



Sharing and neoliberal discourse: The economic function of sharing in the digital on-demand economy



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 March 2016

Received in revised form 26 September 2016

Accepted 6 October 2016

Available online 15 October 2016

Keywords:

Affect

Digital media

Discourse

On-demand economy

Neoliberalism

Sharing economy

ABSTRACT

In this paper I offer a critical analysis of 'sharing' as a discursive formation in the emerging on-demand economy or, as its more commonly known, 'sharing' economy. The set of firms and digital platforms that constitute the on-demand economy evade precise definition, though in popular commentary include Uber, Lyft, Airbnb, Taskrabbit, Couchsurfing, and Yelp, among others. I argue that sharing is a discursive formation that is produced through neoliberal economic practices and contributes to their constitution and performance, connoting the embeddedness and inter-determination of the economic with the social. I analyze interview material with software developers and others working for on-demand economy firms in San Francisco to underscore how the sharing discourse is produced, and to examine the possible relationship between the sharing discourse and working practices in the on-demand economy. I explore how sharing, though a fragile and contested discourse, has been used by some proponents of the on-demand economy in an attempt to justify and normalize flexible and precarious work through an ambiguous association between capitalist exchange and altruistic social values. This ambiguity is productive insofar as sharing has become associated variously with transactional platforms, digital peer review via surveillant and punitive ratings systems, and algorithmically mediated, precarious, and 'entrepreneurial' contract work, while retaining affective associations with community, inclusion, and participation.

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1. Introduction

The on-demand or 'sharing' economy is a term that describes digital platforms that connect consumers to a service or commodity through the use of a mobile application or website.¹ Various referred to as the gig economy (Gregg, 2015), platform economy (Schor, 2015), and collaborative commons (Rifkin, 2014), the on-demand economy defies a clearly agreed-upon definition, but usually refers to digital media firms that connect users through two-sided platform-based marketplaces. Early examples of on-demand platforms - including Couchsurfing, Craigslist, and Freecycle - provided not necessarily transactional services.² Yet the most visible

of these platforms now - Uber, Lyft, and Airbnb - promote by definition explicitly transactional user-interaction (Zervas et al., 2014) pointing to the inter-relationship and ambivalence between the social and economic character of these firms' platforms. These firms have been the topic of controversy for their intrusive impact upon existing transit, housing, and labor markets, while claiming their difference from these markets because of the digital context of their platforms and the rhetoric of sharing they deploy. Various other digital platforms have fallen under the sharing rubric of the on-demand banner, including short-term car rental services such as Zipcar; user-submitted ratings and review platforms such as Yelp; crowdfunding platforms such as Kickstarter; and impact, status, and reputation aggregators such as Traity.

That so many firms fall under the definition of the on-demand economy and therefore also the sharing rhetoric means that in order to make sense of their economic and social effects, close attention must be paid to their differences as well as their similarities. These differences and similarities point to the complexities and paradoxes endemic to the sharing discourse. Indeed, some critical commentators have suggested that 'sharing economy' is itself a contradiction (John and Sützl, 2016; Sützl, 2014). Yet, I argue here that this contradiction is *productive* and does not render redundant the use of sharing to describe economic practice. As Richardson (2015, page 121) suggests, the central paradox of sharing in the

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¹ I use the term 'on-demand economy' synonymously with the more popular term 'sharing economy.' I do this so as not to reproduce the notion that the on-demand economy can be necessarily associated with sharing as such. Instead, I suggest that 'on-demand' better captures the tenor of these emerging digital and platform-based economic systems, while 'sharing' romanticizes broader normative transformations in flexible labor practices to which the on-demand economy contributes.

² 'Transactional' here refers specifically to monetary transactions. I see this definition as a necessary heuristic to describe differences between (1) platforms in which pecuniary exchange between users is endemic and essential to the use of the platform, and (2) platforms in which it is not. My intention is not to outline an arbitrary separation of the social and the economic, but to find a language to narrate the real differences between on-demand platforms.

on-demand economy is that performances of sharing are “framed both as part of the capitalist economy and as an alternative.” Richardson asks us to view sharing as a complex articulation of economic activity that is *iteratively performed* rather than imposed on subjects from without, pointing to the ambivalences and ambiguities that characterize the use of terms like sharing to narrate economic practice. With writers like Zelizer (2005) I suggest the sharing discourse demonstrates the endemic intimacy of social and market relations, and though writers like Brown (2015) suggest that neoliberal forms of reason can be characterized as a transition from the former to the latter, I suggest instead that this presents too neat an image of capitalism in transition (McDowell and Dyson, 2011). The social and the economic have always existed in a relationship of intimacy and mutual constitution, and thus neoliberalism - if it is to remain a useful conceptual category - must be understood in terms of a new articulation of these emerging complex relationships to be examined, rather than as a totalizing and linear imposition of economic relations on an only passive social domain.

