Domesticating the market: moral exchange and the sharing economy

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Abstract

The sharing economy has generated enormous excitement with its promise of transforming work and consumption through technology and novel socio-economic relations. However, critics see the phenomenon as a further development of neoliberalism. Platforms such as Airbnb and TaskRabbit, monetize a previously uncommodified realm of life via renting of bedrooms, possessions, space and labor time. In this paper, we analyze the meanings and attitudes of sharing economy participants. On the basis of 100 interviews in two for-profit and three not-for-profit sites, we find that most see the sharing economy as an opportunity to build a radically different market, from the bottom up. They are critical of the neoliberal market order, and envision an economy of personalized exchanges that are morally attuned, based on ideals of community, and that help them achieve creative and financial autonomy in their working lives. To our respondents, the sharing economy is an opportunity to domesticate the market.

Keywords: sharing economy, morality, neoliberalism, markets, domestic production, economic sociology

JEL classification: D12, Z13, O35

1. Introduction

Since its emergence in the 1980s, neoliberalism has been subjected to a withering critique. Contemporary scholars credit its economistic logic with reshaping work, family life, provisioning and learning in ways that shift risk onto individuals and subject everyday life to a relentless competitive dynamic. Hochschild's concept of the 'outsourced self,' (2012), Neff's 'venture labor,' (2012) and Brown's 'undoing the demos,' (2015) all identify encroachments of market logic into culture. These trends help explain the resurgent interest in Karl Polanyi and the dis-embedding tendencies of capitalism (see Fraser 2013; Gemici, 2008; Block and Somers, 2014), the prominence of the 'hostile worlds' perspective identified (and

critiqued) by Zelizer (2010), and the popularity of precarity discourse (Kalleberg, 2009; Standing, 2011).

In this context, the 'sharing economy' is of particular interest. Founded during a major crisis in the neoliberal regime (the Great Recession of 2008-09), 'sharing' transforms everyday life practices identified by scholars: work, consumption, and leisure. However, this sector began with a decidedly non-neoliberal discourse of sharing and collaboration, an ideology of mutuality, and multiple common good claims. It promised economic opportunity, environmental benefits, social connection and cultural learning (xxxx; xxxx xxxx; Botsman and Rogers, 2011). The sharing economy positioned itself against the greed, callousness and inattention to human well-being identified with neoliberal capitalism.

Perhaps paradoxically, this discourse of social good was often accompanied by extreme versions of markets in action. TaskRabbit, an errands platform, organized its exchanges via auctions, the ultimate 'neoclassical' market. Ride-sharing platforms employ surge pricing during periods of peak demand. 'Putting idle capacity to use,' (Botsman and Rogers, 2011) the mantra of the movement, entailed a hyper-commodification of everyday life practices, turning gift and reciprocal practices (sharing homes, offering rides) into monetizable 'assets'. Platforms termed participants 'micro-entrepreneurs' (Ravenelle, 2016) rather than users or peers, the preferred term in the collaborative production community (Benkler, 2006). Not surprisingly, the feel-good rhetoric of the early days came under scrutiny, and critics came to see the sector as yet another neoliberal excrescence (Martin, 2016). They assailed a 'platform capitalism' (Lobo, 2014) that is ripping off workers (Slee, 2015) and creating even more precarity, in the name of 'sharing.' Digital labor is 'uberworked and underpaid,' one evocative title argued (Scholz, 2016).

We investigate the attitudes of sharing economy participants about these issues. Do they see the sector as neoliberal and precarious? Do they feel the market is encroaching into their daily lives? Or do they see the sharing economy as aligned with its original discourse of sharing, collaboration, and the common good?

To address these questions, we have interviewed participants from five sharing economy cases. We find that the vast majority explicitly value the social connection, flexibility,

efficient resource-allocation, autonomy, and novel means for entrepreneurship and money-making that the services offer. These dimensions may be seen via the lens of neoliberalism, which recognizes that we are all self-governing individuals who exercise economic and political choices (Bondi and Laurie, 2005). But practices that appear to be neoliberal are sometimes anything but (Bondi and Laurie, 2005; Ferguson, 2010), and our participants are not simply neoliberal subjects, responding to the rewards and punishments of the market. Rather, they are critical of the agents of neoliberalism--corporations and normative markets--and see themselves as actors in an innovative attempt to transform markets from the bottom up, to make them morally accountable and forces for social good. They experience their peer-to-peer exchanges as having higher levels of personal accountability and social interaction. They engage in face-to-face connection and distinguish exchanges from commodified transactions with impersonal corporations. They also hold ideals of community, seeing trading partners as potentially long-lasting relations. Participants also look to these markets because they aspire to goals of freedom and autonomy. They seek meaning in their work, as well as creative outlets, and want to have control of their schedules.

In contrast to neoliberal subjectivity, our respondents have constructed an economic imaginary which is pre-capitalist and in many ways pre-modern. They have a vision of a 'moral market' that is rooted in the return of small-scale economic production to a domestic sphere. For many, the market is literally enacted within the home, for example, among our hosts on the peer-to-peer lodging site Airbnb as well as those using TaskRabbit for service provisioning. For others, communal sites such as makerspaces, food swaps and open learning spaces reproduce domesticity through the construction of small-scale community and intimate relations. Throughout the sharing economy, there is a desire to build markets which foster and value artisanal, craft-like production, whether it is via an offering of prepared food at a swap, a homey Airbnb bedroom, or literal craft production in a makerspace (Johnston and Baumann, 2014).

