

Values of Exchange, Values of Sharing: The ambivalence of economic *Weltbeziehungen*, explained for the example of carsharing¹

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My contribution will introduce the ambivalences of exchange and its counterpart, sharing, as it has recently been discussed in the context of “sharing economies”. We share many things and places: as children perhaps toys, a bedroom and our parents, as pupils the classroom and the attention of the teacher, as students the shared flat, as old people the sick room. So, it sounds rather normal. What is actually revolutionary about sharing only becomes visible through its classification in terms of social philosophy. As a part of practical philosophy, social philosophy aims to understand what holds the social world together. Eighty-three million people do not simply live side by side (that’s how many we are in Germany by now), as if everyone lived for themselves—although the automobile society sometimes gives exactly this impression. Rather, together we form a social texture or society—one, not two or five. But which kinds of activity really bind us together?

This question searches for the glue that binds people together, for the social cement that Georg Simmel called “social interaction” (*Wechselwirkung*, Simmel 1908, 17). To find it we may look in thick books, but what you find there went over a thousand desks, it is heavily filtered through all sorts of preconceived doctrines and paradigms. Therefore, there is not one answer, but hundreds. Alternatively, we could also look at everyday experiences for a change, and ask simple questions. When in the day do we actually start meeting others? One meets for breakfast with parents and siblings or with roommates, talks, drinks coffee together—an elementary experience, perhaps in a relationship. But it is not yet the centre of society; first and foremost, there we find individuals.

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Traditionally, individual relationships are dealt with in ethics (what duties do parents have towards children, the healthy towards sick people; what duties do you have in a shared flat when someone has to go into quarantine, etc.). These are important questions, in everyday life as well as in philosophy, but for our topic they are a bit too small-scale. Sometimes it is not even socially visible what happens at home (hence the large fences and investments in private security). Conversely, one starts oversized when asking about crystallized meta-structures that surround us all: for example, adults vote every few years (or should do so); they pay taxes (or should do so); and they are protected (or monitored, as the case may be) by the police. This takes us one level too high now, into political philosophy. The fact that we all vote or pay taxes doesn't really bring us together. Individuals work it out with their own tax slips or their tax office; people rarely come into contact with each other (except perhaps at a tax assistant's office). These relations remain abstract, which is why the young Marx characterised it as political "alienation" (MEW 1, 367): in modern states people no longer get together, except maybe in large protests. Social philosophy, however, wants to know what happens in the normal, everyday practices of togetherness, for example at breakfast, and how this binds a society together. Not infrequently, therefore, researchers like Erving Goffman or Arlie Hochschild have actually sat down at people's breakfast tables and listened.

What distinction is touched upon here, by this talk of small-scale and large-scale? One can roughly separate social spheres from each other in a social ontology: Family, State, and Society. This has been quite common since G.W.F. Hegel's *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (from 1821), and I am using it here by distinguishing the social dimension from political (state-centered) and ethical (family- or group-centered) concerns.

1. The Texture of the Social in Modernity: Exchange Relations

So what is the practice that weaves the social tapestry in the traditional view of social philosophy then? Let's stay with the everyday situation at breakfast. What is the most important thing? Bread and butter, of course! Jam, coffee, or optionally organic muesli with soy milk. One could object that these are things, they are not "social." But that misfires, because these things are deeply embedded in social practices (Henning 2022). Where do they come from? I've been to the bakery around the corner, or to the supermarket with

an SUV. And precisely this is the central intersection of social circles in modern societies, where people meet every day: *exchange*. People have to get their food, clothes, and tools this way, because you can't produce everything yourself anymore, even if you try hard. We usually exchange money for goods, and to get this money, we exchange something else—usually our labour time, for which we get wages or salary. We get it from an employer, and thus numerous acts of exchange intersect. People do this not only in our country, but all over the world; thus the toaster comes from China, the apple from Italy etc. Exchange relations span a worldwide web, a world society or system (Wallerstein 1974). Only with the recent rise of populism and neo-nationalism, with Brexit, the pandemic, and the Russian imperial war, borders have started to be closed and guarded again.

If this is true, then exchange is not a day-to-day triviality, but a pattern of many of our smaller and larger *Weltbeziehungen*, both in theory and in practice. Our dealings with things, with nature, with others and with ourselves are deeply shaped by it (Henning 2021c). From the standpoint of market exchange, they are preconceived as potential raw material, tradeable goods, trade partners or competitors. It begins with the fact that the exchange is not over yet after I went shopping for ten minutes. After all, where do students go after breakfast? If not back to bed, they go to school or to university—and why? To qualify for a job. Many of them want to get a well-paying one, hence there is a shortage of social workers and care workers, who are not well paid. This is how many people understand the good life, and thus themselves: possessing and consuming a lot, and hence working a job that pays for all that. Everything should become more and more, bigger, faster, and more expensive. In order to participate in this, we endure school and training, work, uncertainty, and stressful colleagues. All this cannot be done without exchange, and therefore modern states have done a lot to create trade reliabilities: logistical infrastructures, internal legal security, and international treaties. *Weltbeziehungen* are thus shaped by the exchange paradigm even in a literal sense—globalisation first and foremost is a globalisation of trade (Henning 2023).

