

Article

Domesticating the market: moral exchange and the sharing economy

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Abstract

The ‘sharing economy’ is a contested realm, with critics arguing it represents a further development of neoliberalism, as platforms such as Airbnb and TaskRabbit, monetize previously uncommodified realms of life via renting of bedrooms, possessions, space and labor time. To date, this debate has largely ignored participants’ views. Using data from 120 in-depth interviews with providers in two for-profit and three not-for-profit sites, we find that most see the sharing economy differently, as an opportunity to build a radically different market, from the bottom up. Like the detractors, they are critical of dominant market arrangements, however, they believe the sharing sector can construct personalized exchanges that are morally attuned, based on ideals of community, and that help them achieve creative and financial autonomy in their working lives. These aspirations represent an attempt to tame, or domesticate the neoliberal market.

Key words: sharing economy, morality, neoliberalism, markets, domestic production, economic sociology

JEL classification: D12, Z13, O35

1. Introduction

The ‘sharing economy’ has generated enormous excitement with its promise of transforming work and consumption through technology and novel socio-economic relations. Proponents make claims of efficiency [‘Putting idle capacity to use’ (Botsman and Rogers, 2011)], social connection and environmental benefits. However, other scholars argue that the ‘sharing

economy' concept involves no true sharing (Belk 2014; Ravenelle, 2017), and the framing of sharing initiatives increasingly centers on fairly conventional discourses of economic opportunity (Martin 2016). Some go farther, arguing that the sector represents yet another neoliberal excrement ushering in 'platform capitalism' (Lobo, 2014) and creating even more precarity, in the name of 'sharing'. Earners are termed 'micro-entrepreneurs' (Ravenelle, 2016). Digital labor is 'uberworked and underpaid' (Scholz, 2016).

The increasing monetization of private homes and rides, once the province of reciprocal practices, feeds the view that market logics encroach on culture, a perspective represented by Hochschild's concept of the 'outsourced self' (2012), Neff's 'venture labor' (2012) and Brown's 'undoing the demos' (2015). Concern about such market incursions helps explain the resurgent interest in Polanyi (see Gemici, 2008; Fraser 2013; 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).

Regardless of whether one approves of or dislikes platforms such as Airbnb or TaskRabbit, analytically there is little question that the 'sharing economy' term encompasses a wide array of sites with varying degrees of differentiation from dominant markets (Schor and Fitzmaurice, 2015). On some sites, income is primarily from capital; on others, from labor. Furthermore, there are important distinctions between for-profit business-to-consumer and peer-to-peer platforms and their more decentralized, often non-monetized, peer-to-peer counterparts (Belk 2014; Schor and Fitzmaurice, 2015; Codagnone and Martens, 2016).

Yet, while sites within the sharing economy organize economic exchanges in different ways, we find that participants see them as 'of a piece'. This is particularly true with respect to the moral justifications participants ascribe to their sharing practices. We have interviewed 120 goods and service providers across five sites, spanning both the profit/nonprofit and the monetized/non-monetized divides. Like the critics, these individuals oppose the corrosive forces of the economy. However, the vast majority of them do not see the sharing economy, and their own activities within it, as part of the problem. On the contrary, our interviewees see the sharing economy as a domain that offers social connection, flexibility, autonomy and novel means for entrepreneurship and money-making. They attempt to transform markets from the bottom up.

Why are the moral frameworks these participants employ so similar, when the sharing initiatives they are active in are so different? Most of our respondents have constructed an economic imaginary which is pre-capitalist, pre-modern and fundamentally domestic. Airbnb hosts and TaskRabbit providers literally enact the market within the home. For others, communal sites such as makerspaces, food swaps and open learning spaces reproduce domesticity via small-scale community and intimate relations. But they all share a desire to build markets which foster and value artisanal, craft-like production, whether it is by offering prepared food at a swap, a homey Airbnb bedroom or literal craft production in a makerspace. In addition, our participants all draw on frames from the domestic sphere to construct a vision of a 'moral market' that is rooted in an imagined return to an earlier, home-based system of small-scale economic production.

2. Markets and Morality

Economic sociologists examine how elites and institutional actors adopt particular moral stances to further their interests (Abolafia, 1996; MacKenzie and Millo, 2003; Healy, 2006; Garcia-Parpet, 2008; Zelizer, 2010). This literature finds that markets do not merely reflect

economic principles, they are constructed to promote certain patterns of behavior. Thus, market outcomes depend not merely on whether participants are convinced that obeying the 'rules of the game' is to their advantage (Garcia-Parpet, 2008, p. 46), but also whether doing so is deemed morally acceptable. For example, MacKenzie and Millo (2003) found that a market for financial instruments, created with appeals to rationality, faced limits as traders were concerned about being perceived as 'shit-sellers'. Abolafia (1996) found that a similar effort succeeded when investment banks created an environment with 'minimal interdependence, extraordinary incentives for self-interest and limited constraints on behavior' (p. 37).

