



Upscaling a sharing approach

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Abstract

Parallels between person-to-person sharing and centrally institutionalized forms of redistribution have been noted repeatedly but also need to be assessed critically. When sharing is defined as the allocation of economic goods without calculating returns we may ask whether this also includes redistributive large-scale institutions such as forms of public pooling, crowd-based digital platforms or taxation. Can sharing be upscaled to institutional settings at larger scales or is it tied to intimate contexts of face-to-face interaction? This contribution discusses this question by giving particular attention to the way in which the presence of social agents is shaped in sharing and how it is altered when it is upscaled institutionally. On the basis of comparisons between ethnographic observations in small and large settings, processes of recognizing, mediating, virtualizing and temporalizing presence are identified. Finally, some lessons from research on sharing in intimate settings are being drawn for assessing the role that sharing may play to counter inequalities in larger institutional settings.

Keywords

Sharing, pooling, taxation, scale, presence, distance, platform economy, inequality, institutions, hunter–gatherers

Introduction: Expanding sharing practices into larger institutional settings

Anthropology claims to tackle ‘large issues in small places’ (see Eriksen, 2010) but rarely considers whether and how the issues may change as we move from small places to bigger places that are ever more complex and connected. This invites criticism not only from other disciplines but also from within. For instance, Bird-David (2017) has

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suggested that many key theorems in anthropology are based on research with tiny groups without reflecting about possible problems of scale. In this article, I take stock of one such key idea, namely that inequality can be hedged effectively through levelling mechanisms such as sharing. I rethink the ethnographic evidence on sharing in the light of current concerns about inequality at larger scales and provide an account on how anthropology can revisit some of its key findings, often generated through research in small places, and critically apply them not only to large issues but also to larger places without ignoring problems of scale.

Distinctions between sharing in small face-to-face settings and redistribution through central institutions have been noted repeatedly in the literature on sharing. For instance, Price's (1975) widely cited definition of sharing as the 'allocation of economic goods and services without calculating returns [...]' seems to put sharing into close company with pooling and taxation (Price, 1975: 4). Such a wide definition of sharing allows us to consider many forms of (re)distribution together, including taxation in centralized states, the digital sharing platforms of current crowd-based capitalism (Sundararajan, 2017) and other forms of sharing that are removed from the everyday sharing between kin or friends. However, Price added the half-sentence '[...]within an intimate social group' (Price, 1975: 4) to his definition which raises the question whether small-scale sharing practices and their logic can indeed be upscaled into larger institutional settings. What is gained and what is lost in the process? How is 'intimacy' constituted and what are its limits? This is what I shall investigate in this contribution.

We may start by asking what exactly 'intimate' may mean in the context of sharing practices. In her argument concerning the number-blindness of anthropology, Bird-David (2017) has suggested that intimacy, first and foremost, has to do with group size and the number of agents involved. While anthropologists have often clearly noted that their research was done in 'small-scale societies' of a few hundred individuals, the analytical implications of this have only recently been discussed (see also Widlok and Cruz, 2022). What if persons in such ethnographic settings are not primarily representatives of 'types' or 'categories' for which replacements and substitutes can easily be found when the need arises? Their social ties are said to be 'pluripresent' as people are multiply related, exposed to each other 'all of the time, throughout a lifetime' (Bird-David, 2017: 214). Their simultaneous pluripresence, as Bird-David (2017) calls it, follows rules that differ from those assumed by social and economic theories that are dealing with large-scale societies. The problem is not simply that of an unreflected methodological nationalism (Glick Schiller and Wimmer, 2002) or of an underlying state bias (see Bourdieu, 2014). Rather, it addresses unreflected biases of scale that come in as soon as we talk about 'a person', 'an agent' or 'a relationship' in anthropological writing. If persons in small-scale settings are 'pluripresent', this could be expected to have also implications for sharing practices: if I lose (for whatever reason) someone who regularly shares with me, I may find it hard to find a suitable replacement since my relation with everyone around will be slightly different to that relationship which I have lost. This would be very different from a large-scale market situation in which traders and customers may be expected to be replaced without any fundamental problem (even though sometimes with some practical difficulties).

Against the background of such debates, it is worth noting, however, that there is nothing to indicate that sharing would be *necessarily* limited to small-scale situations of few participants, just as – conversely – market transfers do not *necessarily* involve a large number of agents. Market principles can apply with very few agents who may know one another intimately. Regional small-scale markets exist and many hypermodern markets are limited to a few large corporate players. As in the case of digital media multinationals, this may at some point be considered a threat as markets can give way to monopolies. But generally speaking, there is a sense that market principles can be downscaled to situations with only a few agents, products and transactions. Conversely, ethnographic cases come to mind in which transfers play a role that can meaningfully be called ‘sharing’ even though they evidently include a large number of individuals. The example that I have used elsewhere (Widlok, 2017: 112) is that of the English rambler association whose activities (‘the right to roam’) allow general access to public footpaths for all by walking these footpaths regularly. I consider this to be an act of sharing as it keeps access to the land legally open. This follows my own somewhat revised conceptualization of sharing as ‘allowing others to access what is valued’ (Widlok, 2017: 1). In the digital world, other examples of large-scale sharing come to mind, for instance providing free internet hotspots open to the public, potentially a very large public (Widlok, 2019: 33). I shall discuss below as to who exactly is sharing what with whom in such larger contexts and whether we need to distinguish sharing from pooling or gift-exchange in such settings. At this point, it should suffice to say that ‘intimate’ is not exclusively a matter of numbers, the size of the group.

Scale is not only about the number of individuals in the group involved but it has been theorized in terms of (a) ‘size’ and (b) ‘level’ as well as (c) ‘relation’ (see Howitt, 1998). As discussed at more length elsewhere (Widlok and Cruz, 2022: 8) size itself need not be limited to demography but it could also be understood in terms of spatial extension or institutional complexity. Arguably, even the sharing in small groups of hunter–gatherers can extend across large parts of continents (see Bird et al., 2019) and the intricacies of making demands and dealing with them in interaction can be very complex (see Widlok, 2017). On this basis, we could say that sharing was never entirely limited to the small scale (in terms of size) as it was also sizable in terms of space and complexity. The same would hold with regard to the dimension of level. As multiple levels are typically nested into one another, it is worthwhile underlining that even in economies that are highly commercialized and capitalized at one level, many people at the individual household level make a living not by selling their labour but by receiving allowances through various forms of sharing (see Ferguson, 2015).

When discussing ‘upscaling’ in this article, it is therefore not primarily the dimensions of size or level but rather the dimension of relation that is particularly relevant. ‘Relation’ here includes the question as to what happens to a practice such as sharing if it is scaled up by the agents themselves as they relate different domains of life to one another. In this sense then this concerns the way in which the group of ‘intimate social others’ is scaled. It is not fixed but it refers to those with whom we are willing and able to make ourselves sufficiently familiar. Scale in this context is very much about scaling up one’s presence – and the presence of others – in social relationships. There is no need

at all for these social others to be all of the same type, but intimacy can be scaled by creating and expanding co-presence with others. In other words, establishing what constitutes an intimate group is not ‘given’ in terms of a set number or level of group. Rather, intimacy is a form of co-presence which is created performatively by a community of practice (see Widlok, 2017).

Our question is therefore more precisely phrased in terms of whether and how practices of making yourself (and others) present, of creating a community of practice, can be upscaled. In our case the practice around which such a community is created may be the act of sharing itself, i.e. it could be a community with the sole purpose of sharing certain things, be it objects, information or simply sharing time together as in many leisure-time groups. But the intimacy and presence can also be created, almost as a side product, through being engaged with one another around any other practice, be it an everyday practice such as living around a neighbourhood green, having an office together or having a hobby or some special interest in common. My focus here will be to investigate how such practices generate specific forms of co-presence and thereby allow sharing to be taken from smaller to larger scale.

