

## Which Capitalism for What Responsibility? The Case of the Sharing Economy

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### Abstract

*This paper focuses on the topic of “sharing economy”, which emerges more and more frequently, even in public debate, as an alternative economic form to the dominant capitalist vision. The goal is to question the concept of “sharing” in order to understand if and in what terms we can speak of the sharing economy as a new “spirit” of capitalism. In this direction, this paper asks how the sharing economy is positioned in relation to this theoretical framework. Is it a distinct economic form and opposed to the essential logic of the functioning of current capitalism? Or does it possess a logic of functioning similar to capitalism? We wonder, from a sociological point of view, if behind the label that this economic form advocates there is not the danger of a real introduction of capitalist logic – that is, the efficiency and profit logic – within areas previously governed by gratuitousness.*

**Keywords:** Sharing economy; capitalism, capitalistic spirit; transition; responsibility.

### 1. Introduction

If we were to summarize the content of this paper using some keywords, we could say that it revolves primarily around two concepts implied by the sharing economy: “transition” and “responsibility.”

The sharing economy, as we know, has gained prominence, especially in the last decade, and has become an economically and socially significant phenomenon due to its global spread, despite significant differences across various countries.

Why is it important to talk about the sharing economy today? Certainly because it is a topic widely discussed by the media, the public, and the academic world. Moreover, it has become one of the important topics at the European level as well. The European Commission’s Communication, for example, aimed to establish guidelines for a “European Agenda for the Collaborative Economy” starting from 2016. This phenomenon is widespread in various European and non-European contexts.

The paper is divided into three moments of reflection:

- A first part, which questions the transition connected to the sharing economy through the concept of “spirit of capitalism”. This economic model, as we know, aims today to act as a counterbalance to the traditional capitalist model. It therefore proposes a transition: the transition from the logic of exchange that takes place based on the price of products / services, to the logic of sharing, which hinges on elements such as trust and reputation. If there is a transition there are also, consequently, a “before”, a “during” and an “after” to reach.
- A second part dedicated to the combination of sharing economy and responsibility. These phases of the transition imply, in fact, a “responsibility”: how much and in what terms can sharing, typical of the sharing economy, be said to be responsible or, vice versa, irresponsible? But responsible or irresponsible with respect to whom and to what?
- A third part, finally, in which we will try to draw some conclusions with respect to “the test of facts” which, that is, recalls a responsibility that has to do with specific concrete conditions.

### 2. The “spirit of capitalism” and the transition

The capitalist economic system appears increasingly subject to crises of various kinds and the changes of which it becomes the protagonist seem to call into question the need for a rethinking of what passes under the conceptual category of the “spirit” of capitalism itself.

It is fundamental and necessary to secure a premise on the category of the spirit: namely, that it is, as is known, a conceptual category particularly explored during the 19th and 20th centuries and that the acquisitions that have been reached over time cannot, for reasons of time, be analyzed in depth, but they must be considered as acquired. Suffice it to recall the centrality of the concept of the spirit of capitalism in the theoretical frameworks of classical sociologists such as Werner Sombart and Max Weber, the enormous influence that the debate on the method between the sciences of the spirit and the sciences of nature had on Sombart and that led him to take sides without hesitation on the side of the sciences of the spirit, the only ones able to allow the subject to understand the specific meanings of the historical-social reality that he lives, albeit only partly coinciding with his friend and colleague M.

Weber. In an extremely synthetic way, the spirit of capitalism is given, as is known, by the mentality, the orientations of thought and the values that are the basis of its birth and development.

Taking up one of the most recent studies on the subject, as Boltanski and Chiapello (2014) extensively highlight, a current interpretation of the concept of “spirit” could be linked to the idea of “ideology that justifies commitment to capitalism” (p. 68). This finds a foothold in the ability of the economic system in question to survive despite the predictions of its collapse, becoming increasingly stronger. These are, therefore, representations “capable of guiding action” and “shared justifications” (p. 71), which make it not only a plausible order, but even desirable.

If, on the one hand, everything that constituted the original essence of capitalism seems to have vanished over time, current capitalism does not appear in any case completely devoid of the element of the spirit. Rather than a real disappearance of the capitalist spirit, one wonders if it is not more appropriate to pose the question in terms of a change in the spirit itself: the spiritual dimension does not disappear, but changes face.

