The Rage of the Swineherd.
Phenomenology of Paratactic Commons.

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"I have only contempt for you," he told her.

"You …were all too ready to kiss a swineherd for a tinkling toy to amuse you..."

Then the Prince went home to his kingdom... The Princess could stay outside and sing to her heart's content:

"Oh, dear Augustin,
All is lost, lost, lost."[1]

H.-C. Andersen, 'The Swineherd'

SOPA was really stopped by the people themselves…

we won this fight because everyone made themselves a kind of a hero of their own story.

Aaron Swartz, Keynote speech at the Freedom2Connect conference, 2012

Abstract

If we want to understand the societal applications of the digital commons we should move from ontological to phenomenological perspective. Thus we will return the Subject in our thinking and start to discern what is it for people in the digital commons.

Both Andersen's story "The Swineherd" and the communication theory will help understand a seemingly paradoxical situation represented by paratactic commons.

Key words: sociology, communication theory, phatic communication, noise, subject, phenomenology.

Instruments of the self

Paratactic commons can be seen as a progressive stage in the societal development characterized by increased fragmentation of the society and alienation of its members.

This process started in the mid-nineteenth century with the famous 'law of progress' - the move from personhood associated with status and

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[1] A. Ross in 'The Rest is Noise. Listening to the Twentieth Century' describes an amazing role of this song in the musical history from Mahler to Shostakovich via Dostoevsky. This song was always considered as a symbol of an irresolvable clash. I would argue that Andersen hinted on it to be a song of redemption.

subordination to the law of contract, which 'reduced persons to individual units of investment, labour, or consumption' (Selznick 1992)

If previously persons constituted a society like family members according to a strict hierarchy from the King downwards, now they are independent individuals with free will, whose relationships with each other are only bound by contracts.

That meant that to become a person an individual now had to rely on her own internal resources rather than her social role as previously. Selznick particularly denotes "consciousness of character – of structured selfhood", which "gives centre stage to integrity" (1992: 227): "to form the self… is to treat oneself as an object – but one to be examined and refashioned, not manipulated… to find a healing balance between nonattachment and attachment, alienation and reconciliation" (p.228).

So how did people go about this important task in the emerging circumstances? Can the Andersen's characters provide prototypes?

Let us look at an old story by Andersen "The Swineherd" written in about the same time, 1838. Most of us vaguely remember that there a Prince was infuriated by a Princess. We also remember that the reason was that she displayed shallow interests.

The Prince presented her with two sets of gifts. The first set – the Nightingale and the Rose - reflected his own taste. But the Princess found them to be too natural to be interesting. The natural things belong to Nature, the nightingale was let free and so was the poor Prince.

As a way of revenge the Prince, disguised as a Swineherd, offered the Princess the second set of gifts – a Pot and a Rattle. The Rattle could reproduce all melodies of the world, and the Pot could inform on what is cooking in every kitchen of the town.

The Prince thought these things would fit the tastes of the Princess and he was right: she spent lots of time with those two devices. But the more she was pleased the darker was his mood. He provoked her into immoral way of paying for the 'gift' inciting a scandal and after she was thrown out from home by her father, the Prince turns away from her too and "shut the door of his palace in her face". He explains his decision by the shallowness of her tastes. She should have preferred the natural things to the artificial ones.

But how the Prince and Princess were different? If we examine how they engaged with the world, the Prince and the Princess represent two different ways of detachment. Both of them do not give back, both do not produce meaning: the main and crucial difference is that the Prince is engaged in a passive observation and the Princess prefers a more active approach.

While the Rose is a beautiful object, meant for passive observation and pleasant pastime, even for oblivion, the Pot only gave unstructured fragmented pieces of mundane, trivial information. But it required the active position of the user. I think this is what the Princess especially loved about it, and what the Prince hated. The Princess is thus an epitome of the type of the person, which was still emergent in the 19th century.

20-30 years ago 'The Swineherd' was still perceived simply as a story about trivial tastes of the Princess, but now we can detect too many similarities between ourselves and the Princess to as easily despise her as the Prince did.

The image of the Andersen's Princess' hand over the steaming cooking pot represents active attitude towards information through soaking up the incoming information. Messages from the Pot do not come in arrows, lines of flows neither they are contained and sealed there to be discovered later. They constantly emanate and if you do not hold the hand over the steam - i.e. make a physical effort - there is a possibility to miss the message.

The beauty of the Pot is in it being an instrument rather than an object.

Some 60 years later, the 'heiress' – metaphorically speaking - of the Princess, Gwendolen of Oscar Wilde's "Importance of Being Ernest" said: "I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read in the train" (Wilde 1895).

Here again an instrument for self-development (a diary) is preferred to an object of passive observation and echoes the technologies of the self described by Michel Foucault in both 'Hermeneutics of the Subject' (1982) and 'Technologies of the Self' (Martin et al. 1988) (in the latter Foucault cites an ancient Greek advice to keep diaries as a way of knowing oneself).