In what follows I shall first go through some dimensions of ‘creating co-presence’ in the ethnography of small-scale societies and then ask to what extent these can be found or replicated at larger scales. Against this background, I shall suggest how features observed in interpersonal sharing relations may inform questions of global redistribution that involve larger institutional settings. How can proposed changes to the institutional framework of global redistribution be informed by state-of-the-art anthropological theory on sharing which largely takes its evidence from so-called ‘small-scale’ settings dominated by kin relationships and personal interaction? An important subtext to which this piece also speaks is the question of how to deal with various types of ‘inequitable distribution’ that characterize social relations today: with regards to taxation and related institutional forms of managing distribution, I maintain that across these cases the (in)equalities involved are multilayered and ambivalent, and so are the institutional responses in the form of redistributive measures. The purpose of this contribution is therefore to open up the debate for lessons learned from sharing practices which may be practically integrated into ‘new institutions of sharing’.

My outline of the possibilities (and limitations) when expanding the practice of sharing into larger institutional frames is conducted under the subheadings of *recognized*, *mediated*, *virtualized* and *timed* presence. The ethnography of sharing in small-scale societies on which I base my arguments is my long-term field research with Hai||om and other San in southern Africa as well as experiences with small groups of hunter–gatherers elsewhere, including Australia and Malaysia, as well as the comparative literature in this domain. In each of the following sections, I shall try to transpose lessons learned from small-scale sharing to large-scale contexts: migration, taxation, the platform economy and social security systems. Sharing with migrants as denizens is discussed in terms of *recognizing presence*, sharing taxes and benefits in settings dominated by corporate agents in terms of *mediating presence*, sharing on digital internet platforms in terms of *virtualizing presence* and sharing benefits provided by state-run social security systems over an individual lifetime in terms of *timing presence*. However, I shall also try to

show that in all these cases of upscaling these challenges also overlap considerably. Problematizing presence is a key dimension in all of them: changes in scale affect the possibilities and limitations of maintaining the kinds of presence that are necessary for sharing relations to flourish.

Recognizing presence: Migrants as denizens

The importance of co-evalness and spatial co-presence in sharing practices has been documented in many ethnographic cases and in the comparative theory on sharing (see Widlok, 2017, 2019, 2020). Being there when others cook their meal, for instance, functions like a ‘silent demand’ made in order to receive a share, a demand that is difficult to deny. However, inversely, this means that demands and claims made by those who are *not* there at the same time and at the same location can be easily ignored unless they are being enforced by some other means (see below). In small-scale settings, one of the most visible features of economies dominated by sharing is that ‘being present’ is key when resources are distributed or when access to goods is being provided (see Widlok, 2017). While gift-exchange systems allow for reserving and earmarking items for particular partners who may be far removed in time and space, this becomes more difficult in sharing systems. Not all shares need to be the same but it is very rare that someone who is present is left completely and continuously empty-handed. Pressing for a share may be said to depend on whoever can make themselves particularly ‘present’ in a situation, e.g. through demands, body language and a rhetoric of kinship and relatedness (Widlok, 2013).

In settings in which a lot of sharing takes place, it is one of the most common complaints to hear people lament that they were not there right on the spot when some resource became available. In changing hunter–gatherer settings such as Namibia this could be an animal killed, a government drought relief truck arriving or state pensions being given out to the elderly. Not having been there is an opportunity missed. Thus, while sharing enhances equality between those who share co-presence, it can also aggravate (at least initially) the inequality between those who happened to be there and who received a share versus those who happened to be absent and who missed out on something. However, it is important not to overemphasize the momentariness of the event. Even ‘being there, waiting for a share’ while others cook, typically is a protracted form of co-presence. Passing by is often not good enough, hanging in while others cook, refusing to leave and making one’s silent demand more pressing with an increasing length of stay are the most common performative strategies to turn any haphazard ‘happening to be there’ into ‘co-presence’. Moreover, since there are typically more demands for a share than people who want or who can satisfy these demands, the question arises to what extent having been there first (or having been there for long) can outweigh any claims and demands made by having only arrived recently.

It is one of the common features of large-scale complex societies that they do tend to keep a record as to who arrived when. Consequently, one of the most pervasive inequalities today is that between ‘first-comers’ and ‘late-comers’, or more precisely between ‘earlier’ and ‘later’ arrivals. While hunter–gatherers seem to be fairly tolerant towards

granting shares to recent arrivals, this tends to upset the meritocratic principles of many large societies which rather tolerate inequalities of outcomes than inequalities of merit.¹ Merit here is often understood as allowing to accumulate entitlements over time. It is difficult to imagine how sharing can be upscaled unless any strict categorization of first-comers versus late comers that may exist is reformed and tied into a more dynamic system of access.

Most debates surrounding inequality in present-day large-scale settings, I propose, hinge on the issue of accumulation at a place and over time. Grave inequalities between members of a society are often the consequence of some members of society being able to accumulate assets ‘over generations’, largely through inheritance. This creates an unequal playing field and the distributive ‘unfairness’ that comes with it. Inheritance tax regulations provide a measure ready at hand – even though not often used – that can help to (re-)create a level playing field in large-scale societies and in nation-states across generations. But at times of high mobility and in transnational perspective, this does not alter the often enormous economic rift between those who have lived for a long time at a place as recognized resident citizens and those who have recently arrived, for instance as migrants or refugees. The latter typically are only granted limited support. In a stepwise and incomplete fashion, they may gain some access to rights and assets at their new abode, including residence rights, voting rights, employment rights and opportunities, child benefit and other forms of social welfare. But typically some exclusions remain and these are not merely based on legal rights tied to their status of residency. Instead, they are practically predicated on assets accumulated over time, starting with the necessary cultural capital of knowing what one is entitled to and the social capital of knowing whom to ask and for receiving the support to operate successfully in an unfamiliar environment. An unfamiliar language and specific cultural rules to recognize assets play an important role, for instance, recognizing driver’s licenses or university degrees. It is noteworthy that being recognized as a legitimate and able claimant constitutes a large part of the cultural capital of having a recognized presence. Note also that the inclusion/exclusion mechanisms here seem to be largely independent of what exactly is being shared. Social welfare payments in the context of large-scale societies may be seen to correspond to shared food at the cooking pot at the small scale. Voting rights and other immaterial assets could be said to correspond to getting attention, to being received as visitors or to being incorporated in local ritual.

In the small face-to-face situation of a functioning sharing economy, a ready answer to the ‘problem of absence’ as stated above is mobility. Mobility here includes the seeking of presence, staying with others and moving place when one gets the impression that more is to be gained elsewhere and in the co-presence of others. In the large-scale settings of international migration and mobility the situation is complicated further. Even if one has created co-presence by having arrived at a certain location through physical mobility, social mobility does not follow suit. When moving up the social ladder by gaining an education or through settling in the ‘right’ neighbourhood, the disadvantage of being a ‘late-comer’ often remains to be a structural disadvantage. This is true for people arriving as migrants but also for those, for instance, who enter the real-estate market as first-time

buyers. Both will typically have to spend considerable time ‘catching up’ with the ‘first-comers’. To address this problem some suggestions have already been made to introduce selected elements of the sharing logic into such situations of inequality. For instance, Ferguson (2015) has – under the influence of the sharing paradigm – suggested that strengthening the status of *denizen* (foreign residents) at the cost of the status of *citizen* (national passport holders) will go some way towards eliminating structural inequalities of this sort.

However, the more general lead that we can take from the ethnography of sharing goes beyond that since it allows us to recognize that ‘presence’ is not an on/off status but rather is a performative and negotiated process. Recognizing co-presence in a situation not only depends on specific ways of claiming, underlining and recognizing such presence, it may also differ with regard to the affordances of a particular situation. Elsewhere (Widlok, 2020), I have described how relatively small changes to local architecture – even in hunter–gatherer camps – in terms of using palisade fences, enclosures, fire places, and so forth, change the permeability and accessibility of a place and thereby also the affordances provided for practices of sharing or for dodging sharing demands. The same holds for any strengthening of co-presence in large-scale settings, for instance when urban spaces get infested by gated communities. Hoarding in the sense of accumulation is also facilitated by hoardings in the sense of fences that keep the public out (Widlok, 2020). If we follow Ferguson (2015) and accept co-presence as a design principle of institutionalized sharing in larger settings, the question remains as to what exactly facilitates and creates not only physical but also social co-presence. In some domains, such debates are already underway, for instance with regard to the Basic Income Grant and other welfare payments. Is a Basic Income Grant feasible as a project that is regionally restricted? (see Klocke-Daffa, 2012). Would it include only residents and thereby create new inequalities as recently arrived migrants would be denied the Basic Income.² Would anything but a *global* Basic Income be able to solve these problems? Similarly, should child-benefit payments be paid by virtue of being a citizen, irrespective of where the children reside or should it be paid by virtue of being a denizen and disregard children of the same family elsewhere (see Streinzer, forthcoming)? The child benefit case illustrates that these issues not only trigger considerable political debate but also that the denizen principle itself is also open to strategic, manipulative and exploitative practices as workers may be considered local denizens with the duty to pay tax locally but without the benefits of receiving the same social benefits if their families live elsewhere – or inversely to be recipients of social benefits but without the right to work (vote, pay tax, etc.). Strategizing not only occurs on the side of the states (and the political majorities that run them) but also on the side of those moving between countries. As a consequence, most countries handle a whole repertoire of statuses ranging from being allowed to stay temporarily or permanently, being allowed to work, to vote, and so forth.