Exchanges also affect close social relations: children grow up in milieus that are strongly influenced by their parents' neighbourhood, which in turn often depends on their type of work. Most of our friends we know through school and work, so habitual class differences are passed on. Social philosophy looks at the social consequences and meanings these practices have for people and their communities. Because they matter a lot, exchange became

a central pattern of thought to interpret sociality in theory, from Rousseau, Adam Smith, and David Ricardo to Georg Simmel, Adorno and modern rational choice or game theory. To see what is at stake in these framings, we must distinguish the pro and contra of the exchange paradigm.

2. The Social Imaginary of the Good Exchange

Let's start with the good news. Adorno once said: "Exchange is [...] key to society".² Which values are in the foreground when an entire society is imagined to be based on processes of market exchange?³ For social philosophy, the most important effect of exchange relations, and the implied notion of private property of goods bought on the market, is individual freedom from traditional restraints (Simmel 1900). Anyone who has bought something for the first time with self-earned money will know the feeling, even if it is only a piece of cake: no one can talk you out of this. It's my money, I can buy cake and eat it when and where I want. It is my property now. How wonderful! What an emancipation! I don't have to beg, I don't have to wait. Each one can do as they please, at least with their own money. In the store or on the market, that's all that counts—provided I have the wherewithal. Where I come from, what I look like, none of that matters. (At least it shouldn't.) One will not sell things to friends and neighbours; with them one rather exchanges gifts or inherits things without any money involved. In gift giving there is no need for immediate countervalues and social relationships play a central role. The gift therefore leads further *into* social relations, while the exchange mediated by money leads *out* of them and can thus liberate (Henning 2021a). If a contract ends, the parties go their separate ways. You only barter with strangers (since time immemorial, merchants have come from the outside, bringing things from foreign lands and people). Exchange presupposes distance and thus can break up constricting bonds in the family, village, and milieu.

The second value is equality: where barriers of status lose their grip, everyone can try to make the most of themselves. Today famous singers, actors, athletes have all sorts of genders, ethnic backgrounds, or religions. Maybe not everyone is equally lucky, but the ideal of equal opportunity allows for

² This is how Ritsert (2017, 21) cites Adorno's seminar from 1962 (as reported by H.G. Backhaus).

³ Of course, this is an idealization, which is only applicable for modernity. I do not assume this myself, but examine how this idea is treated in social theory.

continued attempts, and thus reduces stigma related to origin. This does not eliminate every factual inequality, but at least many *perceived* injustices: if everyone has their turn, the playing field seems levelled. Exchange relations, where everyone is the architect of their own fortune, appear to bring justice and equality of opportunity. In the end, everyone has what they deserve: the rich their wealth, the poor their poverty (MEW 23, 742).

The third positive feature is said to be wealth: societies based on market exchange create more of it than previous modes of socialization, since there are more incentives and possibilities to increase productivity. Division of labour and competition (Adam Smith's "invisible hand") ensure that everything becomes more, better, faster, and more colourful. As long as some wealth reaches them, this makes even the relatively poor in a society "better off," as Rawls phrased it, following John Locke and Adam Smith. Thus, at least in theory, our societies become richer and more just. A practice that appears to bring freedom, equal opportunity, justice, and prosperity to all seems to create "the best of all possible worlds" (Leibniz, see Marx's remarks on the "very Eden of the Innate Rights of Man," MEW 23, 85). Hence, exchange found strong advocates in social theory, from neoclassical economics (where everything looks just "perfect") to rational choice or postmodernist "progressive neoliberalism" (Fraser 2019).

3. The Social Imaginary of the Evil Exchange

So much for the good news! But from the perspective of critical social philosophy, the balance looks significantly less rosy. Individual freedom, for example, may come at a high cost and can even go too far: the distancing through exchange mediation can also lead to isolation and loneliness—the consequence would be atomization or "anomie." Ties become looser, families smaller, villages and cities more anonymous, divorces more frequent, friendships more difficult, individuals more oddball, cities and villages unsafe, social relations more hostile and competitive, the meaning of life permanently questionable. In consequence, people go "bowling alone" (Putnam 2000), or take refuge in the so-called "social" media, where one is often "alone together," as Sherry Turkle (2011) described. England has already introduced a Loneliness Minister in 2018. Communication among present persons erodes, relationships become non-committal, attention spans shorter, and the apparent protective zone of the social media bubble

is subject to merciless attention, commercialisation and surveillance from the outside (Zuboff 2019).⁴ Since market exchanges are about maximizing one's own advantage, it becomes rational to spy on others (i.e., on potential exchange "partners") and collect data about them. Exchange-mediated freedom can tip over into loneliness, restlessness, and depression.