Taken together, these findings suggest a different phenomenon than the corrupting market perspective found in the Polanyian literature, the 'hostile worlds' characterizations, and critiques of neoliberalism. The majority of our participants criticize the dominant market, but are committed to using capitalist market exchange to address the failings they see. However, they do not envision a monetization of the domestic sphere. By charging for favors, they see

the sharing economy as a bottom-up project that personalizes and domesticates a market gone awry. Their solution is not neoliberal, nor are they seeking a return to the Keynesian state. Rather, they are creating a personalized, domesticated market that runs on both capitalism and morality.

2. A neoliberal innovation?

In the social sciences, the ongoing restructuring of a wide range of economic, political, and cognitive aspects of contemporary social life is frequently termed neoliberalism (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Harvey, 2005; Mudge, 2008). Neoliberals see unrestricted markets as efficient, rational, and impartial means of allocating resources, and have pursued policies of deregulation (labor markets, financial markets), privatization (infrastructure, healthcare), and selective reductions in public spending. At the same time, the state has increased its involvement in certain areas, such as in economic development (Ong, 2006) and the penal and welfare systems (Wacquant 2010). Neoliberalism has been described as a project of 'socio-spatial transformation' that commodifies social life and promotes the unfettered rule of capital (Brenner and Theodore, 2002). Neoliberalism is credited with creating a 'precariat', a work-dependent class with unstable wages and scant protections (Kalleberg, 2009; Standing, 2011).

The sharing economy has been criticized as yet another neoliberal innovation, undermining legal frameworks that promote safety, competition, and stable communities (Interian, 2016). Opponents claim platforms like Airbnb represent corporate co-optation, while Uber and TaskRabbit are contributing to the casualisation of labour (Martin, 2016). These criticisms are consistent with earlier literature. Scholars have documented the advance of neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005), and often describe it as an unstoppable force. Guthman (2008) argues consumers, activists, and farmers who are creating alternatives to the industrial food system 'uncritically' adopted neoliberal ideas of localism, consumer choice, and value capture. While the literature has largely focused on the role of markets and the state, scholars of neoliberalism have also been increasingly attentive to micro-level processes. Understanding neoliberal governance requires an understanding of neoliberal subjects.

The literature on neoliberal subjectivity draws on Michel Foucault's analysis of power and the concept of governmentality (see Barnett *et al.*, 2008). Foucault argued that neoliberals see people as behaviourally manipulable because they always respond rationally to changes in the environment (Foucault, 2008; Lemke, 2001). The neoliberal subject, then, is induced by the rewards and punishments of the market. Reflecting the characteristics of neoliberal markets and governments, the cognition of neoliberal subjects is refashioned to take on risk and personal responsibility (Neff, 2012), trust in market solutions (Guthman, 2008), and citizenship through acts of consumption (Johnston, 2008; Johnston *et al.*, 2009; Rose, 1999).

Compelling criticisms have been made of this understanding of neoliberal governmentality and subjectivity. Barnett *et al.*, (2008) argue that combining neo-Marxist political economy and Foucauldian governmentality results in a circular, functionalist approach to subjectivity in which techniques of neoliberal governance seamlessly yield neoliberal subjects. There is no recognition of the interactional nature of actors' rationalities and the ways contestation over interests leads to different forms of cooperation. Bondi and Laurie (2005) suggest that such contestation mobilises the subject's claim to be able to think for her- or himself. The result is a seeming inescapability, such that nearly anything other than Keynesian state-centrism is categorized as a reflection of neoliberal subjectivities (Cf. Mudge, 2008).

Ferguson (2010) argues that practices that appear neoliberal can actually be challenges to neoliberalism. Analyzing anti-poverty initiatives in South Africa, he shows that successful political strategies appear neoliberal but have quite different, egalitarian outcomes. Challenging the assumed link between the neoliberal political-economic order and techniques of neoliberal governance, he argues that there are many ways to pose problems and institutional and intellectual mechanisms. Others have made similar distinctions via appeals to individual reflexivity, e.g. by 'shopping for change' (Johnston and Szabo, 2010), and the relational underpinnings of economic activities (xxxx).

In this paper, we take a different, but complementary approach to that of the critics. Our informants emphasize the flexibility, efficiency and entrepreneurship of the sharing economy, concepts which clearly fit within the neoliberal paradigm. But they also describe their actions as moral projects aimed to generate non-neoliberal outcomes such as social connection, autonomy and a return to the domestic form of production. To understand this finding we

draw on literature in economic sociology on the moral underpinnings and moralizing potential of markets, which we argue can untangle potentially neoliberal dispositions and actions from concretely neoliberal projects.

METHODS

2.1 Markets and morality

In contemporary economic sociology, the predominant view is that markets are both moralized and moralizing. Markets are culture, not just because they are the products of human practice and sense-making, but because they are explicitly moral projects, saturated with normativity (Fourcade and Healy, 2007). How people sell, spend, and are paid in markets confirm and contest existing categories of worth (Zelizer, 2010), as people generally have a sense of some economic choices being right but others wrong for people like themselves (Wherry, 2012).

Much of the moral markets literature examines elites, such as professionals and experts, or institutional actors such as corporations, who make large, public markets adopt particular moral stances to further their interests (Abolafia, 1996; Garcia-Parapet, 2008; Healy, 2006; Mackenzie and Milo, 2003; Zelizer, 2010). Like the governmentality literature, these studies show how markets promote certain patterns of moral behavior, i.e., how markets moralize their subjects. Rather than merely reflecting the functioning of economic principles, market success often depends upon forms of governance that can encourage their 'acceptance by others who … [find] it to their advantage to obey the rules of the game' (Garcia-Parpet, 2008, p. 46). MacKenzie and Millo (2003) find that the Chicago Board Options Exchange was created with explicit appeals to economists' ideal of rational, moral behavior. However, this project had limits as derivatives traders held moral concerns about being perceived to be a 'shit-seller'. Under different market conditions the moral project of constructing actors who behave like *homo economici* has proven more successful. Abolafia (1996) finds that in the 1980s, investment banks created an environment with 'minimal interdependence, extraordinary incentives for self-interest and limited constraints on behavior' (p. 37).

