



Group Assembly Process (GAP) - Stirring Paper

„Let's be realistic, let's try the impossible.“ Degrowth needs a different economy!

Gunter Kramp

The capitalist economy has an inherent need to grow which is deeply rooted in the system of the exchange of equivalents. But growth is not unavoidable. Economy can be thought differently: as a commons-based and commons producing peer economy. This is not a utopian but, in it's early stages, already reality.

A lot of texts deal with the negative consequences of a rigid orientation towards economic growth. Ever since the 1972 report "The limits to growth"ⁱ it is widely known that continuous economic growth is incompatible with a limited world. In addition, the notion that economic growth could be uncoupled from the use of resources has been disprovedⁱⁱ. Still almost all political agents rely on economic growth as the only possible way forward. This is neither coincidence nor bad-will.

„we cannot convince capitalism to stop growing, just as we cannot convince a human to stop breathing. All attempts to make capitalism ‚green‘ or ‚ecological‘ are bound to be futile because the essence of this system is permanent growth“ⁱⁱⁱ [Murray Bookchin^{iv}]

We are facing an increasing resource scarcity and an increasingly rapid destruction of the foundations of our livelihood. At the same time there is a crisis of over-production and sales: too many products are placed on a market with too little purchase power and demand. The wealth of the world concentrates with fewer and fewer people while the majority of the earth's population is denied access to the means for a dignified life; similar to a game of ‚Monopoly‘ where the money always accumulates in ‚Picadilly‘^v. The game would have been long over had the banks not provided fresh money time and again. The results are as logical as they are visible^{vi}: mass unemployment, less buying power – a downward spiral. Yet we still await a change in thought. Crisis' are as old as capitalism and as ever we employ the usual measures to react to them: outward expansion of the system, conversion of not-yet-capitalised areas of living into value added ones, intensified exploitation of people and nature, destruction of value in speculation bubbles or wars.

However the backdrop of the economic crisis would be a cause to joy in a sensible economic system: with too little work we can produce too much! We could work less and use less resources while living better!

The question thus arises: Why have all attempts to develop political and economic alternatives mainly led to a merely modernised?

This, in my opinion, is due to the fact that nearly all movements for change, whether they see revolution, reforms or alternative economy as the adequate means, tend to ignore a decisive core of the system: the exchange of goods. Especially in the global north it is true: we cannot live without buying and selling, and therefore we take the exchange of goods for granted. A world without an exchange of goods appears to be unthinkable to us, even though the omnipresence of this exchange⁷ is not an everlasting fact, but made by society, a property of our economic system.

The acceptance of this commodity fetish^{vii} has consequences. Even if we don't see the causes, we still have to face the consequences. Some of those we can easily see in the critical examination of just one single exchange:

<p>from the buyer's perspective: good₁ → money → good₂</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) I have a need for goods₂ 2) I have to sell other goods₁ in order to buy 3) In lack anything else to sell I have to sell my work power 4) Those who don't have can't buy! 5) Needs don't matter, only demand on the market counts
<p>from the seller's perspective: money → goods → money'</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) aim of activities: profit in money 2) no interest in the goods is necessary 3) no interest in (long-term) usability is needed 4) scarcity is essential because otherwise money' > money isn't valid

Without deeper examination it is obvious that we are dealing with an economic system which doesn't serve to fulfil human needs but rather serves the abstract goal of capital propagation in a never ending circle of 'money – goods – more money'^{viii}. Should mankind survive this system it will one day appear as absurd as the concept of a divine monarchy.

More problems become apparent when we look at the entire 'value-added chain'^{ix}.

Investment in production requires credit because we have to produce before we can sell. In capitalism credit is only available with interest^x. In order to pay this return on capital we need growth in society as a whole^{xi}. In a system based on the production of goods there is no sufficient motivation to produce without private property^{xii}, as the experience of „real socialist“ states shows. In addition private property in the form of land and mineral resources^{xiii} is required to backup credit, although these goods have never been produced by humans. For a good reason capitalism once began by privatising^{xiv} land and property, the "original accumulation".

