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BEING WITH ONE ANOTHER: TOWARDS A MEDIA PHENOMENOLOGY OF SHARING

Sharing and its inconspicuousness

The first problem encountered by many in approaching the subject of sharing is its lack of distinction. "The majority of daily sharing of food, money, and possessions goes unnoticed and is invisible to most people for whom it is routine," consumer researcher Russell Belk observes (Belk, "Sharing" 717).

This inconspicuousness of sharing makes it difficult to theorize in any objectifying way: according to the hypothesis I wish to suggest, there is no object here that science could examine, no behavior that is distinct enough to be objectively studied, or work new enough to be exhibited. Therefore, enquiring into the concept of sharing will need to pass through the lens of the everyday: that which tends to pass unnoticed. As an aspect of the everyday (as in the French *quotidian*), sharing can then be considered not as a specific action or form of communication that appears in front of a neutral background, but as written in the "prose of the world," as Hegel called the everyday experience. Prose is language in its ordinary form, not privileged in any way, that against which poetry is the exception.

But how is one to understand a routine that does not stand out as its own, that has no discernable boundary that would set it off as an "action" or a "work"? What type of knowledge is it that we can hope to acquire about everyday routines, considered by Maurice Blanchot as that which "is most difficult to discover?" (Blanchot 34) Indeed, does not the idea of discovery itself keep us confined to the kind of objectifying enquiry that depends on isolating objects and construe them as something distinct from the ordinary?

Posing the problem this way means posing it as a phenomenological question. The moment we try to think about some thing that is an inconspicuous everyday thing, we are lead to questions concerning our own thought, own perceptions, or our own being as enquiring beings. We are confronted with all that happens *before* we can even say "there is this thing." It is this suspicion that gave rise to phenomenology as a philosophical form of enquiry in the first half of the 20th century, starting with the work of Edmund Husserl. Martin Heidegger, Husserl's student, took this work further by enquiring into the nature of everyday existence in *Being and Time*, published in 1927. In this work, he initiates a new enquiry into the question of being.

Unlike exchange, sharing is primarily about being and only secondarily about having. Whenever we share, and no matter what we share, our being and that of others comes into play. Unlike exchange, which can carried out between anyone, sharing affects the being of those who share. However, debates on sharing tend to focus on this secondary dimension of sharing, and therefore, the relationship between sharing and being requires some attention.

I will then to turn Jean-Luc Nancy's interpretation of Heidegger to prepare a more political understanding of sharing that will help inform the subsequent discussion of the everyday and the relationship between the everyday and the media, described by Maurice Blanchot as a "transcription." This should finally make it possible to see how sharing in digital media can be the key component of a neoliberal economic model termed "info-liberalism" by Marlies Bannig: Such pseudo-sharing capitalizes on the very limit that sharing poses to any form of exchange. The sharing economy and social media sharing represent an intensification of exchange that turns this limit *itself* into capital.

Being-with in a shared world: Heidegger's *Being and Time*

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger sets out to restate the question of being with the ambition of devising a fundamental ontology, clarifying the meaning of being. The question of being, he states, needs to be revisited because we have come to equate being with presence. This equation limits us to make statements about being that are ontic statements (concerning beings) rather than ontological statements that capture the essence of being. But in order to do justice to this difference, we need to start from our own specific form of being as humans, which Heidegger calls *dasein*, literally 'being-there.' *Dasein* does not stand out as an object of enquiry, as another presence, but rather it refers to our mode of being as being in the world, to the place from which we can ask questions to begin with. According to Heidegger, the mode of *dasein* is our everyday life—we experience ourselves through the everyday, and, significantly, through being with others.

Dasein, therefore, is always "being-with" or *mit-sein*. Being-with requires us to let go of a Cartesian, individualized notion of subjectivity; no longer are we thinking of subjects as being atomized individuals. Heidegger writes: "Others are not encountered by grasping and discriminating beforehand one's own subject, initially objectively present, from other subjects also present. They are not encountered by first looking at oneself and then ascertaining the opposite pole of a distinction" (Heidegger 116). Once this is acknowledged, sharing emerges as a fundamental trait of *dasein*: "On the basis of this with-bound [mithaften] being-in-the-world the world is always already the one that I share with others. The world of *dasein* is a *with-world* [Mitwelt] (115—116). Sharing, then, would be something that has already occurred when I am *with* others, or *miteinander*, with-one-an-other as the German language says. It is through the shared essence of the world that the others do, in fact, appear as others. We do not share with others that are already there as others, but because we are in a shared world, the others appear as others.

