereas mass media established a monopoly of communication characterized by the unidirectional flow of information from one to many, digital technosocial networks have increasingly come to represent a monopsony of communications where the flow of information is from many to one (whereas a monopoly is defined by the presence of a single seller, a monopsony is defined by the presence of a single buyer). We are *all* producers now, but since we want to maximize the chances of our products being seen by others, we must take our cultural products to the one buyer that can make our content go

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viral: the Flickr and Facebooks of the world (although they don't really *buy* our content; we *pay*—through advertisements if nothing else—for the privilege of having it hosted there). Digital technosocial networks allow for the sharing of information according to models that seem democratic and egalitarian (models such as peer-to-peer and many-to-many), but in terms of the network infrastructure that aggregates and disseminates this information, the model is increasingly that of many users willingly submitting their content to one buyer who manages it and derives profit from it in unequal proportion.

The atopia of disassembly

If we are really interested in alternatives, perhaps we should consider the possibility that we might need to look beyond the logic of the network, and past the exclusion of peers—the exclusion that establishes that a non-peer is irrelevant to the network.

In my work, I argue that digital technosocial networks—including P2P networks—function not just as metaphors to describe sociality, but as full templates or models for organizing it. Since in order for something to be relevant or even visible within the network it needs to be rendered as a node, digital technosocial networks are constituted as totalities by what they include as much as by what they exclude. I propose a framework for understanding the epistemological exclusion embedded in the structure and dynamics of digital technosocial networks, and for exploring the ethical questions associated with the nature of the bond between the node and the excluded other.

The logic of the network—the network episteme, so to speak—rests on a principle I refer to as nodocentrism. One property of networks, as Castells (2000, p. 501) suggests, is that the distance between nodes within the network is finite: while any two given nodes might not be directly linked, they are connected through the indirect links that form the network itself, and information can reach them even if it encounters the occasional barrier. But at the same time the distance between a node and something outside the network is, for all

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practical purposes, infinite. A location on the periphery of the network is separated from the network by a barrier that cannot be breached, unless the location becomes part of the network. Thus, nearness in a network is constituted on the basis of nodes recognizing only other nodes. In the context of digital technosocial networks, we can say that social reality is mediated through a nodocentric filter, and since the distance between a node and something that is not in the network is infinite, only elements that are in the network are rendered as socially near (regardless of whether they are physically near or far).

Nodocentrism is the assertion that only nodes need to be mapped, explained, or accounted for. Nodocentrism means that while networks are extremely efficient at establishing links between nodes, they embody a bias against knowledge of—and engagement with—anything that is not a node on the same network. If it is not a node in the network, it is not real—it might as well not exist as far as the network is concerned. In essence, nodocentrism is a reductionism that eliminates everything but the reality of the node. The network consequently defines the limits of what individuals are capable of knowing, shaping subjects through what is included or excluded from the universe of knowable things, and through what is rendered as near or far in relation to the network. Thus, the question of what is knowable—what is included or excluded from the network—has ethical implications: to include something is to accord to it certain rights and privileges, whereas to exclude something is to deny it a seat in the assembly.

I then propose the concept of the paranodal, which encompasses the space outside and between the nodes, as a way to theorize a resistance to the network, and as a countermeasure to the logic that eliminates everything but the reality of the node. Contrary to its representation in diagrams depicting networks, the outside of the network is not empty but inhabited by multitudes that do not conform to the organizing logic of the network. These peripheries play an important role in giving nodes their identity and history, as changes in this space result in changes to the structure and purpose of the network. Furthermore, the paranodal acts as a site from which we can articulate a subjectivity separate from the network, from which we can unthink the network episteme and disidentify from the network. For Rancière (ref), political

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subjectivization or identity formation happens precisely through a process of disidentification: parts of society disidentify themselves from the whole; individuals and groups recognize themselves as separate from the mainstream. Thus, to use Rancière's terminology, the paranodal is the part of those who have no part; it is the place where we experience—or at least are free to theorize—what it is like to be outside the network.

