

# The Ethical Economy of Customer Coproduction

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In this article, the author argues that customer coproduction should be understood as an expression of a large-scale trend toward the increasing power and relevance of social production. Social production consists in the self-organized systems of (mostly immaterial) production that have evolved around the diffusion of networked information and communication technologies. An analysis of the genealogy of social production is shared; this includes tracing it to the process of re-mediation of social relations put in motion by the expansion of the capitalist economy into the fields of culture and consciousness and the concomitant socialization of production relations. The author then argues that social production, including customer coproduction, follows a very particular economic logic—that is, an ethical economy where value is related to social impact rather than monetary accumulation. A detailed analysis of the logic of this ethical economy is offered; it draws out some implications for the successful management of ever more customer-centric brands, whereby the consumers are directly involved in the processes that add value.

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One of the most important and fundamental trends in contemporary consumer society is the progressive inclusion of consumers in the processes where value is produced around products and brands. A growing number of companies now involve consumers in the coproduction of brands, experiences, design, marketing strategies, and even product development (Zwick, Bonsu, and Darmody 2008). This trend will probably become even more important in the future, as internet access spreads across the globe and the digital divide narrows (see the concluding section for an expansion of this argument). From the point of view of companies, such customer cooperation is generally seen as a free resource that has no, or virtually no, cost. This is because customers are generally not motivated by monetary concerns but engage in such processes of coproduction for other motives—for example, showing off their talent or helping build community and friendship (von Hippel 2006, 124; Benkler 2006; S. Weber 2004).<sup>1</sup> However, that customer coproduction generally does not have a monetary cost does not mean that business can calmly regard this as an entirely free lunch (Toffler and Toffler 2006).

Instead, customer coproduction is part of the general emergence of what Benkler (2006) calls social production as a significant economic phenomenon. Social production includes phenomena such as commons-based peer production and Web 2.0 that emerge in a digitally networked

environment (for a systematic discussion of various forms of collaborative online production, see Kozinets, Hemetsberger, and Schau 2008 [this issue]), but it also encompasses a wider range of phenomena, some of which are only remotely connected to new media technologies: for example, fan culture, social entrepreneurship, local service economies, and alternative currencies; and alternative forms of material production, such as community-based agriculture, which is the quickest growing sector of the contemporary U.S. food economy (McKibben 2007, 3; Arvidsson, Bauwens, and Peitersen 2008; Bauwens 2005; Leadbeater and Miller 2004; Toffler 1980; Tapscott and Williams 2006). What these activities have in common is that they are self-organized, emergent, bottom-up phenomena that are not primarily motivated by monetary concerns. However, if monetary motivations are weak or even absent, this does not mean that social production lacks a proper value system. Indeed, these activities follow a common, particular, and identifiable value logic: an ethical economy where socially recognized self-expression is the main motivation and community contribution is the main measure of value.

The more social production and corporate attempts to derive value from these activities through, among other things, customer coproduction initiatives evolve, the more important it becomes for businesses to understand this particular value logic. Such a proper understanding

will enable a more efficient utilization of customer coproduction as a source of value. It will also help businesses to avoid the kinds of consumer-driven backlash that have recently affected even so-called cool companies such as Apple.<sup>2</sup> This article will supply a theory of this value logic through an analysis of the ethical economy that guides social production in general, looking at its origins, its present mode of operation, and its potential future. The article concludes with some important implications for marketing and brand-management practice.

## Customer Cooperation and Social Production

While the phenomenon of customer coproduction has only recently emerged as a central concern for the academic discipline of marketing (Holt 2002, 2004; Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000, 2004; von Hippel 2006; Zwick, Bonsu, and Darmody 2008), its origins go back much further. Indeed, the phenomenon of customer coproduction is but one manifestation of a wider dialectic that has marked the development of capitalism in the post-WWII period (henceforth referred to as the postwar period).

As the social science literature has firmly established, people have always coproduced the value of goods and other objects of everyday use, by, if nothing else, giving them meaning and value in their own lifeworlds (and in preindustrial times, that contribution generally encompassed the actual material production of things as well; Arnould and Thompson 2005; Miller 1998; Sassatelli 2007; Slater 1997; Tarde 1902). However, in the postwar years, these manifestations of customer coproduction have been discovered by marketing in new ways. In part, this has occurred because marketing has begun to look actively for the productive potential of ordinary consumers. Before WWII, productive consumer practices were understood as an obstacle to be overcome by the imposition of more rational needs and preferences (Arvidsson 2003; Ewen 1976). Now, however, influences from new trends such as motivation research, lifestyle segmentation, and crucially, brand management created a new interest in the potential of consumer practice as a possible source of useful information or even innovation (Arvidsson 2006). However, even if this first discovery of the productive consumer was in part caused by new theoretical trends *within* marketing itself, it did reflect a new public visibility of a wide range of productive consumer practices: mods, hippies, and other visible forms of youth culture; street fashions, new dance styles, and a new culture of garage music; fan culture and a growing DIY movement (leading on to the hackers and computer

amateurs that were crucial in building the basis for today's Internet); and more creative and expressive middle-class consumer styles, what McLuhan famously identified as the new "expressive age" characterized by "sculptural spaces in cars, clothes and housing" (McLuhan 1964, 131).