Scholars have also shown how markets are shaped by the everyday morality of their participants. In the case of organ transfers, only non-market exchange in the form of a donation system matched moral understandings about life and the body (Healy, 2006). Buyers and sellers of illegal goods sometimes frame their markets as affective, socially supportive communities, where solidarity in the face of 'unjust' law enforcement go hand in hand with business (Ladegaard 2017). 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: AT&T promoted an 'essentially democratic' invention meeting everyone's needs, but users feared it would 'break up home life and the old practice of visiting friends' (Fischer, 1994, pp. 1–2).

While much of the literature is concerned with negative examples, there are also cases where participants attempt to enforce new, more moral ways of acting. There is, for example, a growing movement of 'ethical consumers' who seek to alter companies through their purchasing decisions (Willis and Schor, 2012). Our informants take a similar approach, albeit via a project of market creation, to pursue an alternative moral vision—one with greater social connection and control. Faced with a dominant market they see as immoral, corrupt and alienating, they enact new practices—literally bringing the site of economic activity into the home—in an effort to domesticate a market gone awry.

2.1 A neoliberal innovation or diverse economies?

The moral stances of our participants include beliefs about the efficacy of market solutions, personal responsibility and risk-taking. This raises the question: are they merely neoliberal subjects? We think not. Neoliberalism, a term that captures the ongoing restructuring of a wide range of economic, political and cognitive aspects of contemporary social life (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Harvey, 2005; Mudge, 2008), asserts that unrestricted markets are most efficient for allocating resources. This ideal is achieved through policies of deregulation (labor markets, financial markets), privatization (infrastructure, healthcare) and selective reductions in public spending (education). In addition, the state has increased its involvement in 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). It 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). Evidence suggests that workers who depend on income from the sharing economy are on precarious footing (Schor *et al.*, 2017). Several studies have documented familiar patterns of exploitation and discrimination in platforms associated with the sharing economy

(Edelman and Luca, 2014; Ravenelle, 2016; Cansoy and Schor 2017; Ladegaard *et al.*, 2017; Schor *et al.*, 2017), even when participants are motivated by openness and opportunities for social connection (Schor *et al.*, 2016; Ladegaard, 2018). Opponents claim platforms like Airbnb represent corporate co-optation, while Uber and TaskRabbit contribute to the casualization of labor (Martin, 2016). These criticisms are consistent with earlier literature in which scholars documented the advance of neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005), and characterized it as unstoppable. For example, Guthman (2008) has argued that consumers, activists, and farmers who create alternatives to the industrial food system ‘uncritically’ adopt neoliberal ideas of localism, consumer choice and value capture.

Scholars of neoliberalism have also become attentive to micro-level processes and the concept of neoliberal subjects. Accounts of neoliberal subjectivity draw on Foucault’s analysis of power and the concept of governmentality (see Barnett *et al.*, 2008). Foucault argued that people are behaviorally manipulable, and responsive to changes in the environment (Lemke, 2001; Foucault, 2008). The neoliberal subject, then, is induced by the rewards and punishments of the market. Reflecting the characteristics of neoliberal markets and governments, neoliberal subjects are fashioned to take on risk and personal responsibility (Neff, 2012), to trust in market solutions (Guthman, 2008), and to enact citizenship through consumption (Rose, 1999; Johnston, 2008; Johnston *et al.*, 2009).

This view has been critiqued. Barnett and colleagues (2008) argue that combining neo-Marxist political economy and Foucauldian governmentality results in a circular, functionalist approach in which techniques of neoliberal governance seamlessly yield neoliberal subjects. Bondi and Laurie (2005) suggest that such arguments mobilize the subject’s claim to be able to think for herself: a potential expression of a neoliberal system which recognizes that we are all self-governing individuals who exercise economic and political choices. The result is a seeming inescapability, such that nearly anything other than Keynesian state-centrism is categorized as a reflection of neoliberal subjectivity (cf. Mudge, 2008).

Scholars suggest that the ‘actually-existing neoliberalism’ of politics, markets and subjectivities is fraught with contradictions (Brenner and Theodore, 2002). Political projects of de-regulation have proceeded unevenly, and regulations are sometimes put in place to encourage market investments (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Fligstein, 2005). Ferguson (2010) argues that practices that appear neoliberal can actually be challenges to neoliberalism because there are many ways to pose problems and institutional and intellectual mechanisms. He points to ostensibly neo-liberal anti-poverty initiatives in South Africa, which had clear egalitarian outcomes.

