Computing and the Common. Hints of a new utopia in Participatory Design

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ABSTRACT

In this statement, I draw upon the need of Participatory Design to engage with new utopias. I point to contemporary critical theories and to concurrent social conditions that make possible to identify the construction of the common as a possible utopia. In conclusion, I suggest that forms of community-based participatory design could be actual practices supporting such utopia.

Author Keywords

Participatory design; commons; common; utopia.

ACM Classification Keywords

K.4.0 Computers and Society General.

INTRODUCTION

During the Aarhus conference of 2005, Dan Shapiro [21] elaborated on Participatory Design [PD] as a political movement in a phase of economic stability and growth. It is common knowledge that since then things have dramatically changed, due to the effect of "The Great Recession", the economic crisis that has been haunting the Western countries during the past eight years.

In this changing context, PDers could contribute to the shaping of contemporary societies by collectively engaging in the definition of new utopias that could inform their actions. In this respect, both keynote speakers at the XIII Participatory Design Conference, Pelle Ehn and Shaowen Bardzell, articulated reflections on the roles of past and future utopias for research and practice in PD. Their reflections opened up a space for new directions in utopian thinking in computing.

This statement takes on the challenging task of engaging with the construction of a possible utopia oriented to the common. The construction of such utopia is possible nowadays by leveraging on two concurrent social conditions: the existence of a group of highly-skilled precarious workers; and the existence of institutional opportunities for scholars in the design discipline to connect that group with the common through research funding.

In order to explain how a new utopia for PD can take place, this statement is organized as follows. Firstly, I will begin with a preliminary discussion of critical theories of contemporary societies, including an understanding of the role of digital technologies and the common. Secondly, I will present the recent design contributions on computing and the commons. Both will pave the way for a theoretical clarification of the difference between the commons and the common. Thirdly, I will discuss the social and institutional conditions enabling a common-oriented utopia in PD. In conclusion, I will connect critical theory, design contributions, and the social and institutional conditions, to sketch out future directions based on my proposal.

A SHORT SUMMARY OF CRITICAL THEORY TODAY

According to Ehn [8], PD originated in a specific social context characterized by strong trade unions as the main social ally of PD. In the light of the current societal situation, I propose an update of the politics of PD along similar lines. Such update is needed because the economic crisis has pointed out that "business as usual" is not a viable practice from the point of view of the aspirations toward a just and sustainable society. In fact, the crisis has shown the societal limitations of the steady accumulation of capital and it has made evident the need for forms of renewal of the bases on which current societies are tied together [12].

While the pioneers of PD where siding with the workers in the factory system, nowadays PD practitioners are called to an updated understanding of the context and the identification of new social allies (something Dearden et al. tried to do in Aarhus 2005 focusing on agencies promoting emancipation [6]). Critical analyses of the current situation provide a useful lens to reposition the politics of PD and here I present three influential analyses that are looking at the computing-society relationship.

Sociologist Christian Fuchs focuses on the notion of "mode of production" as developed by Karl Marx. Specifically, he summarizes the complex of working activities bringing to the production of digital technologies through the concept of digital labor [9]. The interesting part of Fuchs's update of Marxist theory is the stress on how, in the different places of digital production (from the African mines to Facebook), relations of production involve ownership, coercion, allocation/distribution, and the division of labor. Moreover, he distinguishes between work and labor, the former being the activity of transformation of the world, while the latter

being the commodification of work through the job relation. This distinction is something particularly significant in the age of social media and other digital technologies, in which work is algorithmically commodified.

Michel Bauwens, a scholar and an activist, helps clarify the way through which contemporary capitalism is articulated. Bauwens contribution is particularly interesting in its definition of contemporary capitalism as "netarchical" [2], defined as the "brand of capital that embraces the peer to peer revolution […] It is the force behind the immanence of peer to peer." [p. 7]. As the factory was the locus of construction of workers solidarity in industrial capitalism, the netarchically enabled peer-to-peer collaboration in commons-based project can be the place where the prevalence of the commons on the market can be elaborated and politically constructed. For both Bauwens and Fuchs, the possibility of collaborative work is strengthened by contemporary digital technologies but it is also in the digital domain that such collaborative work can become a form of labor and contribute to the accumulation of capital.