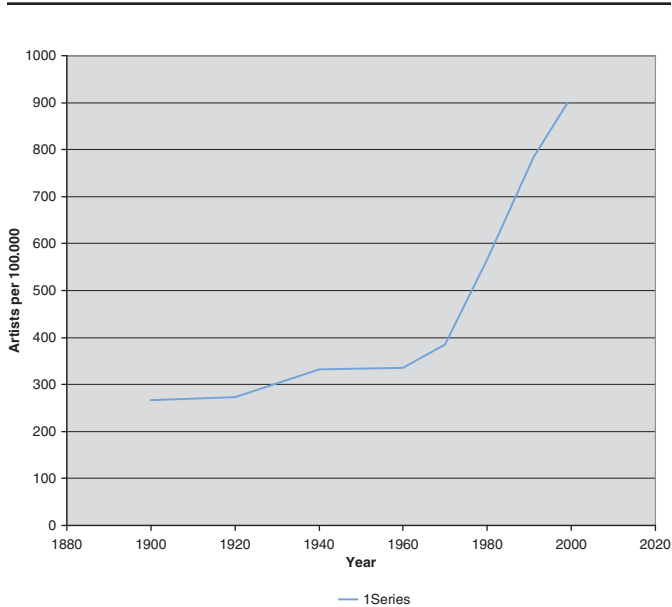
This new strength and visibility of productive consumer culture was not an isolated phenomenon. It was part and parcel of a new activation of civil society that had a multitude of expressions, from an increase in the number of artists and bohemians (see Figure 1), an expansion and intensification of political activism and new social movements, an emerging social entrepreneurship and global solidarity movement, new forms of New Age spirituality and body practices like yoga, jogging, macrobiotic foods, and a host of alternative lifestyles (Bornstein 2004; Lloyd 2006; Marwick 1998; Ray and Anderson 2000). In short, a growing number of people were now engaged in different forms of self-organized production of not only material goods, such as skateboards or mountain bikes, but more than anything else, of new kinds of lifestyles and social relations. The forms of productive consumer practice on which today's interest in customer cooperation builds were part of this secular emergence of grassroots social production as a significant social fact.

Today, social production is a widespread phenomenon: survey results show that between 58 and 83 percent of the population of contemporary industrial societies engage in some such activity.<sup>3</sup> Anecdotal evidence suggests that such new forms of participation have formed an alternative to an older declining civil society: people might abandon the PTA association, but they blog intensely about schools and children's welfare; they might bowl alone, but they socialize around brands and fan culture (Putnam 2000; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). As new developments in management and marketing suggest, such forms of social production are also becoming an important source of value for the capitalist economy (Toffler and Toffler 2006). This increasing economic significance of social production makes it even more urgent to understand how these processes work. The first step in approaching that question is to analyze the origins of social production from within the postwar transformation of the capitalist economy.

## Capitalism and Social Production

The emergence of social production as an important social and economic phenomenon is not simply an effect of the diffusion of new information and communication

**Figure 1**  
**Number of People Who Self-Identify**  
**as Artists in The U.S. Census**



Note: The boom in social production as illustrated in the explosion of people self-identifying as artists in the U.S. census since the 1960s. Source: Lloyd (2006, 66).

technologies (ICTs). Rather, as Barbrook (2007) has shown, both phenomena are part of a deep structural tendency that has marked postwar capitalism. While its immediate reasons are distinct (yet interconnected), its deep, structural cause has to do with the tendency toward a growing socialization of the capitalist production process and the significant transformation of ordinary social relations that has resulted from this process.

Starting at the level of immediate causes, we can identify three reasons for the emergence of social production in the postwar years. First, traditional productive consumer practices (or bricolage; de Certeau 1984), such as the productive potential of social interaction in general, were now substantially empowered as new media (e.g., gramophones, television sets, and transistor radios) gave a new global coherence to consumer culture, enabled commodities to be inscribed in a wider range of mundane practices, and helped trends and fashions to diffuse and circulate more rapidly. At the same time, consumer goods became more expressive as they were increasingly designed, branded, and fashioned, which in turn made it easier to construct and publicly display an identity or lifestyle statement by means of consumption. Particularly for young people, consumer culture emerged as a powerful medium by means of which one could construct a

visibly different identity or lifestyle. This trend has continued with the present diffusion of networked ICTs, which have both lowered the price of access to the means of cultural and informational production and radically facilitated the autonomous organization of productive processes (Benkler 2006; Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003). Second, processes of economic restructuring—deindustrialization and the growth of the more mobile service and knowledge economy—have meant that people have tended to lose their connections to the stable structures and frameworks that had traditionally offered support for personal-identity formation (Harvey 1989; Lash and Urry 1994). This was particularly clear for the working-class youth studied by the British cultural-studies tradition, who deployed consumer goods as a means to construct an alternative to an older working-class culture that was rapidly disappearing with industrial restructuring (Hall and Jefferson 1975). But the middle classes have shown similar concerns with identity and lifestyle, in particular the new class of knowledge workers who had very little in terms of traditional class identity (Barbrook 2006; Nixon 1996; Osgerby 2001; Arvidsson 2006, 17-40; Mills 1951). This delinking of identity from structure (Giddens 1991) thus opened up a new space for innovation and experiment, where new media technologies could be put to work in producing a meaningful and affectively rich social framework in which to anchor personal identity (Boyd 2006; Emmison 2003; Prada 2007). Third, and finally, the expansion of secondary and university schooling produced an oversupply of skilled and motivated people who had been taught to value self-realization as an intrinsic goal. Unlike the nineteenth-century working classes, these knowledge workers (whether employed or not) saw active self-realization through productive labor (and not idle leisure) as their overall goal in life. The result has been, in Ronald Inglehart's words, "a declining confidence in religious, political and even scientific authority [and] a growing mass desire for participation and self-expression" (Inglehart 1997, 96; Zuboff and Maxmin 2002).

