

# **Cornelia Sollfrank in conversation with Wolfgang Sützl**

## **SHARING: THE RISE OF A CONCEPT**

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**Cornelia Sollfrank:** Your recent research has revolved around the notion of “sharing,” and I would like to get a better understanding where this interest comes from and how it is embedded in the larger context of your work.

**Wolfgang Sützl:** This interest in sharing has resulted from my research on media activism. In the course of a research project at University of Innsbruck, we realised that “sharing” plays an important role in many activist communities – while its actual meaning seems to be rather vague. It obviously relates to the then very topical phenomenon of file sharing, but there seemed to be other implications as well.

Media activism was not just brushing media against the grain, but also intervening in the socio-economic structure of the media and tech industries. This involved questioning the notion of scarcity. If you can make digital content available to many people for free, why not do it? In an interview I did with Eben Moglen, a co-founder of the Free Software Foundation, he asked: if you could provide everyone with enough food to eat by pressing a button, what would be the moral argument for denying people that food? Activists realized that digital media had this potential of functioning outside an economy of scarcity. To examine such questions, we organized a conference, *Cultures and Ethics of Sharing*, in Innsbruck, and later I co-organized an ICA preconference on *digital sharing* with Nicholas John (Hebrew University). Since then my research has been mainly concerned with the conceptual dimension of sharing.

**CS:** Before we talk about the phenomenon of sharing in the context of digital networks – which obviously is the field in which it has been rediscovered and has proliferated most in the twenty years – I would be interested in learning more about the intellectual roots of

this concept. You have looked at a number of philosophers who might be useful in order to conceptualise the notion of sharing – one of them being Georges Bataille and his idea of the excess...

**WS:** Bataille is of particular interest in this regard, because he developed outlines of an anti-economy that starts from surplus rather than scarcity. He focused on what we do to expend resources, rather than make them. He felt that Marxism was not radical enough, buying into the notion of scarcity which is at the heart of the capitalist economic model. He defined a boundary to economic exchange, with expenditure being that which can no longer be exchanged, that which no longer yields anything and cannot be recycled into additional growth. He calls this “The Accursed Share,” which is also the title of the book he wrote in 1949. And just like Bataille’s expenditure, sharing is not something that can be used towards growth. The concept of a “sharing economy” does not make any sense.

**CS:** What also comes to mind when thinking about sharing is its embeddedness in Christian culture. How much is the positive connotation of sharing due to this religious origin?

**WS:** The New Testament contains many references to sharing, the most widely known is perhaps the *Feeding of the 5000*, where Jesus and his followers share what seems to be a ridiculously small amount of food. This happens after Jesus tells his disciples not to send people to the surrounding villages to buy food, that is, he stops them from engaging in economic exchange. What seems key to me here is not so much that by sharing a large crowd is fed from a few loafs of bread and some fish, with everyone getting enough. The point is that there are several baskets

full of food that remain uneaten. There is a surplus that comes from sharing, and it is, just like Bataille's "accursed share," a surplus that cannot be recycled into further growth. This is a model of an anti-economy that also underlies the demand to offer the second cheek. The positive connotation of sharing, its "niceness," comes perhaps from the idea of equality and togetherness in sharing. This is very different from the formal equality enjoyed by participants in a market, and the hierarchies that are created or strengthened through almsgiving...

**CS:** Together with Bataille and his notion of expenditure, the multiplication of loaves and fishes suggests a parallel to what we have been experiencing with digital networked media: abundance instead of scarcity. I would be interested in how you think these two schemes together.

**WS:** Bataille applies the word excess to practices that waste energy without return, including sacrifices, luxury, war, and non-reproductive sex. To him, wealth is a matter of expending what cannot be recycled into growth, and it is up to us what form this expenditure has. In principle, digital networked media can be seen as excessive in this way because digital objects are infinitely reproducible, so that in a sense there is always too much, there is always more than we can productively use. However, the commercialization of the internet has led to the paradoxical situation where this excessive availability fuels the growth of Facebook, Google, etc. A few years ago, media activists started virtual suicide platforms that allowed users to delete their profiles, a kind of sacrifice, if you will, that is reminiscent of Bataille's thinking.

**CS:** If we continue this thought, and bring in the notion of sharing, it becomes necessary to distinguish more precisely between

sharing and exchange as an economic transaction. Could you please generally explain the difference of these two concepts?

**WS:** Unlike exchange, sharing is not reciprocal. It does not consist of the mutual give-and-take that forms the structure of exchange, both of economic exchange, as in a market, and of symbolic exchange, as in the giving and returning of gifts, words, or other symbols. Baudrillard's *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976) showed the importance of symbolic exchange in capitalism, and takes the Marxist critique beyond the merely economic. Bourdieu has also developed a critique of symbolic exchange around his notion of cultural capital. But they both stop at the point where a formal representation of reciprocity is no longer possible, the point Baudrillard later theorized as "impossible exchange," in his book of the same title.

**CS:** It appears to me as if symbolic exchange was somewhere between economic exchange and sharing...

**WS:** Almsgiving, like gift-giving in general, is a form of symbolic exchange, which in Bourdieu's thinking affirms and stabilizes social hierarchies. Symbolic exchange determines who is on top and who is at the bottom. By tipping a waiter you, and the waiter who accepts the tip, agree on this. This verticality of symbolic exchange explains why giving and receiving of gifts in relationships between people who want to be equal, such as the modern couple, is often such an awkward affair, sometimes resolved by giving up the idea of a gift altogether.

Baudrillard argues that symbolic exchange has many forms that support the functioning of economic exchange—for example, the law and the state, which intervene when economic exchange fails, as in bankruptcy, unemployment, or by setting base rates. This

too shows how symbolic exchange is bound up with political power. Organized crime, black markets, or state-controlled economies function predominantly in this way.