Exchange-mediated equality is double-edged as well. Its appearance is rooted in the fact that certain things are invisibilized: exchange value abstracts from qualitative abundance and looks only at saleability, a strategic presumption about how others might perceive the thing and how much money they are willing to spend on it.⁵ Participants in the social exchange of goods and services are equal only in the fact of offering some *thing* (or commodity). Who they are, where they belong, what they want—all of this is blanked out. This does not eliminate existing inequalities, for example between social classes or genders. It covers them up. This rosy surface can seduce us into a marketplace-mentality, inducing an understanding of self and world as comparable things, as something "reified": one defines oneself by the thing one has or wants to have, and soon also misunderstands society as a complex of things.⁶ Solving the remaining social problems via a "technofix," i.e., by mechanical means, as the Silicon Valley ideology wants, is then an obvious consequence (Barbrock and Cameron 1995).

If, contrary to the social promises of this imaginary, one experiences real inequality in everyday life, one is easily tricked into trying to compensate for it by consuming even more (which fights fire with fire): if a neighbour has a big car, I want to buy an even bigger one. A spiral of status consumption sets in, leaving everyone dissatisfied and putting a strain on resources. But all effort is in vain because no-one will accept the belittling, everyone will constantly come up with even bigger things (hence the tendency of private cars of getting monstrously large, against any functionality, see Henning 2021b). Exchange-equality conceals existing structural inequalities, which can intensify as a result. Rousseau subtly described the resulting alienation of people from each other and from themselves (Henning 2020).

4 Surveillance did not start in social media; conventional stores also monitor customers and employees; cameras and facial recognition are even installed in public places today.

5 Th. W. Adorno has compared this exchange-abstraction – in a sweeping identification that runs against his own philosophy of non-identity – to generalization in the natural sciences and has thus encouraged a peculiar scepticism of science within critical theory.

6 It "is a definite social relation between men, that assumes [...] the fantastic form of a relation between things" (MEW 23, 86).

Thirdly, this also poisons prosperity and our relation to things: there is an accumulation of goods no one really needs (except to impress others), which clutter up the environment, destroy natural spaces, squander resources, poison the atmosphere and heat up the climate. It is as if a peak has long been passed, after which *more things* become rather toxic and only translate into more trash and poison.⁷ Meanwhile, the things we have and do are no longer appreciated. According to Rousseau, when we only need them to signify status, we lose the sense for their inner depth. So, the theory of alienation in the spirit of Rousseau also implies an *ethics of things*.

And finally, this also has effects on the social *Weltbeziehung*. Contrary to the ideological textbook-wisdom, market-mediated exchange thinking makes us antisocial.⁸ If it would not, nobody could become rich by trade—there is a transfer of wealth from one side to the other. One has not the good of the other, but one's own advantage in mind (that is the point in Adam Smith).⁹ For Aristotle and many Christian philosophers in his lineage, trade, and even more so money trade, had a problematic status in the community. Later liberal theories therefore located the justice of exchange no longer in terms of content (they do not explain how one can become rich through exchange), but procedurally: it is enough that the exchange partners have entered into the exchange willingly, regardless of who gets what (in the end, white colonizers traded glass pearls, hard liquors or even infected blankets).¹⁰ Whether this strengthens or loosens the bonds between them is not an issue. Following the conservative and romantic critique of capitalism, critical social philosophy has pointed out that the marketization of life erodes social relations.¹¹ Taken together, we must conclude that for every benefit of exchange (freedom, equality, wealth), a counter-story can be told.

7 Henning 2022. According to the Genuine Progress Indicator, development towards a good life turned negative in the late 1970s due to the increased social and ecological cost of the many goods produced.

8 Peukert 2018; Gerlach 2017.

9 "It is not from the benevolence of the Butcher, the Brewer or the Baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest" (Smith 1776 I.2).

10 This voluntariness can be stretched quite far, as was seen with John Locke: according to his liberal reading, indigenous people of North America, for example, presumably have consented to their own displacement by entering into the use of money, which he conceives as an implicit contract. Indeed, colonialism proceeded with legal means, it was a dispossession by treaty (see Baner 2007; Greer 2018; or Pistor 2019).

11 Starting with Karl Polanyi; today we may think of Satz 2010 or Sandel 2012.

Positive view	Negative view
Liberty	Loneliness
Equality of opportunity	Social inequality and reification of social relations
Wealth	Waste, ecological disaster

Table 1: Ambivalence of exchange (source: by the author)

Despite this ambivalence, the exchange paradigm was a success story in social theory: not only did it withstand conservative, romantic, and socialist criticism, it has even expanded into areas that basically have little to do with it. This applies to the theoretical coverage of these areas, but also to their practice. The contract for example, which actually originates from acts of sale, has migrated as “contractualism” into the heart of the political theory of liberalism. On the other hand, families now also know marriage contracts, marriage dissolution contracts, inheritance contracts, custody agreements and so on. Thus, the exchange paradigm is also at work in family and politics. In theory, this is reflected in rational choice, which models every action as a calculating decision that maximizes utility, even in the family or in politics. Individuals look to their own advantage and only come out of cover when they spot one. In this mindset of exchange people appear, as Hobbes inimitably put it, as solitary predators.¹²

