RADICAL SHARING TALK AMSTERDAM

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Transcribed and edited for clarity and brevity. The contributions of the two speakers attending digitally are not in this transcript, the questions from the audience are not in this transcript.

Bette: Alan N. Shapiro is a science fiction theorist. I am very happy he is here, I've been following his writing for a long time. Alan studied Government and European intellectual history, and he has an MA in sociology. Alan worked in informatics for several years. And he's now a lecturer and essayist in the fields of Science Fiction Studies, Media Theory, Posthumanism, French Philosophy, Creative Coding, Software Theory, Artificial Intelligence, Futuristic and Transdisciplinary Design.

Alan, welcome. We'll talk about three questions tonight. The first question will be: What is your connection to the words property and sharing? So, Alan, by way of introduction, what is your connection to the words property and sharing?

Alan: I want to give a hint at the beginning of what I'm going to say in the third part of my pragmatic idea, which is about a radical technology company, which would be self-sustaining and self-financing, and could also be active in media, filmmaking, and energy, and ecology areas - which is what I call a radical technology company for short.

For the last seven years I've been teaching in Luzern, Switzerland, at an art university in a program called Digital Ideation. And what we've been developing there is what I would call Transdisciplinary Informatics. Half the students are programmers and the other half are from art and design. And we try to bring them together and experiment in how people with a techy engineering mindset, and people from art, design, philosophy, sociology, can work together and kind of revolutionize what informatics is. So having said that: I will now come to property and sharing.

I think about property and sharing as an anarchist. I'm a radical left thinker. But I'm not a Marxist. And since you mentioned science fiction, I'm interested in science fiction narratives, novels, which present utopian, post-capitalist, post-scarcity societies. I wish that Hollywood would make science fiction films with more utopian scenarios and not only the apocalyptic negative science fiction scenarios that most of them are. Novelists like Ursula Le Guin and Iain M. Banks and Kim Stanley Robinson have written about more utopian societies.

I've published a book about *Star Trek*. That would be the one major example of a science fiction society that is utopian and post-capitalist because there's no money in Star Trek and with the replicator it is sort of hinting at the potential of Post-Scarcity.

Bette: When you say, 'when I think about property and sharing, I think about it as an anarchist, and not a Marxist', could you explain: How do anarchists think about property and sharing?

Alan: Well, I consider Karl Marx a great thinker, and I read Marx, but I don't believe in the Marxist doctrine. I think basic ideas of Marxism have had tremendous influence on everyone; young people, students, thinkers, who think critically about the existing society. Even when they don't realize it, Marxist concepts are in the background, and I think Marxists make a strict separation between property and sharing.

I want to mention the film *Oppenheimer*, I think it's a way of getting into that… In *Oppenheimer*, Oppenheimer's brother and his girlfriend are in the Communist Party in the 1930s. And they ask Oppenheimer at one point, have you read Marx? And he says, of course I read Marx. I even read him in the original German. And Marx said: 'Property is theft.' And this of course is wrong. It was Pierre Joseph Proudhon, the anarchist thinker. He was writing at the same time as Marx, but it was Proudhon who published a book 'What is Property? Property is Theft.' So, Christopher Nolan made a terrible blunder there, revealing that he did not do his research, as he attributes this 'property is theft' idea to Marx. But then, I look around on social media, I see that all the Marxists jump on that, you know. They jump on Christopher Nolan's mistake. And they say: 'well, it wasn't Marx who said property is theft, but Marx explicitly wrote a critique of Proudhon.' This is a famous letter that Marx wrote in 1865, where he makes an elaborate critique of the ideas of Proudhon, and says this idea of property as theft is bullshit from the Marxist point of view, because property is a capitalist invention, and theft is a capitalist invention, according to Marx. But I don't agree with that. And I find that the Marxists jumping on Christopher Nolan are mirroring the mistake of Christopher Nolan - all they're interested in about Proudhon and anarchism is that from the Marxist point of view, Proudhon was wrong, right?

Bette: Because Marx rejects property, he also rejects the notion of theft.

Alan: Marx doesn't want workers to become capitalists.

Bette: For the people who haven't read Proudhon, perhaps you could say a little more about him?

Alan: Well, Proudhon was involved with artisan and artist communities and farmers and peasants, and it was about small utopian communities that were self-sustaining and had mutual aid, as he called it. So, the difference between anarchism and Marxism, first is, Marxism, it's a very doctrinaire idea. Capitalism is to be totally rejected. And you imagine an alternative to it, that there's going to be this powerful centralized state. And then at some point, I think it was Engels who said this, 'the state will wither away.' Right, so we need the state, and then eventually you'll get to real communism. Or anarchism. This is totally naive. And, though I despise Jordan Peterson, who's a right-wing thinker, but if you watch the video of the debate between Jordan Peterson and Slavoj Zizek, who's a Marxist, and Zizek is talking about his vision of communism and so on, you will hear Peterson say: What you're leaving out is human greed. So I have an answer to both Peterson and Zizek. I disagree with both of them.

