Sean Dockray, Lawrence Liang

Sharing Instinct: An Annotation of the Social Contract Through Shadow Libraries

Foederis aequas Dicamus leges
(Let us make fair terms for the compact.)
– Virgil's *Aeneid*, XI

Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains.[1]

June 30, 2015
Dear Sean,

I have been asked by Raqs Media Collective to contribute to a special ongoing issue of e-flux journal *that is part of the Venice Biennale. Raqs's section in the issue rethinks Rousseau's social contract and the possibility of its being rewritten, as a way of imagining social bonds and solidarities that can help instigate and affirm a vision of the world as a space of potential.*

I was wondering if you would join me in a conversation on shadow libraries and social contracts. The entire universe of the book-sharing communities seems to offer the possibility of rethinking the terms of the social contract and its associated terms (consent, general will, private interest, and so on). While the rise in book sharing is at one level a technological phenomenon (a library of 100,000 books put in PDF format can presently fit on a one-terabyte drive that costs less than seventy-five dollars), it is also about how we think of transformations in social relations mediated by sharing books.

If the striking image of books in preprint revolution was of being "in chains," as Rousseau puts it, I am prompted to wonder about the contemporary conflict between the digital and mechanisms of control. Are books born free but are everywhere in chains, or is it the case that they have been set free? In which case are they writing new social contracts?

I was curious about whether you, as the founder of Aaaaarg.org, had the idea of a social contract in mind, or even a community, when you started?

Lawrence

Book I, Chapter VI : The Social Pact

To find a form of association that may defend and protect with the whole force of the community the person and property of every associate, and by means of which each, joining together with all, may nevertheless obey only himself, and remain as free as before." Such is the fundamental problem to which the social contract provides the solution.

We can reduce it to the following terms: "Each of us puts in common his person and all his power under the supreme direction of the general will; and in return each member becomes an indivisible part of the whole."

June 30, 2015
Dear Lawrence,

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I am just listing a few ideas to put things out there and am happy to try other approaches:

– To think about the two kinds of structure that digital libraries take: either each library is shared by many user-librarians or there is a library for each person, shared with all the others. It's a technological design question, yes, but it also suggests different social contracts?

– What is subtracted when we subtract your capacity/right to share a book with others, when every one of us must approach the market anew to come into contact with it? But to take a stab at misappropriating the terms you've listed, consent, what libraries do I consent to? Usually the consent needs to come from the library, in the form of a card or something, but we don't ask enough what we want, maybe. Also what about a social contract of books? Does a book consent to being in a library? What rights does it have or expect?

I really loved the math equation Rousseau used to arrive at the general will: if you subtract the pluses and minuses of particular wills that cancel each other out, then the general will is the sum of the differences! But why does the general need to be the lowest common denominator – certainly there are more appropriate mathematical concepts that have been developed in the past few hundred years?

Sean

Book I, Chapter II: Primitive Societies

This common liberty is a consequence of man's nature. His first law is to attend to his own survival, his first concerns are those he owes to himself; and as soon as he reaches the age of rationality, being sole judge of how to survive, he becomes his own master.

It is the relation of things and not of men that constitutes war; and since the state of war cannot arise from simple personal relations, but only from real relations, private war – war between man and man – cannot exist either in the state of nature, where there is no settled ownership, or in the social state, where everything is under the authority of the laws.

July 1, 2015

Dear Lawrence,

Unlike a logic of exchange, or of offer and return with its demands for reciprocity, the logic of sharing doesn't ask its members for anything in return. There are no guarantees that the one who gives a book will get back anything, whether that is money, an equivalent book, or even a token of gratitude. Similarly, there is nothing to prevent someone from taking without giving. I think a logic of sharing will look positively illogical across the course of its existence. But to me, this is part of the appeal: that it can accommodate behaviors and relationships that might be impossible within the market.

