

Does Marxism Still Apply? Exploring Digital Worker Perspectives in the Sharing Economy

TREO Talk Paper

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Abstract

Imagine a world full of people that own nothing but have access to everything they need because they share things such as tools, meals, rides, couches, and even homes. While this may sound utopian, we are seeing a glimpse of what this society would look like with the rise of the sharing economy- a hybrid economy, characterized by sharing as well as commercial exchange (Lessig 2008). The sharing economy has created new opportunities for digital labor. Sharing firms such as Task Rabbit and Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) match those who need to complete tasks with others that have the time and knowledge to complete those tasks online (Brinkley 2016). The benefit to workers comes in the form of new work opportunities, empowerment, schedule flexibility, and social benefits. However, the disadvantage to workers comes in the form of very few substantive rights and benefits, and low wages.

While the sharing economy phenomenon has been gaining traction in the literature, we want to understand the phenomenon from a labor perspective. Specifically, we have conducted a preliminary literature review of labor in the sharing economy, and the results show that few studies (3 of 30 in our sample) focus on the perspective of the worker. We feel that this makes for an incomplete understanding of the phenomenon.

We propose to study the perspectives of digital workers in the sharing economy using an exploratory qualitative method (i.e. grounded theory) with open-ended questions. We will use MTurk as a primary data source, and we will triangulate the results with excerpts from digital worker blog sites and popular media. While Deng et al. (2016) viewed the phenomenon through a value sensitive design lens, we will use a Marxist lens to answer the following research question: *How can the Marxist perspective inform our understanding of digital work in the sharing economy?* Our goal is to determine if the Marxist exploitation ideology holds in the context of the sharing economy.

References

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