That is why the sharing of the world is not something that stands out as a distinct action that can be formally represented, but it is bound up in our *dasein* as the experience of the everyday. This experience is one that we do not have as individual subjects alongside other subjects, but as "with-bound" beings with one another.

And consequently, in the everyday, the others do not stand out as different from myself: "Others are not encountered by grasping and discriminating beforehand one's own subject, initially objectively present, from other subjects also present. They are not encountered by first looking at oneself and then ascertaining the opposite pole of a distinction" (Heidegger 116). In German, Heidegger calls this non-subjective and non-objective kind of collectivity, the indistinct many of the everyday: the *man*. French uses the word *on*, while English has to circumscribe with "one," "they," or "people." The *man* is not a subject, nor a collectivity of subjects, but the way of *dasein* as being-among-one-another, where "everyone is the other, and no one is himself. The *they*, which supplies the answer to the *who* of everyday *dasein*, is the *nobody* to whom every *dasein* has always surrendered itself, in its being-among-one-another" (124). Therefore, we do not share with others that are already there as others, but because we share, the others appear as others, and otherness appears, becoming part of the world.

Heidegger brings an everyday world into appearance that is in a shared world,

or rather, an always-already-shared world. It is a world where the *man* of everyday existence acts as a manifestation of *dasein* that is no longer the being of subjects, and not even of subjects that relate to one another as subjects. Through sharing, we are constituted as subjects that are not subjects any longer. "The self of everyday *dasein* is the *they-self*," Heidegger writes: It is *dasein* dispersed in the self, prescribing "the nearest interpretation of the world and of being-in-the-world" (Heidegger 125).

This is why sharing, unlike exchange, can involve intimacy. For example, when we share food, we not only offer food for others to take: we offer ourselves for others to be with, and so do those we share with. In his anthropological study of sharing, John Price speaks of "intimate economies" prevalent in sharing band societies (Price 1975). Today, this intimate quality of sharing is invoked each time concern about "oversharing" on social media is expressed (risking details of one's personal life becoming accessible to strangers).

As a consequence of being-with, when we share things we have—food, drink, bicycles, etc. —we share from the place of our own *dasein* as *mit-sein*, and our being-together determines our having, making it a having-together. Sharing as being is at the basis of sharing what we have. Because of this priority of being, sharing what we have is subject to offering ourselves as being with others.

But Heidegger does not make the relationship between being and having clear, and this limits the relevance of his phenomenology to sharing as an everyday routine. However, he does describe *dasein* in the shared world as one characterized by *sorge*, or "care." The shared world concerns us: we are affected by it and our actions are driven by this care. Derived from the Latin cura, both the meaning of the German *Sorge*

and the English 'care' indicate a spectrum of meanings moves between "anxious effort" and "carefulness" (Heidegger 191). We are reminded of this each time someone claims that "sharing is caring." In the heideggerian sense of care, this means something different than simply being nice: it means that the world concerns us, regardless of any moral attributions.

Orjiukwu (2010) has offered an analysis of sharing concerned with this point. He considers sharing as an existential action between an economy of having and an economy of being: the economy of having defines the legal title a subject has over a possession, whereas the inner relationship to the good, the meaning and value it has to its owner, belongs to the economy of being. Sharing is defined as offering something which one values (Orjiukwu 165), which in terms of an economy of being is part of oneself. Along with the possession of the shared part that is transferred to the receiver, the giver therefore gives to being, where no expectation of reciprocity can exist.

The concept of *sorge* helps us see that as we share, whatever we share, and whatever form this sharing takes, it is an expression of an existential fact that concerns ourselves and the others. This makes sharing not only a concept of ontology, but also of politics: we can form a *polis* because we share.