But if there is a lack of a contract governing specific exchanges, then there is something at another level that defines and organizes the space of sharing, that governs its boundaries, and that establishes inclusions and exclusions. Is this something ethics? Identity? Already I am appealing to something that itself would be shared, and would this sharing precede the material sharing of, for example, a library? Or would the shared ethics/identity/whatever be a symptom of the practice of sharing? Well, this is perhaps the conclusion that anthropologists might come to when trying to explain the sharing practices of hunter-gatherer societies, but a library?

Sean

July 1, 2015

Hi Sean,

I liked your question of what might account for a sharing instinct when it comes to books, and whether we appeal to something that already exists as a shared ethics or identity, or is sharing the basis of a shared ethics/identity? I have to say that while I have never thought of my own book-collecting through the analogy of hunter-gatherers, the more I think about it, the more sense it makes to me. Linguistically we always speak of going on book hunts and my daily trawling through the various shadow libraries online does seem to function by way of a hunting-gathering mentality.

Often I download books I know that I will never personally read because I know that it may either be of interest to someone else, or that the place of a library is the cave where one gathers what one has hunted down, not just for oneself but for others. I also like that we are using so-called primitive metaphors to account for twenty-first-century digital practices, because it allows us the possibility of linking these practices to a primal instinct of sharing, which precedes our encounter with the social norms that classify and partition that instinct (legal, illegal, authorized, and so on).

I don't know if you remember the meeting that we had in Mumbai a few years ago – among the other participants, we had an academic from Delhi as an interlocutor. He expressed an absolute terror at what he saw as the "tyranny of availability" in online libraries. In light of the immense number of books available in electronic copies and on our computers or hard discs, he felt overwhelmed and compared his discomfort with that of being inside a large library and not knowing what to do. Interestingly, he regularly writes asking me to supply him with books that he can't find or does not have access to.

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Abdel Kader Haïdara, a librarian who smuggled hundreds of thousands of manuscripts from jihadist-occupied Timbuktu to safety in Bamako, stands with ancient volumes from Timbuktu packed into metal trunks. Photo: Brent Stirton/Getty Images

This got me thinking about the idea of a library and what it may mean, in its classical sense and its digital sense. An encounter with any library, especially when it manifests itself physically, is one where you encounter your own finitude in the face of what seems like the infinity of knowledge. But personally this sense of awe has also been tinged with an immense excitement and possibility. The head rush of wanting to jump from a book on forgotten swear words to an intellectual biography of Benjamin, and the tingling anticipation as you walk out of the library with ten books, captures for me more than any other experience the essence of the word potential.

I have a modest personal library of around four thousand books, which I know will be kind of difficult for me to finish in my lifetime even if I stop adding any new books, and yet the impulse to add books to our unending list never fades. And if you think about this in terms of the number of books that reside on our computers, then the idea of using numbers becomes a little pointless, and we need some other way or measure to make sense of our experience.

Lawrence

Book I, Chapter VII: The Sovereign

Every individual can, as a man, have a particular will contrary to, or divergent from, the general will which he has as a citizen; his private interest may appear to him quite different from the common interest; his absolute and naturally independent existence may make him envisage what he owes to the common cause as a gratuitous contribution, the loss of which would be less harmful to others than the payment of it would be onerous to him.

July 12, 2015

Hi Sean,

There is no symbol that to my mind captures the regulated nature of the library more than that of the board that hushes you with its capitalized SILENCE. Marianne Constable says, "One can acknowledge the figure of silence in the library and its persistence, even as one may wonder what a silent library would be, whether libraries ever are silent, and what the various silences – if any – in a library could be."

If I had to think about the nature of the social contract and the possibilities of its rewriting from the site of the library one encounters another set of silent rules and norms. If social contracts are narrative compacts that establish a political community under the sign of a sovereign collective called the people, libraries also aspire to establish an authority in the name of the readers and to that extent they share a common constitutive character. But just as there is a foundational scandal of absence at the heart of the social contract that presumes our collective consent (what Derrida describes as the absence of the people and the presence of their signature) there seems to be a similar silence in the world of libraries where readers rarely determine the architecture, the logic, or the rules of the library.