**CS:** That means we actually remain in a sort of economy with the gift-giving, while, as you have already indicated, sharing is something that leaves the realm of economic relationships behind altogether. I think this is where we should continue talking about the philosophical concepts which you are exploring in order to develop the concept of sharing. And I'm thinking of phenomenology, for example.

**WS:** Once you realize you cannot theorize sharing in terms of exchange at all, you face certain problems that are similar to theorizing everyday experience. Sharing is indeed an everyday routine, as such it does not have its own truth, or at least it does not stand out as an object available to scientific investigation or to the aesthetic privileging that happens in art. Duchamp's ready-mades were a response to this difficulty of the everyday. What would an artwork look like that is not set apart from the profanity of everyday experience? His answer was, perhaps like a urinal, perhaps like a bottle rack. Phrased in ontological terms, Heidegger undertook a similar enquiry in his *Being and Time* (1927), where he sought to understand being through everyday Dasein, the simple fact of our being-there that is always already assumed, whatever question we may ask.

He uses the term *Mit-sein* or being-with, to understand being as always already shared being. According to him, there is no way to understand the meaning of being other than as shared. As I find myself in the world, I have already shared this world with others. Being cannot be separated from sharing, and the others come into appearance as others because of this sharing. This is why sharing in the commons, as described by Ostrom,

defines a political subjectivity. To me, it also offers a point of departure for understanding why an economy of exchange on the way to totalizing itself, as in the current advance of neoliberalism, has such difficulty with the notions of otherness or difference. Exchange must, in order to function, render otherness or difference meaningless – turn it into a “farce” as Žižek says. The only meaning that it leaves for otherness is the unrestrained negativity of random violence, which is just another caricature of a quest for meaning.

**CS:** What is not nice about sharing?

**WS:** For one, once we understand sharing as a limit to economic expansion, an anti-dote to the economic principle itself, it questions a deeply held belief of Western culture. It represents an outside that can be scary because it cannot be regulated by law – because the law is also an exchange operation. Pirates, who did not recognize the law of the sea, had a strong sharing culture, which came back to life in digital piracy. Also, at the moment of sharing, we cease to be as self-contained individuals, and enter the sphere of intimacy. There is a vulnerability that comes with sharing that is expressed in the problem of “oversharing” on social media, where users offer intimate information to others they do not really know. Because of this, sharing as a practice was traditionally limited to smaller communities. And finally, we also share things like the exhaust fumes and noise of our cars or the crudeness of our advertising billboards. It's not always nice.

**CS:** Now, both of these concepts, exchange and sharing, exist in parallel – offline as well as online. I would like to ask you to describe and unravel this coexistence with regards to digital networked media and also talk about the – maybe intentional – confusions that are emerging from this.

**WS:** Today sharing is often confused with exchange because of the way we use the word in online communication and the hype around the sharing economy. This confusion is an easy one to make because of the very nature of sharing, but there is also an obfuscation that is part of the business plan of the digital media industry that considers sharing as a profitable form of “customer engagement.” The confusion is easy because sharing is a communal phenomenon: it is because our being is always already a being-with-one-another that we can share and experience meaning. This is also why Jean-Luc Nancy can say “meaning is the sharing of being.” But in corporate social media and the sharing economy, subjectivities are formed through structured forms of communication that providers prefer to call “sharing,” benefitting from the anti-economic potential of the digital (its excess) and the connotations of niceness that come with sharing. These subjectivities are shaped to match business plans, they form around the users’ status as customers, as subjects of exchange. But meaning cannot be exchanged, only shared. This is why so much of social media communication is either commercial, or trivial, as in the classic cases of cat videos. There is an erosion of meaning through the dominance of exchange, and a lot of sharing of meaningless content, because what matters to the provider is the profit that comes from customer engagement, from making users do things that affirm their status as customers. But this is due only to the commercialization of digital networks. It is not inherent to digital technology, as for instance the case of Wikipedia shows.

**CS:** To conclude our little conversation, one could say that “sharing” as an essential form of being with others has gained a new dimension through digital technology. At the same time this new form of sharing in the realm of

digital files and knowledge is dependent on a technology which is totally embedded in the cycles of capitalist production, i.e. exchange. I think here is one crack in the concept. Another friction I see in the fact that neoliberalism expands its logic of economisation into all possible domains of life and, through the sharing economy for example, has started to blur a clear distinction between sharing as a way of being or becoming subject and economic exchange. What is at risk here? What is it that drives your research?

**WS:** What drives me is the belief that with a better understanding of sharing we can gain more clarity about the limits of exchange. This is necessary, because the current neoliberal rationality sees a frontier instead of limits. This frontier is a temporary boundary to be pushed forward, a site of emerging markets and venture capital. Helped by the rise of corporate digital media and the disappearance of a serious alternative to capitalism, this frontier has advanced into the political sphere, into subjectivity, and into rationality itself. Wendy Brown offers a compelling analysis of this process in her latest book, *Undoing the Demos* (2015). What is at risk here is the possibility of forming meaningful political communities in the most basic sense of the word, and along with it the possibility to communicate anything political. Therefore, an improved understanding of sharing may help formulate a political argument against neoliberalism, which is the only type of argument that can be expected to be effective. And I agree, for an argument to be communicated, communication channels are needed that will not instantly turn the sharing of ideas into an economic transaction. We can still learn from the tactical media movement in this regard, and perhaps with the dominance of corporate social media and their business strategies, tactics is even more important than before. Digital media do still offer a real,

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non-utopian possibility of sharing, and simply remembering that is a first step. The fact that criticism of the sharing economy is becoming more widespread is also a positive sign. It opens some space for a real discussion of sharing.

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