

The Amateur Class, or, The Reserve Army of the Web

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This article deals with the transformation of the computer industry that has been inaugurated by the new version of the Web. The advent of the social web—or Web 2.0, according to Tim O’Reilly (2006)—gives rise to the formation of the amateur class and to new modes of exploitation, as the amateur starts to have control over the means of Web production. The function of Web 2.0 within capitalist production is to exploit and valorize the volunteer contributions of amateurs. The argument on which this paper is based is that Web 2.0 exhibits both emancipatory and exploitative aspects, and the role of amateurs should be to foster one over the other.

Key Words: Web 2.0, Amateur Class, Exploitation, Netarchists, Commons

Web 2.0 and the exploitation of collective intelligence and creativity are interwoven concepts. Web 2.0 has emerged from the interstices of the first edition, initiating a new corporate revolution in the computer industry. The new design of the Web transformed the complex Internet into a smooth navigation and production platform. Web 2.0 facilitates social creativity, collaboration, and information sharing among users, who can own the data on a site and exercise control over it (O’Reilly 2006). The “architecture of participation,” which a Web 2.0 site may have, encourages users to add value to the application as they use it (O’Reilly 2006). The advent of Web 2.0 gave rise to several business ventures such as eBay, Facebook, Flickr, MySpace, del.icio.us, and YouTube, which generate huge profits. Web 2.0 contains a set of enabled participative practices and tools that the business models fund in order to exploit the collective intelligence.

Paul Graham states that there are basically three roles one can assume in the world of the Web: the *professional*, the *amateur*, and the *final user* (Kleiner and Wyrick 2007). I would also add a fourth category, that of the *hacker*, which has some characteristics of the professional (i.e., profound and specialized knowledge) and some of the amateur (i.e., romanticism). In other words, echoing Wark (2004), who considers hacking a pure experimental activity free from constraint, a hacker is a “professional amateur” who produces new information beyond the private property form. The key difference between the amateur class and the hacker is that the amateur is exploited by the owners of the platforms and seems incapable of producing a surplus of liberty—that is, a true Commons—without the help of a pro (which could be either a hacker or a professional). The amateur remains dependent on the owner of the platform in the same way that the owner is dependent on the amateur class, which adds value to the business venture. This does not mean that a professional or a hacker may not use platforms such as Facebook or Flickr, adding value to them; however, in this paper I focus on the amateur class for the following reason: the formation of the amateur class as a class comes with the advent of Web

2.0, when the amateur starts to have control over the means of production. In Web 1.0, there was no concrete space for the amateur whereas the roles of the professional, the hacker, and the final user were prescribed. The amateur was incapable of producing because of the stuffy and intricate nature of Web 1.0. In contrast with the final user, the amateur was willing to participate in production of Web 1.0, but he or she lacked the necessary knowledge to handle the convoluted means of production. In the labyrinth of Web 1.0, there was a surplus population eager to participate in production; the reserve army of Web 1.0 was composed of loose amateurs who had not yet formed the amateur class, as happened later in Web 2.0. In a similar vein, the reserve army of Web 2.0 still consists of some amateurs who are not advanced enough to participate in immaterial production; this is the latent part of the working Web 2.0 population. The latent part consists of the population—a reservoir of potential workers—that is not yet fully integrated into capitalist production (Marx 1889). The amateurs, who produce no matter their age, are regimented in the workplace—the platforms—not in a hierarchy but in networks, while platforms are being smoothed in order to exploit the surplus population. One might speculate that a new version of the Web will try to solve, in a more efficient way, the aforementioned problem: to exploit more amateurs—that is, people who, compared to the hacker or professional class, are less advanced but quite eager to participate in Web production, receiving a small financial reward, if any.

The amateur (in Greek, ‘amateur’ ερασιτέχνης comes from the synthesis of ‘lover’ εραστής and ‘art’ τέχνη) creates in his or her free time in order to fulfill hierarchically superior needs, without aiming primarily at financial gain (most of the time he or she is not paid at all) and his or her knowledge is not as specialized as the hacker’s or the professional’s. Marx claims that the fetter of human freedom is neither religion nor philosophy but money (Singer 1980). The amateur seems to break with the common perception and a rupture with the past occurs. He or she is reclaiming the genuine value of the world by not seeing the alienated essence of human labor: that is, money (McLellan 1977) as an end in itself. The production of the amateur class is not generally organized by a logic of monetary incentives, but is chiefly based on values like sharing, respect, socialization, and recognition. The amateur, like the hacker described by Wark (2004), creates without owning exclusively: both are advocates of collective work, innovation, and freedom. Arvidsson (2007) considers the type of economy in which the amateur is participating an “ethical economy” where humans create an intersubjective order through communication and interaction. He thinks that modern corporate capitalism is not compatible with an ethically sound social order, and believes that this ethical economy manifests deeper, more fundamental changes within the current social order.

