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Sharing economy as an anti-concept
by Marco Pedroni

Abstract
The "sharing economy", a term often used interchangeably with the "collaborative economy" and "collaborative consumption", is a recurrent topic both in public and academic debate on new Web-based services characterized by forms of peer-to-peer or business-to-peer sharing. This paper investigates it theoretically as an "anti-concept", that is, an unnecessary and rationally unusable label forged to replace a concept endowed with greater legitimacy. A critique of the sharing economy as a common-sense construct is carried out in order to suggest its rejection as an analytical and interpretative category and to question any unconditioned cultural legitimacy of the sharing economy under its promoters' economic interests. Four main critical issues are discussed: (a) the contradiction between the relational and the commercial dimension; (b) regulatory challenges related to the dimensions of labour, trust, risk and agency; (c) the injunction to share; and (d) the consequences of the sharing economy in terms of social change. The notion of *neoliberal entanglement economy* is proposed to replace that of sharing economy.

Contents

1. Introduction

The lack of a generally endorsed definition of "sharing economy" is a recurrent issue in the literature on the subject (Botsman, 2013; Schor, 2014). The notion is used interchangeably with (or alongside) "collaborative economy" and "collaborative consumption" and has the function of cataloguing both for-profit and non-profit schemes characterized by forms of peer-to-peer or business-to-peer sharing. The intersection of these dimensions and the rapid entrepreneurial growth of the sharing economy have generated numerous kinds of practices (Pais and Provasi, 2015), whose similarities cannot conceal the considerable differences among forms of the sharing economy.

This article investigates the sharing economy theoretically as an "anti-concept". According to Ayn Rand (1988; 1979), an anti-concept is an unnecessary and rationally unusable label forged to replace a concept endowed with greater legitimacy. The use of the anti-concept generates a sense of approximative comprehension and has a function more rhetorical-descriptive than scientific as a cognitive barrier to understanding a phenomenon and its consequences.

The paper conducts a critique of the sharing economy as a common-sense construct in order to suggest its rejection as an analytical and interpretative category and to question any unconditioned cultural legitimacy of the sharing economy under its promoters' economic interests. There are various possible starting points to challenge the validity of this lemma, for example by questioning its political, economic or social legitimacy [1]. The choice to focus on its cultural legitimacy is based on a social construction perspective (Berger and Luckmann, 1990): sharing economy is explored as a social construct whose meaning and definition comes as a result of a process of negotiation among different actors, leading to the institutionalisation of a "fabricated" concept and its anchorage in both the intellectual domain and the common sense.

Accordingly, the text deconstructs the anti-concept of sharing economy through a survey of the literature concerned with the contradictions of the phenomenon. Consideration will also be made of articles in the international press that treat the topic in a non-celebratory manner.

It will be shown that this anti-concept has the rhetorical function of concealing the neoliberal mechanisms connected with the labour exploitation practices activated by the new collaborative technology platforms.

The next section analyses an example of the celebration of the sharing economy by the companies that are its protagonists. Section 3 will review the definitions of sharing *tout court* and the sharing economy. Section 4 will consider critical approaches to the subject. Finally, Section 5 will discuss the sharing economy as an anti-concept by underlining how the notions of communicative capitalism, infoliberism, and entanglement may best illuminate the understanding of collaborative practices enhanced by peer-to-peer technologies.

2. "I think we're in the midst of a revolution"

It is almost impossible to read a scientific or press article on the sharing economy which does not mention Airbnb and TaskRabbit, the two cases most frequently cited as emblematic of the "revolution" [2] based on collaborative consumption. The same holds for the *Forbes* list of the sharing economy pioneers [3], which also includes services for car borrowing (RelayRides and Getaround) and ride sharing (Lyft and SideCar), bike renting (Liquid), as well as a peer-to-peer marketplace where services for others are exchanged (Zaarly). But users will not be disappointed on looking for a host who will take care of their dog (DogVacay), clothes to be bought and sold (PoshMark), home Wi-Fi networks to be shared (Fon), "stuff" to share with their neighbours and friends (NeighborGoods), even vulgar cash to be borrowed (LendingClub).

One may even be tempted to welcome enthusiastically this heterogeneous assortment of Web sites and apps under the umbrella term of sharing economy when reading the activist language employed by Peers.org, an organisation founded in 2013 as an advocacy group enhancing awareness about regulations and laws that influence the growth of the sharing economy.

