



## Utopias of ethical economy: A response to Adam Arvidsson

Detlev Zwick

When sociologist Adam Arvidsson writes about marketing and consumption we should pay attention. His 2005 essay 'Brands: A critical perspective' and his 2006 book *Brands: Meaning and value in media culture* have become seminal pieces in the field I call the *critical cultural studies of marketing*, which includes scholars from a wide range of academic disciplines such as critical management studies, sociology, history, marketing, media and cultural studies (see e.g. Zwick and Cayla, 2011). By drawing on post-Marxist and autonomist theory – hitherto considered rather obscure intellectual traditions – Arvidsson has been able to provide a highly original account of how brands function in the age of post-Fordist capitalism, making him one of the most important critical theorists of brands. So naturally expectations are high when one is promised an essay by Arvidsson, especially when it was written for *ephemera*, which provides a space for truly radical contributions to management theory and practice.

In some respects the present article does not disappoint. In typical fashion, Arvidsson's writing is full of grand theoretical ambition – a trait that sets him apart pleasantly from most of the writings on consumption in academic business journals. Drawing on Hannah Arendt, Gabriel Trade and Aristotle, Arvidsson attempts to develop and elaborate a concept of a consumer public as a specific site of collaborative productive consumption, governed by a new form of rationality – what he calls 'ethical rationality' (as opposed to the rationality of neoclassical economics) – and a new type of currency or value – reputation (rather than money or exchange value) – that stems from demonstrating 'excellence of civic action' and, more generally, from the productive participation in some common endeavor.

This paper is not the first time that Arvidsson has presented his thesis that the emergence of networked communications in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has brought about a new economic rationality – what he calls an ‘ethical economy’ – driven by an ethical value standard that he derives from Aristotle's notion of *philia*, meaning friendship, affective proximity, goodwill and positive expectations (see Arvidsson, 2008; Arvidsson, 2009). This particular essay is Arvidsson's most ambitious attempt so far to bring consumption into his theory. In addition, Arvidsson attempts to sketch out the possible political implications of his view of this economic transition to an ethical and socially responsible (post-) capitalism.

Unfortunately, just when it matters most, when Arvidsson aims to establish crucial links between communicative capitalism's socio-economic transformations and new political possibilities, he abandons his previous affinity to critical theory. Hence, in my brief remarks, I will focus mainly on the ideological biases and implications of his particular theorization of the ethical economy of productive consumer publics and on the specificities of his political vision.

### **Participatory consumption, consumer publics and politics**

Arvidsson's thesis of a fundamental transformation of consumption from a passive and unproductive activity to a participatory and productive activity, indeed a ‘new form of public action’, rests to a large degree on his reading of new media such as the Internet to bring about such practices as Open Source and Free Software movements:

that involve thousands of participants in productive practices that are more often motivated by allegiance to a particular values or a particular ethos, than by direct monetary concerns.

For Arvidsson, new media blur the boundaries between production and consumption, which leads to the diffusion of productive consumption. Consumption, Arvidsson acknowledges, has long been productive but this mode of consumption now becomes public and social in the age of the Internet. The reason why we now see so much public productive consumption is because digital media exponentially increase the production and distribution of ‘stuff’ for increased consumption of these digital goods, which then leads to more production and distribution. And on the cycle goes. Arvidsson furthermore argues that the mediatization of consumer goods and of social relations in general has greatly enhanced the ‘signifying power’ of consumer goods, meaning that brands take on much more significance today than ever before. Add to that the fact that the ‘cost of association’ has decreased significantly, ‘making it easier

for enthusiastic consumers to find each other and collaborate in the production of immaterial, as well as, increasingly, material wealth', and we have the formula in place for a world of productive public consumption.

