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Towards a Knowledge Socialism: A Digital Sedition

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*Knowledge Socialism: The Rise of Peer Production: Collegiality and Collaboration and Collective Intelligence*  
Edited by Michael A. Peters, Tina Besley, Petar Jandrić and Xudong Zhu  
Springer Singapore, 2020  
325 pp.

It isn't very often that a book comes along that offers the opportunity to write a review which is facilitated so well by the very logic and structure of the work in question: *Knowledge Socialism* is an edited and collaborative book which has its rationale in peer production, collegiality, collaboration and collective intelligence, indeed, the latter in every sense. This is because the editors of this book on the coming fifth knowledge revolution solicited the responses from their peers in academia and these responses were peer reviewed by at least two other authors.

The result of this collaborative and collegial process constitutes the three sections and fifteen very different chapters of this expansive, not to say, much needed work on how and who constructs and controls knowledge (Peters et al. 2020, 1-2). *Knowledge Socialism* is however, very much the project of Michael Peters and Tina Besley; inviting the book's contributors to engage in a positive critique of the theories and concepts which construct knowledge socialism.

This collaboration was carried out in order to develop the theory and concepts of knowledge socialism. As such, this book is a perfect metaphor for the production of knowledge (in the sense of collaboration) and collective intelligence. From analyses of capitalism, its changing modes over time, to different conceptions of the University, to government policy on how knowledge interconnectivity, to the state and competitive economic society: the global 'knowledge economy', 'knowledge society' or 'knowledge capitalism'; the editors offer the latest thought on how we can radically democratise knowledge. That is, democratise it in the face of the new enhancements offered by digitisation, and appropriate these in this historical socio-economic stage.

For those of us in academia, that is, the University, *Knowledge Socialism* is an essential read. Moreover, it is an essential resource to understand how the production of knowledge is rapidly changing as digitisation comes to affect every aspect of our lives. For those of us not in academia—potential active social agents—*Knowledge Socialism* is also essential reading, as this book raises questions as to who collegiality and online collaboration is actually for. This book is published in the series 'East-West Dialogues in Educational Philosophy and Theory', presupposing that until a critical mass in the academy is achieved, the theory will remain just that.<sup>1</sup> However, it has to be acknowledged that Peters and Besley's development of the theory and concept of 'knowledge cultures' and 'radical openness' (2020, 1-3); understanding particular shared practices of learning and knowledge, and the representation of this under capitalism, and a virtue of openness in all forms of knowledge, are in fact designed to reclaim knowledge for the global public good.

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<sup>1</sup> See: 'The Merging Idea of Knowledge Socialism: Reflective Discourse Between the East and West' in Chapter Fifteen, 'The Highway Robber's Road to Knowledge Socialism: A Collective Work on Collective Work'.

That is, a re-appropriation of knowledge in the wake of the ‘profound restructuring of capitalism’, in which the nature of work is rapidly changing. Knowledge socialism of course implies a collective ownership and use of knowledge: a global knowledge commons or, ‘global collectivist society’ which disrupts the ‘info-tech digital capitalist historical phase’ (Peters et al. 2020, 2). The question and indeed, the answer as to whether this is possible, arguably lie partly in the response to the editor’s call for the developmental chapters to this book. That is, in the critical analyses these chapters answered the call with. Indeed, what is exciting about this book, and given references to Pierce and Dewey, and shades of Habermas (Barnett 2020, 231) within, is the space that is created by the writers in the forthcoming digital revolution for a communicative action. A linguistic-digital moment which realises the utopian future and, ‘the creation of an unsurpassable horizon in which all citizens learn to become truly global’ (Peters 2020, 15-33).

### **A Global Transformation: The Digitally Enhanced Citizen**

On first reading it can seem as though this book is published by academics for academics in an international academic discourse. Thus I will consider how the ‘global citizen’ as an active social agent is positioned throughout this work. The very term ‘peer production’ would suggest they are not. Indeed, and as we will see, Barnett (2020, 219-235) demonstrates that individual active social agents are involved in critique and self-critique and exist far beyond the walls of the University; complicating, if not negating Peters and Besley’s concept of knowledge socialism as an ‘intellectual commons’. That is, the notion we all construct and/or carry knowledge in a collective project geared at a transformation of social relations.

