



Sharing as labour and as gift: Couchsurfing as an ‘affective enterprise’*

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Introduction

In their widely discussed paper titled ‘Bringing work back in’, Stephen Barley and Gideon Kunda developed an argument that ‘organization theory’s effort to make sense of postbureaucratic organizing is hampered by the dearth of detailed studies of work’ (Barley and Kunda, 2001: 76). Deep changes in the very nature of work in the postindustrial economy, they argue, call for new empirical studies. Interestingly, the authors pay attention to the changing spatial and temporal dimension of work: ‘our language of jobs may no longer adequately represent the world of work and there is mounting evidence that work life may be reacquiring some of its preindustrial parsing’ (Barley and Kunda, 2001: 83). It is puzzling that when publishing their text, in the year following the dot-com bubble, they still refer to work in terms of *jobs* and *labour market* only, when notions such as immaterial labour (Lazzarato, 1996; Hardt and Negri, 2000), free labour (Terranova, 2004) or affective labour (Hardt, 1999) were already starting to circulate widely. More inspiring – and at the same time only skimmed over – is their second remark that in some way the emerging new labour resembles to some extent the reality of the preindustrial world.

This paper is a work-in-progress in which I present some difficulties in tackling the changing nature of work done in ‘sharing economy’ (Botsman and Rogers, 2010) based on the example of Couchsurfing.com (CS) – a leading non-payable

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hospitality network in terms of its size and popularity across the world. Couchsurfing and other similar platforms provide an institutional framework which enables strangers to plan encounters with each other online and meet offline to *surf* other members' couch at her/his home or to meet up socially, be shown an unknown city, taken for a lunch, to a party or for a bike trip.

By evoking the notion of labour, I follow Fuchs and Sevignani (2013) and employ the classic distinction between 'work' and 'labour' where I define the former in accordance with Middle English word 'woerc', signifying general creative activity which brings about some change; doing something, acting (Weingart, 1997). Such a formulation, close to economic anthropology, dovetails with Marx's understanding of work as productive of use-values, it 'is a condition of human existence which is independent of all forms of society; it is an eternal natural necessity which mediates the metabolism between man and nature, and therefore human life itself' (Marx, 1867: 133). Labour, in contrast, 'is necessary alienated form of work, in which humans do not control and own the means and results of production' (Fuchs and Sevignani, 2013: 240) and creates exchange value for the capital. Such a choice resonates with the further theoretical apparatus, especially the reference to affective labour introduced by autonomous Marxism. 'Social factory', a term central to autonomous Marxism, designates productive labour not confined to factory production, but dispersed in different guises of the overall social life, so that 'the whole society is placed at the disposal of profit' (Negri, 1989: 79). The notion aims at denying a clear distinction between production and consumption on the one hand, and between work and labour on the other. In other words, 'the work discipline of the factory is exported far beyond its bounded walls, and a large share of the work of production is subsequently and increasingly performed without remuneration, in our daily social doings' (Ross, 2013: 25). My paper also drafts an empirical evidence of adequacy of framing users' engagement in a sharing economy platform in terms of work, but not without pinpointing to difficulties related to applying terms stemming from autonomous Marxism, such as immaterial or affective labour.

Critical social media approaches (Terranova, 2004; Fuchs, 2008, 2011a, 2014; Scholz, 2013) often refer to 'immaterial labour' while describing the users' activities within these platforms. The term stands for 'labour that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity' (Lazzarato, 1996: 133). Another definition expands this concept by underlining the affective component: immaterial labour is seen by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt as labour 'that creates immaterial products, such as knowledge, information, communication, a relationship, or an emotional response' (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 108). Such a formulation is in line with the distinction made by Hardt, who sees immaterial labour as performed in 'traditional' industrial production of goods and services,

in analytical and symbolic tasks (Reich, 1992) and in production of affects, which 'requires (virtual or actual) human proximity' (Hardt, 1999: 98). Hardt treats affective labour of human interaction as an element which is equally important as manipulating information. If 'modernization' marked the transformation from the economy dominated by agriculture to industry, a shift towards the postmodern economy is 'informatization', which does not mean that what Alvin Toffler termed 'first' and 'second wave' economies disappear. In this paper, I seek to explore the adequacy of immaterial and affective labour in studying sharing economy. I shall argue that the latter concept is more promising than the former one, but it still calls for refinement and further research.

