

Electronic commerce, philosophy and the Greek city

Description

Much has been said of the parallels between the network economy and the agora (or forum), the centre of commerce of the ancient cities of Greece and the Roman empire. There are further spaces that feature prominently in ancient philosophy: the **stoa** (that bounded the marketplace or agora), the



1. These are material places in which several important

The electronic **stoa** (or agora) promotes conceptions of the

network economy, in its traditional and pioneering aspects. E-commerce claims several innovations in the way we make commercial transactions. The environment in which we buy and sell is integrated into the same workstation where we communicate (email), type our reports, browse, and communicate. The agora comes to the consumer. There is the promise of the customization of goods and services. Through smart online software, it is becoming relatively inexpensive to customize the design of a product and link this to manufacture and supply.

There is the much-touted “pull” phenomenon. You can make the advance to potential suppliers rather than waiting to be told what is available, or waiting to have them “pushed” to you. Consumers can be put in touch with one another to exchange goods with little mediation. The e-commerce marketplace is inexpensive to access and is relatively unregulated at the moment, which means that it is a fairly simple matter to experiment with marketing ventures and strategies. The Internet marketplace stretches across the globe, so it is possible to see what goods are available at sites otherwise inaccessible, to compare prices, and even to make purchases independent of import and export controls. This suggests a further globalization of commerce. In turn the economic aspects of the Internet seem to be challenged by the persistence of free software and data and the willingness of people to provide certain data, goods, and services without considering payment. These and other developments have been explained by some as an elaboration of the ideal of unregulated free enterprise, the language of the ever-expanding marketplace, the philosophy of the stoa.

The **Academy** is a suburb of ancient and modern Athens, reputedly the place where Plato did his teaching, isolated from the chaos of the marketplace. The academy also furnishes metaphors that find elaboration in the network economy, including elitist prejudices against mass culture, mass markets, popular culture and commercialism. The academy's investment in ideals beyond our current condition motivates the enthusiasm for the Internet as a medium for transcendence, a means to a better society.

The metaphors of the Epicurean **garden** (site of hedonistic pleasures) are also suggestive and perhaps give an account of aspects of advertising and the mass consumption of "the good life." Along with other aspects of the mass media, the World Wide Web provides ample opportunity to promote consumption as a means to pleasure, health, and well-being. The Internet also supports Epicureanism's utilitarian dark side, that of social control, relentless surveillance, and scrutiny via CCTV and webcams, though both come together in popular voyeuristic TV programs that fuse surveillance with lifestyle.

The metaphor of the **household** already has a stronghold in digital narrative: the Internet as cottage industry, the origins of personal computing, home working, the practices of noncommercial collaborations. The household also supports the practical virtue of *phronesis*, the prudent exercise of the faculties of interpretation, which have ready application in a critique of digital commerce.

If the **Stoics** were of the marketplace (stoa), the idealists (**Platonists**) of the **academy**, the **Epicureans** of the **garden**, and the **Aristotelians** of the **household**, then the school of philosophers known as the **Cynics** were the vagabonds on the **street**, the itinerants, the beggars, the homeless, the dispossessed, the peripatetic philosophers against home-bound metaphysical systems. The cynic is dependent on the handout. Narratives validating the Internet also trade in metaphors of the wanderer, the bricoleur, trickster, and thief.

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