Poverty in the network is explained not so much by exclusion (as the 'digital divide' theories suggest) but by inclusion under nodocentric terms that increase inequality. It is easier than ever to join a network, but once inside, the architecture of the network makes it nearly impossible to escape the dynamic that widens the gap between the wealthy hubs and the impoverished nodes. It is under these economic circumstances that the ethical resistance of the paranodal becomes important, because the peripheries of the network represent the only sites from which it is possible to un-think the network episteme, helping to conceptualize new models of identity and sociality.

Peers and paranodes

P2P networks do not escape the exclusionary framing of nodocentrism, and it is from this point of departure that we can begin to ponder the benefits of thinking beyond the peer. P2P might be a rejection of the commodity form, but as we have seen, this rejection is constructed over the old structures of labor and capital that make the commodity form possible in the first place. In capitalism, exploitation happens when the workers, who do not own their own means of production, are made to produce more than what they need to satisfy their needs; the capitalist uses this surplus labor to generate wealth. Brilliantly, P2P circumvents the model by calling attention to the fact that a surplus of digital goods can be created effortlessly, removing the need for exploitation, and by facilitating the distribution of tools that puts the means of production into the hands of more people. However, because this happens over a network and socio-economic structure where not everyone has the access and knowledge to

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participate in the Digital Commons, P2P's 'alternative' consists only in a postponement of exploitation: removing it from the pristine sphere of the digital commons by relegating it (or *externalizing* it, in economic terms) to other spheres. P2P is—again, paradoxically—an alternative to the capitalist economy that cannot exist without the capitalist economy—a parasite that cannot afford to bleed its host to death. Remove that economy from underneath it—remove the millions of dollars invested in developing microchips and financing warlords that control the mining of Coltan through slavery and rape—and the alternative will cease to exist (Coltan is a mineral found in the Congo necessary for the production of many electronic devices). Once the threat of mass piracy is brought under control, P2P will stabilize into a boutique economy, a gift economy for closet anarchists that poses no real challenge to capitalism.

Plainly put, there is no way to escape the fact that the nodocentrism that organizes digital networks—whether they be centralized or decentralized—is an expression of subordination to the rules of capital. But by accepting the inevitability that, for something to matter, it must be digital and networked, we limit our ability to imagine alternatives. Even if we were to accept the claim that P2P network architecture engenders publics instead of markets, we should not put aside Kierkegaard's critique of publics as nihilistic systems intended to facilitate the accumulation of information while postponing action indefinitely. While Kierkegaard was putting down newspaper media, his critique couldn't be more fitting in the age of Web browsers, RSS aggregators and bitTorrent clients.

P2P is indeed a brilliant failure. It allows for the proliferation of parasites, of heterotopias built on top of host systems. This is the first step in disentanglement, in escape. Parasites are useful because they signify that resistance has conceptualized the first step in unthinking the problem.

The breeding ground of disobedience does not lie exclusively in the social conflicts which express protest, but, and above all, in those which express defection... Nothing is less passive than the act fleeing, of exiting. Defection modifies the conditions within which the struggle takes place, rather than

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presupposing those conditions to be an unalterable horizon; it modifies the context within which a problem has arisen, rather than facing this problem by opting for one or the other of the provided alternatives. (Virno, 2004, p. 70)

While parasites may not be able to completely flee the system (they cannot survive without the host), they are able to dissidentify from the host. Peers/parasites are therefore the first to unthink the logic of the system, to ‘modify the conditions within which struggle takes place.’ Furthermore, parasites can form anywhere. Since the network template is everywhere, commodifying sociality everywhere, it stands to reason that resistance—what Hardt and Negri call *the will to be against* (2000, p. 210)—should also be everywhere. Effective resistance, therefore, should not just be a heterotopia—an *elsewhere*—but an atopia—an *everywhere*. “If there is no longer a place that can be recognized as outside, we must be against in every place” (ibid., p. 211). This is where we might encounter the conceptual limits of the peer. P2P is an expression of the will to be against, but it is an expression that only exists in one place and always in relation to the host—a commons built on a small corner of the market. Unlike the parasite, the peerless paranode aims to be not only inside or outside the host, but where the host no longer *is*. P2P might be a good start to *being against* the network in one place: the network itself. But authentic alternatives will need to contemplate what it means to unthink the network altogether, to defect from its logic. The paranode, more than the peer, might be better positioned for such a defection.

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