In other words, presence is never physical presence alone but is typically mediated by being categorized in a particular way. In large-scale societies, this is typically achieved through a legally defined status expressed in identification documents or through entries in one’s passport or national insurance record. Status as legitimate denizen does not come automatically. The ‘*sans papier*’ people typically only have a fraction of the

benefits that ‘proper’ denizens would have. Mobile people who arrive, independently of their travel route or their physical condition, are legally distinguished, either as refugees or as migrants, along the lines of their alleged type of motive for being mobile, refugees being attributed with a political motivation, migrants with an economic motivation. Even though this is highly problematic in that the two typically shade into one another and cannot easily be disentangled, denizens are still thus categorized along the lines of their ‘original’ motive, however far removed from their current situation. In such a situation the knowledge gained from sharing practices in small-scale societies may become an important corrective since it re-focuses us on the immediate needs in any particular physical situation in the here and now. As Mbembe (2013) has pointed out, it is not only the *sans papiers* but more generally the *gents sans parts* (lit. in English the *shareless people*, in German: *Anteilslose*) that face the *ayants droit*, the rights holders in these contexts. In sum: recognizing the presence of the *shareless* does not directly provide them with rights, let alone the same rights and equal shares, but it is a necessary first step as it provides them with the opportunity to engage in the process of making demands for a rightful share. Any difficulties of recognizing the presence of others therefore foreshadow difficulties of realizing the potential of sharing – at any scale. At the same time, it is clear that dealing with injustices involves going beyond the notion of presence as physical presence. Practical social presence in human relationships is always mediated to some extent. The next section therefore explores what the dynamics are that involve mediators, substitutes and the status of legal personhood.

Mediating presence: Corporations as privileged agents

I have outlined how important it is to receive from others the recognition ‘to be present’ in order to make demands for a share and to have others respond to these demands. Even in small-scale societies, there are attempts to use mediating devices, avatars or substitutes to complement bodily presence. The most common strategy is to rely on the kin network whereby a close relative may be sent to replace oneself in sharing transactions. Characteristically, these mediating devices are employed by the providers. Instead of handing over goods ceremoniously, as one would find in many gift-giving systems, shared items in small-scale societies are often transferred by sending children over to those with whom one shares. As I have argued elsewhere (Widlok, 2017) this is to minimize a sense of indebtedness and to avoid marking the act of giving publicly. Children are also sent out to ask for things but when looking at the demand side of sharing it is actually the use of kin terms more generally which can be counted as an act of mediation. When attempting to entice people to give, Hai||om San and others would invoke kinship terms of various sorts. The prototypical sibling or parent is invoked to entice sharing. While in gift-exchange and market systems, this performative kin-talk is often replaced by invoking past transactions and obligations to press for acts that balance out previous transfers, it does remain strong in the sharing systems among many hunter-gatherers: Hai||om would typically say things such as ‘We are siblings’ or ‘We carry the same name’ which transcends the physical presence of ‘me, here and now’ towards a relationship that would carry across time and space. Siblings and namesakes help one another,

even if they are not physically around. Kin talk therefore to some extent serves as a substitute to bodily presence and it bridges embodied and mediated presence. Moreover, practically my being part of a kinship network means that even if I missed the opportunity of a sharing event, because I was not there myself, not all is lost. If one of my relatives was there at the right place and time, I can still indirectly benefit from whatever was handed out. However, as with all mediations, this does add some degree of uncertainty since the mediating person may not be given the same amount, or may him- or herself use up some of what has been given.

In large-scale societies, the use of legal substitutes or avatars has been amplified through the invention of a number of social inventions surrounding legal personhood. The best-known example is money transactions guaranteed by an issuing body such as the state. The pound sterling banknote in my pocket that says 'I promise to pay the bearer on demand the sum of ten pound' and it shows the head of the queen. But this does not mean that I need to see her in natural person to redeem the value specified since I can go to any of her fiscal representatives to do so and they in turn can delegate this further to numerous others. This is due to the 'king's two bodies' (Kantorowicz, 1957). Kings and queens have a physical and a legal body that can both stand for the legal person of the king/queen or indeed the state's social institutions at large. I have shown elsewhere (Widlok, 2002) how much this legal fiction lures most of us to readily accept not only 'kingly' governments but also other institutions such as universities or corporations. By contrast, the dynamics in many community-based organizations (CBOs) shows that many indigenous people find a rigid distinction between natural person and office holder rather hard to swallow. The result is often social pressure along kinship lines exerted on chairpersons and other office holders in these associations and corporations so that social benefits are being channelled exclusively to friends and relatives (see Widlok, 2002). As a consequence, indigenous Australians often rely on outsiders to manage CBO funding since they are pressed by the Australian state, through its Office of the Registrar of Aboriginal Corporations, to predicate their social organization along the lines of 'disembodied' persons. San minorities in southern Africa find themselves in a similar situation with NGOs that require the legal presence of CBOs with distinct organizational prerequisites if San want to benefit from external support (Widlok, 2002). Ultimately, all of these are strategies of scaling up when dealing with the state, with donor agencies or with the legal system at large.

Indigenous people may face particular challenges when they need to construct legal persons. But there are some more general economic problems arising from the use of such avatars or substitutes that directly lead to questions of injustice and to strategies of dealing with them at larger scales. This is because corporations as legal persons are not only legitimate accepted agents in large-scale societies, but they are in many ways also the *preferred* agents and agents that receive preferential treatment. The now most hotly debated cases are those of international corporations that are exempted from taxation where individual workers and consumers cannot avoid paying their taxes. As Tax (1975) observed long ago, corporate family businesses can usually claim tax relief for what they invest, in terms of machines, for instance. Families consisting of 'natural' persons, by contrast, cannot claim the same tax relief for what they spent on

their children. Similarly, at least in most European states today, the taxation on individual labour outweighs the taxation on individual or corporate assets and gains through rent. This creates a growing inequality between labourers and asset-owners including those who inherit what they own – instead of having to work for it. Moreover, the capital that is set to work by those affluent enough to provide it, technically operates like an economic avatar. It allows individuals, but more often corporations, to pool and control assets that they could not otherwise hold or control as natural persons. Especially in the most recent decades capital as an economic avatar has allowed owners to have a far easier life, to accumulate faster, and accumulate more, than any natural person could using his or her own labour. For as long as these privileges are left untouched, it is very likely that any upscaling of sharing principles will run into problems, not due to any inherent size restrictions in sharing but rather due to the unchallenged privileges given to corporate bodies.

Consequently, a major bone of contention within large-scale societies is the creation of justice and equality between those who earn their living through labour and those who are provided for through other means, including the use of capital.³ Typical levelling mechanisms in these contexts are taxation measures, corporate tax, inheritance tax and various forms of property tax. However, as I have pointed out elsewhere (Widlok, 2002, 2007) there is a characteristic contradiction in the constitution of liberal systems: they seek to ensure a level playing field for all members of society while also granting every individual the right to freely dispose of their property, also after their own death. An absence of inheritance tax typically leads to aggravated inequalities over generations, cancelling out meritocratic principles. Very high inheritance tax curtails the right of those who seek to work not only for themselves but also for their family and for others, they feel related to or are connected to in an economic or social enterprise. Again, the exact forms of taxation matter here. The question that I want to turn to now is whether any headway can be made in dealing with this situation by taking a lead from examples found in the ethnography of sharing.