Scholars also highlight the many ‘diverse economies’ of contemporary life (Gibson-Graham 2008). Significant aspects of society, including economic work, remain non-neoliberal and even non-capitalist (Alperovitz, 1972; Emery and Pierce, 2005; Gibson-Graham 2008). Drawing on Sedgwick and Frank (2003), Gibson-Graham characterize the willingness to see neoliberalism everywhere, and the reluctance to acknowledge the diversity of the contemporary economy, as paranoia (2008). Similarly, Richardson (2015) suggests that the sharing economy itself is a diverse economy—fraught with the potential to both push beyond capitalism and ‘further entrench’ the economic ‘business-as-usual’.

Our participants have a novel twist on this debate. On the one hand, they often frame their own economic practices against the neoliberal imaginary: they invoke a monolithic market which is corrosive to social and personal well-being. They emphasize the flexibility, efficiency and entrepreneurship of the sharing economy, concepts which could easily fit

within the neoliberal paradigm. However, they also see their actions within the sharing economy as moral projects that can yield non-neoliberal outcomes such as social connection, autonomy and domestic forms of production.

3. Methods and data

The existing literature on the sharing economy suggests that differences among initiatives produce different types of economic practices. Among peer sharing platforms,¹ typologies include the for-profit platform/non-profit divide (Schor and Fitzmaurice, 2015) and the monetized v. 'pure sharing' distinction (Belk, 2014). Given that different economic practices rely upon and reinforce different moral judgments and justifications, we expect that the moral logics employed by participants will vary across these different types of sharing (Fourcade and Healy, 2007). As a result, to explore the role of moral logics in market construction we chose to sample peer-to-peer cases across these typological distinctions. We interviewed and surveyed 120 active users and providers on five platforms, the majority of whom are located in a Northeastern city in the USA. These disparate research sites allow us to separate the various moral meanings people make of their sharing economy participation from the specific platform (for-profit versus non-profit) or service (monetized versus non-monetized). We ask to what extent, if any, do sharing economy participants invoke a collective moral imaginary? Despite sampling for variation, the fact that these initiatives all involved work that either took place in or extended out from the home proved central to structuring the moral logics of participants. Across our sample, participants drew on frames from the domestic sphere to justify their participation in the sharing economy, and to distinguish their work from other economic arrangements.

We wanted our sample to reflect the population of sharing economy providers and workers. However, when we began data collection in 2011, there was little detailed information on the composition of this group. We did know that young adults were the early adopters and innovators of the sharing economy, as well as its most active participants (Rossa, 2015). Therefore, we concentrated on the 18–34 age group. In cases where a site had a more mixed age profile we interviewed participants across a wider age range. The large majority of our participants are racially white (nearly 85%), which reflects the racial composition of our sites and region. Finally, our participants have high levels of education. This accords with recent national surveys on sharing economy users (PEW, 2016). In our sample, roughly 78% have 4-year college degrees, and among those who don't, many were college students at the time of the interview. Furthermore, they overwhelmingly come from families with high levels of education.

Two of our cases are 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, housecleaning). Two other cases are non-profits: a food swap where members prepare meals and exchange them with others, and a makerspace where members share a workspace and tools and undertake production ranging from high-tech robots to handcrafted furniture. The fifth case, which we

1 While some consider business-to-consumer platforms (e.g. Zipcar) part of the sharing economy, others consider these to be more akin to standard rental arrangements, limiting the sharing economy to peer-to-peer platforms and initiatives. As a result, we limit this study to peer-to-peer initiatives.

term ‘open learning’, is a hybrid and drew participants from multiple sites. The common feature is that participants use online resources (such as Coursera and Skillshare) and teach one another skills and knowledge outside of formal educational institutions.

The 120 semi-structured interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes, and covered participants’ motivations, narratives of participation, attitudes toward costs and benefits, and the nature of their experiences. Although our interview scripts were adjusted slightly for each case, they were broadly similar. All interviews were fully transcribed. We first did a round of open coding, and developed basic descriptive categories around narratives of self, participation, as well as how people got involved in the sector. We then did a second round of theoretical coding to systematically group our participants according to the logics of practice they invoked (e.g. ‘rejects neoliberal subjectivity’ and ‘yearns for autonomy’). Participants often invoked multiple logics, and were therefore not confined to discrete categories.

In the analysis which follows, we explore the normative and moral basis of participation regardless of whether the markets actually ‘live up’ to their proclaimed values. We believe it is worthwhile to take people’s moral valuations seriously. Even if these rhetorical accounts of sharing economy participants reveal more of an imaginary than a reality, the imaginary is illustrative as a source of potentiality, a reflection of what people want from their economic activities, and an indictment of the dominant economy.

4. Findings

Our central finding is that despite the different types of economic practices fostered by various sharing economy initiatives, participants yearn for a domesticated market—one that is organized around the social connection and individual agency long associated with the home. Certainly, social connections within the domestic sphere have never wholly been beneficent or affirming; neither have all individuals experienced the home as a site of agency. Instead, the ‘domestic’, like the ‘local’, serves as a powerful ideological imaginary associated with particular forms of caring and sovereignty, self-reliance and communal support (see Allen 2004). At the same time, the domestic sphere has long served as an ideological counterpoint to the market and a potent antidote to the moral failings our participants identify in their monolithic depictions of ‘the economy’.