Let’s return to the imaginary where practices and theories are neatly pigeonholed. De facto, they are not so clearly limited to certain areas, hence exchange can also spill over into the other areas of politics and the family. But this spillover to other spheres potentiates the problems of the exchange paradigm.¹³ So, might the expansion of another sphere be a solution? State-socialism could be interpreted as the reverse extension of *political* mechanisms to *social* provision. But the answer is negative: the centrally administered economy from above brought many restrictions on freedom, because the inherent logic of society, namely the unleashing of individuals, their right to self-determination, was no longer preserved in most communist coun-

12 By the way: “homo homini lupus” is actually doing injustice to wolves, which are highly social animals.

13 For Michael Walzer, justice demands that social logic stay within its own “for spheres”.

tries.¹⁴ But in the trinitarian picture of family, state, and society which we used so far, one possibility remains: designing the overarching concept from below, from families or smaller *communities*. And as we will see in a minute, it is from such small communities indeed that sharing originates. Could it be the sought-after solution to frequently diagnosed “pathologies of modernity” that can result from both market-radical precarization of everything and statist overregulation? That depends on the version of the story told. For in the case of sharing, too, there is an ambivalence between (at least) two perspectives, two sides of the coin. Let’s start with the good news again!

4. The Social Imaginary of Good Sharing

Sharing keeps us warm. Everyday life indicates that we share above all with people close to us—we share the blanket. Or consider the family breakfast: bread and butter or rent for the room are not charged to the children, they are shared. This is also known from festivities or from camping, where everything is shared. Marshal Sahlins (1972) used this to create a model of reciprocity norms that depend on social proximity: in the inner social circle, one shares everything and does not think about reciprocation (he calls it “generalized reciprocity”). Rather, what we find is “pooling:” resources are assembled in a central place and handed out to members later on. In the middle circle, one still gives generously, but here one expects reciprocation—though it is not specified when, how, and how much. We already touched on this in the neighbourhood example. Or think of the pub crawl—if you buy a round of drinks, that is a gift exchange: you give something to others. Eventually you might get something back, but what and when remains open, and maybe you won’t. You can also experience this when traveling—you may be unexpectedly hosted by strangers and can’t reciprocate anything. Yet eventually you may get into the opposite situation and give something back. Only those who are considered outsiders, strangers, and potential enemies experience “negative reciprocity”: one then tries to exploit or even rob them (lat. *privare*). This corresponds to market exchange, where one puts profit over people, and the lan-

14 Of course, not every economic “interference” of politics has to be a command economy – there are other models. Yet “regulations” do not have a good reputation in today’s politics; one tries to leave as much as possible to the decisions of individuals and therefore prefers to rely on “incentives” and self-organization.

guage used there is amazingly close to military events. Words like “battle for customers” or “cut throat competition” are common, and Marx picked this up when he spoke of “armies” of labour.¹⁵

Sahlins’ influential model ties the alternative of sharing vs. exchange to the degree of social proximity. While this is plausible, it leads to a problem: in this imaginary, sharing cannot be an *alternative* to exchange on a larger scale, so it cannot be a cement of modern society, exactly because it originates in smaller groups with high levels of trust (tribal societies, brotherhoods e.g.). Max Weber spoke of “fraternity ethics” (1922, 366). How could we translate this into larger contexts?

A first answer to this question is historical. The commons, which existed and still exist all over the world (but have been plundered for centuries now), did not always presuppose kinship; nevertheless, overuse did not occur for long periods of time. The communal property was shared between local people in a sustainable way.¹⁶ As Ostrom and others have shown, in many cases social coordination mechanisms have been in place locally, but these can quickly be thrown out of balance by well-meaning outside interventions that misread or ignore local contexts. Today private property and market exchange have become the dominant social forms. As sharing seems to presuppose close social bonds and a shared ownership, how is it possible in a world dominated by private property? Here the “sharing economy” comes in, because it has decisively modernized sharing practices; it reintroduced them into the realm of private property and expanded them beyond the limits of intimate groups. What exactly has changed here?

In the positive version of the sharing-economy-narrative, the decisive change occurred with the Internet: more precisely, with the interactive Web 2.0 and the platform economy.¹⁷ Before that, resource-sharing practices indeed had a coordination problem when things were shared beyond a smaller group: if someone had things to spare, it wasn’t easy to find people to invite and share with. In every shared flat, there are arguments about who was the last to shop or clean. A privately-owned car stood idle for a long time, but when you needed it (during vacations, e.g.), the neighbours needed one as well. So, both families had their own cars, even if they were

15 Marx spoke of the “reserve army of labour” (MEW 23, 657), Lenin of “commanding heights” etc.

16 For the commons see Ostrom 2015; Dardot and Laval 2019; Standing 2019; or Helfrich and Bollier 2020.

17 Botsman and Rogers 2010; Sundararajan 2017.

not used most of the time. But here are the glad tidings: this problem has been solved today! Now there are digital platforms that help us coordinate perfectly. If I need a car now and my neighbours do too, I can borrow one from the neighbours one street over, because they're going on vacation by train. If a bakery now has leftover bread, they put it on the platform, and collectors are found immediately. It's all a question of perfect information! In this way, unused resources can be shared: they are now consumed jointly (hence the term "collaborative consumption"; Botsman and Rogers 2010), not alone, thus avoiding waste. Thanks to the digital work from home, we can even work from a vacation and don't have to stick to other people's plans when traveling, thus using off-seasons and weekdays to relax.