The who of sharing: Nancy's *Being Singular Plural*

When sharing can be understood as grounded in being-with that can extend into having, the first question that arises from a political point of view is to think about this non-subjectivity of the sharer. Looking for an

answer to this question means stepping from phenomenology into political philosophy: asking the question of the lost subject. This is what Jean-Luc Nancy sets out to do in his interpretation of *Being and Time* in *Being Singular Plural*. The political subjectivity he presents is one grounded in the "with" of being-with. Heidegger himself distinguishes "with" from the German *auch*, meaning "also" or "alongside." But how can the social bond that comes from the "with" of sharing be described? And, above all, "who" has such bonds?

According to Nancy, when Heidegger specifies the *man* as the subject of *dasein*, he forgets that there is someone who even asks this question. In other words, when I ask who is the subject of dasein, from which place am I asking this question? Who am I as I ask the question? The asker of this question, according to Nancy, "removes himself or has a tendency to remove himself" (Nancy 7) and Heidegger "risks neglecting the fact that there is no pure and simple 'one,' no 'one' in which 'properly existing' existence is, from the start, purely and simply immersed" (Nancy 7). The with comes before the who.

"People," Nancy writes in the English translation of his French translation of the German *man*, "clearly designates the mode of the 'one' by which 'I' remove myself, to the point of appearing to forget or neglect the fact that I myself am part of 'people' " (Nancy 7). As I become part of people, I remove myself—or rather I *am removed* as the "I" subject.

Perhaps this thought can be exemplified by looking at the way we use "traffic" as an excuse for a delay. We arrive late at an appointment because too many others tried to share the road ("Sorry I'm late! Traffic …!"). At the moment of the excuse, we think of traffic as something that stands in our way like an obstacle external to us. We forget that we ourselves formed part of the traffic: we were,

in fact, part of everyone else's traffic and only in as much as we were *our own traffic*. I am removed as a subject, and in that moment I am a subject only in as much as that subject is removed.

This is why Nancy can say that the "with" at the core of sharing is "at once both more and less than relation or bond […]." (34) It is more than a relation or bond because it must be there for the bond to be possible, and it is less than a bond because it weakens the very notion of "subjects" brought together in a bond. As we share, we share ourselves, but that experiencing "we" is already shared in its being-with.

According to Nancy, this way of thinking about the subject as removed stands against the atomization of subjectivity in the current process of globalization, which "results [..] in a co-dispersion given to idiocy." (Nancy 45) Why idiocy? Because such a co-dispersed subjectivity is not able to generate or experience any meaning: "There is no meaning if meaning is not shared […] because meaning is itself the sharing of Being" (2).

Being-with as the foundation of a first political philosophy, then, is related to sharing in two ways. Firstly, a political community, a *polis*, emerges from shared being. But secondly, this shared being involves a different bond and a different form of subjectivity than traditional political philosophy posits. Traditionally, we think of a political community as "adding commonality from above to the multiplicity of things below," whereas Nancy seeks to articulate the spacing of the communal the belongs to beings as such (Brogan 296). In Nancy's interpretation of Heidegger's being-with, the spacing of the communal occurs as sharing itself, among beings whose being is being-with. Secondly, Nancy sees meaning as emerging from shared being. Without sharing, no meaning is possible.

When nothing happens: Sharing and the everyday

The everyday is the unremarkable place where we are most of the time. It, therefore, has a potential political quality; this quality attracted the attention particularly of French structuralists and post-structuralists, most notably Henri Lefebvre who in 1947 published the first volume of his *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, in which he defines the everyday as "whatever remains after one has eliminated all specialized activities." (Lefebvre qtd. in Kaplan and Ross 2). Lefebvre's hypothesis is that it is "in everyday life and starting from everyday life that genuine *creations* are achieved" (31). Anything created outside of the everyday "in the superior realms of social practice" must still "demonstrate its validity in the everyday, whether it be art, philosophy or politics" (31-32). To Lefebvre, therefore, effective social change can only occur in the everyday, but this is also where it is most difficult to achieve because the everyday is "hardest of all to change" (33).