Which possible alternatives result from this? Alternative structures that don't move away

from the exchange of equivalents are at great risk of assimilation into capitalism! The division between consumers and producers implies a division between capital and workers. This even applies when the workers and the owners of capital are one and the same. The split is then right through these people^{xv}. Ownership of the means of production doesn't automatically change the principle of outward competition. As a result, sooner or later this competition wins over inward relationships as well. This is at the heart of the Oppenheim law of transformation, formulated by Franz Oppenheimer as early as 1896: »it is rare for a production cooperative to reach its full blossom. And when it does, it stops being a production cooperative«^{xvi}. At that point it becomes more profitable for the members to turn into quasi-shareholders with employees instead of accepting new members into the cooperative. Sadly this insight has been misinterpreted to mean that the legal form of the cooperative is the problem. It was overlooked that in fact it results from the exchange of goods in a market wrought by competition. Hence alternative businesses of the 80s could not but repeat the mistakes of the past: the dream of autonomy at work turned into individualism and precariousness^{xvii}. Karl Marx had already acknowledged that »it is a wish as pious as it is stupid that exchange value would not develop into capital, nor the work producing this value into wage labour.«^{xviii} But being a thinker strongly shaped by the authoritarian spirit of his time he wasn't able to develop better alternatives. On the contrary, in the first international association of workers he contributed decisively to marginalising those who took his demand " *to overthrow all conditions in which man is a debased, enslaved, neglected, contemptible being* " ^{xix} too literally. The consequences are well known.

What next, TINA^{xx}?

Alternatives are available! These are based on a fundamentally new (or rather very old?^{xxi}) mode of production – the commons-based peer economy^{xxii}. This isn't just a concept or a utopian dream, but in its seminal state peer production is a practise which is in part already existing the world over. Yochai Benkler coined the term in 2006 when he described the commons-based peer production in the field of knowledge and software. Peer production is a way of production which differs fundamentally from market economy (,capitalism') as well as planned economy (,real socialism'). It can basically be applied to all of societal (re)production. Rather than being merely an addition to capitalism it provides an alternative. A generalised use of this mode of production throughout the whole of society, that is the economic system, is called peer economy

How does peer production work?

The basic principle of peer production can be summed up in the slogan: "*contribute instead of exchange*"^{xxiii}. Instead of buying products as consumers people join projects which supply them with the things they need. In these projects all members involved contribute towards the shared goal and share the effort to reach it according to rules freely chosen by the group. It is essential that this balances out in way that all the contributions needed for success are made. The ideal is that: "*everyone contributes what they can and want, and take what they need*". Restrictions in use and fees are only introduced wherever the members found them to be unavoidable. As the basic principle is "*share what you can*", knowledge and

software are made accessible freely.

Peer production is based on free cooperation^{xxiv} rather than coercion^{xxv}. People voluntarily get together in projects in order to organise the fulfillment of their needs. In these projects no-one can order others to do something, and no-one is forced to obey. Everyone can at any time connect their cooperation in the project to conditions or end it altogether. For this to become real, all persons involved must be able to join or leave the cooperation at similar and reasonable costs^{xxvi}. Decision making in peer production projects usually follows ‚consent‘ rather than majority or consensus principles. There are hardly any elections or votes in the usual sense, but many discussions open to all who are interested in order to find solutions. Often there are "maintainers", that is coordinators, instead of bosses. While in theory these can take decisions for the whole project they will in reality only do so in a way that will maintain the members' cooperation because the implementation depends on their voluntary efforts. But many times a collective decision isn't even necessary. Things are then regulated/ modulated by stigmergy^{xxvii} and independent choices of those directly involved.

Properties of a peer economy	
<p>sufficient</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. oriented towards needs not profit 2. no creation of need = unnecessary production avoided 3. usage instead of ownership ->re-use 4. requires no growth! 	<p>ecological and economic</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. efficient and resilient 6. optimal satisfaction of needs 7. no scarcity needed = surplus is used 8. cost covered instead of profit 9. priority of regional cooperation
<p>socially inklusive</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. non-monetary contributions welcome 11. based on needs, not on demand 12. gains in efficiency reduce effort/ input by all instead of creating unemployment 13. promoting cooperation instead of competition 14. no upward re-distribution 	<p>(directly) democratic</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 15. central decision-making is mostly redundant 16. everyone can participate, no-one can be forced to take part 17. free information instead of business secrets 18. economic activity free of domination instead of a ‚halved democracy‘ (Ulrich Beck)