Renewed interest in the moral nature of markets has also shown the ways markets themselves are shaped by the everyday morality of their participants. In the case of organ transfer, despite new medical transplant technologies, only non-market exchange in the form of a donation system matched moral understandings about life and the body (Healy, 2006). Similarly, new markets are often resisted and the moral meanings of products challenged, subverted or ignored. Even the market for the telephone was morally contested: presented by AT&T in 1926 as an 'essentially democratic' invention meeting everyone's needs, concerned users feared the telephone would 'break up home life and the old practice of visiting friends' (Fischer, 1994, pp. 1-2).

Scholars have also studied moral behavior in consumer markets, under the rubric of 'ethical consumption' (xxxx). Ethical consumers use their market choices instrumentally in the hopes of changing companies' or other consumers' behaviors. In these contexts, morality is acknowledged and even promoted.

Our informants take a similar stance, albeit via a project of creating new markets, rather than purchasing or boycotting products. At the same time, their moral stance includes beliefs about the efficacy of market solutions, personal responsibility, and risk that are widely associated with neoliberal governmentality. This begs the question, are they the neoliberal subjects of the sharing economy? The answer we offer in this paper is no. We find that a significant portion of our participants engage neoliberal strategies of the self but to pursue an alternative moral vision: one with greater social connection and control, not less. Faced with a dominant market they see as immoral, corrupt, and alienating, they are trying to enact new types of market practices — literally bringing the site of economic activity into the home, in an effort to domesticate a market gone awry.

3. Methods and Data

Our data stem from an ongoing research project that began in 2011, as the sharing economy was emerging. In this paper, we use data from five cases. These include two for-profit platforms: Airbnb, which matches travelers with hosts who rent out spare rooms or entire apartments and houses and TaskRabbit, where workers sell their labor in a range of services (e.g., furniture assembly, data entry), and two non-profits: a food swap where members

prepare foods and exchange them with others, and a makerspace (hereafter Collaborators), where members share a workspace and tools and undertake production ranging from high-tech robots to handcrafted furniture. The final case involves open learning where participants use online resources and teach one another skills and knowledge outside of formal educational institutions (e.g., Coursera, SkillShare).

For this paper, we have interviewed and surveyed approximately 100 users. We also conducted hundreds of hours of participant observation in the makerspace, open learning and food swap cases. Interviews ranged from 45-90 minutes and were semi-structured, and covered participants' motivations, narratives of participation, attitudes toward costs and benefits, and the nature of their experiences. Most of our interviewees live in an urban area in the northeastern United States, though a small subset are from elsewhere. They are mainly 18-34, as this age group represents the early adopters and innovators of the sharing economy, as well as its most active participants (Rossa, 2015). However, in sites with a more mixed age profile, we interview a wider age range. The large majority of our participants are racially white, in part because of the demographic makeup of our site, and in part because whites dominate in this sector. Among the informants we discuss in this paper, just over 15% are non-white, which accords with our full sample. Finally, our participants have high levels of education. Nearly all have college degrees, and among those who don't, a good number are still students. Many have graduate degrees as well. Furthermore, they come from families with high levels of parental education. Again, this is characteristic of both our site and this sector.

4. Findings

A large majority of our sample espouse the idealistic goals of the sharing economy (see xxxx) and put these ideals into practice in their exchanges and actions in these sites. In this section we detail three major themes that structure our informants' moral interpretations of their actions: social connection, autonomy, and the desire to return to a domestic mode of production.

4.1 Social connection

Sharing economy participants choose a personalized form of economic exchange partly because they seek genuine human connections in their economic exchanges. They denounce the 'fake nice' delivered in check-out aisles and faceless corporate communications, and desire authentic, personalized exchanges. They want connection, collaboration and community. There is a difference between this desire for human-scale exchange and the established finding in economic sociology that people prefer personalized trade when there are uncertainties about quality and performance (DiMaggio and Louch, 1998). In the sharing economy, while these uncertainties abound because market exchange is largely between strangers, they are assumed to be mitigated via ratings and reputations systems (Diekmann *et al.*, 2014). For our informants, however, personal interaction is not a means to reduce risk, but an end in itself.

4.1.1 Personalized exchange

Money is an important motivator on the for-profit platforms, but participants also stress that they enjoy interacting with the people they serve. Fred, a 21-year-old college-educated white man has signed up with TaskRabbit. He generally describes his tasks as 'hit or miss.' One miss was a 'really annoying' experience scheduling appointments for a client over the internet that reproduced the faceless and impersonal corporate work that many in our sample critique. A 'hit' was a 'really fulfilling' task where he got to 'help people and have them be so gratifying.' In one of his 'favorite' tasks, he helped a couple his age move. 'And it turned out that they shared very similar interests with me, and were, like, pretty cool to hang out with.'

Peter, who is 27 and white, is a seasoned Airbnb host and active on various sharing economy platforms. He says that social connections is a big part of the hosting experience: 'The financial part is great … but aside from [that] . . . you get to meet a lot of really cool people … the kind of people that use the service, they're more open-minded — like, they like to travel, they like to talk, they like social interaction.' Hope, a 29-year-old white woman, signed up for TaskRabbit because her work at a public school did not offer much 'compassion-wise or just love-wise.' She distinguishes customer interactions through TaskRabbit from those she got from subbing and doing administrative work at school. Like Fred, she describes herself as someone who 'really want[s] to help people', and when that happens via short-term exchanges with TaskRabbit customers, she sometimes experiences 'bursts of, like, kindness and

authenticity.' She adds, 'I can be that nice girl, and be myself, and not be, like, Trader Joe's fake nice, where they were like: 'you need to be more talkative with the customers blah blah blah."

