

Media in Transition 8: Public Media, Private Media

## **Subjectivities of Sharing**

### **The Emergence of an Anti-economy**

Draft version 1.0

Wolfgang Sützl, University of Innsbruck

Please address comments to: [wolfgang.suetzl@uibk.ac.at](mailto:wolfgang.suetzl@uibk.ac.at)

#### **1. Introduction**

To most of us, the idea of sharing has a nice ring to it. We are inclined to believe that it is a good idea to educate our children towards sharing. Oscar Wilde's tale of the Selfish Giant who refuses to share and consequently ends up in a place of perpetual winter may be one example among a large number of literary works we use to educate children this way. The willingness to share seems crucial in growing beyond the limitations of our individual interests, and to reach a more sociable, noble state of being. But sharing is not only thought of as nice, it is also useful and necessary, a thought that is at the basis of ecological thinking and received worldwide attention through documents such as the Limits to Growth (1972) and Global 2000 (1980). With the rise of digital networks since the 1990s, sharing took on a whole new dimension and the possibilities of sharing that exist there, and this has given rise to the research conducted on the information commons, knowledge commons, cultural commons, etc. created in the net. The niceness of sharing began to share the stage with sharing as a crime, as in online sharing of copyrighted cultural products. Nevertheless, the nice ring of sharing is there more than ever and has reached the mainstream as testified by this year's CeBIT trade fair, Germany's main technology fair, selecting Shareconomy as its keynote theme and call it a “megatrend” and the “hottest topic for business and society.”<sup>1</sup>

For the purposes of this essay, I will understand such a statement here as meaning that when we believe we share, we do not actually know what we are doing, and therefore resort to big words, hoping they will do the thinking for us. Which might seem both a convenient and legitimate arrangement, especially given that in addition to being nice, sharing also seems to work. So there is no real demand for a theory of sharing, there is not a problem to understand and to resolve, and all the more for practices of sharing, tools of sharing, which has led to a substantial body of research on the digital commons, knowledge commons, peer-to-peer technologies, questions of intellectual property, etc., (e.g. Lessig 2002, Stalder 2005, Benkler 2006, Sützl et al. 2012, Bauwens 2013).

---

<sup>1</sup>(<http://www.cebit.de/en/about-the-trade-show/topics-trends/keynote-theme-shareconomy> last accessed 9 April 2013).

Much is being written about what is, or could be, or should be shared: democratic theory is concerned with the sharing of power, international relations with the sharing of intelligence, educational science and sociology with the sharing of knowledge, psychology with the sharing of stories and emotions, political science with the sharing of territory, communication with sharing information, computer science with sharing time, etc. But there is no clear understanding as to what constitutes an act of sharing, on what we think we refer to when we say “we are sharing,” although we do so constantly, especially since the rise of Web 2.0 (John 2012).

My own intention therefor is to focus not on institutions, structures, tools or objects of sharing, but to contribute towards an understanding of subjectivities of sharing, in other words, ask the question what kind of action sharing is, how sharing can be considered an act of construction of subjectivity and what kind of social relationships it creates. My interest in this questions relates back to the works of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler (1997) on political subjectivity, and the belief that they both share regarding the importance of subject construction in emancipatory politics after the demise of the great ideologies, an approach that we can also find in Italian postmarxist and postworkerist writers such as Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno. My thesis is that by looking at the subjectivity of sharing we can understand more about the political quality of the act of sharing itself, and what that means for the distinction between the public and private realm. In a first step, I will try to separate out sharing from the two dominant concepts in cultural economics: the gift, and exchange.

## **2. Gift, Exchange, and Sharing**

In 1925, the French sociologist Marcel Mauss published his influential study of gift exchange in what he called “archaic societies” (Mauss 1966). He shows how in the non-European cultures he researches, as well as in early European ones, gifts are exchanged, rather than simply given without return, and this gift exchange is tied with all areas of social life, from politics to economics and law and ethics, and thus form a “total social fact” (Mauss 1966, pp. vii-viii). The gift, Mauss finds, is a key form of building and defining social relationships in these societies. However, Mauss' understanding of the gift is from the outset subordinate to the concept of exchange. “In theory,” Mauss (1966, p. 1) states, “such gifts are voluntary but in fact they are given and repaid under obligation.”

This obligation has been one of the points of criticism of the gift. Perhaps the most radical critique of the gift has been proposed by Jacques Derrida (1991), who, in a critical engagement

with Heidegger and Mauss, claims that the gift is inherently impossible. The gift, in its true sense, thought of as something “must not be exchanged .. it must not in any case be exhausted, as a gift, by the process of exchange, by the movement of circulation of the circle in the form of return to the point of departure.” The pure gift—the gift as a gift, as Derrida likes to call it—is “aneconomic,” it disrupts the economic circle (Derrida 1991, p. 7). Yet the inevitable exchange situation that is constituted by gift giving means that the gift in order to be possible, must appear as something else than the gift. Conversely, “for there to be a gift, it is necessary that the gift not appear, that it is not perceived or received as a gift.” (Derrida 1991, p. 16). The gift, in short, suppresses its own reality.

That we speak of gifts as 'presents' is one of the ways in which our everyday language reveals the relationship between the gift and time, which is key in Derrida's perspective. According to him, it is our metaphysical understanding of time as a circle that makes the gift impossible. (Derrida 1991, p. 9). In order for the gift to be possible as a gift, it would need to depart from the circle of time, it would need to cause an effraction of the circle. The condition of the gift “concerns time but does not belong to it ... There would be a gift only at the instant when the *paradoxical* instant (in the sense in which Kierkegaard says of the paradoxical instant of decision that it is madness) tears time apart.” (p. 9) The gift, then, would be the attempt of a present, and knowing that such an attempt must fail, that we cannot negate time through the gift, that, consequently, “where there is the gift, there is time” (Derrida 1991, p. 59).