Lefebvre attributes this political quality to the everyday because he considers it historically founded. According to him, the everyday is a result of the industrialization, urbanization, and the rise of the masses that occurred in Europe in the middle of the 19th century; that is, a product of the bourgeois age. Daily repetition of standardized activities, predictable and calculable, created the drabness of everyday life. As Kristin Ross writes:

Everyday life, properly speaking, came into being only [...] when the lived experience of those new urban dwellers became organized, channeled and codified into a set of repetitive and hence visible patterns, when

markets became common between the provinces and the capital, when everything—money, work hours, miles, calories, minutes—became calculated and calculable, and when objects, people and the relations between them changed under the onslaught of such quantification. (Ross 44)

Prior to that, the routines of everyday were not routines in this sense because "church and monarch held sway, imparting a distinct imprint or style—and thus significance—to every gesture, utensil, or articles of clothing" (44).

This way of conceptualizing the everyday would leave little space for anything outside of exchange; in fact, it is a way of describing the proliferation of exchange in European society of the time. Calculable and predictable activities blend in seamlessly with the general expansion of industrial capitalism and the growth of technology. In fact, when Lefebvre understands the everyday as becoming observable with the bourgeois age, it would seem that this visibility is owed to the expansion of capitalism, and that sharing would indeed remain invisible from his perspective.

As a materialist and Marxist, Lefebvre equates the everyday experience with alienation, creating a kind of Marxist supplement to Heidegger's ambiguous philosophy of the everyday. While Heidegger thinks the everyday is characterized by the *man* as the non-subject of *dasein*, Lefebvre extends Marx's alienation theory from production to the reproductive activities that, according to him, make up the everyday. If it were not for the bourgeois control of the means of production, one is tempted to conclude, there would be no everyday, which is why, on the other hand, the everyday, and not just labor, is a potential location of the overthrow of the bourgeois class.

In fact, adopting Lefebvre's historical perspective, it is clear that sharing must disappear in the generalization of economic exchange, as evident in the enclosure movement in 17th century England that assigned common lands, also known as wasteland, to private owners (Boyle 43-44). The incompatibility of exchange and sharing is historically manifest in this transition: as economic exchange expands, it eliminates sharing by turning the commons into a commodity. Capitalism marks a transition from production for use and shared resources, to production for exchange, and private ownership of the means of production. What Marx and Engels called the "primitive communism," practiced by pre-capitalist societies, finally disappears.

In terms of media history, the 19th century process of urbanization in Europe and North America corresponds to the emergence in the modern mass audience. Popular newspapers with printed photographs, fairground entertainment media such as magic lantern shows and *Kaiserpanoramas*, the evolution of sound recording and other new media of the time all combined to offer popular entertainment, creating a type of shared experience among those masses and initiating the birth of media as mass media. These media provided a recreational space that was initially not reached by exchange. What does this mean for understanding sharing in digital media?

Sharing and the media: Transcribing the everyday

"How many people turn on the radio and leave the room, satisfied with this distant and sufficient noise?" Blanchot asks (14). We are often content with hearing the radio from a distance—or with noticing the flickering of a screen from the corner of our eye, or browsing a magazine while thinking of something else—because "what is essential is not that one particular person speak and another one hear, but that, with no one in particular speaking and no one in particular listening, there should nonetheless be speech, a kind of undefined promise to communicate" (14). Reminiscent of Heidegger's "idle talk" (*gerede*, Heidegger 161 – 164) Blanchot here understands everyday speech as characterized by "platitude" (the French *plat* means flat, stale, smooth) by "that which falls back, the residual life with which our trash cans and cemeteries are filled: scrap and refuse" (Blanchot 13). Yet who is going to buy a newspaper full of platitudes? The media have a problem with the everyday as repetitive, predictable, and flat. In order for something to become media content, it must be edited, designed, and given form in ways that make it stand out from the everyday.