Economies that are predicated on sharing are characterized by explicit or implicit demands that initiate sharing (see Widlok, 2017). As I have argued elsewhere (Widlok, 2017, 2019) the main problem of sharing is therefore not the decision as to how to distribute what has been accumulated, but rather how to respond to an endless stream of demands, some silent and some outspoken, some legitimate and some blown out of proportion. Of course, all of these demands can – in principle – also be made in mediated fashion. Solicitation letters have been an established social institution in European history for a long time. Given that literacy has been limited among Hai||om during most my own field research, I have only had one example of a written note that one of my contacts in the field asked me to take to one of his relatives whom I was about to travel to. The note, asking to send more foodstuff, was duly delivered – and ignored. This was at least in part, I would suggest, because demands made in person carry much more weight than such a note could (see above). Nowadays, text messages are now sent as forms of demand share (see Widlok, 2017: 180) and so-called ‘missed calls’ on mobile phones are widely known in Africa as ways of signalling to family and friends that they should send airtime (money transfers via the mobile phone). In

fact, much of the spam mail that we receive in our email inboxes today could be categorized as explicit or covert solicitation letters, asking for our money or our data – or simply for our attention. In the digital world, many of these demands are made by avatars, generated by bots. After all, the majority of entities interacting on the internet today seem to be bots rather than natural persons. Even when written by a ‘natural’ person, the digital media allow for a considerable amplification of demands at little or no extra cost. Where in the old analogue days agents were limited – physically – by only being able to approach a limited number of relevant others with their demands, or write ever so many solicitation letters, the new media allow numerous requests be sent out to numerous addressees without any, or very little, extra effort. The ‘demand load’ is thereby increasing while there is at the same time a decrease in the means for us to judge which demands are appropriate and which one should or need to respond to positively. A personal encounter, or a personal solicitation letter from family or friends for that matter, provides the person to whom the demand is directed, with opportunity to judge the request. This is far less so in the case of multiplied emails, text messages or missed calls that come in in large numbers, from any distance and with the amplification through many media. The new digital media thereby inherently threatens to damage the mutuality that characterizes sharing in other, ‘smaller’ contexts.

One could argue that while gift-exchanges (and commercial transactions) operate on the basis of reciprocity, sharing works on the basis of mutuality. Many sharing transactions are uneven since they involve net-providers and net-receivers (see Widlok, 2017). But that does not alter the fact that the opportunity to ask is indeed mutual and so is the opportunity to respond to these demands. Both require effort: those who demand have to make their presence felt and their demand known. Those to whom demands are directed need to respond and need to find good reasons to keep or not to give. This mutuality is severed if the two types of mediation described above come together, the use of avatars accepted as substitutes or mediators and the use of media that make demands multiply at no cost. Moreover, what makes most large-scale societies unequal is that access to these mediating devices is not equal and is not mutual. Taxation is a good example. Tax is collected not simply by ‘natural persons’ in the form of tax collectors but it is now included in basically any transaction between humans. This not only applies to commercial transactions in the narrow sense, in the form of value-added tax (VAT), but also in many specialized taxes, including property tax, poll tax, income tax, capital gains tax, and so forth. In some instances, the state collects tax for other legal bodies (as with the Church tax in Germany) but in most cases, the state can collect the tax from their ‘customers’ through an army of intermediaries and technical devices, including automated cashier systems that deduct VAT. Public debate largely centres on the proportions of these taxes, e.g. whether capital income should be taxed more than labour income, or whether there should be reduced VAT rates for foodstuff or books than for luxury goods. Taking a lead from the sharing ethnography, I suggest, would mean to move the emphasis back to the modalities of demanding.

Sharing practices rely on opportunities to react to sharing demands, of refuting demands that are out of proportion and on a degree of mutuality. Transposed to an institutional tax setting we could argue that currently the demands that tax-collectors make on

labour, as opposed to inherited or corporate assets, is not only disproportionately high. Maybe more importantly, it has become disproportionately hard to avoid these demands. In the current economy dodging labour-based tax, through moonlighting, for instance, is only possible at the danger of committing crimes and being sanctioned. Dodging asset-based tax, by contrast, is much easier when being empowered by the use of the many avatars that help to deflect these demands, including tax advisors but also through employing lawyers, lobbyists, internet sites, publicity managers, influencers, and so forth.

Thus, tax regulations and liability conditions not only differ in the way in which they create a burden on various members of the society but also in the way in which they allow these various members of the society to deal with (tax) demands – for instance whether they allow the state or capital investors to ‘scrounge’ assets or to deflect demands that are considered out of proportion. While we currently see attention finally being given to international companies and their opportunities to dodge tax demands and of how to curb the situation accordingly, we could expect a similar debate to also emerge *within* nation-states. Much of the felt injustices of the taxation system not only have to do with the different degrees of taxing various assets but also with the unequal ability of agents to deal with tax demands. Tax exemptions aggravate the problem in that they provide opportunities for tax evasion for those who are ‘in the know’ and who can afford employing the relevant expertise. International corporations thrive on the fact that they have a number of ‘exit options’ by shifting their profits to places with little or no taxation. They exit the system of tax that is based on national boundaries. In societies with strong sharing practices, by contrast, everyone in the system enjoys pretty much the same possibilities and the same limitations when attempting to dodge demands, prototypically by hiding what they do not want to share and by having to deal with peer pressure if they are seen to own more than they can use. In these contexts, out-of-proportion demands can be refuted situationally but no-one has the possibility to entirely exit the system, at least not without forfeiting the social cosmos they live in. In complex economies run by corporations such exit options do exist, but only for larger, multinational players who can juggle taxation in a variety of countries they work in by shifting deficits and gains across national boundaries.

Two measures come to mind when trying to curb this problem in complex institutional settings: the first one, currently much discussed, is to restrict or disable the exceptional options of corporate players to dodge (tax) demands. The other, much less discussed, would be to boost or enable the power of ‘natural’ (non-corporate) persons to regain some control over their dealing with what may be considered inappropriate demands. This is not tantamount to allowing people to evade taxes but rather to manage the demands that are made on them proactively. In practice, this management power is restricted to the limited opportunities of individuals to choose their residence and nationality. There are very few ways in which individuals can influence how the tax they pay is allocated to the levels of the municipality, state or central government – or to particular purposes such as health, education or infrastructure. Even with regard to targeted fees such as Church tax, there is no means to allocate payments for specific purposes. While it makes perfect sense to provide any governing body with some discretion for

providing infrastructure or other measures that individuals may consider useless expenses, this should not be confused with a *carte blanche* for the powerful few who can subsidize groups and measures at will. Technically, it is possible to design a system that would combine necessary discretion with wider participation. When the state demands a 'time tax' (as in the compulsory national service of Germany in the past, for instance) the citizens were de facto given a choice of paying this tax either through service in the armed forces or in a variety of social services. The reason why this is not put to practice more often is that this affects not only the amounts of tax or other pooled resources that are collected but more fundamentally the mode of distribution and the balance of power between those who demand and those who respond to demands such as taxation.

In sum: corporate avatars and other mediating devices add a whole new dimension to sharing in contexts of modern taxation. This unlocks a whole new set of inequalities. The lesson from successful sharing systems at smaller scales here is to redirect our attention back to strengthening the ability of natural persons to deal with the continual demands they face and to reintroduce a larger degree of mutuality. There are obvious problems emerging if citizens were allowed to earmark their tax payments entirely since this may leave some unpopular purposes underfunded. But the current system is one in which there is no such opportunity at all. Moreover, a fundamental difference between sharing and taxation surfaces here: the latter is really a pooling practice. Both can do without reciprocity but pooling typically suspends mutuality and instead makes mediation unavoidable since any pool will demand an authority that mediates the redistribution. In taxation systems, it is the state or any other polity that collects and re-allocates funds. The relation of those connected to one another through a shared pool is not one of mutuality but rather one of enforced and mediated redistribution. In this regard, many of the platforms that characterize what is sometimes called 'the sharing economy' (and should more appropriately be called 'the platform economy') are of the same nature as the pools created by tax payments. It is such a 'virtual' presence on digital platforms that I want to turn to now.