To understand the quality of the time given by the gift, Derrida follows Heidegger in terms of the relationship established by the latter between Being and time. Accordingly, because “Being (Sein) is signalled on the basis of the gift” (Derrida, 1991, p. 19), which is “played out around the German expression *es gibt* ... We cannot say that 'time is,' or 'Being is,' but '*es gibt Sein*,' and '*es gibt Zeit*' (p. 20). “It so happens,” Derrida concludes

that the structure of this impossible *gift* is that of Being—that gives itself to be thought on the condition of being nothing (no present-being, no being-present)—and of time which ... is always defined in the paradoxia or rather the aporia of what is without being, of what is never present or what is only scarcely and dimly. (Derrida 1991, p. 27)

And eventually, “The difference between a gift and every other operation of pure and simple exchange is that the gift gives time. *There where there is gift, there is time.*” (Derrida 1991, p. 41)

That the gift signals Being would explain why gifts are capable of defining social relations as hierarchical relations, establishing a top-bottom relationship between the giver and the receiver. As Elfie Miklantz observed, the gift represents a challenge to the receiver and cannot be considered

as the 'other' of economic exchange, a benign sphere where “altruism, voluntariness, generosity and freedom dominate over a calculated self-interest” (Miklautz 2010, p. 19). Whatever the response of the receiver to the gift, there must be a response, including the problematic possibilities of rejecting or ignoring a gift offered. That we usually do not think of gift-giving in this way, as a definition of societal status, may well be the result of what Derrida calls the “forgetting” of the gift: “Forgetting is the condition of the gift, and the gift the condition of forgetting.” (Derrida 1991, p. 18) This forgetting must be total, eliminating the memory even of the very act of forgetting itself. Such an act of forgetting takes place when we think of gifts as something to be exchanged, or indeed as something that can be reconciled with equality between giver and receiver. Is it the *shared* forgetting of the gift that is at the basis of our cultural experience of the gift?

This argument is found in Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1998). He shares Derrida's belief that the gift as such is impossible, but as a sociologist focuses on the types of social relationships that form around the gift thus understood. What Derrida refers to as the forgetting of the gift to him is the shared repression of this structural impossibility. “The giver and the receiver collaborate, without knowing it, in a work of dissimulation tending to deny the truth of the exchange, the exchange of exact equivalents, which represents the destruction of the exchange of gifts.” (Bourdieu 1998, p. 94) We go to great lengths in keeping this individual and collective self-deception alive, removing price tags and hiding invoices, writing letters to baby Jesus, part of an elaborate structure built around the “taboo of making things explicit,” with the price, the exchange value, being explicitness par excellence. (Bourdieu 1998, p. 96) Bourdieu considers the gift as part of the economy of symbolic exchanges: the double truth of the gift, its structural hypocrisy, is that there is an objective exchange taking place, while there is a collective agreement to pretend otherwise.

Like Derrida, Bourdieu looks at the gift from the angle of time. In Bourdieu's analysis, the principal tool for dissimulating the underlying exchange structure of the gift is introducing a time interval between receiving and returning a gift. This interval acts as a smokescreen that allows us to pretend that the gift was given as a gift. Thus, the gift is a function of the time that elapses between the giving of a gift and its returning (Bourdieu 1998, p. 94). But making this arrangement explicit is a taboo. We keep silent about the truth of the exchange that takes place, and this silence is a “shared silence.” (p. 97) What seems to be a rather cursory remark is really a very fundamental statement about the possibility of the (fiction of, impossibility of) the gift: Because we *share* this intention to keep the fiction of the gift alive, the gift becomes possible, along with its remaining impossibility. It is this sharing that allows us to speak of the gift as if it were a gift.

What does this mean in terms of social relations? The gift belongs to the sphere that Bourdieu calls symbolic exchange, or the market of symbolic goods (Bourdieu 1985). This social sphere is made up by those parts of society where economic exchange does not enter, where islands of symbolic exchange exist the stream of economic exchange: such places are the family, paternal relationships, relations among the dominant, where it is the word that counts, the word that overrules calculation. It is easy to see that this sphere is also the private sphere, where the spoken word reigns supreme over the number. The ways in which the laws of exchange are overridden, the pacts, the routines, the specific relations that are formed on these islands are not subject to public scrutiny, or rather, they are subject to public scrutiny only in as much as they cease to be such islands, in as much as they concede that symbolic exchange that takes place there, the accumulation of social and symbolic capital, is also a form of exchange that could be economized. Thus, when we think of a marriage contract that renders a marriage explicit in terms of exchange value, we still think it serves the *termination* of the marriage more than the marriage itself. We still don't pay salaries to our friends or family members, although we do pay and receive gifts in order to *override* the laws of economic exchange; in some cases we call this a bribe, and it shows us that the power of the gift with its duplicity is capable of disabling economic exchange. On the other hand, we call it *law* when governments override the economy of exchange by virtue of being governments. Governments can nationalize private property, enforce payments, set interest rates, rescue banks. by virtue of the sovereign word, unhinging any economic calculus.

Given that the act of gift-giving affects and defines social hierarchies, it is a rather delicate act capable of reaffirming a relationship, but also of causing alienation. Gifts are particularly difficult to manage between people who wish to consider each other as equals, as in the modern romantic relationship: full transparency about gifts, for example by agreeing on how much to spend, takes away their gift character and may reduce the act of gift-giving to a lackluster economic transaction, while offering a gift that is too large, too small, or just the wrong thing will cause alienation. This problem can also be observed in the case of the tip: As a gift, the tip reiterates the dependence of the person tipped on the tip-giver. Socialism therefore tried to outlaw the tip, considering it as the expression of the Hegelian master-slave relationships that define bourgeois society. On the other hand, the economic exchange culture of capitalism, the hierarchical nature of the tip is typically hidden in calculation in order to obscure the existence of hierarchy: pulling out pocket calculators or using tipping apps on their smartphones, tip-givers tell themselves that they are paying in exchange for good service (rather than giving a gift to a servant), thus pretending that

the relationship to the waiter is strictly defined by a competitive market on which all are formally equal competitors.