The result of these three processes has been a historically unprecedented supply of talented people with an unprecedented access to technologies for the production and distribution of knowledge, creativity, and other immaterial goods and with a powerful motivation to be productive. When young and underemployed, these people supply the core of the urban bohemia, which, since the 1970s, has constituted the avant-garde of social production (Lloyd 2006; Zukin 1981). When older and less radical, they are highly motivated to take part in other forms of social production, including customer

co-creation (von Hippel 2006). This motivation partly builds on a desire to receive material goods and other use values (e.g., organically grown carrots or music concerts). To a large extent, however, it builds on the desire to construct new and alternative forms of social relations as an alternative to a weakening social structure and widespread manifestations of loneliness and alienation.

The important thing to understand about social production is that its emergence as an alternative to mainstream capitalist society has been an intrinsic part of the dialectics of postwar capitalism itself. Capitalism is a dynamic system driven by the overall motive of profit maximization. This means that its history has been one of continuous expansion; it has had to find new ways to generate value in order to sustain new profits. (Indeed, capitalism began as a rather marginal phenomenon, the concern of a restricted class of merchants, and has since developed to encompass most of social life.) As capitalism expands, it transforms social relations so that they become more compatible with its own requirements. Such processes of transformation can entail the diffusion of a commodity culture that supports an accumulative motivational structure, enabling people to value labor over leisure. (This was one of the main problems for early industrial entrepreneurs.) Peasant laborers tended to work only as much as they needed to satisfy their static needs. Modern consumer culture was influential in spreading an endless needs structure that could motivate people to continue to work in order to accumulate more (Campbell 1987; Cross 2000; Thompson 1980). They can entail direct propaganda and reeducation, such as the diffusion of primary schooling, an important purpose of which was, at least in the nineteenth century, to prepare future workers for factory discipline. They can also entail the direct destruction of previous life forms, leaving people with no choice but to adopt a lifestyle compatible with some form of participation in the capitalist economy (e.g., the seventeenth-century, English enclosure movement that destroyed the material basis for traditional village life and created a rootless proletariat on which industrialization could build). Generally, the process involves some combination of these three elements (for a list of spectacular contemporary examples, see Klein 2007). The point here is that the capitalist transformation of social relations is a process in which people's identities and motivations—their subjectivity—change; they become forced, ready, and motivated to take part in the capitalist production process; and they become expressions of potentially productive labor power, which can be directly employed, or made to generate value in some other way, without much further ado.

From this perspective, we can see the expansion of productive consumer practices in the postwar years as a result of the successive capitalist transformation of the social environment. The expansion of television, the music industry, and a new branded-commodity culture, along with new technologies such as freezers and the microwave oven, transformed a host of everyday practices—from socializing with neighbors and cooking for one's family to finding one's identity as an adolescent—and made them transpire *through* the medium of consumer goods. This way, they also came to constitute a potential resource: a reservoir of consumer productivity that could be tapped as a source for new trends and innovations, if managed to cultivate the image and equity of a brand. However, the capitalist transformation of its environment also puts in motion a powerful dialectic, which would eventually develop beyond the control of the system from which it has originated.

Indeed, for Marx, as for Adam Smith before him, the main advance of capitalism was that it enabled new forms of productive cooperation. Already from Marx's (1939/1973) early notes in the *Grundrisse*, it was clear that the concentration of capital in machinery and large factory systems made possible new, more complex forms of social organization in which productive energies were organized in new and more efficient ways. In the famous *Fragment on Machinery*, it seems that this reorganization of social cooperation constituted the *main* productive contribution of machinery and hence the chief source of what Marx called relative surplus value. This productive contribution, which comes entirely from the social reorganization of production performed by machinery (in the wide sense of that term: concrete material machines as well as the machine-like organization of the factory system as such), is the source of what Marx called "General Intellect." Empirically, he considered General Intellect to consist of a number of competences that are inscribed in the social environment organized by capitalist machinery and hence available freely to its participants by virtue of their existence as "social individuals" (Marx 1939/1973, 705). These competences can be cognitive, as in technical or scientific knowledge, but they can also be social and affective, as in knowledge about how to organize the production process or how to interact and function in the factory. In short, they consist of the worker's "understanding of nature and mastery over it by virtue of his presence as a social body" (Marx 1939/1973, 705). The point to stress here is that General Intellect is the outcome of the transformation and re-mediation of social interaction performed by capitalist machinery in the factory: it is a socialized factor of production, freely

available to those who participate in these forms of productive cooperation. The socialized nature of General Intellect means that it cannot be entirely controlled or appropriated by capital. It can be and is employed for purposes that cannot be totally controlled or programmed. (Think, for example, of the emerging labor movement that makes use of organizational skills learned in the factory to build a powerful and effective political organization [Thompson 1980].)

To Marx, who wrote with early industrial capitalism in mind, General Intellect developed inside the factory system: it was a socialized productive force that evolved beyond the direct control of capital but within its walls, so to speak. However, in his concluding remarks to the *Grundrisse*, he opened up to the possibility that the ongoing socialization of capital—the expansion of the production process beyond the walls of the single factory through the emergence of an ever more interconnected world market, culminating in today's global assembly lines and global brands—would extend the availability of General Intellect to all social life.

The development of fixed capital indicates to what degree general social knowledge has become a direct force of production and, hence, to what degree the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the General Intellect and been transformed in accordance with it—to what degree the powers of social production have been produced, not simply in the form of knowledge but also as immediate organs of social practice, of the real life process (Marx 1939/1973, 706).