The story that the rise of interactive media challenges the traditional boundaries of production and consumption is a familiar one, as is the suggestion that productive consumption has become a more widespread and also a social phenomenon (see e.g. Cova, Dalli and Zwick, 2011; Denegri Knott, 2004; Denegri Knott and Zwick, 2012; Kozinets, Hemetsberger, and Jensen Schau, 2008; Ritzer and Juergenson, 2010). Indeed, Arvidsson does an excellent job throughout of describing in detail how what Jodi Dean (2010) calls communicative capitalism 'works' from his perspective. He first breaks down step-by-step the key characteristics for the informational mode of productive consumption, then makes a systematic case for replacing the popular notion of community with that of 'publics' before offering an original account of what he sees as an emergent form of value, what he calls 'reputation value'. Such value is bestowed upon an individual according to a collective judgment of that individual's contribution to a rather incongruous set of collective projects (e.g. software production, conversation about a brand, organic farming, open design, etc.). Finally, Arvidsson makes the connection between his theory of public productive consumption and politics, suggesting in the process that the new collaboratively consumerist ethos of the 'networked multitude' is analogous to political practice. Echoing discernibly the cyber-libertarian narratives of Stewart Brand, Howard Rheingold and John Perry Barlow, as well as the technophilic hopes of *Wired* magazine, Arvidsson suggests that the fleeting value judgments of networked individuals offer the conditions of possibility for a more harmonious, caring and just political economy.

While fully appreciating Arvidsson's courage to argue that communicative capitalism's networked and productive consumption does not extinguish but simply reconfigures the political – including deliberation, belonging, sovereignty and concern with the common and with justice – I claim that there are a number of problems with his account of a transition to a post-capitalist society. These need to be highlighted before we can assess the potential of his theory of the consumer public and its ethos of collaborative value creation for articulating an alternative to the neoliberal ethos of economization and de-politicization (Brown, 2006; Çalışkan and Callon, 2009).

First, Arvidsson identifies a new era of collaborative production that is self-organized and autonomous. As examples he mentions the Open Source and Free Software phenomena and their extensions into other areas such as manufacturing, agriculture, design and so on. This drive towards 'open-

everything' represents for Arvidsson the dawn of a new modality of value creation that imposes itself against 'traditional' (presumably capitalist) forms of value, i.e. money or exchange value. I would submit, however, that this critique of traditional modalities of value aims at a straw man: post-Fordist capitalism has long incorporated concepts of worker self-organization and collaborative production into its regime of accumulation (Kumar, 1995; Thrift, 2005). Arvidsson does recognize this, citing management texts that describe how the discourse of employee self-organization, empowerment and freedom has transformed work inside capitalist firms over the last 30 years. Thus, Arvidsson's point here does *not* seem to be that an economy based on collaboration, self-organization and reputation value needs to be juxtaposed against a stifling corporate bureaucratic form of monopoly capitalism. Rather, he seems to imply that to move towards a more inclusive and just economic organization, what is needed is the expansion of the collaborative ethos already employed successfully to everyone and everything by the best of breed, namely, post-Fordist capitalists.

In other words, for Arvidsson the opponent is not post-Fordist capitalism and its often cynical appropriation of social productivity and collective creativity. Indeed, he seems to advocate a universalizing of the values on which the success of contemporary communicative capitalism is based, including notions of individual empowerment, information sharing and networked collaboration (Dean, 2010). Rather, his opponents are institutions – corporations, the state and so on – that aim at restricting the ability of individual networkers to generate, access and share the information they need to devise new, freer and more fulfilled modes of being.

Conceptually, Arvidsson uses consumption as a way to universalize the collaborative ethos of communicative capitalism. By making the shift from collaborative production to what he then calls 'productive consumer practices' – mainly through the notion of immaterial labor – he embarks on his journey to sketch out a theory of consumption as public action. This is based on the idea that if consumption can be seen as productive, then we are no longer just looking at production as confined to formal organizations but as diffused across the vast global information network, encompassing in its sphere anyone equipped with a computer. Arvidsson considers a wide range of practices as productive consumption, from creating personal identities to collaborating on Open Source software projects to tweeting about Apple products. Indeed, how far-reaching productive consumption is becomes clearer during his discussion of the forms of value created by consumers.