Couchsurfing has already been a topic of sociological and ethnographic studies whose focus was on affects and affective labour – even if their authors have not made a direct reference to this term. For instance, Paula Bialski investigated the process of becoming an 'intimate tourist' and developed an account of how closeness, intimacy and friendship are mediated by digital technologies of hospitality which are built up by volunteers (Bialski, 2007, 2012). Another sociologist, Jennie Germann Molz (2012), understands this network as a means of communicating beyond market framework and resisting lifestyles propagated by the corporate world (eg. mass tourism). David Pickard and Sonja Buchberger (2013) recognize that studying Couchsurfing involves many notions central to anthropology, such as gift, friendship and kinship, or modernity. Their edited book offers an overview of several case studies whose authors discuss issues related to tensions between cosmopolitanism and locality.

However, these studies call for an introduction of an institutional context, since in 2011 Couchsurfing has changed its legal status from a non-profit to a for-profit organization (between 2011 and 2013 holding the status of a 'Certified B-corporation', an organization that pledges to pursue social goals as well as business ones whose periodic evaluation was performed by an NGO called B-Lab) and is now funded by venture capital. Only in the first year of its operation as a company, Couchsurfing claims to have raised over 22 million dollars from the investors. As yet, no user fees were introduced, and advertisements did not surface prior to 2015. The symptomatic change of Couchsurfing into a corporation leads to thinking about the possibilities for building a network of alternative consumption and the purpose of doing this organizational work. This is the point of departure for my research.

Since summer 2013, I have recorded about 50 interviews with devoted (current or former) Couchsurfers in several locations in Europe and in the US. The interviewees sometimes have been also active in Servas (an 'offline predecessor' of Couchsurfing, founded in the post-WWII years); or HospitalityClub – arguably

the first online hospitality exchange network. In the recent years, some of them have become members of BeWelcome, a hospitality platform which positions itself as the opposite of Couchsurfing (that is, it remains non-profit and is built in a bottom-up manner by a democratic community of volunteers); or have started incorporating accommodation booked *via* Airbnb, the rapidly grown platform enabling short-term rentals of private rooms or flats.

My way to the topic of privatization of Couchsurfing was paved by economic anthropology (Polanyi, 1957; Mauss, 1990; Carrier, 2005) and the classic juxtaposition of gift and market economy; studies in post-socialist transition addressing changing labour regimes with the arrival of the global capitalism (Burawoy & Lucacs, 1992; Verdery, 1996; Dunn, 2004); and studies of 'encounters of intimacy and economy' (Zelizer, 2005). Such background led me to treating ownership change as a possibility to tackle how the *activities* related to organizing this network are understood by its members. The study is not a result of a fascination with the ease of travelling the whole world, or with the possibility engaging in close contact with different cultures and lifestyles mediated by new technologies. Neither does this work result from the acknowledgement of the social salience of 'consuming goods and services which are in some sense unnecessary' (Urry, 2002: 1). Rather, it is motivated by the recognition that researching engagement in various sharing economy platforms is a necessary element in tackling changing regimes of post-Fordist work.

Sharing as labour

In *The Third Wave*, the grand narrative on the global history of the economy based on the notions of production, consumption and prosumption, Alvin Toffler (1980) claimed that the (then) rising new era was about to be marked by 'the emergence of electronic cottage': he saw the household as the most important space of *both* production and consumption. If the 'first wave' was based on agricultural work done around the household and for its members, and the 'second wave' – started by the industrial revolution – was defined by the split of the producer and the consumer, the 'third wave' is the age of prosumption – where the 'production for exchange' typical of labour in the 'second wave' and 'production for use' similar to the one in premodern households are both present in the prosumers' lives on a fifty-fifty basis. The emergence of the 'electronic cottage' that becomes the centre of society once again is both more economically rational and ecological than the functional split between production and consumption: while working from home, more costs are borne with the employee and everyday shuttling becomes obsolete. In his account, the arrival of the 'third wave' does not mean that the market diminishes, but it shrinks

significantly. Even today, when re-reading Toffler, one can be startled by some of these insightful predictions about how the today's world will look like, but there is a major slip in his argumentation: he predicted the work day to become shorter and the structural unemployment to reduce due to easier access to tele-jobs. He saw the blurring of the division between production and consumption but he failed to acknowledge the fuzziness of the split between 'production for exchange' and 'production for use'. This is also a major tension found in the narratives of some dedicated CS users.