Bette: Just to clarify, Zizek was defending Marxism and Peterson said, you're forgetting about human greed, Marxism will never work because humans are greedy, right?

Alan: And power hungry. So the socialist idea that there should be an instance of society or politics which acts in the public interest, in the social interest, and balances or supersedes the private interests of capitalists. This is a good idea that I agree with. The flaw… When you had the USSR and the Eastern Europe and so on, this demonstrated that when humans are in charge of that instance that's acting in the social good, it becomes totalitarian because humans are power hungry and greedy, right? The party elite and the people at the top…. Or China today… it's similar. I'm interested in….

Bette: But you have a solution.

Alan: Yes. So I just want to say I am interested in someone like Albert Camus, or George Orwell, or the Situationists. And then I'm interested in posthumanism, the cultural theory and cultural movement of what's today called posthumanism, of which I think the best example would be Donna Haraway's cyborg theory. Posthumanism is a critique of anthropocentrism.

The solution is that we can organize society, economy, logistics, with the social interest and the public interest in mind, without humans coming into power, without a new ruling class of powerful bureaucrats, like what happened in the

Soviet Union. We can do that through designing technology, algorithms. And I am not at all defending the way that AI and algorithms are being used and implemented by capitalism, but we could design partnership systems with AI so that actually AI is understood in an anarchist way.

Bette: I think that's a great moment to go to the next question, keeping in mind: AI, in an anarchist way. So, rethinking property and how we live together seems increasingly urgent, but it's also complicated because we have existing structures. And there's another complication, which is that the way everything has been divided happened in the past and there have been some injustices there. What does it mean when you're in a good position and you say : now that I'm here in this good position, I'm willing to share more with you 'poor people'. Or 'I am going to propose a reform.' What does that mean? Should you go back and look at all the injustices that have happened before? In this country, the Netherlands has been really involved in stealing all over the world, for instance. But we're also inventing new injustices, like leaning on low cost labor in other countries, or contributing to carbon emissions in an unequal way.

So, where to begin? I would like to ask you, Alan, If you think about property and sharing, and how we can change things, do you look at fixing things from the past or are you looking at the future?

Alan: Yes. To finish from the first part, I want to say that for me, property and sharing are not mutually exclusive. Most of the discourse is that private property is this capitalist, individualist thing: what belongs to me. And when we think about radical experiments, it's about the commons. And in Marxism, social change is going to come about through this revolution. So, I don't think property and sharing are mutually exclusive in a kind of binary or dualism. I think they are deeply intertwined with each other. And that's more and more clear in the digital situation. If you just look at social media and the kind of paradoxical structure that social media had, that they were intended to be new social spaces of making communities or simulated online communities. And what have social media become now? The echo chamber, the filter bubble, hate, negative emotions, conspiracy theories, right wing, rise of the right wing, racism, sexism, and so on.

When I am sitting in my living room at my computer and all of my "friends" see when I come online or go offline, and I see them. They are with me in what was previously called my private space. It started with cell phones, when I started to listen to the intimate conversations of strangers while sitting in a cafe or on the train. This makes all conversation banal. In politics, I share comments and forums with an interlocutor. It is private in a way, but it's where politics is now really happening. The old dichotomy of private and public no longer makes

sense. It's on that obsolete dichotomy that the old dualism of property versus the commons rests. When this hybrid-without-conscious-design social media configuration gets overturned, then sharing, in a conscious design, can be in things which are hybrid not the "pure" commons.

Bette: Yes. And I guess that in a way that links to the question as well, because if you think about whether we should fix the past or look at the future, some of these ideas are from the past. There is this idea that if you're questioning property in some way, very soon people will think that you are a communist. Because that's the two ways we tend to look at it - either capitalism or communism, and then maybe anarchism if you are very chaotic. So I guess that's something that comes from the past, that we think there's only one alternative, which is communism.

Alan: Yes. Well, in anarchism, you're not waiting for the revolution. You're acting in the here and now, in activities and experiments and communities that you can build today.

Bette: And anarchism has had success in history. In Spain, for instance, it existed alongside the existing system, so they didn't have to overthrow the regime, it could just grow. You don't necessarily have to overthrow or end the current system to be anarchist. You can start being anarchist today, I guess. Would you agree?

Alan: Yes, I mean, Proudhon's ideas were about workplace democracy and self-management and so on, but now those ideas can be supplemented with designing technology to be part of the decision-making. Which means that there's no humans who are going to gain power. We need moral algorithms. We need ethics or morality built into algorithms. We need to stop thinking about AI as just autonomous systems which replace humans and instead design partnership systems. We can share decision-making with them.

But on the topic of the past and the future… in 1968, which is, was for me kind of the background of when I became radicalised. When I was young, there were ideas - I won't name specific authors - that we could move from work to creativity. The anthropocentric idea of a prosperous society that's dominating nature and viewing nature for natural resources to be exploited. This instrumental attitude, which makes us define our lives through work, work, work. So Marx was sort of right with his alienated labor concept. By designing and implementing, designing, and deploying technology intelligently, we could achieve a post-scarcity economy, which is what *Star Trek* sort of envisions when you can make things with a replicator, a digital blueprint, and so on.

