

# Ethnography of sharing initiatives in Brno

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**Abstract.** The sharing economy is one of the main topics currently discussed not only by academics. Perhaps everyone has heard of platforms like Airbnb or Uber. But many of these activities are criticized for exploiting the positive connotations of the word sharing to achieve financial gain. On the other hand, sharing has always been present in society, especially in families or closely related communities, where it was a fundamental form of asset redistribution. There is a third form of sharing that is often neglected. I focus on sharing in the form of initiatives that are motivated by social, environmental or other goals. I will present several sharing initiatives that operate in Brno, the second largest city in the Czech Republic. Based on semi-structured interviews with their representatives and ethnographic research that was implemented in the selected initiative, I will clarify: 1. How these initiatives are organized in communities or networks - I mainly focus on relational sociology and geography to show how communities are able to access resources and further control their flow through networks. 2. What is the motivation of people to get involved in these networks - as I define these initiatives as activities that are not focused on financial profit, the question remains what motivates people to share things with strangers. I conclude that these are mostly social, environmental or other motivations and their combinations. I place the whole theme of sharing in the broader context of a diversified and community-based economy as presented by Gibson-Graham (2006).

## 1 Introduction

According to many authors (Amin 2009, Fournier 2008, Gibson-Graham 2006, Habermas 2000, Jonas 2010, Polanyi 2006, Zademach - Hillebrand 2013, etc.), current social and environmental problems demand a radical solution by changing our approach to the economy. Gibson-Graham (2006) point out that the market

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economy is just the tip of the iceberg. Although it is most visible, we must not forget the many other economic activities (cooperatives, self-provisioning, family care, neighborhood assistance, housework, etc.) that are hidden below the surface. Gibson-Graham (2006) wants to highlight this diverse range of economic activities, thereby enabling people and communities to realize their full potential.

In recent years, there has been a growing civic and academic interest in online platforms that facilitate peer-to-peer delivery of services such as accommodation and transportation (the best-known Airbnb and Uber). The sharing economy has become a new type of business and accessing the services through technology development (Belk 2014a, Richardson 2015). Proponents (like Botsman - Rogers 2011) of the sharing economy celebrate it as rational use of immovable and movable goods and leisure. On the other hand, there is huge criticism. Authors (Martin 2015, Richardson 2015, Murillo et al. 2017) highlight issues related to the rights and obligations of people using sharing platforms. The biggest criticism is that these platforms are wrapped in a vocabulary of sharing, but they represent neoliberalism on steroids (Murillo et al. 2017). Belk (2014a and 2014b) calls these activities of sharing, which require financial or other compensation, pseudo-sharing.

In addition to sharing economy, other terms are used to denote related forms of economic activity or directly as its synonyms: gig economy, access economy / access-based consumption, platform economy, the on-demand economy and others (Cockayne 2016, Holmes 2018, Plewnia - Guenther 2017).

According to Belk (2007), sharing includes voluntary lending, co-use of resources and use of public goods. In general, Belk defines sharing as "the act and process of distributing what is ours for use by others, as well as the act and process of receiving something from others for our use (Belk 2007, p. 127)." In this article, I will use the term sharing economy for-profit forms of sharing.

In contrast to a sharing economy, informal sharing is a common part of our lives from birth. We share within the family, we share with neighbors, friends, colleagues at work. Two quite different forms of activity are referred to as sharing. One takes place among strangers and is motivated by profit; the other is in a circle of loved ones and motivations are social.

In addition to a sharing economy and informal sharing within family and friends, we can distinguish a third type of sharing. The sharing initiatives I pursue in my research are somewhere in the middle between sharing economy and

informal sharing. On the one hand, they make it possible to share with people outside the extended family or with strangers, just like a sharing economy; but they are nonprofit as informal sharing. Geiger et al. (2018) designate non-profit forms of sharing as "true sharing". The key question is what is the motivation for people to participate in true sharing? Geiger et al. (2018) give us a shallow explanation that motivation can be environmental, economic or social.