In the individual in-depth interviews the questions concerning what has happened with Couchsurfing and what meaning it has for the participants has in many cases occurred to be a trigger of a conversation about how they see not only the organizational logic that underpins the network, but also their understanding of their own activity within CS. After laying out the spectrum of discourses which revolve around work, I contrast their narratives with the official value statement published by the portal.

In the first stage of analysing these materials, I have paid attention to narratives of Couchsurfers from both ends of the spectrum when it comes to making judgements concerning the transformation of the business model. Accordingly, they are either those who were convinced that Couchsurfing's transformation into a business was desirable or at least understandable, or just the opposite.

Travelling and spending leisure time showing around town some newly met visitors are not easily termed labour. However, work is the issue around which Couchsurfers' arguments are built. First, what was termed labour was the job done by servers and their maintenance by IT specialists. Within the non-profit framework *their* labour was *free labour* (Terranova, 2004): the platform developers are understood not to have been paid at all or to have been paid very little when CS was not yet a firm. From this perspective, the IT work is in fact seen as exploited:

People are very against Couchsurfing becoming a corporation. I didn't really understand why. I never got what the problem was. It was a non-profit that people had to put tremendous amounts of time and energy to in order to make it work, and all we did was reap benefits. All I did was get value while giving none back...I programmed no lines of code. I did host people, but I didn't have a stake in how the website actually operated. I didn't pay for servers. I didn't do any of that. – *male, 31 years old, USA.*

Since hosting and travelling relied upon volunteers maintaining the online infrastructure, using it merely for the purpose of socializing without contributing to its technological underpinning is equalled here to freeriding. As the network

has significantly grown within the past few years, responsible leaders cannot merely rely upon volunteers, a further argument goes:

I understand that probably they need people to do certain jobs, to make it work on the website and, you know, sort of administration of it...They can't expect them to do it all for free. I paid the donation one year...but most people don't do that. Unless people are donating money, which they probably weren't doing that much, then you need...to find ways of making money – *female, 38 years old, UK.*

These Couchsurfers understand coding and maintaining servers as *fair* when treated as 'production for exchange' and not 'production for use', since the amount of work and time put in developing the portal exceeds the 'production for use' of the volunteer IT labour in the early years of Couchsurfing.

Another aspect of securing funds for remuneration for IT development is clarifying the organizational rules not only in the sense of formalizing labour, but also receiving a better service in return:

For me it's, like, which method is going to provide the best, most authentic service to what people want. ...They did another update [in 2013], before that I couldn't find what I wanted. Couchsurfing is a story of not being able to find what you want, and they keep adding a different way of how they track your guests, or what you see on your homepage, and it's just, they have never, in my opinion, been effective – *male, 31 years old, USA.*

In this type of discourse, the introduction of market exchange enables pinpointing to concrete actors who can be held accountable for their performance in delivering a *service*. Experiencing something genuine is not understood as being possible to achieve only *beyond* the market, but also *through* market exchange.

In the view of many interviewees who are against the marketization of Couchsurfing, however, the argument is inverted: moving CS to the market *obscures* what is happening at the headquarters – reportedly, almost no one knew of the decision to transform into a for-profit before the very day it was announced. Many users share their doubts as to how the organization manages to make profits, if it claims it is financed by optional user-verification fees and advertisements were not present until 2015. It is the users' engagement that is framed here as the *true* labour – for instance, the ambassadors' work to arrange local leisure activities – so they could have been at least consulted before:

Okay, it's true. It's a system that is managed by people. So there are some people that need to be paid. There are servers that need to be paid, of course. But look at Wikipedia. Wikipedia is much, much bigger, and you don't need to pay. Wikipedia didn't need to change [into] a profitable organization.... They [CS] could always ask for more donations, sponsorships. They could use a little bit of publicity to cover the expense, but why becoming a profitable organization? I totally don't agree with

that. ...Until now I could not find anyone that would agree with that, or anyone in favour of that...There was this image that everybody started to put on their profile saying, 'Sold out', or, 'Sold'. Yeah. The ambassador of Paris, he gave up. ...Some people just don't agree with that, so they just left – *male, 36 years old, Slovenia*.

