

Yochai Benkler, *Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*

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With the *Wealth of Networks*, Benkler takes on Adam Smith's epoch-defining work, first published in 1776, at the very point in history when the economic system that Smith so carefully describes in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* appears to have finally realized its global destiny, what, with market economies having now taken root around the world. It may seem an odd moment, then, for Benkler to turn the tables on Smith's vision, that is, to displace nations with networks and transform markets through social production (into *nonmarkets*, as it turns out). Although Benkler does not anywhere else in his book make such direct use of Smith's influential book, the *Wealth of Networks* establishes the economic viability of what is, at many points, much the opposite of what Smith was describing then as a new economic regime and what has subsequently taken on the qualities of natural law.

In the process, Benkler takes hold of capitalism's two dearest concepts, wealth and freedom, and gives them both a second economic life. He identifies project after project which is driven by not by national and personal self-interest – which figured so prominently in Smith's work, as well as the continuing stream of economic theory following that tradition – but operates instead cooperatively through global, collaborative networks. These networks represent for Benkler a revolution in individual autonomy and democratic action, given how they freely distribute the means of participation to others, and those two concepts have a certain resonance with other events from 1776.

Yet if Benkler's book plays off of the *Wealth of Nations*, concept by concept, it still resembles Smith's book in form. Both books describe new developments by identifying the logic and economic benefits in each case. Both give name and shape to what are already growing segments of the economy; both deploy prime instances, like the pin factory and open source software, leading to improvements in quality and increases in productivity and creative application. By rendering these developments sensible and visibly part of a larger development, Smith and Benkler accelerate their take-up by others over the longer term, if Smith's success is anything to go by.

To begin at the beginning: when Smith introduces on the first page of the *Wealth of Nations* the "division of labor" as the new best hope of "the productive powers of labor," Benkler's opens with "the networked information environment" which represents the evolution of "liberal markets and liberal democracies" that have prevailed since Smith's day (p. 1). To stay with Benkler's key term, the *networked information environment* brings to the fore what is most valuable and what might otherwise be overlooked in "the Internet Revolution" (p. 1). At a time when, as he rightly points out, academics are dismissing such revolutionary talk as "positively naïve," Benkler compresses into a triple-decker phrase like *networked information environment* the pervasive and encompassing flow of information through our lives and work, whether in call-centres or college campuses. But if Benkler had left it at that, we would have little that was not already well known and often stated. Instead, he follows this initial portmanteau of a phrase with, in quick succession, the new terms of this revolution, marked by "cooperative nonmarket production" (p. 2), "decentralized individual action"

(p. 3), “nonproprietary strategies” (p. 4), “large-scale cooperative efforts” (p. 5), and so on. Recombinant possibilities soon emerge, with the likes of “networked information economy” (p. 3), “radically distributed nonmarket mechanisms” (*ibid.*), and “nonmarket, nonpropriety production” (p. 106). Each of Benkler’s phrases has its own way of rewriting one or more of Smith’s basic economic principles, whether one thinks of Smith’s sense of *market*, *exchange value*, *self-interest*, *nation*, or the *division of labor*.¹

Benkler’s forceful linguistic turn makes him a strong candidate for what the late philosopher Richard Rorty identified as the transformative poet. Benkler makes no pretense to being a poet, but he is certainly a writer capable of generating “increasingly useful metaphors,” in Rorty’s term, who thus changes how the world is viewed and read (1989, p. 9). Benkler does appear to have an inexhaustible ability, again in Rorty’s seeming simplification of things “to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways,” leading to “a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it” (pp. 7, 9). For Rorty, there is no greater intellectual or poetic power than this particular knack; the “talent for speaking differently, rather than arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change” (*ibid.*).

Now in addition to speaking differently, Benkler also argues these cultural changes, and exceptionally well, to my way of thinking. He makes fine distinctions, sets up sensible categories, and marshals myriad on-the-ground instances to substantiate them, from Free High School Science Texts in South Africa (p. 101) to NASA’s use of the public to mark crater maps and undertake other scientific work (p. 69). Yet this particular talent for naming what these various projects have in common contributes, in its own way, to “an increasingly robust ethic of open sharing,” as Benkler names what many of us hope will indeed carry the spirit of the age (p. 7).

By naming this economic model, if only in the negative terms, as both *nonmarket* and *nonproprietary*, Benkler makes it clear that the creation and distribution, for example, of free software code is not simply a circumvention or aberration in what is software’s rightful market.² Rather, open source software represents a highly productive way for people to work together toward a public good. And while Benkler allows that people work on developing open source software because it provides people with access to what has become one of our basic communication systems, he also holds that it is about more than an ethics of openness. It is also about efficiency and productivity, those two critical wealth factors. Benkler very clearly sets out how a cooperative approaches are contributing to “the greatest improvement in the productive powers of labor” since the division of labor, to borrow from the opening from Adam Smith’s first chapter (2005, p. 5). By demonstrating the effectiveness of cooperative ventures, such as open source software and *Wikipedia*, Benkler undermines what might otherwise have seemed, at the close of the twentieth century, to be the ubiquitous triumph of the market.