The instances of meaning of capitalism that were originally sought outside capitalism and that returned externally – that is, found their purpose in the satisfaction of the system of needs of the community – now instead appear to be found within it. In this sense, the meaning of “spirit of capitalism” as “ideology justifying commitment to capitalism” implies that capitalism cannot get rid of its spirit. It can, in fact, change the substance of the ideology through which to justify participation in the system, but ideology as such cannot be lost, unless the whole structure is precipitated. Therefore, the motivational sources to appeal to would change – think of the idea of individual or collective benefits – and the expressions of the spirit would change, but the latter would continue to exist in a different form.

Today, the reference to different forms of the spirit appears to be important. It is, in any case, a spiritual dimension that appears very different from that of early capitalism, as understood by classical sociological literature. We think, for example, of the requests for affirmation, also in the economic field, of a holistic and transversal spirituality (Hernández i Martí, 2014), aimed at achieving a process of “re-enchantment of the world” (Maffesoli, 2009), or of those social movements that point to the realization of a further phase of capitalism, that of a “spirit beyond capitalism” (Hernández i Martí, 2014, p. 171), that is, of a spiritual dimension of planetary level that calls into question the social legitimacy of the reading of the world proper to capitalism. The spirit is here understood as an element that returns forcefully against the system itself, undermining its foundations and promoting a transformation of the collective consciousness capable of preventing its cultural reproduction.

The component of the spirit also re-emerges through the category of so-called “spiritual capitalism” (Hernández i Martí, 2014, p. 162), in which the spirit – in the broad sense of an experiential and emotional spirituality – becomes the object of capitalist production, the final commodity of exchange. We have come to leave it to capitalism to satisfy our need for security and even that of our need for meaning. From this point of view, Sennett’s analysis in his work *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (2006) is illuminating.

The category of the spirit of capitalism helps us to focus on what, although invisible (because, as Bruni states, we do not want to see or because the system does not allow us to see), produces enormous consequences of various kinds (not only economic, but first and foremost social and psychological). It is therefore to the contradictions, to the criticalities, to the most invisible aspects of economic processes that we want to turn our gaze. As in the case of the sharing economy, which presents itself as a “more human” experience (Bruni, 2018, p. 92) than the experiences that can be experienced in traditional markets and capitalist companies, but which behind this appearance hides numerous effects, even unintentional.

We note, first of all, that there is no shared definition of sharing economy, neither nationally nor internationally, as this term refers to a very wide conceptual area. In the most common sense of the term, a sharing economy refers to an economy that distributes goods and services through sharing and that prefers the concept of possession to that of property. The transition, therefore, takes place, at the ideal level, from a system based on the concept of *profit* – the condition of the “before” – to a system based on the concept of *gratuitousness*, the condition of the “after”. Our current condition of inclusion in this passage is the “during”, which deserves to be analyzed with a critical eye.

The sharing of houses, cars, and meals – citing only some of the spheres invested by the sharing economy – is presented today as a more innovative experience, but above all *more* human than the experiences possible in traditional markets and capitalist companies (Bruni, 2018, p. 92). But why should the sharing economy represent a “more human” experience? Precisely because, according to its proponents, it is inspired by the concept of *gratuitousness*. Gratuitousness, as Bruni (2020) reminds us, does not need too many words: we all recognize it when we meet it and above all we all seek it and suffer when we lose it in ourselves or when it is betrayed. It is an extremely difficult concept to define, perhaps because it is an essential human dimension. “One can in fact live for a long time without markets and without income, but very little without giving and receiving *gratuitousness*” (Bruni, 2020, p. 76). Through social phenomena such as the sharing economy it is as if today we asked those human relationships inherent within economic exchange, which for a long time seemed repressed by capitalism and its profiting logic, to come out; to those human relationships “hidden in the shell of a relationship between things” (Marx, 1975, p. 90) – as Marx would say – “to come to light, to thaw” (Bruni, 2020, p. 52).