Not only is the communication with the headquarters rendered poor, but many interviewees are also worried that their personal data is being sold and that they are under growing surveillance:

I don't trust [that] companies don't abuse the data that you put in there. Facebook itself already knows a lot about you, and also Couchsurfing has the data organized so that they know a lot about you. If you merged these two, and maybe [also] Gmail, they would know more about your life than you remember – *male, 33 years old, Slovenia*.

In these narratives, Couchsurfers also emphasise commercialization of work the volunteers have put into developing the platform:

C\$ sold us out! I translated with 2 other volunteers the whole couchsurfing pages into Polish and now it is a corporation making money on our previous voluntary work and on our hosting!¹

They see the change of CS into a for-profit as entailing in transforming what they understood as 'production for use' into 'production for exchange'.

Interestingly, a common thread woven into the interpretations of what is happening with Couchsurfing for both those participants who are strongly against marketization and those who do not connect to the problem, is based on understanding the *real work* in Couchsurfing are all the activities of hosting and being a guest. What is this *real work* comprised of? Among other things, it is preparing a bed, taking visitors on a trip, cooking or cleaning up to reciprocate hospitality, being an instant friend to confide to: talk about difficulties in relationships, troubles at work, or share 'life-hacks'. These activities are located not necessarily in an 'electronic' but a 'brick-and-mortar cottage', to paraphrase Toffler, and the intimacy it allows. For instance, a university lecturer whom I met in Slovenia shared a following story related to her couch-surfing:

I went to Australia and I needed a conformation that the decision to divorce my husband was the right one and...everybody I stayed with were divorced or were going through a divorce or had someone in the family [who got divorced]...so...I got my confirmation and [in some cases] I gave them a confirmation, so it was mutual...[We always talked about intimate issues], they [other CS-ers] felt like my family...[and if] someone lets me in their home, I feel I am part of their family. – *female, 40 years old, Slovenia*.

¹ <https://www.couchsurfing.com/groups/1861>; retrieved on 17.12.2014, original spelling.

Even though the supposedly separate realities of ‘digital’ and ‘actual’ (Ben-Ze’ev, 2004) are a continuum, still the face-to-face interactions in bricks-and-mortar settings are seen as more important:

In the end, Couchsurfing is a company, it’s something that exists online and something that exists outside. I think this is part of the problem. People can’t really connect to [it], because for us it’s somewhere ‘there’. You can’t really reach it. There are two realities, one is ‘there is Couchsurfing’ and the other reality is you hanging out with people, and you will still enjoy being with someone – *female, 28 years old, Slovenia*.

From the worm’s-eye view, the essence of Couchsurfing is being re-created each time its members actually meet, and it is difficult to grasp that some distant corporate headquarters put any labour in making this happen. This is the reason why many of the users do not pay attention to the ownership change – ‘if the membership is still going to be free, it works for me!’, they often say. It is the ‘production for use’ that actually matters more – charity begins at home, the saying goes.

Inspired by Illouz’s ‘Cold intimacies’ (2007) I began to study the process of ‘matching’ the hosts with the guests and see it as resembling the functioning of dating portals which are governed by a specific market logic with users striving to build their ‘competitive advantage’ and ‘maximize their chances to succeed’ in achieving the goal of meeting ‘offline’: that is, by choosing cautiously to address only the hosts in the perfect location (and not in some boondocks), by writing to several possible hosts at once to maximize the chance of receiving a response or – by not inviting travellers who seem dull, judging by their profiles. When reading closely into the narratives of ‘production’ of hospitality, one can easily find stories of its eventual exchange value:

Every time I went to a Couchsurfing host...I asked them: ‘why are you hosting?’. For half of them, it was for the same reason – ‘I want references, because afterwards I will go [and travel myself]’. – *female, 54 years old, Belgium*.