Which *values* are associated with this? First, users retain their freedom through the use of helpful things, but in addition they are now free from the responsibility and care for the things and the costs involved. Even without owning a car myself, I can drive to the hardware store in a car-sharing car and bring home the wanted stuff—if I still need to buy it, that is. I could also use a drill without buying it (this is a standard example): if it is not simply borrowed from the neighbour next door, it is freely available in the local "library of things" (Ameli 2020). Second, this freedom avoids the loneliness and reification that consumer freedom can bring, as sharing often happens in some form of community: "sharing is caring!" They who have too many cherries in the garden and offer that others fetch them finally get to know the long-time neighbours whom they often see but with whom they have never spoken. If you want to earn some extra money by subletting a room at short notice, you can establish contact with a wide variety of people. This can counteract the modern tendency toward isolation.

Nature also benefits: things no longer spoil, but are consumed by others; this saves waste and avoids buying new things. Those who use drills, cars, apartments, or office space together consume fewer resources than those who constantly buy or hire everything for themselves but rarely use it. And finally, this also seems to enable a more equal access to many things: you no longer have to be rich to drive a car. In the interviews we conducted in our research project on the sharing economy, many users reported that now they only care about the use value, no longer about the status signal or "fetish" of things. In other words, they no longer need to brag about them or outdo others. Being an early user of sharing practices may bring some prestige of its own kind, but this is no longer exclusionary, but open to all.

Now, isn't *that* the best of all worlds? On the one hand, you retain the advantages of exchange: freedom, equality, and prosperity. On the other hand, you avoid the disadvantages: there are "communities" instead of isolation, less objectification and more equal access to things than in exclusive private ownership. We even save resources: e.g., one shared car can save up to 20 private cars, which would leave more space for life in inner cities.¹⁸ Since 2010, therefore, there has been a real hype about sharing.¹⁹ So much for the good version.

5. The Social Imaginary of Bad Sharing

Critical social philosophy, however, sees a dark underside here as well. This criticism does not want to belittle anything, but rather aims to provide a more complete picture, on the basis of which one can form one's own judgment. The goal is maturity, not bickering. For this more complete picture, let us stay with the advantages of exchange: market mediation works through money, which creates distance and a sense of freedom by abstracting from details. Money is also involved in sharing in many cases, otherwise it would not be called a sharing *economy*.²⁰ A certain distance to others and a small price to pay for services rendered by a third party is welcomed by many users we spoke to, because this way one saves a lot of time and trouble that would otherwise be wasted on planning, discussing, and arguing. This is the first *negative* image of sharing: sharing between a group of peers or co-owners may lead to time-consuming discussions and social conflict (anyone who has lived in a shared flat will have experienced this). So, the sharing economies introduce one advantage of exchange—freedom by monetary mediation—to outsource one disadvantage of sharing: social conflict. Once money is in the game, however, it brings unintended effects. But how does money actually get in? Here are some examples.

- *Exchange without owning*: Even without money involved one can gain access to services by opening a gift exchange: e.g., I mow your lawn and get

18 There are different estimates: the BCS (2016) mention a rate of 1 to 15, the city of Bremen a rate of 1 to 16, (one shared car saving 16 private cars, cf. Schreier et al. 2018). The numbers are lower for free-floating (Share 2018; Rid 2018, 22, 33).

19 For an overview, see Ravenelle 2019; Ameli 2020; Schor 2020; Cesnuitte et al. 2021.

20 Schreyer 2020 therefor writes: "Sharing ≠ Sharing Economy".

a haircut in return; or: I offer my sofa for free to travellers, in return I can sleep on sofas of others in other places. This was the basic idea of couchsurfing.com, and there were also webpages where simple services could be exchanged (easyswap.org, Diensttausch.com, taskrabbitt.de etc.). But even if you no longer have to pay for an exchange, you may have to pay a fee to access the platform.