The aim of this paper is 1) to know how initiatives of true sharing create networks and 2) what motivation people have for sharing. I use relational sociology and geography approaches (Radil - Walther 2018), which help determine how important networks are in gaining control of resources and their distribution. The answer to the question about motivation is crucial because, without strong motivation, these sharing initiatives are unlikely to emerge and maintain their functionality.

By answering the research questions, we will gain a deeper insight into the topic of true sharing, which has not received as much attention in the academic literature as a sharing economy. I research the sharing of material things (food, clothing for books, flowers, etc.). The topic of sharing services, information, time is equally important and deserves its processing.

## 2 Methods

I chose Brno to research true sharing initiatives. Brno is the second largest city in the Czech Republic, it has around 400 thousand inhabitants. Several universities and international companies are located there so we can thus assume a certain cosmopolitanism of the city, to which foreigners come for work and study and, on the contrary, students go abroad. As a large part of sharing activities draws inspiration from abroad, Brno creates a favorable context for the emergence of true sharing initiatives.

During 2018, I conducted nine semi-structured interviews with representatives of initiatives: Veřejné lednice Brno (Public Refrigerator), Freebox at Faculty of Social Sciences at Masaryk University (FSS MU), Freebox at Tři ocásci café, Food Bank for South Moravian Region, Paběrkování po Brněnsku (Gleaning in Brno Region), Food Not Bombs Brno, Květena (Flora), Literary Benches by Jiří

Mahen Library, Freeshop of Endowment Student Fund at Faculty of Arts at Masaryk University.

The questions were focused primarily on the origin and activity of initiatives. The second intention of the interviews was to find out the motivation of people to participate in initiatives. All interviews lasted around one to two hours. After recording the interviews, I worked with the transcripts and analyzed them with open coding. I used sociograms of relationships and material flows between individual initiatives and other actors to display networks of sharing. In the following text, I will use fictive names for anonymization my communication partners.

Although the interviews provided valuable material, it is necessary to spend a longer time with those people to better understand how initiatives work, how people are involved and, above all, their motivation to share. To reach that I joined one of the initiatives to conducted ethnographic research based mostly on participating observation.

Thanks to the interview information, I knew most of the initiatives were formed around a small group of people involved in organizing sharing. These people are often linked by close friendly ties. Moreover, building and running an initiative rarely requires the involvement of more people. Other people can do subtasks, but not get into the main process. For my ethnographic research, I was looking for an initiative that would allow me to meet regularly with people involved in it, and at the same time I could participate in sharing activities as much as they did. However, some of the initiatives that would suit my requirements only act as occasional actions or are bound to a certain season of the year (e.g. gleaning).

The Brno group of Food Not Bombs (FNB) seemed to be the most appropriate initiative in which I could conduct the observation. Food Not Bombs (FNB) is a non-hierarchical worldwide initiative. It is made up of a network of independently functioning collectives that have no central control, only a common idea. As the title suggests, the main aim of the initiative is to highlight the high cost of armaments, which contrasts with food insecurity for a significant part of the population. According to the FNB, “food is right and not a privilege (<https://food-not-bombs.cz/>)”. They strongly criticize the economic and social system based on neoliberal capitalism and draw attention to the negative consequences of inequality and unequal access to wealth on the one hand, and life in luxury and waste on the other.

This initiative is open to new members wishing to engage in regular food preparation and distribution. The advantage is the knowledge of one of the members, who informally guarantees that the interest in cooperation is genuine. In my case, contact with the representative of the initiative with whom I interviewed served. I received instructions from him on how to proceed and whom to contact for more precise agreement.

My ethnographic research involves engaging in regular food preparation and distribution with FNB Brno. Every Saturday of the month, a different group provides cooking, although the specific lineup of people is changing. To gain a wider range of information, I have rotated two of these groups during the research. At a later stage of the research, however, I decided to join regularly only one of these groups. The reason for this decision was the fact that in addition to more stable core members, new or for me unknown members also always appeared. The second reason was the effort to establish a deeper friendship and thereby gain trust. The question of trust is crucial in any ethnographic research. Without trust, the researcher will not have access to all relevant information. It is also a commitment not to abuse this trust.

