

## **A Changemaker Profile of Michel Bauwens**

**By Sharon Ede**

*Michel Bauwens is a co-founder and leading activist of the P2P Foundation (Foundation for Peer-to-Peer Alternatives), which works in collaboration with a global group of researchers exploring peer production/governance/property and the open/free, participatory, and commons-oriented modes of human cooperation. He is a member of the Advisory Board of Kosmos Journal.*

### **1. Tell us about the work you are involved with:**

In 2006, I founded the Foundation for Peer-to-Peer Alternatives. We are a knowledge commons and a global ‘collaboratory’ of researchers into peer production, peer governance, and peer property. I realize I need to unpack these words, so here we go.

Our key belief and hypothesis is that the internet is creating not just a great horizontalisation in communication, but also new forms of cooperation and actual ‘production’, not just of knowledge and code (software), but also the capacity of making things in a wholly new way. It is now possible for people to meet together, declare their joint intention to produce something, and go about organizing this using a combination of ‘virtual’ and ‘physical’ means. These systems are based on people engaging with their passion, ie. doing things they actually want and like to do, to create a community around it, and to start jointly producing their knowledge online, but also physically coming together in new types of co-working such as hackerspaces, co-working hubs, and the like. Just as mutualizing immaterial things such as knowledge, code and design are now possible through internet cooperation, eg. the miniaturisation of the immaterial means of production, just so it is now possible to mutualize physical production, through the miniaturisation of manufacturing machinery, such as 3D Printing and other forms of distributed manufacturing.

The new rule is: heavy is near, light can be far away, ie. producing locally but cooperating globally. This is happening both from the bottom-up, in every area of human life, in what we call peer production, but also top-down, as existing hierarchical and centralized institutions try to adapt, engage and even co-opt these same possibilities. Thus we have crowdsourcing, collaborative consumption, open innovation and many other trends.

Our purpose then, is to observe and analyze them, but also to work for their advancement, as we believe that freely engaging producers is a great advancement, not just in terms of economic democracy, but also in terms of human life and happiness. So we don’t believe in a utopian future (though there’s nothing wrong with dreaming of a better world) but to actually look at existing practices and seek out how to extend them.

### **2. What motivated you to be doing this work?**

Though I was a disaffected and radical youth, after a long spiritual search and self-work, I adapted to the world, and undertook a career as a librarian, then corporate knowledge manager, and finally internet entrepreneur. But from my early forties on, I felt an increasing disquiet as I could observe that all indicators seemed to go in the wrong direction. Not just the ongoing destruction of the biosphere, but also the increased precariousness facing youth in the West, the increased inequality, and what I saw as the deterioration of the human psyche in corporate settings.

So I pretty much decided at some point that I had to re-engage with the political and social world. But what can really change the world? Though I am by no means a technological determinist, ie. driven by the belief that technology is good or will liberate humanity ‘by itself’, I am convinced though that we are essentially a technological species, and that human history pretty much proceeds by technological shocks, which periodically re-arrange the deck. It is in these periods of transition that human emancipation gets a new chance to re-arrange the balance of power. We are now going to precisely such a period, in which the internet is changing our ways of being (ontology), ways of knowing (epistemology), value systems (axiology).

There is both a decomposition of the mainstream world, and a recomposition of the outline of a new type of society and economy, and I would argue, a new civilisational model. This model is based on the potential to globally scale

small group dynamics, ie. to scale the trust and honesty and cooperation we feel and practice when we are dealing with those close to us. Peer to peer is the leverage that brings us an unprecedented opportunity to rehumanize our world; it is not a given, but it is worth fighting for.

So, at some point, I undertook a two-year sabbatical, did intensive reading on previous phase transitions (the change from the Roman Empire to the feudal system as well as the birth of capitalism), and slowly started developing a P2P Theory which is geared towards transforming our present society, but which is closely linked to all the positive things that people are already doing. I decided to dedicate the rest of my life to this quest.

In discovering those patterns, inter-relating them, spreading them, I am hoping that these inter-related patterns will find each other and coalesce in a new 'sustainable' logic for the future of humanity and the planet. I proceed from an extension of the existing peer to peer relationships we have with family and friends, with our chosen communities of practice over the internet, and try to expand this happiness-producing dynamic in as much aspects of life as we possibly can. We don't want to be the leader of any of these trends and movements, but be one of the catalysts, by bringing greater awareness to what is now difficult for most people to see.

### **3. What is the most rewarding aspect of your work?**

It's difficult to pin it down to one specific aspect. This engagement with social change is bound with my personal history. A first attempt as a disaffected youth, then an abandonment of the impulse, and a re-engagement with it on a more mature level after a mid-life crisis. If you have a deep impulse in life and you abandon it for whatever reason, even if you are successful in other ways, you have a black hole that sucks up your life energy. So when I decide to re-own my deep impulse as a world-changer, I achieved a higher level of personal integration, a kind of twice-born experience as explained by William James in his famous book, 'Varieties of Religious Experience'. Once you feel aligned with your 'cosmic self', a deep sense of purpose and an intimate feeling that you know why you are on this planet, a deep baseline of happiness arises.