According to Blanchot, the media resolve that problem by "transcribing" the everyday. So while the newspaper appears every day and as such is part of the everyday experience, finding its audience on the street and among the masses, it transcribes the everyday by rendering it "informed, stabilized, put forth to advantage." The very absence of events in the everyday, Blanchot argues becomes the drama of the news item:

> The newspaper, incapable of seizing the insignificance of the everyday, is only able to render its value apprehensible by declaring it sensational […] having replaced the 'nothing happens' of the everyday, the newspaper presents us with history's 'something is happening' at the level of what it claims to be the day-to-day […]. (18)

Transcribing the everyday, turning it into the drama of the news, makes the everyday becomes manifest as a story that is told, and disappears as the common experience of dasein. Through the media, the "everyday looses the power to reach us" (Blanchot 14).

The presence of media in people's everyday life has grown much since Blanchot wrote this, and media technologies have moved on from print to electronic and digital media. With media consumption becoming almost constant, the extraordinary has eroded the ordinary and occupied its place. 20th century media have created an everyday as a service to be consumed, a service tells the audience that something extraordinary is happening all the time. Every day, the everyday is presented as all the events that don't happen every day.

While the subjectivity of everyday experience is that of "anyone" and this any-one is, properly speaking […] neither one nor the other" (Blanchot 18), the transformation of everyday experience into that which stands out as special over itself, therefore available for endless measuring and exchange, furthers a sense of competitive individuality whose meaning-making power dwindles as sharing is replace by exchange.

With the advent of Web 2.0 the conception of everyday and sharing as a common and inconspicuous everyday routine has changed dramatically. The transcription of the everyday now occurs in real time on social media. What is new and special is determined by popularity, the mass, as expressed in likes, re-tweets, comments, etc. The non-subject of the everyday, is becoming reconstructed entirely as a result of exchange. The subject turns from the agent of exchange into a mechanism of exchange. The Web 2.0 subject is no longer a non-subject like Heidegger's *man* or Blanchot's anyone, but the precise opposite: a subject that excels in its subjectivity, stands out over and against other subjects, measures and compares itself, seeks to improve itself and makes every attempt not to be an invisible member of the masses. It is what happens on social media.

Pseudo-sharing, info-liberalism, and social media

In social media sharing and the sharing economy, the lack of distinction of the removed subject, characteristic of the classic mass media audience, is replaced by a subject that consists of *only* distinct properties: no exchange will ever occur between precisely the same things. This subject has, as its main purpose, contributed to the expansion of capital by generating information. The distinct properties acquired, circulated, and shared stand in for the subject itself, and they can therefore be acquired and traded by automatisms. The information generated through "sharing" on social media take on the form of a user profile, a trading commodity.

The removed subject of the mass medium audience, where there is neither one nor the other, where no one in particular listens or speaks, is replaced by a form of individual subjectivity in the form of e one or the other. The move to Web 2.0 and social media sharing maps this transformation.

The more a user gives and engages with the platform, the more advantages in terms of social capital are offered in return (popularity, number of followers, re-tweets, etc.). Unlike the classic subject of the European Enlightenment, such digital sharing subjects can no longer be the carrier of political rights, free will, or sovereignty: in other words, they can no longer be citizens. They can only do what the platform allows and indeed urges and seduces them to do: behave in ways that will increase their value as human capital, with "sharing" being one of them.

What is called "sharing" on these platforms, is not sharing at all—it is the neoliberal reconstruction of a subject without sovereignty. Belk simply calls it "pseudo-sharing:" a rhetorical gimmick that benefits from the association of commonality and sociability that comes with the word and creates a "virtual *kumbaya* of joy, commensality, and fellowship" that masks the economic calculus and neoliberal rationality at work (Belk, "Sharing versus Pseudo-Sharing" 10). This masking is nothing new. Marx already described a similar phenomenon as "commodity fetishism": the masking of social relationships (between the capitalist and the laborer) embodied by the commodity by relationships among commodities. The rhetoric and semblance of sharing that occurs on Web 2.0 acts to cloud the exchange relationships that are established. Much like the laborers in factories create value for the factory owner, the sharers (and engages customers in general) on corporate social networking platforms create value for the platform owner.