Virtualizing presence: Digital platforms as redistributors

It may sound like a moot point to say that the small-scale societies that feature in much of our classical ethnography consist largely of 'natural' persons with none of the virtual avatars and digital identities that we find on electronic platforms and in other digital environments – but this is not so straightforward. As Sahlin (2017) has recently pointed out, many small-scale societies are in fact much larger and more complex if we include the non-human cosmological beings whom they themselves consider to be part of their cosmo-polities. Slowly western legal systems, and the public at large, begin to accept that not only 'virtual' legal bodies such as business corporations but also rivers, lakes and other non-human entities may become legal persons endowed with rights (see, Muehlebach, 2021). Thereby, the seemingly wide gap between African foragers and hipster platform users may be narrowing in this regard.

If we take on board that cross-culturally non-human agents take part in transfers and transactions in many settings (see Sahlins, 2017; for a critique, see Buitron and Steinmüller, 2021) the divide between the analogue and the digital economy is no longer a categorical difference but a matter of degree. Spiritual or non-human natural species on whom humans depend may occupy the same position as providers and algorithms do in digital environments. What such a comparative perspective encourages us to do is to re-consider the nature of transfers involving any ‘invisible’ or ‘virtual’ agents. In the analogue and in the digital world these silent participants can turn apparently equitable relationships into inequitable ones. Initially, the ‘platform economy’ raised considerable hopes of providing an equitable open access environment for many domains of human lives (see Belk et al., 2019). However, the internet at large is ‘spikier’ and less egalitarian than initially anticipated. Moreover, many exchanges that take place on digital platforms may appear to be bilateral exchanges between equal peers while they are in fact trilateral transactions in which a third party is allowed to accumulate while the others engage in their exchange. This applies to platforms of all domains of life such as *Airbnb* for accommodation, *MechanicalTurk* or *TaskRabbit* for job opportunities, *Uber* or *Grab* for mobility, *Tinder* or other dating apps for partner searches, and so forth. Such platforms consider themselves ‘disruptive’ economic enterprises. They do not abolish the market but they become competitors to established companies and agencies that cater for accommodation, mobility or employment. Some of the electronic ‘sharing’ platforms do provide information that is indeed freely shared. But again, there is a wide range to be found here. Instructive ‘how to’ videos and specialized user platforms for any possible brand, consumer object, travel destination or any other leisure time hobby may provide ‘free’ content but can still be motivated by accumulating clicks and capitalizing on attention.

There is also a political side to such platforms where individuals may seek help or advice when they feel they have been tricked or disadvantaged, including the use of social media for making public any human rights violations or the abuse of state power. Social media platforms or social networking services such as *nextdoor.com*, *nebenan.de* or *mesvoisins.fr* may serve as an example since they allow for a range of peer-to-peer transfers to take place. These transfers include the sharing of local knowledge, e.g. about shops and service providers, and the sharing of objects such as garden tools or household utensils that not everyone owns. In this respect, they emulate the analogue local exchange and trading systems that have been around before digitization (see Hart, 2000) and which also had the aspiration to overcome social and economic inequalities by providing access to individuals with little income or cash. They allow the cashless to enjoy goods and services (babysitting, pet-minding, gardening, private lessons, etc.) as part of an exchange pool or a local currency or voucher system. The neighbouring platforms can also be used like an electronic give-box (see Widlok, 2017) when people offer tickets or household items they no longer need but do not want to throw away. For a large part, the platforms are being used to share information about recommended local repairmen, garden help or cleaners but they also serve as a neighbourhood crime watch system warning neighbours about break-ins or vandalism. Everyone who has signed up to the platform can search or offer services, things and information, usually free of charge

and with equal rights. These platforms are ‘policed’ more or less rigidly by a company or association who check whether access requirements are met. In the case of neighbourhood apps some evidence of living in a particular residential area has to be uploaded and illegal or inappropriate postings will be removed. In return, these companies receive funding from ads, they pool donated funds and they may sell accumulated data (or the platform itself) when the opportunity arises.

The platforms sketched above work like any pooling agency, similar to the tax-collecting states already discussed, with their membership base and with an inbuilt inequality between users and providers. In this respect, too, they divert from the sharing practices found, for instance in foraging societies, which strongly depend on each agent being potentially a provider and a recipient at the same time. This need not produce de-facto reciprocity because contributions do not balance out as pointed out above. However, it ensures that every (!) participant can put him- or herself in the shoes of those making demands or deflecting demands. This mutuality at eye level is typically lost in data-collecting platforms. Extra measures are needed to reintroduce it to the digital environments: the first task would be to make the level or lack of mutuality transparent. In some instances, the lack of mutuality is less obvious than in tax-pooling state activities and it is sometimes actively disguised. Peers may meet on a platform to exchange or share ideas or assets but they are made to forget that there is a third party in the background collecting data that can be converted into much larger capital assets, above all marketable data about customer behaviour for targeted advertising (see Widlok, 2017). In this regard, there is a danger that electronic platforms aggravate inequalities instead of alleviating them if they continue to allow the accumulators to hide in the background.

As noted above (and elsewhere, see Widlok, 2021) small-scale societies may be part of larger networks involving ‘virtual’ non-human entities as Sahlins (2017) pointed out. At the same time, they have also got a long tradition of developing effective strategies of dealing with such entities and the demands they make on everyday human life. They know how to deal with spirits, they are ‘street-wise’ in dealing with powers beyond their full control. It is noteworthy, for instance, that in many of the sharing economies among foragers, the living seek to prevent the dead from making any claims and demands on them. Unlike in many ancestor-based agrarian societies, the dead cannot demand a share. This is not because they would be considered to be non-existent but rather that their existence in an afterlife is given no resonance in the life of the living who – unlike people in other redistributive systems – typically do not visit graves, erect tombs, and so forth. This emphasizes another important aspect of the importance of presence. Presence, in whatever shape, whether bodily or virtually, depends on a relation of resonance between those who claim or show presence and those who recognize and acknowledge it. In many small-scale face-to-face societies, a visitor to a house only becomes a recognized visitor after he or she has been greeted by the residents (see Widlok, 2020). On electronic platforms, these roles are typically inverted as it is the provider who needs to recognize and accept the user, often upon ‘recommendation’ when they can prove an existing virtual identity for instance a *facebook* or *google* account. The acknowledgement of the user, by contrast, is typically reduced to clicking

on the button that indicates agreement with the terms and conditions. After this initial ‘handshake’ the value that users add to the platform may be expressed through an inter-user rating system but is otherwise not recognized. In effect, the providers as owners of the platform and its algorithms could be likened to individuals in foraging societies who make outrageous demands (namely on data and attention) but leave the users with no option at all to deflect these demands, except by quitting the platform altogether. In hunter–gatherer societies such agents who make out-of-proportion demands would be subject to considerable social sanction. In most cases, people would simply walk away from them. If sharing is to flourish in the digital world, a similar sort of social sanction has to be put into place. As it is, the platform operators who do not share insight into their algorithms successfully strive for monopolies which makes it ever more difficult ‘to walk away from them’ without suffering disadvantages.

It therefore may seem that the platform providers, just as the state and other tax-collecting entities, have taken advantage of the fact that they occupy a position that was previously held by religious entities in other societies (see Bloch, 2013). And they are generally unwilling to give up their privileges in these transfers. It is therefore not far-fetched for users to demand more rights as subjects confronted with agents controlling pooled resources or resources for pooling, e.g. platforms and their algorithms. Platform users ask to be put into a position that allows them to employ similar levelling strategies that they have also successfully employed with regard to other meta-human agencies in the past. Such strategies usually involve an act of distancing, be it physical distancing by moving away or – in mediatized settings – ways exerting the right to be disconnected (Stäheli, 2021), including a right to do basic things in an analogue fashion. One recommendation that we can derive from the ethnography of interpersonal sharing relations – somewhat counterintuitively – is that those contributing to a pool or platform may actually be less well off when being too close and too connected. So far, the assumption has often been that blurring the boundary between a contributing person and the community to which they contribute would stabilize a shared collective resource pool. If I give to a body of which I am an integral part, then my contribution is like giving to myself and therefore painless and appear to be ‘natural’ (see Belk, 2010). However, the sharing ethnography suggests something else: identifying too closely with the tax-collecting entity or the data-collecting platform, in terms of a *Gemeinschaft*, may actually destabilize the relationship. While resonance is critical in generating presence, a blurred identity in an encompassing collective makes equitable relationships much less likely. A precondition for resonance is the ability to establish rapport while at the same time managing a certain amount of distance. Parallel to what Plessner has discussed about practices of *Vergesellschaftung* and the limits of *Gemeinschaft* (Plessner, 2003) I want to argue that such distancing is relevant for both, face-to-face groups and the principally unlimited large-scale virtual networks discussed here.

