

Conference proceedings

Money can't buy me love

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Abstract

Small communities, such as family, friends, neighbourhoods or social groups, create spaces where donation is possible. These exchanges can be made in a necessity-based approach, where the time waste on unnecessary goods can be saved for activities that develop our inner potential, and can be shared and enjoyed by others. In this way, three basic needs are satisfied: belonging in a group, altruism and creativity.

Keywords

community, belonging, altruism, necessity-based exchange, creativity, sharing

1 Introduction

During the 2010 Conference for Economic Degrowth, in the working group on Degrowth and Human Nature, we divided in small groups. In our group, the discussion started with a statement from one of the participants, Debal Deb, which had a strong impact on the following debate. Let me put it here in my own words:

“Human beings have three basic necessities: the need to be accepted in a social group; the need to share (altruism); and the urge of creativity”.

In the capitalist system, we discussed, these necessities have been co-opted by money and mercantilism, resulting in individualism, the search for self-profit and a sheepish behaviour. Degrowth, then, means taking these three basic necessities back into account.

This paper is a somewhat naïve reflection on how to get closer to satisfy the above necessities, by getting away from money.

2 Belonging in a social group

The use of money in a mercantilist system creates alienated behaviour both in the production and in the consumption ends. On the consumption end, marketing and publicity mould our consumption habits, and we get to depend on a lot of goods that we would not otherwise need. Consumption is based on commodities and possession rather than true enjoyment and fulfilment of authentic needs. On the production end, wages are the main reason why most of the people work. Production is oriented towards profit, rather than towards solving real necessities, or fulfilling our creative potential. Even most of our leisure time, driven also by consumerism, is spent in more or less lonely activities that take place in the middle of a crowd, or at home, watching commercials. Since most of our behaviour is dictated by money, we live isolated in the workplace, isolated in our neighbourhoods and isolated in the marketplace. Money, co-opting our sense of community, is the intermediary in most of our relationships.

Of course, luckily enough, we still have families, friends and neighbours, but the size of these groups, their number, their scope and their activities have been reduced and contaminated by the market. If we wish to recover our sense of social belonging, we need to create money-free spaces, where the natural drives of giving and receiving can take place, both materially and affectively. In order for this to be possible, these communities need to be physical (face to face) and relatively small, so that people can get to know each other and take affection on each other. My feeling is that, nowadays, communities of this kind are flourishing again.

If we have to leave money out of the equation, then, let us look for alternative ways to exchange our goods and services.

3 The guaranteed job in practice

When we trade, the reason why we expect something in exchange (money or goods) is that we need to get resources so that, latter on, we can fulfil our needs. If we could place and solve our necessities first, then we could offer our services without expecting anything in exchange.

The problem, in a offer-based market, lies in the order of the events:

1. First, someone (the producer) invents a product or service.
2. Then, someone else (the consumer) makes a choice among the goods available.
3. Then, the consumer buys.
4. And, finally, the producer sells.

No matter if the exchange is made in official currency, alternative money or by bartering. The producer *needs* something in exchange for her/his goods, because latter on s/he will need to buy something her/himself. Furthermore, the attitude of the producer when s/he decides what to produce, is to make up something that others will buy, before even knowing what they need. Something “new” is more likely to be saleable. The consumer, on her/his side, rather than connecting with her/his inner needs, browses the goods available, and s/he gets to buy things that s/he had not planned for. This is the origin of consumerism.

On the other side, in a necessity-based exchange, the steps are shifted in the following way:

1. First, the consumer states her/his needs.
2. Then, the producer checks the consumers needs, and produces goods that match them.
3. Then, producers provide goods to consumers.
4. And, finally, consumers get their necessities fulfilled.

The difference, now, is that goods and services are focused towards real needs. Furthermore, since producers are consumers themselves, producers can potentially give their products for free, because they know that their necessities as consumers will also be provided for. In such a setting, there is room for altruism.

With this approach, the main motivations for the exchange are generosity, solidarity and the sense of community. The aim of the group is to solve the authentic necessities of all of its members. In this way, since consumerism of unnecessary goods is reduced, the global amount of work is also reduced. Production and work can be planned before hand, based on the inventory of pending necessities. There is no need for equity, there is no need to set a value on the exchanged goods. Reciprocity is reached in the middle term.

Giving something for free, tough, is a difficult attitude. And so is receiving something. Someone has to start, so that the cycle begins. Everybody should receive according to their necessities, and everybody should provide according to their possibilities.

Yet, the community as a whole has to decide on how to deal with the two main problems. What to do if someone does not receive what they need. And what to do if someone does not provide enough. Sometimes the problem is not only the existence of free-riders, but the existence of people who cannot tolerate them.

4 Creativity in a sharing-based exchange

Being able to work creatively in something that fulfils our inner potential, and sharing our work with others is dignifying and makes us grow up as human beings. This is not usually the case in an employment oriented way of live, where enjoyment is often based on consumerism and left for the leisure time.

In our approach, once the basic necessities have been satisfied in a necessity based exchange, like in the previous section, the remaining time is left for creativity. No matter the kind of activity, growing tomatoes, cooking, drawing a painting or mending a house, work can be done with love and care, with the intention of sharing rather than earning money from it.

The exchange, which is now based on the offer, has a totally different quality. The steps are the following:

1. Someone develops her/his inner potential.
2. Others join and share.

Now, necessity lies in the production rather than the consumption side. But it is a different kind of necessity: the necessity to be oneself, the necessity to create. Consumption is no longer consumption but sharing, enjoyment. And the community leisure time is reoriented towards socialization and creativity.

5 Questions & Conclusions

The reflection presented in this paper is not a global proposal for the transformation of society. It is a simple call on a shift in our attitude towards the people we live close to. We are not suggesting that we should all live in self-sufficient communities were all exchanges are made for free, but that we make communities wherever we go, and that we give something for free whenever we have a chance to do so. And a call to act we love, care and creativity in all the activities that we undertake.

In Catalonia and Spain, my feeling is that the number of initiatives that in some way or other are oriented toward these goals is increasing, with initiatives that include, among others, neo rural communities, permaculture projects, squatter social centers, bartering fairs, consumption cooperatives, production cooperatives, and alternative social currencies.

Finally, I'd like to mention that necessity-based fairs with the principles described in section 3 have been put into practice within Ecoarxa de Barcelona, and in my neighborhood. In both cases, an important number of necessities could be solved within the community.

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"You may think that I'm a dreamer,
But I'm not the only one."

John Lennon



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