Indeed, given the thesis of postmodernism (Lytoard 1979), that knowledge is as much constructed outside the academy as in it, the coming digital revolution is perhaps of little surprise to the University; although who controls knowledge, and how it is constructed in this latest stage of capitalism is of the extreme importance to us all. How our world and indeed, world view (reality) is shaped by the dynamics of knowledge production, and who owns it and gives access to it will shape and affect all our lives as the fifth knowledge revolution materialises. That is, in a futuristic world of 5G communications, cybernetics and cyborgs: transhumanism in other words (Mercer and Trothen 2020).

### **The University and Socialism: Squaring the Circle**

The question asked and indeed answered by the collaborators with the editors of this book, is whether capitalism is diametrically opposed to knowledge socialism or conducive to it, and if the University is in fact a socialist entity. Moreover, are the systems of capitalism and socialism diametrically opposed or mutually reciprocating systems? Thus in beginning this review, and to elucidate this question, and indeed the conceptual framework of the book for the reader, it is apposite to begin by juxtapositioning four chapters from this book:

Michael Peters’s Chapter Two, ‘Towards a Theory of Knowledge Socialism: Cognitive Capitalism and the Fourth Knowledge Revolution’ **and** Steve Fuller’s Chapter Seven, ‘Knowledge Socialism Purged of Marx: the Return of Organised Capitalism’;

Sharon Rider's Chapter Ten, 'Going Public: Higher Education and the Democratization of Knowledge' **and** Ronald Barnett's Chapter Eleven 'The University: From Knowledge Socialism to Knowledge Cooperatives'.

Michael Peters is of course one of the pioneers of knowledge socialism, Barnett is one of the best-known voices on higher education and the shape-shifting, liquid and arguably disparate 'University' (2009; 2011; 2012; 2013; 2013b); Steve Fuller is an Existentialist and has also written expansively on the institution of the mind; the home of the intellectual. Sharon Rider is a professor of philosophy at the University of Uppsala, Sweden, and has written prodigiously on higher education.

What is particularly interesting about Fuller's previous writing is his critique of academic rentierism. That is to say, the academic rent-seeking character of higher education, particularly of the research universities, and the knowledge boundaries imposed in the disciplinary bound mercenary 'ivory tower' which Fuller (2016) argued has lost its relevance. We will see in due course if Fuller sees a way forward for the University, he argued previously, in a mirror of the thesis of postmodernism, had lost its relevance.

### **Knowledge Socialism and the Digitisation: The Future for Good or Bad**

In Chapter Two, 'Towards a Theory of Knowledge Socialism: Cognitive Capitalism and the Fourth Knowledge Revolution' (2020, 15-33), Michael Peters sets out not only his theory of knowledge socialism, but of our digital future. Peters does this after traversing the theories and concepts of Peters and Bröckling, Marx, Foucault, Luhmann, Stiglitz—and concludes by developing the theory of cognitive capitalism of Negri, Virno and Lazzarato of the Italian Autonomist School. In doing so, Peters marries Marx and Foucault to theorise in the field of education, and asks questions about the future of work, specifically, 'digital labour'.

Peters's concern is with equal opportunity and the way 'excellence' is conflated with economization by the neoliberal agenda, specifically by the German and Scottish Higher Education sectors. Indeed, he sees this conflation and the concern of capitalism with human capital as part of the hegemonic discourse of neoliberalism. Discussing inclusion and exclusion, Peters's normative theoretical perspective envisions a wrestling of education from the state, and a separation of knowledge from capital.

