

Super Market¹ or the Counterpoint Kitchen

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I

The Shy Signifier

In recent years a type of entity known as signifiers have been the subject of much writing. A signifier is an object, thing, trace, sound, or complex of such, which basically says: "Don't look at me, I'm not really me, I stand here for something else!" In minimal definition, then, signifiers are busily, often ostentatively pointing *away* from themselves. For instance, let "this paper-clip" be a signifier. What it would like to evoke in your mind or bring to your attention is not these words but instead for instance this little object:

(In the printed version, a real, material paper clip was inserted here – impossible in a file version, lamentably)

Fig 1.
(*L'effet Post-Magritte:
Ceci est un trombone*)

Most common signifiers are spoken or written words. If viewed as material objects (printer's ink, sound waves) this subcategory stands out for its inability to do anything much *else* than signifying, pointing elsewhere. Other subcategories, however, may be called icons, signals, indices etc. – non-verbal tokens still sharing the property of *basically* pointing away. Thus for instance Magritte's pipe-painting, while not a lingual representation certainly is an iconic signifier of another, a (most often) absent object, an actual pipe for tobacco smoking. Such tokens may – to some limited extent – act or be put to uses other than pointing away, being blown over a head, say. An old milepost may become part of a plinth, etc.

Not-Only Signifiers

Other basic uses are more readily seen, of course, in objects which most often do non-signifying roles: Smoke may perform as an index of fire (Peirce), true, but also, say, for curing salmon, or being filtered so as to limit pollution. Still more clearly when an object such as the new Citroën is taken, not for a drive but to stand for "the very essence of petit-bourgeois advancement" (Barthes): Pertinent as an observation, yes but still rather *ungerade* as a use.

These last cases exemplify further possible subcategories of signifiers¹, full or part-time: The entire world of objects, natural or man-made, objects which while basically doing something else still may be regarded as signifiers in certain parts, respects or contexts. While mainly ment and made for other uses they may occasionally be used as pointers too. Most succinctly put by Roland Barthes, "as soon as there is society, every usage is converted into a sign of itself" (1967:41). A utensil in his instance cannot

¹ The idea of not-only signifiers must not be taken to mean that there is an as if unbridgeable gulf between 'words' and 'things', categories that may overlap or even merge in certain crucial contexts. In a famous example the word 'asylum' replaced for instance 'stultiferum navis' only when – or after – a quite new and distinct thing, asylums, had been created.

possibly be seen or used without some amount of 'pointing away' being involved.

Extending from this again is the idea that all of Human Culture, material or not, is basically signification or meaning, sort of an ubiquitous though muffled or indistinct language just waiting to be read – a possibly difficult and controversial but always feasible task. "Language may not only mirror but actually *be*" society, in Hjelmslev's careful – but very expressly hypothetical phrasing (1943:1). Or conversely when Peirce insists that Man himself is a sign – a stand less prominent in his later work though.

The Indistinct Object

Now, following up such doubts: Barthes' statement, as he might have agreed in later years, may be "true as it reads but false as it is taken"². All known objects are identified as belonging to some type or category – but that is subsumption rather than pointing. More basically they appear as *themselves*, not totally unique perhaps but still as the only present specimen in focus, available for examination, use etc.

The meaning of words, our basic pointers is conventional. But lingual conventions are limited, easily verified, and independent of single wills³. Not so, or not quite so at least with non-lingual objects cast in the role as signifiers. Their meaning too is conventional but by far not so well delimited or verifiable. Numerous different or conflicting conventions may compete, with nothing like lexicographic or etymologic authorities to judge between them. And their selected, idiosyncratic, or 'sentimental' value may be will-contingent.

² Paraphrasing Goffman (1974:1) on the so-called Thomas-theorem "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences".

³ Largely, since decipherable patois, local slang or sociolect, and even individual idiosyncrasy or innovation do occur.

The effects of linguistics on social science was by analogy all along. A linguistics based on the Humpty-Dumpty-principle⁴ is entirely out of the question. Not so, lamentably, not quite so, with a more general semiology and the social scientific work which it inspired.