The second thing is that if you are free to follow your passion, to self-allocate your energies with others who do the same, and you minimize the authoritarian impulse, it's simply a very happy way to work. I strongly feel that what was once an aspiration in the sixties and seventies, the free-flow of cooperation between like-minded people, is now simply a daily reality. Other aspects are the constant learning, and the fact that we are in service of others, constantly helping people finding the right resources and contacts so they can in turn advance their own projects. But you have to realize as well that it is not a bed of roses. The hardest for me has been the constant financial insecurity, the lack of income for healthcare, insufficient funds for my own family. So it is a source of happiness, but also a sacrifice, and a source of worry. But at least, the worry and anxieties occur within a baseline of happiness and purpose.

### **4. What do you feel is your biggest communication challenge?**

There are two issues for me. The first issue is one of our own networked culture, and the problem there is fragmentation. For example, our P2P Foundation is pretty good with its communications, we have a constant interest and are growing at about 30% every year, without any professional marketing, expanding just by word of mouth. We have 20 million viewers for our wiki and reach about 26 thousand daily. Still, there are many networks out there, and while it is easy to filter out quality in your own field, what do you do with other fields? There are so many domains that are under-reported by the mainstream, but it is very difficult to find the best alternative sources in all the different domains. I think this is a general problem for many people.

The second problem is the communication between the p2p subcultures and the mainstream. You still want to reach a broader population but the mass media have significantly dumbed down and become ever more corporatized. So you have two worlds, a well-informed alternative networked world; and a fundamentally misinformed mainstream. But it is still important to reach the broader population. For example, when I write for Al Jazeera, my audience jumps hundredfold, and I don't recognize any of the names of the re-tweeters, which shows we are reaching a different audience that is not familiar with our work.

### **5. How do you handle a situation when you find yourself in conflict with someone about your work or ideas?**

I'm an adherent of integral philosophy and methodology; this means a recognition of the complexity of any reality and the impossibility for any person or movement to get a fully correct understanding of the world. Furthermore, it also follows that no one can be 100% mistaken. This means that difference in perspectives is fully constitutive of our world, and that truth building is necessarily a collective process, whereby the ability to see the world from various perspectives, those of others than yourself, adds to the capacity to shed light on any 'object' of knowledge (which of course is no object at all, since knowledge is a participative process).

This is how the P2P Foundation work is constituted. Our wiki is not neutral or objective like the stated aim of the Wikipedia, but is a 'perspectopedia' in which various viewpoints are honoured, on the condition that you are interested in peer to peer dynamics. Our boundaries are: overt and hostile racism, sexism, and other forms of rankism that deny the equipotentiality of the other members of our community, ie. their capacity to offer useful contributions to our collective project. We make a big difference in the freedom to say what you want, in terms of context, but pay attention to 'how you say it', ie. we ban personal attacks. This means that overall, our internal and communications are generally quite peaceful. Of course, occasionally, both online and offline, there are occasional outbursts. From my own experience, love and hate are usually intertwined (you can only be really angry at something you love), and outbursts are often tied to unprocessed 'hot buttons'. In other words, you get into conflict not exactly because of what the other person says, but because it awakens something you condemn within yourself. And finally, cultivating some form of self-awareness about such processes, helps you regulate your own negative emotional outbursts. Of course they do happen to me as to others. I try to be civil in all cases, to be exclusively defensive in terms of doing hurtful things (ie. never initiate any aggressive action), and if the conflict seems unresolvable, to part ways, and simply decide that each party goes on its own path, without unduly disturbing the other. Peer productions contexts are helpful, because they allow permissionless action of individuals, and keep conflicts where they really needed; and because they happen in a common context of love for the commons, ie. the social object that binds us. A final rule is, bring conflict into the open, submit it to the arbitrage of the collective wisdom of the group, do not take authoritarian actions based on individual power.

## **6. What's your best piece of advice for change-makers and activists?**

That's a tough one. I don't really feel successful enough, nor able to generalize easily from my own very specific experience. Very generally speaking, as an advocate of peer production, ie. passionate production, I feel that every individual should look at the confluence of these three factors: 1) what do I want to do (your passion), 2) what can I do (your skills), 3) what does the world need (this only can guarantee a livelihood through donations or any other means of support). Take your time to find this, and wait for your gut to tell you what the right decision is. It may still be a wrong decision, but as long as you have integrity with others, and sincerity with yourself, it does not matter, as even wrong turns can be productive and a gift to the world. Bear in mind that no good deed goes unpunished and therefore, your motivation cannot be the success of the endeavour, which is not under your control.

Combine a steadfastness based on principles, and a long term vision of your strategy, with an adaptation to emergent realities and what the others and the universe will dictate you as the 'next step'. The way is the destination. In all likelihood, you will fail, but if you hadn't made the effort, it's much more likely that the world would be much worse off. Find the right mix between selflessness for the goal, and the enjoyment of life, ie. engagement with your own wellbeing, those of your loved ones, and the communities you are engaged with. Listen to your heart, your instincts, but also to your reason. Be integral and integrative, not monological in your search for solutions. We're all just part of the puzzle, but each part of the puzzle is necessary, so the key is to find your right 'fit'.

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