Drawing on Tarde, Arvidsson suggests that almost anything we do as modern consumers becomes productive in some fashion, largely because it can be recast

as communication. Up to this point, I agree with his assessment. Similar observations about the productive aspect of consumption have been made in different ways and contexts (e.g. Frank, 1998; Heath and Potter, 2004; Smythe, 1981/2006). However, I part ways with Arvidsson when he claims that much, if not most, of this self-organized and autonomous work done by consumers in some form of loose association takes place outside the domain of markets, property relations and corporate hierarchies. He makes this claim by proposing two distinct domains of value circulation, one traditional (based on money currency) and one ethical (based on reputation currency), without clarifying the relationship between the two domains and the nature of the value circulating in the ethical one.

It is through this distinction that Arvidsson's description of life and work in post-capitalism – that is, of productive consumption – conjures up images of countercultural bliss, rejecting centralized-hierarchical, planned and top-down capitalism for the decentralized, emergent and bottom-up world of cognitive/communicative capitalism. In this world, the computer-literate give and take freely from a common repository of information and knowledge, no one claims property rights and individual self-reliance combined with a collaborative ethos frees these 'digeratis' from the dependence on corporate provisions. What is more, money matters not in this economy. Indeed, it is the somewhat implicit claim that the reason that these publics 'work' is exactly because money has been replaced by a different kind of currency: individual reputation, or the more diffuse concept of 'civic excellence'.

At this juncture, his discussion of value creation in these consumer publics<sup>1</sup> ties back directly to the libertarian fantasies of the New Communalists and their vision of life, which 'combined nomadic tribes and high-tech electronics in a frontier fantasy of do-it-yourself freedom' (Dean, 2010: 20; see also Turner, 2006). Arvidsson combines notions of individual consciousness, affective intensity, and self-organizing systems to describe a world of harmonious and collaborative information workers passionately vying for reputational status. Nonetheless, an economy of sorts – what I would call 'libertarian commonism' – almost entirely disavows its position within a capitalist economy and conceals the economic dependence of the members of these consuming-producing publics on the market. What, for example, about the aspiring graphic designer in Toronto

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1 I shall emphasize that I agree with his rejection of the wide-spread use of the term 'community' to describe almost any kind of association of networked individuals, no matter how transient and loosely allied. I differ, however, with regard to his assessment of their political potential.

whose already precarious economic situation is being threatened further by the emerging global competition from designers in low-wage countries, allowing the Canadian entrepreneur looking for a cool new logo for his nascent company to take advantage of ‘the reduced cost of association’ to conduct his own version of labor cost arbitrage? As one of my students recently told me, he was able to save between 80% and 90% of the cost for the logo design by replacing a local designer with one in the Philippines<sup>2</sup>.

Or consider the field of ‘game modding’, an activity in which players of games create their own modifications to the game – a great example of Arvidsson’s ethical or reputation economy. Modders compete fiercely for peer recognition and social capital (Banks, 2010). But in this communal world of productive consumption, the lines between amateurs and professionals are very thinly drawn. Kushner (2002), for example, relates the story of how John Carmack and John Romero – the developers of the first popular moddable game *DOOM* – became professional developers by first distinguishing themselves as amateur game-makers. Indeed, id Software, the company that produces *DOOM*, makes a conspicuous point of the fact that it ‘discovered many of their current employees and development partners based on mods that were created and distributed over the Internet’ (id Software, 2013)<sup>3</sup>.

These examples from the reputation-based world of game development – and many others could be added from such fields as general software code writing, hacking, creative design, fashion design and so on – underscore how the collective productive work of the players themselves is often recognized as a valid and important avenue for acquiring jobs in the industry (Au, 2002). As Sotamaa (2010) points out, stories of modders-turned-developers circulate routinely in modding communities, creating an awareness among modders that a strong reputation gained as an amateur developer may be converted into paid employment. For a company seeking top talent, nothing would be more sensible than to scour modding communities for high performers, turning the fierce competition among modders for a reputation as a top-notch creative into a proxy job interview. We should note the ease with which the mod, an emblematic product of Arvidsson’s ethical economy, is recast as a résumé building-block and integrated into the circuits of competitive communicative capitalism.

Interestingly, Arvidsson is quite aware of the affinity between competitive market capitalism and his model of an ethical economy that is based on reputation

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2 See <http://99designs.com>.