And vice-versa, one will find stories of how travelling using hospitality networks enabled access to places and activities that would have been expensive or unreachable otherwise, like listening to a private concert performed by professional musicians or learning a new craft. Another phenomenon worth mentioning is the practice of proving to the potential host living in an extremely popular location that the person is willing to stay at this hosts’ place – for instance, by agreeing to fulfil a certain task or challenge, or to listen to sexist or in other ways violent comments – in other words, sacrificing one’s comfort for finding a couch. Even though such instances may in fact be rare, this shows us how the non-pecuniary character of exchanges does not contribute *automatically*

to the sociality associated with gift economy, which Couchsurfing is often equated to. And *vice versa* – money exchange can also contribute to sociality and building denser networks. Gift and a ‘rational contract’, as Pierre Bourdieu put it, can be seen as a continuum, distinguished by their varying temporal dynamics: ‘a rational contract would telescope into an instant a transaction which gift exchange disguises, by stretching it out in time’ (Bourdieu, 1977: 171).

If one would like to summarize the ownership change of Couchsurfing merely as turning what has functioned as a gift economy (Mauss, 1990) and was marked by *work*, into a market enterprise – with the dominance of *labour*, one risks repeating the sharp distinction drawn by social anthropology which probably over-romanticises non-monetary gift exchange, as Arjun Appadurai (1986) pointed out. A sharp distinction between ‘production for use’ and ‘production for exchange’ fails to grasp how the gift and market economy intertwine. We cannot render the ownership change at the macro-level as simply appropriation of a network based on gift economy for the purpose of market exchange (that is, attracting investors, making profit). Ideally, in the online realm there is a trace of each brick-and-mortar hospitality exchange between Couchsurfers – in the form of references mutually given by hosts and guests. They build up the ‘digital archive of the self’ (Coté and Pybus, 2011). Even if the ownership of the company changes, both the ‘value for use’ and ‘value for exchange’ of the interactions between CS-ers at the micro level of one-on-one interactions remain unchanged.

How do we link this discussion with the notions of immaterial and – especially – affective labour? Immaterial labour, which ‘creates immaterial products, such as knowledge, information, communication, a relationship or an emotional response’ (Hardt and Negri, 2004: XV), causes a significant difficulty with regard to sharing economies. It ‘implies that there is material and a non-material – i.e. spiritual – part of the world’ (Fuchs, 2008: 103). Michael Hardt’s counterargument is that ‘this labour is immaterial, even if it is corporeal and affective, in the sense that its products are intangible: a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion – even a sense of connectedness and community’ (Hardt, 1999: 96). Emotional labour, the way Arlie Hochschild (1983) framed it, seems to be more accurate, for it embraces also the ‘management’ of anger, sadness, anxiety, or stress – which are easily found in the descriptions of encounters with strangers *via* Couchsurfing. More importantly, Hardt fails to acknowledge that in hospitality networks (which function both online and offline), homes are spaces of mobility and cultural encounters, thus means of production *as well as* means of consumption of travel experiences.

The company managing the platform does not own (all) the means of production. The labour of sharing has a very *material* component: it encompasses preparing food and a place to sleep, cleaning, and driving. This household work has an inherent affective component. It is possible to look at hospitality through the frame provided by Tiziana Terranova, who argues that digital labour is not necessarily confined to advanced (informational) activities:

These types of cultural and technical labour are not produced by capitalism in any direct, cause-and-effect fashion; that is, they have not developed simply as an answer to the economic needs of capital. However...they are a part of a process of economic experimentation with the creation of monetary value out of knowledge/culture/affect. (Terranova, 2013: 39).

This is how the idea quoted at the beginning of the text – that work in the postindustrial era resembles to a greater extent the labour of the preindustrial era – becomes relevant. A glimpse at the official value statement published at the Couchsurfing webpage will help us further this point.

