Microentrepreneur or Precariat? Exploring the Sharing Economy through the Experiences of Workers for Airbnb, Taskrabbit, Uber and Kitchensurfing

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It's nearly impossible to read *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal* without coming across a mention of the sharing economy or a discussion of how Uber/Taskrabbit/Airbnb/Rover, etc., are disrupting life as we know it. Suddenly an app and a smartphone is all you need to hail a cab, hire a handyman, find a hotel room and book a pet sitter; and in each case, you're working with individuals as opposed to a corporation. The breathless consensus is that the sharing economy is bringing people together, allowing for a more efficient and environmentally friendly use of resources and even making it possible for us to trust each other (Tanz, 2014).

But rather than lead to wholesale bartering, the so-called sharing economy commodifies services previously done for free, making "inroads into our very understanding of the self" (Hochschild, 2012, p. 11). Although the concept of outsourcing or purchasing the intimate is most commonly associated with Hochschild (2012, 1983) and Zelizer (2007), in a sense, this is simply capitalism taken to its logical conclusion. In the "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," Marx decried how workers were alienated from the product of their labor, the act of producing, from the self and even from other workers. Marx argued that workers experienced false consciousness due to an inaccurate sense of themselves, relationships with each other, and a lack of understanding of how capitalism operates. In the sharing economy, with its claims of entrepreneurism for all, the workers are so divided that they try to make money from each other by "sharing." Meanwhile, writing about the Protestant ethic, Weber (1905/2002), noted that the "'spirit of capitalism...' strives systematically for profit for its own sake" (p. 19). Renting one's spare couch or unused car is nothing but rational capitalism. At the same time, members of the reserve labor force internalize the norms of job insecurity and convince themselves that they are successful entrepreneurs, not realizing that this new economy and its focus on labor market flexibility have simply meant "transferring risks and insecurity onto workers and their families" (Standing, 2011, p.1).

As the sharing economy commodifies services, it is growing exponentially. As of January 2015, Uber was valued at north of $40 billion, more than doubling its company value in just six months (Lien & Chang, 2014). Airbnb, worth a comparatively paltry $13 billion, is the second most valuable private company in Silicon Valley (Lorenzetti, 2014). In 2013, the global sharing economy market was valued at $26 billion and some predict it will grow to become a $110 billion revenue market in the coming years, making it larger than the U.S. chain restaurant industry (Cannon & Summers, 2014). Yet even with this explosive growth and investment, these companies are not creating full-time jobs with benefits, but short-term, gig employment where, in the words of one CEO, "you can hire 10,000 people for 10 to 15 minutes. When they're done, those 10,000 people just melt away" (Associated Press, 2013).

My paper examines the rise of the sharing economy through the eyes of the workers for four organizations thought to be the epitome of this new economy movement: Uber, Airbnb, Taskrabbit and Kitchensurfing. These four companies illustrate the variety that is found within the sharing companies: incredibly successful, well-funded companies worth billions (Uber and Airbnb), an established but somewhat struggling start-up (TaskRabbit) and a relatively new up-start (Kitchensurfing). All four firms proclaim to provide efficiency, cost-savings and instantly available on-call workers. Finally, all four of these services make it possible to hire a peer --

even as Airbnb ostensibly offers rooms, it markets itself as providing access to locals, complete with neighborhood expertise. Although marketed as sharing, I argue that these services simply make it easier to rent people, what Patricia Marx (2013) describes as "a cyber-marketplace... that allows regular Joes to behave like dictators and celebrities." As a result, my research seeks to provide an understanding of what life is like on the service side of what I call the "human rental" economy.

Utilizing a short demographic survey and in-person interviews with approximately 30 workers, this pilot study analyzes the motivations and characteristics of sharing economy participants. In doing so, I investigate four key, interrelated research questions:

1. Who are the gig workers, why do they choose to do this work and is it really an occupation of choice?
2. Do sharing economy workers love the freelance life, or are they quietly desperate people who are internalizing the new norms of job insecurity? To what extent is the sharing economy unemployment-lite?
3. Are the workers seeking community and friendship as the companies profess or is their gig employment simply one more piece of a multiple-job puzzle?
4. Does the gig economy provide workers with the freedom to become successful small business owners (micro-entrepreneurs) with a ready supply of clients, or is it creating a precariat of workers with the combined disadvantages of small business ownership (social security taxes, financial insecurity, personal liability) and of temp agency employment (work assignment instability, middlemen fees, no benefits)?

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