

## *Ripple Effects: Art and Parecon*

Michael Albert interviewed by Ross Birrell

**RB: In your chapter on 'Art' in *Realizing Hope: Life Beyond Capitalism* (London and New York: Zed Books) in which you outline the position of artists in a parecon and address some common apprehensions artists have about parecon, you conclude 'Parecon is art friendly. It is an artistic economy.' (107) Can you say a little more about why you consider parecon an 'artistic economy'?**

MA: It has two broad meanings. First, parecon is friendly to artists per se - in that it provides for them an environment in which they can pursue their labors in solidarity with all other citizens, receiving a just income geared to how long, how hard, and under what conditions they do socially valued work, without having to endure commercialization and alienation much less subordination to donors, owners, etc., and more generally without being members of a class materially or socially above or below other people, and, finally, having self managing say, like other people, over their economic labors and lives. Parecon does all this for everyone, artists included.

Second, parecon creates a context and culture of creative diversity and social and personal development rather than homogenized, commercialized, profit seeking and collective subordination. In this context, the pursuit of artistic excellence and innovation is explored and enacted according to the will of artists, not according to the will of entrepreneurial employers or donors.

**RB: Your description of artistic labour seems rooted in the language of 'production' and 'consumption' (the rights of artists to be remunerated for their work as artists seems to lie in their creative 'product' being accepted as valued art by their peers). But how does this relate to the context of art practice in what for some is an epoch of 'postproduction', where artists manipulate and reproduce the creative production or output of others?**

MA: Parecon is about economic life and activity, production, consumption, and allocation. So insofar as parecon has implications for art and artists, it is primarily in their role as producers or consumers. Presumably people interested in doing art as a part of their socially valuable economic labor will wish to be remunerated for it, as others are for their contributions. Thus the discussion of that.

As to an 'epoch of post production' I don't know what you may have in mind here. On the one hand, of course anyone can produce or enjoy art in their free time, not as

part of their economic work. Nothing prevents that. Beyond that, I don't understand the question - the idea that we are in a world where we don't need to produce, don't need to work - is, well, utterly ludicrous, so I assume you don't mean that. I think you may be saying that many who are called artists won't be so much creating output from scratch as utilizing outputs that exist in new ways. I don't see the problem, assuming it is generating new results that are socially valued.

**RB: When I was involved in setting up the Scottish Artists Union (the first new union of the 21st Century) the difficulty to get artists to join was that there was no identifiable single employer to collectivize against in order to protect wages, improve conditions, etc. In this respect the model of the factory and worker's council and the artist's 'monopoly' on their creativity seems out of step with the conditions of artistic labour? How would you address this perceived discrepancy between the theory and practice of parecon?**

MA: In a parecon, no worker has an employer against whom it is necessary to organize and battle in order to try to protect wages or conditions. Workers are their own employers, so to speak, and there is no zero sum contest, either, for income, nor does anyone have a motive to impose speedup, harsh conditions, etc., nor the means to do it, for that matter. Artists in a parecon, like all others who contribute by their labors to the social product, whether making bicycles, or playing sports that are viewed, or providing medical care, or whatever - are organized by their field into a large industry council, into worker's councils for their individual workplaces, and into various teams, etc., within that. They receive income based on how long they work, how hard they work, and the onerousness of the conditions of their work - not based on property, power, or even volume of output. They work in what we call balanced job complexes, having a fair mix of tasks and responsibilities comparably empowering to the mix that others have. And they self manage, collectively, within the broad economic setting of participatory planning.

I am not sure I understand what contradiction you have in mind. Perhaps you can clarify. In capitalism about 20% of the population, who I call the coordinator class, gets very substantial income, even huge income, by virtue of holding a monopoly on empowering work that conveys immense bargaining power, in turn brought to bear in the market. They protect that monopoly fervently, which produces not only class division, but a waste of many other people's potentials. But none of this persists in a parecon wherein there are balanced job complexes and no market but instead participatory planning, etc. etc. So, for example, artists in a parecon don't get income by virtue of keeping down the number of artists, raising the value of their products, etc., but, they get income, instead, for the duration, intensity, and onerousness of their socially valued labor.

**RB: For artists, the contradiction of art in a parecon seems to reside in the tension between worker's 'autonomy' and 'socially useful labour'. In the Twentieth Century avant-garde 'artistic autonomy' and 'socially useful art' were often incommensurate, splitting the Surrealist movement and the SI, for example. Do you see 'artistic autonomy' and 'socially**

### **useful art' as necessarily incompatible terms in a parecon?**

MA: It depends what you mean by artistic autonomy. Artists, like scientists, bicycle producers, and all others who contribute to the social product and who earn a share of it as income for their efforts, must be producing something valued. Imagine that I say I want to work as a singer, say, or as a surgeon, or as a football goalie. I might want to do one of those things, yes, but I can't because I can't do such work well enough to be worth remunerating. I can't produce socially valuable output in these ways. To be remunerated for it, I have to work at something where my output is valued.

This holds for artists too. So, to be an artist - singer, writer, sculptor, or whatever - I apply to the relevant workers council in my region for a job - just as I would apply to the airplane pilots council, or the bicycle workplace council, etc., for other jobs. The workers have to decide if they wish to hire me to their workplace. They are judging whether I can do the work well enough to contribute to the value of their operation, not the public.

