

(Krzysztof Gutfranski is editor of Alternativa Editions in Gdansk (Poland) which is part of the visual arts festival Alternativa (hosted by the Wyspa Institute of Art) . The interview was conducted for the "Labour and Leisure" issue, with texts by Hannah Arendt, Miklos Haraszti, Cornelius Castoriadis, Boris Arvatov, Stanley Aronowitz, Yochai Benkler and others)

KG: In 2006 Harvard law professor Yochai Benkler made a bet with Jonathan Carr—a journalist dealing with new technologies—that by 2011 most media content would be peer-produced. Based on examples such as Wikipedia and Linux, Benkler assumed that this phenomenon would replace or exist in parallel to information technology driven by capital and run through hierarchical management. The event was widely reported, and commented on, as the 'Carr-Benkler wager.' Do you think the situation of volunteer peer-production has changed since then?

GL: No—and such a change could not be realistically expected. Deliberately or not, often peer-production activities remain unnoticed. The nature of peer-production is direct, which means as unmediated as possible. Most internet users have not yet encountered peer-production. I am not talking about 'social media.' So far true peer-production has not become a mass cultural phenomenon. However, it would be wrong to classify contributors to peer-production as underground. Geeks and hackers are not sub-cultural; Anonymous, Wikileaks, free software initiatives, Creative Commons, pirate parties, they are all manifestations of a new social formation. It is technology gone mass culture in a different way from the 19th century crafts movement and the 20th century pragmatist class of engineers who built public infrastructures for whoever was in power.

The forces behind peer-production are obviously a minority, a pretty loud and influential one and that has not yet grown exponentially—like in the usual telecom and IT curves. Even though the internet crossed the two billion mark in 2011, it will take some time before a considerable number of those users will also be part of volunteer peer-production networks. In that sense Benkler would have been more prudent to suggest 2016 or 2026, rather than 2011. The growing support for pirate parties in Western Europe is an interesting case. Who would have predicted that they would organize themselves and form political parties? Libertarian techno-utopianism has taken an alarmist twist. There is a lot at stake for everyone, even though the particular details may be quite obscure. Few people have even heard about

SOPA, Hadopi, or ICANN, for example. Internet freedoms are taken for granted and are easy to lose—it is hard to imagine how to reinvent and implement them again once they have vanished. Peer-to-peer environments are highly unstable and could easily disappear and peer-production depends on these existing decentralized, distributed networks.

KG: It is easy to be pessimistic. Think of figures like Nicolas Carr or Jaron Lanier’s disillusion with popular net culture and more general anthropological views expressed by Sherry Turkle. They all give us a rather sad perspective, suggesting that technology and social media unlearn (meaning re-educate) us from the ability to cooperate with other people, they also generate a question “Do we need human intelligence? And what happens if we fail to exercise it?” I should also add here the post-Soviet devaluation of concepts which have never been fully developed, such as collectivism or cooperation.

GL: I wonder if ‘free cooperation’ as recently defined by the German theorist Christoph Spehr from Bremen as the freedom to talk away from the collaboration was ever part of the Soviet canon, but yes, I get what you mean... The techno-utopian practices that reached the mainstream surface with the rise of the world-wide web in the mid-1990s were, and were not, in sync with the harsh cynical neo-liberal regimes that became dominant in Eastern Europe (and elsewhere) after the fall of the Berlin Wall. They are pro-market and have this naïve belief in entrepreneurial energy, as if this can expand outside of the restraints given by the large institutional regimes of finance, marketing and management. There are frictions between corporate power and the logic of the start-up that disrupts and aims at the ‘creative destruction’ of the existing conglomerates. The current wave of conservative net criticism that reaches us from the US is cultural in essence and doesn’t contribute to a political economy of these new media—but it does help question the hegemony of, for instance, Google and Facebook. Critique aimed at behavioral correction can be politicized. Nothing is worse than the totalitarian organized optimism that bans all forms of negativism in favor of seamless product marketing which, in the end, only depresses people (a feeling or sickness that cannot be publicly expressed but is omnipresent nonetheless).

