

## Honouring the Psychological Commons: Peer to Peer Networks and Post-Professional Psychopractice

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As the Regulation of the psychological therapies in the UK moves towards an endgame, elpnosis attention has turned from resisting the Health Professions Council's [HPC] codification of the ineffable strands of working with the human condition, to re-stating, exploring and developing what we value and trust.

Foremost among this for elpnosis has long been the notion of a 'psychological commons', an abundance of psychological knowledge and practice that has been more or less freely available for decades.

'Psychological commons' refers to a psychological space where people can find support for enquiries into their particular experience of the human condition. It is a space informed but not dominated by the hundreds of thousands of articles, journals, books, tapes, cd's and DVDs about psychology, the hundreds of varieties of psycho-practice, plus survivor groups, user groups, help lines, self-help manuals, twelve step programs, Balint groups, infant massage, 5 rhythms dancing, agony aunts, radio chat programmes, meditation, co-counselling, re-evaluation counselling and so on.

Aided and abetted by the confident codification of the HPC, the fiefdoms and clans of the mainstream accrediting bodies seek to consolidate their capture of sections of this commons, and in a re-iteration of similar historical appropriations, enclose them in state endorsed gated communities. Psychology is already captured and the HPC have counselling and psychology in their sights.

elpnosis has been very active in defending the psychological commons from these developments, a task in which hundreds, even thousands of practitioners are engaged. Attention here now turns to how the psychological commons might be supported and enhanced – helped to flourish as an entity in its own right.

If we ask what a post-professional practice that honours the psychological commons would entail, the answer seems to require a paradigm shift. A move which, while not denying the value of the schools of psychological knowhow, seeks to embrace mutuality and community; the generation of peer to peer cultures structured in ways that support the generation/development/keeping open access to those aspects of the psychological commons currently under threat, and out of which a post-professional practice could be born.

Happily such a tradition exists in what has become known as the peer to peer [P2P] movement, a well-established world-wide cultural tradition of [thousands of such entities](#). P2P stands for an international network of networks built around the idea of holding open the creation and maintenance of commons of many kinds, not least the planetary one.

Peer to peer forms of occupational relating are familiar to Independent Practitioner Network [IPN] participants but this article, while entirely supportive of IPN as a worked example of P2P, is not a selling document for it. I intend a review of some of the key elements of the P2P tradition, especially the commons notion, which might be attractive to practitioners and others who may adopt principled non-compliance with HPC. In what follows I draw extensively on an [introduction to the P2P movement](#) by one of the people who have been

leaders in identifying and promoting it, Michel Bauwens.

P2P is a label that describes the emergence of a form of human network based organization that rests on the free participation of participants who are developing or producing common resources or services where money is not a key motivating factor and which is not organized through hierarchical command and control. It is a mode of knowledge exchange and collective learning that is hugely supported by the internet. Michel Bauwens' definition runs like this:

... It is a specific form of relational dynamic, is based on the assumed equipotency of its participants, organized through the free cooperation of equals in view of the performance of a common task, for the creation of a common good. Equipotency means that there is no prior formal filtering for participation, but rather that it is the immediate practice of cooperation which determines the expertise and level of participation. It does not deny 'authority', but only fixed forced hierarchy, and therefore accepts authority based on expertise, initiation of the project, etc... 2.1

P2P has many historical antecedents but has been hugely amplified by the information abundance of the internet and digital culture generally.

Hierarchy only works with scarcity, and in a situation where the control of scarce resources determines the end result of the zero-sum power games being conducted. In a situation of abundance, centralized nodes cannot possibly cope. Information, I probably do not need to remind the reader of this, is different from material goods, in that its sharing does not diminish its value, but on the contrary augments it. 2.2

Bauwens suggests that P2P be seen as a part of a third phase of capitalism, 'cognitive capitalism', where immaterial processes are more important economically than the production of goods. Where 'information as property' become a central asset.

This is not to posit some emerging techutopia, more to hold on to the downside of technical 'advances' of recent decades that P2P networks have the capacity to contradict.

Efficiency and productivity thinking has taken over the sphere of intimacy. There has been a dramatic destruction of social knowledge and skill, of autonomous cultures, and this type of knowledge has been 'appropriated' by the system of capital, and re-sold to us as commodities. Think of paid-for online dating, as a symptom of the loss of skill in dating, as one example. 2.3.A

Bauwens argues that peer to peer be understood as a densely interconnected network of affinity-based P2P networks participating in and generating a variety of 'commons'. These have previously existed, in the tribal eras, before the division of labour, the advent of property and class divisions.

However it is important not see P2P as a technology artifact, it appears to be an example of a profound shift in our understanding of human nature from dominance as natural and inevitable, to cooperation, community and mutuality. A new politics deriving from less authoritarian child-care threaded through the old. The technology abundance of the internet enables a huge amplification of what had previously been local and minority perceptions.