On the non-profit platforms, social connection was often a prime motive for participation. Maya, a young woman who recently joined a food swap we attended, said that while she can buy almost anything she gets at the swaps in a store with less hassle, it is more personally meaningful to meet the people making her food, and to know that they are making the items because they really want to share them with others. Similarly, Joey, a white man in his mid-30s who did everything at Collaborators from teaching free circuit hacking to running a freelance coding business, described the environment there in terms of its helpful community: 'You're pretty likely to find, I don't know, a partner in art or crime or whatever, or there's a lot of skill trade that happens here. I teach people electronics in exchange for, like, welding tips, things like that.' Joey acknowledges frustrations, particularly when communal tools were broken or misplaced, but nonetheless distinguished the instrumental, impersonal orientation of for-profit tool-shares like Tech Shop and the ethos of makerspaces like Collaborators:

> We've got members here who have been part of the community for years. Tech Shop is also geared toward hobbyists and people starting small businesses to do prototyping production…We have that here, but we have right next to them artists who a year ago were a full-time lawyer, or working in public health and now they do art for a living.

Our participants also find meaning in the ways that exchanges are small dips into the lives of others, which makes the transactions more intimate. Rachel, a white woman in her early 30s who occasionally participated in the food swap, explains that something as simple as homemade pear butter carries subtle layers of meaning that are absent in the mass-produced alternative. 'It was incredibly tasty pear butter, and I would like it just for that, but it's also really cool that they made pear butter to give to everybody at their wedding and these were the leftovers.'

Orlando, a 30-year-old African-American man with a master's degree, said most people he encounters in his TaskRabbit work are 'nice', and likes that he gets to 'experience people in their intimate setting, in their home.' He sees such platforms as a merger of the professional and personal economy that 'feels' richer on both sides of the exchange. 'You want to be

professional, but you're not a professional; like you just need an extra hand with stuff…Even though there are companies in the background … it doesn't feel like that to the average consumer.' He uses Airbnb and other platforms as well, and one commonality he sees among them sums up what many other participants also expressed. In the sharing economy, 'the kind of cold', 'very highly professional way', is removed from the business. 'Because now you're, like, 'I'm dealing with my neighbor; I know this is just a regular person."

4.1.2 Community and durable connections

The relations between Airbnb hosts and their guests are sometimes quite intimate. Some share meals and personal stories, and even exchange gifts. A study of hosts in Helsinki found that monetized hospitality facilitated casual sociability (Ikkala and Lampinen, 2015). Our participants sometimes go further, creating durable connections. Adam, a 25-year-old white graduate student who hosts and travels on Airbnb, recalls a 20-year-old visitor from Switzerland:

> We, like, went out to dinner with him, and showed him around the neighborhood and stuff … And he ended up then staying for, like, another extra three nights … it was, you know, like, a cool way to meet a friend … If we were ever to go to wherever he's from in Switzerland I'd definitely hit him up.

Several hosts are like Adam, reporting that they can or might reach out to their guests, if they go on their own trip. Few actually stay in touch, but as Peter's experience shows, it does happen:

> We got to know [the guest] over the six weeks she was here, and we're actually still really good friends with her. We've gone out to her place for dinner a few times … She told us a story of why she came here, and the background of why she chose to go Airbnb … And it was just really cool to get to meet someone on a personal level and realize how much of a difference you made in their lives. Because they were just going to come here and go to a hotel room and realizing after she stayed here, that [she] really enjoyed, like, coming home. And we were kind of, like, family to her.

Several participants in the other cases express a desire to establish a more communal connection in their lives. At Collaborators people preferred not to work on their projects in the isolation of their apartments, garages, or basements, but sought out other the presence of

other makers. Jen, a white woman in her late 20s and an original founder of Collaborators, described this desire as a fundamental human need:

> Interacting and making tangible things actually has social and cognitive impacts on human beings that are really important. The absence of those from our lives is having [adverse] affects on our society … One part of the human experience is enabling that, whether somebody wants to interact with it just as a hobby … or as their main mode of expression and work. And then doing it in a collaborative environment.

Jen took this humanizing mission seriously, devoting what seemed to be all of her waking life to managing the space. For her, community and collaboration were not side benefits of Collaborators, but a defining premise of the organization. Anne, a 28-year-old white woman working as a freelance writer, finds a similar sense of community in the food swap she co-founded, proudly remarking that she, a self-proclaimed 'city girl', got to 'know a farmer': 'I would say that what's important about food swaps is that it builds community around food … urban people who might otherwise, you know, sort of, not know each other … We're bringing them together around food.'

Even on a site as transactional as TaskRabbit, durable relationships form. Jacqui is a white 28-year-old who used to work as a teacher and now does administrative tasks for clients on the platform. She says she 'loves being able to help people' especially because ninety percent of them are female business owners. 'It's amazing to have all these, like, strong, amazing people around you. And I love that aspect of it, and that there's the connections that I've made through it.' Jacqui has been able to move 'off-platform' because she developed long-term relationships with two clients who helped her get full-time work.

Open learners also applaud the connections made via new learning platforms. These participants are often critical of the standard model of centralized authority, e.g. teachers and their curricula, noting that without an expert-in-chief, learning becomes a collective and collaborative effort. Joan, a 30-year-old white woman, explains: 'People can come on and you guys can learn together instead of it being, 'I'm the instructor.' It's like, 'No, no, no. I just created the challenge. This is something I want to learn. And if you guys want to participate too that's awesome." Jenni, a Chinese woman in her mid-20s, is enthusiastic about the design-thinking group that emerged out of an open learning site.