Within this common moral project of enacting a mode of production that is rooted in the home, we find variations across our cases that map onto the ways these differing sharing initiatives organize participants’ activities. Providers on monetized platforms draw different moral imperatives from their imaginings of the domestic sphere than those engaged in initiatives that foster do-it-yourself skills and economies. These varied imaginings of a domestic mode of production, rooted in particular sites and practices, lead to distinct modes of exchange across these cases.

In Figure 1, we have created a conceptual map of the frames drawn from the domestic imaginary across our cases. The figure is not a precise measure of how much social connection or agency providers experience on these platforms and in these initiatives. Instead, it attempts to represent the particular ways our participants frame their sharing practices as moral actions. This space is bounded by concerns about ‘social connection’ and ‘agency’, central ideas in the domestic imaginary. The moral worth of social connection ranges from personable interactions to desiring bonds of community, while agency is expressed in terms of work life flexibility and creative control.

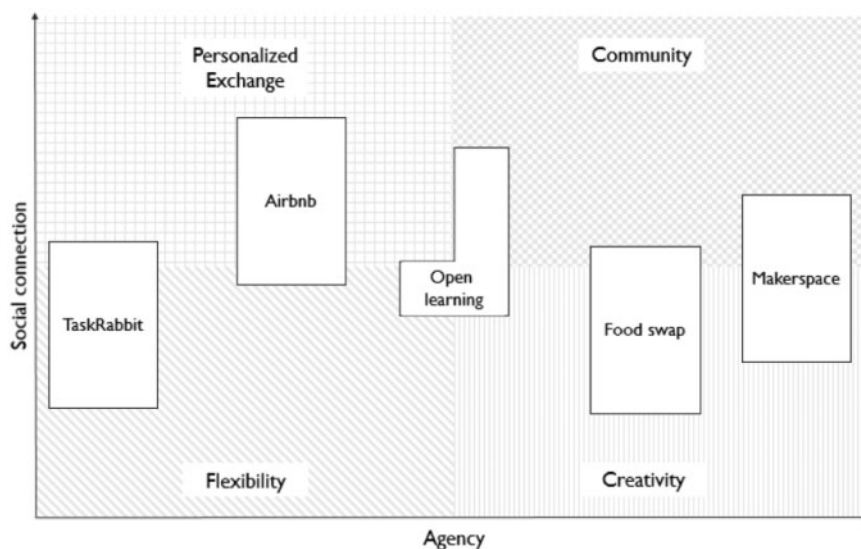


Figure 1. Mapping the 'domestic' imaginary: key frames drawn from the 'domestic' across five cases.

We find that most of our respondents draw on the pervasive framing of the domestic sphere as one of genuine intimacy and social connection uncontaminated by the market (Zelizer 2010). They assert that more 'homey' relationships are a moral good that lead to greater social connection. In the following sections, we will also outline the range of meanings that social connections took on in various settings. Providers on TaskRabbit and Airbnb feel that bringing economic production into the home results in personalized exchange: that is, social connection results from individual economic activities. Participants in the Food swap, the makerspace, and some open learners imagine that their exchanges foster social connection on a community level—they want to labor, learn and create with likeminded others.

The relationship between the domestic imaginary and agency also varies between the monetized and the DIY sites. Taskers and Airbnb hosts want to take control of their work lives. Taskers appreciate that they can turn off the app when they have other priorities, while Airbnb hosts literally use their homes as sources of income to do things they otherwise would not be able to. Some of these participants even hope to work less through their involvement and articulate the moral value of autonomy—freedom—more than just flexibility. For open learners, food swappers and makers the homey environments of production and exchange enable creativity; they want an economy in which they can build on their inventiveness, and produce meaningful goods.

Open learning contains elements of multiple frames. While open learners value autonomy, they also value flexible social connections that can help them imagine alternative modes of earning and production. They attempt to create communities for horizontal exchange and market-oriented projects. As a hybrid case, open learning shows how moral imperatives are expressed in pursuit of a new relationship between learning and labor (Carfagna, 2017).

4.1 Social connection

Sharing economy participants seek genuine human connections in their economic exchanges. They want personalized exchanges, collaboration and community. In the sharing economy, uncertainties abound because market trade is largely between strangers, but they are assumed to be mitigated via ratings and reputations systems (Diekmann *et al.*, 2014). For our informants, personal interaction is not a means to reduce risk, but an end in itself.