Gratuitousness, therefore, – that is, the horizon of transition – versus profit, is the starting point of the transition itself. What lies in the middle of this time frame is that set of intentional and unintentional effects, that result of criticality and contradictions that derives from the non-existence of gratuitous-profit polarization within the sharing economy, at least in the form that it has assumed in the current social landscape. Yes, because, on closer inspection, far from being two poles opposed to each other, gratuitousness and profit combine with each other, overlap, and confuse. Even when – and especially when – some elements do not appear fully visible and distinguishable, because we do not want to see them or because it is the system itself that does not allow us to see them.

Among the main effects of the sharing economy, we can include the birth of new markets in sectors that were previously governed by the logic of gratuitousness. We are, therefore, in the presence of a mixture between the logic of gratuitousness and profit (Bruni, 2018). Until a few years ago, to go on vacation we chose between a hotel or a friend who hosted us. If we wanted to go out for dinner, the alternative was between friends, family, and restaurant. If we had to make a trip, we could have relied on paid vehicles or hitchhiking. So, two distinct worlds and upright, in fact, by very different logics.

The sharing economy, rather than representing an alternative opposed to the traditional market, seems to recall its underlying logic. To go on holiday, for example, we can also be hosted by unknown families. To dine out there are people who organize dinners for us. To travel there is even a network that combines supply and demand of car rides. And much more.

On closer inspection, therefore, there is no logic very different from the classic market logic, for which it is possible to obtain a good or a service against payment. It is sociability that is combined with profit.

In this way, capitalism intends to appropriate the dynamics of gratuitousness and gift, because it recognizes the potential of these elements for its own objectives, but at the same time disregards their real constitutive dynamics. In other words, bringing the gift back into the contract. This, however, escapes by constitution the logic of the contract, avoids the constraints that come from the contract. The gift, in fact, is “transgressive and free” (Bruni, 2018, p. 99). This is why capitalism, while feeling the need to recall the gift and gratuitousness – as factors capable of activating the most intimate component of the person – in reality it fears enormously the devastating effects that derive from them for the functioning of contractual logic. “If companies accepted the register of the gift-gratuity”, says Bruni, “they would have to deal with workers who would follow their own intrinsic motivations, which would go beyond the limits of the contract [...]. They would be faced with people who would come out of the organizational charts, from the job descriptions, with much more life, therefore with much more confusion and noise as happens with living things” (Bruni, 2018, p. 99). It is the life of Simmelian memory that rejects as much as possible the cage of form (Simmel, 1908).

Among the contradictions of the sharing *economy*, which hinges precisely on the idea of sharing, there is also a practice of mutuality (i.e., without community implications, based on an anonymous and decentralized peer-to-peer mechanism) rather than a sharing based on strong social ties (Pedroni, 2019). This mutuality transforms sharing economy platforms into commercial activities where experiences are aggregated, but not necessarily collective.

### **3. Sharing economy and responsibility**

So how much do all these elements make the transition to the sharing economy responsible? And how much do they not make it, instead, irresponsible?

It is certainly not easy to define unequivocally what responsibility is called into question by the sharing economy. We know, in fact, that responsibility in the economic sphere can be declined in many ways. But surely some junctions emerge as central in this sense.

1) First of all, as has been said so far, a responsibility in terms of exploiting the most intimate components of the human dimension, such as gratuitousness, sharing, giving, and so on.

2) A responsibility, moreover, that we can define as labor law, or a responsibility in terms of work dynamics typical of the new collaborative technological platforms, which stand out as critical issues still to be addressed. Think of the case of drivers of the Uber platform, whose work is presented as flexible, fun, able to increase income and improve living conditions. The flip side of the coin is represented by the statements of the drivers themselves, who say they are often forced to say they are happy with their working condition that is characterized by precariousness (Bernardi, 2015). Uber also requires drivers to accept rides and not cancel them, imposes different conditions on them, monitors their performance, evaluates them and if it deems it necessary “punishes” them by deactivating them, or firing them (Staglianò, 2018). Or let’s think about the work dynamics generated by the fact that these are disintermediate practices and with respect to which for gratuitousness there are no “trade organizations, unions nor politicians of reference” (Bruni, 2018, p. 93).

3) Another profile of responsibility has to do with the well-known problem of respecting users' privacy. In the collaborative economy, although the platform often presents the offer of goods or services as a free service (where the good or service is offered without consideration for a price or consideration), the real consideration offered to the platform would consist of the personal data of users (who are recipients of the goods or services offered by / on the platform, or users supplying the same goods or services through the digital intermediation platform).