Peer production projects are based on commons, that is on resources which are used and administered by a community. These resources as well as the products of each project are meaningful only in terms of possession of something which is used, and not in terms of ownership of things which can be sold. In a society based on private property the principle „commons instead of property“ can be secured by ‚copyleft‘^{xxviii} and/or neutralising of capital^{xxix}. In peer production the usual division between production and reproduction is dropped as the mode of organising the activities is similar, whether we produce goods or,

for example, take care of people. All activities needed by humans are structurally defined to be of equal importance. Thus the economic foundation of patriarchal hegemony becomes insignificant, as does the foundation of economic exclusion on the basis of other differences such as nationality, skin colour etc.

Peer production is at the same time compatible to capitalism and an opposing model. Like a seed in the ground, peer economy can grow out of the old system without necessarily anticipating everything in the seedling that the fully grown tree will contain. Hence it is possible to experience the beginnings of the new economy here and today.

Existing projects

The number of peer production projects is growing fast, so a complete oversight is no longer possible. The best known are probably the projects in the area of free knowledge and software^{xxx}. Lesser known but equally interesting are those dealing with material production and providing services. They counter claims that peer production is only viable for goods which can be copied at negligible costs^{xxxi}.

In this text I can only mention shortly 'Premium Cola' with their „open source operating system for companies“, the borrow shop *Leila in Berlin, open workshop spaces, hacker spaces und fablabs; and community supported agriculture (CSA) which has spread widely worldwide^{xxxii}. These individual projects manage to a different degree to comply to the principle „*contribute instead of exchange*“. But they all have in common that people consciously cooperate in these projects in order to fulfil their needs^{xxxiii} instead of aiming to sell goods to make profits. Wolfgang Stränz, one of the active members of the CSA-group 'Solawi Buschberghof', phrases this nicely: „*This company is unprofitable, and has been so successfully for more than 25 years*“. In the field of habitation the tenement syndicate deserves special mentioning. By means of a creative legal construct it takes buildings off the housing market permanently and thus turns them into commons. The inhabitants can then decide fairly freely on the use and no-one can sell these houses.

In both types of projects, material and immaterial, the output is no longer a sellable good: food produced in the CSA is simply distributed directly to the members. Whatever they don't want to use up is given away for free. This way market prices become irrelevant. Apart from these existing projects there are a number of ideas or projects in their conceptual phase, e.g. Sol.E, a project which aims for a decentralised regenerative energy supply.

Outlook

We can find examples for projects based on peer production for almost all human needs, and they often find imitators quite quickly. As soon as there are enough basic projects in one area it is obvious for them to cooperate with one another in order to produce their preliminary products and means of production. In this way the platform 'Open Source

Ecology' already works with projects all over the world to enable a self-organised production of the machinery and tools most needed for our civilisation. People who would fulfill a greater part of their human needs through peer production could then experience how a world without the exchange of goods would look like. If the regional projects needed for this also cooperated, the exchange of goods could be pushed back even further^{xxxiv}.

Such an idea of a different economy^{xxxv} and the real projects of solidarity-based economy could provide the foundation for political battles on preserving our livelihood, a good life and on overcoming patriarchal gender relations.