Culture, Meaning, Metabolism: What Things Do when they Don't Point Away

Some semantic or semiologic work was brilliant, some fair, some merely copious. But over the years I noted a certain weariness with the idea of a world constructed as if consisting of *nothing but* signifiers and meanings, meanings and signifiers. While by no means denying their existence or importance, I for one wanted to find out about less roundabout things too: things pointing, that is, not away but *to themselves*, things as objects for our – sometimes even as subjects for their own – use or transformation. Their basic message – if indeed it is a message and not simply an action or effect – is: "Look here, I'm *me*, use me!"⁵ Or even "Like it or not, taking notice or not, durably impressed or not, you're using me – or being put to use by me – right now!"⁶

II

The very first such object to strike my mind (quite literally effecting the blow on my head which our Magritte's painting might but didn't) was the

⁴ Carroll/Dodgson's character from *Through the Looking Glass* states that human power can rule at will even over the meaning of words.

⁵ After, perhaps, a first "Look at me – I'm one of us (one of my kind) !"

⁶ Space precludes two further excursions, one about some possible prejudices in the general philosophical notion of an object (as detached rather than embedded, and as nature-given rather than man-made); the other on some differences – and similarities – between metaphors and metonyms.

speed bump, or sleeping policeman⁷. This little-noted invention, more recent than both nukes, chips and similar modern marvels, for once was an object, a product such as to act only, and not at all to signify. It may of course be taken as if *saying* "drive slowly – or else!" but the essential point is, it will act its part no matter whether you see it, read it, understand it or not.

From this first success, limited and modest, I've been going on to try and study more complex and essential contemporary phenomena, real challenges for further insight⁸. I wrote something about cars and transportation (1986, 1990), and I started writing on one of its terminals, the *home* (1988), always keeping in mind, not significations or meanings but what things do when they are *not* pointing away; what they do to us and we to them. As this latter task proved to be difficult (perhaps exceedingly so), its object having for instance no single clear purpose or function, centre or periphery, dependence or independence, I decided to approach its difficulties as if from without.

Starting with a text on a minuscule detail, the key (1989), I wanted to go on with the kitchen, as a possible centerpiece; not a most used room, perhaps, but the one most clearly used for production or processing purposes. But what is a kitchen without its stores; a fridge, cupboards, pantry etc.⁹? And what are these without the dealers and retailers, grocer's shops, supermarkets etc. from which to fill them? The point may be even more

⁷ Bruno Latour's taking note of this phenomenon came to my notice well after the present paper was first written, cf. Latour (1992:244). His 'actants' etc. is a somewhat similar idea though worked out in more detail for safety belts, keys, door shutters etc.

⁸ Benjamin's work (1983) provides constant inspiration, the idea that through careful selection and analysis of certain objects (or object systems) you may characterise not only a metropolis but an entire epoch. Paris or the 19th century, then, is its archades, fashions, reconstruction works, exhibitions and publicity, interiors, its poets and flâneurs, prostitution, museums, robots etc. A contemporary text of potentially similar scope might be George Perec: *Life. A User's Guide*, though (to the extent there is a conflict) literary rather than scientific. For the second Asa Briggs: *Victorian Things*, too.

⁹ The general use of kitchens, now that every household has one, becomes somewhat akin to the subsistence farms etc. of former generations, generating some independence in food processing etc. but, being insufficient, some dependence too – a need for finding outside sources of income, most often wage labour.

readily seen in converse, perhaps: What is a grocer's shop to you when you're *without* a kitchen, staying in a hotel for instance? Clearly there is some sort of a contingency between kitchens and supermarkets, as if a point-counter-point relation.

Consequently if one proves difficult to understand, why not start with the other?

III

Shopping Around

What does the unbiased eye see when Mr. or Ms. Jedermann goes for his (her) regular shopping?¹⁰ In the first place a number of other actors and objects, personal and impersonal. As for the former a divide between staff and customers will attempt conspicuousness.

Now first, why are we/they there in the first place? The *staff* is there performing its semi-skilled labour, guiding, price-tagging, restocking, tidying etc. in return for an agreed wage. The *customers* share at least one of these tasks: They're there, as already noted, out of the necessity of regularly restocking their own kitchen's stores. Further they inspect, select, reflect, learn, calculate, judge, decide; they may socialise etc. – and finally pay.