4.1.1 Personalized exchange (TaskRabbit, Airbnb)

Money is an important motivator on the two for-profit platforms in our study, Airbnb and TaskRabbit, but participants also stress that they enjoy interacting with the people they serve. While providers on both platforms imagine an economy that is embedded in social connection, there are some differences. Providers on Airbnb are often hosting individuals for days at a time in their own homes, and are more apt to suggest that these are intrinsically valuable experiences that can forge genuine personal connections, if not friendships. Taskers, meanwhile, denounce faceless corporate communications and value the more genuine economic interactions they sometimes find in the sharing economy.

TaskRabbit: personalized exchange and the chance to be authentic

Fred, a 21-year-old college-educated white man, describes his TaskRabbit assignments as ‘hit or miss’. One recent miss was a ‘really annoying’ task where he scheduled appointments for a client over the internet, which reproduced the faceless and impersonal corporate work that he and many others 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.’ 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.’

Taskers also like that exchanges are small dips into the lives of others, which makes the transactions more intimate. Orlando, a 30-year-old African-American 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 ... even though there are companies in the background ... it doesn’t feel like that to the average consumer.’ Orlando uses Airbnb and other platforms as well, and one commonality he sees among them sums up a common view among our participants: 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’. Jacqui, a white 28-year-old former teacher who now does administrative tasks for clients on TaskRabbit, has remained in touch with people she met through 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 developed long-term relationships with two clients.

Airbnb: extended interactions and the possibility of lasting connections

Twenty-seven-year-old Peter, white, is a seasoned Airbnb host. He says that social connections are a big part of the hosting experience. '[Y]ou get to meet a lot of really cool people ... they're more open-minded—like, they like to travel, they like to talk, they like social interaction.' The relations between Airbnb hosts and their guests are sometimes quite intimate, with shared meals, personal stories, gifts, and in some cases, create durable connections (Ladegaard, 2018). 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 ... 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. They report that they can or might reach out to their guests if they go on their own trip. As Peter's experience shows, off-platform relationships do develop:

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 ... Because they[sic] 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.

4.1.2 Community (food swap, makerspace, open learning)

Members of the food swap and makerspace aspire for more than mere personal connections; they want to establish supportive communities. Such sentiments are also held by a few of our Airbnb and TaskRabbit participants, but their practices rarely amount to community participation. Open learners also feel that being part of a supportive community of other learners is a vital part of pursuing their individual interests.

Open learning: a collaborative space to pursue a personalized education

Open learners applaud the social connections made through learning platforms. They are often critical of the standard model of centralized authority, e.g. teachers and their curricula, and note 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 these tools enable 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.

Naomi, a white 32-year-old who attended alternative schools in her childhood and is in the midst of a PhD program, is committed to learning that is decentralized and socially connected.

[T]here's really no competition, it's more, like, this cool sense of community or brotherhood between, you know, developers and the programmers and the people in startup world that you don't really see.

Food swap: yearning for communal food systems

Anne, a 28-year-old white woman working as a freelance writer, finds a sense of community in the food swap she co-founded, proudly remarking that she, a self-proclaimed 'city girl', got to 'know a farmer': '[The food swap] builds community around food ... urban people who might otherwise, you know, sort of, not know each other ... We're bringing them together around food.' The yearning for community is also evident when a platform fails 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.

Makerspace: from do-it-yourself to doing-it-together

People at Makerspace preferred not to work on their projects in the isolation of their apartments, garages or basements, and sought out the presence of other makers, to 'do-it-together' (Busch, 2012). Jen, a white woman in her late 20s and an original founder of the makerspace, 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 and devoted what seemed to be all of her waking life to managing the space. For her, community and collaboration were not side benefits of Makerspace, but a defining premise of the organization.

4.2 Agency

The sharing economy offers people novel means of exercising control over their labor, finances and creativity. Participants denounce jobs that are 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. In our conversations, they vividly enacted the corporate critique that has saturated pop culture for decades (Saval, 2014).

4.2.1 Flexibility and control (TaskRabbit, Airbnb, open learning)

Our informants want to avoid employment where supervisors manage their time and the job consumes most of their day. Taskers wanted flexible work that allowed them to follow their own priorities. With TaskRabbit, they could set their own hours and generally choose tasks that interested them. Meanwhile, Airbnb providers appreciated that renting on the platform

offered a greater degree of financial autonomy. They used income to pay down debt and, in some cases, even gained freedom from having to work. Lastly, Open learners want opportunities to advance professionally and personally, which they say are rare in the conventional economy. They valued learning skills that gave them greater control over the type of work they would be doing. They wanted access to meaningful work that they were passionate about. Participants in these three groups want control of the organization of their work lives.

TaskRabbit: avoiding the nine-to-five grind

The taskers we interviewed say their work is at times demeaning, such as when one is tasked to deliver a \$7 burrito to a ‘lazy’ customer, but they are also happy about the platform’s flexibility – they can work when they want, as much as they want, and are free to prioritize other things in their lives. Saul, a white man in his 20s who has done ‘a lot’ of tasks, is 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 can connect me with short-term gigs, or just really unique, interesting experiences has been a real positive thing for me.