Conversely, exploitation happens when the economic exchange structure of symbolic exchange is denied in what has been called precarious labor, where work is performed on markets that pretend not to be one, and where therefore labor relations revert upon hierarchical structures of dependence: young people aspiring to professional careers as artists, scholars, journalists, even managers, are expected to work for free, they are granted an opportunity to “earn their spurs,” an that has its origins in the European medieval knight culture, i.e. precisely in the paternal sections of society referred to by Bourdieu. Here, paternal relations, the domination of the younger by the older, of men over women, of the heterosexual over the homosexual, overrides any logic of economic exchange, an island in the stream of economic exchange is created where any accountability is subordinate to hierarchical structures.

The place of the gift, then, is what has been called the private sphere, the sphere where the word is the law. Whenever the gift is given in the public, it makes the private public, the public begins to function in ways that allow no recourse, it becomes a mere extension of the private sphere of the patriarchs. This was the typical situation of the European monarchies of the *ancien régime*, but can also be observed in examples of dictatorial anti-capitalist experiments relying on a cult of the leader, as in Stalinism and Nazism, as well as in numerous corrupt authoritarian regimes of the present, where the state as such is an extension of the leader's private sphere, or, in a less radical ways, in the rule of elite families over certain parts of societies. The social relations typical in this sphere are hierarchical.

Economic exchange, on the other hand, due to its explicitness, requires a public sphere within which prices can be communicated. Historically, we are talking about the emergence of the liberal public sphere as described by Habermas in the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas 1990), and by Foucault as a inner limitation of the *raison d'état* by the rise of liberalism in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe (Foucault 2008).

Regarding the meaning of time, so crucial to the gift—the gift as “giving time” according to Derrida, time allowing the collective pretension of the gift in Bourdieu—economic exchange creates its own negation of time, a time which is in lack of itself, therefore a calculated and priced period within which a return must take place. In terms of political economy, this is manifest in terms of interest rates, repayment periods, and the scrambling for some extra time through economic growth.

Unless such periods and rates are regulated by a law that is not part of the economic exchange itself, but a sovereign act that belongs to the sphere of symbolic exchange, there would be no solution to the problem of usury, and markets might collapse. Like Bourdieu, Jean Baudrillard believes that economic exchange cannot rid itself of symbolic exchange: in the form of law, power, and—this is Baudrillard's emphasis—it “haunts” economic exchange (Baudrillard 1993, p. 1). The word “haunting” suggests a flight from death, a fight for yet another instances of survival, of postponement, as the German word *Frist* indicates, referring to a defined period, a temporary suspension, a postponement, a term, the quality of time that lapses rather than passing. The German language can turn the noun *Frist* into a verb, *fristen*, often used in the phrase *das Dasein fristen*, that is, to struggle for survival rather than creating one's life. In this haunt, what is postponed is the moment where exchange becomes impossible, or rather, possible only as the exchange of life against death, as Baudrillard argues, and as the English word “deadline” charmingly reveals.

Time, in economic exchange, inevitably has the status of a postponement, of escaping from the symbolic, from the ultimate power of the sovereign word, as manifest, for example in the governmental regulation of bankruptcy procedures, of social welfare, and in the government's power to dispossess, and equally in its power to bail out banks, all of which are ways of curtailing economic exchange by the sovereign word. Historically, debt bondage, and debtors' prisons illustrate this point, this *fristen* (and English expressions 'doing time' or 'serving' a prison sentence also reveal a particular meaning). It would be a mistake to think that the haunting of economic exchange by symbolic exchange is only just experienced by the poor; the rich, too, fear it, in the form of taxes, dispossession, inflation, socialist governments, etc. For life to be possible at all under these circumstances, the laws of economic value are curtailed by the sovereign word of government, for example by setting prime rates or bailing out floundering banks, against economic rationality. Paraphrasing Derrida, the negation of time created by economic exchange is tempered by the King's given time. In liberal democracies, this specific temporal relationship has been institutionalized as the middle class, a fictional social group that is supposed to be exempt from this tension between symbolic and economic exchange, and therefore provides a source of legitimacy for every government that wishes to be seen as democratic. The current alleged disappearance of the middle class is, from this perspective, merely a difficulty in narrating this fictional tale, a difficulty that surfaces at a time when the principle of economic exchange is given priority in free-market thinking.

The public sphere created by the processes and institutions of economic exchange is a

sphere in which time disappears, a phenomenon manifest in many forms in contemporary culture, from just-in-time logistics to the disappearance of *free*, or non-economized time, to the 2008 financial crisis, and the current debt crisis in Europe. It has taken powerful sovereign words and generous sovereign gifts, given time, to extend the deadline one more time.

### 3. Sharing and Excess: George Bataille's General Economy

Given this relation between gift, exchange, time, and social relations, where can sharing be located? It seems clear that in order to understand sharing, and to avoid remaining trapped in the dichotomies of exchange and gift, of economic exchange and symbolic exchange, and continuing to apply great violence in order to keep either alive, we need to perform a rather radical departure from these two dominant models of cultural economy. We need to step out of the two semiotic strings of gift-word-hierarchy-absolutism-state socialism on the one hand, and exchange-number-competition-liberalism-free-market capitalism, on the other. It is easy to observe that both of these models are failing on a global scale, with gifts given by governments to the banks, failing corporations, and bankrupt other governments representing what is hoped to be a cure for the failure of exchange, and for the socialist superpower China trying to save its socialist gift-economy and political establishment by becoming more capitalist than the capitalists. It can readily be seen how both types of remedy exact an enormous cost from the people in whose interest governments claim to act. The only thing that we have been able to see about sharing in our discussion of gift-giving and exchange, is that neither of these sequences can describe sharing, although there seems to be a sharing element present in the ways both the gift and exchange are constructed socially: there is Bourdieu's hint at the knowledge of the impossibility of the gift being “shared knowledge”, and there is Derrida's reference to the connection between sharing and existence, the German *it gives* for something that exists, and is much as we all do, we share existence, similar to Bourdieu's point, we share before we do anything else, including giving gifts or engaging in exchange. And finally, Baudrillard's view that exchange of whatever form is ultimately impossible, this impossibility is our “destiny,” given that “destiny cannot be exchanged for anything” (Baudrillard 2003, p. 77) seems to suggest that there is an outside to exchange, a limit to growth that is not simply the running dry of natural resources, cannot be accounted for in any numerical way at all. In fact, Baudrillard states, “that ... which cannot be exchanged (can) be said to be what Bataille terms the 'accursed share' (Baudrillard 2003, p. 78). Indeed, Bataille's economy of excess, his idea of a surplus that cannot be cycled back into production, that does not enter any economic calculus, and therefore must be