In the context of *Policy Futures for Education*, it makes sense to ask what the new terms of this alternative economy mean for the schools. When Benkler writes of the

¹ Part of the power of a compound concept like *networked information environment* is how each term shares equally in the idea and any one of the three terms can come to the fore, while the other two proximate terms can be hyphenated (i.e., networked-information environment; networked information-environment).

² The refusal to hyphenate *non* in *nonmarket* and tying it to *nonproprietary* suggests that this negation is already commonplace.

Internet's democratic spirit – in terms of how the “network allows all citizens to change their relationship to the public sphere” as “creators and primary subjects” – he could as easily be addressing what the public schools have long promised, if not always delivered (p. 272). This overlap is nowhere more clearly at issue than with the educational challenge posed by *Wikipedia*.

Benkler regards this multilingual free encyclopedia, not surprisingly, as a leading instance of an “open, peer-produced model,” and “one of the most successful collaborative enterprises that has developed in the first five years of the twenty-first century” (pp. 71, 70). And yet *Wikipedia* is not like anything taking place in the schools today. It is the exact opposite. Ask yourself, as I have more than once in the face of *Wikipedia's* heart-felt learning, what in today's schools can be said to really prepare students to collaborate anonymously, without credit or deadlines, on a drop-in basis, at the risk of being over-written and vigorously attacked by equally anonymous strangers, as they press together collectively in the name of a “neutral point of view” (as *Wikipedia* puts it), while being governed by a loosely organized (and enforced) series of principles having to do with verification and structure? *Wikipedia* demonstrates what a life of learning outside of school, for the sake of learning, can be mean. It is a demonstration for the schools that continues to grow daily on a global scale and in a remarkably organic way. For all of its shortcomings, *Wikipedia* serves for most people as the primary educational gateway into this networked information environment. That this open and vibrant model of learning is so removed from the everyday world of schooling surely has implications for the policy futures for education.

I am not suggesting, however, that Benkler has fallen short in addressing the educational implications in the *Wealth of Networks*. He is above reproach on this count. He has done more than enough by pausing for a moment and offering a brilliantly sweeping educational vision based on “the possibility that teachers and educators can collaborate, both locally and globally, on a platform model like *Wikipedia*, to coauthor learning objects, teaching modules, and more ambitiously, textbooks that could then be widely accessed by local teachers” (p. 315). It seems only fair to say that the onus for pursuing this book's educational implications falls on those who profess education for a living, at least insofar as they are persuaded by this book.

And that would be me, as I am an obvious enthusiast for Benkler's approach, and have already been involved in opening access to knowledge online (through work over the last ten years on the Public Knowledge Project). This symposium may not be the appropriate place to do undertake, although a few initial observations do seem in order, especially as it seems to me that Benkler's particular rhetorical casting of the new non-Smithean economics cannot be directly applied to the public schools. The schools may already be an information commons of sorts, operating outside of the commercialized world of markets. Yet schools that going to have their students actively contributing to the intellectual commons within their communities are going to have to teach these students many orders of propriety and property. In other words, the need is not, then, for a *nonproprietary* program in the schools or a program that engages in the nonmarket production of knowledge, per se. This is because, unlike the open revolt against the restrictive marketing of intellectual property represented by open source software, there has never been a market for the intellectual work coming out of the schools. In fact, some

thought needs to be given to cultivating such a market, to finding ways for students to direct their learning toward work that serves others.

The educator, entering the school with the *Wealth of Networks* in hand, has now to assemble a curriculum that provides opportunities for learning about proprieties and properties, including the different forms of producing and utilizing intellectual property. It is not simply that one must learn the rules in order to break them. It is to understand that Benkler's nonproprietary economics is *non-proprietary* in very particular ways. It says *no* to only certain limited aspects of this broad concept. For instance, with open access research, another of Benkler's leading instances of markets transformed, we are seeing a number of scholars and librarians challenging an extremely damaging proprietary element of scholarly publishing, namely the exorbitant pricing of scholarly journals that results in reduced access (which is further compounded by the impossibility of being able to subscribe to all journals even if there were reasonably priced). Yet the open access movement in scholarly publishing leaves untouched the proprieties of intellectual ownership that demands that authors duly credit those whose work they draw on, just as open access is not about the proprieties of grammar, genre, bibliographic formatting, graphic representation, and on and on.

But then when it comes to Benkler's particular focus on *nonproprietary* forms of cooperation and production, what seems clear is that school work is already all too nonproprietary, in the sense that students' work lacks any value, as intellectual property. At a time when schools seem increasingly like training grounds for large-scale test-score production, there are few opportunities for students to engage in working on something that has value in its own right. The preparation for, and writing of, such tests has taken on such importance that it can end up teaching the students that their learning has nothing to do creating a property. In this sense, the test-driven school is entirely a nonmarket and nonproprietary entities, and discouragingly so, given Benkler's sense that such entities otherwise are leading to increases in individual creativity and autonomy, as well as democratic responsiveness.