According to contemporary exponents of the Italian *operaista* school, this is precisely what has happened in the postwar years (Dyer-Withford 1999). With the diffusion of consumer goods, consumption and media technologies, and most important, networked ICTs, an unprecedented extent of social life has become mediated by machinery in some form, whether material (as the computer) or immaterial (as in industrially produced Media Culture; Kellner 1995). This development arguably has obliterated older forms of popular culture: “commercial cultural commodities is all that most people have,” to use a phrase mourned by Willis (1990, 26). But, at the same time, the development has made General Intellect an immanent feature of social life—of the real life process. It has resulted in what Paolo Virno (2004) called a generalized condition of mass intellectuality. As these tools and the common knowledge and competences that they make possible are often used productively, this development has massively increased the immaterial productivity of social life: its ability to produce new relations, experiential intensities, and forms of

life. If we add on the postmodern condition with its lack of clear structures, identities, and guidelines, we find ourselves in a condition marked by both an unprecedented necessity and an unprecedented possibility to produce anew a cognitive and affective framework for life. Immaterial production—the production of creativity, knowledge, and social organization—has become an immanent feature of ordinary life processes.

We can understand the massive emergence of social production as a manifestation of alternative uses of socialized General Intellect, or mass intellectuality. As this productive resource is (almost) fully socialized and thus at the disposition of (virtually) anybody, it is beyond the control of capitalist corporations (because this control builds, in the end, on the monopoly over the means of production). This means that capitalism comes to promote and ultimately depends on a resource- social production deploying General Intellect, which it cannot control. This new dependency on an external resource is the structural reason behind the emergence of new “net-archic” (Bauwens 2005) business models that principally aim at attracting rent from processes of productive cooperation that unfolds beyond their direct control. This can be a matter of profiting from the self-organized cooperation of knowledge workers (Halal 1996); it can be a matter of creative industries tapping into and commodifying creativity that emerges from the urban environment that surrounds them (Florida 2002); it can be a matter of brand managers trying to “manage” independent forms of consumer sociality; it can be a matter of Web 2.0 successes like MySpace or YouTube that live off the autonomous communication of their users; it can be a matter, finally, of the forms of customer cooperation that this issue discusses (see Table 1 for definitions and examples of the various dimensions of social production). Capitalism has come to depend on a vast galaxy of social production that it cannot directly control. But how does social production work, what motivates its actors, and how is value produced?

## Ethical Economy

To begin, we need to affirm that participants in social production are generally not motivated by monetary concerns. These concerns exist to some extent, but they consistently come out as least important in surveys and other studies (see note 3). This makes sense for two reasons. First, because the kinds of resources that have monetary value, like labor time and access to information and technology, are not scarce in social production but abundant. The socialization of General Intellect and networked

**Table 1**  
**Social Production and General Intellect**

General Intellect	Mass Intellectuality	Social Production	Customer Coproduction
<p>A more complex division of labor creates more complex forms of mediation of the labor process, through machinery, transports, and ultimately information and communication technologies. This increases the necessary amount of interaction and communication, which creates a cultural resource specific to the work environment in the form of common knowledge, competences, and habits. This General Intellect eventually becomes an important productive resource.</p>	<p>Initially, General Intellect is embodied in machinery and communication channels (e.g., corporate intranets) that are internal to the company. However, as the production process is socialized and extended to include external subcontractors and, importantly, the everyday life productivity of consumers, General Intellect becomes a productive resource that is embodied in the life process and available to everybody as a socialized member of society.</p>	<p>Since socialized General Intellect, or mass intellectuality, is a common resource, it cannot be monopolized by capital owners (or by any other actor). This means that people can use this resource for their own purposes, producing things that they desire, within organizational forms that they themselves create. As this development accelerates, capitalism comes to depend on transversal networks of social production that transpire inside and outside firms and organizations and that are not primarily motivated by monetary concerns.</p>	<p>As companies discover the productive potential of social production they try to include these processes within their own value chains. Customer coproduction is a manifestation of this tendency. It originated in the 1960s with brand management and qualitative market research, which aim at making consumers coproduce the immaterial or symbolic content of brands and commodities. As market intelligence becomes more sophisticated this tendency continues with cool hunting and data mining. With the boom of the Internet, it becomes possible to construct corporate platforms that cultivate social production and organize it around a particular brand or product.</p>
<p>The main productive contribution of British knowledge workers consists in their ability to “exchange information and make judgments with a need to draw on multifaceted knowledge in exchange with co-workers, customers and suppliers to solve complex, collaborative problems; in their ability to draw on the General Intellect commonly available in the social environment of the knowledge intensive firm: ‘What makes these workers valuable is their ability to work collaboratively, to leverage ‘relationship capital’, and to improvise and improve new solutions’ within an environment that fosters trust and constant learning” (Beardsley et al. 2006, 52).</p>	<p>Contemporary wine consumption thrives on the coproduction of experiences by consumers. Such widespread coproduction is rendered possible through the diffusion of a mediated wine culture, with a particular language and complex forms of know-how. Access to this know-how is open to anyone. One need no longer be born into the haute bourgeoisie to be able to distinguish a Bordeaux from a Bourgogne (Arvidsson and Musarò 2008).</p>	<p>Drawing on their general access to technology and ability to engage in cultural production, young people pursue creative careers in unprecedented numbers (Figure 1). One no longer needs an expensive studio to shoot a documentary; it is sufficient to have a digital camera and some video-editing software (which comes with Macintosh, anyway). Such creative scenes have become a general feature of big cities, and they fuel a new and growing branch of “creative industries” that essentially live off their ability to translate such creativity into the corporate language of big companies (Lloyd 2006).</p>	<p>Procter &amp; Gamble have increased the productivity of their R&amp;D department by 30 percent by consistently involving consumers in the development of new products, packaging, and designs (Huston and Sakkab 2006).  In its 2006 Global CEO Survey, IBM found that for many companies, customers and business partners had by far surpassed the importance of the internal R&amp;D as a source of innovation (Rometti 2006).</p>