When launching Peers.org, the head of Community and e-staff member at Airbnb, Douglas Atkin, referred to it as a "movement for sharing economy" consisting in "huge numbers of people, with a shared identity, mobilized to take action to do two things: to grow the peer sharing economy, and to fight for their collective interests against unfair and unreasonable obstacles" [4]. Depicted as a grassroots organisation, even if supported by 40 corporate partners including the billionaire giants of the sharing economy [5], Atkin extolled the movement as "not just people sharing their skills, or their apartment, or their car", but as an expression of "peer power" described with a counter-hegemonic language typical of a revolution breaking outdated schemes ("the old economy has largely failed us") and promising new opportunities of democratisation for common people ("the peer sharing economy is a new model, which distributes power, wealth, and control to everyone else"); a language imbued with Silicon Valley values ("economic independence, entrepreneurialism, community, individuality, happiness") and anti-establishment ideology where an (apparently) anti-capitalistic rhetoric is used to promote commercial goods and services (Lee, 2015). In short, Peers.org's thesis is that citizens have a strong interest in defending the sharing

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economy against the unfair limitations (*e.g.*, laws protecting workers and consumers) imposed by the institutions. Curiously enough, such a people's voice is disseminated by for-profit companies: "Vive la Révolution", said Atkin, on concluding his speech.

3. Genesis of a successful subject

From a scholarly perspective, the triumphant affirmation of the sharing economy as a label to legitimize new online platforms as drivers of innovation (within an economic context characterised by a persistent crisis) raises several issues, and solicits a critical approach aimed at understanding what "sharing" means, how it connects with profit activities, and what contribution it makes to social change beyond the obvious benefits for investors, companies and consumers.

Needless to say, the sharing economy is attracting growing scientific interest. If we count only the papers that contain this expression in their title, of the 1,880 articles registered by Google Scholar on 1 January 2019, 195 were published in 2015, 375 in 2016 and almost 600 in 2017, a result repeated in 2018.

Similar growth trends are recorded if we use keywords such as "collaborative economy" or "collaborative consumption", which contribute to defining the imprecise semantic universe of the sharing economy.

The concise review that follows, far from offering a complete analysis of any contribution to the topic, will consider, firstly, sharing as a concept when used independently; secondly, sharing economy from both its prophets' and critics' standpoints. Critical views will also be taken from online sources such as magazines and blogs because — sad to say — they often display more awareness about the inconsistency of this category than the scholarly debate. Key authors and stances will be identified. This section will prepare the ground for introducing side-concepts into the discussion, such as info-liberalism, communication capitalism, and entanglement.

3.1. Sharing and its simulacra

Russell Belk (2007; 2005; 1996; 1979) has significantly contributed to specifying what sharing means by defining it as "the act and process of distributing what is ours to others for their use and/or the act and process of receiving or taking something from others for our use" [6]. Belk is aware of the problems of defining a phenomenon that, on the one hand, belongs to the culture of contemporary consumption, and on the other is not recognised by some as a form of exchange (Fiske, 1991; Price, 1975); he therefore suggests that sharing should be conceptualized by identifying prototypes. Two in particular are useful for this purpose (Belk, 2010; 2007): mothering and family. If maternal caregiving well expresses the idea of natural and free sharing, the family is a context in which goods are owned and used jointly. In both cases, sharing is based on (and generates) solidarity and bonding.

Sharing differs from economic exchange and gift exchange because the prototypes of reference are different: the former is exemplified by a marketplace where a person exchanges money for bread, while the latter is embodied in the "pure gift", which is immaterial, price-less, and does not impose the obligation of a return gift [7]. Although this distinction tends to underestimate the blurred boundary between gift-giving and economic exchange — as emphasised for example by Bourdieu (1977) in his studies on Kabylie — here it is useful for emphasising that sharing, gift-giving and commodity exchange are three conceptually different practices which the rhetoric of the sharing economy tries to mix by suggesting the existence of gratuitousness, bonds of trust, and community spirit even when the transaction is merely commercial and the only collaborative aspect lies in the Web architecture of the sites and apps that puts the holders and users of a resource into contact (typically in cases of rent-based sharing economy).

The culture of sharing is a constitutive part of Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005), together with interactivity and social networking (Miller, 2008), and it raises new difficulties in understanding what sharing is: "share" is a typical button on social networking sites (SNSs), and implicitly a logic of use, inviting participants to share opinions, thoughts, photos, videos, preferences, tastes, experiences — in short their entire lifestyles (John, 2013).