3 See Hong, R., & V. H.-H. Chen (forthcoming) *Becoming an ideal co-creator: Web materiality and intensive laboring practices in game modding*. New Media & Society.

capital, even as he pushes aside the competitive imperative of capitalism to make his political point. He states:

This [the creative collaborative production of software, brand use, fan fiction, and so on] has led many observers, coming from widely different perspective to suggest that such collaborative practices are the harbingers of a new altruistic mode of production where monetary rewards, and by implication traditional conceptions of economic rationality no longer apply...I believe that this is something of a premature conclusion. It is definitely possible to reconstruct an economic rationality around participation in practices of collaborative production. But it is a different rationality than that proposed by neoclassical economics. I will suggest that it is better understood as a civic, or ethical rationality, where motives of economic gain and motives that have to do with the excellence of civic action tend to coincide, or at least approach one another.

Here, then, we arrive at the crux of Arvidsson's theory of a political economy of the ethical: it is about changing the currency of competitive consumer capitalism but not the game itself. In fact, by presuming that the work of productive consumer publics is analogous to politics – with its concern for justice, the common, deliberation, sovereignty and so on – Arvidsson avoids conflict and political struggle over how to govern ourselves. In his conception of the reputation economy as a path towards a new form of government (via the political decisions of loosely associated consumer publics), Arvidsson acts as if the market and the government were the same thing. His intention may be different, since he imagines a multitude of empowered and networked individuals to draw on and contribute to some sort of common resource. But importantly, the commons of his world are constructed through an imperative of entrepreneurial competitiveness in which individual knowledge workers play all kinds of collaborative games to accrue whatever currency is at stake.

Once we reinsert the economic context in which these activities of collaboration take place, it becomes clear that the reputation economy merely extends the neoliberal logic of competition and the concomitant production of few winners and many losers to all participants, even to the production and consumption of common resources. In short, the reputation economy posits that every knowledge producer-consumer become an entrepreneur of himself. Here, the person who wins will be the most adept at appropriating common resources for the creation of innovative and ultimately individual contributions that can at some point be privatized as profit or salary. From a political perspective, then, the notion of the 'circulation of common' – which, it should be added, has a rather different meaning in Dyer-Witheford's essay of the same name (2009) – forecloses the possibility of an extended and committed concern for the public good and replaces it with a market-driven allocation of fleeting private interest

and temporary affective attachments that can always be withdrawn and reallocated as required by market demand.

Politics for Arvidsson, then, becomes a private consumerist matter even as the product of these private activities is what Kelty (2008) calls a 'recursive public'. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that Arvidsson cites Kelty approvingly and draws extensively on this concept to sketch out his notion of consumer publics. This is so because Kelty represents the extreme view of cyber-libertarian anti-government market anarchism in which the entrepreneurs of communicative capitalism govern the rest of us, almost literally merging markets and governance (see Dean 2010 for a critique of Kelty). More to the point, Kelty's recursive publics – a concept, by the way, based on the sole example of Free Software – represent a vision of politics in which the *demos* has been replaced by a technocratic elite whose collaborative, creative and affective work is posited as the appropriate site of political determination. These publics, just like Arvidsson's, may be political but, being neither authorized nor legitimated, they most definitely are not democratic – a point I will return to below.

It is at this juncture of Arvidsson's argument that we need to turn our attention to what I consider a possibility of redemption for his economic and political vision: the nature of labour in consumer publics. Arvidsson is quite aware, it seems to me, that his account of an economy of collaborative ethos and reputation capital has the potential to reproduce the same extremes of inequality and can be just as exploitative as any other regime of capitalism. After all, in communicative capitalism's competitive games for reputation, we have to imagine a winner-takes-almost-all outcome as expressed by the proclivity to rank individuals by score (that is the constant peer ranking usually accompanied by a score of some kind, such as an '89% approval' on Ebay), rendering reputation a relative measure and, hence, scarce (we cannot all be number one!).

So what could make this ethical economy somehow more palatable than your generic capitalist one? What could make it, to use Arvidsson's words, post-capitalist? His answer to this conundrum is that labour in an economy characterized by self-organization, collective experimentation and individual empowerment is undertaken 'freely and out of passion'. In other words, work by knowledge workers in consumer publics has nothing in common with the alienated and directed form of labour found in the kind of corporate-industrial capitalism consumer publics apparently reject.