It could be interesting to investigate if a post-Soviet concept of coding, design and networks and even collaboration might be possible. It might be too late to ask this question, twenty years onwards, but maybe the time

wasn't ripe for this in the early 1990s. Can we have techno-cultural ideas without ideals? Is it possible to, collectively, reach a zero level in terms of all ideological commitments—and still be critical, imaginative and passionate about everything digital? I am saying collective here because it is impossible for a single person to do on their own. In the current circumstance the individual can only be consumer of Western values and their backlashes. The genius, if this Gestalt (figure) still exists in the first place, only thrives in contrast to, and as a product of a complex ecology of cultural practices. The social here is not an ideal but a necessary requirement that is growing out of expertise and division of labor. The evolution over the past decades from communities to networks should be seen as breeding ground, a necessary infrastructure, not as a goal in itself.

Post-Soviet techno-politics would not just imply a rejection of state socialist notions, but also an exodus from religion, neo-liberal market beliefs, democratic principles and ultimately Western individualism. I am not talking about merely applying the available nihilistic energies to the level of applications, or apps, which are developed, administrated and owned by others to start with. We are talking here about the development of fundamental concepts, which will then, step by step, are transformed in protocols and code through a living culture. One of the hardest and most interesting steps into the unknown will be if we leave behind the Berkman-Soros consensus and develop models that lie beyond the ideas of free and open and its startup culture. How can we strip off the rituals and conventions of that particular culture of developers and build something different from the core? What landscapes arise on other side of horizon of our illusions and conventions? The desire to normalcy has created its own monsters. So let's ignore Loic Lemur (the organizer of LeWeb) and the next TedX in Kraków (<http://tedxkrakow.com/>). "Mobile application for Lechia Gdansk Football Club is indispensable for every true Lechia fan." -Sure, but we all know that other, radically different algorithmic presumptions and network architectures are possible. So why not start examining them?

KG: After 1989 there were specific ideas how to develop our own solutions—a mixed economy that included pluralisation of ownership forms and was against the sudden American-way leap, however they have never been brought into effect. In the context of your examples I'd say that Poland would be in state that, quoting Sherry Turkle, could be called Walden 2.0. The awareness here of Creative Commons, the benefits of Linux and other, above mentioned

initiatives is rather sketchy.

GL: I have never been to Poland and I know almost nothing about it. The countries that I know well are Romania, Hungary, former Yugoslavia (is one still allowed to say that?) and of course East-Germany. It is always interesting to speculate about parallel possible futures that were never realized.

KG: Before the 20th century there were many interesting, still unexploited ideas, such as ‘mutual credit’ from Josiah Warren’s Cincinnati Time Store dating back to 1831. Linking this concept to today’s time economy and dominance of Leviathan over participation, can we view the horizon the third way?

GL: One way to start would be to think of way to cut out the mid level, from the middle man, middle management, PR layers to aggregators and other forms of parasitic economic behavior. Just look at the economic model of Groupon, Google, and Facebook, its clever, yet destructive. The internet was introduced with the promise that it would eliminate filters and blockades. But so far it has only introduced new ones. Both governments and corporations have no interest into peer-to-peer networks or peer-production. This should be no surprise. But the battle for peer-production is still being waged on the abstract-conceptual level. If the internet plus mobile phone are only there to remediate existing content and ownership structures, then it only utilizes a fraction of its potential. What we should do is strengthen local networks, while simultaneously exploring the largely untapped person-to-person direct interaction on a global level. How many friends in Asia do you have? Japan? There are no longer high costs involved in such exchanges. What we faced with are cultural barriers, and intermediate politics such as Facebook that would rather like us to hang out online with our school friends or neighbors to whom we have little to say anyway. So why not dream up cross-border, cosmopolitan exchanges of a very different nature?