How, Belk (2014) asks, can sharing be distinguished from pseudo-sharing? The latter is a "business relationship masquerading as communal sharing" [8] which involves long-term and short-term rentals where it is arguable that a genuine sense of mutual ownership is created, as in the SNSs where data sharing is a tool for the accumulation of big data by web oligopolists (Dean, 2010) which exploit user information for commercial purposes; but, according to Belk, nor can the online-facilitated barter economy be considered a full-fledged form of sharing because the absence of monetary transactions is not in itself sufficient to testify to the creation of bonding among members of an online community. In this regard, belonging to the sharing category are sites listing free goods like Craiglist, peer-to-peer sharing systems like Napster, crowdfunding platforms like Kickstarter, while in the field of hospitality sharing is visible in the person-to-person hospitality of CouchSurfing, but not in Airbnb's commercial hospitality [9].

If there is no true sense of community, we have pseudo-sharing, and the self-proclaimed sharing economy functions as an instrument to construct a gated community where a group of users share common facilities excluding non-residents (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2016; Blandy and Lister, 2005). In the frame of the rise of the social media enhancing a culture of sharing, such a label works as a *Zeitgeist* and the sharing economy *à la* Uber or Airbnb is a subject of calculation (users as value producers for the platform owner, John and Sützl, 2016) while real sharing is not.

3.2. The prophets of the sharing economy

The studies discussed thus far, however, might convey the idea of a scientific debate on sharing economics largely focused on critique of an improper conceptual category. Showing that this is not the case are the works of the two main "prophets" of the sharing economy, April Rinne and Rachel Botsman. With different emphases, these two authors put forward the idea of the sharing economy as a general category which comprises the various collaborative and sharing activities that have emerged in recent years, and which include, for example, coworking, cohousing, bartering, swapping and crowdsourcing.

Rinne, who on her Web site [10] calls herself a "guide and thought leader in the sharing economy", insists on the opportunities for markets, urban economics and the middle class that make the sharing economy a chance for social innovation, with a rhetoric not dissimilar from that which we have previously seen for Peers.org, based on the evocative concepts of revolution and people empowerment via technologies:

> The sharing economy represents one node of a much broader series of shifts underway dating back to the Industrial Revolution and, much later, to the invention of the Internet. Just over 15 years ago, collaborative consumption pioneers such as eBay and Craigslist launched, capitalizing on our newly found ability to use the Internet to match millions of haves with millions of wants, instantly and efficiently. People of all ages became empowered not just to be buyers, but also sellers of things through the explosion of peer-to-peer (P2P) commerce. In so doing, they were able to unlock the idling capacity — the untapped social, economic and environmental value of underutilized assets — that can now be redistributed through technology platforms. (World Economic Forum, 2013)

A few lines later, Rinne cites Rachel Botsman and her conception of the sharing economy as a form of collaborative consumption (Botsman and Rogers, 2011) characterized by a more efficient and sustainable use of economic resources, also able to create and strengthen social ties among people. The first and fundamental domain in which one speaks of sharing economy is therefore that of collaborative consumption, an expression which denotes practices of use (and not possession) of goods shared among several consumers.

In a paper also published also on collaborativeconsumption.com, Botsman (2013) shows awareness of the confusion among sharing economy, peer economy, collaborative consumption and collaborative economics, used as synonyms in the debate on this phenomenon, and she proposes the following definition of the sharing economy:

> An economic model based on sharing underutilized assets from spaces to skills to stuff for monetary or non-monetary benefits. It is currently largely talked about in relation to P2P marketplaces but equal opportunity lies in the B2C models. (Botsman, 2013)

More composite is her view of collaborative economics, "an economy built on distributed networks of connected individuals and communities versus centralized institutions, transforming how we can produce, consume, finance, and learn" based (a) on the production and distribution of goods through collaborative networks, (b) asset consumption through an efficient and shared distribution of underutilized resources, (c) decentralized and crowd-driven finance, and (d) open and democratized education.

Far from clarifying the boundaries among these categories, the text instead makes explicit the classificatory, descriptive, and acritically enthusiastic approach of the prophets of the sharing economy who, behind phrases such as "sharing is cool" rarely mention the problems associated with the model of neoliberal development of which the so-called sharing economy is an expression. There is, however, an ideological endeavour to present the phenomenon in light of its positive economic and social implications, rather than a merely technological view of platforms as "economic-technological coordination providers" [11] that enable the online interaction of communities engaged in the search for and supply of goods and services. The sharing economy thus functions as a positive version of "moral panic" because, by overturning the definition of the latter [12], it gives rise to a process of arousing social *enthusiasm* over the issue.

The ideological premises of the sharing economy, the outpost of the capitalist economy that denies some of its principles (such as ownership) with proclamations such as "disownership is the new normal" [13], reside in texts such as Jeremy Rifkin's *The age of access* (2000): access to networks is a precondition for access to sharing economy services, and it replaces ownership as the underlying logic of the new economy.