This argument is made by Peters in the context of a digitisation of the world in which he sees the fusing of the physical, digital, biological worlds and science at the nano level and which he argues creates a global knowledge society: artificial intelligence; algorithms, along with the Deep Mind of Google, Watson of IBM; machine learning and intelligent publishing will represent, Peters argues, the 'Epoch of Digital Reason'. Seeing this development as having the capacity for good and bad, Peters invokes Marx's 'Fragment of Machine'. Marx saw the process of technology and knowledge evolving to exclude the creativity of the individual, and thus to have a stultifying effect on the mind, as well as excluding citizens from the economic and cultural realms. Peters talks of 'Roboticization', suggesting an army

of cyborg like workers operating mechanically without thought.<sup>2</sup> A frightening thought indeed, and so in contradiction to the introduction to this review, the book under review clearly does include all active agents in its analyses of the future of knowledge.

Indeed, and as we have read, Peters also sees the inexorable rise of digital technologies, biology and biotech as having the capacity, if wrestled from the State, the potential to create a global knowledge commons; a global public good. It is this focus on the public good that now returns us to education and the University. Is capitalism antithetical to the University, and is it possible for the University to be socialist with regard to knowledge production and collaboration? I now proceed, reviewing the other contributions to *Knowledge Socialism* in the contributory chapters to this book by focusing on the University, capitalism, and the world of work. In doing so, I will evaluate the writing in these chapters to ascertain whether ‘excellence’ is in fact separate from the economy, the technological and instrumental aspects of the economy, and education; and indeed, whether these roles are in fact part of higher education’s mission to reach the dizzy heights of a global intellectual commons.

### **What is Knowledge—Is it Theft?**

At this juncture, it is perhaps wise to think about capitalism, knowledge and the University and how these fit together, if at all. The conclusion of Fuller’s Chapter Seven, ‘Knowledge Socialism Purged of Marx: The Return of Organised Capitalism’ (2020, 117-135) perhaps coincides directly with Peters’s writing on the transhumanist aspects of the coming digital revolution. After taking us through the history of capitalism, welfarism, and of course neoliberalism Fuller, in a perhaps to some a surprising turn, takes us to Saint-Simon and Proudhon (1994). Firstly however, and in discussing corporate and organised capitalism, and demonstrating the rigidity and (the Johnny come lately) traditionalism of Marxism, Fuller argues that the philosophy of Saint-Simon and Proudhon in different ways (here the reader is urged to engage with Fuller’s extremely complex and erudite text) is commensurate with the market.

Travelling through Aristotle’s notion of the spontaneous political sphere and the creation of the active citizen, the Zoon-Politikon, to Popper, Fuller not only takes us to Peters’s notion of the fungible actor, in terms of form, mirroring the positive and negative transhumanist possibilities in ‘roboticization’; but then very cleverly uses the medieval notion of *Universitas*, meaning artificial person, as a metaphor for our digital Transhumanist future selves. Fuller also seems to suggest that capitalism, commodities, knowledge itself are fungible. The most intriguing argument of Fuller, if interpreted correctly, is that neoliberalism is fungible, that it has performed a Gestalt switch (a switch in perception) on us: it, and 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge in particular, is commensurate with the coming digital revolution, as are human beings. However, to understand where Fuller is really coming from, we need to visit Sharon Rider’s Chapter Ten, ‘Going Public: Higher Education and the Democratization of Knowledge’ (2020, 197-219).

For readers wishing to get to grips with Fuller’s positioning on knowledge and what the University should or could be, Sharon Rider’s chapter is essential reading; as this represents a

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<sup>2</sup> <https://social-epistemology.com/2021/08/26/enhancing-human-existence-mercier-and-trothens-religion-and-the-technological-future-des-hewitt/>.

critical analysis of Fuller's ideas. I have pointed to Fuller's previous writing on the disciplinary bound institution of the University. In *Academic Caesar* (2016) Fuller wrote how the privilege of academic rentierism (rent-seeking) made the University like a firm with a cartel on knowledge, thus preventing the realisation of Humboldt's vision of the Enlightenment University. That is, an institution which is antithetical to authority, and engaged in the constant creative destruction of knowledge and elites. This is in fact the presentation of Fuller that Rider makes. Moreover, she also correctly cites Fuller's more recent writing in his post-truth series as integral to his theorising on the University (2018; 2020).