People got to meet up offline and talk about how we can apply [design] to social problems in society. So I think it's because of these tools enables us to connect, either online and offline, I mean, especially offline. So we got to talk face-to-face to connect and to enhance each other's interests, and then to, yes, and just grow our interests and desire to know more about this industry.

The yearning for community is also evident when platforms fail to deliver it. One food-swapper was disheartened by the fact that our interview with her was the first time she met someone from the swap outside of the monthly gathering. Bev, a 30-year-old white Tasker, expressed a similar sentiment: 'When I first started they used to have … events periodically for all the TaskRabbits to get together … it was nice to have someone local who I knew.'

4.2 Autonomy, flexibility, and creativity

The sharing economy offers people novel means of exercising control over their labor, finances and creativity. Our informants want to avoid being dependent on nine-to-five employment, in which their time is controlled by superiors, and the tasks they are assigned impede creative work. Others want to regain some sense of control in domains that have been outsourced to professionals and thus estranged from their lives, such as food production and education.

4.2.1 Autonomy in work and production

Participants were quick to denounce jobs that were rote, inflexible and unfulfilling. Even with the weak economic recovery, informants did not speak nostalgically of bureaucratic or corporate life, the traditional bases of a stable, middle-class existence. Rather, the corporate critique that has saturated pop culture since at least the 1980s was vividly enacted in our conversations (Saval, 2015). This sentiment was found throughout our sample, but was perhaps most prevalent at Collaborators. Jen, who was at the helm of the makerspace when we talked, described her transition from a Manhattan upbringing and Ivy League education:

I took a year off between high school and college because it felt like goals were very clear … Society has just built up these fairly artificial and arbitrary hoops to jump through in order to be able to accomplish anything else. In this environment, because

the work that I do has immediate impact to people whom I know, it is much easier to stay motivated to get work done.

In Jen's view, the goals she inherited as a consequence of her professional upbringing, while an acknowledged privilege, were also a source of alienation. She didn't want to simply assume a role, she wanted to create her own. This meant helping to build a space that would provide her and others with the freedom to pursue their interests outside of the conventional world of work.

Once you kind of get a taste of, like, being entrepreneurial and being able to, like, live life on your own terms, and kind of run something the way that you want it to be run, and kind of solve a problem, and you get to set all the ground rules, it's definitely really addicting.

Others contrast their experience with traditional jobs. Jess, a white woman in her late 20s, was one of only three full-time employees at Collaborators. After working for an e-commerce company and as an administrator for an arts college, Jess landed her dream job.

I totally fit in here because it's, like, 'Oh, I can be a human. I don't have to be an employee.' I'm a member, technically, and feel like I could not leave this place now. There's just, like, too many changes that this job has made [to me]. I don't know what 'work life balance' means anymore because I make my own hours, I work in a staff culture that values completing the work over desk time … I don't think I'll be able to ever go back to nine-to-five employment because of how flexible this is.

Jess noted that others in the space share this motivation, remarking, 'there's also this sense of wanting to get out of a traditional work environment, like, where they were unhappy, or stuck, or not fulfilled. This place could maybe give them the opportunity or the skills to have more options.' Saul, a white man in his 20s who has done 'a lot' of tasks through the TaskRabbit platform, is also critical of the common workaday routine:

I never really looked forward to having a nine-to-five office gig or anything like that. So, having so many different sites out there that I can connect me with short-term gigs, or just really unique, interesting experiences has been a real positive thing for me.

Derek, a white man in his 20s, also desires control, which he attributes to his entrepreneurial mother. She was fired when her company took a hit during the 2008 financial crisis, and lacking a majority stake in the company, there was little she could do to prevent it. Derek reasoned that if he could learn all aspects of running a company, then he would be valuable

enough to keep a larger stake in his own venture. Open learning allowed him to not only direct his own learning, but also to achieve a more autonomous work life through entrepreneurship.

Rachel, the food swap participant, feels alienated from the work and production that characterizes so much of our lives, including food, and was drawn to the food swap as an alternative to the global food system and its 'insanity.' Her swapping is motivated by a desire for delicious food, made by people rather than corporations. In the way dull, corporate labor alienates working people from the services they provide and the products they build, processed and plastic-packed strawberries alienate people from the pleasures of fresh, locally-sourced and savory food.

Other participants express the desire for autonomy in financial terms. Following the 2008-2009 crisis, Bev's work hours had been 'cut back' so she was 'looking for a way to supplement my income.' The flexibility of tasking saved her, she said, from the 'very standard kind of nine-to-five work' she wanted to avoid. Eric, a 31-year-old who manages a friend's Airbnb listing for a share of the revenue, says the arrangement gives him a sense of control of his life. 'I haven't worked in several years, and I kind of like that… I'm hoping that I can design a lifestyle where I work a modest amount and receive, okay, obviously a modest amount … And collaborative consumption is a way actually to do that.'

Most open learners we talked to were also participating with the aim of achieving more fulfilling work. Alexandra, a white woman in her late 20s, works for an organization that designs open learning content, and is an open learner herself. In her view, these study platforms allow people to control what they are learning and become more valuable at work. 'I want people to make things that are deeply meaningful. And culturally important,' she said. 'If you do projects that you love, you will acquire skills that people will pay for.' Mike, a white man in his mid-20s, started exploring alternative careers when he realized that his corporate job offered little room for advancement. A mentor offered an entry-level role at a startup company, and encouraged him to use open learning resources to figure out what he could do next. Unlike at his corporate job, he was encouraged to present his ideas to his supervisors and was given opportunities to use the skills he had acquired from his self-study efforts: 'I sent around my notes from this UX thing [user experience], and the CEO is, like,

'Cool, you know, if that's interesting to you, like, we'll try to get you on some discussions and stuff.'' Through open learning, Mike attained enough confidence and skills to take advantage of the opportunities presented in a new and more autonomous job. Learning became the means to work towards a more self-determined work situation.