3.3. The ambivalence of the sharing economy

A more balanced approach less inclined to see sharing as the "future of business" (Gansky, 2010) is that of Juliet Schor (2014; see also Schor and Fitzmaurice, 2015), who considers the ambivalence of the sharing economy poised between, on the one hand, potential for economic and social development, and on the other, problems such as labour exploitation and working conditions, regulation and taxation and unequal access for subaltern social groups. Schor insists on the difference between for-profit and non-profit experiences, dismantling the rhetoric of disintermediation conveyed by the websites of the sharing economy, which consists instead of a re-intermediation operation by new technological gatekeepers based on resource optimisation systems.

The principles of consumer sharing, "originally conceived as the next stage in the peer production revolution" [14], are thus betrayed, and the need for platforms owned and controlled by users is fuelled. In this sense it is realistic, although it seems rash, to think of Uber as an obstacle to the sharing economy, since big companies prevent society from realizing the benefits of a real sharing economy.

Schor does not use evaluative categories, but it is not difficult to conclude on reading her reflections that there is a *good* sharing economy driven by the search for community ties and by economic, cultural and environmental motivations, and a *bad* sharing economy that exploits the labour of the proletarians of the new gig economy (made available by the global economic crisis that began in 2007–2008), eludes the tax system, and earns profits from the voluntary disclosure of data by users. This is distinction that does not always overlap with that between non-profit and for-profit activities, but to a large extent does so, and also corresponds to a classification by "size" small and authentic enterprises/communities (embodied in start-ups or non-market experiences) versus huge (and rental oriented) platforms.

However, also Schor renounces a definition of the sharing economy and concentrates on categorisation of its activities, which she distinguishes into four categories: recirculation of goods (*e.g.*, eBay), increased utilisation of durable assets (*e.g.*, Lyft), exchange of services (*e.g.*, TaskRabbit), and sharing of productive assets (*e.g.*, Skillshare) (Schor, 2014).

In this regard there are more drastic categorisations — such as that by Hamari, *et al.* (2016), who distinguish between platforms of collaborative consumption based on access to ownership (renting and lending), and those based on the transfer of ownership (swapping, donating and buying used goods) — and other more refined ones, such as that by Pais and Provasi (2015) based on a thorough analysis of the scientific literature. The authors distinguish (a) the rental economy exemplified by ZipCar, (b) the peer-to-peer economy of under-utilized goods embodied by Airbnb, (c) the on-demand economy of platforms that broker professional services like Uber, (d) time banking, in which there are no money transactions but forms of bartering or time exchange, (e) the free open software of which Linux is an example, (f) and finally, finance based on sharing criteria, which includes social lending and crowdfunding *à la* Kickstarter.

Although the classificatory and descriptive approaches contain criticisms of the vagueness of the notion of sharing economy, they do not fully address the main issue: the inconsistency of this label, and the consequent need to renounce its use, through a break with common sense and escape from the cultural consequences that the use of the label entails for academic reflection.

4. Discussion: Critical issues

Moving now to more critical terrain, I will try to show, with no claim to exhaustiveness, the main problematic issues posed by the label "sharing economy".

The first is the tension between relational/communitarian and commercial aspects, which are often contradictory in the sharing economy (Grassl, 2011). As summarized by Banning:

> By definition, sharing is not premised on a monetary exchange for goods or services. Yet the Internet enables and celebrates a culture of sharing and the sharing economy while it thoroughly exploits both to fuel its economy. [15]

This unresolved tension generates trenchant comments such as "the sharing economy isn't about sharing, [i]t's about making as many quick bucks as possible" (Le Tellier, 2014) and views of the phenomenon as a mask for a "failing economy" (Morozov, 2014) or "disaster capitalism" (Cagle, 2014) which exploits the existence of an industrial reserve army to use Marx's expression, made available by a vast economic crisis without truly creating confidence:

> It trades on cultural homogeneity and established social networks both online and in real life. Where it builds new connections, it often replicates old patterns of privileged access for some, and denial for others. (Cagle, 2014)

In a perverse relationship with the economic crisis, the sharing economy springs from the unexpected collision between technological development and the worst recession since 1929, promising to alleviate the economic difficulties of both those offering services and those purchasing them at low price. Not sufficiently emphasised in this mechanism, according to Morozov, is the existence of a "Matthew effect" (Merton, 1968) whereby those who possess something (to be made available, rentable, usable through the sharing economy) can monetize their "discomfort", while those lacking the means of production required by the sharing economy can only offer their labour on the often prohibitive conditions of the gig economy (Friedman, 2014), while the companies of the new economy emphasise the communitarian and trustworthy component of the phenomenon.