- *Renting without owning*: Thanks to digital sharing platforms you can now easily rent out things out for money without owning them; for example, rental apartments via *Airbnb*. This creates additional income—in this case not for the owners, who already receive one, but for the tenants. This promises more equality: the money potentially spreads more widely if both owners and tenants get an income from the same object. One even expected a job miracle from this: if thanks to digitalized “sharing” one can sell services without having to own a company or rent an office, unemployment becomes technically impossible: every person with an internet connection can offer something—a car, a flat, some time, or a couch. One can become a self-employed entrepreneur without owning any capital in the literal sense. Access to simple commodities is enough (one’s car, tools etc.) to make some money with it.
- *Data trade and advertising*: Once money is involved, it can also be earned from other sources. It is no coincidence that the first sharing platforms like Uber were financed by venture capital early on. One of the first investors in those start-ups was the right-wing-extremist Peter Thiel. What do venture capitalists expect from the sharing economy? Platform providers profit in two ways: one source of profit is the sale of data for personalized advertising, another the sale of advertising space on their websites, which made companies like Facebook, Instagram, and Google very rich.²¹
- *Tariffs and fees through artificial scarcity*: Crucial for the aspired high profits is a critical size of the platform; there is therefore a tendency towards monopolization (as could be observed with Amazon, Microsoft, Google, Facebook, etc.). Once you control a monopoly (or are near to it), a

21 In digital platforms, private property has not disappeared, it just moved upwards and became transcendental, as an unavoidable framework. Even to lend to neighbours, I have to deposit data online and sometimes pay. Therefore, platform owners (like Amazon, Alibaba, Microsoft, Zoom, Google, Facebook, TikTok, etc.) have been able to multiply wealth and influence especially during the recent Coronavirus pandemic.

third stream of earnings opens up: now you can charge fees. Couchsurfing.com, Spotify, or Amazon Prime, for example, all do that. Airbnb made an astonishing \$ 350 million profit this way in 2021, without owning real estate! But it changes this market as well: real estate companies are buying up hundreds of apartments to rent them to tourists via Airbnb. This is much more profitable than renting out regular apartments long-term. In the long run, this displaces the “normal” living space for normal people. Here the ecological promise dissolves: an extra demand is created that calls for an additional supply. The sharing economy thus fuels a kind of gentrification 2.0: a permanent and growing influx of wealthy people who never stay for long but are ever changing and therefore cannot establish any ties. The profit principle of these digital platforms is reminiscent of robber baron waylaying: “You want to get through here, so pay.” It’s like a return of the repressed: only recently, in global free trade, public institutions lost the opportunity to earn from trade through levies (though those institutions often helped local producers). Now private platforms have filled the void. They earn from brokering access to things that do not belong to them and spend labour that they do not pay for.

- *Disruptive deregulation*: In addition to these direct effects there is another, more indirect, but highly political effect. To the extent that sharing generates access to income for short term work units, it undermines achievements that were once fought for in regular labour markets: minimum wage, health, pension and accident insurance, a right to vacation, to participation in work councils and protection against sexual harassment. It is a radicalization of neoliberal deregulation, an almost complete loss of labour rights. Peter Thiel calls this “disruptive,” Naomi Klein “shock therapy:” the change is so radical that resistance is paralysed.²² Likewise, social work is outsourced from communal budgets to the people affected—as “self-help” was always popular with market radicals (Bendix 1960). From this perspective, the success of the sharing economy around 2010 was no incision by new internet tools, but by the financial crisis that made many people poor, particularly in the USA and Greece. This forced many to somehow make money out of their private things (cars, beds, tools), driving the “commodity frontier” much deeper into intimate life (Hochschild 2003, 30 ff.).

22 Klein 2007. “Airbnb and Lyft [...] were projects designed to reshape labor markets, removing the protections that workers had enjoyed since the New Deal” (Chafkin 2021, 190).

Alexandrina Ravenelle (2019) and Juliet Schor (2020) have shown how this increases inequality instead of reducing it: among the work providers on sharing platforms, only those who do not need additional income really benefit—wealthier people who put their second homes on Airbnb. People who depend on income from Uber, task-rabbit, etc. for lack of alternatives can barely make ends meet and bear all the risks and costs themselves. Instead of reducing unemployment, this further displaces regular jobs and replaces them with precarious ones, while on the other hand big players expand their market power.

There is one last point: The lack of regulations and the display of user photos on the platform profiles, which are supposed to bring people together, also bring back social prejudices: while a hotel is not allowed to reject anyone based on their appearance, sharing platforms allow discrimination based on colour or gender (Edelman 2017). At the same time, this fuels superficial self-optimization, because you have to constantly show yourself in the best light and collect recommendations and “likes” (as on Facebook etc.). Users need to reify and advertise themselves like a commodity on the market. We are thus faced with a great contradiction: as with exchange, also with sharing. Important and by no means “false” values are opposed by great disadvantages these same values bring as side-effects.

Positive interpretation of sharing	Negative interpretation of sharing
Freedom through things, but in community	Exclusion by communities Extensive coordination & discussions
Equalized access to things and income streams	Precarization of labour Superprofits for platform owners
Decreasing resource consumption	Additional markets, more consumption

Table 2: The Impacts of Sharing (source: by the author)

6. The Explanatory Power of Ownership Structures

Now what are we to do with all this? How do we deal with this contradictory complexity? Neither can we simply cross out a page and cut the analysis in

half, seeing only the good sides of one practice and the bad of the other, or vice versa. Nor can we leave it at these ambivalences. But how can we explain that practices of exchange and sharing turn out one way in one case and differently in another? I propose that the distribution of ascribed positive and negative effects of both practices is not at random, but follows a certain pattern that is based on *structures of ownership* and their effects on the resulting practices.