Significantly, Rider also presents Fuller's positioning on what and where the University should be now. The University will be radically reorganised as a consequence of the radical reorganisation of social relations which the University then mirrors (or perhaps vice-versa); and it is this that brings about a revolutionary global intellectual commons, and importantly for Fuller, epistemic justice for the trans community. Whether the coming fifth knowledge revolution realises this or imprisons us in a 5G controlled robotic cage is yet to be seen. Interestingly, in *Academic Caesar*, Fuller argued that to steal a march on big-tech the University should take a leaf out of their book and follow their practices of constant digital upgrade.

Is this to outwit the fox and disrupt the market, or steal its clothes, one might be justified in asking. This is a doubly interesting point or rather question, because in this book under review now, Fuller echoes the famous words that form title of Proudhon's book, 'What is property? Property is theft' (1994). Fuller argues in his chapter that, like any commodity in the market, knowledge ceases to be the possession of the originator, as its uses are developed and become apparent to all, and ownership becomes extended, collective even.

Rider herself pointedly decides not to discuss the notion of what a University is, that is, what constitutes the sum of its parts. Rather, Rider seemingly critiques Fuller's positioning on knowledge boundaries in a complex word game Wittgenstein himself would have been proud of. Ironically, and mirroring Fuller's musings on Popper's induction and falsification, Rider employs the 'does Sweden exist' word and thought conundrum (this gives a new meaning to 'I see no ships').

Through this intellectual chess-like mastery, Rider seems to argue we should enter into political communications and accept we see real barriers, borders in knowledge as we do in the immovable market. However, Rider also sees the increasingly public nature of knowledge drawing the University into the public realm, implying reluctance now on the part of the institution to engage. Indeed, throughout this review so far, visions of either the fabled 'ivory tower' or of many collective like lighthouses or beacons have sprung to mind. Rider's rational and reasoned argument that the public, society has never been entirely welcomed over the drawbridge evokes the castle she explicitly mentions in her conclusion. So what is the sum of the University's parts? Ronald Barnett's chapter illuminates this question and seeks to develop knowledge socialism for an institution he argues is not inherently socialist.

## **Collectivist Critical Thinking**

If we want to continue with an analysis of what the University is an institution, then Ronald Barnett's chapter is an excellent place to locate ourselves. Barnett is not just a well-known voice and professor of the philosophy of higher education, but a prodigious writer on what this institution is, and moreover, what it has been historically, will be in the future and crucially, what it is now, in the present. In many ways, Barnett personifies the University. How better to evaluate knowledge socialism then, than through Barnett's chapter, 'The University: From Knowledge Socialism to Knowledge Cooperatives'.

Barnett presents a pragmatic picture of knowledge, the University, and how digital communications have come to change our world and so the position of higher education in society. Firstly, and in contradiction to Fuller, Barnett sees the multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary state of the of epistemic world as diffusing knowledge internally and externally to the University. Moreover, given the way that higher education works in conjunction with private big-tech, science and industry,<sup>3</sup> the University can hardly be said to be an ivory tower or closed rent-seeking institution of compartmentalised disciplines, schools and departments.

Barnett also points to the way the digitization of society has delegitimized the University, a digitization Barnett argues the University is complicit in. Barnett cites the advent of social media as compounding the thesis of postmodernism (Lyotard 1979); that is, that knowledge is produced outside the University. This is complicated, as Barnett points out, by the post-truth phenomenon. What counts as knowledge, truth, reality can now be constructed, achieved from someone's bedroom, as can the hacking, crashing of a national intelligence computer. Moreover, the existence of artificial intelligence, algorithms etc., can skew the world view and the image and relevance of the University anew. The notion of the University as a sphere of communicative reason then ceases.