Production of meaning: importance of being open

Jumping to our technology-laden times, we find ourselves so deeply embedded in the technological environment so that we find it difficult to detach from it in order to consider it to be a 'technology of the self'.

Most of the discourse on commons is dedicated to the technicalities of the commons: which platforms are effective, what products are being made. The important issue of the Subject of the commons seems to slip away. To put this discourse in a philosophical perspective, the commons are increasingly seen ontologically and not phenomenologically.

Too often the commons are taken for granted. But as Douglas Rushkoff reminds us, "the codes of the software have been arranged by people, sometimes with agendas that had not formerly been apparent" (2003), just like our society at large.

Commons – both physical and digital – were designed and built by people and for people. Thus to study commons we necessarily should study the people who stand behind the commons, both designers and participants. What is it in them for the participant? What does it take to become one? Does one have to have a particular personality to participate in a sharing community? Is there a special 'sharing' trait of character, which provides the inclination?

These questions did not appear in the commons discourse, probably due to the homogenous set up of the participants so far. But with time, when the use of commons spread across many countries with different cultures, questions started to arise.

Anil Dash (2012) recently raised this issue blaming the generational problem, aggravated by the multitude of the users. The more the product becomes mass-oriented, the simpler it is accessed and some things are necessarily lost in the process. Of course it is lamented by the old-time geeks who loved to be proud users of Usenet – very few users, thus perceiving themselves as an elite.

More importantly, what Anil Dash discerned is the two distinct attitudes toward the Internet: geeks versus mass users. Open infrastructure, open frameworks and open software do not exist by themselves. Rather what matters are open-minded people, people with open attitudes.

To be fair, nearly all participants of the public debates on the societal roles of the Internet called for pro-active, open attitudes – E. Morozov (2011), D. Rushkoff (2003, 2011), G. Lovink (2011), Critical Engineers (2012). Though with different assumptions, their shared aim is to stir up the Internet community to create a new Subject of Internet communication.

Dan Hind (2008) explicitly writes about 'the free software movement' when drafting 'a programme of enlightened inquiry': 'the success of free software should make us optimistic that we can develop a free information movement, in which the goal is not the creation of a piece of software, but individual and collective liberation' (Hind 2008).

I agree with him that this type of community is more viable than those of revolutionary insurgency or artistic elites. What is questionable though is Hind's assurance that such community will produce meaning. Moreover, he assigns production of meaning and understanding as its main task (p.143).

This is the main drawback of the Hind's thinking and, unfortunately, it is not limited to him: discourse on the technological environment often suggests that new technologies would somehow help us to understand each other and the world (Vattimo 1992, Mason 2012).

It is a quite widely held belief that the mere co-existence of different opinions and – better still – simple facts and other data would produce liberating meanings, which potentially can better our conditions. I would tentatively suggest that this belief belongs to spatial metaphors in our cognition.

Cognitive psychologists have proved that a metaphor of 'a container' is one of the basic mental metaphors used (mostly unconsciously) in such distinct areas as linguistics and mathematics (Lakoff, Johnson 1980). I think we can detect a similar pattern in the imaginary of the Internet: websites, social media, open software/sharing platforms are imagined as containers to be filled with data.

Of course, sharing and data collection improves with the quantitative growth, but if our aim is a production of meaning we must understand what exactly do people do when collaborating via digital commons. Who is the Subject and what is her agenda?

The communication theory

We can safely say that the situation of sharing via digital commons is a communication situation. Our society is increasingly a communication society (Vattimo 1992).

The communication theory can provide a few insights into the Subject of the communication.

Here spatial metaphors are particularly strong. Lakoff & Johnson noted that the inner structure of the very term 'communication' is likened to our idea of transferring objects from one container to another. We use metaphors of a movement of ideas across space, from one head to another, with metaphorical barriers like 'thick-headed', as if we deal with physical objects (Lakoff, Johnson 1980).

If we take away spatial metaphors, we will be surprised to discover that the Subject's main concern is herself. In communication, we do not move anything neither metaphorically nor really, we are instead busy forming our own selfhood even while communicating with others.

The communication theory recognized it in at least two notions: one is Phatic communication, the other one is Static (noise) - a hinder to the communication.

Phatic communication.

The Oxford English Dictionary describes it as communication "that serves to establish or maintain social relationships rather than to impart information, communicate ideas, etc." The most obvious example is a small talk about weather: "- It is a nice day today. – Oh yes, the weather is great!"

However trivial such exchange may seem, there is a strong argument to be made that phatic functions influence all social interaction, and are fundamental to human communication generally. As Zeynep Tufecki argues, "that's what humans do" (Tufecki 2011 cited in Schandorf 2011).

Noise.