expended without a return, could provide on possible entry point towards a more sound theoretical understanding of sharing. This non-economic, or aneconomic sphere, this sphere of the impossible exchange, is thus the sphere of excess, and it is also where sharing must be located given that it cannot be accounted for or described in the terms of the two dominant models discussed so far.

To illustrate this point, I suggest we briefly look at several metaphorical accounts of sharing situations. One such account is the Feeding of the Multitude (New Testament, Mark 6.31–44), where five loaves of bread and two fish are fead to a crowd of five thousand. The suggestion of the disciples to send people to the surrounding villages to buy food, i.e. to obtain food through economic exchange, is not taken up by Jesus,<sup>2</sup> who instead asks them to collect all the food that is available, and when he learns that there are two fish and five breads, he asks for them to be distributed among the crowd. In the end, not only did the five thousand people who had followed Jesus all “eat and were filled,” but, and this is essential, there were “twelve basket full of broken pieces” remaining—the act of sharing has generated a surplus that could no longer be used up. Nothing is said about these remains, except that they remain and that what remains is more than what was there at the beginning, in spite of the fact that everyone ate to their fill. There is a clear connection here between sharing and abundance, and abundance that seems to not be there before the sharing, but is generated *through* the act of sharing, out of what seemed to be a situation of scarcity.

In another well-known account of sharing is the story of Martin of Tours and the beggar, as told by Sulpitius Severus (363–425). Martin shares his soldier's cloak by cutting it into two and giving half of it to the beggar. Here, we clearly see the difference between gift-giving and sharing: the sharing required the cloak to be cut into two, so that both men could be clothed. It is this act of sharing that makes the soldier and the beggar equals, in violation of the existing social hierarchy. The fact that Martin is a soldier, and thus someone who is defined by a fully explicit rank may underscore the outrageous nature of this violation. Had Martin given away his cloak to the beggar as a gift, this social hierarchy, which places the soldier above the beggar, would have remained perfectly intact, and even been re-affirmed. Riding away, he still would have been the same soldier as before, and the beggar the same beggar, except that the beggar would be indebted to Martin, owing him gratitude, and therefore even more of a beggar. If we were to think about this situation as being resolved by economic exchange, the beggar would be a potential customer of the soldier, and they would have had to negotiate a price. Given that a beggar is by definition one who has nothing, a have-not, he would not have been able to pay any price at all. But the act of sharing makes them

<sup>2</sup> Another instance where the principle of economic exchange is rejected would be the Cleansing of the Temple.

both equals, and it earns Martin the ridicule of his peers, who through their peerage with Martin, now have to accept the beggar as one of theirs.

A third metaphorical account of sharing, this time explicitly blasphemous, is contained in Mikhail Bakhtin's book on François Rabelais (Bakhtin 1984). The Russian literary theorist here examines the suspension of social and material boundaries in the popular culture of the early modern Europe the subject of Rabelais' writing. Banquets, carnival rites, feasts, bawdy songs, and a disrespectful culture of laughing are among the practices examined by Bakhtin, with a grotesque conception of the body occupying a key position: a body that continually grows beyond its own boundaries, a body that is open, amorphous, moldable, not its own, a continuum of flesh in which the sense of individual identity gives way to a shared identity, one in which social differences are suspended (Sützl 2007, p. 3). This grotesque conception of the body returns in the culture of digital media and has been used by artists and activists challenging imposed structures of scarcity and control in modern society.

With varying points of emphasis, each of these accounts offers two positive attributes of sharing: equality among the sharers, and abundance. They offer the view of a non-competitive equality.

In the *The Accursed Share*, originally published in 1949, Georges Bataille proposes an economic theory based precisely on abundance. His “general economy” puts the assumption of *scarcity* existing in both symbolic and economic exchange on its head, stating that the fundamental problems faced by humankind derive not of “necessity, but its contrary, luxury” (Bataille 1988, p. 12), the place where the cool calculation of political economy yield to the heat of excess. Abundance and excess, according to Bataille, are the essential traits of the general economy. “On the surface of the globe, *living matter in general*, energy is always in excess; the question is always posed in terms of extravagance. The choice is limited to how the wealth is to be squandered. It is to the *particular* living being, or to the limited populations of living beings, that the problem of necessity presents itself.” (Bataille 1988, p. 23) The question of a general economy goes beyond “man contending with the living world and with other men for his share of resources. The general movement of exudation (of waste) of living matter impels him, and he cannot stop it; moreover, being at the summit, his sovereignty in the living world identifies him with this movement; it destines him ... to useless consumption.” (Bataille 1988, p. 23) According to Bataille, the choice is one between war, as the catastrophic expenditure of excess energy, or to waste it in extravagant waste, as in celebrations or other forms of unproductive use that can not generate any profit.