In an attempt to combine economic and social relationality, Erickson and Sørensen [16] depict the sharing economy as "the aggregation of individual offers (of goods, labour, creative expression) into a common pool" from which other participants to the community may draw: reciprocity and shared ownership jointly animate the commercial platforms currently existing. But nor does this definition provide a convincing solution because it delineates a mutuality (without communitarian implications, based on an anonymous and decentralized peer-to-peer mechanism) rather than a sharing founded on strong social ties. This mutuality recalls membership in a market rather than possession of goods, and it transforms sharing economy platforms into businesses where experiences are aggregated but not necessarily collective [17]. Accordingly, "crowdworking and crowdsourcing economy" (Walker, 2015), "platform capitalism" (Srnicek, 2016) or "renting economy" (Foremski, 2014) appear to be labels better suited to describing the dominant platforms, although they obviously do not do justice to the variety of experiences encapsulated by the expression "sharing economy" in the everyday sense.

A second set of problems presented — and not resolved — by the sharing economy involves the governance and regulatory challenges raised. The former are of course broader than the latter, and deal with the governance of knowledge sharing (Frischmann, *et al.*, 2014), as well as issues related to the legitimacy of participation and decision-making in various platforms, for example the earlier mentioned Peers.org. The analysis of these goes beyond the purposes of this text. Regulation, however, is of key importance here because the category of sharing economy we are criticising is in the main the output of a commercial narrative which attempts to present the erosion of rules and norms as an element of cultural and economic progress. In this context, "cooperation" alludes to practices of collective action in virtual environments with an impact on the public/off-line scenario, but the word cooperation takes on a meaning far from that assumed when referring to collaborative government (Linders, 2012) or online creation communities (Fuster Morell, 2009) such as Wikipedia.

Erickson and Sørensen [18] summarize the regulatory challenges of the sharing economy in four points, each of which indicates an image of cooperation as a form of subordination of the social agents to a collective, unfair mechanism:

(a) *Labour* and working conditions of the sharing economy (which becomes a *sharing exploitation economy*, if use of this expression is permissible) exposed to high entrepreneurial risks without adequate trade-union or security protection and engaged in low-paid work that is at the same time the cause and effect of an "extreme deskilling of large parts of the population" (Scholz, 2014).

(b) *Trust*, which is in fact an algorithmic construction based on rating systems and manipulable both by users and platforms, and as such does not work as an effective substitute for effective trust, even if intimacy in sharing practices is documented (Mora, 2018).

(c) *Legal liability*, to a greater extent displaced to users and participants, shifting the risks of entrepreneurial activity from companies to individuals, using the economic crisis as a chance to continue the work of social rights of citizenship: privatized risk, or even the removal of risk, gives rise to a narrative of self-entrepreneurship without the risks of entrepreneurship.

(d) *Agency*, which is limited, whether we consider individual users (whose possibility to choose with whom to make transactions and how is restricted by platform rules) or whether we consider national or local communities (unable to impose their own regulatory systems on transactional platforms that operate in new, often unregulated domains).

Each of these points is deserving of further consideration within the limits and scope of this paper. However, additional comments on *labour* appear particularly appropriate.

Digital labour and its exploitation (Fuchs, 2012; 2009; Arvidsson and Colleoni, 2012) by Internet-based platforms are the subject of a broad literature whose focus is even wider than the domain of sharing economy applications. Relevant to our purposes is underlining how sharing economy Web sites work as a perfect example of what Ekbia and Nardi (2017; 2014) define "heteromation". If technologies of automation such as manufacturing and banking aim to make humans irrelevant in the production process, crowdsourced apps and social media (often intertwined in the sharing economy platforms) are another challenge to the division of labour between humans and computers in allowing end users to act as indispensable mediators in the work of value creation. Such a digital and heteromated labour, available 24/7 (almost) everywhere, draws on a continuum of uncompensated tasks, that of users who receive non-monetary or affective rewards [19] while producing data and metadata, micropaid and poorly paid activities (Casilli, 2017) typical of the gig economy. This labour, often presented and experienced as play, allows enterprises to accumulate economic value by benefitting from the labour of others (Scholz, 2012). If the celebratory accounts *à la* Jenkins (2006) on participatory culture, which provide the ideological justification to the platform economy, are excited about the short-term affective rewards of heteromation, they show less attention to the long-term socio-economic consequences of the exploited labour and the erosion of protective resources, unemployment, social security, health services, pensions etc., for the large amount of the population who do not benefit from the sharing economy profits.

This leads us to a third problematic area, the tendency to treat the sharing economy as a relatively independent subset of the participatory Web. The sharing economy, in fact, cannot be analysed separately from the activities of other global tech giants like Amazon, engaged in tax optimisation and reducing the cost of labour, nor more generally from the economic and social processes legitimized by Web 2.0.