> I'm doing it 'cause I want to make myself potentially more valuable...Not only… so I can make more money but, like, so that I can have a job that I like, and that I have flexibility, and that maybe I can work for myself and just do, like, be a contractor.

Food swapper Anne also sees learning as a vehicle for autonomy. She found trading food to be educational and empowering. Like open learners who acquire skills that give them choices, learning to make food from produce she has grown helps her avoid the processed supermarket stuff she denounces.

> It's been educational for me, because I didn't really grow up in a family that cared about that stuff...We would microwave things or defrost things. It was a lot of prepared foods. So it's kind of interesting for me to discover this older, like, world of food.

4.2.2 Autonomy as a means for creativity

Many of our respondents see autonomy in work as enabling creative and artistic labor, which they found difficult to realize in workplaces and classrooms that value docility over creativity and exploration. Foodies are drawn to the swaps to explore, experiment and emulate the taste, texture and smell of meals that are crafted from scratch. Hobbyist makers often find themselves bustling between projects they have crammed into their scarce off-hours, while makers-in-residence leisurely craft, socialize and experiment. Most Taskers and some Airbnb hosts are primarily motivated by money, but they also engage their creativity as they decorate homes and curate travel guides or pick up artistic tasks like songwriting or music video production. Open learners express joy as they describe producing their own software or websites and more grandly, companies. Our respondents offer enthusiastic accounts of the attractions of the sharing economy, frequently focusing on autonomy and creativity. Many find these aspects the most rewarding feature of their participation.

Evan, a lively, fast-talking white man in his early 30s, has no shortage of ideas about the meaning of Collaborators as a space, and making as a pursuit. While Evan works as a shop

steward at an engineering school full-time, he spends many free hours at Collaborators building custom bike frames, which is his true passion. Throughout our interview, he returned to the idea of human freedom and creativity. For him, these amount to the same thing: agency. He invoked the popular writer Matt Crawford and his book, *Shop Class as Soulcraft*:

> He talks about [craft] as agency...Another guy and I made these S-hooks. We created that thing. And that's just really cool. I mean, it's a Maslow's higher order need, right? Like, shelter or making things — yes, I'm going to choose shelter. But I would be less of a happy camper, and I would be less raring to go at work if I didn't have the outlet of coming here once a week, twice a week.

The hooks Evan recalls making are not technologically sophisticated, they are just S-shaped pieces of metal that can hang tools and other items. However, he found this simple act of creating extremely pleasurable and felt that without his time at Collaborators, he would be less fulfilled. For Guthrie, a white man in his late 20s with a pastoral sensibility, the community at Collaborators transformed his relationship to making and creativity:

> In my basement shop I could've … really mastered hand tool work; I could've learned to use non-power tools in a way that would've achieved really high quality results for not a ton of money. But I didn't have, you know, people around me that were kind of interested in that.

For Evan and Guthrie, autonomy does not mean isolation, but freedom to create in the context of community.

Lidia, a white woman from France who came to the U.S. for graduate studies and began participating in the food swap, was longing to do something creative and tangible with her hands: 'As a student...after a while I just really wanted to be able to do something where I could see the results of all of my efforts — something with a material outcome.' At the same time, she marveled at the ingredients Americans tolerated in their processed food. 'Why would anyone ever even think to put animal bones [in the form of gelatin] in yogurt? It's *yogurt*.' Lidia began making exotic jams and jellies — plums blended with vermouth, black apricots transformed into conserves, and even cantaloupes turned into a spreadable topping for yogurt or toast. As her storage space began filling up she started food swapping, to keep trying new recipes and imagining new things. Often, she finds herself most concerned about unloading enough jars so that she can keep canning.

Even participants on TaskRabbit, which offers arguably the most mundane work among our cases, recounted experiences that allowed them to fulfill their creative urges. Tyler, a white 22-year-old who signed up after college because he needed money, has found that the platform sometimes allows him to further his music career, which is his real passion. One client in San Francisco hired him to create a party mix and has since become a recurring customer:

> It's kind of cool to be able to do something that's musical … Right now [I'm] recording a kids' song — it's a remake of a Barenaked Ladies song called 'There's a Word for That.' And this guy wants a 'There's a Math Word for That.' So I'm just singing the song with math lyrics in it, making a little music video for it.

4.3 Reimaging domestic modes of production

Many of our participants express uncertainty and concern about the morality of the dominant economy. They think contemporary market relations corrode social intimacy and undermine meaningful relationships. Labor conditions stifle creativity and undermine personal security and autonomy. Consumer experiences are considered passive and alienated, deskilled and environmentally destructive. Sharers see their exchanges as potential solutions to these concerns. These new markets hold out promise, they believe, because they facilitate production, consumption, and work among family, neighbors, and friends, as well as forming new relations with strangers. The markets they envision resonate with a nostalgic yearning for more familial — and domestic — relations of exchange.