In the form of eating, death and sexual reproduction, nature offers its own luxuries (and these are extensively covered in Bakhtin's book on Rabelais mentioned above): “The eating of one species by another is the simplest form of luxury,” (p. 33) whereas “death is the most costly form of luxury.” (p. 34) Nature, in Bataille's view, gives itself away, it wastes itself because it generates more energy than its systems can use for growth. “... There is generally no growth but only a luxurious squandering of energy in every form. The history of life on earth is mainly the effect of a wild exuberance; the dominant event is the development of luxury, the production of increasingly burdensome forms of life.” (Bataille 1988, p. 33)

The question as to how societies deal with the surplus that nature yields is indeed a crucial one, and one that may easily be overlooked from within our common views of economics, revolving as they do around scarcity and how scarce resources might or should be distributed. From the perspective of scarcity, surplus must be recycled into the production process, with the understanding that growth can and must be indefinitely continued in order to deal with scarcity. Consumption under these circumstances also serves a productive purpose, and even if there are many ways in which we commonly understand our resources to be wasted—air travel, automobiles, short-lived consumer products are cases in point—they are still productive because they stimulate production and growth.

In fact, it can readily be observed how the current global economic system the amount of surplus that is *not* recycled into growth, that is not redirected into the economic calculus, is getting smaller and tremendous efforts are made to reduce it even further in the name of economic growth. Consider the economization of areas of life that once were places where surplus was used up without a return, such as great cultural or sport events, and how through sponsorship and advertising they have taken on an economic function. Consider the pressures for record performances in sport: how the non-expendable share, the difference that separates the record from the second-best mark, is reduced to ridiculously small amounts. Consider the pressure on education to produce knowledge that is quantifiable and is immediately productive. Or consider the leisure industry, where being unproductive is structurally suppressed, where economic consumption recycled into growth is encouraged, and new forms of consumption are invented where previously there were none, where entire industries have sprung up that did not exist until recently and whose purpose is to accommodate this additional sector of production. In the present model of immaterial, post-fordist production, a cult of “relentless productivity” is unfolding that eliminates leisure (Quillinan 2013). And of course our digital media landscape is quickly evolving into a place where every affective

expression is turned into capital the moment it occurs. And yet, significantly, the net is also a place where the growth model has not been able to quite catch up with the expansion of media themselves.

If we think in the terms Bataille suggests, and understand wealth as the amount of surplus we are ready to expend without return, then the current global economic system appears to be a system of progressive impoverishment—supported by the belief that the very insistence on growth that is at the root of this problem will, in fact, resolve that problem. This is also exemplified by the requirement of austerity in national economies, relentlessly imposed in many parts of the world, which makes the thought of “non-productive squandering of surplus sound blasphemous,” as Gerd Bergfleth remarks in his study on Bataille (Bergfleth 1975, p. 295). Austerity, possibly a response to the impoverishment created by the very idea of growth itself, is both non-productive and non-wasteful, somewhat the worst of both worlds.

At this point the radicality of sharing as the affirmation of abundance acquires more focus. Sharing stands outside the assumption of scarcity underlying any economic calculus, it is, in one form or another, a celebration of abundance, of excess that can no longer be captured and reduced into an exchange economy. Such a stance is easily seen as illegitimate and overly provocative from within the global economic system; in fact, from within the logic of scarcity of this system, sharing is sometimes perceived as 'theft,' (as in file sharing) or misunderstood as altruistic gift-giving. Sharing, without a need to burn down castles and set up revolutionary tribunals, provides a radical and outrageous opposition to existing economies: not a 'better' way of managing scarcity, but a way of allowing abundance to be a social reality. Sharing, seen from this perspective, is an action inseparable from celebration, from affirming life in as much as it is a life that expends itself, from luxury. Once abundance is understood in this way, equality is possible, at least in as much as there is no gift-giving hierarchy and no competition, both of which are ways of administering scarcity and of legitimizing political orders based on the assumption of the scarcity of everything.

### **Subjectivities of Sharing**

I believe that the way digital networks function supports Bataille's view regarding non-productive expenditure, and that therein lies the potential of radical social transformation that is often associated with the net. The internet is a prime example for wealth that cannot be fully fed back into growth. There is always, no matter how much and fast the network expands, an increasing share of unproductive surplus. Digital networks have become an ever-expanding bread-and-fish scenario. It

is, in my view, this experience that has led to the renewal of discussions on sharing in recent years, and it is this very abundance, this excess impossible to be consumed by growth, that Manuel Castell's can refer to digital culture as a “culture of sharing” networks (Castells 2009, p. 126). Given the equality created by this sharing, we often refer to sharers as “peers” (Bauwens 2013).

Because sharing requires an openness to equality, because it can only be done among people who are willing risk giving up both competition and hierarchical position, one subjectivity of sharing is often referred to as *peerage* (peer-to-peer production, peer-to-peer systems, peer groups, etc.). The strength of this concept, in my view, lies in its independence from the objective level, and in the spontaneity it allows. We can decide any time to be peers toward one another. However, peerage as a subjectivity of sharing because it may lead to the assumption that in order to share, we must already be sharing something. The “we” that decides to be peers must already be in place, and this we inevitably creates a “they,” an exclusion. In this regard, “we, the peers” has the same problem as “we, the people.” The concept of peers limits sharing to communities that have constituted themselves as communities prior to sharing.

In an even more poignant way, this problem surfaces when we consider friendship as a subjectivity of sharing, as done facebook does. The use of “friends” as synonymous with users that follow one another on social media platforms represents an intriguing attempt to create a social universe of pure positivity, populated only by ourselves and our friends. In fact, as Mercedes Bunz reminds us, facebook does not need to discipline its users because it designs their actions, “and these are positive”, so forcefully so that even a post on the Nazi atrocities at the Jewish ghetto in Cracow attracts seventy-seven 'likes' (Bunz 2011, p. 138). Such positivity without any negative thresholds, without any 'dislikes' may indeed cause its own “terror of positivity,” as Byung-Chul Han has eloquently argued (Han 2011). In his study of the politics of friendship, Jacques Derrida (1993) has gone to the root of the problem raised by a politics of friendship: as a form of political subjectivity it inevitably takes us to friend-enemy opposition which to Carl Schmitt represented the essence of the political (Schmitt 1976), and begs the uncomfortable question what, in such a universe of positivity, the people are who are not covered by the category of friend might be called. In fact, insisting on the friend as the primary category, and turning the Schmittian 'enemy' into a mere non-friend, or a mere potential friend, might count as a way of putting the harsh, uncomfortable Schmittian thought on its head, but the formal structure remains the same, and may serve as an indication of Schmitt's current haunting of democratic theory (Mouffe 1999). Taking it beyond facebook, which is best understood as a large paternal structure, an essentially private