Identifying too closely with religious representatives creates obligations and dependencies. Only a safe distance can avoid such dependencies (Widlok, 2021). Becoming too close and too dependent on electronic platforms can create exactly the same problem. Becoming a subordinated member of a tight commune – be it analogue or digital – typically goes along with a gift-exchange logic of *do-ut-des* (I give so that you give) and not

with the logic of sharing which maintains the relevance of distancing in maintaining resonant presence. The notion that I should pray and sacrifice so that I receive a calculable return from the meta-human that I depend on, is structurally similar to me giving a gift (paying tax, uploading data) so that I receive benefits in return. By contrast, there is a more stable sense of fairness that follows the sharing logic of ‘allowing to take’ as it depends on me being able to distance myself from the platform or the collective pool when demands become out of proportion. What characterizes successful sharing relationships is therefore not so much being present (read: being a member) but rather being able to fine-tune my presence in order to manage demands. Taking a distance allows people to be part of sharing relations independently of whether they will continue to be net-providers or net-beneficiaries. In this regard hunters, some who have hunting luck and others who do not, are not all that different to those maintaining virtual identities in vast electronic networks: on *Wikipedia* there will probably always be more readers than authors, just as there will always be some who pay more tax than they receive benefits in return. Such continuing – and to some extent unavoidable – inequalities do no harm to a successful sharing system since a sharing system neither requires strict balancing nor the blurring between me, the others and the contents of our shared pool. What it does require, though, is a certain training in distancing practices. Sharers need to be able to distance themselves from the items shared. They need to learn to ‘let go’ of things (see Widlok, 2017). They also need to be able to bear that others at times of need receive from the common pool while they themselves do not – unless they are in need themselves. In a sharing system, I have no entitlements to gain repayments from my health insurance unless I am actually sick. The sharing environment, whether designed through analogue social practices or in electronic forms, needs to give room for this type of distance.

In sum: when returning to the question whether and how practices of sharing can be upscaled into the international domain, a word of caution seems to be in order. Sharing practices are occasionally misunderstood as creating collectivist pools, a sort of ‘primitive communism’. Accordingly, there are also ideas that international human solidarity and equality could or should be built on such a ‘primitive communism’ writ large, a globalized *nextdoor.com* or some other such community facilitated through digital platforms that have the potential to connect – in principle – unlimited numbers of people across an unlimited virtual space. Independently of the pros and cons of platform organizations and independently of the question of a desirability of a globalized collective, the sharing ethnography that I have analysed here with regard to this issue makes it clear that the characteristics of sharing as a system of transfer practices does not lend itself as a model for such a utopian merger. Rather, given that a certain amount of distancing is inherent in the resonant presence that enables sharing, we would need to expect a *less* stable and a *less* tight set of relations arising from sharing than what is typically expected of collectivist pooling. I maintain that this instability is not so much an unfortunate and unintended side effect of sharing systems but rather a condition that is continually generated from the heart of such systems. If the goal was a tight global community, committed to standardized goals and a globally enforced and maintained pool, examples of which could be a global tax or a global form of Basic Income Grant, then sharing practices would not be the appropriate way to reach such a goal. As outlined above, this is

because sharing does require providers and receivers to have a presence that resonates while also maintaining a safe distance. This is a far cry from merging with one another or from creating a joint identity since resonance does by definition require duality or multiplicity, a social other (see Marten, 2017). While sharing will go a long way in connecting people, it is to be expected that their 'ligatures' (Dahrendorf, 1969) will not be stable and unchanging. Such instability and diversity, I maintain, is inherent in sharing. It is not a transitional imperfectness which we should expect to give way – in due course – to a perfect community of solidarity and equality, as the utopian goal to strive for and to be realized sometime in the future. This future perspective leads me to the last section of my contribution which considers the temporal dynamics involved in sharing and in equitable relations.

Timing presence: Social support as interim outcome

It is one of the significant findings of the recent relevant literature that sharing is not based on producing balanced reciprocity and on tit-for-tat principles (see Widlok, 2017). For any attempt to design sharing institutions at larger scales, this is good news insofar as it suggests that a sharing system can work over time and at the satisfaction of participants even though there continue to be net-providers and net-receivers. Unlike systems of balanced reciprocity, sharing systems do not necessarily need any overlooking central authority, a collective administering of pooled resources or centrally regulated policing to enforce a balance. At a more fundamental level, however, this also challenges assumptions sometimes built into expectations about the temporality of equality.

In contrast to sharing, gift-exchange is fully compatible with keeping records (see Brumann, 1998, for private gift records in Japan) and so is renting and debt-collecting (see Graeber, 2011, for a more general argument in that direction). This combination of giving and accounting is not the case with sharing practices as they are documented in the ethnographic record of small-scale contexts. While there may be a diffuse sense of being mutually indebted among close friends, residents and relatives, keeping a record is actively discouraged. It is discouraged, and to some extent disabled, through a number of features built into the practice itself. Disconnecting the act of giving from the act of receiving is one of these strategies. This can be achieved through intermediaries (sending a child with food, see above) or by turning the act of giving into one of allowing to take. This practice is so wide spread that many ethnographers writing on sharing have discussed sharing under the labels 'tolerated scrounging', 'tolerated theft' or more generally 'tolerated taking' (see Widlok, 2017). Whenever, during my own field research with Hai||om San, I have tried to deflect demands by making my act of giving conditional on a counteract ('I give you this when you do that') or conditional on previous acts ('But I have already given you something yesterday'), I was scolded for 'not sharing' and for acting 'like a Wambo', Aawambo being the agropastoralist and business-minded neighbours of the Hai||om. Keeping a record was not on, creating specific obligations on the basis of previous transactions was not acceptable – and more generally making up a balance was not considered appropriate. Such a refusal to make up a balance is widespread among hunter-gatherers and saturates many aspects of life. Sometimes it is

misrepresented as a disability to look beyond the moment (see Day et al., 1999) or worse as an incapacity for rational thinking. I have indeed recorded many instances where Hai||om San strategies did not comply with the economic rationality that I assumed. Hai||om who engaged in handcraft refused what seemed to me a good deal, e.g. an offer to pay much more than the typical rate for an axe-repair. Their refusal was justified by arguing that they had just finished doing a similar job and wanted to do something else for a change. Conversely, San are known to trade in items of considerable value when craving for particular foodstuffs or when badly wanting a lift somewhere. Non-San traders regularly exploit this by timing their appearance accordingly.

It is too simplistic to explain this feature of the San habitus in terms of an orientation towards the short term, a rejection of long-term planning and the inability to postpone gratification (see Chen, 2013). I propose that it is better interpreted as a result of the dominant researcher habitus to undertheorize the temporal dimension and to think of personal lives and of inequality relations in terms of a more or less static balance sheet. Abbott (2016) has spelled this out most clearly for sociological theory: he pointed out that poverty and affluence are not 'given' independently of those who define and manage it. Poverty and affluence, or more generally giving and returns are constituted in concert with diagnostic tools and measures. This is why concepts like the 'working poor' emerge in the United States and 'Altersarmut' (old age poverty) and 'Kinderarmut' (child poverty) in Germany as tropes and categories at particular historical moments. They should not be confused with the emergence of particular forms of scarcity and of suffering that affects particular people. More generally, Abbott's critique is that social theory tends to see inequalities as expressed and defined by ultimate outcomes. He argues that the social sciences measure (in)equality along a 'bourgeois' standard of what the balance sheet of an individual life should be, namely a stable marriage, children with a career, paid-up mortgage, long-life in reasonable health, and so forth (Abbott, 2016). The alternative to this outcome-orientation is process-orientation and that is, by and large, what we find also at work in sharing systems.