- i [Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows, Jørgen Randers & William W. Behrens III: Die Grenzen des Wachstums.](#) Dt. von Hans-Dieter Heck. Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft, Stuttgart 1972 Kurzdarstellung siehe http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Die_Grenzen_des_Wachstums
- ii see also: Nico Paech z.B.: *Einführung in die Postwachstumsökonomik* <http://www.wifo-hh.de/veranstaltungen/Klima091202/paech.pdf>
- iii Eine anschauliche Begründung dafür wieso das so sein muss, bietet Hans Christoph Binswangers Darstellung der Wachstumsspirale z.B. unter <http://www.postwachstumsoekonomie.org/Binswanger-Vortrag-OL.pdf>
- iv Übersetzung d. Verfassers: „Capitalism can no more be "persuaded" to limit growth than a human being can be "persuaded" to stop breathing. Attempts to "green" capitalism, to make it "ecological", are doomed by the very nature of the system as a system of endless growth.“
Murray Bookchin: *Remaking Society*, 1990 zit. nach <http://www.marxists.org/archive/bookchin/>
- v Besonders eindrucksvoll zeigt das *therules.org: Global Wealth Inequality - What you never knew you never knew* <http://www.therules.org/>
- vi Das ist im Süden und Osten Europas gerade besonders sichtbar. Andere Länder wie China bilden hingegen eher den Raum für die Krisenbearbeitung durch Expansion, dementsprechend wächst dort die Wirtschaft.
- vii In his main work *Das Kapital* (1867) Karl Marx coins the term ‚commodity fetish‘ to name the quasi-religious material relationship to products which are made by man in capitalist production. The commodity fetish consists in the fact that products are equalled to being goods with a value as part of their material properties while in fact ‚goods‘ and ‚value‘ are socially constructed. See also <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Warenfetisch>
- viii Genau genommen kommt es hier nicht auf das Geld sondern auf den Wert an. Dementsprechend beeinflussen Änderungen am Geld- und Finanzsystem nur Symptome. Wachstum kann damit vielleicht gesteigert oder gebremst werden, nicht jedoch verhindert.
- ix vgl. Andreas Exner: *Mythos Geld-Ein Diskussionsanstoß in 5 Akten in Streifzüge* 54/2012. <http://www.streifzuege.org/2012/mythos-geld-ein-diskussionsanstoss-in-5-akten>
- x bzw. Gewinnbeteiligung bei Aktien oder bei Islamic Banking, was aber im Endeffekt und Durchschnitt auf´s gleiche herauskommt.
- xi Dies ist ein großer Teil des stattfindenden Wachstums. Darüber hinaus gibt es natürlich auch das Wirtschaftswachstum das durch ein Wachstum der Bevölkerung erzeugt wird. Bei diesem sind wiederum Armut und Missachtung von Frauenrechten entscheidende Faktoren, die ebenfalls eng mit dem Wirtschaftssystem zusammenhängen.
- xii In der Warenproduktion ist den Menschen die Produktivität ihrer Arbeit tendenziell egal, Motivation sind vor allem Konsum und Eigentumsmehrung
- xiii In *Rolf Peter Sieferle: Alternativen der Industrialisierung?* beschreibt der Historiker, dass sich der Kapitalismus bzw. die Industrialisierung nur dort entwickeln konnte wo Kohle erlaubte die Grenzen einer nachhaltigen Energieversorgung zu durchbrechen. Sonst wäre der Wachstumspfad schon früh an der Grenze der lokal vorhandenen Ressourcen gescheitert.
- xiv privat kommt übrigens vom lateinischen *privare* = berauben.
- xv Als Sparer*in erwarten sie Zinsen, als Arbeitende leiden sie unter dem Druck diese zu erwirtschaften. In der Produktionsgenossenschaft führt das zu dem von Oppenheimer beschriebenen Effekt, dass aus Genossen Aktionäre werden - der Widerspruch wird externalisiert.
- xvi *Franz Oppenheimer: Die Siedlungsgenossenschaft. Versuch einer positiven Überwindung des Kommunismus durch Lösung des Genossenschaftsproblems und der Agrarfrage.* 1. Aufl. Duncker & Humblot, Leipzig 1896. S. 45.
- xvii *Arnd Neumann: Kleine geile Firmen - Alternativprojekte zwischen Revolte und Management*, Edition Nautilus, 2008.
- xviii *Karl Marx: Grundrisse zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie, MEW 42, S.189.*
- xix *Karl Marx: Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie. Einleitung, MEW 1, S.385.*
- xx TINA ist ein Akronym und steht für englisch *there is no alternative* dt. ‚Es gibt keine Alternative‘ <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/TINA-Prinzip>
- xxi Diese Produktionsweise es gibt vermutlich schon sehr lange in der Geschichte der Menschheit, sie wurde nur durch den Kapitalismus verdrängt. Bei Widerstandsbewegungen an der wenig durchkapitalisierten Peripherie wie z.B. bei den Zapatistas ist den Menschen daher sehr viel klarer wie sie ohne Kapitalismus leben könnten.
- xxii Der alternativ dazu vorgeschlagene Begriff *Commons creating Peer Economy* macht stark, dass nicht nur die Basis der Produktion sondern auch die Produkte Commons und keine Waren sein sollen. Andere übliche Begriffe sind *Peer Commony*, *Ecomony* oder auch *Commonismus*. Ein deutschsprachiger Begriff fehlt bisher, vermutlich weil *Peers* = Menschen die auf Augenhöhe kooperieren nicht übersetzbar ist.
- xxiii *Christian Siefkes: Beitragen statt tauschen - Materielle Produktion nach dem Modell Freier Software*, AG SPAK Bücher, Neu-Ulm <http://peerconomy.org/text/peer-oekonomie.pdf>
- xxiv *Christoph Spehr: Gleicher als Andere. Eine Grundlegung der Freien Kooperation.* Karl Dietz Verlag Berlin, 2003 www.rosalux.de/fileadmin/rls_uploads/pdfs/texte9.pdf
- xxv mit Zwang ist hier nicht nur direkte, sichtbare Herrschaft sondern auch strukturelle Zwänge z.B. ökonomische gemeint