The task may be liked or not, a drudgery or an inspiration as extremes; it is not however strictly speaking voluntary: Someone from every household will *have to* go there ever so often. There are alternatives only in a limited sense: Other shops, eating out; but rarely if at all significant amounts of self-provisioning or direct dealing with producers. Specialisation in farming has brought this even to most of the countryside: A farmer today may have his (over-) fill of celery cabbage *or* broccoli *or* (unprocessed)

¹⁰ For a (very) brief general statement of method, see Otnes (1990). I also try to apply the methodological sequence recommended by Bourdieu et al. (1973), that is, a process of four basic phases: Rupture, construction of the object, verification, and epistemological feedback. The actual data they stem in the main from my reflections on doing most of a family's shopping over a number of years.

cereals *or* milk *or* eggs *or* pork *or* mutton etc. of his own production but rarely more than a few; the rest will have to come from shops here as everywhere else.

This goes to say that today's supermarket, taking over the role of the grocer's shop and more, is *mediating* – and rather inavoidably at that – the general metabolism of our lives. If, as in Marx' famous phrase "nature is the inorganic body of Man", the supermarket nowadays is a most – perhaps *the* most – crucial scene for facing it, getting Nature mediated, experiencing it: a closeup of our inorganic bodies, so to say; Nature negosticated¹¹, if not domesticated – quite yet.

This experience, conscious or not, is direct for those of us involved in shopping and processing of meals etc.; indirect – mediated for example at our dinner tables for the rest. And as the shop or shopping itself, it is nothing like a voluntarily chosen activity – not in content, and in the short run, not much even in form.

There is a routine but ultimate trust involved in our in-take of meals: The eaten goods gain access to our bodies; *they become us* – transformed, it's true but still part of us physiologically. These very goods result from our society's shared efforts, however intricate, distant, or veiled that connection may be. In a very material sense, *they are us and we are them*. One is reminded of Hegel's reference to "the mysteries of Ceres and Bacchus". In his doctrine this results from the consciousness's despair of not being able to grasp a phenomenon, a 'this', in its full uniqueness, hence proceeding to devour it instead. This is offered in anticipation of 'practice', or his doctrine of desire, pleasure, or disgust; master, mediation, and slave.¹² Desire or despair, taste is a basic, a transforming sense.

From Counter to Coating

¹¹ A somewhat awkward neologism for Nature taking a Shop or Business (Lat. *negotium*) form – admissible, perhaps, since both commercialisation and commodification are already taken for different use.

¹² We'll return to this towards the end of this paper, cf. another paper, in Fürst et al. (1991).

Following the exterior doors a biggish hall, measuring some 1500-2000 sq. ft., with a system of bars immediately inside, a second entrance-and-exit within the first, a system indicating a preferred direction for shopping walks: Start at the entrance, finish at the checkout. Look closely, minimise U-turns. – Trolleys or baskets for transporting your chosen merchandise are usually waiting to serve by the entrance.

The bars or barrier setting off the sales area proper is of some special interest in that it replaces the *counter* of traditional grocers' shops. In the old days counters and their staff were generally there to prevent customers from stealing, contaminating or polluting, or acting in other ways irresponsibly towards the merchandise. For some pollution-prone products – fresh meat, fish, delicatessen, cheese, and perhaps bakery products; but not generally vegetables – the staffed counter is still there. Similarly for potentially dangerous products such as the chemists' or (in Norway, Sweden, Finland) alcoholic beverages. But generally, apart from this, today's shopper or consumer has direct access to most marketed products, being allowed to inspect, turn and touch them – with the barrier on the one hand, and a variety of packings and coatings on the other acting the part of former shop assistants and their counters. Not unlike Foucault's power, commodity-protection has been internalised by each, in the form of a PVC, paper, glass, tin etc. shield covering it. "Use commodities to sell commodities" might be the motto.

Once inside the bars with your trolley numerous gondolas, shelves and counters meet the eye. In them, ordered in some kind of system or sequence – deployed and on display in this life-size vending-machine or buy trap – is the world of goods, or the temple of commodity fetichism.

Haec Tibi Omnia Dabo ...

It is a marvellous, great and varied exposition – a takeaway exposition, or so it seems – of what contemporary production can do for you, your house

and person, your kitchen, meal, palate, body, your bath and personal hygiene, your clothes, linen etc. It may act as a most welcome challenge to what the French call their *épanouissement*, the unfurling and development of your skills in culinary arts, or (less frequently) in lavandory or cleaning arts.

