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Sharing mobilities. Some propaedeutic considerations

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ABSTRACT

The sharing economy in general and the increasing number of sharing services in mobilities in particular stand, in many ways, for a phenomenon which is somehow bulky and unwieldy for classical economic theory. Within social sciences, these new practices of sharing rather than owning have been labelled in different ways highlighting distinctive characteristics of what sharing mobilities might mean for different people and networks. A common characteristic seems to be that sharing concepts are all highly ambivalent and often constitute a paradox between being part of the capitalist economy or providing an alternative to the capitalist economy. This special issue stands as an example of the many different approaches to sharing, with its point of departure being the twelfth Cosmobilities Network Conference in 2016 in Germany. The conference entitled “Sharing Mobilities. New Perspectives for Societies on the Move?” was a starting point for social-science-based debate on the future of new forms of mobilities. This special issue picks up some of the questions that were raised there and focuses on open questions with an outset in the mobilities turn. The authors critically investigate, think through and analyse a highly actual phenomenon, and discusses its urgency and relevance both socially and politically.

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The sharing economy in general, and the increasing number of sharing services in mobilities in particular, stand, in many ways, for a phenomenon which is somehow bulky and unwieldy for classical economic theory. The sharing economy is referred to in a variety of ways, such as “... forms of exchange facilitated through online platforms, encompassing a diversity of for-profit and non-profit activities ...”(Richardson 2015, 121). Or: “the value in taking under-utilized assets and making them accessible online to a community, leading to a reduced need for ownership” (Stephany 2015, 205). The new economic practices of sharing rather than owning have been labelled in different ways such as platform economy, crowd-based capitalism, the collaborative economy, etc. (Benkler 2004; Belk 2014; Kostakis and Bauwens 2014; Stephany 2015; Hamari, Sjöklint, and Ukkonen 2016; Kenny and Zysman 2016; Sundararajan 2016). The dominant discourse about “sharing” is based on its economic character, but some argue there is a difference between sharing and the sharing economy (Light and Miskelly 2015). Some use platforms for economic exchange, while others engage

in more altruistic community-based cultures of sharing. This differentiation highlights distinctive characteristics of what sharing mobilities might mean for different people and networks. A common characteristic seems to be that sharing concepts are all highly ambivalent and often constitute a paradox between being *part* of the capitalist economy or providing an *alternative* to the capitalist economy. Arun Sundararajan from New York University recently wrote, in a somewhat tongue-in-cheek manner: what is the new phenomena?

Capitalist or socialist? Commercial economy or gift economy? Market or hierarchy? Global or local economic impact? Regulatory arbitrage or self-regulatory expression? Centralized or decentralized value capture? Empowered entrepreneur or disenfranchised drone? Job destruction or work creation? Isolated or connected societies? As you may have realized by now, the answer to each of these questions in the sharing economy is “yes.” (Sundararajan 2016, 205)

This special issue stands as an example of the many different approaches to sharing, with its point of departure being the twelfth Cosmobilities Network Conference in 2016 in Germany. The conference entitled “Sharing Mobilities. New Perspectives for Societies on the Move?” was a starting point for social-science-based debate on the future of new forms of mobilities. This special issue picks up some of the questions that were raised there and focuses on open questions with an outset in the mobilities turn. The authors critically investigate, think through and analyse a highly actual phenomenon, and discusses its urgency and relevance both socially and politically.

Sharing mobilities and resources for transport and connectivity are not just a new phenomenon. In this special issue, Fjalland points out that sharing can be seen as the outset for human populations. With Fisher (1979), she underlines the importance of sharing resources collected or hunted in order to keep one’s tribe strong, and thus able to survive, and that sharing was what held societies together, based on trust-based local communities. Fjalland’s focus is on the sharing mobilities of food and it opens up the importance of sharing information and knowledge in the form of storytelling. Today, storytelling is still significant, but the speed at which storytelling and information travels has changed. In the twenty-first century, the Internet is increasingly becoming the communication medium and major infrastructure for managing distributed renewable Materialities and mobilities; and, also to discuss global Commons (see Rifkin 2015; Mason 2016). This can be understood as a specific form of what Ulrich Beck once coined as “reflexive modernization” (Beck, Bonss, and Lau 2003) which is becoming an increasingly global phenomenon (Beck 2008; Kyung-Sup 2010). Against this backdrop, sharing mobilities is not an isolated, marginalized phenomenon; it is at the very heart of transitory developments which may have the potential to change the socio-technical figurations of modern societies and the overarching economic system of capitalism. It is this change within the framework of the platform economy that Wessels focuses on in this special issue. She argues that these virtual exchange-based mobilities are composed of networks of sharing and transaction that seek to add value to resources. In line with the above-mentioned paradox, she sees them as both an extension of commercial exchanges and as non-profit making communal activities. Individuals draw on culture and the language of the second modernity to assess the meaning of sharing versus the meaning of transaction, and accessing resources becomes meaningful through a reflexive engagement with the social values embedded within.

