



Review of M. A. Peters, T. Besley, P. Jandrić, and Xudong Zhu (Eds.) (2020). *Knowledge Socialism. The Rise of Peer Production: Collegiality, Collaboration, and Collective Intelligence*

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Michael Hogan¹ 

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The Long Road to Knowledge Socialism

Now, you could say that our ordinary thought in society is incoherent – it is going in all sorts of directions, with thoughts conflicting and cancelling each other out. But if people were to think together in a coherent way, it would have tremendous power. (Bohm [n/d](#))

Deep in their bones, many people hold out hope for socialism. We hear the cry of the new generation: if we could only align our values and see our way to supporting one another with requisite variety and adaptive efficiency, the world would be a better place. Of course, this requires collective knowledge and collective action that is fit for purpose. The authors of this interesting book, *Knowledge Socialism. The Rise of Peer Production: Collegiality, Collaboration, and Collective Intelligence*, map out some important aspects of the problem space and potential solutions going forward. A clarification is introduced in Chapter 1:

Whereas knowledge capitalism focuses on the economics of knowledge, emphasising human capital development, intellectual property regimes, and efficiency and profit maximization, knowledge socialism shifts emphasis toward recognition that knowledge and its value are ultimately rooted in social relations (Peters and Besley [2006](#)). Knowledge socialism promotes the social-

✉ Michael Hogan
michael.hogan@nuigalway.ie

¹ School of Psychology, NUI, Galway, Ireland

ity of knowledge by providing mechanisms for a truly free exchange of ideas. (Peters et al. 2020: 6-7)

Designing, implementing, and sustaining systems supporting ‘truly free’ exchange dynamics is difficult, particularly in a world where people need to turn up to work every day in order to pay their bills. And it is not simply ‘free’ exchange that is called for but also free exchange dynamics that have a socialist ethos — democratically agreed upon. This implies some effort to reinforce a strong democratic infrastructure coupled with a culture that is fundamentally non-competitive and increasingly cooperative.

As many authors in this book note (e.g. Neilson 2020), the global dynamic we are operating in is increasingly competitive, with democracy threatened by a self-centred neoliberal culture that has been imposed upon citizens by those who seek personal wealth and power. We see increased commodification of everything including knowledge, and we see colonisation of democratic discourse by market individualism and enterprise society. Even education itself is threatened by reduced public funding, increased privatisation, and ideological colonisation. In order to counter these trends, we need a cosmopolitan democracy, says Neilson, that has national and transnational coherence and integrity — and perhaps, then, we can push back on many fronts, against many damaging trends, to a more cooperative and just and truly innovative open knowledge society. Currently, socialism in all its manifestations is struggling to survive.

Knowledge Socialism and System Operations

Academically, socialism emerges from and resonates most strongly with the humanities. It is a product of philosophy that rarely sits comfortably in any other discipline. Those working in the natural sciences may find socialism to be a curious and somewhat abstract idea, while those working across various schools of business and economics might wonder how to pay for it. The engineers might naturally take the design challenges of ‘socialism’ seriously, but they will also naturally seek more concrete specification of the problem and solution space, and key system requirements. Philosophically, the idea of socialism is rooted in the idealism of Karl Marx, who envisioned a transcendent movement of human relations beyond the dominance hierarchies of the animal kingdom, and beyond the rapacious appetites of the domineering capitalists who want to own everything and build upon their wealth, status, and power. Marx pointed to a system where people are fundamentally and collectively empowered — a system where people can confidently take control over the means of production and work hard to maintain their world systems collaboratively while distributing their resources in reasonably sustainable ways.

It is a big project that no engineering team has yet been able to specify in concrete and specific detail. The Cybersyn project¹ in Chile made a reasonable attempt in principle and even in practice, that is, before a CIA-backed military coup resulted in the destruction of the Cybersyn operations room. Since then, capitalism and imperialism and its various centres of power has further extended its global influence, and yet within an increasingly weak and dysfunctional democratic system, there still burns a strong flame of enlightenment that recognises the error of our ways and the corrupting influence of capitalism and imperialism. Assuming they can lead the way in reforming the democratic process, socialism may still have a chance.

But as John Morgan (2020: 327) notes, ‘socialist thought has been reluctant to state what a socialist society would look like and how it would work in practice, perhaps because Marx himself had little to say on the subject’. Modern world systems are different from the systems Salvador Allende was working with in the Cybersyn project in Chile in 1971, and again the engineers will be confused if they are not provided with concrete requirements for system design work. Other members of the academic community may offer little by way of assistance. For example, those in the school of business and economics may simply smile whimsically or frown indignantly; the natural scientists may simply return to their experiments when they identify the lack of precision in the process of socialist reform; and the transdisciplinary social scientists may grapple in the space between and perhaps tweet another shout-out before taking a jog by the river.

In reality, establishing coherence and shared purpose across the fields of philosophy, science, engineering, business, and economics is no joke, and a redesigned democratic and socialist system cannot operate in the absence of a coherent working model. In the idealist cycle of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, the details of any operational synthesis are critical. Certainly, one may disdain the unequal distribution of wealth and the global, creeping attachment of money to a growing set of valued exchanges, but no system was ever built by disdain alone, or by simply stating what should *not* be — one has to generate a precise operational description and simulation of what *will* be. One has to make friends with all the weird and wonderful characters from across all the academic disciplines — and across the whole of society — to iteratively design, evaluate, and redesign the operational systems supporting knowledge socialism and the truly free exchange of ideas.