Barnett questions the very premise of knowledge socialism through this presentation, and importantly points to how the production of knowledge can be the consequence of many individuals' labour and achievements but often within a definite epistemic sphere (as well as pointing to how contributions to knowledge could theoretically span the entire staff of a university). Barnett also suggests that individuals on the periphery of knowledge production, for example reviewers could be counted as collaborative knowledge creators and peer reviewers.<sup>4,5</sup>

This perhaps suggests the knowledge collectives Barnett conceptualizes as an alternative to a universal University as it were, although Barnett introduces these because of the particular cultures of institutions and the multiplicities of knowledge construction; these collectives would operate internally in the University and externally to it. In the spirit of a thought probe or thought experiment now, Barnett's mention of communicative reason and the way digital communications have become myriad could in theory lend itself to a Habermasian

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<sup>3</sup> This dynamic as Bothwell and Stewart demonstrate (2020, 278) is precisely how Peters (2019) conceptualizes the advent of knowledge socialism.

<sup>4</sup> A reviewer writing on a smart little computer phone could be argued to personify knowledge collaboration in the forthcoming digital revolution.

<sup>5</sup> See Peters's chapter in the book's conclusion: 'Knowledge Socialism, Collective Writing and Academic Labour. A Response: Collective Writing and the Juridical Construction of the Author'.

ideal speech situation.<sup>6,7</sup> This would be a situation in which the diverse and diffuse knowledge producers of the digital age come together (in the digital ether), in a collective project to deliberate on how knowledge is produced and shared in a global knowledge commons.

### **Knowledge Socialism Through the Sedition of Thought Probes**

Chapter Four, Perversities or Problems in the Rise of Peer Production with ‘Knowledge Socialism: Collegiality, Collaboration, Collective Intelligence’, Timothy W. Luke presents a different thought experiment designed to bring forth knowledge socialism. After discussing the seemingly intractable nature of cognitive capitalism, plutocrats, and the gross economic inequality of the world, Luke invokes as a thought probe, Marcuse’s *Great Refusal* and Gramsci’s ‘philosophy of praxis’ and his ‘organic intellectuals’ to theorise radical change towards knowledge socialism and a communist society. However, and in returning to the idea above that the frenetic digitization of world communications could engender this, Luke also talks of how cognitive capitalism is run through billions of fibre optic cables, internet companies tracking every move we make online, on our cell phones, every keystroke on our pc’s, and how we are also under surveillance from this, and from the much simpler CCTV cameras that keep global capitalism moving. However, an inversion of this conceptualisation is Barnett’s view of the many independent social agents across the globe that are potentially able to undermine neoliberalism’s digital surveillance and disciplinary measures.<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly, Petar Jandric opens his Chapter Five, ‘Post-Digital Knowledge Socialism’ (2020, 81-99) with this quote from Lenin at the Eight All-Russia Congress of Soviets. ‘Communism is Soviet Power with the Electrification of the Whole Country’. The implication of this for a collective control of the fifth digital revolution is clear. Chapter Fourteen perhaps gives us more of an idea of how we could perform a digital insurrection.

### **Performance Through Art, Space and Time: A Ghost from the Future Coming to Reclaim the Present**

Chapter Fourteen, ‘Knowledge Exchange and Knowing: The Self, Art Practice and the Digital’ (2020: 277-301) by D.M. Bothwell and P. A. Stewart is in many ways reminiscent of the Frankfurt School’s work on aesthetics. However, this theorisation of art and the self through the concept or method of ‘hauntology’ doesn’t conclude as Marcuse’s *The Aesthetic Dimension: Towards a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (1978) does, in dissilutionment. Hauntology is the method practised through art which understands the present through a dialectical like recombination with the past. This brings to mind Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilisation* (1956) which, following Freud, theorised how organised society had become repressed as it tried to forget and repress the memory of how we were before capitalism. Through art, music,

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<sup>6</sup> Barnett (2020, 231) cites this concept but sees it as a limited form of Socialism within the University.