Sharing as gift

How are the activities that bring the Couchsurfers together rendered in the official statements posted on the portal? The ‘value statement’ at the webpage says that in Couchsurfing

we envision a world where everyone can explore and create meaningful connections with the people and places they encounter. Building meaningful connections across cultures enables us to respond to diversity with curiosity, appreciation, and respect. The appreciation of diversity spreads tolerance and creates a global community².

The users are encouraged to share their life stories, experiences, homes, some food and beautiful moments. This is the way by which the platform addresses sharing economy: by emphasizing material and non-material gifts both hosts and guests could give each other that in the long run have ‘the power to profoundly change the world’³. There are few points worth mentioning here.

First, the network is not addressed to any particular type of users selected by any set of qualities apart from the willingness to put effort and time into meaningful interactions with other people in any place in the world. Couchsurfing emphasizes the ethical dimension of participating in the network: hospitality should contribute to transforming social relations and diminishing stereotypes

2 <http://about.couchsurfing.com/values/>; retrieved on 17.12.2014.

3 *ibid.*

and ethnocentrism. Affective labour is understood as inherent in the practice of sharing couches. Second, similarly to using dating portals described by Eva Illouz, ‘meeting requires a great deal of introspection’ (Illouz, 2007: 78) which is a necessary prerequisite to being ‘open to giving, receiving and discovering the unexpected’⁴. In an older version of the website, there was a hint to ‘be creative, imaginative, wacky if you need to be. Take a look at other profiles if you are not sure what to say here’⁵. One of the founders of the portal has explained that the structure of the profiles ‘brings out the essence of people. And when people’s essences are visible, it contributes to the building of trust’ (Bialski, 2007: 7). Third, while looking for an underpinning of the value statement, we can argue that organizational culture of Couchsurfing can be understood as based on gift economy. There is no trace of rendering the activity of sharing as labour.

The text posted on the website is very general if not vague, and non-controversial. Even if gift exchange is a mode of social integration that can be traced to early human societies, in a hospitality network (and maybe in broader sharing economy as well) it becomes a (re)invented tradition and tends to be ‘unspecific and vague to the nature of values, rights and obligations of the group membership [it] inculcate[s]’ (Hobsbawm, 1983: 10). An invented practice, says Hobsbawm, reintroduces status into a world of contract and is evoked when a certain practice has lost its social salience. Hosting and sharing may have never lost social salience in the modern world, but got pushed aside in the modern age of mass tourism and hotel chains. The portal does not refer at any point to the marketization, which could be seen as a being just the opposite of what the organisational culture implies. Cultural norms of hospitality, however, help to conceal the *labour of sharing* with its inherent *material* as well as *affective* component.

Sharing and affective labour

One of the first remarks in my text had to do with differentiating between *work* (a broader term, related to any creative activity) and *labour*, which is necessarily exploited by capital. Can they be made separate in sharing economy? Hospitality – hardly a new practice that emerged together with the digital economy – can be understood as ‘digitally exploited’ (Fuchs, 2011b: 299) with the growth of companies such as Couchsurfing International Inc., but the interpretation of this process by the members of the network is far less straight-forward. As Tiziana

4 <http://about.couchsurfing.com/resource-center/>; retrieved on 17.12.2014.

5 <https://www.couchsurfing.org/editprofile.html?edit=description>, retrieved on 15.05.2013.

Terranova puts it, ‘the fruits of collective cultural labour have been not simply appropriated, but voluntarily *channelled* and controversially *structured* within capitalist business practices’ (Terranova, 2004: 80). In an inquiry into affective labour in hospitality-exchange we are dealing with a setting in ‘it is virtually impossible to distinguish the rationalization and commodification of selfhood from the capacity of the self to shape and help itself and to engage in deliberation and communication with others (Illouz, 2007: 109). What is more, this ‘digital archive of self’, these textualized identities, which incorporate the chronicles of past interactions related to ‘surfing’ become at the same time ‘private hoarded capital’ for future exchanges and building blocks of affective capitalism. They embrace both a material and an immaterial trace of the interaction: the ‘stubborn materiality’ (Gill and Pratt, 2008: 9) of most work related to hospitality, as well as the overall emotional atmosphere of the encounter. It is the very materiality of everyday interactions which forms the basis of this ‘affective enterprise’.

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