In addition to the question of trust, I had to deal with the secrecy or openness of research. I decided not to present myself as a researcher, but if someone asked me, I would not hide my research intention. Since Radek, with whom I interviewed, knew about my research and passed this information to some other members, I wasn't undercover as a researcher. Although some members had this information about me and I confirmed it, I did not see it as an obstacle. My personal (and not only research) interest in the experience of sharing food within the FNB and being fully involved in the preparation and distribution process has helped me to eliminate any artificiality of the researcher versus research subject.

Ethnographic research at the FNB Brno has been underway since the beginning of 2019 and is still ongoing in the time of writing paper. I gather my experience and research information in the field diary and record it as a voice recorder. The research results are therefore based on a combination of data obtained from interviews and observation.

### 3 Results

FNB Brno has been in operation since 2001 and the people, who started the group in Brno, were involved in the non-profit organization. This organization still provides a kitchen for food preparation and a place to store material. It thus represents a stabilizing element for the activities of FNB Brno. Members of FNB created a net for the free distribution of food and clothes to the people in need.

Cooking and food distribution take place every Saturday of the month. Members are divided into informal groups, with a member of the core who oversees convening other people for each week. Cooking is provided by a group of usually 5-8 people. But it starts with the gathering of raw materials on Friday evening. This means that some of the more active members will go to places that are suitable for so-called dumpster diving, and restaurants or smaller shops where they are agreed to hand over the food. Most of these are similarly alternative-minded businesses that, for example, cook vegan or vegetarian and support the idea of reducing food waste. They leave surpluses of raw materials or goods that they no longer use and sell. At the time of the research, three shops and one restaurant were arranged. The supply of raw materials from these sources has been so great in the last year that dumpster diving is kept to a minimum.

The distribution takes place in the park near the city center. Food is completely free. People in some sort of social distress come for food. Sometimes retirees, families with children or students come as well. Usually, there are dozens (about 50-70 people), depending on the weather, time of year and week in a month. For Radek, a member of the FNB Brno, cooking and giving food is more a way how to help people in need than a goal. They want to save food that would otherwise be wasted and at the same time lead people to think about waste. Members like Radek have a vision that our society will be based on a more equitable distribution of wealth, so people's basic life needs like food will be secure. For other members, it is important to be involved in some volunteer activities.

Members of FNB are mostly young people (20-35 years), university students or people who are in an activist and non-profit environment. The active core consists of about ten people. Around another one hundred people are occasionally participating in FNB activities. Radek's observations show that the Brno activist scene is relatively small and benefits from the interconnection of people through a personal acquaintance. In this way, FNB Brno is also networked with other sharing initiatives - Free Food Brno, Food Bank for South Moravian Region and

Paběrkování po Brněnsku (Gleaning in Brno Region) - through staffing, friendship or collaboration based on similar visions and values.

FNB Brno is linked to a similar initiative Free Food Brno. They create a platform that would help to save and share surplus food of restaurants during the week when FNB Brno is not working. Sometimes these two groups cooperate and distribute food on the same day and in the same place.

Some members of the FNB Brno and the Food Bank jointly founded Paběrkování po Brněnsku (Gleaning in Brno Region). They organized the gleaning of crops that farmers leave for various reasons (unsatisfactory size, aesthetics of vegetables and fruit, etc.). This saved vegetable or fruit is used by FNB Brno for cooking, most of the harvest is taken over by the Food Bank and distributed to organizations like charity. Food Bank offered to FNB closer cooperation in food distribution, but this offer was rejected. The FNB wanted to maintain informality, which is also manifested in organizational freedom (FNB is not any kind of a legal entity). However, according to David, the representative of the Food Bank for the South Moravian Region, it is good that initiatives that are formal and systemically anchored, as well as semi-system initiatives that may not comply with all standards and regulations, can work side by side. They can complement each other, cover the gaps in the net and save more food and help more people in need.