As the previous paragraphs should have made clear, I claim that Arvidsson's assessment of the nature of labour in the consumer publics is too naïve to be convincing. I hold his disavowal of the underlying political economy of



knowledge work responsible for his fall into the ideological trap of equating techno-utopian entrepreneurialism with freedom and voluntarism of work. One does not have to be a Marxist to see how hollow such a claim sounds at a time when millions of knowledge and creative workers are forced into precarious work relations and insecure self-employment as the only chance of making a living. From the analysis offered above, the productive consumption work described by Arvidsson represents little more than a continuation (if not a radicalization) of what Lazzarato (2009) calls ‘neoliberalism in action’, a decades-old project of progressive individualization and precarization of labour, an entrepreneurialization of society and a universalization of the logic of competition. In Arvidsson’s economic world, there is a need for an admiring and evaluating public – the market for individual contributions, if you like – and there is also a need for a ‘substance’ or affect, to be exploited to create value (be this the body for the self-exploiting worker or the common-creative resources of the consumer public [knowledge, styles, ideas, etc.] for the modern digital entrepreneur, i.e. the productive consumer self as reputation manager).

One’s economic value, therefore, depends on one’s ability to appeal to a market of ‘collective judgment’. We may call this collective judgment ‘the common’, but how Arvidsson’s notion of the common, when boiled down to this particular essence, is any different in principle from ‘the market’ is not very clear. Indeed, it seems that the underlying logic of accruing economic worth in and from ‘the commons’ is no different in practice and in its governmental effects on the performing subject (*qua* competitive entrepreneurial experimentation) than that of neoliberal capitalism, regardless of the nature of the currency. Can we really speak of un-alienated and non-exploitative work when what is at stake now is the competition for reputation as the abstraction of the value of individual creative labour? This is especially so because reputation capital allows the holder to marshal a following across other domains, *qua* improved ‘personal brand equity’, which can then, hopefully, be turned into economic capital (there is, as the author points out, a Bourdieudian element to all of this). Apparently alienation in communicative capitalism takes a different shape. Indeed it is tempting to imagine a world of ‘alienation 2.0’<sup>4</sup> in which ‘free and passionate’ knowledge workers find that the separation of labour and its fruits re-enter their lives when reputation acquires exchange value in the money economy.

In the final analysis, and returning to the implications of his version of communicative capitalism for an emancipatory political project, Arvidsson promotes an anti-corporate and anti-governmental picture of consumer capitalism, where the networked consumer-entrepreneur wrestles away power

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4 I thank Yesim Ozalp for providing me with this term.

from companies over the determination of what is being produced, where and by whom. Based on his cyber-libertarian approach to the emerging networked commons and a disavowal of its underlying political economy, Arvidsson elevates democratic ideals of information access, inclusion, discussion and participation to a stand-in for democratic politics *tout court*. This to me represents the extrapolation of the familiar neoliberal story of the strange convergence between democracy and capitalism by uncritically situating political action in the global communication network.

But not everyone can become a reputation entrepreneur and not everyone who becomes one can win the experimental game of reputation creation. Perhaps more urgently than critiquing the ethical economy's inherent characteristics of inequality and competition, we must ask with Dean (2010: 24): What makes the productive consumption job – whether voluntary, freelance or corporate – the activities of a *demos*? To whom are these collaborative producers accountable? Who oversees *them*? Who determines whether what they've produced is good, right or legitimate? What if non-networked non-creatives want to participate? Or, what if they understand their creative, productive and affective work as the proper field of political determination?

