

Opening Education Beyond the Property Relation: From Commons to Communism

The University of Utopia

Abstract

Open Education, and specifically the OER movement, seeks to provide universal access to knowledge, undermining the historical enclosure and the increasing privatisation of the public education system. In this paper we examine this aspiration by submitting the implicit theoretical assumptions of Open Education to the test of critical political economy. We acknowledge the Open Education movement's revolutionary potential but outline the inherent limitations of its current focus on the commons (property relations) rather than the social relations of capitalist production (wage work, the company) and because of this, argue that it will only achieve limited, rather than revolutionary, impact.

Recommended citation:

The University of Utopia (2010). Opening Education Beyond the Property Relation: From Commons to Communism. In *Open ED 2010 Proceedings*. Barcelona: UOC, OU, BYU.

[Accessed: dd/mm/yy].< <http://hdl.handle.net/10609/5243>>

Introduction

The opening of education beyond the property relation is distinguished by two terms that are often used interchangeably, yet retain subtle differences: Open Education and Open Educational Resources.

Open Education refers to recent efforts by individuals and organisations across the world to use the Internet to share knowledge, ideas, teaching practices, infrastructure, tools and resources, inside and outside formal educational settings. Through collaboration and experimentation, new pedagogies and curricula are emerging. Although the term Open Education has been used since the 1960s, the current dominant use of the term refers to co-ordinated efforts during the past decade to exploit the growing availability of personal computers and increasingly ubiquitous high speed networks.

Open Educational Resources (OER) refers to both the worldwide community effort to create an educational commons and the actual “educational materials and resources offered freely and openly for anyone to use and under some licenses to re-mix, improve and redistribute” (Wikipedia). Typically, those resources are made available under a Creative Commons license and include both learning resources and tools by which those resources are created, managed and disseminated. As both a means of protecting and liberating research, teaching and learning materials, OER relies heavily on the use of open licenses, all of which are in one way or another derived from the General Public License (GPL) and Berkeley Software Distribution (BSD) licenses first created in 1989. Since the 1990s, software has been created and distributed using such licenses and it is widely acknowledged that Creative Commons was inspired by, and drew experience from, the use of open licenses in the world of software.

In just ten years, a relatively small number of educators have created a discernible movement that has attracted millions of pounds from philanthropic and state funding. This movement, growing out of hundreds of universities, colleges, schools and other organisations, has produced tens of thousands of educational resources, often entire course materials, that can be accessed by anyone with access to the Internet. Today, there are international consortia, conferences, NGOs and government reports that promote the opening up of education, to which Open Education and OERs are central.

Open Education is a pragmatic response by educators and researchers to the growth of the Internet, using a widespread technology to undertake what its advocates see as both a public good and to exploit an opportunity to effect educational reform. The question remains open as to whether Open Education and OER constitute a revolution in teaching and learning, as their proponents claim (Cape Town Open Education Declaration).

Private Property and Creative Commons

The values that underpin Open Education are liberal rather than revolutionary encoded in Creative Commons licensing and argued in a number of scholarly works (Lessig 2001, 2004; Boyle 2009; Benkler, 2006).

Creative commons licensing provides a method for producers of Open Educational Resources to define more precisely the terms of use of their intellectual property. Although this allows the producers to claim fewer rights than traditional copyright law affords, it does not undermine the law of private property. Creative Commons further liberalises the market by putting greater power in the hands of producers (i.e. teachers or their institutions) to determine the level of freedom to grant the consumer (Kleiner 2006). As such, Open Education and OER, in their attempts to provide universal access to knowledge, do not undermine the increasing privatization of the public education system.

The work surrounding Creative Commons provides persuasive and eloquent arguments about the importance of protecting and developing a creative and (re)productive commons in the face of attempts to consolidate the property relation in an increasingly digital culture. It builds on the work of Richard Stallman and the Free Software Foundation (Stallman 2002), which has worked to defend and sustain the freedom to share their creative output through the notion of 'copyleft'. The purpose of 'copyleft' is to overcome the rights of producer-control by asserting "the right to distribute copies and modified versions of a work and requiring that the same rights be preserved in modified versions of the work" (Wikipedia). Such novel licensing, however, does not ultimately undermine the law of private property, but, rather, makes the process of privatisation of information more transparent and the market for information more efficient by providing a clear and legally binding method of communicating the rights of the producer to the consumer.

Freedom of things not the freedom of labour

While Open Education claims to liberate intellectual work from the constraints of intellectual property law, it does nothing about liberating the intellectual worker from the constraints of the academic labour process.