Another tasker, 30-year-old Bev, who is white, expresses the desire for flexibility and control in financial terms. Following the 2008–2009 crisis, her work hours had been ‘cut back’, so she was ‘looking for a way to supplement’ her income. Tasking saved her, she said, from the ‘very standard kind of nine-to-five work’ she wanted to avoid.

Airbnb: gaining greater freedom from financial burdens

Nearly all of the Airbnb hosts we interviewed say that their home-sharing earnings give them more flexibility in their lives. Thirty-two-year-old Megan, a white development director for an environmental NGO, and her husband listed a bedroom in their home, and together they were able to repay nearly \$15,000 in student loans. It worked so well for them that they are now planning to buy a condo that can be subleased. ‘[W]e always want to host, because I love it, and I think it’s fun, and it’s useful for when you have friends in town. And we can just, like, imagine paying back our mortgage so much faster if we have the extra income.’ Eric, a white 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.’

Open learning: finding work where your passions are valued

Most open learners we talked to aimed to find 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 . . . 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 [user experience] thing’, 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 . . . 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.

Derek, a white open learner in his 20s, also desires control, which he attributes to his entrepreneurial mother. His mother 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 and avoid his mother’s misfortune. Open learning allowed him to achieve a more autonomous work life through entrepreneurship.

4.2.2 Innovation and creativity (open learning, food swap, makerspace)

Makers, food swappers and open learners 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. They want an economy that doesn’t impede creative work, but lets them innovate and create products, projects, and ideas that they find meaningful. 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. A few respondents on TaskRabbit and Airbnb enjoy the creative aspects of their platform work, such as creating music videos for children, and apartment decoration, but such accounts are rare for participants in the two for-profit platforms. For the food swappers, open learners and makers, on the other hand, creative freedom is paramount.

Open learning: making work around your passions

Naomi and other open learners joyously describe how they produce their own software or websites and more grandly, companies. These skills give them more than the flexibility to find work they are passionate about: they see opportunities to *make* work they are passionate about.

When people start to see more peer to peer transactions around everything [there’s] creativity, service creation, contact creation that people can exchange in more ways than they used to be able to and then sort of discover new ways. . . . So, if you happen to be interested in glow in the dark yo-yos made from special imported wood from I don’t know where. Maybe that’s your thing. And maybe you can really go and learn about the wood and learn about glow in the dark paint materials and become an expert in that and teach somebody else and maybe make a bit of

money . . . and then start selling your yo-yos to your neighbors down the street. All of that, that whole hierarchy that whole stack of learning and creating and economics didn't used to be possible.

To Naomi, open learning presents people with a newfound opportunity to create and innovate.

Food swap: a space for a creative outlet

People are drawn to the swaps to explore, experiment and emulate the taste, texture and smell of meals that are crafted from scratch. Rachel, who is white and 32 years old, 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. Twenty-eight-year-old Anne also sees learning as a vehicle for autonomy. For her, food trading is educational and empowering, and 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 . . . So it's kind of interesting for me to discover this older, like, world of food.

Thirty-one-year-old Lidia, a white woman from France who came to the USA for graduate studies, joined the food swap because she longed to do something creative and tangible with her hands: '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.' 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 made exotic jams and jellies—plums blended with vermouth, black apricots transformed into preserves, and even cantaloupes turned into a spreadable topping for yogurt or toast. As her storage space filled up she started food swapping, to try new recipes and imagine new things.

Makerspace: an escape from the conventional

Hobbyist makers often bustle between projects they have crammed into their scarce off-hours, while makers-in-residence leisurely craft, socialize and experiment. Jen, who was at the helm of the makerspace when we talked, described her transition from a Manhattan upbringing and Ivy League education:

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. Evan, a lively, fast-talking white man in his early 30s, has no shortage of ideas about the meaning of Makerspace 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 Makerspace 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 made are not technologically sophisticated, they are literally S-shaped pieces of metal that can hold tools and other items. But he found this simple act of creating extremely pleasurable and felt that without his time at the makerspace, he would be less fulfilled. For Evan and others, autonomy does not mean isolation, but freedom to create in the context of community.

4.3 Reimagining domesticity: where autonomy and social connection meet

Our participants express concern about the morality of the dominant economy. They think contemporary market relations corrode social intimacy. Labor conditions undermine personal connection, creativity and autonomy, while consumer experiences are deskilled, alienated and impersonal. The sharing economy is viewed as a potential remedy. Our participants believe the new economic arrangements facilitate production, consumption and work among family, neighbors and friends, and build relations among strangers. Despite differences among the platforms, our participants envision a market that resonates with a nostalgic yearning for more familial—and domestic—relations of exchange. Across the five initiatives, providers of goods and services view their practices not as individualized solutions to economic problems, but as a way to build moral markets that emanate from the lifeworld of the home as we show in [Table 1](#). They desire markets that foster meaning and social connection.