The domestic sphere has long been a powerful symbol in American life, imagined as a bastion of individual security against the broader problems of society (Tocqueville, 2003). With the emergence of market society in the 19th Century, the 'domestic sphere provided an always identifiable place of refuge for the individual, signifying the private domain of individuality apart from the marketplace,' (Brown, 1990, p.3). Constructions of the domestic sphere as a source of safety, fairness, and empowerment elide the often-bleak realities of the home, while the 'homey' relationships of small communities may be stifling, and often oppressive, particularly for marginalized groups (see Allen, 2004). Nevertheless, belief in the sincerity and simplicity of small-scale, handmade, craft products — bound to ideas of traditional forms of domestic and community based artisanal production — have become a

driving force in contemporary consumption (Allen, 2004; Johnston and Baumann, 2014) and, we find, the sharing economy.

The perceived domesticity of the sharing economy serves as a powerful social imaginary against the broader economy. Megan, a white 32-year-old Airbnb host and development director for an environmental NGO, offers a withering critique of the contemporary economy.

> I think that our politicians and corporations have sold us this bill of goods that if you just buy more stuff you'll be happy … In fact, it probably makes you less happy. And it wastes resources and we're destroying our environment. … this whole way of living...replaces, I think, the things that would make people care more about and invest more in the communities they have.

In other accounts, subjects that could be framed in political terms are instead couched in moral ones. Amrita, a South-Asian woman in her mid-20s, juggles work in multiple sharing economy platforms while waiting for her green card. She thinks that the sharing economy could address inefficient and uneven resource distribution in society: 'If you're keeping it with you, it's not being used. The value is more when it's being used for others … society has limited resources.'

However, while many of our participants find fault with the moral order of corporate capitalism or individualistic consumerism, they do not see 'markets' *per se* as the cause of these problems. Instead, their critiques are in many ways a mirror image of the common view that the market and the social operate in separate, hostile spheres (Zelizer, 2010). Rather than understanding 'the market' as colonizing and corrosive, they are constructing different kinds of markets or engaging in practices that shift production and consumption from corporations to the personal sphere, where they believe there is greater intimacy, social connection, and self-direction. In response to the perceived failings of dominant markets, our respondents often propose alternatives that glance backwards with nostalgia to an era of self-production, when economic work was done under the aegis of the home or guild.

This nostalgic yearning for a time when economic life was rooted in local relationships of mutual concern is evident in Orlando's understanding of the sharing economy as a sign of production and consumption coming full circle:

> We used to do everything for ourselves and we were very hospitable towards each other. And then we started going to corporations, and corporations started moving in, the advertising started coming in, and everyone went there. And now . . . people just really started being anti-corporation. People are going back to helping each other again because it's easier … people are getting used to doing things online. So now it's, like, going back to locally, here we are — we don't need these big companies.

At the core of Orlando's vision of a moral market order is belief in the power and moral worth of people doing things for themselves and for each other, without relying on the 'big companies' at the root of the economy's moral failings. Many of our participants shared this perspective.

Guthrie describes his attraction to Collaborators as a 'yearning to make things.' He wants to repair family furniture that was damaged during a flood, build a cider press for apples he had gathered, and build furniture for friends and family:

> I would love to produce furniture that I could sell. I saw at a farmers market a guy selling a couple nice pieces of furniture — I think I could do that … And it would be a sense of pride … I have a list of furniture from my girlfriend, but I'm going to exhaust that at some point in the next couple of years...and then it's just a matter of, like, making stuff and just giving stuff. That's what my grandfather used to do.

Ideally, Guthrie would like to make it unnecessary for others to buy furniture on the market. Rather than taking place in the formal, for-profit sector, his production would be rooted in the domestic sphere and be given as gifts.

Dissatisfaction with dominant consumer offerings led many of our participants to, quite literally, take economic exchange into the domestic sphere. Megan describes Airbnb as 'real,' providing travelers with unique, personal experiences with 'way more character' than a hotel room.

> Think of Boston — it's, like, you could be the typical traveler and stay in the ritzy hotel downtown and never leave the Freedom Trail line, or you could, like, stay in [Jamaica Plain] and, like, go to the [local bar] … It's more authentic.

Shauna, a 34-year-old African-American lawyer and cofounder of the food swap, expresses a similar DIY-sentiment and resistance to corporate influence when describing food swapping as a way for people to 'take back their pantries' in an age where so many are convinced that

'real food and cooking' are a 'hard thing that people don't actually do.' Like Airbnb, the food swap literally envisioned the home as the valorized site of economic activity. However, Shauna also believes that the swap enabled local, household-level production by others. The swap was founded partly because she and her co-organizers joined local community supported agriculture farms and struggled to use all the produce that came with it. By creating a new market to trade home-produced jams and pickles, the founders hoped single urbanites like themselves could avoid corporate food. Liz, the woodworker, also invokes her home.

> I use the space's equipment to make art and to express myself, but I also use this stuff to build functional things I need at my house, and to fix things that are broken … Everyone should know how to use a drill, everyone should know, like, at least one method of sawing through a board.

These individuals are not indiscriminately nostalgic for the economics of the past and recognize that do-it-yourself practices come with tradeoffs. Nevertheless, they believe that returning production and consumption to the domestic sphere adds meaning to the economics of everyday life, and that this added value trumps rational cost-benefit analyses. Evan is enthusiastic about the DIY option:

> You change your own oil and it makes no [economic] sense. When you go to the auto parts store, they're selling the kit — the oil filter and the five quarts of oil that you need — for like, $27. And you can pay somebody to change your oil for you for, like, $25 … But it's awesome changing your own oil. It doesn't take a lot of time, especially if you have the right tools, and it's really good for your car to, like, feel the oil. Like, you're not talking to somebody who talked to somebody who talked to the mechanic who changed your own oil. You're, like, 'No, no, no; the oil, it feels right.'

Likewise, while many of our participants express romantic views of the past, they seek to create a domestic economy that reflects the values of the present. Shauna, the food swap co-founder, acknowledges how different home canning is for her, compared to how she imagine others have experienced food preservation in the household economy.

