

## Foreword: ‘We’re All in this Together’

We’re all in this together  
Once we see  
There’s a chance  
That we have  
And we take it

*High School Musical* (2006)

The idea of the sharing economy brings to mind the whiz-bang excitement of constant innovation, the libertarian promise of peer-to-peer collaboration, the instant pleasures of friction-free online transactions, the mould-breaking potential of crowdfunding. It might, too, bring to mind the downside associated with rental-based economies: Airbnb contributing to artificially inflated property markets; the de-regulation of services in the name of consumer convenience typified by the growth of Uber; the insecurities of the gig economy.

The essays collected here move beyond the hype of *the* sharing economy, in both its positive and negative forms. They do so by placing the more well-known versions of the sharing economy, which often emphasise the libertarian promise of technologically enhanced interaction, alongside various forms of everyday coping that have emerged in response to the insecurities associated with contemporary economic life. Here, sharing economies emerge not so much as the cutting-edge of a bright and shiny future, and look instead like responses to precarious employment, reduced public spending, and shrivelled welfare provision. The exemplars of sharing practices turn out to be food bank experiments or alternative housing schemes; the prevalent norms at work are less to do with entrepreneurialism than with care, need, and vulnerability; its subjects are elderly people, the addicted, the poor. Sharing is, the contributors to this book remind us, a practice - it is something that people *do*. It turns out they do it out of all sorts of motivations, charitable ones and instrumental ones, self-regarding ones as well as selfless ones. And this raises some interesting questions about the values associated with sharing.

If we want to grasp what sharing is good for, then we might start by noticing the way in which public debates about the sharing economy tend to invoke two distinct but related meanings of ‘sharing’. First, there is a vision of sharing as unmediated interaction, freed-up from the intrusions of bureaucratic red-tape, top-down planning, or corporate strategy. Sharing, in this vision, is a kind of spontaneous process that can be cultivated but not planned, directed or regulated. There is, though, a second, and more interesting, sense of sharing evident in such discussions, one in which what is shared is the infrastructure upon which apparently unmediated interactions depend – whether it is open source software or user-generated content or social media platforms, or the proliferation of creative co-working spaces in towns and cities. The second idea of sharing draws into view questions about the conditions upon which forms of social interaction depend. And thinking of the conditions of social life through the lens of sharing practices might well disrupt the established economy of value associated with the idea of sharing.

While sharing sounds like an unambiguously positive thing, it is in fact a rather complex concept. Sharing perhaps brings to mind images of collective life and togetherness, of all sorts of pastimes people share-in alongside each other. But the objects of sharing practices are often burdens of certain sorts – sharing the responsibilities of caring for elderly relatives, or sharing the risks of misfortune with one’s fellow citizens. Sharing, in this sense, is a way of managing with the unavoidable ups-and-downs of life.

There is a strand of philosophical analysis, developed by thinkers including Jacques Derrida, Jacques Rancière, and above all Jean-Luc Nancy, that makes a great deal out of the apparent paradoxes that lie at the heart of the idea of sharing. All of these thinkers exploit the polysemy associated with the French verb *partager*, which suggests sharing but also separating, participating, dividing, partitioning. *Partage*, it turns out, refers to an idea of sharing in and sharing out, to partaking in as well as partitioning out – so that we might best think in terms of practices of ‘sharing (out)’.<sup>1</sup> What this line of thought draws attention to is the double sense of sharing, as both form of collective action or making things common, alongside a sense of sharing as allocating, distributing or dividing.

In Jacques Rancière’s work, the idea of “le partage du sensible” is used to refer to the idea that the opening up of a world of shared perception is constituted by the simultaneous restriction of what is made available to be seen and sensed. Rancière makes use of related senses of *partage* and *avoir-part* - of division and separation as well as taking part, of partaking and participation - to propose that the ‘the partition of the sensible’ involves an inaugural separation and exclusion that opens up a common world of shared perception.<sup>2</sup> In Rancière’s vision, drawing on a longer train of modernist thought in which a shared world of perception and intelligibility is presented as being founded through exclusion, identifying the paradoxes of sharing mean that settled patterns of life might always be disrupted and rearranged in new ways.

In Nancy’s work, and in Derrida’s engagement with it too, the polysemy of *partage* is given a somewhat different inflection. One finds there the same idea that a series of ideas usually associated with positive values - communication, participation, collective life - necessarily entail forms of separation, splitting, partitioning, distancing or dissociation as their very conditions of possibility. But this is interpreted as indicating a form of spacing that is internal to community life, so that the varied connotations of sharing - as sharing in, sharing with, sharing out – are presented not as resources with which to disrupt settled orders, but rather as the means of re-describing existing images of collective life by drawing attention to aspects of them too easily overlooked. Nancy uses the theme of *partage* to insist that any and all experience of commonality always takes the form of what he calls ‘being-in-common’, in which the singularity of individuals is not subsumed by a higher form of

---

<sup>1</sup> Derrida, J. 2005. *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*. Stanford, Stanford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, translated by Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004),

unified identity.<sup>3</sup> His elaboration of the theme of *partage* is meant to underscore the problem of imagining co-existence between and amongst singular beings.

Across their differences, Nancy, Derrida and Rancière all emphasise the distributive aspects of practices of sharing, where sharing in and sharing with presupposes some form of sharing out. They ask us, in short, to attend more closely to the constitution of *what* it is possible to share ‘in common’ with others.