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 ([De Tocqueville, 2003](#)). When market society emerged 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, 1992, p.3](#)). Constructions of the domestic sphere as a source of safety, fairness and empowerment elide the often-bleak realities of the home. The 'homey' relationships of small communities may be stifling, and often oppressive, particularly for marginalized groups (see [Allen, 2004](#)). Indeed, the historical development of the modern domestic sphere was bound together with projects of class and race-based exclusion and gendered subjugation (see [Heneghan, 2004; Kelly, 2010](#)). As a result, some frames drawn from the domestic sphere may not be progressive, and some might serve to supplement, rather than supplant existing market moralities. Nevertheless, belief in the sincerity and simplicity of small-scale, handmade, craft products that are bound to ideas of traditional forms of domestic and community-based artisanal production have become a driving

Table 1. Initiative logics, moral imperatives of the domestic imaginary and exchange practices by case

Sites	Logic	Moral of social connection	Moral of agency
TaskRabbit • <i>Associated norms and practices</i>	Earning	Personalized exchange <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critique of 'fake nice' exchanges and 'cold' professionalism • Small dips into intimate settings of home and daily life 	Flexibility and control <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critique of 9–5 office work • Manage own hours and choice of jobs • Financial control via supplemental income
Airbnb • <i>Associated norms and practices</i>	Earning	Personalized exchange <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share meals and stories, even gift exchanges • Monetized hospitality facilitates casual sociability 	Flexibility and control <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enables freedom from employment • Reduce debt and financial precarity • More control over domestic space
Open learning • <i>Associated norms and practices</i>	DIY— Long-term Earning	Hybrid <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participatory learning environments • Joint software coding 	Hybrid <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-determined work situation via collaborative skill acquisition • Autonomy through entrepreneurship • Facilitates meaningful projects and work content
Makerspace • <i>Associated norms and practices</i>	DIY	Community <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community and collaboration defining premise of organization 	Innovation and creativity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-directed making for personal consumption • Craft as agency/customized fabrication. • Freedom to reject normative life trajectories
Food swap • <i>Associated norms and practices</i>	DIY	Community <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yearning for community/building community around food • Facilitating connections between households and local food system 	Innovation and creativity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desire for creative expression in the kitchen • Sharing food allows for experimentation—trade surplus for diverse pantry • Local and seasonal variation/and one-of-a-kind products

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

Airbnb: the ‘real’ as the life of the home

The perceived domesticity of the sharing economy serves as a powerful social imaginary against the broader economy. Megan 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.

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. Tourists sometimes venture into the ‘backspaces’ of their destinations in search of more authentic experiences (MacCannell, 1973), and the search for ‘the real, the genuine’ is sought in many other cultural domains, too (Fine, 2003). Our participants say that the sharing economy offers authentic exchanges, because the exchange is embedded in people’s homes and in local communities.

TaskRabbit: linking production and consumption

Orlando sees the sharing economy as a sign of production and consumption coming full circle. He yearns for a time when economic life was rooted in local relationships of mutual concern.

We used to do everything for ourselves and we were very hospitable towards each other. And then we started going to corporations . . . and everyone went there. 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.

Makerspace: skills for self-sufficiency

Guthrie, a white man in his late 20s with a pastoral sensibility, describes his attraction to the makerspace 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 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 conventional retail industry, his production would

be rooted in the domestic sphere and be given as gifts. 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 they 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. Evan is enthusiastic about the DIY option:

You change your own oil and it makes no [economic] sense . . . 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.'

For Evan, Guthrie and many others, the feeling of having more control of daily challenges trumps rational cost-benefit analyses. 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. 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': '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. Makers also highlight that they come here to work amongst others. Barbara, for example, notes that although 'being a studio artist is a very lone kind of activity . . . I still somehow feel connected to something being there as opposed to if I was at my own house.' Brian is also drawn to the makerspace as a site for autonomy and community. 'I really was interested in what all these other people were doing. And the only way I learned more is by showing up and being there and doing my own thing.'

Open learning: cultivating self-reliance

Open learners view their learning as part of larger shift towards self-provisioning, where the knowledge to do or make something is more valuable than buying 'stuff'. Purchasing easily available commodities is denounced as a lazy practice if one can learn to make something similar on one's own. Marco, a white male in his early 20s, was learning how to run his own fitness business through open resources. In the process, he expanded his learning beyond business skills and became interested in living a self-provisioned, anti-materialist lifestyle. Marco wants to learn how to create his own rainwater collection system and solar panels for a mini-home he is designing with his uncle. When he describes these projects, he critiques mass consumption:

People consume, I think, because they're lazy . . . If you put a few hours in, you save yourself money and you help save the environment. It doesn't make sense not to do it. But everyone wants what's right there right now, it's easy.