In various settings, ethnographers have described what is known as the 'waves of sharing' (see Widlok, 2017). This is a cascade pattern whereby those who receive whatever it is that is being shared in a first wave, usually at the site of the resource acquisition, is followed by at least two other waves, one at the shared camp and one within the intimate circle of close family and friends. Often this is followed by further waves that ultimately include everyone who is present. At the start of the cascading waves, there may be a marked concentration of resources and a massive inequality consisting of one hunter (or few hunters) having a large game animal such as an elephant or a whale at their disposal and all others having nothing. But it is the waves of sharing that make sure that this inequality, the highly unequal access to a resource, is mitigated continuously as the meat is handed on across the waves, from kill to carcass to cooking pot and to individual dining plate, so to speak. More importantly, this is not a mechanical distribution directed towards an ultimate outcome (same share for everyone) but one in which at every wave there are opportunities and unpredictabilities built into the system as agents at every stage can make demands or may need to deflect demands to some degree. Unlike redistribution models that administer a collective pool and

are outcome-oriented, sharing practices are process-oriented. Having observed how the waves of sharing meat from a large animal works in practice, I can testify (see Widlok, 1999) that multiple sharing goes on concurrently to such an extent that it is very much ‘a process continuously generating new results’ instead of ‘waves of successive outcomes’ (Abbott, 2016: 174–175). Although an outside observer may find that at the end of the day, most people will have received some meat, this is primarily an attempt to gloss real-life events into the dominant but somewhat misleading language of ‘outcomes’ since there are in real life no such ‘ultimate’ outcomes. Some recipients may feel that they could have eaten more and some who got their share in an early wave may be hungry again by the time the last person in the group gets a share in the final ripples of the wave that a successful hunt has produced. Moreover, while people eat, there is prospection and retrospection, memories of previous hunts and meals and hopeful stories about future hunts and meat to be eaten. There is also a continuous inversion of roles since those who have received a large chunk of the resource at one moment in the process are subject to demands from others who have not yet received anything at that moment. To be sure there may be net receivers and net providers over time but the sharing practices are finely tuned to prevent the net providers to convert their opportunities, be it hunting luck or hunting skill or whatever, into lasting dependency relationships with which they can systematically extract assets from others in the future (Widlok, 2017).

All of these features, sketched only briefly here, make sharing much less amenable to a classical sociological analysis predicated on outcomes. But what are the implications with regard to institutional initiatives directed against structural postponement at large scales? At the face of it, this call against postponement is an initiative that is focused on the now and against the long term. It is also one that operates at a societal level and not at the individual level. In other words, the dividing line here is not so much between small-scale and large-scale societies but rather between analyses at the individual level (with a tendency towards outcomes based on the linearity and irrevocability of individual lives) and analyses at the societal level (with a tendency towards longer continuous processes surpassing individual lives). In fact, movements towards global structural change are predicated on ‘final outcomes’ – e.g. equality for all, descent living standards for all, etc. – or as pressing attention on the current moment of decision, with potential benefits in the distant or not-so-distant future. Taking a lead from ethnographic studies of sharing the question of ‘structural postponement’ turns out to be a value-loaded decision in a double sense. It not only provokes moral critique by considering global inequalities of being a low-priority affair that will have to wait until there are, at some uncertain time in the future, necessary transnational institutions in place to tackle these injustices. It also provokes a critical stance towards largely arbitrary decision on the target to be reached as a desirable ‘ultimate outcome’ of any redistributive and rehabilitative measures to be taken now – and at any particular point in the future. Sharing practitioners know that there is no ‘ultimately’ satisfying distribution of goods, there is no moment when the demands will end and there is no moment when demands will have been responded to once and for all. Sharing not only takes training (see above) but it also takes endurance and continuous readjustments. It therefore suggests, as a

practical strategy, that we give less attention to irrevocable outcomes, e.g. major decisions in individual lives, and focus instead on interim outcomes that can and many need to be altered as time moves on. There may be some life-and-death issues that may need to be measured in terms of irrevocable outcomes for the simple fact that they cannot be undone. But many issues surrounding inequality may need continuous revisiting. What is true for the face-to-face sharing contexts also holds for many contexts at larger scales. What comes to mind are measures of affirmative action or some other privilege given to help rectifying injustices created in the historical past. International policies and institutional arrangements could benefit by taking on board the temporal awareness built into sharing practices.

The bottom line is that human life is tensed life and accordingly injustices are also temporal in nature. As Abbott (2016) and others have shown, measuring injustice as a temporal phenomenon is complex. Consider the example of a young person dropping out of education. At that stage of his or her life that person may earn more than a person of the same age who decides to continue education. But with all likelihood their income difference is inverted later in life (Abbott, 2016). What is true for individual life biographies also holds for social situations where one feature, e.g. the presence of oil or other raw materials, the presence of heavy industry, can have utility and benefits in one historical moment but detrimental disutility at a later stage, e.g. armed conflicts because of raw materials or environmental degradation because of heavy industry. The presence of participants in sharing systems that are characterized by waves of sharing (as outlined above) is tensed as they are recipients at one moment and providers at the next. Moreover, sharers are aware of their tensed presence and of that of others. Their orientation is what Abbott would call – somewhat misleadingly – ‘pantemporal’ (Abbott, 2016: 195). Their sharing decisions are prospective as they deal with uncertain futures. They are also momentary in that they are driven by the presence of people around them and by the conditions that indexically depend on the here and now of the decisions. And they are retrospective in outlook, which means not only being saturated by memories of mutuality but also by an awareness about windows of opportunities that can be missed and regretted when looking back, again both from the perspective of recipients as much as from the perspective of those who can provide. Institutions of sharing for larger scales are possible but they would similarly need to encompass such a pantemporal orientation: they would need to deal with evolving and emerging discrimination that reproduce inequalities or result in future injustices, the clandestine accumulation by digital platforms already mentioned is a case in point. They would also need to attend to the current concerns of those under pressure at any particular point in time (see the discussion of denizens’ rights above). And finally, they would have to try and combat long-term effects of disadvantages inherited from the past (e.g. in colonization) and to be expected and regretted in future hindsight (e.g. in cases of environmental damage and climate justice). Sharing practices that are ethnographically documented in everyday contexts tend to achieve all of these and thereby underline that sharing in itself is a complex social institution. While knowing these features helps, it also suggests that turning them into design principals for large-scale sharing strategies is a complex enterprise indeed.

In sharing systems people not only make relevant choices at the beginning of their careers, for instance selecting a profession, buying a house or such like, nor does any final balance sheet, for instance, a pension or status to be received, determine their lives. Rather, they adapt their needs and change the things they come to desire, including the reference points for what is considered scarce. They also routinely accept that ‘past well-being might live in memory’, as Abbott (2016: 187) puts it, and one may want to add they also routinely accept that future well-being may start its life prospectively. In Abbott’s (2016: 197) words, their sharing is ‘not so much about where you ended up as it [is] a commitment to the getting there’. When transposed to the supra-individual sphere of social structures this would lead us to problematize ‘monotonic causal flow’ (Abbott, 2001: 44): we should not assume causes that produce inequality which are equally relevant across all situated time periods – and in all corners of the world. The rationality of everyday life, it appears, is more often than not non-monotonic (see Widlok and Stenning, 2018) meaning that we should expect that inequality can have a host of causes that change over time. Eliminating one known cause for inequality would therefore be unlikely to secure equality for good but only for an interim period. The institutional frameworks need to take account of this condition.

In sum: while legal forms and rights are important stepping stones in an institutional strategy to counteract inequalities, they are unlikely to suffice since they are likely to continually lag behind because new causes for inequality are likely to emerge all the time. We are facing an iterative problem. Debates such as the one on inheritance tax, referred to above, find their extension in current debates of intergenerational justice that have become particularly heated in current climate-change debates. The key idea derived from the sharing ethnography at smaller scales when trying to deal with intergenerational questions of justice of this sort is to take a more processual approach. Such an approach would move away from ‘final outcomes’ and instead towards the techniques of continuously monitoring *intermediate* outcomes with many options for readjustment in the process. It would suggest that there are no lasting privileges or discriminations in this system reserved unchangingly for any generational or group. Rather, privileges or any form of resource access has to be framed in the light of what is available at any one moment in time. To some extent, this contravenes the dominant strong notion of ‘*pacta sunt servanda*’ (contracts need to be kept) if this would mean, for instance, a guaranteed pension or repayment from a pool when that pool has recently undergone shocks or is otherwise in disarray. It also moves away from a balance sheet approach. The sharing waves model is constantly ‘unbalanced’. There would not be a need for a wave or a flow for that matter if there were no imbalances re-emerging. In practice, this means that the assumption that poverty or inequality could be eradicated once and for all through a one-off structural adjustment is not only unrealistic and utopian but in fact counterproductive. Consequently, institutionalized sharing practices could be deemed successful even if some inequality remains and resurfaces provided that sharing also continues as levelling mechanisms for dealing with intermediate unequal outcomes – produced as a result of a diversity of reasons. Conversely, practices that promise to institutionally rid humanity of inequality are likely to destroy and not to

enable sharing since they presume this could establish a situation in which sharing was no longer necessary.