ICTs have made know-how and technology abundant; the new motivational structure centered on self-realization has abolished the crucial distinction between labor and life, thus making motivated labor power plentiful as well. Labor is supplied free of charge by a multitude of

volunteers, which, for all practical purposes, is without limits. We can illustrate the situation by comparing two software producers, Microsoft, which is a typical example of the logic of the traditional capitalist economy applied to software production, and Linux, which

exemplifies the logic of what I call the ethical economy. To Microsoft, labor is a scarce resource. People have to be paid to code for Microsoft; they do not do this freely. They subsequently have to be managed, commanded, and controlled by paid supervisors. In short, the production of software unfolds in a classic capitalist way, through the rational control of commanded labor. Consequently, its products are sold at a price that is roughly related to the investments of such salaried labor (research, development, programming, debugging, etc.). And the company struggles mightily to uphold the juridical status of the artificial property rights that allow it to charge such a price. For Linux, on the other hand, labor is not scarce. There are more willing programmers that want to contribute to the product than can possibly be admitted. The problem is rather to keep people out and to make sure that only those who are qualified get a chance to cooperate. Because of this, Linux has developed a complex system of entry requirements that starts presumptive programmers off with smaller, less significant tasks to determine whether they are worthy to take greater responsibility in the project. Indeed, the very management model of Linux is extremely wasteful in relation to labor time. People are allowed to do what they want and to initiate projects of their own. Management has neither the interest nor the mandate to intervene. The result is a number of half-finished projects, most of which amount to nothing. Such a management style would be completely inconceivable if labor power had a value (Ingo 2005; Siefkes 2007; S. Weber 2004).

Second, the fact that social production, to a large extent, moves outside the monetary economy of capitalism means that there simply is too little money in social production for this to be a major motivation. Sholette (2002) found that 50 percent of respondents who self-identified as artists in the 1990 U.S. census made less than \$3,000 a year from their art. Our investigations of the creative scenes of Malmö, Sweden, and Copenhagen, Denmark, indicate similar incomes. Only the top DJs, artists, designers, or lately, promoters are able to make a living from their creativity. Even in commercial success stories, such as Second Life, money plays a relatively small role (see also Bonsu and Darmody 2008 [this issue]).<sup>4</sup>

Most forms of customer-coproduction initiatives work the same way; they try to attract vast amounts of free labor without offering any monetary compensation (or offering only symbolic forms of compensation). They rely on the fact that people have other motivations. So what does produce value in social production? The best way to answer that question is to look at what participants in social production themselves value. Why do they do it? What are their motivations? There have been many investigations of

this, and they have consistently come up with the same result. The most important motivation that people state for taking part in social production is what we could call socially recognized self-realization. Stephen Weber (2004) stressed this in *The Success of Open Source*. Open-source programming is first of all an aesthetic pursuit; it is a pleasurable act of self-expression; it is about “the ineffably geeky joys of writing the slickest code you can” (Dibbel 2007). So, in part, the ability to engage in what Marx would have called nonalienated labor—to do what one does best according to one’s own ideas and to realize oneself in one’s very productive activity—is motivation enough. This seems reasonable enough. After all, the opportunity to engage in such authentic, productive self-realization is very rare in our society, so rare in fact that a whole experience economy can be erected around people’s desire to pay for that possibility. However, it is important to underline that such self-realization is a social activity. It is not enough for me to know that I write excellent code. I need a community of people whom I recognize as my peers to recognize this fact, in turn. So the real motivation consists in developing “code that represents an elegant solution to a complex problem” that “is in itself a thing of beauty that in the open source setting can be shared with others” (Dibbel 2007).

Open source lets you show the world just how creative you really are. It is the equivalent of putting your best work on display at the national gallery of art as opposed to locking it in your basement (S. Weber 2004, 137).

Such socially recognized self-realization consistently comes out as the top motive in investigations of social production. It is the main reason that people blog, that they act as DJs without being paid for it, that they take leadership in online communities, that they take an interest in developing fashion and engaging in practices of creative consumption and “prosumerism” (von Hippel 2006; Tapscott and Williams 2006). It is also emerging as the main motive for knowledge workers in explaining why they put more hours, as well as their souls or at least free time, into their work. It is even a primary motive for many entrepreneurs.<sup>5</sup> In other words, people take part in social production mainly because they desire the experience of having meaningful social ties with others or, to use a classic term, *philia*.

Given that socially recognized self-realization, or the experience of *philia*, consistently comes out as the highest motive for engaging in social production and that this motive is more prevalent than the monetary or even the use value of what is actually produced, we must conclude one important feature that sets off social production from capitalist production. In social production, value is not primarily of the product but of the process. While the product might be useful and valuable, it is the

process that allows participants to have their efforts socially recognized as creative, inventive, or beautiful in a sustained way. Indeed, the use value of many products consists precisely in that they allow participation in such processes. This is most obviously the case of commercial products that rely on social production to some extent, such as a brand or an interactive game platform: where the value consists precisely in the ability to take a however marginal role in a process in which one's contribution can be recognized (Jenkins 2006). The promise of the product is the process of recognition. Second, the importance of process over product is also evident from the fact that the people who are most highly valued, who have the highest status in networks of social production, are the people who are best at contributing to the strength, quality, and endurance of the process by organizing social cooperation.