With mobilities’ strong impact on modern economies, cultures and cities, this exchange of resources, knowledge and information has become even more significant (Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006; Freudendal-Pedersen, Hannam, and Kesselring 2016). Concurrently, this process has enabled a degree of specialization and expertise, providing cities and

societies with economic efficiency and technological development. Seen from a social science perspective, the rise of sharing services from Uber, Lyft and BlaBlaCar, to Airbnb and Couchsurfing.com, and from station-based car-sharing services such as DriveNow and Car2Go, sharing systems are a growing part of the city's mobilities. Right now, Uber, as one of the giants in the field, is pioneering mobility and transport and has recently been estimated to be worth close to 70 billion USD (Tyfield 2018, 194). But Uber is just the glossiest competitor in a wide field of big players, such as Google, Tesla, Alibaba and Baidu, all of which have entered the highly diverse global market of "After-the-car" services.¹ The economic dynamic and disruptive quality of sharing mobilities has neither been intended (by most economic actors) nor foreseen or even actively sought; instead, the dynamics of new sharing practices and of global commons have developed a self-organizing energy which has not been "on the radar" for most players in the field. The rise of new mobility services in multinational corporations such as General Motors, Daimler and Toyota is more a reaction on the social transitions in the "system of automobility" (Urry 2004), and the disenchantment of the automobile as an object of conspicuous consumption, than an intentionally propelled business model.

But where does this social change come from? Why is sharing such an appealing idea and attracts non-profit as well as companies such as Deutsche Bahn, BMW, Daimler, Uber, Alibaba, and many other more local and regional companies and initiatives like Cambio in Germany and GoMore in Denmark (just to name a couple)? In this special issue Hartman-Petersen is interviewing Søren Riis, one of the inventors of GoMore, about these new services and their significance. Among other things they discuss if we can expect a new mobility regime, new players in the field, with more diversity and maybe even higher efficiency, especially in cities with growing markets for sharing mobilities? (see Canzler and Knie 2016) Maybe another unintended consequence – a positive side effect of these economic and social shifts – may be conceivable: new forms of accessibility to common goods could generate more equality and social participation and, by making mobility available for wider social groups, this could even have positive effects on labour and the sustainability of mobility cultures. In this special issue, Rode and Cruz's paper focuses on how access to people, goods, ideas and services forms the basis of city development. They discuss a pathway for alternative ways of thinking about mobilities, individual ownership, the organization of space and the changing relationships people have to mobility artefacts, such as cars, bikes, scooters and more. This is done through a discussion of accessibility, where they argue that a focus on the accessibility paradigm affects the capacity for integrating shared mobility and mobility as a service in transport and planning policy.

And accessibility is an important reason why people increasingly share cars and bikes as well as houses, food, expertise and mastery in science and craftsmen's work, etc. (McLaren and Agyeman 2015; Meyer and Shaheen 2017). Once radical visions have become part of the lingering but steady transformation of values, norms, procedures, institutional routines and even capitalist principles (Ostrom 2012; Mason 2016), a burgeoning political awareness can be witnessed in cities, regions, in mobilities as well as transportation research, planning, politics, business and civil society. As mentioned before, global car producers not only become part of the new sharing culture and economy, they also become drivers of the whole process, moving away from mobility concepts that built on the centrality of individual car ownership. It is not only the "classical sharing concepts" that play an essential role here – the discourses on automated driving, electric mobility, and the discussions around congestion

charges and other restrictions on automobility must also be taken into account when trying to understand the current transitory disruptive dynamics of mobility and transport (Freudendal-Pedersen, Hannam, and Kesselring 2016).