KG: It seems that Web 2.0 culture introduced a new paradigm that radically broke with the industrial division between work and leisure, in which these activities are neither work nor play. You could also say that terms such as “exploitation” or “exploitative work” got completely blurred due to this.

GL: Sure, the end of everything. We still live in the end times, as Žižek rightly states. Most 20th century philosophers devoted their time on the

thinking the end. The Situationists promised that we would “leave the 20th century,” but when will we? True, Hiroshima and Auschwitz are no longer the central focal points for younger generations but what categories have replaced them? Is the return to capitalism providing us with more insight than the worn-out Dialectics of Enlightenment? Let’s take “the end of work,” which was theorized by André Gorz in the 1970s. As Wikipedia notes his central theme was “wage labour issues such as liberation from work, just distribution of work, social alienation, and guaranteed basic income.” Blurring work with leisure doesn’t help those who are dealing with the real issues. The blend of “work as leisure” with “leisure as work” is a typical example of 1990s neo-liberal fantasy. While the ‘real’ work was outsourced elsewhere, the issues that Gorz raised were put on hold.

KG: Apparently labor movements were replaced by “human resources” management. After another example: Italian philosopher Paolo Virno states that the crisis of the society of labor is reflected in the multitude itself: “Social wealth is produced from science, from the general intellect, rather than from the work delivered by individuals. The work demanded seems reducible to a virtually negligible portion of a life. Science, information, knowledge in general, cooperation, these present themselves as the key support system of production - these, rather than labor time.”

GL: I do not have much to add to this. The term ‘general intellect,’ does not explain much. The fact that Marx once used it does not mean it is truth-making. I never was a Marxist and never will. What we need are critical terms that open new spaces of imagination and action. General intellect, in my experience, lacks utility as its obscurity excludes people from the debate. It leads the discussion down the labyrinth of Marxian theory of value from which so few escape. My past engagements with the ‘real existing socialism’ (I crossed the Iron Curtain for the first time, in 1978) has made me wary using this kind of terminology. I am in favor of a critical political economy that is rooted in today’s society, not in mid 19th century England. This obviously doesn’t mean that we have to start from scratch. I am interested in Marx as a historical figure. To me he was a critic and a brilliant writer, but otherwise an unsympathetic personality. As an autonomous anarchist I have other sources of inspiration. I am a child of the cultural and gender turn, of a generation who no longer believes in grand economic schemes and the Party and instead participated in radical issue-based social movements.

Intellectual labour has become a central pillar of production, but the knowledge workers have so far been unable to gain much prestige from this strategic position. The 1% that profits from the 'knowledge economy' are banks and shareholders. The same can be said of the 'creative industries'. Instead of general intellect I would speak of the tragic, or the tragedy of intellect. Inventors do not own their patents, musicians not their music, authors not their texts. It is not hard to see that this robbery will not last forever and that a peer-to-peer based direct payment system will be put in place. But will we have to go through a Third World War first in order to reach that point? One wonders. The skepticism towards state socialist solutions is justified. But the drive towards a commons-based economy is inevitable. Capitalism is not distributing the accumulated wealth—particularly not in the research, education and arts sectors.

KG: How do concepts such as multitude, precarity and free cooperation relate with practice? Is it not true that the notions we use are one step behind the actual status?

GL: Instead of building some metaphysical system of such concepts that relate in theory and just look around you and see how they operate in a context like the Occupy movement. I was never concerned exactly how concepts related to one another. The question is rather how they can be turned into a machine and become productive (and here I follow Deleuze, yes). It is fun to discover the materiality of ideas. They can be turned into code, squats, direct action, a work of art, you name it. The concept of 'multitude' usefully expresses the real existing diversity in society once you start to organize. My question to you is: What you think of a possible future reappearance of global solidarity that this time is implemented in software. I know, some concepts are of the living dead category, we should not go near them. What turns you on? It is my sincere hope that we can leave behind the legalistic legacy of the 'civil society' rhetoric in order to get a better understanding of 21st century conflicts.