sphere of symbolic exchange, with the terms and conditions of use representing the ultimate, unassailable authority—a location of exchange, then, rather than of sharing—how do friends share? Their subjectivity certainly has a stronger political character than peerage, especially when we understand friendship as more open to both the public sphere and the private sphere, existing in a convivial sphere where sharing is a traditional practice. Yet if friendship is understood as a subjectivity of sharing, it again restricts the practice to those who have something in common, in this case, friendship—with the alternative being that we call our non-friends enemies, with whom we would then *share* the quality of being enemies. Such a Schmittian interpretation of the use of 'friend' in social media would give them a political quality, and indeed, as Bunz reminds us of the use of Facebook in the Arab spring, where it served as a “critical social tool” (Bunz 2011, p. 144), who also suggests to not view facebook as one's enemy, but rather look at it from the perspective of Foucault's famous definition of critique, as “not wanting to be governed like that” (144), avoiding the direct attack and instead continue to cause irritation (Bunz cites the irritation caused by data protection watchdogs in Europe).

One significant contribution to political subjectivity that is relevant as a subjectivity of sharing is the concept of the multitude, a Spinozian idea brought into the current discourse by thinkers in the postmarxist tradition, such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2009), Paolo Virno (2003), and Maurizio Lazzarato (1998). In his analysis of post-fordist production Lazzarato describes the immaterial labor characteristic of this form of production as depending on the expansion of productive cooperation in a way that includes the production and reproduction of communication, and its core, subjectivity. The product is thus seen not as an isolated 'thing' that can either be shared or not, but as a flexible and ever shifting manifestation of processes of communication and subjectification. Lazzarato indicates as an example the car that is not produced before it is communicated about (process) and the desire for the car has been created in the potential customer (subjectification): “The post-fordist good thus turns out as the result of a creative process that includes the consumers and the producers.” (Lazzarato 1998, p. 55) From this perspective, the good has no autonomy, and the question as to what can be shared becomes the question of how goods are produced and consumed, and what kind of subjectivities are created in the process. Sharing, then, happens not on the level of the good, and thus there are no sharable or not sharable goods. In this view, sharing is, for example, intrinsic to actions against the new forms of exploitation in “cognitive capitalism” (Berardi 2009) and does not play out on the level of the object at all. Even though none of these authors explicitly addresses the question of sharing, they offer a

way of thinking about sharing in terms of subjectivity by considering the (shared) object as secondary to the level of subject construction, opening a view that the concept of peerage does not seem to allow. Additionally, because they think of economics as inseparable from the question of power, and challenging power as inseparable from the construction of subjectivity, they offer a way of understanding sharing as a scandal, a radical, yet non-violent political act. They provide a basis for understanding the subjectivity of sharing as one of resistance without an ultimate reconciliation.

A remarkable similar attempt, more explicitly located in the area of political theory, has recently been offered by Michael Ferguson (2012, 2007). Drawing on the problem of essentialist and anti-essentialist positions in feminist theory, Ferguson offers a view of the *demos* that is not the passive sharing of some common 'identity,' but the result of heterogeneous political actions. Both in democratic and feminist theory, Ferguson argues, there is the “presumption that sharing identity means sharing some *thing*” (Ferguson 2007, p. 32, emphasis Ferguson), and that this “shared thing is independent of the people who share it” (p. 37). Referring to Hannah Arendt, she suggests that in the “a common thing is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for us to share;” (p. 9) instead we share when “we interact with other people to try make sense of the world together” in the process of what Arendt calls “world-building.” (ibid.) Precisely because Ferguson's point refers to the sharing of identity or meaning, and not to sharing of any goods in the symbolic or economic sense, it allows a more precise understanding of the subjective side of sharing, of ultimately of a political meaning of sharing. This political meaning of sharing is most pronounced, in Ferguson's view, in the act of protesting, where a democratic imaginary is created (pp. 137–164). **This is the point where her views meet with the philosophy of the multitude as outlined above, and would underline the political significance of sharing.**

It is Judith Butler who relates the imaginary of the protest to sharing as an activity. Taking a closer look at recent street protests, and discussing the nature of the public sphere created in these street protests, Butler voices criticism of the unspoken assumptions on the part of the protesters that support for their bodies is available. This support, Butler argues, is relegated to a pre-political private sphere that does not surface on the public square, to a sphere historically occupied by slaves, servants and other mute subjects. Today, this dividing line between the political public and the pre-political private sphere follows gender divisions: “[...] The body in the private sphere is female, aging, or childish, and pre-political [...] When male citizens enter in to the public square to debate questions of justice, revenge, war and emancipation, they take the illuminated public square for granted [...] their speech [is] physically cut off from the private domicile, itself shrouded in

darkness and reproduced through activities that are not quite action in the proper and public senses.” (Butler 2011) But in the street protests at Cairo, Butler argues, this line of separation has been overcome. The pre-political private sphere was taken onto the square:

After all, in Cairo, it was not just that people amassed in the square: they were there; they slept there; they dispensed medicine and food, they assembled and sang, and they spoke. Can we distinguish those vocalizations from the body from those other expressions of material need and urgency? They were, after all, sleeping and eating in the public square, constructing toilets and various systems for sharing the space, and so not only refusing to be privatized—refusing to go or stay home—and not only claiming the public domain for themselves—acting in concert on conditions of equality—but also maintaining themselves as persisting bodies with needs, desires, and requirements (ibid).