Evidently, exchange presupposes a certain ownership: merchants need to own the goods they aim to sell (at least at one point in time, as in the case of “futures”); hence the pattern to perceive the world as a bundle of marketable things. But ethically speaking, property itself is ambiguous. On the one hand, positive values such as freedom and security are associated with it: owners may feel independent of short-term events or from the influence of others (as long, that is, as their titles are recognized, which again is a social affair). On the other hand, there clearly are disadvantages. Owners bear responsibility: maintenance and repair work or taxes are incurred; capital needs utilization and profitable sales channels. Above all, one is tied to the *thing* (we may call this “thing-care,” to distinguish it from person-care). If you own a house or a car, you are not exempt from ongoing consumer spending. On the contrary, roofs and pipes have to be replaced regularly, heating and renovations are necessary, etc. To own a car, you need licences, parking space, tires, fuel, repairs, you pay taxes and insurance, not to mention the occasional legal disputes. Ownership *encourages* rather than relieves permanent spending on consumption. It can become quite a nuisance. From the perspective of non-owners, there are even more disadvantages of property—just to mention capitalist exploitation: profit is legally appropriated by whoever owns the means of production (entrepreneurs, banks, shareholders), not by the ones who do the work or have to bear the negative effects.

In view of these downsides, for many *sharing* represents the good side of overcoming private property, hence the slogan “sharing instead of owning”: sharing something saves resources, it conserves household budgets as well as the environment. Giving away and using things together even promises to make us more fraternal. This egalitarian nimbus of sharing stems from a long and early phase of humanity, when captured food was not stored but consumed together (Woodburn 2005; Widlok 2017). Property disputes did hardly arise. Nothing is ever completely over, so this type of sharing-without-ownership still sounds familiar. Sharing in the sharing economy, on the other hand, in most cases *presupposes* private property. It is an illusion to assume

that property is not involved in practices of sharing (the food at the dinner table is provided by *somebody*, even if it is shared by the dinner guests). The things shared need to belong to *somebody*, so sharing itself is no alternative to property as such, but does offer alternative uses of it. But private property can be used and shared in different ways. Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish how private property can be involved in sharing, because this releases the different dynamics we encounter in the practices. In the following I will take carsharing as an example.

7. Not All Sharing is the Same: Types and Effects of Ownership involved in Car Sharing

Different ownership structures have different practical *effects*, and this could partly explain why sharing can turn out to be both “good” or “bad” (Loske 2015, 2019). A shared car may serve as an example here. So let us consider the various ways of jointly using a car.

(a) The counter-example against which sharing is often contrasted is the proto-typical exclusive use of private property: someone owns something and excludes others from using it. It is my car, only I am allowed to use it. The typical effect is that others are excluded—not only from using this particular car, but also from the use of the public space occupied by it when driving on public roads or parking in public space (Notz 2017). But this exclusion is not necessary, as things like cars can easily be shared. Most cars carry at least four passengers. But what types of sharing can we distinguish?

(b) Individual property can be used by different people, as in families, between friends (“Baby you can drive my car”) or in carpools. Family cars are the norm in many cases (Heine et al. 2001, 39 ff.): not only does the family head (mostly the father) drive it to work, but one may drive on vacation together, take the children to sports or to school, and so on. While family cars are often shared simultaneously (several people in the same car at the same time), acquaintances tend to do so sequentially. The practical downside of this is evident: if there is one owner, but several users, there is a power differential that may lead to subordination. Families are hierarchical by their very nature. One way to solve this problem in many families was simply to buy another car. Thus, buying more and more cars promised not only freedom of movement, but also freedom from domination (an emancipation). But this

is a dead end: it leads to more consumption, overspending, and traffic jams. Another way to equalize the relation of users is to share not only in the use of things, but also in the ownership (which also levels the playing field) of the used thing.

(c) In groups outside the family, sharing may extend to the ownership itself, if people share the costs as well as the use. Imagine a shared flat that also shares a car. At some point the question will arise why only one person should shoulder the cost of a car that is used by everybody, and the solution here is to share the burdens together with the benefits. If users share the ownership of the things used in common, legally this is still considered “private” (as in associations or a shared apartment). But friendship circles cannot grow arbitrarily large, and diverging plans can lead to disputes (if two persons need the car at the same time or someone parked it too far away). Therefore, this type of sharing is again intrinsically unstable, as it leads to conflict and high coordination costs—in terms of time and nerve. If every time you wish to use a car it is either taken, or you need to debate for hours, people will tend to opt out sooner or later. Therefore, ownership can eventually be outsourced to larger entities outside of the group itself to minimize organization costs. Here we face a bifurcation, as the third entity can once again have different ownership structures.

(d) It can be turned over into cooperative or municipal ownership, which is still rare in the field of car sharing (maybe because cities already have a public transportation system).²³ Here, group property enters a somewhat larger and more formalized scale. However, if a cooperative can no longer thrive on voluntary work and starts to pay people for the work they throw in (which is a matter of fairness), it joins the formal economy.