- ^{xxvi} Bei Projekten im Bereich freier Software ist das z.B. der Fall, alle können jederzeit sich vom Projekt abspalten und ein eigenes Projekt gründen. Das Wissen im Projekt, der Quellcode, ist allen zugänglich, niemand kann von der Nutzung ausgeschlossen werden. Ganz anders ist die Lage in einem üblichen kapitalistischen Unternehmen: Es kann zwar jeder kündigen, aber alles Wissen, Kontakte und Produktionsmitteln bleiben beim Unternehmen.
- ^{xxvii} Kommunikation und Selbstorganisation durch Hinterlassen von Zeichen - Ein bekanntes Beispiel dafür sind die „roten Links“ bei Wikipedia, welche auf einen fehlenden Artikel hinweisen.
- ^{xxviii} <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Copyleft>
- ^{xxix} näheres siehe Michael Neuling: Rechtsformen für alternative Betriebe
http://www.kj.nomos.de/fileadmin/kj/doc/1986/19863Neuling_S_309.pdf
- ^{xxx} Beispiele für Freie Software sind GNU/Linux, Libre Office und VLC. Beispiele für freies Wissen Wikipedia, und andere Wikimedia Projekte, Open Access, creative commons und die Khan Academy
- ^{xxxi} Üblicherweise als „Güter geringer Ausschließlichkeit“ bezeichnet
- ^{xxxii} auch CSA (community supported agriculture) genannt
- ^{xxxiii} vgl. Jan Henrik Crop: Was ist eigentlich „solidarisch“ an der „Solidarischen Landwirtschaft“?
<http://keimform.de/2013/was-ist-eigentlich-solidarisch-an-der-solidarischen-landwirtschaft/>
- ^{xxxiv} Um es vorstellbarer zu machen: Angenommen es gäbe in einem Ort ein Fahrradwerkstattkollektiv, eine Solawi und Hausprojekte. Dann könnten die Gärtnerinnen der Solawi in den Hausprojekten wohnen, das Fahrradkollektiv für beide anderen Projekte Räder bereitstellen und die Solawi alle mit Lebensmitteln versorgen. Statt die bei einem einzelnen Projekt notwendigen monetären Beiträge gegenseitig zu zahlen können die Projekte untereinander auch einfach auf die Beiträge verzichten. Dabei kommt es nicht drauf an dass die Beiträge sich exakt aufheben, denn sie sind ja ohnehin nach Selbsteinschätzung. Es kommt nur darauf an, dass es sich für alle Beteiligten gerecht anfühlt. Um die entsprechenden Beträge vermindern sich die Kosten der jeweiligen Projekte. Ich nenne das das Kürzungstheorem der Demonetarisierung
- ^{xxxv} Eine etwas technikfixierte Vision einer solchen Gesellschaft ist in *Christian Siefkes: Freie Quellen oder wie die Produktion zur Nebensache wurde* dargestellt <http://keimform.de/2013/freie-quellen-1/>