I wish to offer the argument that the specific kind of public, that this crossing-over of the political and pre-political space Butler describes here, is brought about by sharing: it is the sharing practices that create a new kind of sphere, a specific publicness of the private for which I would like to call the convivial sphere. In this convivial sphere that emerges when sharing takes place, a sphere that is both radical and anti-violent. It emerges where the classical distinction between the public and private spheres, as criticized by Butler, are not simply bridged, and even less reconciled, but become much less relevant in terms for the actual assertion of political freedom. It is in this sphere of conviviality that also the public-private distinction underlying the difference between economic exchange and symbolic or gift exchange, and finally the distinction between the public enemy and the private friend. This is also the reason why a corporate medium such as facebook was able to play an important role in some of these protests—its private nature was just less relevant, as was the public nature of the square.

What could be gained if through sharing we built such convivial spheres remains, at this point, itself part of our political imaginary.

## **Conclusions**

The point of this essay was to put forward several propositions about the nature of sharing. One, that sharing is essentially different from the forms of the gift and economic exchange, that it cannot be adequately described in their terms and that it therefore constitutes its own social sphere. While sharing is often understood as an economic model that offers a solution to many of the impasses of the capitalist market economy and its structure of economic exchange, and leads to better results as



argued by Benkler (2004), the view I have tried to account for here suggest a more radical understanding of sharing as an activity that fundamentally disturbs the very idea of economic exchange such as it underlies standard economic theory. Classical economics is largely limited to seeing sharing as an aberrant activity to be economized and subjected to the principles of economic exchange, as 'theft,' or as violation of intellectual property rights. I have also suggested that sharing disturbs the economy of the gift by unhinging the social hierarchization upon which the gift inevitably relies, and which are reinforced in one way or another through gift-giving. Drawing on Derrida and Bourdieu, I have argued that both economic exchange and gift-giving (or symbolic exchange) are different ways of legitimizing and managing scarcity, in the former case through a formal equality that is inseparable from competition, and in the latter case through an essentially anti-liberal social hierarchization. I have agreed with Baudrillard that economic exchange is inevitably haunted by symbolic exchange. On the other hand, I have described sharing as a performance of equality among the sharers that disables both competition and hierarchy. It can do that because it does not have to subscribe to a metaphysical assumption of scarcity. Such a negation of scarcity is at the basis of George Bataille's idea of the general economy which looks at economics from the perspective of excess, from that which is expended without return, a perspective that might seem frivolous to many at a first glance. However, it would be difficult to argue that the problems resulting from the global pressures for productivity at all costs do not exist: not only have we begun to see what happens when our natural resources are put at the service of this drive for growth, cognitive (or immaterial) capitalism has taken this drive into the very core of our everyday lives, where production is the production of subjectivity, exploiting those areas of life the once were leisure, or where affects, emotions, and general knowledge are located that did not serve a productive purpose. Indeed, if we measure wealth on the basis of what we make available to be expended without a return, then we might see ourselves the midst of a massive drive for poverty, of situations of extreme austerity in the midst of abundance. This is only seemingly a paradox, given that growth itself relies on using up as little as possible from what has been produced, and re-investing as much as possible. I have argued that sharing may create wealth by expending what Bataille calls the "accursed share," and not by providing a fix for an economic system that can be continued only at the price of much violence. To think of sharing as a fix can only lead to sharing being considered another growth area, which would explain the excitement about the shareconomy at the Cebit fair, and certainly use 'sharing' as a euphemism for exploiting a hitherto unexploited area.

The internet is both a model for sharing as a politically radical, yet non-violent activity, and a battleground between such sharing practices and sharing as a business model dominated by a handful of corporations. It seems rather clear to me that what is at stake in terms of the future of the internet is this: do we think of digital media as the site where the drive for growth grows beyond itself, a source of potentially limitless growth and exploitation of the most intimate, the most human, is it our tool to “drink up the sea,” our sponge with which to “wipe away the entire horizon”? (Nietzsche, *Gay Science*) Or do we think of it as a site that allows us not only to share in novel ways, but also to share an effort to redeem those non-digital forms of sharing that have been forced to the sidelines by the existing economic calculus and outlawed by the state? This amounts to asking: do we see the internet as a sphere of conviviality, or do we allow ourselves to think of it in terms of friends and enemies and in terms of a competitive market?

Because the production of subjectivity has moved into the core of economics, the subjectivity produced by sharing is of particular relevance. I have looked at peerage, friendship (and hostility), the multitude, and the world-making demos as such subjectivities and tried to understand how far they can be said to describe a subjectivity of sharing. In doing so, my intention was to get to the political core of sharing, where both Butler and Ferguson each in a different way link sharing to protest. This, together with Bataille's rejection of scarcity, is what in the view I have tried to present here accounts for the radicality and the scandal of sharing.

To take this thought even further, and in conclusion, I wish to suggest that in as much as these ways of thinking about subjectivity are ways of thinking of subjectivities of sharing, they are ways of weakening the notion of the subject as such. I understand this in terms of Gianni Vattimo's use of the word (Vattimo 1981, 2006; Sützl 2003), as a weakening of the metaphysical determinations of Being that occurs in postmodernity's twisting of metaphysics. The western political subject of the modern period, whose inevitable complicity with the hierarchies of power have not just been described by Foucault and Butler, but by a generation of postcolonial and several generations of feminist critics, can not serve for a theory of sharing. It would follow from that that institutions, structures and theories that rely on a strong, self-contained notion of subjectivity, whether ideological or merely formal, will have little to do with sharing. This applies to both government and its reliance on the citizen subject (the Leviathan, in Benkler's terms), and to the market economy with its phantasy of the homo economicus (the invisible hand), but also those places where sharing is viewed as expression of altruism in the sense of an strong ethical, incorruptible subject of selfless *giving*.