A similar concern is shared by the philosophers Michael Hardt and Toni Negri [11], two of the key thinkers of the stream of Marxism known as Autonomous Marxism (AM). AM relies upon Marx's "Fragment on the machines", that stresses how productive forces evolve through the expansion of the "general intellect", a form of collective and distributed knowledge. As knowledge is a growing part of the production process, the life of the knowledge producers itself is turned into a source of value, independently from the classical labor relation, in what AM defines as the "life theory of value" [16]. In such a perspective, AM shares the preoccupation of Fuchs for infinite exploitation of the social media users, for example, and the opportunities that Bauwens sees in the forms of peer-to-peer collaboration. Another reason that makes AM interesting is the inclusion of authors like Spinoza, Foucault, and Deleuze as inspirational sources. Drawing upon them, Hardt and Negri develop a peculiar anthropology, based on three fundamental elements: the anthropological priority of freedom over power, the latter seen as a containing force; the social priority of the multitude of the poors, whose actions institutionalized powers react to; and the centrality of affect in the development of social life, with the possibility of forms of love and hate to take the stage in historical development. The domain on which freedom, the multitude, and affect operate is that of the common. The common, without an "s", is intended as the ensemble of the material and symbolic elements that tie together human beings. The perspective of Negri and Hardt has the privilege to enrich the analysis of the political economy, as the one discussed by Fuchs and Bauwens, with a perspective on the subjects of social life, characterized by affects, a desire for freedom, and the capability to act collectively.

My proposal for a renewed utopia for PD is to orient PD practices toward the common, being aware of the current mode of production and of the role of netarchical capitalism. That implies the quest for new social allies. Before identifying them, I discuss how PD is already engaging with the commons.

PARTICIPATORY DESIGN, THE COMMONS, AND THE COMMON

Although less oriented to the labor-capital conflict than before [10], in PD there has been a growing attention to the commons, a peculiar institutional arrangement discussed extensively by Elinor Ostrom [17]. The commons are institutional arrangements for managing shared resources that are not based on private nor state property. Specifically, in the digital domain, a commons can be defined through a legal protection that favor the availability to third parties and a form of collective ownership and that entails distributed governance in the management of the interactive artifact. Digital commons (like Wikipedia or Free Software) are characterized by specific organizational traits, such as voluntary participation and contribution. In those institutional settings, many participants contribute without a necessity of doing that (as in a job relation) but out of their commitment to the project [3].

From a design perspective, pointing to the commons implies not only to understand how Intellectual Property Rights affect design [14], but also to acknowledge that designing a commons entails the social processes of maintenance and governance of a commons, that is a process of commoning [13]. In the PD tradition, the attention to the commons as a specific form of production has been gaining momentum, framing the roles of the users and designers [15], understanding collaborative production in specific places [19], or trying to include in the design process the political implications of Free Software [5].

All this work has proven effective in discussing some of the implications for the design practices of a commons perspective. However, these are still lacking a perspective able to politically scale to the societal dimensions described by Fuchs, Bauwens or Autonomous Marxists. My suggestion is to supplement the framework proposed by Elinor Ostrom, who focused on the actual institutional arrangements related to the management of a specific resource, to locate the specific commons in the wider perspective of Hardt and Negri's accent on the common, as the ensemble of the material and symbolic elements that tie together human beings. In Hardt and Negri's reading, the common can actually be nourished or dispossesed, and the actual forms of capitalism are drawing precisely on forms of accumulation by dispossession, in which value is extracted out of the collaborative capabilities of people.

In this context, PD can locate itself as a progressive force by strengthening social practices and social groups that nourish the common, and by identifying both relevant social allies and practical means. Due to the centrality of

knowledge in contemporary society, I argue that a relevant ally can be identified in the "The Fifth Estate", a group composed by highly-skilled precarious workers. Moreover, design projects with this group are possible thanks to specific narratives used by the funding agencies, in particular by the European Union.

THE FIFTH ESTATE IN SOUTHERN EUROPE

Recently, Allegri and Ciccarelli [1] have proposed an analytical category, named the "Fifth Estate", to include highly-skilled precarious and freelance workers who are fully or partially excluded from accessing welfare security and benefits in Southern European welfare states.