The reification of 'the commons' as a site of non-scarce, replicable and accessible educational resources is to mistake the freedom of things for the freedom of labour. The increasing reliance on the online virtual world as a mode of teaching and instruction have exacerbated the proletarianisation of academic labour. Faculty have much in common with the historic plight of other skilled workers. Academic work is being restructured, through the imposition of virtual online technologies, in ways that reduce the autonomy, independence, and control of academics over their work, placing their knowledge and the dissemination and control of that knowledge into the hands of the university administration. As in other industries, technology is being deployed by management to discipline, de-skill, and displace labor (Noble 1998). The virtualisation of courses occurs long before the application of copyright and a novel license. OER is simply "a stage in the metamorphosis of the labour process". (Söderberg, 2007, 71).

As universities rapidly replace their collegial structures with corporate structures, prioritising commercial partnerships and promoting themselves as engines of economic growth (Finlayson and Hayward 2010; Levidow 2002), the work and rights of teachers grows increasingly vulnerable and exploited through the use of fixed-term and casual employment contracts and the roll out of technologies which aim to automate and regulate the work of teachers in the name of efficiency and improving the student-customer experience. In this form, education is simply a market where indebted students enter into a contract around learning content and accreditation. The value of the

content is, both in its form and substance, standardised so all customers receive the same quality of product and delivered with efficiency so as to reproduce it at low cost.

As the university increasingly adopts corporate forms, objectives and practices, so the role of the academic is to improve the brand and reputation of the university (Neocleous 2003). The profile provided by online courses and educational resources provides a further level of academic distinction to higher education institutions. To what extent the Open Education movement can oppose the corporatisation of institutions and the objectification of their staff and students, is still open to question, although the overwhelming trend so far is for OER to be seen as sustainable only to the extent that it can attract private and state funding, which serves the reputation building of the respective universities as institutions for the public good and notable for the quality of their teaching resources.

From the distraction of 'the commons' to a new common-sense

In the recent period the notion of 'open' has been subjected to a Marxist critique through a critical elaboration of the idea of the commons.

The Commons

The promotion of 'the commons' as a counterpoint to the commercialisation of all human relations has been most advanced by Marxist scholars. Writers in the Marxist tradition have exposed the historical development of capitalism as the destruction of common land and its associated customary rights. Capitalism began as a process of enclosure and improvement; starting in England in the 16th century it spread throughout the world by colonialism, empire and globalisation (Meiksins Wood, 2002). This process of enclosure (i.e. 'primitive accumulation') by which peasants and indigenous peoples were forced from the land was characterized by violence and repression, signaling a complete transformation in the most basic human practices with each other and with nature (Meiksins Wood 2002, 95; Bellamy Foster 2000).

Enclosure and improvement are not simply about the restrictions and development of common land, but are more fundamentally concerned with the historic and social fabrication of human labour as waged work, forming the basis for capitalist relations of production. Under the terms of waged work direct producers are dispossessed of all property, other than their own labour-power, which they are compelled to sell to their employers. The rate at which labour-power is exploited by employers decides the amount of surplus value that is produced. The rate of surplus value is not in any sense related to the concrete nature of labour (i.e. use value) or the quantity of goods produced (i.e. empirical wealth) , but is a social calculation based on the productivity of each worker (i.e. socially necessary labour) in relation to the productivity of labour in general (i.e. abstract labour), taken as a social average. It is the extent to which value in capitalism is calculated as the social

measure of a real abstraction, rather than simply by the quantity of goods produced, that defines the character of capitalist value (i.e. non-empirical wealth). Under pressure of competition employers are forced to improve the objective conditions of production, including the capacity of labour-power, to realise their investment on the market by the exchange of goods and services (i. e. commodities). These objective conditions include the forms in which labour-power is reproduced, meaning that the relations of work extend to include the whole of society, until they constitute the nature of the social itself (i.e. real subsumption).

These improvements are highly contentious and are prone to produce ever more sophisticated forms of worker resistance as the capacity of labour-power is improved. These increasingly sophisticated forms of protest ensure that conflict, contradiction and crisis are an endemic aspect of the capitalist world. The alternatives proposed by dispossessed workers are based on the social ownership and control of the conditions of production, which the increasingly socialised process of production implies. It is this increasingly social process of production which creates the conditions for the idea of 'the commons' to re-emerge as a critical principle and political project.

The peculiarity of capital is that these imperatives of production are impersonal and indirect, enforced through the abstract law of value which exists as the political power of the state and the economic power of money, each of which constitute the abstract power of the capital relation (Postone 1993, Clarke 1991). This process of abstraction renders what is a social and historical process appear as if it were natural and timeless, requiring a critique of political economy to reveal its true nature. Social emancipation involves connecting real practical and progressive alternatives with progressive critical theory (i.e. communism) (Clarke 1991).