The connection between self-provisioning and open learning is that they take time to learn through trial and error but lead to less waste and more thrift:

It's going to take some time to do it, but I'm going to learn the right way and it's going to save everybody time and money.

Mei, an Asian-American woman in her mid-20s, also believes that overconsumption is problematic and thinks open learning is a way to learn a different, richer life. Mei works at a fairly well-established startup with several employees. Independently, she learns skills relevant to her job and takes cooking classes for fun. Mei also denounces hyper-consumption and intentionally tries to create a different type of life for her family through the moral experience of open learning.

I think we all have, for the most part, material goods that are decent, and instead of moving on to maybe like, social, emotional goods, like relationship, and quality of life that way, the goods consumption has just been matched up to like, all these crazy levels of luxury. And, to me that's like a distraction, and a disease, so to speak. . . . So, I wish people valued things that were more about the heart, rather than the wallet, I guess, and these new modes of learning are, I think, an expression of moving towards the heart.

The connection between open learning and self-provision is simple for Mei: when people can teach and learn without certifications, opportunities to learn from each other will flourish. For her, open learning moves education away from a credentialed, institutionalized experience to a socially connected, more domestic experience.

Food swap: reimagining the household economy

Food swappers envisioned the home as the valorized site of socially connected exchanges and domestic modes of production. One interviewee hopes that their monthly gatherings will foster relationships, while Shauna, a 34-year-old African-American lawyer and cofounder of the food swap, expresses a 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.' 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 they received. By creating a new market to trade home-produced jams and pickles, the founders hoped single urbanites like themselves could avoid corporate food. At the same time, food swappers and participants in other platforms seek to create a domestic economy that reflects the values of the present. Shauna acknowledges how different home canning is for her, compared to how she imagines 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 giving up preferences for variety and gustatory excitement or turning managing their pantries into a full-time job.

Many of our participants find fault with the moral order of corporate capitalism or impersonal consumerism, but they do not see ‘markets’ per se as the cause of these problems. Instead, their critiques are a mirror image of the common view that the market and the social operate in separate, hostile spheres (Zelizer, 2010). They don’t view ‘the market’ as colonizing and corrosive, rather, they construct different kinds of markets. They 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.

5. Conclusion

Economic sociologists demonstrate that economic concerns are integrated into even the most intimate exchanges, and neither alienate nor erode social relations (Healy, 2006; Zelizer, 2010). Nevertheless, modern understandings of the market often pit the world of work and exchange against that of hearth and home and frame the market as both ‘separate’ from and ‘hostile’ to the domestic sphere (Zelizer, 2010). In the moral projects of our participants, we see a slightly different dynamic at work. They do see a dominant economy that is profoundly alienating, but rather than adopting a ‘hostile worlds’ perspective, they attempt to enact a moral economy by bringing the market home. Holding to a moral vision of economic life rooted in a new domestic mode of production, they seek to take part in the construction of better alternatives.

Our findings suggest the importance of bringing critiques of neoliberalism and contemporary economies into conversation with the growing recognition of the role of morality in all market exchange. Scholars are increasingly challenging monolithic views of the market: they recognize the existence of diverse economies in contemporary life (Gibson-Graham, 2008) and highlight the ways morality pervades even the most pure, and seemingly ‘amoral’ markets (MacKenzie and Millo, 2003). While the moral projects of participants across our sharing economy initiatives are rooted in their imaginings of a moral domestic order, another imaginary equally shapes their practices: a perception of the economy as corrosive. Nevertheless, they choose to bring economic production and market relationships into the ‘domestic’ realm. Rather than viewing these initiatives as invasive, colonizing, or destructive, providers believe that sharing initiatives allow them to construct new domesticated markets where they can create social connections and regain autonomy in their working lives. In part, this is a result of their ability to forge good matches (Zelizer, 2010): they wed their involvement in sharing initiatives with moral frames and nostalgic imagery of the home as the locus of pre-capitalist production and exchange.

Critics cast the sharing economy as nothing but the next frontier of neoliberalism, but we document that the specific economic logics of various sharing initiatives intersect with widespread, albeit romanticized, understandings of the domestic sphere, thereby producing distinct sets of moral aspirations. These moralities are linked by sharing providers’ efforts to resist the influence of corporations, which, in their view, strip meaning from economic exchange, value from work and social connection from life. Their success remains uncertain. However, forged at the intersection of these initiatives’ economic logics and participants’ imaginings of the domestic sphere, the moralities we document shape concrete economic

practices in providers' daily lives. To them, the sharing economy is an opportunity to domesticate the market, and foster morally attuned exchange.

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