Morozov (2014), in this regard, stresses two key aspects. The first has to do with the capacity of technological innovations to affect capitalist production processes:

> The rapid ascent of the sharing economy can thus be explained by capitalism's newly found technological capability to convert every commodity that has been bought and removed from the market — temporarily becoming "dead capital" of sorts — into a rentable object that never leaves the market at all. (Morozov, 2014)

From this ensues a "sharing imperative" which

> dictates that everything that we own, from tangible assets to intangible thoughts, be categorised and assigned some kind of a unique identifier like the QR code. (Morozov, 2014)

There consequently arises an "injunction to share" not unlike the "injunction to be connected" (Boccia Artieri, *et al.*, 2017) conveyed by social media. This perspective highlights the existence of contributions (posts, likes, materials and reactions of any type published and disseminated through SNSs) that acquire value according to the number of contacts and a logic of the count. This approach links the "injunction to participate" (Dean, 2010) with reproduction of communication as a form of social pressure which, in the context of an outright communicative capitalism (Hardt and Negri, 2010; Dean, 2005), drives users to create profiles and content through SNSs, as well as participating in the lives of the online communities which animate the sharing economy.

This participatory tension translates into a form of injunction to be connected and share content, and it is compounded by an increase in the time spent on SNSs and content management activities in order to generate new possibilities for interaction (new contacts, new functions of the social network, greater use in terms of comments, likes, interactions, etc.) that fuel the hyper-production of content. The injunction to connect and share therefore appears to be a socio-technical device that, on the one hand, provides SNSs users (and, by extension, sharing economy platforms) with a chance for communicative inclusion and participation in the life of an online community, and on the other hand, makes them producers of data and labour monetized by the platform owners.

The fourth and final set of problems that I want to highlight concerns the kind of social innovation and change produced by the so-called sharing economy. On a techno-optimistic view of social reality, in which the knowledge society theorized by Castells (2010) and Bell (1976) is realized through "the establishment of a networking logic that displaces the hierarchical organisation of economic and social relations and permeates all aspects of current society" [20], the prophets of the sharing economy do not fully question the consequences that the phenomenon has on three levels: (a) the mode of innovation (understood as "a set of social mechanisms that determine how and where innovation is to be produced") [21], (b) the type of access to knowledge that sharing-based apps allow, and (c) the types of market that these innovations produce, since digitisation has significantly changed the production and consumption of goods and services, opened new markets and generated new power relations.

5. Breaking with common sense

By means of the foregoing brief review of critical positions, I have sought to show that definition of sharing economy is not a merely academic issue, because it involves a battle on accepting (or rejecting) a dominant model of reality in which new forms of capitalist exploitation are presented as opportunities within a new ethic of sharing.

More than a concept, sharing economy is a common-sense expression (also frequently used in the scientific debate) able to capture a set of experiences of production and consumption made possible by digital technologies (which enable the sharing), but whose variety is too great for "sharing economy" to function as an effective category. Moreover, its use by dominant platforms, which emphasise its counter-cultural flavour while pursuing commercial goals, transforms "sharing economy" into a lemma in the ideological dictionary of the new Web oligopolists.

As defined by novelist and philosopher Ayn Rand (1988), an "anti-concept" is an unnecessary and rationally unusable label forged to replace and obliterate a concept with greater legitimacy and usability. The use of the anti-concept generates a sense of approximate comprehension and has a more rhetorical-descriptive than scientific function as a cognitive barrier to understanding a phenomenon and its consequences. By contrast, for Rand "a concept is a mental integration of two or more units that are isolated according to a specific characteristic (s) and united by a specific definition" [22].

The sharing economy is a phenomenon with at least three main units. First, digital 2.0 technology, which works as an exogenous infrastructure that technically enables content sharing and online interaction. Second, sharing as a social practice based on communal bonding and social ties. Third, the new entrepreneurial and business models, exemplified by Uber and Airbnb, based on the digital technology that activates the sharing injunction.

But this account lacks the ingredient that can best illuminate the overall framework within which the so-called sharing economy takes shape: the neoliberal logic that governs the functioning of the sharing platforms. I do not intend here to venture into analysis of the concept of neoliberalism [23]; rather, I shall briefly discuss two aspects.

First, the existence of a neoliberal *episteme* (Foucault, 2008) which subordinates political power to economy — as evidenced by the difficulties of local and national administrations in regulating the platforms of the sharing economy — and which fuels the production of a neoliberal Self (Gershon, 2011), *i.e.*, management of identity on digital platforms that conceives and uses personal and expressive resources as a set of goods to be continually nurtured and developed, and contact networks as a means to obtain visibility, popularity and self-promotion. In a context largely self-regulated by platform owners, users sell themselves as products, directing their every online and off-line action to building a reputation measured by ratings.