> If I were, for instance, to … only eat the strawberry jam I put up myself, then I would end up eating the same thing over and over and over again. … It's just important to actually, like, have a diverse pantry, you know, not have to necessarily do the work of making, like, fifteen different things.

Food swapping allows modern young urbanites to 'put up' the harvest of their choosing, without having to give up preferences for variety and gustatory excitement or turning managing their pantries into a full-time job.

The finding that sharing economy participants value economic practices associated with the domestic sphere, in and of itself, may not be so surprising. Matcher (2013) has written about the rise of a new domesticity, and scholars have shown that the revalorization of domestic activities both reproduces and challenges problematic gender roles (Johnston and Baumann, 2014; Kairns and Johnston, 2015; Luckman, 2015) as well as the precarity of a neoliberal economy (Dawkins, 2011; Luckman, 2015). However, the nature of markets as both moral objects and moralizing forces suggests that normative justifications for such domestic modes of production warrant further consideration. Many of our participants view their efforts at domesticating economic practices as a moral challenge to the neoliberal economy. They are trying to resist the influence of corporations, which they understand as stripping away meaning from economic exchange, value from work, and social connection from life.

Our respondents view their work not as a neoliberal retreat into the autonomy of the home as micro-entrepreneurs, but as a means of regaining autonomy required for building morally valorized relationships. Tyler says working for the TaskRabbit platform helped him meet and connect with people.

> It's really important to meet people and, like, have a network of people that you know that support you. You know, if you do repeated work for people, you kind of become like family to them. … I know if I ever really came into a bad situation … I do have people that would be willing to help. The neighbor-to-neighbor thing that TaskRabbit really likes to market … I think it's enormously awesome.

Meanwhile, Barbara, a white woman in her late 50s and member of Collaborators highlights how her work enriches and deepens existing social relationships. By domesticating the scale of her economic relationships, she can make things that have been increasingly commodified in the dominant market. Production comes full circle, as in Orlando's claim that 'in the beginning, we used to do everything for ourselves,' and Shauna's attempts to counter mass-produced food by encouraging people to make 'real' food again. For Barbara, producing decorations for a bar mitzvah returned her to the domestic sphere.

I did take some tool training, and just for a personal project where somebody in my family was having an elaborate party and wanted centerpieces, and I had to design something. … I learned how to use the ban-saw, and I also got wood from the scrap bin … I made these really cute things. They were pretty amazing. … When the kids came to the party and saw these big things on every table it was, like, 'wow. Where'd they get that?'

Barbara also attributes moral virtue to her process of learning and making. Like many of our participants, she sees her engagement with DIY practices as an opportunity for making social connections and generating value beyond the bottom line. In contrast to the morality of neoliberal subjectivities, these individuals view their practices not as individualized solutions to economic problems, but as a way to build moral markets that foster meaning and social connection, emanating from the lifeworld of the home.

5. Conclusion

Isabelle, a PhD student in biochemistry in her late 20s, grew up in Los Angeles with one Mexican and one Japanese parent. We met her through a woodworking class at Collaborators. She is hardly emblematic of an old-fashioned domesticity, but she values her parents' frugality and practical, everyday skills. When asked what other forms of 'making' she engaged in, her answer is not a far-out project involving lasers or advanced robotics, but simply 'darning socks': 'It's when you stitch over the holes. All my 12 wool socks had holes in the heels. I wear out the heels so quickly. I don't know what it is. I looked it up online, and I was like, 'that looks pretty easy, so I'm going to do it.' Isabelle is embarrassed that she had not learned how to do it earlier, because, as she put it, 'I hate throwing things away. It kills me every time.' The domesticity Isabelle articulates is not one of an obedience to a traditional role, but rather an environmental concern that is personal.

For our informants, the entry of economic production and market relationships into hitherto sheltered aspects of their lives is not experienced as an invasive, colonizing or destructive process. They believe that 'sharing' markets allow them to construct a new domesticated marketspace in which they can create social connections that substitute for the anonymized and standardized interactions associated with conventional markets. Participants believe these

connections can outlast the exchanges that originally created them, and ultimately foster friendships, build communities, and enable collaboration.

Our informants also participate in the sharing economy to regain their autonomy. Some want to avoid financial dependence on work in conventional markets, whose operating logics they dislike. These new markets are spaces in which they can exercise greater control over their schedules, invest in their own activities, and have intellectually, socially and professionally stimulating experiences.

It is possible to interpret the concerns and actions of our participants as a Polanyian re-embedding movement, but these people are not, as Polanyi would predict, seeking a return to the state regulation of the economy. Instead, they envision and actively participate in the construction of morally attuned markets. At the center of this social and emancipatory space is the 'domestic' realm, imagined as the locus of pre-capitalist forms of production and exchange. For some, this is enacted by literally producing their own furniture or food, or renting out their home. For others, 'domestic' applies more broadly to the communities and relationships that sometimes result from engagement with the sharing economy.

Scholars of neoliberalism will be dubious about the prospects for success in this market-building project, and *critics* of neoliberalism might see the efforts and words of our participants as contemporary examples of how consent is manufactured (Burawoy, 1979) among members of the precariat. Owners of the sharing economy's for-profit enterprises will probably be pleased to hear that people identify so deeply with the services they sell. The tools that our participants embrace can be seen as neoliberal innovations, e.g. the venture-capital-funded platforms that have few employees but thousands of people working for them. But as noted above, initiatives that appear neoliberal are sometimes challenges to neoliberalism (Ferguson, 2009). Our participants have earnest concerns about what market capitalism does to social life, and they are committed to creating an alternative. To them, the sharing economy is an opportunity to domesticate the market, and foster morally attuned exchanges.

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