KG: A greater emphasis on critical studies and education concerning Internet can be the first step. In the first half of 1990's in Poland you could see people coming to lunch at McDonalds in their best Sunday clothes.

GL: Sure, but let's not demonize these early feelings of liberation. There is no reason to feel guilty or remorseful about all these wasted neo-liberal

years of ignorance and capitalist idealism. During the early '90s we used to joke that consumerism was the next human right to be added on the list. The question should instead be how to rebuild alternative movements from scratch and design subversive and radical motives that have no connection whatsoever with the official Marxist-Leninist past. There are so many subcultures and underground art forms, lifestyles and ideas that were oppressed by the Communists, why not connect to those? If you believe that all critical thinking will end up creating next Gulags and Death-camps, then it is indeed better to sign up for a job in the creative industries, in banking or PR marketing where questioning is seen as a sign of cultural pessimism and is outlawed. People have the right to remain ignorant. There is no need to wake them up. They protect themselves against the forces of History. Fair enough! But there is little chance that they can run away from the forces unleashed by capitalist crises. That's the irony. It often feels useless to start a propaganda campaign against investment banks, mafia and corruption inside the political class. Either you can see it in what they do right now or you simply cannot. Critical information, research, Wikileaks and Anonymous evidence is all good but often falls on deaf ears. Luckily now that's changing.

It is understandable that the impoverished multitudes in Poland are wary of the return of collectivist ideologies. So why not start with the demolition of the power of the Catholic Church by celebrating radical individualism? The problem is that such expressions of artistic singularity cannot thrive in a cultural desert. It needs pockets of deviant and clandestine culture. Figures such as cyber punks, data dandies, eco travelers and techno ravers will be crushed if they remain isolated outcasts. In network societies like ours the pressure to conform is becoming massive. Even though 'small' differences are promoted and appreciated, behavior and opinions outside the norm is remarkably fast labeled as 'terrorist' (in fact, much faster than 20 years ago). We're back to the early '60s when you were arrested by the cops over nothing.

KG: Was there anything that surprised you positively about Internet usage in 2011?

GL: Nothing in 2011 was business as usual, don't you think? Let's not list all the events of the past year from Wikileaks onwards. Time Magazine hit the zeitgeist by choosing the Demonstrator as 'person' of the year—and it wasn't even possible to include the wave of protests in Russia of December 2011. I don't want to make yet another praise of the Tunisian and Egyptian

'Facebook revolution'. The question how networked mobile media and social change relate has occupied us for a long time, and in 2011 reached the stage of mass experimentation on a global scale. To deconstruct the agenda of certain Egyptian Google employees once again is not necessary here. It is much more interesting to relate the rise of the media savvy demonstrators to urban issues and the occupation of public spaces that are under threat worldwide. The middle class is under pressure.

KG: Your new book *Networks Without a Cause - A Critique of Social Media* appears early 2012 with Polity Press with German and Italian translations coming soon afterwards. Is this book a continuation of your critical internet studies? What is the main focus?

GL: I am never quite sure if my books are too general or too specific. I am not ready to synthesize my work into a General Network Theory. I see myself more as a *chroniqueur* who is telling stories and trying to influence the overall direction of net culture with critical concepts and research network initiatives. Based in Europe, working in the academic-cultural field my influence as an intellectual is modest, but still exciting. In this fourth part I continue my investigations into blogging, reflect on the status of 'net criticism', discuss the neurological turn in net criticism, develop a theory of comment cultures and report on the ambiguous status of new media education within arts and humanities. Are new media just a fad or are they here stay? If so, then why it is so hard to build up an autonomous discipline in terms of academic research and education?

KG: You have raised the issue of 'mass anonymity', which is becoming an ever important topic of discussion. Today, we see more and more attempts to prohibit it. Could we also draw up a scenario without anonymity?

