

Explorers & Pirates: Digital Creators and the Creation of Value(s)

Conference framing

The rise of digital economies has changed dramatically the way we think about what counts and how to count but we do not know yet the rules of this new regime. With the digital economy notions of property, capital and labor have been displaced in ways that are both highly consequential and nearly insensible. Simply put, the stuff of the economy and the sources of value seem to have changed. Maybe no longer labor and capital but immaterial knowledge and recombined information gleaned from our most mundane actions. The problem is the rise of a new form of economy that could well destabilize our common world. The stakes are high: we either find ourselves on the verge of a novel definition of the economy with its attendant new social values or we are about to witness the destruction of the real economy by a form of parasitic fad.

The digitalization of the economy presents us with challenges to past ideas of property rights and economic properties, trade secrets and participatory economic democracy. It also generates radically new puzzles by turning what used to be elusive web trails and personal traces into tradable commodities thanks to new forms of digital memory. In a nutshell, with the economy becoming digital, both the persons (producers as well as consumers) and the goods/services have lost their contours. As a consequence, central questions of political economy and political philosophy are reopened. Has the economy really turned its back to labor and materiality to wed itself to the promise of information? Our new economic landscape is difficult to decipher because such grand claims – encapsulated in shortcut notions as “the digital economy” or “the new economy” - do not convey the multiplicity of paths followed by economic models as they embrace some form of digital expression. Clarifying these various modes of becoming digital is the mission of the Explorers and Pirates conference.

The consequences of the digital on our economies

Joseph Schumpeter first formulated the counter intuitive insight that market economies are characterized by “creative destruction”. What he did not have in mind was the possibility that, a few decades down the road, being an entrepreneur and creating value could mean something entirely different. Namely “deriving” value instead of creating it by prior destruction. We are now struggling to make sense of this new economic regime of derivation, at a time when it has been exacerbated by a digital imperative presented as the panacea to all our ills.

The new digital economy has not only created additional value in the Gross Domestic Product of innovative nations, it has also given birth to new collective values. These values, maybe more than the narrow stock performances of the technology clusters in the Bay area, Boston, Bangalore or the Saint Petersburg clusters, are likely to have long-term consequences on the way we think about the economy. Analyzing the novelty of these values and their mode of articulation to the underlying technological innovations

is crucial to our long-term understanding of the new economic landscape. An example will illustrate the kind of challenges created there. The recent emphasis on collaboration, peer-to-peer, crowd economies and crowd sourcing destabilizes and challenges the old model of companies with its strict distinction between the production side and the consumption. The value of cooperation clearly predates the sharing of files or the crowd sourcing impulse but the technologies made available on a large scale have amplified it to the point where the division of labor ruling the old corporation may become irrelevant. Against the view that the digital deployment have stood in the way of immutable values, it is time to survey the rise of new values as they recombine existing ones and to observe how new economic configurations have emerged that challenge previous iron rules. For old economy businesses, these recent transformations are clearly rife with perils. Yet, not seeing the generative dimension in action there is to miss the opportunities carried by the new modes of economic actions.

This new landscape is not entirely unknown for readers of Michel Serres. In his insightful and provoking re-articulation of the old notion of parasites, Serres has helped us rethink the economy as a derivative activity, against all the foundational theories offered since the birth of economics as a discipline. Serres invites us to understand theft and other forms of illegal economic activities as central to the economic edifice itself. Against the Lockean dream of clean and dry lines of property divides supporting social and economic order, Serres insists that we pay attention to the subversion of these lines and, most important, to the ways in which that subversion is necessary to the endurance of the economy. Instead of a foundation/expression formula, Serres offers a derivational/composition theory of the economy. We want to document these other forms of value(s) creation. Usually cast as parasitic and destructive, they harbor much more complex political programs that we will try to decode. Exploration is one of these programs.

Exploring and discovering the economy

Exploring and discovering have a long history in the social sciences. From anarchists to economists of organization, through neo liberal thinkers like Hayek, exploring has long been thematized as a crucial modality of living in the world. The puzzle with some of these celebrations of exploration and discovery as a mode of engagement is their strong attachment to forms of (private) property that run against the grain of the very exploration and excavation of the properties of the discovered world. The notions of "property" and "properties" have long been discussed by scholars who do not necessarily read each other, let alone engage conceptually with each other. Famous exceptions like the late work of Marilyn Strathern remind us that the intersection can be most fruitfully explored, but we are interested in using the digital modes of economies (DME) as an occasion to reopen the question. Put simply, DME offers new lines of demarcation, both for property and properties so that we could use a series of cases to think anew or afresh the articulation of these multiple modes of engagements with the economy. On the one hand, the tension around property and property rights, exacerbated by the economies in which goods have an exclusively DME. On the other

hand, the new modes of exploration of economies and the new economy of these explorations. We hope to use the conference and its cases to illuminate the links between the definitions of economy, property/ownership and properties/engagement. We have for a long time lived in a regime where properties were conceived as finite lists, so that even the two conflicting regimes of private property rights and the dream of common property had that in common. They bracketed the engagement with the economy and the economy was thus defined as these finite-lists worlds where explorations, investigations and surprises were ruled out. What happens when we reopen that dimension? What happens when instead of a world that looks like designed for game theorists fantasies, we discover a world made of explorers?

This line of enquiry looks fruitful to the extent that it allows us to operate new distinctions and to blur previously prevalent ones that prove now irrelevant. To simplify, explorers' gestures cut across most prevalent concepts handed down by economic theorists: instead of falling neatly on one or the other side of the economic producer/economic consumer divide, they invent a new topos. Because they invent constantly new modes of relations with the economy and re-enchant it by being a-specialized and a-professional, they create new forms of organization and mobilization that disrupt and challenge the ones that a few hundred years of economic organizations had solidified.