What the public does, however, is by its choices in what is called participatory planning, indicate the total output from the bicycle plant, the airplane pilots, or the singer or writers or other artists, that they want to consume. Some of this product is straight production... as in bicycles, flights, or songs. But some of this product is the exploration, innovation, investment, and creative design of new options. Not all this pans out. But the public is more than able to understand the need for and desirability of innovation in every field, even innovation that is difficult to understand or appreciate for a time.

So, if I call myself an artist I don't suddenly gain the option of doing anything I want - autonomously, outside society. True. But if I want to be artist, and am hired by one or another artist's workplace council to be one, then I can self manage my labours, yes, producing output - including innovation, obscure art, or very widely accessible art, as the workplace intends and in accord, as well, with the public's overall planning - just as for scientists, teachers, manufacturers, farmers, and so on.

No one gets to do whatever they want regardless of the impact on others - either by utilizing inputs that could go to other ends, or by taking outputs that aren't earned, and so on. But we all, artists and everyone else, get to have a say in decisions affecting us - our work and our consumption - in proportion as the degree we are affected and in accord with our respective jobs.

**RB: For Adam Smith, the labour of (performing) artists (musicians, actors, etc.) is unproductive of any quantifiable value and is akin to the unproductive labour of 'menial servants' (a position they also share with philosophers). It is thus difficult to determine its social use in that unproductive labour fails to produce a vendible commodity which can sustain and reproduce itself in an economy. Artists and servants (as well as lawyers, judges, etc.) are thus maintained by a part of the annual produce of others. How would unproductive labour be supported in a parecon?**

MA: In the first place, this is a peculiar formulation, clearly. Obviously the product of the labors of all these folks, artists and others, is valuable, not only to the person doing these labors, but to others who receive the results, and more broadly to society as well. In a parecon, the overall community determines by its desires for these outputs and its comprehension of their broad and varied merits, how much of the society's laboring and energy and other capacities should be allotted to their production. It really is no different for art than it is for anything else. I can't summarize the whole system here and would urge folks, artists and others, to take a look.

**RB: Why is a parecon founded upon rewarding 'effort' and 'sacrifice'? Can you say a little more on the choice of the word 'sacrifice'? What is your opinion about anarchist positions which celebrate 'The Right to be Lazy'?**

MA: Work takes time that could go to other ends. It takes intensity that could, again, be saved and allotted elsewhere. And it involves some onerous conditions, as well. These are the features for which remuneration - income - should be paid in order to have the warranted incentive effect on generating desirable outcomes. You should get more, in my view and in parecon's view, if you work longer, or harder, or under worse conditions. You should not get more, however, by virtue of being able to take it due to bargaining power, or being lucky enough to have better tools, or more inborn talent, much less owning property.

We all have a right to rest – doesn't anyone think otherwise? I don't much like the word lazy, I will freely admit - but we certainly have every right to enjoy time off, to regulate our efforts, and so on. That said, I don't believe one person has a right to say I want the same or more income than everybody else, but despite my being perfectly healthy, I want to take naps all day, or swim in the bay all day, while others do all the productive labor that I wish to benefit from and I contribute nothing. People can have different value systems, of course, but I doubt there is a serious anarchist anywhere on this planet who truly thinks it makes sense to celebrate, or to remunerate, people for choosing to not contribute to social output. It would be utterly dysfunctional - but, more, there is nothing morally desirable about such a stance, either, I think, and also nothing particularly anarchist.

What anarchists have instead historically believed is that people will enjoy and gain pleasure and dignity and fulfillment from honest, socially worthy labor, freely undertaken, and collectively self managed. With this, I quite agree, and Parecon permits and indeed makes just such labor the norm, indeed the only option for its citizens who are able to work.

**RB: What in your view is the social use of art, if any?**

MA: There are various social 'uses' or benefits. There is the pleasure of art's production - its creation, rendition, etc., etc. There is the pleasure of its consumption, as in people's enjoyment of seeing, hearing, or otherwise experiencing the artistic creation. Then there are the ripple effects, as well, one might call them, of the implications of artistic expression and experience for people's

attitudes, emotions, insights, etc. In all these ways, art is again quite like many, indeed most, other aspects of social output. There are benefits to producers, to consumers, and to society more broadly in by products rippling throughout the community.

**RB: In your chapter on ‘Art’ you discuss popular art, but is there a role for ‘Critical art’ (as outlined by Proudhon, for example) in a parecon, or would critical art simply be unnecessary in the realized utopia of a parecon?**

MA: I suspect you mean by critical art, art that seeks to reveal truths or underlying relations in a manner calling them into question for change, or art that attempts to galvanize constituencies toward seeking types of change, etc. History doesn’t end with attaining a participatory economy, or even with a participatory society that has not only a new classless economy, but also a just and truly self-managing polity, an intercommunalist and mutually respectful and group-sustaining culture, a feminist kinship sphere, and so on. Life goes on. And so does struggle and innovation. So why shouldn’t critical art, in this sense of that phrase, continue as well?