Within the framework of reflection on the sharing economy — and this brings us to the second aspect — neoliberal logic can be well described by the notions of communicative capitalism (Dean, 2002), info-liberalism, and entanglement (Banning, 2015).

The notion of communicative capitalism originates in the thought of certain contemporary philosophers, such as Slavoj Žižek, Giorgio Agamben and the post-Marxists Tony Negri and Michael Hardt. These last, in particular, have emphasised the link between communication and capitalism:

> Communication is the form of capitalist production in which capital has succeeded in submitting society entirely and globally to its regime, suppressing all alternative paths. [24]

According to these authors, communication is today the face of capitalism: that is, the form in which the power relations typical of the capitalist production system are expressed. If industrial capitalism was based on the exploitation of labour, Dean (2005) points out, communication capitalism is based on the exploitation of communication and our desire to participate. This desire is "captured" to produce entertainment and, at the same time, surveillance.

Reflecting on SNSs, Dean identifies four forms of labour exploitation within communicative capitalism, but they fit perfectly with the sharing economy: "Web oligopolists" exploit users' data and metadata, as well as their attention (which translates into the time that users subtract from paid activities) and their social relations, since sharing work primarily involves the sharing of social networks as a premise for visibility on the Web. Let us analyse these points in more detail.

(a) Exploitation of *data*. Sharing platforms are owners of information that users produce without receiving any payment in exchange.

(b) Exploitation of *metadata*. By participating in Web-mediated communication, users produce so-called metadata, *i.e.*, data describing other data (search preferences, information about habits and interests), on the basis of which it is possible to deliver targeted advertisements or customize the functions of the platforms.

(c) Exploitation of *complex social networks*. Through digital platforms, including sharing ones, we make our relational networks informatically visible. For advertisers, these complex networks become excellent eWom (electronic word of mouth) tools. In this way, our networks are exploited for commercial purposes, with our complicity, without the production of paid work.

(d) Exploitation of *attention*. It is not entirely true that SNSs are free. Subscribing to a sharing platform does not have costs, but we pay in terms of time and attention: publishing and reading materials, requests, paying attention to the messages that our smartphones send us in the form of sound alerts are small but frequent actions that, added up, indicate the amount of attention that we remove from other activities throughout the day. Each user activity generates other responses, with a progressive acceleration.

Banning (2015) proposes using the term "info-liberalism" for a semantic universe similar to the one described by Dean, characterized by the contradiction between social engagement and exploitation of digital labour: info-liberalism is "an umbrella term for critiques of the close alignment between neoliberal capitalism and digital communication" [25]. Banning, who unlike Dean refers specifically to the sharing economy and not to SNSs in general, insists on the comparison between off-line and online sharing to demonstrate the problematic nature of the notion of sharing economy:

> While off-line sharing involves the allocation and division of goods, online sharing is more likely to involve the duplication and multiplication of information than its division. Online sharing includes the practices of data collection and long-term, proprietary storage of user data. [26]

In other words, online sharing feeds infoliberal capitalism and the collection of big data in a way that is obviously unknown to off-line sharing practices. SNSs fuel the production of public or semi-public information which generates forms of profit privatized by platform owners. This comes about in an apparently non-oppressive way, because the structure of SNSs solicits the voluntary production of information, and the algorithms which regulate the functioning of the Web sites (and generate quantifiable forms of trust like that expressed by the ratings) remain invisible.

In this framework, *entanglement* (Banning, 2015), as a form of involvement from which it is difficult to escape, expresses better than *sharing* the imperatives contained in the technical and social structure of the platforms:

> Being online means being entangled in digital sharing interactions, but increasingly, so does being "off-line". This is first premise of digital entanglement: anyone who wants to gain an education, earn a living, drive a car, take a bus or taxi, raise children, pay bills, use a credit card, get on a plane, keep in touch with distant friends, family, colleagues or coworkers, and make plans — the list continues — cannot escape the Web, opt out of digital sharing, especially in the form of data collection and mining, and avoid the algorithmic turn, ideology or culture. It simply is not a viable option. [...] Entanglement and the concept of the apparatus together illuminate how new media technologies are creating structures premised on digital sharing that [...] embed neoliberal philosophies, norms and standards in practices that are unlikely to held up to scrutiny or questioned, and yet have significant material consequences. [27]

Entanglement, therefore, unlike sharing, is a term that does not renounce describing the dimension of interconnections (where there is space also for the creation of social ties) but goes beyond a solely positive and optimistic view of sharing as an opportunity. It instead highlights that involvement is unavoidable, because to be involved is not just a choice, but becomes a *dispositif* which rules the digital media apparatus.

