



SERRC
Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>
ISSN: 2471-9560

Are We Wiser Together? A Review of Cizek and Uricchio's *Collective Wisdom*

Tertia Gillett, Villanova University, tgillett@villanova.edu

Gillett, Tertia. 2023. "Are We Wiser Together? A Review of Cizek and Uricchio's *Collective Wisdom: Co-Creating Media for Equity and Justice*." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 12 (9): 1–5. <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-849>.

Collective Wisdom: Co-Creating Media for Equity and Justice
Katerina Cizek and William Uricchio
The MIT Press, 2022
400 pp.

Acts of collective creation are varied and plentiful, but they are commonly overlooked and rendered invisible in a contemporary culture invested in sole authorship and individual ownership. Katerina Cizek and William Uricchio draw our attention to this phenomenon by reminding us of the many ways that humans have historically cooperated and created together in ways that do not fit into the relatively recent, but predominant, narratives of sole authorship. Through a series of interviews and case studies they explore the contemporary terrain of co-creation. True to their vision, this work can itself be seen as a co-creative project with many authors, contributors, and collaborators imparting their stories, experience, and expertise to the discussion. In addition to the hardback edition, an Open Source eBook is available for free online, so these ideas are accessible beyond the academy.

Defining Co-Creation

The diverse group of contributors to this volume do not share a single vision of co-creation, but they seem to agree in a general sense that it is the collective undertaking and ownership of a creative project that focuses more on the process than the result. We might think of it as falling somewhere on a spectrum between media motivated primarily by the creator, and media created primarily in service to a partner (26). But it is also not to be confused with simple collaboration or contribution, which might suggest that the project is ultimately the creative project of a single person. The authors provide us with the following definition:

Co-creation offers alternatives to a single-author vision, and involves a constellation of media production methods, frameworks, and feedback systems. In co-creation, projects emerge out of process, and evolve from *within* communities and *with* people, rather than being made *for* or *about* them. Co-creation spans across and beyond disciplines and organizations and can also involve non-human or beyond human systems (original emphasis, 19).

This definition is broad, but it highlights the ongoing process crucial for creating collectively, resulting in both a creative project and increased mutual understanding. This work comes at a time when our collective understanding of the world seems to be shattered, and the authors hope that renewing attention and dedicating resources to co-creative practices can help us to rebuild a collective vision and shared values.

An Overview

The book begins by calling attention to humanity's rich history of creating together that has typically been overlooked in favor of contemporary models of individual authorship. But this is not simply a summary of a lost history, and it highlights the many ways that the co-creative

processes lives on. The international response to the COVID-19 pandemic offers a recent example of how thousands of scientists immediately dropped their individual research projects and worked together, collaborated, and freely shared data in order to rapidly respond to the global health crisis (4–5). Although many traditional creative enterprises like barn raisings and quilting bees have mostly fallen by the wayside as outdated, premodern practices (31), they have not altogether disappeared, and community members still work together creatively without concern for who can exclusively claim, and profit from, these collective endeavors.

The first chapter introduces the terminology of co-creation and discusses why its implementation is increasingly necessary. Co-creation, the authors think, offers us a way to approach long-term, complex problems as well as a way to rebuild public trust and a shared vision of the future. The second chapter address practical considerations when co-creating media with and within communities to ensure that those most affected are not only superficially consulted when their stories are told, but actively involved and empowered to tell their own stories. This process requires not only radically reimagining of the roles of producers, subjects, and audiences, but rethinking the entire process and internal structuring of media production. They propose a “third way” between the apparently opposing values of single authorship and co-creation (136).

Chapter 3 considers co-creation and collaboration across organizations and disciplines, particularly those of media, art, and science. This chapter also suggests alternative spaces and opportunities for co-creation, like those provided by hackathons, labs, and residencies, which can foment creativity, provide greater opportunities, and facilitate conversation across disciplines. The next chapter considers the possibilities of co-creating with non-human systems like bees, bacteria, and artificial intelligence. Chapter 5 communicates lessons learned, and risks associated with, the co-creative process. And finally, the conclusion looks to the future and offers suggestions for supporting the co-creative process, encouraging structural changes, and providing resources and networks for creation that are not controlled by profit-seekers.

Throughout the book there are numerous real-world examples and ten specific case studies, as well interviews, collaborative artwork, diagrams, and data to show co-creation in practice. They showcase beautiful artwork, documentaries, indigenous films, and innovative products for marginalized communities. The intention is not to find a consensus among these various creators, but rather to glean practical insight and advice from experienced media-makers who wish to share what they have learned and to display the great variety and impressive results of this distinct creative process.

The Need for Further Conceptual Discussion

Although there is much to appreciate in this book, I do have two specific critiques.

First, it is described as a discussion of co-creation as a practice, methodology, and concept (17). As a practical and methodological guide, it contains useful advice and inspiration for

those interested in alternative forms of media production. However, I find it to be lacking in the conceptual discussion. For example, the work of Emile Durkheim is mentioned in passing (17) but never elaborated upon beyond that. There is a brief attempt to distinguish co-creation from similar concepts like collaboration and participation, as the authors think this term attempts to capture different processes and goals. Various other contributors lend their own understanding of the concept, highlighting that it “connotes a collective sense of ownership, a joint journey of discovery, and an abandonment of ego,” (21) resulting in a rather vague definition, but perhaps necessarily so, due to the dynamic nature of the process itself.