Unlike the notion of the phatic communication, the notion of 'noise' is still considered as a hinder to an effective communication. It received more attention in psychoanalysis where Z. Freud considered it as a source of information, which was supposed to be suppressed. Another psychoanalyst, Guattari, on the contrary, argued that this noise needs to be discovered and developed:

'on the usual logic… the world of desires and passions leads to nothing in the end, except to the "jamming" of objective cognition to "noise" in the sense that communication theory uses the term… However, …[by] a different logic, …[r]ather than abandon them to their apparent irrationality they can be treated as a kind of basic material, as an ore, whose life-essential elements, and particularly those relating to humanity's desires and creative potentialities can be extracted.' (Guattari 2009/1977 p.195)

The 'noise' definition does not fit usual spatial metaphors of the communication. Noise – cognitive or environmental – does not fill containers nor move from one scull to another. Very similarly to the steam emanating from the Princess' Pot, it comes from multiple directions, and even without any directions at all, it does not have quantifiable nature.

Considered this way, communication is not about 'sending' information in a desirable direction towards the Receiver or even less about moving from one container to another. It is more like a process of being engulfed in all sorts of information – about room temperature, body flows etc. – where the sent information is only one fragment of the bigger picture of the receiver's worldview.[2]

What is common to both notions of the 'phatic communication' and the 'noise' is that they debunk the usual image of communication as linear, directional and meaningful. Here the communication process is represented as erratic, fluid, sometimes non-existent, sometimes excessive, tautological.

The main concern of the participants is not the information (or a production of meaning) but the process of communication itself, in which they are actively consciously involved through reflection and self-reflection.

The Receiver of the information actively regulates her attention, which gets distracted by a number of static noises, and first of all cognitive noises of her own thoughts, background knowledge and such.

In other words, the communication theory sees participants as active agents, constantly producing their selfhood through reflecting on the exchanged information as well as on themselves while being engaged in the communication process. Phenomenological tradition from E. Husserl to J. Caputo would agree with this scheme.

Phenomenology in paratactic commons

Would be Dan Hind frustrated if he discovered that sharing communities do not produce much information and meaning about our world? Perhaps. Just like our Prince, he may be infuriated to see how shallow are the interests of those who use the technological advances.

But we can look at this situation from a different angle. For the first time in our history we have technological means to rediscover ourselves, to participate in communication and in sharing, co-producing activities without getting together physically. It means we are more now left to ourselves, to observe and know ourselves better (Foucault). It also means more introverts are involved in collaborations.

But by no means it should create a situation of more alienation in the society. People in crowds can be alienated even more, following negative group dynamics even among the closest partners. Only with ourselves we can understand our inner selves better, which would allow us to be more integrate and consistent in our actions (on the fallacy of "groupwork" see Cain 2012).

This is a paratactic way of co-existence in the society: aware of each other yet separate, fragmentary yet coherent. A truly democratic society should be interested in personal growth of its members. Paratactic commons provide a useful model for such a society primarily due to its possibilities for personal development.

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[2] A comprehensive list of noises in communication is in Rothwell (1975).

Stockburger explains how we can expect development of 'intersubjective relations' in such seemingly alienating circumstances: 'Novel forms of social groupings as exemplified by the practices of file sharing communities' consist of individuals who internalize ideas of utopia and 'if… **internalized utopia is governed by a bypassing of idealised social interaction and a shift of the focus towards individual options and the private, the question emerges whether this merely represents a moment of contraction before new social formations establish themselves and communities return, on a different plane of action**' (2010).

Hiroshi Yoshioka also acknowledges importance of our technical environment as means for development of particular "pattern of behavior": 'One great advantage of living in today's digital media environment is that we are coming closer to this perspective [i.e. "tolerance of complexity"], not so much as the result of philosophical or scientific insight, but rather as a more common pattern of behavior, which we have acquired through our normal experience of digital media' (2009).

Both authors talk about emergence of a new personality, perhaps the one harbouring a new kind of society. Charles Taylor (2004) examines how 'what start off as theories held by a few people come to infiltrate the social imaginary, first of elites, perhaps, and then the whole society' (p.24), 'what is originally just an idealization grows into a complex imaginary through being taken up and associated with social practices' (p.29) – among them the 16th century dream of a society constituted not as an hierarchy but as a collaboration of self-reliant individuals – emergent then as a dream of an educated few and widely accomplished by mid-19th century (Selznick 1992, Taylor 2004).

Similarly, "like literacy, the open source ethos and process are hard if not impossible to control once they are unleashed" (Rushkoff 2003).

Conclusion

Sharing communities, paratactic commons of all types can be viewed as models of a new society, but it would probably be more accurate to see them as instruments, channels through which particular energies are channelled, particular personalities are crystallised, which with time – perhaps a very long time – can build a new society. Paratactic yet sharing society.

Epilogue

Once I asked a girl, who had recently participated in a street demonstration, about her feelings regarding the experience. I expected her to tell me about excitement of a street action, about unity with like-minded people inspired by a shared cause. To my surprise she said that her main feeling was confusion.

- You know, - she said, - while we were in heated discussions on social media everything was clear, we knew our demands and how we are going to

get them. But once we were on the street everything became so confused! All these groups of people I would never identify with, all their different agendas and demands. It was so different from our expectations, I don't even know how to evaluate the results of the action!

Was that girl a 21st century heiress of the Andersen's Princess? Perhaps.

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