4) Finally, the issue of socio-economic inequalities and territorial divides. How does the sharing economy fit into this theme? It was analyzed how one of the examples of sharing economy that we all have most under our eyes, namely *sharing mobility*, can favor the processes of social inclusion for that part of the population with an income performed. However, it has been highlighted that shared mobility services are often the prerogative of people with a medium-high income. They also require knowledge of IT tools to be able to access them. It follows that such services become inaccessible for those who do not have the financial means and a sufficient degree of digital literacy (Smorto, 2020). The suburbs, where usually reside the subjects who are in the most disadvantaged conditions, present themselves as the most problematic territorial dimension for shared mobility activities because, for example, introducing *car sharing* stations turns out to be an uneconomic decision, which goes against the logic of profit, consequently, geographical, and socio-economic inequalities between center and periphery increase (Smorto, 2020).

If, therefore, the *sharing economy* is presented because of innovation, it is appropriate to ask for which subjects this innovation really takes place and, above all, under what conditions.

It is not a question – and this is a central point – of analysing processes that involve exclusively the economic sphere, but of examining processes that risk producing important effects on the whole of social life, as demonstrated by the colonization of every vital area by the economic logic, which advocates efficiency, incentives, speed – just to name a few –, such as the criteria to be used no longer and not only in the economic sphere, but even in the most private areas of the personal dimension.

It remains, therefore, to investigate, in what terms the sharing advocated by the sharing *economy* reflects the constitutive sense of the very dimension of sharing and if it does not often correspond to an instrumental use of the logic of sharing. That dimension of gratuitousness so sought after we are perhaps asking the wrong actor, namely the market. Perhaps, therefore, it is not enough to go back to including dimensions such as, precisely, sharing in the economic sphere without reflecting on the nature of the use of these resources.

#### 4. Conclusions

What future scenarios to imagine? Although we can be led to draw pessimistic conclusions, in reality the very logic of elements such as gratuitousness and sharing protects us, in a certain sense, from the total exploitation of these and other components so intimate by the capitalist mechanism. These resources, in fact, bear fruit only if they are not exploited. Thus, they do not allow, “by their very intrinsic nature, to be used for profit” and if this happens, they certainly “do not allow it for a long time” (Bruni, 2018, p. 15). Although, perhaps, the greatest innovation of capitalism will be given precisely by its ability not only to transform even gratuitousness into a commodity, but to do so in such a way that, for us, genuine gratuitousness is no longer distinguishable from fictitious gratuitousness. “It is true”, says Iannone about the “man of the organization” theorized by the sociologist Whyte, “that man should fight against the organization because the demands to abdicate to himself are continuous and powerful, it is also true that the more he comes to love the life of the organization, the more difficult he will find it difficult to resist these requests and even recognize them as such” (Iannone, 2019, p. 133).

It is up to us, therefore, to distinguish the sharing economy as an affirmation of a paradigm really alternative to the prevailing capitalist logic, from the sharing economy as a reiteration, but in a mystified and more hidden form, of capitalism itself.

Finally, to resume the initial question, that is, whether the sharing economy represents a responsible transition or not, the answer can probably only be “it depends”.

It depends on how we are willing to view this dimension of responsibility. If we consider it as “attention to work processes and their conditions [...]”, as “respect for the environment” (Iannone, 2006, pp. 47-48), as “inclusion”, as “individual and collective interest” (Iannone, 2006, p. 48) – just to mention some of the essential areas to be considered – then the sharing economy can be said to be a responsible transition.

Otherwise, when my neighbor starts organizing paid dinners at his house and I want to organize a dinner with some friends, to calculate the cost of dinner I will not use the market cost of the ingredients, but the higher opportunity cost of the neighbors' dinner. “And maybe one day I will conclude that it costs too much, and I will give up this free sociality or I will start asking for a price or at least a reimbursement of expenses”. “And we will lend the house to a relative of ours with an 80% discount on the current price in the sharing economy of housing. And then we will feel generous, and they will think they have received a gift.

And the poor will be increasingly excluded from homes, travel, meals, marginalized by a culture that no longer wants anything and no one without merit” (Bruni, 2018, p. 94).

In this case, perhaps, it will be necessary to reflect again on the criteria that make the sharing economy an irresponsible transition.

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