So libraries have often mirrored, rather than inverted, power relations that underlie the social contracts that they almost underwrite. In contrast I am wondering if the various shadow libraries that have burgeoned online, the portable personal libraries that are shared offline: Whether all of them reimagine the social contract of libraries, and try to create a more insurgent imagination of the library?

Lawrence

July 13, 2015

Hi Lawrence,

As you know, I'm very interested in structures that allow the people within ways to meaningfully reconfigure them. This is distinct from participation or interaction, where the structures are inquisitive or responsive, but not fundamentally changeable.

I appreciate the idea that a library might have, not just a collection of books or a system of organizing, but its own social contract. In the case of Aaaaarg, as you noticed, it is not explicit. Not only is there no statement as such, there was never a process prior to the library in which something like a social contract was designed.

I did ask users to write out a short statement of their reason for joining Aaaaarg and have around fifty thousand of these expressions of intention. I think it's more interesting to think of the social contract, or at least a "general will," in terms of those. If Rousseau distinguished between the will of all and the general will, in a way that could be illustrated by the catalog of reasons for joining Aaaaarg. Whereas the will of all might be a sum of all the reasons, the general will would be the sum of what remains after you "take away the pluses and minuses that cancel one another." I haven't done the math, but I don't think the general will, the general reason, goes beyond a desire for access.

To summarize a few significant groupings:

– To think outside institutions;
– To find things that one cannot find;
– To have a place to share things;
– To act out a position against intellectual property;
– A love of books (in whatever form).

What I do see as common across these groupings is that the desire for access is, more specifically, a desire to have a relationship with texts and others that is not mediated by market *relations.*

In my original conception of the site, it would be something like a collective commonplace. Like commonplacing, the excerpts that people would keep were those parts of texts that seemed particularly useful, that produced a spark that one wanted to share. This is important: that it was the experience of being electrified in some way that people were sharing and not a book as such. Over time, things changed and the shared objects became more complete so to say, and less "subjective," but I hope that there is still that spark. But, at this point, I realize that I am just another one of the many wills, and just one designer of whatever social contract is underlying the library.

So, again – What is the social contract? It wasn't determined in advance and it is not written in any about section or FAQ. I would say that it is, like the library itself, something that is growing and evolving over time, wouldn't you?

Sean

Book II, Chapter VIII : The People

As an architect, before erecting a large edifice, examines and tests the soil in order to see whether it can support the weight, so a wise lawgiver does not begin by drawing up laws that are good in themselves, but considers first whether the people for whom he designs them are fit to maintain them.

July 15, 2015

Lawrence,

There are many different ways of organizing a library, of structuring it, and it's the same for online libraries. I think the most interesting conversation would not be to bemoan the digital for overloading our ability to be discerning, or to criticize it for not conforming to the kind of economy that we expected publishing to have, or become nostalgic for book smells; but to actually really wonder what it is that could make these libraries great, places that will be missed in the future if they go away. To me, this is the most depressing thing about the unfortunate fact that digital shadow libraries have to operate somewhat below the radar: it introduces a precariousness that doesn't allow imagination to really expand, as it becomes stuck on techniques of evasion, distribution, and redundancy. But what does it mean when a library functions transnationally? When its contents can be searched? When reading interfaces aren't bound by the book form? When its contents can be referenced from anywhere?

What I wanted when building Aaaaarg.org the first time was to make it useful, in the absolute fullest sense of the word, something for people who saw books not just as things you buy to read because they're enjoyable, but as things you need to have a sense of self, of orientation in the world, to learn your language and join in the conversation you are a part of – a library for people who related to books like that.