Other links in the sharing network lead from Paběrkování to the Public Refrigerator initiative. The students who started the initiative got to know each other thanks to the activities of Paběrkování.

In 2018, in cooperation with the Brno-center City Hall and the Public Wardrobe initiative, they succeeded in creating the so-called Sharepoint on Římské náměstí in the center of Brno. Sharepoint consisted of a public refrigerator where people could put aside or take food from it, and a wardrobe that served in a similar way for clothes. However, after a few months, the organizers of the initiatives showed different visions and values. While the Public Wardrobe was intended primarily for homeless people or in a socially difficult situation, especially in the winter months, the Public Refrigerator was intended for all people indiscriminately. The main goal was to avoid wasting food and at the same time to create a space for sharing that can foster a sense of community even in a relatively anonymous city like Brno. These motivations facilitated cooperation with Free Food Brno, from which they obtained a fridge, and this initiative also

occasionally filled the fridge with its surpluses. Sharepoint was canceled after about six months. However, Brno's Public Refrigerator established cooperation with the Black box café, thanks to contacts from Paběrkování, where they placed a second (currently the only) public fridge, which is accessible during the opening hours of the café.

In addition to food, clothes, books, dishes, etc. are shared in Brno within two freeboxes. One of them is in the café Tři ocásci, the other at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Masaryk University. These initiatives seek to create spaces of otherness where people do not need money to meet their material needs. In particular, the café Tři ocásci is testing how the economy can work to make it environmentally friendly, more human and fairer. Books can also be obtained at Literary benches (the activity of the Jiří Mahen Library in cooperation with the organization Retro Use). Houseplants and their seeds or cuttings are also shared thanks to the Květena initiative. The organizers say that flowers should not be for money but should be accessible to everyone.

## 4 Discussion

The social and material aspects of the economy are closely linked also in true sharing (Lee et al. 2008). FNB members spend several hours each week to create a distribution network that saves a certain amount of food and feed others. In terms of relational spatiality, initiatives thus demonstrate the ability to access and control resources through network flows (Radil - Walther 2018).

The people in each initiative and their interconnection are important. The power of this connection and centrality in the network is often enhanced by friendship (Radil - Walther 2018). However, other actors in the network are equally important. Organizations or individuals who provide shared items and, on the other hand, people who use them or put them back into circulation. Subjects that support initiatives materially, financially or another way (e.g. promotion) are also crucial. These entities are cafes, shops, other initiatives, non-profit organizations, universities, city or regional authorities, etc. Most of the initiatives include several such supporting entities, of which at least one is essential and without whose linking with the initiative sharing would not be possible. Examples include the use of the Nesehnutí's kitchen by FNB Brno, the cooperation of the

Public Refrigerator with the Black box café or the Freebox at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Masaryk University. Some initiatives are also interconnected, both personally (Paběrkování, Food Bank and Food not Bombs) or materially (Free Food Brno and Public Refrigerators). According to Radil and Walther (2018) actors who are well integrated into a dense group of close relationships and able to create contacts beyond their community.

Geiger (2018) states that the motivations for true sharing are social, environmental or economic. Social and environmental motivation has been confirmed by research conducted in FNB Brno. For some members, the most important is the social dimension, which is realized in helping people in need and meeting their basic needs in terms of food or clothing. Others emphasize reducing food waste and generally changing people's access to food. The collective is made up of a varied mix of people with different opinions, and the motivations may vary for each of them. What they have in common is the belief in the meaningfulness of cooking and sharing food. Instead of economic motivation (eg trying to save money), there is political motivation (criticism of political preference of market capitalism and insufficient solution of social issues). A similar variety and different emphasis on individual motivations are also observed with other representatives of initiatives. Economic motivation can be assumed on the part of users of sharing initiatives. The motivation of some organizers is to change how we operate economically. They try to create spaces where things are removed from the market economy and provided free of charge for use.

Seen through the glacier model (Gibson-Graham 2006) lens, true sharing initiatives are part of underwater activities. The emergence and growth of these activities are important for maintaining economic diversity.

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