Commonism

In the recent period the concept of 'commonism' has emerged as an alternative to communism, claiming to reignite Marx's critique by connecting it to the global network of contemporary struggles, 'the movement of movements', as the basis for new collective projects of resistance and mass organisation (Dyer-Witheford 2007). Key to the concept of commonism is its claim to avoid the bad history of authoritarian state communism, providing an antidote to centralised planning and the restrictions of private property through new forms of collective ownership.

The principle of commonism is derived from Autonomist Marxism, developed in continental Europe in the 1960s and 1970s through the work of Negri, Tronti etc (Wright 2002). A key feature of autonomist Marxism was the way in which it demonstrated theoretically that Marx's social theory was not only a theory of the circulation of capital, but provided a framework through which to articulate the ways in which struggles against capitalism were derived out of the circuits of capitalist expansion. The purpose of commonism is to point towards the kinds of progressive forms of social associations that these struggles have created. Commonism identifies these new forms of ownership as the *ecological commons* - through massive social planning, the *social commons* - through basic income and solidarity economics, and the *networked commons* - through Creative Commons and open source culture, including Open Education and Open Educational Resources (Dyer-Witheford 2007).

Commonism takes as its starting point the organising principle on which the circuit of capitalist expansion is established, i.e. the commodity form. Marx opens Capital Vol. 1 with the statement:

The wealth of society in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, *appears* an immense collection of commodities; the individual commodity *appears* as its elemental form. Our investigation therefore begins with the analysis of the commodity (Marx Capital 1 – our emphasis).

Commonism takes this statement as the organising principle for its own radical response to the social relations of capitalist society:

If the cell form of capitalism is the commodity, the cellular form of a society beyond capital is the common. A commodity is a good produced for sale, a common is a good produced, or conserved, to be shared. The notion of a commodity, a good produced for sale, presupposes private owners between whom the exchange occurs. The notions of the common presupposes collectivities – associations and assemblies – within which sharing is organised. If capitalism presents itself as an immense heap of commodities, commonism is a multiplication of commons (Dyer-Witheford 2007).

The emphasis here is on the difference between the production of goods for sale, and the production of goods to be shared as a public good. In each case the emphasis is on forms of ownership with no attempt to problematise the ways in which the goods are produced. While commonism does draw attention to progressive forms of collaborative labour, in relation to hacking and immaterial labour, its focus is very much on the positive redistribution of goods and resources. The implication is that forms of exchange produce different forms of social activity “shared resources generate forms of shared co-operation – associations – that coordinate the conversion of further resources into expanded commons” (Dyer-Witheford 2007), rather than searching for more substantive underlying levels of social determinations in the ways in which social relations are produced.

Hacking is one of the few examples where labour power, connected by a communications network, has demonstrated a real alternative to the academic labour process. Hackers offer a rare showcase of 'play struggle' that demonstrates the potential for new forms of work that might collapse and resist the distinction between producer and consumer, with the potential to subvert the logic of the commodity form (Söderberg 2007). However, in the forms in which it is currently practiced, hacking remains far from being an exemplary anti-capitalist type of work. Most hackers remain largely disconnected from wider social struggles, with their focus, where it exists, on challenging private property, asserting freedom of information and promoting civil liberties. The diversity of the hacker movement remains predicated on the liberal myth of meritocracy, an idea with close ties to the academic origins from where hacking emerged and which encodes class inequalities in terms of individual ambition rather than collective resistance (Söderberg 2007, 117). Furthermore, from the point of view of hacking, the immaterial and virtual world is not substantiated. Far from being derived out of virtuality, the Internet is, in fact, grounded in the

physical and natural world of electricity pylons, electro-magnetic fields, radio waves, power cuts, and fossil fuels.

While the identification of immaterial labour as a significant new form of capitalist production does point the way to progressive collective practices, the way in which immateriality is described: “those forms of communicational and affective production associated, not exclusively but strongly with digital networks” (Dyer-Witheford 2007), diverts attention from Marx's substantive account of the relationship between materiality and immateriality in capitalist society. For Marx, all forms of capitalist work are defined as the asymmetrical relationship between use value (materiality) and exchange value (immateriality), where goods are defined by their usefulness but are only made in order to be exchanged. The defining feature of bourgeois social science is its complete inability to recognise the significance of value, as a non-empirical (i.e. immaterial) social substance, and its motivational power for a fully capitalised human society, with all of its devastating consequences (Kay and Mott 1982; Sohn-Rethel 1978).