GL: Imagine a world in which full enclosure of one's identity wouldn't cause any problem. For some this is the nightmare of transparency, a dystopia of a life without secrets (as if this would exist in the first place). All suspense is eliminated in favor of an 'honest life' in honor of God, Big Brother, the Party, the Market or whatever authority. Needless to say that I am not in favor of this! However, I do not believe in anonymity as a (human) right. The link between anonymity and the American constitution is interesting from a historical perspective but should not encourage us to go in a legal direction. Legislation can be an empty shelf without a lively culture that both supports

and subverts that legal system. I believe in the lived experience of mass anonymity as inscribed in social rituals and technical systems. I understand surveillance is on the rise, the signs are everywhere, but we can also see the same arrangements untangle and fall into disrepair, almost overnight. Sabotage is one, the Hope for decommissioning another. There is a Will to Uninstall; a vital undercurrent in history which we should rely on more.

KG: Do you think that social media have the possibility to transform informal networks and peer-to-peer collaborations into something different?

GL: We need to distinguish between the few social media that most people know and the general logic—and potential—of social networking. This distinction is what we hope to explore with the Unlike Us network. Obviously, peer-production collaborations would further benefit from next generations of free software that shapes the social in new ways. The question I ask myself: Which design principle should be used? We know from the recent past that all tendencies towards baroque code and interfaces should be repressed: Nie wieder Multimedia, Death to Crossmedia, Ban all Transmedia. The trick is not to connect everybody with everything, to aim to mobilize all senses. If you look at email, SMS, blogging, but also at Twitter and even Facebook it starts off with an almost violent reduction in functionality. You pair a revolutionary, unheard, scandalous possibility (such as free peer-to-peer voice over IP in the case of Skype), with voluntary simplicity. Sometimes I think it is hard for activists and artists, raised in the age of postmodern complexity to fully understand the libidinous energy accelerations that are facilitated by smallband communication. I use this term not to refer to reduced speed but to modernist clarity and technical precession. The more technology is integrated into the everyday life of the billions, the more we want it to accompany us in the background. The current culture of complaint about “information overload” will eventually pass and make way for a more relaxed form of networking outside of the hands of monopolies.

KG: Can we compare the shift from ‘link’ to ‘like’ with ongoing changes in the global economy and consumerism in times of crisis?

GL: The shift from the distributed, technical act of linking to a web address to the centralized click service to express one’s affection to a person or product might be temporary and may either regress and decay or be taken

to another level. I am not sure I see this reflected in other developments within society at large. Of course we say that outsourcing of responsibility is a trend, but I am not a member of the 'interpassivity' school of Žižek, Pfaller, Mladen and here in the Netherlands Oosterling and van Oenen. We do not 'delegate' power to Facebook because we are tired to send out status updates. The stats suggest increased involvements, not tiredness. Are societies beginning to crack up because of the 'interactive strain?' To think of social media as a 'resistive load' is in accordance with the 'info overload' discourse, which I associate with older generations that are in charge and experience all these new media as a nuisance, as fads that will fade away again.

While the theories of interpassivity present themselves as resistance through civilized non-cooperation ('thanks, I would rather not') I am of the opinion that this offline romanticism is neither contributing to a better insight into political economy of networks nor does it create alternatives or attacks the "participatory culture" *a la* Henry Jenkins. Of course we all want to have a break every now and then. The trade union movement started off with the demand for the 8 hour working day. Our question today should be what shape the reproduction of the digital labor force will take? What does holidays mean in times of 24/7 online availability? Does switching off have any meaning? Jean Baudrillard was right when he stated that the 'silence of the masses' would lead to the implosion of the System. Mass conformism existed over the past decades, in Poland as well, if I may say so, but didn't go anywhere as a political project. We now see it gliding away into right-wing populism, racism, anti-Islam and anti-Semitism. In times of crisis interpassivity merely results into more poverty, more violence. To call our reliance on new media 'techno slavery' is not helpful either. It is nice and justified to switch off and not answer, but let's politicize those impulses, turn it into a conscious act, disrupt the corporate feedback flows and call it a strike. Pause to the people!

(Edited by Tom Apperley)