Marlies Banning uses the word "info-liberalism" for the informational outgrowth of neoliberalism that has shaped Web 2.0. According to her, the sharing occurring on social networking sites creates an affective link between the sharer and neoliberal capital. What Han terms "smart power" is manifest in technologies that, in her perspective, takes on the form of an affective link between the sharer and Internet companies design new media technologies in "everyday, and ubiquitous ways to create affective situations that induce user participation and expand their business base" (Banning 493). Because of this, Banning considers online sharing labor.

But what is exploited is not just labor of a worker, which could be exchanged for a wage. Because sharing is a modality of everyday *dasein*, it is being itself that is transformed into capital. Things "are" in as much as they are capital; people are human in as much as they are human capital. Rather than transcribing the everyday, as Blanchot understood the role of media, Web 2.0 has begun to colonize the everyday as a seemingly endless source of exploitation.

The reason why social media have grown as much as they did is that turning the everyday into capital is that the everyday literally renews itself every day: it is an infinite resource, one that does not get consumed or diminished through this form of exploitation. Allowing this to happen on a global scale is how corporate social media supports neoliberal rationality: the dissemination of "market values and metrics to every sphere of life [construing] the human itself exclusively as *homo economicus*" (Brown 176).

Social media are a technology that makes the info-liberal pseudo-sharing feel like entertainment, not like labor. No disciplining is necessary. In his recent book on neoliberalism, Byung Chul Han argues that rather than power being applied in the Foucauldian, disciplinary fashion, freedom itself is exploited. Han calls the power model that applies here "smart power" (Han 25-28). This smart power is more efficient than the power of discipline, as it has no resistance to overcome. In fact, the more is shared, the more this power consolidates itself as being without an alternative.

Eventually, because of the relationship between sharing and meaning as discussed by Nancy, this kind of online sharing makes meaning dissipate: if meaning comes from shared being, being as synonymous with exchange will thrive on the circulation of meaningless content. Such content is promoted by the Web 2.0 itself with the purpose of optimizing the social media business model. Trivial content will circulate more quickly, resulting in more user data being generated. Tellingly, a search for "cat" on YouTube yields no less than 45 million results.

Sharing as limit

Yet sharing that is not pseudo-sharing remains a limit to exchange. It cannot be capitalized because it is non-reciprocal and inherently incommensurate, not subject to calculation. Actual sharing will limit and even slow down the expansion of exchange. It will set a limit to what can be exchanged, rather than acting as a "frontier" be moved forward, as Web 2.0 pseudo-sharing does.

At this point we must remember that this debate about sharing is occurring because of digital media and because we share files on these media. In fact, digital content is shared content from the moment of its creation because it never forms a stable, limited, and unique object. That is why computer networks were first constructed around the very idea of sharing. As Nicholas John reminds us, "the origins of the term 'file sharing' [are] located within the history of computing" (John, "File Sharing" 201). From "time sharing," "shared file access," and "disk sharing" to the emergence of file sharing in the current sense of the word, following the widespread adoption of the file transfer protocol (FTP) in the 1980s, sharing has been a core concept in computing. "File sharing is very similar to the model of the commons in that […] users put files in a repository that others have access to. It is unlike the commons, though, in that, as mentioned above, downloaders take nothing away from the commons by downloading a file: in this commons, there can be no tragedy" (John, "File Sharing" 204). It will therefore be difficult to eliminate sharing, understood as digital file sharing, from networked digital media. We have seen that it is possible to mask sharing with pseudo-sharing by applying a rhetoric that emphasizes the niceness of process but is actually not sharing; instead, it is a type of exchange that advances neoliberal rationality.

Remembering sharing as the everyday that limits the expansion of exchange may help identify the "pseudo" in sharing the construction of a purely economic subjectivity that is human capital. Seeing sharing as an everyday routine means acknowledging its inconspicuousness and its place outside the accounts and away from privileged objects, gestures, and discourses, and competitive subjects. Sharing as the inconspicuous everyday routine and the being-with of the political together may form the basis for a freedom that eludes the next exchange operation.

As a limit to exchange, sharing is not an alternative to exchange. It is not a utopian vision of a better world. However, with utopian visions of a better world being another commodity offered on a market, being non-utopian and remaining part of our everyday being may be a reliable indicator whether we are talking about sharing or pseudo-sharing.

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