With its focus on exchange rather than production, commonism not only replays the consumerist limits of OER, but also, ironically, is in danger of replicating the forms of social regulation it is attempting to avoid: Socialism. If Socialism is “the collective ownership of the means of production and economic planning in an industrialised context” (Postone 1993, 7), then commonism looks very much like the latest form socialist society. Notwithstanding the fact that commonism attempts to privilege one form of planning over another, radical and democratic rather than centralised and repressive, without an awareness of the processes through which capitalist society is (re)produced, these instructions look normative and contingent rather than determined by a progressive social project (Postone 1993, 11 & 15).

A fully grounded social theory begins in the substantive forms within which social relations are derived and determined. For Marx those relations are determined by Capital, described as “value in motion...” (Marx Capital 1). Therefore the starting point for any analysis of capital is value and not the commodity form (Postone 1993; Clarke 1991). While Commonism is right to draw our attention to the significance of the commodity-form as the organising principle for capitalism and for struggle, Marx is careful to draw our attention to the fact that the wealth of capitalist societies only *appears* to be the vast accumulation of commodities. The real wealth of capital society is not material things, but immaterial value, the substance of which is abstract labour, which *appears* in the form of things (i.e. commodities). Therefore, any attempt to build a critique of capital from the concept of the commodity form, rather than the immaterial reality of value out of which the thing like world of commodities are derived, is based on a fundamental misconception of Marx's critical social theory and the form of value in capital.

A fully developed critique of capital does not start by replicating the cell-like commodity form; but, rather by negating the non-empirical logic of capitalist production: anti-value in motion through insurgent interruptions (Bell and Cleaver 1982; Dinerstein and Neary 2002). The key point is that “Marx's notion of the overcoming of capitalism... involves a transformation not only of the existing mode of distribution but also of the mode of production” (Postone, 1993, 23). This does not mean simply doing less work or no work, allowing machines to produce the wealth of society (Gorz 1992). Rather, it means recasting the meaning and purpose of work based on an emancipatory notion of what constitutes wealth in a newly substantiated post-capitalist world. Marxist scholarship is replete with what that wealth might look like, for example 'the society of abundance' based on a reworking of the relationship between need and capacity (Kay and Mott 1982), or 'disposable time'

drawing on Marx's formulations in the Grundrisse (Postone 1993), or an Open Marxism based on the dissolution of the relationship between use and exchange value organised around a programme where humanity becomes the project rather than the resource (Bonefeld, Gunn and Psychopedis 1992), or the reconnection of manual and intellectual labour (Sohn-Rethel 1978), or the creation of 'mass intellectuality' through the promotion of a critical and practical reflexive self consciousness among direct producers (Hardt and Negri, 2000).

What all of these post capitalist forms of wealth have in common is an awareness that capitalism has made an exponential improvement of the productive power and knowledge of humanity, but that these powers and knowledge have been used to alienate and oppress its own productive populations (Postone 1993). Any progressive revolutionary project must be based on the need re-appropriate this knowledge and power for the populations that have produced it; not simply to make available new knowledge in less restricted 'open' forms, nor to reify new forms of property relations through commons and commonism; but, rather, to produce a new common sense: raising critique to the level of society so that society can recognise its real nature and recompose itself in a more sustainable and progressive form.

Conclusion. The violence of the virtual

Open Education and OER are progressive attempts to provide educational materials that are openly accessible. While these forms of provision stretch the limits of the laws of intellectual property, they do not undermine the laws of private property, but further liberalise the conditions through which knowledge can be exchanged. While these new educational resources provide for closer engagement between student and academic they do not undermine the ways in which capitalist work is organised, rather they exacerbate the proletarianisation of academic labour.

Despite the dynamism generated by the digitalisation of social life and the apparently endless possibilities provided by this 'technological utopia', the logic of the so called virtual revolution does not escape the conditions where 'the dull compulsion of economic life completes the subjection of the labourer to the capitalist' (Marx Capital Vol 1). Our analysis has identified Capital as 'value in motion', which, in the form of abstract labour, provides a real logic for the concept of immateriality, i.e. exchange value, and a real substance for the notion of the virtual. In the bizarre world of capitalist production, social wealth is measured as the expansion of a socially constituted substance (exchange value) in a material form (use value). The brutal logic of capitalist production really is the logic of abstraction and the immaterial, or, in other words, the violence of virtuality and its destructive consequences.

The question for a *really* open education is not the extent to which educational resources can be made freely available, within the current constraints of capitalist property law; but, rather, what should constitute the nature of wealth in a sustainable and progressive post capitalist society. That is the really open question.