(e) It can also be turned into a small company that takes care of organizational matters and aims to refinance itself through fees or municipal support. Thus, private companies for the common good have emerged from citizens’ initiatives, as in the case of TeilAuto or Cambio. This allows for more flexibility and reliability: if something does not work out in a cooperative, you might expect heart-warming excuses or endless discussions. If something goes wrong in a company, you get your money back. This is one advantage of becoming professional: things are organized more factually. This type of car sharing is often station-based, so there are always reliable parking spaces on returning the car.

²³ One example is StattAuto in Northern Germany.

The main goal of these citizen-companies is not making profit by increasing their market share, but rather to reduce traffic and enhance the quality of life in their respective cities. However, some of them have grown, as demand for alternatives to the ownership model is on the rise. Indeed, the economy of scale is an advantage: dividing one car among four users is more complicated than dividing ten cars among forty users or 100 among 400. But this leads to a paradox: on the one hand, the aim of these companies is to reduce traffic and the number of cars in the streets. On the other hand, we see a constant drive towards expansion: small companies can easily be outcompeted or ruined even by minor economic irregularities; and users enjoy more choice and more range if the carsharing company is larger or active in different cities. This quantitative growth runs the risk of turning into a qualitative shift, as we have seen it in the commercialisation of sharing platforms (Airbnb, couchsurfing etc.).

(f) Finally, larger profit-oriented private companies with a lot of capital (such as car companies) may enter what is now a market, once they see that there is money to be made. Large car producers have the necessary capital and even a fleet to spare in order to get a carsharing company going with the snap of a finger. Of course, car companies wish to sell cars, or put them to another profitable use, the more, the better. For them leasing or “sharing” cars out against money is just another way to make a profit. So, their motive no longer is a reduction of traffic; rather, they have an interest to increase traffic and the number of cars, sold or rented out. This invalidates the ecological argument for sharing—if more cars are sold and used through sharing rather than less, the effect is reversed and turned into greenwashing. Studies have shown that cars from these free-floating fleets are often used on top of a car at home, so it does not reduce private cars, but rather public transport. Where profit becomes the end, the ecological subtext shrinks to a matter of marketing.

This ecological difference between (e) (reduction of traffic) and (f) (increase of traffic) can not only be attributed to different economic interests embodied by different types of firms (common good vs. for profit). It also works through different incentives for the users. Studies show that smaller providers (e) make it easier to say goodbye to cars, because in typical cases (trips to the hardware store, to the lake, to the grandparents) one can fall back on one without having to buy it (BCS 2016; Schreier et al. 2018; Öko-Institut 2018). If one uses shared cars *instead* of one's own, reduction occurs. The lever is the cost structure: if your own car has already swallowed up a lot

Ownership structure	a) private property used individually	b) private-property used together	c) group property	d) cooperative or communal property	e) private property of small non-profit firms	f) private property of large for-profit firms
Type of sharing	(-)	Sharing within a small group	Sharing within a small group	Sharing in a community	Sharing in a town	Sharing in a city
Practical effect	Exclusion	Risk of domination	High coordination costs	Reduction of traffic	Reduction of traffic	Increase of traffic

Table 3: Effects of the Ownership Structure

of money before use, this encourages as many journeys as possible. But if each journey costs extra, that encourages people to drive less.

On the other hand, the low access-threshold of free-floating models is particularly tempting: you no longer have to go to the counter of a rental station, and the time of use is shorter and cheaper thanks to quick booking via smartphone (the car is paid for by the minute or by the mile). This cheap and easy comfort seduces to *additional* trips for people who already have a car at home and are used to it, but are on a trip somewhere without it, and also people who aspire to drive a fancy car. This leads to an addition to traffic, because the use is at the expense of public transport (if you missed the local train, quickly fetch a car).

Indirectly, this easy availability has further advantages for the industry: it socializes into driving even those people who cannot (yet) afford a car. The cheap and easy availability of cars socialises young people with a limited budget into car-junkies and also promotes the industry's newest models. It is a perfect advertising mechanism: it binds users to brands and provides "greenwashing" for companies with damaged reputations (think of the diesel scandal in Germany). This can be seen in the fact that free-floating also provides SUVs, sports or luxury cars that are meant to incite fun driving and boasting. Or think of business travellers who drive shared cars instead of public transport when they travel, or car owners who park their cars outside the city and use shared cars inside the city. Thus, more cars are driven, not fewer. Here, the whole point of sharing is reversed and turned into just another business with hardly any effect on social or ecological sustainability.

This comparison illustrates that sharing and private property are not at all mutually exclusive, that sharing is not per se an alternative to property. But sharing is not simply an extension of private property or practices of exchange. Some sharing practices *limit* the power of private property: they preserve the use-value-promises of private cars (flexibility and independence) without allowing private property to proliferate into profit-oriented exchange value and consumer fetishism (where the car turns into a symbol of distinction and status, and a sacred cow of economic policy). In order to grasp the differences, it is central to differentiate property structures involved in practices of sharing and their effects on the *Weltbeziehungen* of the users.

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