Why is P2P important? It marks an emerging cultural shift in how work is organized. Bauwens quotes Himanen:

time is not rigidly separated into work and non-work; intensive work periods are followed by extensive leave taking, the latter necessary for intellectual and creative renewal; there is a logic of self-unfolding at work, workers look for projects at which they feel energized and that expands their learning and experience in desired directions; participation is voluntary; learning is informal and continuous; the value of pleasure and play are crucial; the project has to have social value and be of use to a wider community; there is total transparency, no secrets; there is an ethic that values activity and caring; creativity, the continuous surpassing of oneself in solving problems and creating new use value, is paramount. 3.1

Because P2P is founded on abundance, especially informational abundance, there is every reason to suppose that it can be extended into any field where there is perceived abundance. Psychological knowledge would be one such field. However scarcity can be an obstacle.

So far as there appears to be scarcity, Bauwens reminds us that it is often a social construction.

when [nature] was transformed into land that counted as property, land became scarce and a resource to be fought for. The enclosures movement in England was designed to be precisely that. Out of land, previously plentiful resources were taken, and transformed into the form of property known as capital. Capital became scarce and to be fought for. 3.2.A

P2P networks provide massive support for a commons of psychological knowhow that isn't coded, Institutionalized and commodified.

Knowledge has historically often been guarded as a component of power wrapped in secrecy, in Guilds, a bible in Latin, and tight monopolies of interpretation of sacred texts. As Bauwens argues, knowledge then was obtained through imitation and initiation. The encyclopedia movement brought knowledge into view as a public resource and as Foucault has indicated, knowledge began to be regulated by coding and rules through which we can tell what is or is not valid. As examples Bauwens gives: academic peer review, the scientific method, and universities, to which could be added psychiatry and the medical model of human functioning.

He continues:

...peer to peer appears as a radical shift. In the new emergent practices of knowledge exchange, equipotency is assumed from the start. There are no formal rules to engage in participation (unlike academic peer review, where formal degrees are required). Validation is a communal intersubjective process. If there are formal rules, they have to be accepted by the community, and they are ad hoc for particular projects. There is a move away from public categorization, such as the bibliographic formats (Dewey, UDC, etc..) to informal communal 'tagging', what some people have termed folksonomies. In blogging, news and commentary are democratized and open to any participant, and it is the reputation of trustworthiness, acquired over time, by the individual in question, which will lead to the viral diffusion of particular 'memes'. Power and influence are determined by the quality of the contribution, and have to be accepted and constantly renewed by the community of participants. All this can be termed the de-formalization of knowledge. 3.4.C

Building on earlier history, cognitive capitalism extends the commodifying of everything. P2P is a counter reaction to its tendency to privatize education, love etc., to the extent to which any immaterial process can be sold as a commodity.

With 'commons-based peer production' or P2Pbased knowledge exchange more generally, the production does not result in commodities sold to consumers, but in use value made for users. 3.4.C

He might have added for and with users. This reverses the usual process of how information is shared in hierarchical social systems

Participation is assumed, and non-participation has to be justified. Information sharing, the public good status of your information, is assumed, and it is secrecy which has to be justified. 3.4.D

P2P participation creates a 'commons' - from each according to his or her abilities to each according to her or his needs - but who, if anyone, gets to rule the commons? Another way of posing the question is to ask who is creating or sustaining scarcity? i.e. who is claiming ownership of information and its gate-keeping and diffusion, and to challenge this and develop workarounds.

The network structures of P2P allow for fluidity and avoidance of locked adversarial positions, ad hoc temporary coalitions respond to local or urgent priorities. This is supported by adoption/emergence of a paradigm of non-representationality, no-one speaks for the group or for anyone else, or the movement, only in their own name.

P2P may offer some specific alternatives to present institutions, what is more important is that as a culture it features the creation of open processes of governance not determined by the power politics and vested interests of dominant elites. Its institutions are determined by diverse autonomous constituencies of people and echo their values and wishes for the future.

Bauwens draws attention to a feature of P2P, the phenomena of 'coordinations'. By this he refers to coalitions often of very diverse groupings based on non-representationality, no one is elected to represent the group, anyone can participate and decisions are based on consensus, with participants retaining freedom of action. A very potent contradiction of traditional political styles.

P2P political strategies include refusing to enemise opposition; routing round obstacles, and moving to create real time alternative practices that refuse consent and legitimation to oppressive agendas. Bauwens quotes Miguel Benasayag who argues:

...that 'to resist is to create', and that political struggle is essentially about the construction of alternatives, here and now. Current practice has to reflect the desired future, and has to emerge, not from the 'sad passions' of hate and anger, but from the joys of producing a commons. 4.1.C

That P2P is contentious, not least for cultures based on dominance and scarcity goes without saying. The main challenge would seem to be that the construction of information commons would be a task which provides a serious challenge to for-profit firms who already have, or seek, the appropriation of knowledge through which they can convert information into a commodity. And of course regulators.