Sean

July 17, 2015

Hi Sean,

To pick up on the reasons that people give for joining Aaaaarg.org: even though Aaaaarg.org is not bound by a social contract, we do see the outlines – through common interests and motivations – of a fuzzy sense of a community. And the thing with fuzzy communities is that they don't necessarily need to be defined with the same clarity as enumerated communities, like nations, do. Sudipta Kaviraj, who used the term fuzzy communities, also speaks of a "narrative contract" – perhaps a useful way to think about how to make sense of the bibliophilic motivations and intentions, or what you describe as the "desire to have a relationship with texts and others that is not mediated by market relations."

This seems a perfectly reasonable motivation except that it is one that would be deemed impossible at the very least, and absurd at worst by those for whom the world of books and ideas can only be mediated by the market. And it's this idea of the absurd and the illogical that I would like to think a little bit about via the idea of the ludic, a term that I think might be useful to deploy while thinking of ways of rewriting the social contract: a ludic contract, if you will, entered into through routes allowed by ludic libraries.

If we trace the word ludic back to its French and Latin roots, we find it going back to the idea of playing (from Latin ludere *"to play" or* ludique *"spontaneously playful"), but today it has mutated into most popular usage (ludicrous) generally used in relation to an idea that is so impossible it seems absurd. And more often than not the term conveys an absurdity associated with a deviation from well-established norms including utility, seriousness, purpose, and property.*

But what if our participation in various forms of book sharing was less like an invitation to enter a social contract, and more like an invitation to play? But play what, you may ask, since the term play has childish and sometimes frivolous connotation to it? And we are talking here about serious business. Gadamer proposes that rather than the idea of fun and games, we can think with the analogy of a cycle, suggesting that it was important not to tighten the nuts on the axle too much, or else the wheel could not turn. "It has to have some play in it ... and not too much play, or the wheel will fall off. It was all about spielraum, *'play-room,' some room for play. It needs space."*

The ludic, or the invitation to the ludic in this account, is first and foremost a necessary relief – just as playing is – from constraining situations and circumstances. They could be physical, monetary, or out of sheer nonavailability (thus the desire for access could be thought of as a tactical maneuver to create openings). They could be philosophical constraints (epistemological, disciplinary), social constraints (divisions of class, work, and leisure time). At any rate all efforts at participating in shadow libraries seem propelled by an instinct to exceed the boundaries of the self however defined, and to make some room for play or to create a "ludic spaciousness," as it were.

The spatial metaphor is also related to the bounded/unbounded (another name for freedom I guess) and to the extent that the unbounded allows us a way into our impossible selves; they share a space with dreams, but rarely do we think of the violation of the right to access as fundamentally being a violation of our right to dream. Your compilation of the reasons that people wanted to join Aaaaarg may well be thought of as an archive of one-sentence-long dreams of the ludic library.

If for Bachelard the house protects the dreamer, the library for me is a ludic shelter, which brings me back to an interesting coincidence. I don't know what it is that prompted you to choose the name Aaaaarg.org; I don't know if you are aware it binds you irrevocably (to use the legal language of contracts) with one of the very few theorists of the ludic, the Dutch philosopher Johan Huizinga, who coined the word homo ludens *(as against the more functional, scientific homo sapiens or functional homo faber). In his 1938 text Huizinga observes that "the fun of playing, resists all analysis, all logical interpretation," and as a concept it cannot be reduced to any other mental category. He feels that no language really has an exact equivalent to the word fun but the closest he comes in his own language is the Dutch word* aardigkeit, *so the line between aaaarg and aaard may have well have been dreamt of before Aaaaarg.org even started.*

More soon,

Lawrence

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Sean Dockray is an artist and writer who initiated the autonomous pedagogical projects The Public School and AAAARG.ORG.

Lawrence Liang is a researcher and writer based at the Alternative Law Forum, Bangalore.

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All excerpts from *The Social Contract* are from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract: And, The First and Second Discourses,* ed. Susan Dunn and Gita May (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

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