So I want to revive this post-scarcity through technology idea from 1968 with the digital and virtual technologies of today. Because in the last 10 or 15 years I was involved in the scenes of blockchain, the scene of 3D printers, additive manufacturing, the scene of emotional relations with robots, and the scene of what I call dialogical AI, as opposed to autonomous AI. By the way, all the universities making institutes for AI, they just assume that AI is about autonomous systems. You can read it in their descriptions. But, so, I think, if we learn from the political philosophy and historical social movements of anarchism, if we learn from the cultural theory and feminist and ecological ideas about posthumanism and we think about these technologies of decentralization, which is what blockchain is supposed to do. I'm not like an advocate of cryptocurrencies, but we have an opportunity today to think about these advanced digital technologies as bringing back anarchism and intertwined ideas about property and sharing as, as somehow happening together.

Bette: I've done this same talk in San Francisco in two places, and one place was the Internet Archive. It's a great place. They're all about open access, open knowledge for everyone, and there were some young people from the tech world visiting, who were talking about how AI should be different. How it should be built up from the ground up with different principles. 'We need moral algorithms. We need technology not being made by commercial companies, but by creative young people in an artistic way. So we get fundamentally different technology.' Then I asked them, where do you work? And they would work at some biotech company because they had student debt. In their spare time, they all had really interesting AI experiments running on a whole bunch of computers somewhere. So Alan, who is going do this alternative AI project? If all the tech people coming out of great schools have student debt. How can they do this on the side?

Alan: Well, Biden is cancelling their student debt.

Bette: That's a solution!

Alan: I think, since the first wave of digitalization in 1984 with the first Macintosh, there have been hints towards this radical technology company, which needs to, which needs to be explicitly anti-capitalist in its values. I think we've seen with Apple Computer at the beginning, that they tried, in their own kind of limited understanding, to be a radical technology company. I think Steve Jobs and Apple made very creative, radical designs. Google, at a certain point about 10 or 15 years ago, was giving their workers much more freedom, they could set their own hours, they could go to yoga, or therapy, or something, you know. So, I mean, there have been attempts, experiments, to change the culture.

Bette: Didn't work out, though, sadly.

Alan: No, because the whole computer and tech industry, Silicon Valley and so on, and even on the left, is, has always been imbued with what I call technological determinism, which is that if you have some amazing idea of a new technology - like the internet was supposed to lead to greater democracy and communication and open knowledge for everyone, you know - there were utopian ideas about the internet which all have been demonstrated to have been vaporware, to use a term. Vaporware in software development means an idea that never happens.

Bette: And technological determinism means…

Alan: Technological determinism means to believe that some cool, new, amazing technology by itself will lead to a progressive, emancipatory social change. And that's wrong because technology is really about design. It's about how you design the technology. I mean, you can name any technology, and I could tell you three or four different ways in which it could be designed, and what effect it will have on society and our lives, depending on how you design it. So, we need philosophy, art, sociology, media theory, and so on. We need ideas and knowledge from the humanities and the arts and the social sciences. What is the curriculum and education of the programmer? We want to redefine it, transform it.

Bette: So since I'm here trying to figure out a project, I also ask specifically, what can people and communities do? Alan has this great idea for a radical technology company where people who are aware of the humanities and philosophies are involved in making technology. This company would be successful in capitalism and self-sustaining, but with anarchist values embedded in everything they do and create. Am I saying this correctly, Alan?

Alan: Yes. Sounds good.

Bette: So, just very briefly because we're running out of time, how would one begin this radical company?

Alan: Well, I mean, I am a science fiction theorist. So it's actually a science fiction idea.

Bette: So one could write a novel about it, or a story, start out writing a little more fiction about it.

Alan: Yes, it could be described, or I could talk about it, like what we're doing right now. To inspire some younger people to start to do it. And I think to see kind of the conceptual traps that leftist thinking is stuck in and to become more creative and critical thinkers. Like, for example, when we develop concepts about property and sharing, which are intertwined, then we will reach a larger audience. I think when we can link property and sharing together in, in hybrid, with hybrid concepts, we'll reach a larger audience and get into dialogue with more people who are, you know, people even on the right, or in the middle, who are stuck in their capitalist ideology. I'm a critic of the existing society. I'm appalled by much of it. But I think it's a mistake to always call it capitalism. Because it's algorithmic, totalitarian, bureaucratic, hyperreal, virtual, simulation and simulacra, anthropocentric, informatic, science fiction. There isn't all that much difference between, I mean, it depends how you look at it, but in a certain way between China and America and Western Europe, I mean, there's somewhat different models of it, but they're all implementing technology in totalitarian directions and for consolidating the power of big corporations or the communist state.

That's all.

Bette: Thank you, Alan.