If the rock star, the person who actually produced concerts and performances, was the king of urban bohemia in the 1970s, to be followed perhaps by the DJ in the 1980s, the most influential characters today tend to be promoters: people whose main role is to organize productive cooperation among others. They are the people who generally have the highest status in urban scenes and other networks of social production, and they are also generally the people who are able to live off their activities in social production by selling out to the creative industries or other actors. The high status of promoters has to do with two fundamental characteristics of social production. The first characteristic is the abundance of labor, knowledge, and other resources. In the 1970s, one could gain social standing through skill at playing or producing rock music; in the 1990s, DJs gained respect and standing on the basis of their knowledge of and access to music (Thornton 1995). To some extent, these factors still count, but with the diffusion of ICTs, the ability to produce music has been virtually generalized; it is now an abundant potential, as is the knowledge of music. (One no longer needs a rare record collection; most songs or events can be found on the Internet.) This means that the actual production of concerts, club nights, or other events is no longer a scarce talent. The second fundamental characteristic of social production is that creative production has become increasingly project oriented and short term. A generation ago, cultural organizations were built to last; today, creative scenes consist of looser configurations of diverse talent, which are put together for a single project or event and then dissolve. The author's observations suggest that even bands are more short term than before. Add to this the increasingly multidisciplinary or transaesthetic character of these events. It is no longer enough to have a band; a club night should combine

music, art, installations, performances, and food. This means that the ability to organize such essentially short-term relations of productive cooperation becomes scarce. Promoters thrive by giving affective strength, for a short time at least, to what are essentially weak ties between participants in a scene. These ties entail commitment, trust, and solidarity—that is, they are experienced as ethically significant. We are now getting closer to the main point: the production of value in networks of social production is the same thing as the production of ethically significant strong ties, *philia*, or to use Lazzarato's (1997) term, an ethical surplus. This applies to most forms of social production, including customer coproduction, for the simple fact that these unfold in a complex and fragmented—postmodern as it were—social environment in which durable strong ties—*philia*—are a scarce good.

This value form is evident in the main currencies of value that circulate in these contexts: networks and respect (or recognition, community status, or some similar term). Networks are a measure of the extension of a person's social impact, or how many people to whom he or she matters. Reputation, on the other hand, is a measure of the quality of that impact: essentially, it reflects a person's ability to contribute to a particular scene, both by creating actual products (good concerts, beautiful code, interesting blog articles, etc.) and, more important, by strengthening the scene itself by creating *philia* and contributing to its productive organization. They tend to converge in a mutually reinforcing process.

However, one's standing in the community, and one's experience of *philia* with the community, is also a reflection of the ability to create *philia*, or strong ties that reinforce the community. Indeed, respect and networks function as a kind of capital—*ethical capital*—that makes it possible to initiate and to organize productive processes. And the higher one's position, the more ethical capital one has, and the easier it is to mobilize resources, motivate others, and create the strong ties that organize productive processes. This leads to another crucial insight. Social production is driven by a paradoxical combination of, on one hand, community-oriented sharing and, on the other, the rational and reflexive pursuit of self-interest. Indeed, one gives to the community to increase one's own standing and charisma, or the size of one's networks. This tendency toward self-interested sharing can be essentially expressed. At the more extreme end, it takes the form of networking or personal branding where the very point of creating community ties and offering experiences is the cultivation of charisma and social capital. Table 2 summarizes the central differences between the currently dominant, money-based form of economy and the emerging ethical economy.

**Table 2**  
**Capitalist and Social Production**

Capitalist Economy	Example	Social Production	Example
Labor and other productive resources are scarce.	Microsoft needs to pay their programmers a wage.	Labor and other productive resources are abundant.	Linux confronts an abundance of free "labor" in the form of volunteers and must devise systems that filter out the less suitable.
Value is embodied in the product and is related to investment of scarce labor time and other productive resources.	Microsoft operating systems must sell at a price that cover costs, at least in the long run.	Value is embodied in the productive process and is related to the affective energies deployed in its production.	Linux is a free good, but the Linux community attracts an abundance of free labor and, lately, corporate financing.
Motivations for participation are monetary.	People code for Microsoft to pay the rent.	Motivations for participation are ethical.	People code for Linux because they feel a proximity to its community or its values and because they want to realize them selves.
The achievement of private rewards is the overreaching value.	Microsoft coders will work overtime only for more money.	The achievement of public standing is the overreaching value.	Linux coders work "overtime" to achieve recognition for brilliance.

So we could identify something like a charismatic logic of value at work in social production. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Capitalism*, Max Weber (1930) gave us an ideal-typical description of what drives and motivates the modern capitalist entrepreneur: rational and endless private accumulation. But Weber also gave us another concept that we can use to understand the core logic of the ethical economy: charisma. A charismatic leader, he argued, exercises authority not through traditional power, nor through monetary wealth, but through his or her powers to attract the affective investments, the esteem and confidence, of the public: through his or her ability to produce strong ties or *philia* (M. Weber 1930, 1948). The basis of power is the ability to create community—to make people feel that they belong to something greater, nobler, and more powerful than themselves. (Revolutionary leaders and founders of new movements or religions—Ghandi or Jesus Christ—are prime examples of charismatic leaders.) The point is that the charismatic leader then lives freely off the generosity of the community that he or she has created. Once she has accumulated sufficient affective status, people will volunteer to put their services at her disposition: vote for her, fight for her, work for her, offer her their hospitality, and so on. They do this not for personal gain but because they believe in, feel for, or belong to a community around the charismatic person. Similarly, a person enjoying charismatic leadership must appear to give to the community without self-interest. If it became apparent that she primarily sought personal gain, her charisma would clearly suffer.