In first and second modernity the “system of automobility” (Urry 2004), with its credo of the car as the one best way of being mobile and connected, has seemingly been unbeatable. There wasn’t serious competition for this symbol of flexibility and success. But right now, modern societies are observing an accelerated diversification and the rise of a system of multi-mobility. This is strongly driven by the digitalization and mediatization of all spheres of modern lives (Canzler and Knie 2016; Couldry and Hepp 2017). The digitalization and “robotization” (Elliott 2016) of, for example, the automotive industry and its major product, the car, has a deep impact on the organization of everyday life, economic activity and sociality in general (Fraedrich and Lenz 2014; Fraedrich, Beiker, and Lenz 2015). In this sense, sharing mobilities is much more than just a case of sharing cars or any other mode of transport; against the backdrop of climate change, sustainability and individual ownership of vehicles, the car – as the facilitator and the main social technology of modern lives that gives access to individual freedom and self-actualization – all this has been fundamentally questioned. The fact that global car companies invest in car sharing concepts and new mobility concepts in economic terminology, has to do with the fact that the car industry knows that the future of automobility will look different. The equation “freedom = individualized, privately owned automobility” does not apply in the same way as it did throughout the twentieth century.

The question that pops up in relations to the increasing opportunities of sharing is: if the hype on sharing is just an expression of the pursuit of big business, the next phase of capitalist development. Capital needs a fixed base to expand (Harvey 2001) and today people willingly take it upon themselves to invest in raw materials and labour (Airbnb and Uber). By doing so, they commodify it while allowing others to profit. It opens a new pathway for the immobility of some people and for the high mobility of others (Graham and Marvin 2001; Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006). It also provides a spatial fix to overcome current barriers for capital accumulation in urban mobility and dwelling (Spinney 2016). Therefore, it is argued that the concept of sharing has been co-opted by mainstream economics in the search for profit (Martin 2015). And with the current development within sharing platforms such as Airbnb and Uber, it seems the order of capitalist society is certainly having a strong grip on modern societies. In relation to physical mobilities (bike and car sharing), it seems quite clear that these sharing platforms are a new form of rental economy facilitated on a peer-to-peer level through the Internet and the many new portable technologies increasingly becoming normalized in today’s world (Kallis 2014).

This is what Spinney emphasizes in this special issue, focusing on the gathering, combining and privatizing of user data in an ICT-based Public Bike Sharing System. He discusses how this has created a resource that is not currently being used to achieve civic goals, but rather is being used to enhance both the brand image of operators and leverage in order to facilitate the cooperation of municipal governments. Thereby the shared bike is being transformed into a vehicle for harvesting, recording and combining user data with a view to monetizing this resource and that the relatively pervasive and black-boxed nature of this datafication and its politicisation is a key issue.

A reason for this can be that the original value of sharing based on a non-monetary exchange of assets – based on reciprocity and communal ownership – has been incorporated as gasoline in another round of commodification and capitalization (Martin 2015). However,

these kinds of sharing fundamentally alter modern principles of mobility and flexibility and also feed emerging discussions on the rise of commons as a social and cultural resource in a cosmopolitan world full of social, ecological, economic and cultural risks. And with the current embeddedness in capitalist principles there is also a strong potential for sharing mobilities that are not based on profit – systems where monetary exchange is not excluded, but monetary benefit for those not managing the system is excluded and focus is on collaborative ownership (Glover 2011, 2013).

Either way, today we are witnessing how sharing is not only seen as a radical vision (see e.g. Wolfgang Sachs' work) but has become a part of a slowly emerging but steady transformation of norms, routines and capitalist routines. "Networked (urban) mobilities" (Freudental-Pedersen and Kesselring 2018) can be interpreted as a growing social and political awareness and an opportunity to act, which is interwoven with the global environmental crisis (Urry 2011; Dennis 2013). The consequences that consumption has on the condition of the planet (see Urry 2010) has been at the forefront in the media and, thus, in our daily lives. However, this is often ignored since it is hard to determine how to act on these concerns. The sharing economy provides an opportunity to act collectively. Modern everyday life is full of choices (even if, sociologically, choice is a concept which needs careful treatment as there is no such thing as completely free choice). Virtual mobility, smartphones and computers provide a previously unseen awareness of options which increase our physical mobility – we want to get out and see, notice, taste, smell or participate in some of the opportunities we discover on the Internet. Most people are aware that this increased mobility plays a role in allowing our cattle to overgraze our community pasture. But the ability to act for the common good in a world where individualization plays a major role is the big challenge. This should not be confused with egotism or a lack of ethics or common responsibility; paralysis by analysis has become an increasing problem in a world where information saturates our everyday lives, especially when it comes to information about environmental crises. In many ways, the sharing economy can be viewed as an opportunity for individuals to step up to these challenges. The sharing economy therefore has an opportunity, and a responsibility, to establish new types of communities that can handle local/global responsibilities and transform them into positive visions for both cities and regions.

Note

1. This notion is taken from Dennis and Urry, *After the car*, and their ideas of a future of mobilities beyond the dominance of the car as the iconic mode of global transport.

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