It's simultaneously and as much sort of a prison in disguise, a soft suppression: Not only charity, but need and dependence too begins at home – and to top it, their *limitation* as well, our incomes or budgets. As mentioned you just cannot go without some choice of goods from shelves such as these, and you have to¹³ pay for them, which reminds all of us ever so discreetly that our purses, wallets, budgets are oh so limited.

What did we need incomes or wages for if it wasn't for the soft suppression, the literal compulsion to buy, from the supermarket? Do we really need its system of money-vote-rationing by the piece or even by the weight unit, forever and ever? The consensus would seem total: it is as general in socialist as in capitalist societies. Still one keeps wondering. Effective? Or just misplaced accuracy?

For Ms. Jedermann the philosopher or linguist several other things strikes the mind concerning this exhibition:

A Languageless System

It is, or may be, put to use almost entirely without any speech or language. You may walk through a supermarket finding what you want and paying for it without uttering, reading or understanding one single word. True, the merchandize regularly have written names, on their shelves, maybe even on themselves, their tins, packings, coatings etc. But almost as often they are either in transparent (glass, PVC) or in iconised packs: Outside the can

¹³ This compulsion, of course, is accepted rather than physically binding. The volume of thefts, cheatings, fiddlings etc. appears not to be very substantial, despite the very remarkable efforts of those specialising in it, cf. Taylor (1984).

of green beans is a picture, idealised perhaps but not grossly misleading, of the green beans inside the can.

There is a further point touching on art history here – from Magritte to Warhol: On his famous Campbell soup can silk prints the contents icon *is missing*; it's a later addition, not a regular feature of late 60s and early 70s. A constant feature, though, is the highlighting of brand or producer names rather than ingredient or product type name.

More important for identification than the name is the *number*, more regularly known as the price, of the goods. This is the single symbol you will *have to* decode, to somehow understand and act adequately upon: Not the individual prices but their final sum, which will be displayed for pronouncing, or pointing at, at the shopping's end. That, and for assuring the required response, the symbols of that strangest of all commodities, money itself, for finding and handing over an commensurate number of bills, coins, cheque or credit card¹⁴.

Thus at our shopping-tour's end the initial *haec tibi omnia dabo* ends with a conditional: *si pacabis mihi*; non-demonic but also admitting no exceptions. So, the contemporary Scripture according to St. Market becomes, in the vernacular: "All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt manage to pay me".

The Perfectly Direct Discourse

The goods exhibited do form a system of signs but of a most peculiar sort. Wonderlandlike, their basic common message is very, very simple: "Eat me", "drink me", "wear me", "use me" etc.¹⁵

¹⁴ This final checkout or paying phase calls for closer analysis later. Some topics: Money as a redundant or 'joker' signifier: Anything of its worth. – Exchange vs. gift theory. – The rarity of customer insolvencies: do they take pains to stay within, or simply interna-lise or embody, their budget limitations, or what?

¹⁵ We may wonder whether Carroll/Dodgson the erudite logician were not teasing his colleague Peirce with his "eat me", "drink me" labels: Such signs, or their contents, affect us bodily, even if not understood. It takes a careful blend of trust and suspicion in the first place; and a learned, carefully proportioned use, if one is to avoid both swelling and shrinking, acquiring suitable size, as Alice.

This basic message is repeated on the aggregate level, outside the supermarket entrance: It's neon sign saying "This is supermarket DUNCECO" which more basically reads "Come in!" and "Use me!" too.

As for inside details the striking feature is the commodities' perfection of self-reference: "I am me – let doubters check, taste, try!" Unlike a sign of oral or written language which refers invariably¹⁶ to something outside of, other than, itself (cf. part I above), a supermarket commodity will refer, as invariably, to nothing but itself. In perfect opposition to the famous Cretan¹⁷ the supermarket commodity is a case of remarkably *consistent* self-reference. Strange that the philosophers have paid so little attention: The language of commodities may be muffled, dim and indistinct; it is nevertheless extremely precise, almost infinitely variable, and, whatever it may be seen as uttering, it has its own meta-language embodied in itself¹⁸: "I am what I seem. Please test!" One might suggest that on this non- or sub-human level, Rousseau's *être* and *paraître*, parting according to him with the advent of inequality and urbanism, has, in this particular but very broad field – a predominantly urban one at that – joined forces again: If not we ourselves, our commodities at least are just that, just exactly what they seem¹⁹.