The same logic holds for the entrepreneurs of social production: regardless of their individual motivations, they must genuinely do something to strengthen the ties of the productive network in which they are engaged in order to accumulate respect or and networks. The point is that their individual motivations do not really matter. Even if they have purely strategic intentions, the only way they can realize these ambitions is to contribute genuinely to the group they are part of, to make a difference, and to matter to that group. They can accumulate a standing only by genuinely putting their resources to work in producing the strong ties that reinforce the community as a whole. So, in social production, the accumulation of value becomes contingent on the ability to produce ethically significant ties, and its currencies—networks and respect—are for all intents and purposes a measure of that ability; hence the term *ethical economy*.

### **Conclusion: How to Manage an Ethical Spime**

Customer cooperation, similar to many contemporary managerial initiatives, is essentially an attempt to put the ethical economy of social production to work for the capitalist valorization process: to direct a flow of free lunches from the nonmonetary to the monetary economy (Toffler and Toffler 2006). This often can be achieved rather effortlessly since many manifestations of this ethical economy already transpire around brands and consumer goods. People engage in brand communities to

create something in common with others, if only a common animosity to other brands. They contribute to user-led innovation schemes to achieve public recognition for their skills and expertise. The stylistic innovation of street culture unfolds in autonomous ways that cannot be controlled or preprogrammed by management. That these practices move according to noncapitalist, ethical-value logic means that navigating the border between the ethical and the capitalist economy is a core challenge for contemporary management. How can such processes be managed to best use, or at least not to alienate, this resource? And how will this challenge evolve with the further development and proliferation of ICTs?

First, managers need to keep in mind the prevalence of process over product. For most participants in customer coproduction, similarly to other forms of social production, motivation is directly related to the pleasures that can be derived from community participation and contribution. This means that it is a good idea to expand the scope and strengthen the durability of such communities. To give participants the experience of having an impact, of being able to matter to the product-centered community, it is important to give up a certain amount of control in the processes. Today, this might entail effectively outsourcing the power to make design and marketing decisions to the community itself. In the future, it might also mean outsourcing the actual material production of the product to the community of productive users. This is already happening in certain specialized amateur communities such as skateboarders and mountain bikers, as well as in experience-oriented consumption like wine and gastronomy. There, large parts of the final experience are produced by consumers themselves (much of the wine experience is realized through wine talk, and really advanced wine enthusiasts grow their own grapes; Arvidsson and Musarò 2008). Current trends in desktop manufacturing and multipurpose tooling indicate that in a not-so-distant future, similar things could happen to more mundane material objects such as bikes or furniture. Indeed, such configurations are already emerging, as open-design processes, building on the participatory coproduction of detailed designs for products such as solar power cells, are proliferating.<sup>6</sup> Twenty years from now, we might be able to download an open design and then manufacture it at a small local plant. Science-fiction writer and design philosopher Bruce Sterling speaks of new kinds of objects, what he calls “Spimes” (from *space* and *times*), that emerge as ideas and designs generated in continuous communities of social production and only afterwards are materialized in actual, concrete things. So instead of thinking the customer community as an add-on to the object, as a sort of socialized brand, managers would need

to think of the thing as a temporary incarnation of this enduring communitarian process (Sterling 2004).

Most important, however, is that these Spimes need to be ethical. First, a significant motivation for customers participating in coproduction communities lies in the ability to realize their values—that is, to matter and to make a difference according to their own value horizon. Linux is an example of this because it is largely held together by not being Microsoft; Mac users unite against PC users (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). So Spimes with strong ethical profiles will tend to stand out as more attractive, as a better value proposition (Vargo and Lusch 2004). Second, the growing visibility associated with an ICT-empowered public opinion means that it will be increasingly difficult to hide unethical aspects of brands or Spimes. This is already one of the main reasons behind the boom in initiatives for corporate social responsibility. However, the need to be ethical will be intensified by a third development: the narrowing of the digital divide. Mobile telephones are already spreading fast in Africa, South America, and Southeast Asia; they are affordable and will, within a decade, have mobile Internet access as a standard.<sup>7</sup> This means that the Thai seamstresses that produce Nike’s shoes will want to take part in the Spime community that has evolved around the product (after all, they are producing it in a very concrete sense). They will probably have very different opinions on the extent to which “Just Do It” sums up the social impact and value of the Nike brand. This tendency to integrate actors all along the value chain—from producers in the South to consumers in the North, via suppliers, investors, transport people, and other stakeholders—will be strengthened by two additional tendencies: the diffusion of RFID tags and of rating mechanisms. These are already well under way. RFID tagging is a reality in most logistics systems and will soon become one for consumer goods too. Rating—in some form or another—is already becoming an intrinsic part of many e-commerce transactions. Consider the consumer who buys a ticket online and soon thereafter receives an e-mail asking him or her to rate the performance. One can well envision media platforms where users and other stakeholders can rate the performance of a brand according to particular criteria. (Actics.com is one such platform that is already on the market.) These ratings then can be agglomerated into a quantitative index easily available via one’s cell phone. Sweeping that phone over a sweater in a store will produce immediate ratings of the item’s environmental sustainability or the extent to which its production process has respected workers’ rights or unfolded according to particular religious concerns. This information will be generated by people positioned all along its global

production-distribution-marketing chain. The emergence of such global public spheres, following global assembly lines that most brands now employ, will shift the power balance from capital to consumers, workers, and other stakeholders. It will be very difficult for brand owners to claim the moral high ground—for example, global sustainability, fair trade, and helping the poor—if every such claim can be rated by virtually everybody concerned in ways that are easily accessible and immediately visible. What this might very well amount to is a radical de-fetishization of commodities and brands and a new visibility of their actual production processes and their real social impact.