Sharing does not occur on any balance sheets. It is neither a form of economic nor one of symbolic exchange, and Bataille's idea of an anti-economy may contain more clues to understand what really happens when we share. For the moment, the rise of sharing, if and when it is a rise of *sharing* rather than propaganda or self-deception, is causing irritation wherever economies assume strong subjectivity, and to many, this is surely a reason for hope.

## Bibliography

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1984. *Rabelais and his World*. Trans. by Hellene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Batailles, George. 1988. *The Accursed Share*. Vol. 1, Consumption. New York: Zone Books.
- Baudrillard, Jean. 1993. *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. London; Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Baudrillard, Jean. 2003. *Passwords*. London: Verso.
- Bauwens, Michael. 2013. *Collection of Core Works on P2P Theory*.  
[http://p2pfoundation.net/P2P\\_Theory](http://p2pfoundation.net/P2P_Theory)
- Benkler, Yochai. 2004. "Sharing Nicely." *Yale Law Journal* 114 (273).
- . 2006. *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Pr.
- . 2011. *The Penguin and the Leviathan. How Cooperation Triumphs over Self-Interest*. New York: Crown Business.
- Bergfleth, Gerd. 1975. "Theorie der Verschwendung." In: Bataille, Georges: *Das theoretische Werk*. Band 1, Die Aufhebung der Ökonomie. München: Rogner & Bernhard, pp. 289–406.
- Botsman, Rachel, and Roo Rogers. 2011. *What's Mine Is Yours: The Rise of Collaborative Consumption*. Trade Paperback. Harpercollins UK.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1998. *Practical Reason. On the Theory of Action*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 1998.
- Bunz, Mercedes. 2013. "As You Like It: Critique in the Era of an Affirmative Discourse." In: Lovink, Geert and Miriam Rasch (eds.): *Unlike Us Reader. Social Media Monoploies and their Alternatives*. Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 137–145.
- Butler, Judith. 2011. "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street." *Transversal*, 09,  
<http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/1011/butler/en>
- . 1997. *The Psychic Life of Power*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Castells, Manuel. 2009. *Communication Power*. Oxford: Oxford University. Press.
- David, Matthew. 2009. *Peer to Peer and the Music Industry: The Criminalization of Sharing*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1991. *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*. Transl. by Peggy Kamuf. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.
- . 1993. "The Politics of Friendship." *American Imago* 50: 3, pp. 353–388.
- Ferguson, Michael. 2007. "Sharing without Knowing." *Hypatia*, 22: 4, pp. 30–345.
- . 2012. *Sharing Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 2008. *The Birth of Biopolitics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gimesi, Thomas and Werner Hanselitsch (eds.). 2010. *Geben, Nehmen, Tauschen*. Wien: Lit-Verl.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1990. *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Han, Byung-Chul. 2011. "Der Terror der Positivität." Interview by Vera Tollmann, in *springerin*, 4,

22–26.

- Hardt, Michael & Antonio Negri. 2009. *Common Wealth*. Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press
- Lazzarato, Maurizio. 1998. “Immaterielle Arbeit. Gesellschaftliche Tätigkeit unter den Bedingungen des Postfordismus” In: Negri, Toni, Maurizio Lazzarato, Paolo Virno: *Umherschweifende Produzenten. Immaterielle Arbeit und Subversion*. Berlin: ID Verlag, pp. 39–65.
- Lessig, Lawrence. 2002. *The Future of Ideas*. New York: Vintage.
- Lovink, Geert, and Trebor Scholz. 2007. *The Art of Free Cooperation*. New York: Autonomedia.
- Mauss, Marcel. 1966. *The Gift*. London: Cohen & West.
- Miklautz, Elfie. 2010. *Geschenkt: Tausch gegen Gabe - eine Kritik der symbolischen Ökonomie*. Paderborn: Fink.
- Mouffe, Chantal (ed.). 1999. *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*. London: Verso
- Negri, Antonio. 1999. *Savage Anomaly. The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Orjiukwu, Remigius. 2010. “Teilen. Höhepunkt menschlicher existentieller Selbsterfahrung.” In: Gimesi, Thomas u. Werner Hanselitsch (eds.): *Geben, Nehmen, Tauschen*. Wien, Berlin: Lit Verlag, pp. 151–161.
- Quillinan, Susie. 2013. *Immaterial Leisure*. MFA thesis; Transart Institute (unpublished).
- Schmitt, Carl. 1976. *The Concept of the Political*. New Brunswick: Rutgers.
- Seeling, Mathias. 2008. *Das Un-Ding Der Gabe. Die Gabe Bei Jacques Derrida*. München: GRIN.
- Stalder, Felix. 2005. *Open Culture and the Nature of Networks*. Frankfurt: Revolver – Archiv für aktuelle Kunst. Download: [http://felix.openflows.com/pdf/Notebook\\_eng.pdf](http://felix.openflows.com/pdf/Notebook_eng.pdf)
- Sützl, Wolfgang. 2003. “The weak subject. Peace and nihilism reconsidered,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 29, 4, pp. 407–425.
- Sützl, Wolfgang. 2011. “Banquets, blasphemy, and grotesque bodies: Carnavalesque forms in biopolitical media activism.” Conference paper, Media in Transition 7, MIT, Cambridge. Download: <http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/mit7/papers/Stutzl.pdf>
- Vattimo, Gianni. 1981. *Al di là del soggetto*. Milano: Feltrinelli.
- . 2006. “Weak Thought,” in Dietrich, Wolfgang et al. (eds.). *Schlüsseltexzte der Friedensforschung*. Innsbruck: Lit Verl.
- Virno, Paolo. 2003. *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*. Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series. Cambridge, Mass; London: Semiotext (e).
- Wesley, Shu, and Yu-Hao Chuang. 2011. “Why People Share Knowledge in Virtual Communities.” *Social Behavior & Personality* 39 (5): 671–690.
- Wolf-Dieter, Enkelmann. 2010. *Beginnen wir mit dem Unmöglichen: Jacques Derrida, Ressourcen und der Ursprung der Ökonomie*. Marburg: Metropolis