Yet the paradoxes and complex articulations of the performances of sharing vary by platform, suggesting different deployments of the sharing discourse, despite the apparent singularity of the ‘sharing economy’ moniker as mentioned above. For example, Couchsurfing is non-transactional, yet has been for-profit since 2011, and utilizes a revenue strategy based on advertising and user-interaction similar to social media sites (Cockayne, 2016; Fuchs, 2014). Transactional platforms like Airbnb and Uber both tout platforms that make available excess user ‘resources’ or ‘assets,’ yet Uber works on a model that employs users as contractors that allows them to sell their labor power to other smartphone users, while Airbnb users profit from listing properties, which does require work, but are not formally employed or remunerated by the platform. In each case therefore, questions quickly arise around precisely what is shared and with whom; how the sharing rhetoric is related (or not) to the revenue strategies of each on-demand firm; and whether sharing is the promise of a new community, a mask for the devaluation of labor under digital forms of capital, or some more ambiguous combination of both. Yet what is clear is that sharing, though still a contested and contradictory discourse, does connect a set of otherwise disparate economic practices and digital platforms, and the laboring subjectivities and affective dispositions that accompany them. What is required therefore, is close attention to how exponents of the on-demand economy encourage or dissuade, through the perpetuation of the sharing trope, particular and simultaneously laboring and social practices.

Here I examine the relationship between discourse and economic practice through the example of sharing rhetoric in the on-demand economy. I draw on interviews and participant observation with workers in San Francisco’s digital media sector to examine the ambivalences and paradoxes of the sharing discourse. I conceptualize discourse as not incidental to economic practice, but instead as co-produced alongside it, and essential to capitalism itself (Marazzi, 2007). I view neoliberal capitalism as not only an exploitative system but also one that is also affective, in which attachment, intimacy, and identification are endemic to the mode of production (Berlant, 2011; Konings, 2015). The sharing discourse has a real function in the on-demand economy, and by drawing attention to how on-demand platforms do or do not promise community, inclusion, and participation through the sharing rhetoric, I demonstrate that language and economic practice are interrelated, and in doing so, contribute to an emerging affective geography of neoliberalism (Anderson, 2015; Cairnes, 2013; Joseph, 2014). I question in particular whether the production of sharing as a discursive frame for the on-demand economy is a concerted strategy that contributes to the flexibilization and de-

under-valuation of labor in the context of both changing work practices and ethics (Christopherson, 2002; Peck, 1992, 2002; Weeks, 2011) and digital forms of labor that are often characterized by their encouragement of piece-work, labor fragmentation, and un- or under-payment (Irani, 2015; Lehdonvitra, 2016). I argue in this light that sharing as a discursive formation is not incidental to economic practice, but instead contributes to its very constitution and performance.

In the next section I present a conceptual framework for thinking through sharing in the on-demand economy, examining approaches in cultural economic geography, literatures on neoliberalism and its relationship to discourse, and research on sharing specifically in the context of digital and social media. In section three I briefly discuss the methodology employed to collect the data I present in the section that follows. In section four I present evidence from interviews and participant observation with entrepreneurs and software developers working for on-demand economy firms in San Francisco to think through first the contested and contradictory set of meanings that accompany the sharing discourse, second the unanimous association of sharing with purportedly egalitarian peer-review systems, and third, the images research subjects presented on how sharing as an affective promise that would change social relations. Finally, I reflect on the relationship between the narration of sharing as an economic practice, and the implications for laboring relations in the on-demand economy.

2. Economic discourse, neoliberalism, and digital sharing

“Discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized” (Foucault, 1981, page 52–53).

Researchers in the cultural economic tradition in economic geography have consistently argued that the economy is constitutively interwoven with other not-specifically economic phenomena (Ettlinger, 2003; Gibson-Graham, 1996; McDowell, 1997; Shoenberger, 1997). Drawing on economic sociology, geographers have emphasized the always-embedded character of economic processes, and that the function of markets is constructed in conjunction with social conditions (Lawson, 2010; Peck, 2005). Cultural economic geographers argue that the expectations of certain working conditions over others (i.e., that jobs are permanent or transitory, that one can or should attempt to climb the corporate ‘ladder,’ etc.) are themselves constructed and produced, and are not the natural product of a transcendent and singular market system. For example, contract work in creative industries tends to be framed positively yet condescendingly as available, flexible, and fun work (often in direct contradiction with the material conditions of that work) that could neatly fit into the lives of any individual to earn them a little extra pocket money (Christopherson, 2008; McDowell, 1997). This ‘flexibility’ is presumed to be desired by and desirable for the worker. The classification (legal or otherwise) of work as contracted, part-time, temporary, flexible, and so on - characteristics often associated with post-Fordist and neoliberal working conditions (Gill and Pratt, 2008) - has considerable ramifications for how work itself is understood. Thus, precisely how the capitalist-consumer views work and objectifies workers is mediated in and produced through discourse, among a variety other factors (Neo, 2010).

The production of discourse alongside economic practice, as noted in the quote by Foucault (see also 1972, 1978) above, is a site of negotiation, resistance, and struggle. Discourse is not constructed from above by a capitalist class and unilaterally imposed upon a passive workforce (Massey, 2004). Nor is it the linear and

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