How then will brands make money, since the value-generating processes of immaterial and even material production will be increasingly handed over to consumers themselves? The probable answer is in financial markets. After all, this is already happening today. Much of brand management is primarily directed at boosting brand equity, which is then realized through easier access to finance capital. Indeed, brand equity can be seen as a securitization of the rent stream that a company is able to extract from social production, by its ability to charge a premium price that builds, to a large extent, on the image that consumers have constructed around the brand in autonomous networks of communication and interaction (Arvidsson 2006). What might happen in the future, however, is that such brand values—which today are virtually immeasurable—will be more closely correlated to indexations of the actual social impact of brands (or Spimes). Such indexations could furthermore tend to be peer based, as they could emerge from ratings that are embedded in the mediated relations that unfold between a brand and its multitude of stakeholders. Again, this will amount to a de-fetishization of value since the ratings will supply a realistic measurement of the brand owner's ability to matter and to make a difference by organizing the abundant resources of social production, productively.

In the form of customer coproduction, among other things, we have seen an increasing utilization of social production within the capitalist valorization process. To date, this has occurred with little or no concern for the inherent value logic of social production: this resource has been considered, by and large, a free lunch for business. With the further diffusion of ICTs, mainly mobile Internet and RFID tagging and their integration in an internet of things, we will probably see a further influence of the value logic, the ethical economy, of social production on the modus operandi of capitalism itself. This might be a matter of increasing competition from the actual ethical economy in attracting users and

producers. It could be a matter of further transparency: the emergence of global public spheres. It could also be a matter of the development of peer-based measurement systems of ethical impact in one form or another and their closer connections to the valorization of intangibles on financial markets. All these processes will help to de-fetishize commodities and other value forms (such as brand values). All of these developments also give the value logic of the ethical economy and its focus on “matter” and social impact a stronger impact on the ways in which value and profit are generated within the capitalist economy. The economic strength of the ethical economy might force capitalism to become ethical in new and radical ways. Indeed, such an influence of the ethical economy on the logic of capital might be as important as that exercised by the labor movement on industrial capital in the early decades of the past century. It might very well spur a global “new deal,” organized around social responsibility and environmental sustainability.

An increasingly large number of people recognize the importance of social production as a source of value. A cynical, postmodern position would be to negate its transformative potential, arguing that this phenomenon will ultimately be absorbed within neoliberal capitalism, like so many of its radical predecessors, without leaving much of a trace. However, there are strong systemic reasons to believe that such an inclusion also will significantly change the nature of capitalism, enabling it to evolve beyond its present, crisis ridden neoliberal model.

## Notes

1. Recent examples follow. Nokia Concept Lounge (<http://www.thesedays.com/conceptlounge/>)—an open-innovation platform with 450,000 visitors and 4,500 ideas submitted in 2007—does not offer any cash prizes but seems to suggest that the cool interactivity of the experience is reward enough. Heinz TV Challenge (<http://www.tophistv.com/>)—an open invitation for members of the public to construct their own advertisements for Heinz products using an online archive of images and other material—offers a cash prize of \$57,000 but only to the winner. The main motivation is presented as the possibility to be seen: all contributed videos will be posted on Heinz Web sites “and seen by up to 65,000 viewers”; finalists go on national television “and reach millions of viewers.” Similarly, Electrolux Design Lab (<http://www.electrolux.com/designlab/>), a contest open for design school students, offers rather meager cash prizes—€5,000 and €3,000 for first and second prize, respectively. The real appeal is rather the event in itself, “with a star-packed jury” and “an exciting press conference with journalists from around the world.”

2. In the “Green My Apple” campaign, consumers protested against the poor environmental record of Apple products arguing that this contradicted the expectations that they had developed in relation to the brand: “We love Apple. Apple knows more about ‘clean’ design than anybody, right? So why do Macs, iPods, iBooks and the rest of their product range contain hazardous substances that other companies

have abandoned” (<http://www.greenmyapple.org/>). Although Apple never made any explicit pledge to environmental sustainability, the process of coproduction put in motion by their brand-management strategy created such expectations.

3. Leadbeater and Miller (2004) found that 58 percent of the British population is involved in what they call “Pro-Amateur activity.” Our survey of social production in the small Swedish town of Malmö indicates that 79 percent of the population has taken part in some such activity within the past twelve months. Survey results will be available, together with our research report in August, at <http://malmo.se/spontanlab>.

4. Although it is possible to convert Linden Dollars into real dollars and thus produce a real income stream from what were once just activities in Second Life, there is simply too little money around for this to be a mass pursuit: in early 2008, Lindens’ own statistics showed that out of Second Life’s roughly 700,000 active residents only 935 could potentially live off their online activities. The numbers are similar for World of Warcraft where, with the exception of (predominantly Chinese) “goldfarmers,” few people make a living (and even these eek out a very poor income). I define “being able to live off one’s online activities” as having a Positive Monthly Linden Dollar Flow corresponding to \$1,000 or more (see [http://secondlife.com/whatis/economy\\_stats.php](http://secondlife.com/whatis/economy_stats.php)).

5. Results from a survey administered by scholars from Liverpool University indicate that 41.4 percent of the entrepreneurs and small-business owners surveyed stated “passion for new ideas” as their main motive for starting a business, while only 6.9 percent stated “financial reward” as their prime motivation (see, e.g., PyschOrg.com 2008).

6. See, for example, the resources available at the P2Pfoundation ([http://p2pfoundation.net/Category:Design#Kevin\\_Kelly\\_on\\_nearly-free\\_material\\_production](http://p2pfoundation.net/Category:Design#Kevin_Kelly_on_nearly-free_material_production)).

7. The number of mobile phone users in Africa has already surpassed that of North America and is expected to grow to 300 million June 2008 (<http://www.textually.org/textually/archives/2008/05/019983.htm>).

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