Yet there has always been a river running through the schools that is given to the cooperative, collaborative production – as students gather with paints, paper, glue, scissors, and computer – and it is now time to think about the market for what these students could produce, as they are gathered at perhaps the sole center in their community engaged in noncommercialized intellectual production. The schools need to begin to think of the work that students do, as a result of their learning, as having value and interest for others, as itself one of the *properties* of intellectual work. Students can indeed, as Benkler suggests, help others in their learning, by developing resources for teachers and students; they need to contribute to *Wikipedia*, creating intellectual properties that begin with the local.

This suggests that would students will have first to learn about their own capacity to produce intellectual properties of value to others, as well as learn, in the process, about the qualities (and proprieties) that such properties entail. Once students are thinking about producing intellectual properties of potential interest (and thus of value) to others, they could then take their first lesson in nonproprietary production by selecting one of the various Creative Commons licenses for their work. In helping people select a license, the Creative Commons provides a clear and readily comprehensive introduction to such issues as attribution, derivatives, share-alike, non-commercial use, etc. In thinking about

their own work, students would be in a good position to learn about how properties of this sort –whether for photographs, maps, music, etc. – are marketed within and outside of traditional corporate economies. If terms such as nonproprietary are indeed metaphors, in the spirit of Rorty, then a basic concept like *property* can be further stretched and turned, rather than simply negated, as if it referred but to one thing, even within the economic realm.

By the same token, Benkler’s use of the term *nonmarket* for this new economy is directed at negating but one aspect of *market*, by which goods are distributed on a commercial basis, with the goal of maximizing profits and, in the case of public corporations, increasing shareholder value. The nonmarket of (nonproprietary) open source software exists within the well-defined market of operating systems, which is dominated by Microsoft, while the growing success of Linux, Apache and other open source software is measured in their “market share.” That is, the nonmarket is itself a portion of the market that has grown out of the refusal of the current commercial model. It operates within an existing market of users.

As well, in the world of scholarly publishing, open access could be said to creating a new manner of marketing research among authors and readers, one that ensures that the ability to find and read the relevant research on a topic is no longer unduly influenced by price structures and profit margins. But that said, scholarly publishing, as infused as it is today with various open access models, is no less a marketplace of ideas governed by longstanding proprieties. So, before the schools foster students of the nonmarket and nonproprietary aspects of this new economy, they would do well to consider using the very idea of *market* as a way of thinking about how students could direct some part of their learning toward the interests of those within their community, who could benefit from the sort of intellectual work that that students are capable of producing, whether one thinks of local history, language services, performing arts.

Such work would still entail the proprieties of both student accountability and audience expectations, in terms of how this work is marketed within school districts and communities. On the question of accountability, for example, some educational jurisdictions have been experimenting for some time with students assembling portfolios for evaluation purposes, which represent a range of projects to which they have contributed (Tierney et al. 1998). These portfolios can capture the nature of the students’ contributions, as well as – following the model of open source software development – provide evidence of the students’ growing reputations for a certainly quality of work (which will have been enhanced and developed in the hands of inspired teachers). In the process, the students learn the value of responding to the expectations of the market for their work.³ By virtue of their work in the community, the students would have a stake in the game, and be able to see that their work within a public institution, like the schools, is already part of this knowledge economy.⁴

³ There is a parallel here with what is known in educational circles, as “service learning” (e.g., Wolfson and Willinsky, 1998).

⁴ Another point of connection among progressive educators is with the “see for yourself” political culture, which Benkler notes is superseding the sole reliance on mainstream media (p. 218), that is found in those social studies classrooms that have set aside the textbooks (read mainstream media) and taken up the study of the primary sources around historical events (Wineburg 2007).

Progressive forces within the schools have long sought to embrace the commons, and take full advantage of the John-Dewey moment that Benkler champions: “There is emerging a broad practice of *learning by doing* that makes the entire society more effective readers and writers of own culture” (p. 299, emphasis added). Today, and in light of Benkler’s book, what needs to be *learnt by doing* is how to direct one’s learning toward sharing with others, even as learning how to establish a market for one’s writing is exactly what being an *effective* writer is all about. Inspired by Benkler, educators have their own part to play in learning to do, by going back to public education’s basic democratic promise, in examining how the schools can do more to ensure that, in fact, “a networked information economy overcomes some of the structural components of continued poverty” (p. 307). To return, finally, to the title of Benkler’s book, the schools should be able to use this model of social production, which they are so well suited for, to transform the current market for achievement-test scores into a new account of what students are learning and achieving in school, and they could do so in ways that would very much support the “thickening of preexisting relationships with friends, families and neighbors” that Benkler notes as another effect of this new economy (p. 357). Such could be the wealth of networks when it comes to policy futures for education.

References

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