I do not think Arvidsson's conception of a political economy has satisfying answers to these questions. He clearly betrays a lack of a more radical aspiration for wider wealth redistribution. All that is on offer from his point of view is a slight widening of the base of political participation, stating: 'In this sense, publics and the "ethical economy"...represent a new possibility to let a wider plurality of "voices" have a say in the elaboration of economic values'. The commons Arvidsson speaks of may be political but it is neither democratic nor necessarily anti-capitalist. Rather, Arvidsson's consuming publics have a lot more in common with Kelty's recursive publics than with Dyer-Witheford's (2009) notion of a circulation of the commons and the possibility for a collectively determined (bio) commonism. The notion of the commons marshalled by Arvidsson shows the weakness of an otherwise promising concept. As Dyer-Witheford (2010) points out:

Commons covers a variety of proposals for collective management of various resources, some radical, and some reformist. The commonness of commons discourse, the fact that it could be shared by activists of different stripes, was useful for movement of movements whose strength was its diversity.

This strength is also a weakness because the diversity of movements gathered around the notion of the commons produces a vagueness around what it really means. Is the movement of movements anti-corporate, or anti-capitalist? If it is anti-capitalist, what is its vision of post-capitalism? As Dyer-Witheford (2010)

explains: ‘This vagueness afflicted the notion of commons’. Dyer-Witheford here builds on how George Caffentzis had previously suggested that neoliberal capital, when it confronts the mounting debacle of free market policies, could turn to a ‘Plan B’, in which limited versions of a commons (such as pollution trading schemes, community development and open-source and file sharing practices) are introduced as subordinate aspects of a capitalist economy where voluntary cooperation subsidizes profit. One can think here of how Web 2.0 re-appropriates many of the innovations of radical digital activists and converts them into a source of rent. There are, again, historical parallels. In romantic accounts of the historical commons it is often forgotten that commons were a supplement to a fiercely coercive feudalism; contemporary commons have the potential to be no more than a marginal, and useful add-on to global capital (see full dialogue in Dyer-Witheford 2010).

It seems to me that Arvidsson’s vision of the commons of communicative capitalism realizes Dyer-Witheford and Caffentzis’s fears of the radicalization, rather than the abolition (or, at a minimum, profound transformation), of neoliberal capitalism. Only by ignoring the existence of capital relations could one believe that the mode of production and value creation of the consumer publics leads to some kind of equal, sovereign, just and collective management of the commons. The political economy the author describes cannot but lead to the same enclosures of the networked, communicative consumer commons that capital performs routinely with other forms of commons.

## Conclusion

To his credit, Arvidsson does admit that ‘[T]his article is a highly speculative piece [that] seeks to envision what a theory could look like’. Yet this is also precisely why one may be disappointed with the theoretical vision that is being suggested. When dissected into its inner workings, his particular vision of an economy based on a collaborative ethos aligns rather well with the dominant narrative of a neoliberalization of everyday life. However it seems that Arvidsson could well have imagined a more radical form of collective consumption and production – a consumer commonism, perhaps, with an unabashed disavowal of concepts such as private property, market competitiveness, and individualized entrepreneurialism that are central to contemporary forms of neoliberal capitalism.

Keeping more closely with Dyer-Witheford’s notion of the commons, we could imagine a commonism of productive consumption as collaborative sharing in the absence of private property. This would be combined with an inclusive model of

political determination, collective sovereignty, belonging, and justice, that treats the networked publics of brand lovers, software geeks, fashion designers, real estate aficionados and so on as part of the problem, not the solution. Like Arvidsson's consumer publics, Dyer-Witheford's commonism proposes a form of social organization that is based on a collaborative ethos of the commons, except Dyer-Witheford rejects any possibility of commodification. But what else is the idea of reputation than a round-about way of commodifying creativity, a re-enclosure of the commons?

In an economy of the commons, the economic is governed by the political and not the other way around, as Arvidsson has it. In his essay in *Capital and Class*, Arvidsson (2009: 15) claims that pursuing a 'circulation of commons' of non-proprietary resources – that is, a humanity evolving from a civilization based on exchange to one based on 'contribution' – amounts to an unhelpful utopianism. We should be more pragmatic about what can be achieved. I would suggest, however, that nothing is more utopian than to expect the reputation economy of communicative capitalism to offer anything other than the continuation of growing economic inequality and the intensification of social injustice characteristic of extreme neoliberalism. There is nothing post-capitalist about it.

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## the author

Detlev Zwick is Associate Professor of Marketing at Schulich School of Business, York University, Toronto, Canada.

Email: dzwick@schulich.yorku.ca