The commodity thus presented is becoming more than Marx' fetish, that is, not only embodying human effort, social relations in an obscured but lite-

¹⁶ Excepting some specialist uses, by linguists, grammaticians, logicians and philosophers.

¹⁷ Epimenides, rumoured to have said "All Cretans lie", thus inventing the *inconsistent* self-reference. For a solution, cf. Hansen (1971).

¹⁸ Not unlike Hjelmslev's (1973) crediting Tarski with the thesis of the *universality* of everyday languages: They can express well-nigh anything, or (citing Kierkegaard CW, v. 6, 1924:512), in everyday language you can grapple with the ineffable until it's expressed. It is consequently rich enough not to need any special metalanguage; all that can be said about it can be said in it.

¹⁹ On closer look, this equality – like most others – proves to be formal rather than real: Though the commodities are materially present – perfectly equal – before each and every customer, a tacit inequality still results from the fact that our *abilities* to act on their "use me !" differ; what use is either soup can or roast if you can't operate a cooker ? what use knitting wool if you can't operate knitting needles, etc.

rally objective form. It's basic message, act, or performance: "Use me – I'm me", will when generalised fade over into "I am that I am" – or god-like qualities. The fetish deified, or almost.

Critics of consumerism will protest that goods, merchandize may, and often do, mislead, even lie, and I agree that they may: The meatballs containing soya rather than meat, for instance, or the kangaroo meet appearing as beef, or the not-always stated harmful side effects of prolonged use of, let's say, to-morrow's cigarettes.

The commoner case, however, is for less total, less outright lies, that is, for less than full truths: The possibly dangerous additives hiding under 'E' codes, for instance. Or for smaller admixtures of cheap ingredients in more expensive ones. But the commonest case would seem to be more like exaggerating and bragging, rather than blatant lies, black or white. The commodity appears as almost human once again: It does not speak well but it is inclined to some bragging. Who wouldn't like to appear an unoffensive little bit better than we really are?

Adding now to the basic message of commodities in a shop, the extremely simple: "Use me" is, however, a second, contextual message due to its juxtaposition with so many other, rather similar goods. It becomes "*Use me, not my neighbour*" instead. This is what gives rise to occurrences of immoderate bragging on the part of commodities, the need to outshine its neighbours. Each "use me" would like to appear as if totally unique, absolutely incomparable, a total innovation. A very noisy universe of commodities ensues, consisting as it were of nothing but Big Bangs; impossible but still attempted.

The Loss of Face in Focus

Our visual field, or consciousness generally tends to divide into focus and blur, figure and ground, front– and backstage. The 'general blur' or pause is not infrequent: "Nothing much of interest to look at now"; general or total

focus is an impossibility. Equal attention all over all fields is infeasible, beyond capacity.

In such fields human bodies, especially the heads and faces with their concentration of sensory terminals, are routinely scanned for potential focusing.

But in a world of goods a face is a landmark. Now typically in the supermarket the customers face nothing but goods. Contrast it with traditional type shops – today preserved mainly for outstandingly expensive, expert or dangerous merchandise: They have counters, behind which, *facing you*, looking your way now, or (rather) soon, are attendants, shopkeeper, deputies, assistants. Their faces provide rest, focus, contact, they save our visual fields from the chaos of the goods galore.

The shop used to be a theatre; it has become an exhibition. For in the supermarket such faces, such co-actors, are largely missing – until you reach the checkout. If they're there, they're either at special counters guarding dangers, contaminables, valuables – or you will have to go searching for them, like you have to do for everything else you want to find in such shops. You're left alone to contemplate the goods. But not quite alone:

Only Yous

If you'd get annoyed with something while waiting your turn in a traditional shop, your aggression (if you dare express it) has an obvious target: The faces across the counter. Your customer role has an ostentative, a literal counterpart readily visible, the shop personel. Not so in the supermarket: If you get annoyed, the nearest face is almost invariably a fellow customer, looking in the same general direction as you do, as totally irresponsible as you for the goods you're all observing, in a hurry minding his own business, which is exactly the same as yours (cf. below for modifications).

