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Zeitgeist 2- Intellectual Property

For this second zeitgeist activity we decided to concentrate on intellectual property in different areas of society. We came to choose this subject after hearing Dr Amit Kapoor mention it during class and wanted to map out what positive and negative influences it might have. The three different aspects we looked at were IP in business, in government and in education. Seeing as IP is quite a broad subject and we didn't have enough knowledge to encompass all forms of IP we concentrated on the two different types we were the most familiar with: patents, particularly in the pharmaceutical industry, and copyrights. Our business and government analysis were axed on the first ones and education on the second ones. However this map could also potentially be applied to other types of IP.

Our first step was to look into the influence of patents in business. One of the positive effects they have on businesses is that it increases competition and willingness to make new discoveries fast because the first company that files a patent for a certain invention gets a monopoly on that market for a certain amount of time. Those innovations allow for the creation of new markets, which lead to more competition and thus closes the positive reinforcement loop. An added benefit to this loop is that it creates new job opportunities. The right to intellectual property creates an incentive for businesses to work faster and better. However, a negative effect of that constant competition would be the bending of the rules and cheating, such as spying on other companies or finding loopholes in patent descriptions and using them against their inventor's consent.

Next, we decided to look into how patent regulations affect businesses. On one side, they prevent eternal ownership of the invention, which, in turn, prevents monopoly of a market, but on the other side they still cause temporary monopoly, which allows companies to increase prices of their invention. Regulations state that, for a patent to be accepted, a detailed description of the invention must be included, so that a professional competent in that domain can reproduce it without any other explanation. This, and the requirement for the invention to be marketable, makes the innovations available to the public and prevents eternal monopoly.

Another aspect of business that is affected by patents is the research and development. As they offer a ensured revenue stream, more money can be invested in R&D, which leads to more products that directly benefit society and also to more patents, thus closing the positive reinforcement loop. However in all those three aspects of buisness influenced by patents, a negative effect is often unavoidable: greed. In competition, the possible cheating and in regulations, the temporary monopoly that causes prices to increase are both due to greed. In R&D, the increased revenue ensured by patents is often used to increase profit instead of research.

In education the intellectual property that is the most encountered is copyright in schoolbooks. These copyrights lead to prohibitive costs since they can make information difficult to access. Copyright protected information cannot for example be accessed on any website and require one to pay for knowledge. Knowledge is no longer freely accessed and can also lead to a change in motive for research. People might no longer research for knowledge but for money. However they also have the positive effect of providing a revenue stream for education. A discovery made at a university for example will usually belong to that establishment and any IP revenue will get back into the educational system.

Since filing an IP can be very expensive, it also provides a revenue stream for the government through the institutions dealing with the regulations. This money, or part of it, can then be reinvested into society or institutions through grants for research and innovation, which leads to more inventions that will directly benefit society, such as medicine for example. To stretch out this map a little further we also looked into what happens when the government is involved in reinvesting money into society. People usually fear corruption. This mistrust in the government can lead to strikes and protests and in the worst-case revolutions. It also pushes people to vote for extremist parties. For example if a socialist government is mistrusted it can lead the population to vote for a far right government or vice-versa which then brings us back to corruption and mistrust.