Bibliographic references

- Bell, Peter and Cleaver, Harry (1982). 'Marx's Theory of Crisis as a Theory of Class Struggle' Research in Political Economy. *The Commoner: A Journal for Other Values* (2002) – <http://www.commoner.org.uk/cleaver05.pdf>
- Benkler, Yochai (2006). *The Wealth of Networks*. Yale University Press, New Haven and London.
- Bonefield, Werner, Gunn, Richard and Psychopedis, Kosmas (1992) *Open Marxism – Dialectics and History Volume 1*, Pluto Press, London.
- Cape Town Open Education Declaration. <http://www.capetowndeclaration.org/read-the-declaration>
- Clarke, Simon (1991). *Marx, Marginalism and Modern Sociology*, Macmillan, London.
- Dinerstein, Ana and Neary, Michael (2002). 'Anti-value in Motion: Labour, Real Subsumption and the Struggles Against Capitalism', in A. Dinerstein and M. Neary (eds) *The Labour Debate: An Investigation into the Theory and Reality of Capitalist Work*, Ashgate, Aldershot: 226 – 240
- Dyer-Witthorpe, Nick (1999). *Cyber Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggles in High Technology Capitalism*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago.
- Dyer-Witthorpe, Nick (2006). 'Species Being and the New Commonism: Notes on an Interrupted Cycle of Struggle', *The Commoner*, <http://www.commoner.org.uk/11withthorpe.pdf>
- Dyer-Witthorpe, Nick (2006). 'The Circulation of the Common', paper presented at *Immaterial Labour, Multitudes and New Social Subjects: Class Composition and Cognitive Capitalism*, Kings College Cambridge.
- Dyer-Witthorpe, Nick (2007). *Commonism. Turbulence 1*. <http://turbulence.org.uk/turbulence/1/commonism/>
- Finlayson, Gordon & Hayward, Daniel (2010). *Education towards Heteronomy: A Critical Analysis of the Reform of UK Universities since 1978*. <http://lncn.eu/e56>
- Foster, John Bellamy (2000). *Marx's Ecology. Materialism and Nature*. Monthly Review Press, New York.
- Gorz, André (1992). *Farewell to the Working Class, An Essay on Post Industrial Socialism*, Pluto Press, London and Sydney.
- Hardt, Michael and Negri, Antonio (2000). *Empire*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London.
- Kay, G. and Mott, J. (1982). *Political Order and the Law of Labour*, Macmillan, London.
- Kleiner, Dmytri (2006). *The Creative Anti-Commons and the Poverty of Networks*. Mute Magazine. <http://www.metamute.org/en/WOS4-The-Creative-Anti-Commons-and-the-Poverty-of-Networks>
- Lessig, Lawrence (2004). *Free Culture*. The Penguin Press, New York.
- Lessig, Lawrence (2001). *The Future of Ideas*. Random House, New York.
- Levidow, Les (2002). In: Robins, Kevin and Webster, Frank eds. *The Virtual University? Knowledge, Markets and Management*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, pp. 227–248.
- Marx, Karl (1990). *Capital Vol 1*, Penguin, London.
- Neocleous, Mark (2003). *Staging power: Marx, Hobbes and the personification of capital*. *Law and Critique*. 14, 147-165.
- Noble, David F. (1998). *Digital Diploma Mills: the automation of higher education*. *First Monday* Vol. 3, Issue 1.

Postone, Moishe (1993). *Time, Labour and Social Domination – A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Söderberg, Johan (2007). *Hacking Capitalism. The Free and Open Source Software Movement*. Routledge, Oxford.

Sohn-Rethel, Alfred (1978). *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, Macmillan, Basingstoke.

Stallman, Richard (2002). *Free Software, Free Society: Selected essays of Richard Stallman*. GNU Press, Boston.

Wikipedia: Open Educational Resources. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_educational_resources

Wikipedia: Copyleft. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Copyleft>

Wood, Ellen Meiksins (2002). *The Origin of Capitalism. A Longer View*. Verso, London.

Wright, Steve (2002). *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*, Pluto Press, London.

About the authors

The University of Utopia

We call education the real movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence.

<http://www.universityofutopia.org>



This proceeding, unless otherwise indicated, is subject to a Creative Commons Attribution-Non commercial-No derivative works 3.0 Spain licence. It may be copied, distributed and broadcast provided that the author, and the institutions that publish it (UOC, OU, BYU) are cited. Commercial use and derivative works are not permitted. The full licence can be consulted on <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/en/deed.en>.