However, the terminology of co-creation is not the only important conceptual language used without deeper analysis or elaboration. The title of the book, “collective wisdom,” is barely mentioned and does not lead to any discussion of what defines collectivity or wisdom, as individual terms or in conjunction. The authors explain that “co-creation becomes wise only when it is tied to equity and justice,” (6) to distinguish wisdom from mere “collective intelligence” (7). But what exactly do they mean by this? Not all groups of people are collectivities, and certainly not all collectivities are intelligent.

The meaning of wisdom here is even less clear than the slippery notion of intelligence, and we are left wondering when or how different groups might acquire these characteristics while others do not. Additionally, the conceptual, philosophically-loaded terminology of sentience, consciousness, and agency are used throughout the book, but very loosely and without analysis or reference to the relevant literature in these areas (193–228). The authors are not philosophers, and detailed research in this area is probably unnecessary for the success of their project. But anyone attracted by the title looking for analytical clarity will be disappointed to find that engagement with the extensive philosophical literature dedicated to issues of collective intention, action, agency, and mind, are absent.

Questions about the agency of animals, social insects, and artificial intelligence are left to artists and musicians alone to discuss (193–228), when consulting experts on this issue would likely provide more satisfying answers. For example, a specific definition of agency is offered by Christian List and Philip Pettit in their book *Group Agency*: “An ‘agent,’ on our account, is a system with these features: it has representational states, motivational states, and a capacity to process them and to act on their basis” (2011, 20). Do ants, bees, termites, or even groups of people meet these requirements? We might think that considering a question like this should include a thorough consideration of what defines these states and how we might recognize them instead of relying on intuition alone. One artist doing creative work with insects, molds, microbes, and other groups, describes them as possessing “collective memory,” and her work is described as a presentation of “collective intelligence” (199).

Philosopher Bryce Huebner explains how various collectives in the natural world actually function in very different ways, and while the beehive might exemplify a macrocognitive system, “The *appearance* of unified and purposeful behavior obscures the fact that a termite mound is a purposeless structure that results from the simple aggregation of individual

capacities,” and can be fully explained without any recourse to collective mentality (2013, 22–23). I am very sympathetic to the possibility that agency, creativity, and other cognitive capacities can be attributed to non-human organisms and groups, but I fear that attributing these characteristics broadly and uncritically will lead to ever-increasing confusion about important concepts like mind, consciousness, and agency. There are likely to be significant theoretical and ethical implications that result from ascribing agency to systems we have not previously considered to be agential.

The Need for Actionable Claims

The secondary concern I have with this book is political, specifically in terms of the history of anti-hierarchical organizing and its practical application. I support the authors’ general goal of organizing and creating collectively with an eye toward equity and social justice, but the tone remains rather noncommittal and avoids making strong, actionable claims. From global pandemics to mounting ecological disasters and perpetual economic and political crises, the enormous problems facing humanity on a global level call for an urgent collective response. But at the points where their stated goals apparently come into conflict with the sociopolitical status quo, the authors simply state that “These tensions do not mean that co-creation is necessarily antithetical to existence in a marketplace, but it might have to negotiate its role there in distinctive ways” (32). Should we perhaps consider that the goals of capital conflict, or are even entirely incompatible, with collective modes of being and creating, not to mention sustainable environmentalism and pandemic responses? As we approach potentially irreversible climate disaster, it is critical to address these issues, but doing so may lead to more radical results than the authors are willing to consider.

Co-creation is described by Cizek and Uricchio as a democratic process that questions and resists hierarchies of power, both within the field of media creation and beyond it. Remember, this socially transformative attitude with an eye toward social justice is what makes this form of collectivity “wise.” There is a brief discussion dedicated to resisting the existing conditions through “horizontalism,” a term that has been used by some social movements beginning in Argentina in 2001 (40). However, the history of social movements and political groups based on anti-authoritarian, anti-hierarchical principles who promote self-organization and direct democracy is a very long one that has typically gone by a different name: anarchism.

Despite the historical significance of organizing that has sought to challenge authoritarian states and economic systems as well as to dismantle inner-group hierarchies, there is no mention of the far-reaching influence of anarchists at all. This silence is particularly relevant when the Occupy movement is discussed, given the central role of anarchists and their contributions to the process, including consensus decision-making, hand signals, and the refusal to make demands (Bray 2013). The authors acknowledge that the work of building non-hierarchical, non-oppressive institutions is often difficult, boring, and thankless, but to truly avoid “reinventing the wheel” (231), the history of political radicals dedicated to this work for more than a century should not be completely omitted. Significant contributions to

reimagining social organizing and collective action, as well as lessons and strategies for challenging institutional hierarchies, can be taken from this work.

Recommendations

Overall, this book is primarily of interest for anyone currently working in, or interested in beginning, cooperative artistic endeavors and media projects. The case studies and interviews provide inspiration and practical insight for collaborating with diverse groups of people and empowering underserved communities in a way that blurs and questions the lines between producers, subjects, and audiences. It is a constructive example of how technology can be harnessed for the collective good, not just for profit and exploitation, as so often seems to be the case. The collective creative process itself can be the goal, instead of the single-minded focus on products. However, there is not much in this book for those interested in the more abstract, conceptual questions of collective intelligence, intentionality, or agency.

Although the authors recommend cross-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary partnerships, that seems primarily restricted to the arts and technology, with little to no consultation of scientists, philosophers, and political thinkers. While that may be an unreasonable expectation for a single book of limited scope, I do not think this book delivers on its promise to explore the conceptual significance of co-creation or the wisdom of collectives.

References

- Bray, Mark. 2013. *Translating Anarchy: The Anarchism of Occupy Wall Street*. Washington: Zero Books.
- List, Christian, and Philip Pettit. 2011. *Group Agency: The Possibility, Design, and Status of Corporate Agents*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.