We might also think a little more about *how* sharing practices are enacted. The political theorist Patrick Chabal, in his discussion of the formations of political life in contemporary Africa, suggests that normative models of participation, often sourced from idealised models of political practices in the global North, do not actually capture the range of motivations shaping collective action. He proposes instead the idea of partaking, in order to signal the degree to which collective life combines an aspect of taking part in activities with others with an aspect of making use of shared resources.<sup>4</sup> The sense of partaking identified by Chabal, with its suggestions of ritualized engagements in collective practices, also reminds us of the degree to which sharing always involves an aspect of sacrifice, at least in the sense that it involves the giving over of one’s own self to others, to purposes other than pure egoistical self-interest.

So, if we reflect a little about the meaning of sharing, with the help of thinkers such as Nancy and Chabal, we begin to spot different aspects of sharing practices: there is a sense in which sharing involves the appropriation or making use of shared resources; a sense of sharing as a form of collective action that depends upon not just division and distribution, but separation, and therefore raises problems of coordination and co-existence; and there is a sense that what is shared is, more often than not, burdens and risks and sacrifices. In other words, sharing turns out to be a topic that foregrounds problems of living together in ways that avoid simple moral contrasts between (bad) individualism and (good) solidarity. And if we are to take the theme of sharing seriously, then it requires us to give up the easy habits associated with radical social theory, in which a grasp of the virtues of collective life are assumed to be the preserve of those able to de-familiarise the ruses of rampant individualism.

Thinking of sharing as an heuristic for ongoing analysis might, even, help dislodge some of the settled ways of thinking about ‘neoliberalism’ and its associated ills. For example, Margaret Thatcher’s famous remark to the effect that “There is no such thing as society” has often been invoked as if it encapsulates all that is wrong with a form of political and economic project that valorises selfish egoism over public life and citizenly virtue. But the force of Thatcher’s remark lay in specifying where shared responsibility lies, not with dismissing it out of hand. Sharing the burdens of care and responsibility for life’s travails, Thatcher asserted, was a matter for families and communities, not the welfare state. It is, it should be said, an emphatically conservative prejudice that she expressed, hardly a distinctively neoliberal one at all. Thatcher’s remark did not embody a divide between collective values and individual ones, so much as a division between two very different visions of the type of social bond upon which sharing in the collective life of a community should be based. We might say that it is the *abstraction* implied by the idea of Society that most offended

---

<sup>3</sup> Nancy, J-L. 1991. *The Inoperative Community*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>4</sup> Chabal, P. 2009. *Africa: The Politics of Suffering and Smiling*. London, Zed Books.

Thatcher. What is rejected is the idea that one should expect assistance from others or be expected to provide it to others who do not conform to the models of social bond epitomized by family, community, or nation. The rhetorical force of the remark lies in its rejection of the commitment to sharing equally in the fate of one's fellow *citizens* – a rejection, even, of the kind of justification that would allow the costs of unfettered financial speculation to be borne collectively by the most vulnerable of citizens on the grounds that 'We are all in this together'.

Inadvertently, Thatcher's remark helps us see that modern public life can be thought of as a family of practices of sharing with others, whether this is sharing goods and services, sharing risks, or sharing in political discourse and cultural life. It is a form of sharing that is necessarily mediated, anonymous, and abstracted in certain ways. The specifically public content of the values associated with ideas of publicness, across their variety, depends on a certain mode of partaking with others in which sharing always involves relations with strangers. Being-public is a form of sharing that necessarily involves making use of resources of different kinds, and is therefore also always likely to generate conflicts and disagreements.<sup>5</sup>

The single most arresting conceptualisation of sharing as a principle of analysis in modern social thought is to be found in the resolutely liberal theory of justice developed by John Rawls.<sup>6</sup> Rawls' famous 'difference principle', according to which unequal distributions of primary goods can only be justified if they benefit those least advantaged by that inequality, is often interpreted as if were either thinly veiled justification of inequality or a weakly developed justification of a presumption against inequality. Either way, it is presumed to lack the appropriate radical insight into the real dynamics of injustice. But Rawls' distinctive contribution to social thought was to suggest that the diversity of talents and the contingent distribution of life-chances should be thought of not as reflections of individual merit or desert, but as a sort of collective asset, the benefits of which should be shared fairly amongst everyone. His concern was, accordingly, with thinking through how to share out the benefits that accrue from cooperative life in a way that respected individuals as having diverse needs, endowments and vulnerabilities, and treating them always as ends not means, that is, as equal and free fellow citizens. Rawls' theory of justice is, whatever else its faults might be, an exemplar of an attempt to think through problems of cooperation, co-existence, and interaction – that is, problems of sharing – without reducing these problems to either the utilitarian aggregation of the preferences of self-owning selves, or enveloping the pluralism of human life beneath higher-order categories of class, community, or nation.

If at first sight, sharing seems to be a model of reciprocity, mutuality and commonality, then by following the thoughts of thinkers as different as Nancy, Chabal, and Rawls, we can see that making sense of practices of sharing requires us to think more deeply about the constitutive pluralism of human life, and also to address problems of co-operation, co-existence, togetherness and being-in-common. Taken as a whole, this collection outlines the promise of re-ordering social analysis around these problems precisely because it foregrounds the importance of thinking of sharing as a difficult practice.

---

<sup>5</sup> Barnett, C. 2014. Theorizing emergent public spheres: negotiating development, democracy and dissent. *Acta Academica* 46(1), 1-21.

<sup>6</sup> Rawls, J. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.