Web 2.0 created the conditions for exploitation of the amateurs’ reserve army. Flickr, MySpace, Facebook, del.icio.us, and YouTube are representative parts of the exploitative side of this new Web platform which, by activating the abilities of the amateur as well as his or her desire for creativity, captures him or her, in this way making a strategically important step toward the initiation of immiscible business practices. The amateur’s voluntary participation is therefore being transformed into (surplus) value for the administrators of the aforementioned social networks and services. The means of production became available to the amateurs with the advent

of Web 2.0, and the exploitation of collective intelligence and creativity was reborn. Nevertheless the platforms, as Trebor Scholz and Paul Hartzog (2007) underline, continue to be owned by the corporations. This is a new expression of the capitalist relations of production: in industrial production the worker—the “professional,” according to the previous categorization—sells his or her time and labor in order to get a financial reward without, most of the time, enjoying the pleasure of creation, self-esteem, and fulfillment, while, at the same time, the company grows richer. Moreover, the laborers would be alienated as the production process is based on competition. In a similar fashion, in Web 2.0’s intellectual production, which is not premised on competition, the amateur enjoys the pleasure of creation, communication, and socialization as well as self-esteem (receiving sometimes a small financial reward) while the corporations make huge profits (mainly from advertisements) from this tradeoff. In October 2007, Microsoft bought a 1.6 percent share of Facebook for \$246 million (McCarthy 2007), and one year later Google Inc. had reached a deal to acquire the YouTube company for \$1.65 billion (Reuters 2006). Even in the Web production of amateurs, where there is almost no paid labor, capital is being accumulated.

Marx (1889) stated that, in the industrial world, capital accumulation constantly produces a redundant population of laborers, a population of greater extent than suffices for the self-expansion of capital and therefore a surplus population. However, in the production of the amateurs, there is no wage dependency and therefore almost no marginal cost when exploiting an additional amateur. Hence the *netarchists* or *netocrats*—those that own the platforms and promote participation—try to exploit as many amateurs as possible. Minimizing the reserve army is quite an achievable target. Netarchists or netocrats, who are the capitalists within Web production, are dangerous as trustees of the various plans for reinforcement of the sphere of the commons due to their speculative nature (Bauwens 2005). It is in the amateurs’ and hackers’ hands to abolish the new capitalist relations of production—exploitation by the capitalist who owns the platform—in the name of creation and reinforcement of the sphere of the commons.

Deleuze and Guattari write that “we do not lack communication, on the contrary we have too much of it. We lack creation. We lack resistance to the present” (1994, 108). Although the amateur creates and resists the present, there is something more to be achieved: the independence and autonomy of the platform should, by all means, be a tactical goal of his or her political struggle. It is obvious that a new form of social contract is emerging from the production of the social Web. Using Web terminology, it could be called “Social Contract 2.0,” which encompasses new meanings and ways of production (peer production) and ownership (peer property), constituting an abstract act of commitment toward creation of a real *sphere of the commons*. In peer production, which is a third open mode of production, decisions arise from the free engagement and cooperation of producers: this mode is radically different from market-based production, premised on equivalent exchange (Benkler 2006), and planned economies based on hierarchical structures. Peer property is a form of communal shareholding where the resources are held in common (Bauwens 2005; Fiske 1991) under legal forms such as the Creative Commons or the General Public License (Bauwens 2005). Peer property is radically different from private or

state property. Whereas traditional forms of property are exclusionary (“if it is mine, it is not yours”), peer property forms are inclusionary (“if it is mine, it can be yours as well”) (Bauwens, 2005); whereas a state owns and manages public property for its people, in peer property people co-own and co-manage their property—the commons (Bauwens 2005). Hence, the alternative to the netarchical platforms would be a true commons based on the *peer triptych* (i.e., peer production, property, and governance), where the management of collective intelligence and social creativity will not rely on private, for-profit companies driven by the “Netarchical ideology” (what Barbrook and Cameron tried to describe in 1995 under the term the “Californian ideology”). Although netarchists seem to embrace participation, they see capitalism as the only conceivable horizon for the future of humanity (Bauwens 2005).

In conclusion, it is true that the broad categorization and generalization in this paper may lead to errors of interpretation in specific cases. I hope in this article to have shed some light on tricky aspects of Web 2.0. Web 2.0 exhibits both emancipatory and exploitative aspects, and the role of amateurs is to foster one over the other. It may seem that amateurs give up some rights to the owners of platforms in order to receive the chance to create. On the other hand, the netarchists—owners of the platforms—aim at exploiting as many amateurs as they can, generating huge profits from the free labor. The amateurs maintain a social order where the production of immaterial value leads away from wage dependency, as they produce in order to satisfy their higher needs. In a *flood* of creation the independence and autonomy of the platform toward reinforcement of the commons is more than a realistic goal to be achieved. As Bauwens (2007) notes, new ways of thinking are needed that require “the continued strengthening of sharing and commons communities as the key agents of social change.”

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