<sup>7</sup> <https://faculty.georgetown.edu/bassr/gaynor/idealsp.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> See Nielsen’s Chapter Eight, ‘The Democratic Socialisation of Knowledge: Integral to an Alternative to the Neoliberal Model of Development’: Section entitled ‘Beyond Facebook: Challenges for constructing a Global Civil Society’, 139.



poetry and song we remember our past liberation, and this brings a tension to life under capitalism.

Hauntology is different to repressive sublimation (Marcuse 1956) in that it is an unpicking of the self through art and performance imaginaries of what does not yet exist; a ghost of the future still to come, thus not of the past, and one which is eerily haunting us now in the digital machine. This implies knowledge socialism is haunting us, tempting us from the future. In the spirit of Bothwell and Stewart's chapter and to really shine a light on the method of hauntology and its meaning, the following song lyrics (originally a song by the Buzzcocks<sup>9</sup>) really define and evoke the sentiment of being haunted from the future by an ideal; and, is a performance to raise the spectre of knowledge socialism:

I always used to dream of the past  
But like they say yesterday never comes  
Sometimes there's a song in my brain  
And I feel that my heart knows the refrain  
I guess it's just the music that brings on nostalgia for an age yet to come  
About the future I only can reminisce  
For what I've had is what I'll never get  
And although this may sound strange  
My future and my past are presently disarranged  
And I'm surfing on a wave of nostalgia for an age yet to come  
I look I only see what I don't know  
All that was strong invincible is slain  
Takes more than sunshine to make everything fine  
And I feel like I'm trapped in the middle of time  
With this constant feeling of nostalgia for an age yet to come

Institutional critique through art performance like this song played in the digital realm, which realises the self through nostalgia for an age of knowledge socialism could, ideally, ultimately realise the radical transformation of the means of production and all social relations. However, Bothwell and Stewart also discuss the digital realm with regard to open democratic collective access: for example, MOOCs,<sup>10</sup> which could, potentially, create the space for a critical mass to develop. Luke, who I discussed above, cites the Occupy movement and Extinction Rebellion as vehicles for a possible transformation. In a thought probe, an idea for praxis, it is conceivable that these countercultural movements, in concert with online resistance, could lead to a 'Great Refusal';<sup>11</sup> leading then to an ideal speech situation in which all sides come to unencumbered by psychological constraints and assumptions and move to a transformation of social relations.

It is possible to imagine millions of active agents around the globe connected via their laptops, cell phones, smart phones or 5G digital brain implants (Mercer and Trothen 2020) communicating in a critical mass with the institution that is neoliberalism: an institution,

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<sup>9</sup> Originally sung by the Buzzcocks Nostalgia was also performed by Penetration:  
<https://youtu.be/DyUfbGq3PE0>.

<sup>10</sup> 'MOOCs' = 'Massive Online Open Courses'.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08854300.2017.1376400>.

brought to the ‘table’ by the power of the fifth digital revolution, which had been appropriated by a transhumanist-cyborg army of the people.

## Conclusion

I now conclude, but in doing so hopes that through the use of the imaginary above it has elucidated the chapters, the theories and concepts contained in this invaluable guide to the digital future; and, the possibilities for transformation in the guise of knowledge socialism for the reader. Finally, and alas, it has not been possible to include all chapters of *Knowledge Socialism* in this review. However, perhaps it is apposite to conclude with the words below from Derek R. Ford’s Chapter Eight, ‘A Communist Theory of Writing: Virno, Lyotard and a Rewriting of the General Intellect’ (2020, 99-117).

After pointing out that communist revolution is not achieved by writing alone, Ford argues that it does however attack the fundamental causes of oppression and exploitation through organised, disciplined and protracted struggle; and that although no theory of Communism is sufficient, we can labour to defend the general line of the intellect, thereby increasing the transformational potential of the general intellect. In the introduction to this review I asked who this book is really for. These sentiments on writing and the general intellect from Ford (2020, 112) answer this question most magnificently. It is for us all.

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