To conclude, sharing economy is a keyword that obscures the existence of a further conceptual substrate, that of an info-liberal economy, and the consequent need to evaluate the benefits and promises of the sharing economy in light of the forms of exploitation and conditioning that it entails (and does not only affect Uber's piece-workers, but generally all users as data providers).

6. Conclusion

Disputing the "sharing economy" label is to challenge an ideological construct that can be used as a means of social oppression, since anti-concepts work for reproduction of the dominant order by legitimizing it with the "sanction of the victim" [28], that is, by imposing forms of "symbolic violence", to use Pierre Bourdieu's (2001) expression, in which those subject to the oppression (primarily the workers exploited by the gig economy) may even enthusiastically endorse the processes that generate such oppression. To treat sharing economy as an anti-concept is therefore to deny its heuristic utility, dismantle common sense, and reopen a debate on the processes underlying this subject, so as to solicit criticism of the ideological elements contained in it.

This paper has proposed a critique of sharing economy as an anti-concept by contrasting celebratory approaches and critical approaches to the matter. Among the critical issues that may be involved in further discussion are: (a) the not fully resolved contradiction between a relational dimension and a commercial dimension that characterizes many sharing economy schemes; (b) regulatory challenges that comprise the dimensions of trust, risk, agency and, above all, labour; (c) the link between sharing economy platforms and the more general rise of Web 2.0, which makes it possible to thematise user participation as an injunction to share; and (d) the consequences of the phenomenon in terms of social change, with reference to modes of innovation, forms of access to knowledge and the structure of the resulting markets.

Then identified were three units that form the anti-concept "sharing economy" (digital technology, communal bonding and sharing-based business architecture), as well as a fourth one (the neoliberal capitalism described by Dean and Banning as communicative capitalism and info-liberalism, where sharing practices are identifiable as entanglement practices) as an element removed in the analysis of the topic. In light of these reflections, it may be useful to replace "sharing economy" with the guiding concept of *neoliberal entanglement economy*.

In view of the argument that the sharing economy is a mask for an intensification of neoliberal economic practices, and that the presence of authentic sharing practices acts as an ideological cover to the dominance of pure market logic of platform economy, this article is intended to contribute to reconceptualisation of the sharing economy, which requires careful empirical verification, in particular through analysis of the experiences of the protagonists of digital sharing platforms and their self-representations of the keyword "sharing economy" (Pedroni, 2018). Future research may usefully focus on the critical issues raised by this article, in the effort (advocated by many sharing economy analysts) to restore to the phenomenon its innovative dimension tied to the creation of social and trust relationships — a dimension still alive in the rhetoric of the protagonists of the sharing economy but being rapidly undermined by the prevalence of commercial logic in sharing platforms.

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Notes

1. See Arcidiacono, Gandini and Pais (2018) for a systematic review of the academic debate.

2. A "revolution" as declared by Brian Chesky, Airbnb's chief executive. Quoted by Morozov (2013).

3. See "Airbnb, Snapgoods and 12 more pioneers of the 'Share Economy'," at https://goo.gl/DbdpGB, accessed 17 May 2017..

4. See Douglas Atkin (Airbnb), LeWeb Conference, London 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cp2Hlp2TP-M, accessed 18 May 2017.

5. See Slee, 2013, for a detailed list.

6. Belk, 2007, p. 126.

7. Belk, 2010, p. 718.

8. Belk, 2014, p. 11.

9. Belk, 2014, pp. 14–15.

10. See http://www.aprilrinne.com, accessed 18 May 2017.

11. Hamari, *et al.*, 2016, p. 2,052.

12. See Scott, 2014, p. 492.

13. See "Shareable, survey finds that disownership is the new normal", at http://www.shareable.net/blog/survey-finds-that-disownership-is-the-new-normal, accessed 18 May 2017..

14. Schor, 2015, p. 15.

15. Banning, 2015, p. 490.

16. Erickson and Sørensen, 2016, p. 3.

17. Erickson and Sørensen, 2016, p. 5.

18. Erickson and Sørensen, 2016, pp. 6–7.

19. See, for example, Ekbia and Nardi, 2012.

20. Haunss, 2011, p. 137.

21. Haunss, 2011, p. 133.

22. Rand, 1979, p. 7.

23. See Venugopal, 2015, for a review.

24. Hardt and Negri, 2010, p. 347.

25. Banning, 2015, p. 490.

26. Banning, 2015, pp. 492–493.

27. Banning, 2015, p. 499.

28. Sciabarra, 1989, p. 38.

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