Bauwens puts this very well:

In modernity, the concept is that autonomous individuals cannot create a peaceful order, and therefore they defer their power to a sovereign, whether it be the king of the nation. In becoming a people, they become a 'collective individual'. They lose out as individuals, while the unified people or nation behaves 'as if' it was an individual, i.e.

with ambition for power. It is 'transcendent' vis a vis its parts. In non-representationality however, nothing of the sort is given away. This means that the collective hereby created, is not a 'collective individual', it cannot act with ambition apart from its members. The genius of the protocols devised in peer to peer initiatives, is that they avoid the creation of a collective individual with agency. Instead, it is the communion of the collective which filters value. The ethical implication is important as well. Not having given anything up of their full power, the participants in fact voluntarily take up the concern not only for the whole in terms of the project, but for the social field in which its operates. 4.2.A

There are two ways of describing the conditions for this to work, one is the absence of duress, coercion and the use or threat of force, and secondly it requires a considerable degree of personal and interpersonal freedom.

P2P is predicated on the maximum freedom. The freedom to join and participate, to fully express oneself and one's potential, the freedom to change course at any point in time, the freedom to quit. Within the common projects, freedom is constrained through communal validation and consensus (i.e. the freedom of others). But individuals can always leave, fork to a new project, create their own. The challenge is to find affinities, to create a common sphere with at least a few others and to create effective use value. Unlike in representative democracy, it is not a model based on a majority imposing its will on a minority. 4.2.B

From this it will be clear that power is a continuing preoccupation of P2P processes and that it points to new forms of power which Kumon describes as a Wisdom Game:

In order to have influence, one must give quality knowledge away, and thus build reputation, through the demonstration of one's 'Wisdom'. The more one shares, the more this material is used by others, the higher one's reputation, the bigger one's influence. This process is true for individuals within groups, and for the process among groups, thus creating a hierarchy of influence amongst networks. But as I have argued, in a true P2P environment, this process is flexible and permanently reversible. 4.3

Two, new to me, phrases have been important for understanding P2P, one is 'Multitude' as a way of referring to who might participate, and 'Commons' what is created.

The collective is no longer the local 'wholistic' and 'oppressive' community, and it is no longer the contractually based society with its institutions, now also seen as oppressive. The new commons is not a unified and transcendent collective individual, but a collection of large number of singular projects, constituting a multitude. 6.1.A

I feel it is important to keep in mind like other acronyms, 'P2P' tends to solidify what is necessarily a flux of feeling, concepts, percepts and proposals for action:

Imagine a successful meeting of minds: individual ideas are confronted, but also changed in the process, through the free association born of the encounter with other intelligences. Thus eventually a common idea emerges, that has integrated the differences, not subsumed them. The participants do not feel they have made concessions or compromises, but feel that the new common integration is based on their ideas. There has been no minority, which has succumbed to the majority. There has been no 'representation', or loss of difference. Such is the true process of peer to peer. 6.1.A

We would be remiss not to notice that P2P plays a major industrial role in sustaining cognitive capitalism, for instance in the software industries, while being highly contradictory of its ethos. However this paradox that has not prevented its flourishing. Bauwens invites us to seek out and recognize the commonality of P2P exponents and build bridges of cooperation and understanding with them. Secondly, along with as he suggests, “furiously” building the commons, he remarks that:

Adopting a network sociality and building dense interconnections as we participate in knowledge creation and exchange is enormously politically significant. By feeding our immaterial and spiritual needs outside of the consumption system, we can stop the logic which is destroying our ecosphere.. The present system may not like opposition, but even more does it fear indifference, because it can feed on the energy of strife, but starts dying when it is shunted.

Today, the new ethic says that 'to resist is in the first place to create'. The world we want is the world we are creating through our cooperative P2P ethos, it is visible in what we do today, not an utopian creation for the future. Building the commons has a crucial ingredient: the building of a dense alternative media network, for permanent and collective self-education in human culture, away from the mass-consumption model promoted by the corporate media. 7.1.D

What does P2P offer practitioners who may feel unable or unwilling to be compliant with the Health Professions Council?

Becoming participants in IPN provides an immediate and welcoming point of entry to the P2P paradigm however, in keeping with the P2P ethos, any suggestion here that it is the only way to go would be out of place. My intention has been to stimulate your creative juices in the hope and expectation that other forms of peer to peer will emerge in the psychological commons.

There will perhaps need to be 'transition' groups that acknowledge how deeply as practitioners we are embedded in the psychological fiefdoms out of which the psychological therapies grew. And perhaps there will be a return to decades old strands of the psychological commons that already integrate client/practitioner relations, for example 'co-counselling'. And is it too much to hope that there will also be new and presently unimagined forms of peer to peer accountability that also include client participation.

That said, P2P does open a window on the range and value of choices around how we pursue 'civic accountability' 'alternative professional accountability' or 'compliance with the HPC'. As elpnosis has long argued in different terms, until recently most of the choices have been determined by the generation of scarcity; if we choose to take it, abundance is a viable option.

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There is another article introducing P2P The Political Economy of Peer Production [here](#).

There is another review of the Michel Bauwens original article [here](#).