Conclusion: Presence and distance

Anthropology is a latecomer to research global politics and transformations, the ‘large places’. This is despite the fact that most ethnographers have experienced cases of colonial subjugation under European domination or subsequent forms of global injustices. As a discipline, we do not have a thorough theoretical grip on such large-scale processes but we eclectically rely on theories developed by neighbouring disciplines. This is partly because there is uncertainty as to how much the institutional dynamics of complex world systems can be usefully conceptualized by upscaling the social dynamics observed in so-called small-scale societies that anthropologists have traditionally been concerned with. Taxation, for instance, is typically seen as part of *Gesellschaft* while equivalent social institutions such as tribute payment or forms of communal pooling are rendered to the domain of *Gemeinschaft*. More recently, attempts are made to overcome this bipolarity (see Gertenbach et al., 2010) by drawing connecting lines between both processes, *Vergesellschaftung* and *Vergemeinschaftung*. In this contribution, I have explored connecting lines between forms of institutionalized redistribution that are found at the global level and the everyday sharing practices documented at smaller scales. I argue that our understanding of new institutions of sharing at larger scales can be improved when they are considered in the light of sharing and other interpersonal redistributive practices. There are enough parallels between the two to warrant comparison without glossing over the differences.

Moreover, in many settings studied by anthropologists today, for instance, in many parts of southern Africa, people depend on the nascent welfare state funded by international donors *and* they strongly depend on one another in their everyday personal relationships. In all of these cases of nested scales, I argue, the dimensions of presence and distance matter. Presence not only matters for receiving but also for contributing to pools, depending on whether they are controlled from a distance or in the immediacy of face-to-face relationships. However, the main lesson to be learned from comparative ethnography in this context is to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of what presence actually means in sharing practices. In conclusion, I formulate these observations in the format of ‘lessons learned’ that can be transposed from situations of intimate sharing to situations of global redistributive institutions.

The first lesson is to move attention from the balance sheet of what is being transacted to the ways in which givers and recipients are presented and positioned to one another. Sharing relations do not primarily differ from other transactions in terms of a specific balance sheet (e.g. being one-sided rather than two-sided transfers) but rather in terms of specific ways in which the presence and demands of others are being recognized. I have hinted at the proposed shift from citizen to denizen but with the important caveat that ‘being present’ (i.e. becoming a denizen) is not a given but depends on how presence is performed and recognized – or denied as the case may be. It is this recognition of presence which allows demands to be made, supported and deflected. Although this practical

presence is not limited to physical presence it does rely to a large extent on bodily presence and embodied *Vermögen*, a mix of capacity, ability, fortune – and assets. The relation between first-comers and late-comers which is particularly pronounced at larger scales, including migration contexts, needs to be revised and reformed.

The second lesson is to zoom in on the demand side of sharing and to recognize that the basic problem in sharing is to distinguish legitimate demands from out-of-proportion demands. Therefore, equity needs to begin with equal rights and opportunities to make demands and to be in a position to respond to them. While it is important to prevent agents from exiting the system, it is equally important to allow for situative distancing to occur which provides agents with opportunities of deflecting and managing demands without escaping them altogether. At this stage, tax systems but also other systems of redistribution are inherently unequal in that some players are allowed to summon a multitude of substitutes and avatars to expand their presence. Their presence is mediatized through legal persons and representatives. The mutuality that characterizes sharing in small-scale societies is weakened in the process and any institutionalization of sharing at a larger level will have to find ways of re-instating mutuality between agents. Restricting the exceptional options for corporate players to dodge demands is a measure that is already been discussed while boosting the power of those who need to respond to demands is a venue that deserves more attention.

The third lesson is to recognize that the ability to make demands through substitutes is amplified in an unprecedented way through the virtual presence on digital platforms. These platforms amplify connections and provide new options but they will not eradicate the difference between net-providers and net-receivers. Digitization will also not do away with the problem of exclusionary mechanisms. Rather, developing levelling mechanisms, which already exist towards non-human ‘virtual’ agents in small-scale settings, is of equal importance in digital environments. Digital tools provide unprecedented power to multiply claims and demands at very low cost. Being able to deal with demands therefore is of prime importance. In small-scale situations, most levelling mechanisms rely on distancing practices. Getting closer or creating distance are the ways of making presence resonant but also of managing demands. This suggests that sharing transfers at large-scale settings will also need to create resonance between the participants, ligatures that give meaning and affect to the contractual links between those who participate in sharing. Sharing practices are not tools for reaching a utopian state in which there are no inequalities. Somewhat counterintuitively the recommendation given is not the abolition of distance – which would create close(d) communities – but to train contributors in the distancing practices which have been learned in face-to-face settings vis-à-vis non-humans. These include being prepared to let go and to allow others to take but also to answer appropriately to demands, for instance by keeping a distance to out of proportion demands.

The fourth lesson is drawn from the fact that human presence is always tensed and that a specific temporality needs to be built into (re)distributive measures. How should the costs incurred in the future (as in climate change) or those incurred in the past (as in debates surrounding debts) be factored in when creating institutional frameworks of redistribution that are effective at the present? Here the model of ‘waves of sharing’

that we find at the small scale helps to envisage an institutional framework in which the idea of balance sheets defining ‘final costs’ and ‘guaranteed benefits’ is replaced by interim achievements (defining equality prospectively, momentarily and retrospectively). Maybe it is the ultimate challenge for any attempt to design an *institutional* framework, meant to provide stability, for a social process that is inherently dynamic as it needs to be open to change and revision. These institutions are currently largely defined in terms of ultimate outcomes or deliverables. This has a simplicity to it that is not appropriate to the required complexity. Future frameworks will have to be less static in their guarantees and in terms of the returns they promise while at the same time being more versatile in allowing people to readjust and react to unexpected ripples in the waves of sharing. The main cost of designing new institutions of sharing is not that people will necessarily have to contribute more, pay more and keep less but rather that their entitlements are not fixed once and for all.

In sum, this article has shown that it is possible to derive what one may want to call design principles for large-scale contexts on the basis of comparative ethnographic evidence from small-scale settings. At a more fundamental level, it allows us to rethink and recalibrate the ‘small places – big issues’ approach in which anthropology takes pride. As anthropologists face issues at large scales they commonly try to find the small places appropriate to the large issues. With reference to the examples dealt with here, this would translate into selecting a refugee camp when studying migration (Nakueira, 2019), a bank or state office when studying taxation and corporate agents (Leins, 2018), alternative transport and accommodation platforms when studying the digital economy (Bialski, 2012) or the *banlieue* when working on social security payments (Bourdieu, 1997). And as the quoted references indicate there have been excellent ethnographic studies which have achieved just that. However, on the basis of my discussion of upscaling sharing from face-to-face hunter–gatherer settings, I suggest that there is a complementary strategy: trying to understand the big places through transposing results from small places is also possible and productive because it is the large issues that connect them. The analytical movement here is not so much a vertical one between levels when trying to find the large issue in the small place or seek out the small places in which large issues manifest themselves. Rather, it is a lateral one: understanding organizational patterns by relating them to one another across the scales in which they manifest themselves. Relating and comparing small and big places with one another helps clarifying the large issue. After all, the big issues are all over the place.

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Notes

1. The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16) is often mentioned in this context as being a provocation to strictly meritocratic systems and as being more in line with what hunter–gatherers would expect as a social norm.
2. This seems to have been the dynamic in the 2019 Swiss referendum on the Basic Income Grant, in which many Swiss voted against the scheme as they were expecting a new divide between citizens eligible for the grant and others in the country who would not be eligible.
3. Those who earn a living through transfers other than selling their labour directly on the market (i.e. state support, rent, inheritance, etc.) are in a majority in the United States (see Ferguson, 2015) and in Germany (see Widlok, 2017: xiii).

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