Does the system achieve its purpose? Is the operation of the system sustainable? Are the power-hungry capitalists happy to join your club? Or can you at least bring them to heel and somehow satisfy their base instincts and their desire to experience ongoing *valuable incentives* without incurring too much pain, destruction, and death? This is part of your design challenge, and it is a design challenge that must

¹ The Cybersyn project involved the development of a decision support system to aid in the management of the Chilean economy. The system architecture was designed under the guidance of Stafford Beer, following principles of organisational cybernetics and his viable system model. It included a national network of factory-level telex machines linked to a mainframe computer, software to both monitor factor-level performance and model the national economy, and an operations room allowing data and models to be considered by a team tasked with making operational decisions (see Medina 2011).

factor in the dark side of our collective human nature in addition to the idealised better angels of our nature.

Knowledge socialism, in all its varied complexity — including communities of enquiry, peer production systems, creative labour, social innovation, digital universities, global civil societies, and collective intelligence assemblies — points to a sub-system that requires a more comprehensive and global operating environment we call a ‘socialist system’. At its core, the design of operations in this sub-system requires the knowledge and know-how to design and sustain a socialist system. The authors of this wide-ranging book recognise this — collectively, they understand that knowledge socialism in all its specific operational manifestations requires broader knowledge and know-how in relation to the design of social and political systems. The book provides a useful starting point, in part because the authors have sustained a conversation amongst themselves and a broader field of collaborators, and this conversation has advanced their collective knowledge (cf. Gibbons et al. 2020).

Furthermore, many of the authors have developed operational systems, including new epistemologies and methods for collective deliberation, which may indeed provide a new backbone for more advanced and powerful forms of democracy and integral operations across the humanities and social sciences (cf. Lévy 2020). All the authors have also participated in the operation of modern knowledge systems. As such, they have squared up honestly to the reality of implementing operations that approach the ideals of knowledge socialism. Problems at the political level and in the relations between the public and private sectors abound, but future trends also point to hopeful possibilities. For example, Petar Jandrić (2020) highlights the evolution of technologies and the emergence of increasingly distributed, digital technologies that may support not only advanced forms of adaptive learning but also the emergence of a new understanding and operational realisation of the university as a public good. Jandrić examines Woolf University² as an innovation that moves in this direction, but notes that while technological affordances for knowledge socialism are increasingly advanced, its theory and political economy are not robust and Woolf University and similar innovations are ‘ripe for another round of capitalist appropriation’ (Jandrić 2020: 93).

Outside of some well-established and reasonably transparent systems (e.g. peer production systems), the operational manifestations of knowledge socialism are somewhat fuzzy and very much in their infancy — and it remains unclear how the political economy might evolve to support greater maturity, or if the mature capitalists will allow emerging systems of knowledge socialism to survive past infancy. Some of the fuzziness derives from the diversity of language used to describe systems — knowledge cultures, communities of enquiry, digital universities, creative labour, social innovation, global civil societies, and collective intelligence — many of which present themselves on the TED talk circuit with an admixture of religious zeal, pre-teen vague abstractions, and limited coherence and consensus in their operational specification. Even in opposition to market capitalism, managerialism, neo-liberalism, and ongoing commodifications of the knowledge economy, the precise

² See <https://woolf.university/>. Accessed 26 March 2021.

target of opposition is rarely agreed amongst the socialists and this acts as a barrier to consensus-based system design thinking amongst the knowledge socialists. Having said that, by grappling with the subtle complexity in the history and evolution of socialist thinking (e.g. Fuller 2020) and by outlining some of the key design challenges (e.g. Morgan 2020), this book offers an important contribution to a slowly maturing field of enquiry and practice.

Advancing Dialogue and Design

Although still in an early stage of piloting, it is inspiring to read about the potential for collaboration to take place using a new bespoke language for reflection and exchange, as part of the emerging digital humanities and collective intelligence movement (Lévy 2020). The book is also valuable as it allows the knowledge socialists to reflect on the deeper truth that ‘the human is not opposed to capital’, but rather the human ‘is whatever manages to recover and enhance its value by shifting its shape in a dynamic market’ (Fuller 2020: 132). This reminds us that knowledge socialism and collective intelligence, whether it plays out in the digital humanities or elsewhere, is always going to involve some hard work in our efforts to generate something valuable in collaborative groups.

This hard work needs to be rewarding and rewarded for the human to recognise and appreciate its value. In this context, this book offers a great diversity of perspectives as regards how we might move together in a positive direction. For example, it is valuable to read about how the practice of art can help us to understand knowledge under capital and develop new perspectives on knowledge exchange (Bothwell and Stewart 2020). And the book prompts those of us working in universities to think further about how universities might be transformed into new systems that work ‘internally and externally, experimenting in cooperatives of knowledge production, consumption and dissemination, and with differing kinds of social relationships’ (Barnett 2020: 233).

Much like the New Green Deal has excited the capitalists into recognising the value and importance of sustainability as a core system goal — potentially allowing humans to recover from past failures and enhance value by shifting shape in a dynamic market — it is also motivating to envision how a confluence of trends (Jandrić 2020; Peters 2020) may further prompt the capitalists to recognise the value and importance of open knowledge. In this context, the capitalist may place to the side the accumulation of wealth and power as their primary goal and join cooperatively and democratically with the poor, the disempowered, the abused, and the uneducated to design radically new open knowledge systems that transform social relations and empower the use of our collective knowledge for the greater public good — placing as their primary goal the well-being and sustainability of the living system itself.

What we need to do going forward is to continue the dialogue that has been started in this excellent and interesting book, transform the ordinary thought in society — currently going in all sorts of directions, with thoughts conflicting and

cancelling each other out — and help people to think together in a coherent way about the real benefits of open knowledge and the constructive practices supporting open knowledge exchange. If we could do this, we would experience the tremendous power and potential that is latent in the core and inspired ideal of knowledge socialism.

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