The customer role in a supermarket is, briefly, skewed or biased. The role system is very nearly unilateral. There used to be the housewife²⁰ and her shopkeeper interacting face to face. Now we're all consumers, customers, all performing in the same half of the old role-set, all looking the same way – at the commodities. Only in the end, at the cashier's, and then very briefly, will we have to face a genuine, Personal Other.

This is strikingly dissimilar from standard role-sets: Mother-child, doctor-patient, cops-gangsters, cowboys-indians, boss-worker and what have you. Even compared to the relative egalitarianism of friend-friend there is a great difference: Friends (that remain friends) will typically have something to say to each other, to do for each other. Not so with supermarket customers. They may ask and be asked questions but are under no obligation to reply.

There is even a difference from the monotony of the assembly line: Its workers perform monotonous tasks, but still tasks that somehow in the end fit together, emerge as a finished accomplishment. Whether viewed with pride, shame, hate, love, or indifference the workers have this in common, in material fact: Their product.

Supermarket customers do not have that. They've only the cherished, much propagated 'free choices' in common – and that on closer look may be very little, not even so thoroughly free: Dollar votes are freely (well, Bourdieu) cast but *very* skewedly distributed. That's why they're not (in principle at least) allowed to count in political elections.

In a supermarket, then, we're all out on the same spree, or moderation. Everybody looking in the same direction, everybody in everybody else's way, still everybody as irresponsible for the chaos, pokes, and general inconvenience – or its opposites for those who can shop during slack hours.

²⁰ Not even yet printed is, I believe, Louis Pinto's remarkable paper (1988) on *la ménagère* as forerunner of the more recent consumer role, presented at the first conference on the sociology of consumption in Oslo in January 1988.

Its done on purpose, of course, no doubt about it. People would never accept such treatment from Responsible Other People. But with shelves, gondolas, commodities and fellow customers only, they most often do; they acquiesce. One strong reason may be the wide observance of that minimal social norm: "Don't get in the way!", or "watch it!" so common in anonymous and amorphous occasions.

Mechanic Insolidarities?

Sociologically of striking interest is the fact that supermarket customers would seem to exhibit a near maximum of Durkheim's mechanic solidarity: "We're all doing the same thing". This solidarity, however, is supposed to be based on the similarity, likeness, the equality of its units.

Now this is where our present consumers explode the pattern of mechanic solidarity altogether. For anyone who cares to stay and note at the cashiers, our baskets, trolleys, wallets or bank accounts in the end are very dissimilar indeed.

A case of mechanical solidarity *without* similarity, then? That would have been a nice and stimulating deviant case for the science of sociology. But lamentably it's rather a case of small or lacking solidarity. The similarity is superficial, situational, passing, ephemeral only.

Nevertheless it remains interesting that even such limited similarity may give rise to non- or in-solidarity *at will*, incorporated (or crystallised in Durkheim's term) in a material system, the supermarket itself. It's an instructive contrast to industrial factory organisation and material lay-out. For example it brought an end to the institution of haggling²¹ – discussed or negotiated prices ("for you special price" – for all). Today that is largely history in mass, final consumption trade. In its place petty price tag fraud²²

²¹ For a classic counterinstance, cf. Garfinkel (1967:68 ff.).

²² With glued price-tags seen as signifiers – as long as they're removable the glue itself becomes significant; or the Sr-Sd-relation becomes no stronger than the tag glue.

found somewhat of a niche, later ousted by the pin-code laser-scanned system, giving in due course no doubt rise to further 'fiddling' efforts.

There results even a similarity, an isomorphy customer – commodity: Each looking the same way as his likes, each facing the other. Hegel's 'practice' becomes a dialectic not of Master, Slave (or rather Lord and Serf) and Mediating Product, but more like a Slave-Slave, or a set of compartmentalised Slave-Product dialectics. This may be why it is so exhausting, why it is so difficult even when making conscious efforts, to take note of what other customers do, select, approve or disapprove of.

Hence by material fact customers or consumers have no visible Opponent and no shared interests. The supermarket is a sort of self-service purveyor belt, resulting however in no final product but in a multitude of entirely separate merchandise basket, application efforts, etc. – shared, but in small isolated groups, eac with their similar or dissimilar meals, cleanings etc.

If they ever manage to organise production on such principles Capitalism would be thouroughly transformed. And isn't it?

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