In the last decade in Southern Europe that social group has grown and has included an increasing number of university graduates, as a result of the worsening labour market conditions [Eurostat data until 2012[1]]. Looking at the age group 30-34, we see that at the European level there are about 35% of people who completed tertiary education, with a growth of approximately 15% of graduates in the past 15 years. Enrollment in tertiary education is also growing, with an overall difference of about 2.5 million students between 2003 and 2012. Contemporaneously, in Southern European countries the level of employment three years after graduation has dramatically decreased (-14% in Italy and -23% in Spain). In Greece, the country that is worse off, in 2012 only 40% of the university graduates had a job three years after graduation. Moreover, the growth of part-time jobs during the crisis together with a decrease in full-time jobs, suggests that the quality of available jobs is decreasing too.

Allegri and Ciccarelli [1] argue that the Fifth Estate could be, in contemporary capitalism, what the Fourth Estate was in industrial capitalism: one of the leading forces capable of articulating new perspectives of wealth distribution. The emergence of the Fifth Estate is characterized by new forms of commons-based practices like bottom-up cooperation, solidarity, and civic cooperation. In fact, the growth of phenomena like co-working spaces (more than 100 only in Italy [18]) and of new funding strategies like crowdfunding (in May 2014 there were 41 active platforms only in Italy! [4]), suggests that the Fifth Estate is actually experimenting with new forms of collaboration.

To put it briefly, the Fifth Estate is engaging in commons-based forms of association that can nourish the common. Therefore, we can argue that one of the potential allies for contemporary PD is the Fifth Estate, as one of the social groups able to characterize future progressive change (it is not by chance that some commentators are pointing to that social group as the backbone of Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain).

HORIZON 2020 AND DIGITAL SOCIAL INNOVATION

In the early times of PD, the presence of strong trade unions constituted an opportunity for designers to rethink their practices in terms of political positioning. Today the alliance with the Fifth Estate could be similarly challenging. Moreover, it can be fruitfully achieved by leveraging current narratives in the European Union funding strategies.

In fact, the main research policy instrument in the EU is Horizon 2020 which basic narrative regards the innovation addressing social and environmental issues as the key component for the European development in the globalized world. In this framework, a couple of specific lines of funding are relevant to understand how the research policies of the European Union frame the theme of interest here, that is the commons in the digital world, the "Onlife Initiative" and CAPS (Collective Awareness Platforms for Sustainability and Social Innovation[2]).

The more relevant is what the EU refers to as CAPS, a very small line of funding, counting approximately 35 million Euros per year. Nevertheless, this line of funding is particularly interesting as it revolves around the collective distribution of social power through the deployment of technologies. On the IEEE Technology and Society Magazine, Fabrizio Sestini [20], the reference person in the European Commission for this line of funding, states that "The ultimate goal is to foster a more sustainable future based on a low-carbon, beyond GDP economy, and a resilient, cooperative democratic community.". Examples of project already funded through this line include, for example, D-Cent and P2PValue. D-Cent[3] is a project working with social movements (like the Spanish *Indignados*) to build technologies for direct democracy and economic empowerment, as digital social currencies. P2PValue[4] focuses on value in peer production, in connection with new forms of cooperative organizations and significant forms of activism.

Moreover, this EU narrative frames innovation as "digital social innovation", a collaborative form of innovation based on the co-creation of knowledge, technologies, and services. The stress on democracy by Sestini and the focus on collaboration in relation to digital social innovation, clearly refer to organizational forms that differ from the traditional bureaucratic organizations or from the networked enterprises typical of the period between the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s. To summarize, the described EU narrative can actually constitute an opportunity window for common-oriented PD project to be funded and conducted.

CONCLUSION: PRACTICING UTOPIA

Through an understanding of contemporary capitalism as something providing tensions between forms of social collaboration and of accumulation by dispossession, I articulate a potential update of PD positioning in relation to the social allies PD could talk to and to the practical means to conduct projects. I identify the significant social subject in the "Fifth Estate", a social group of highly-skilled precarious workers, and the practical means to fund and conduct projects in the European Union drive toward digital social innovation. The ensemble of the discussed theories, design perspectives, and social conditions, is what constitutes a design space oriented to the common.

From the point of view of PD practices, community-based PD [7] looks like the most interesting methodological starting point toward common-oriented PD, as it entangles the capability to intercept the diverse and distributed character of the Fifth Estate and it can be easily aligned with the definition of the funding agencies.

Summarizing, I provided hints of a new utopia in PD based on the idea of nourishing the common, the ensemble of the material and symbolic elements that tie together human beings. Such utopia can potentially make the PD community a strong actor in the construction of a more just and sustainable society.

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