

Review of PhD thesis

Mgr.Ing Esther Martos Carrión „Historical-sociological analysis of the sharing Economy from its early digital foundations to the present“

My review is organised in the following steps: firstly, I am going to present my reading of the text and underline topics and argumentative claims which I find interesting and explorative; secondly, I shall point to weak points of the text – in terms of structuring the theme, methodological approach and formulation of findings; thirdly, I will pay my attention to the evaluation of the outcome of the thesis both in the terms of the formulated research goals, and the contribution of the thesis to respective field of social science studies (sociology of economy, historical sociology).

The structure of the thesis is giving a good insight in the field which is subject of the author's interest; the sequence of the topics is well reflecting assumed dependencies among the studied issues; the chosen research procedure indicates a mode of reflection; and the data background (figures, tables, references, enclosures with transcript of interviews) outlines an empirical dimension of the study. The verbal mode of the text is well supported by the graphic means.

The first chapter presents the aim of the study. It is done in two steps. Firstly, the author formulates her intention to assess the role of emerging practices of sharing economy in the frame of main economic business paradigm. In the next step a wide scope of related (macroeconomic) knowledge is focused on formulation of principal goals and specific issues (pp.15-16). In my reading the author aims to explore an emergence of collaborative aspects in business practices and their impact on transformations of capitalist market economy. The second chapter presents the applied methodological design which is justified both by advantages / disadvantages of available social science methods (pp.17-18) and by the cognitive requirements of the studied topic (p. 19).

Theoretical part of the thesis is covered by six chapters (chapters 3 – chapter 8). The chapter 3 (“Digital transformation”) deals with changes of ICT and economic and social implications of its digital mode. Formation of peer production platforms is assessed by diffusion of internet, its on-line mode and by its economic and social implications; specifically, by their open and participative influences, inclusive effects, value added impact and pull of altruistic inclinations. The Chapter 4 (Semantic transformations) is aiming to make use of current epistemological situation in social science, i.e. in current complex societies any new phenomenon should be reflected (and has been) by diversity of its concepts / definitions. An overview of concepts for certain period is presented with an aim to deduce from their views an “appropriate and accurate definition, in which essence of the sharing economy is

clearly reflected” (p.57). Twelve indicative characteristics of shared economy are formulated by help of analysis of definitions as formulated by widely known authors. That done, two more general knowledge claims have been formulated: (i) optimal consumption of underused physical objects and spaces together with shared access to knowledge and services are key features of sharing economy, and (ii) early stage of sharing economy was influenced by social and communicative factors while the latter stages (first decade of this century) have been affected by profit oriented aims and large companies. Fifth chapter is monitoring eco-system of sharing economy: number of concepts and practices is assessed in comparative way to identify similar and distinctive features to be typical for sharing economy. In fact, the border line between the digitally supported platforms of capitalist market valuation and between platforms with alternative valuation (e.g. reciprocity, collaboration, reputation) patterns and governance regimes has been described and assessed. It gives interesting and persuasive overview (and ideal types) of a social experimenting (and reflexivity) in the sphere of economic institutions (for-profit oriented type, for-sharing oriented type, as well as their hybrid mixtures). The causes, or factors of influence, are discussed in the chapter six (titled “Main drivers”). Again, the author refers to the standpoints of the selected experts dealing with sharing economy and explores what weight / rating they assign to the assumed factors (digital technology, growing role of access to networked platforms in relation to a need to own things, financial crises in 2008, and environmental concerns). An ambition to give a holistic explanation of factors influencing sharing economy is attained by a sort of quantitative discursive analysis – by assessment of the weight of assumed factors (codes) which is assigned to them by reputable authors in their concepts. Even if the thesis is following historical and sociological perspective and has been, so far and correctly, focused on structural issues, it gets oriented in the 7th chapter on the level of actions and actors, on the issues of motivations. Still, author counts with a distance between this actor-related perspective and structural issues: motives to action are mediated by received ideal types. Here again, interesting arguments are presented, how economic and social, individualistic and communicative motives are intensive/urgent and how they interact. For me the assessment of the environmental motives has been quite instructive: their impact is mediated by economic and community related reasons rather than exerting direct influence. According to the author’s statement it is the aim of the chapter eight (“Controversies and challenges”) understand “dark side” of sharing economy. Again, argumentative evidence is mostly related to received concepts, this time to the concept of a leading author who follows critical approach to role of sharing economy (T. Slee). According to his critical position the formation of sharing economy platforms is an integrative element of capitalist system and that is why specific problems of implementation of sharing economy (legislative, regulatory, cultural issue like social awareness, trust building) are important and should be studied. Slee’s arguments are critically assessed and well used in author’s argumentative track. Before the final conclusions of the

thesis are drawn the author is adding the findings of two case studies. They are monitoring growth rate of selected platforms by technical indicators (online visitors – web traffic - of sharing economy platforms - case study 1; size of Facebook groups with marketing practices – case study 2); each case is introduced by specific aim, methodology and limitations of the selected (quantitative) analysis. Findings of both cases should answer the question whether the practices of sharing economy have been growing or not.

The last chapter (11 Conclusions) sums up the findings of the research. Summary follows the sequence of single chapters and re-presents their findings: about the impact of digital technology on growth and evolution of sharing economy (hybrid form embracing sharing, commercial and social networking forms); about main characteristics of sharing economy in comparison with other business paradigms (circular economy, gig economy, gift economy, platform economy); about main drivers as discussed in the chapter 6; about the motivation background of users, structural obstacles in practices of sharing economy and their growth measured by traffic at selected platforms. Summary of findings is extended by discussion which is focused on knowledge claim of holistic story line, or predictive robustness of attained findings about practices of sharing economy. The following factors are mentioned to influence their development: dynamics of digital technology and its communicative impact (smartphones); abundance of assets and renewed recovery after financial crises; socio-cultural preferences of millennial generation; globalisation; and the efforts of large companies to make use of sharing economy practices. Their influence may be positive as well as negative but author claims that within these (contradictory) influences the sharing economy will be preserved in its function as a “better management of underused goods based on collaborative consumption” (p. 229). So far, the reading of the presented text which has - in my perspective - pointed to its positive side and interesting (interdisciplinary) contribution to this area of social studies.

In the next part of my review, as mentioned above, I am going to address (i) certain problems in the formulation and interpretation of the researched issues, and (ii) to draw attention to their alternative cognitive approaches. In my comment to former issue I shall follow the structure of the thesis; the latter assessment will follow the framework of the thesis, its structure and research design. That said, let us go to my critical comments. The first two chapters describe two essential dimensions of researching: subject of the research and the method which should guarantee validity of attained knowledge; in the situation of complex and open societies it is recommended that relevant theoretical concepts are used to specify the research problem and in the next step the hypothesis is formulated to be verified or falsified by research findings. The reviewed study goes a bit distinct way: it describes thematic pattern of studied subject (sharing economy) by several questions the reply to

which should help understand holistic interpretation of sharing economy (p.13); next, the subject is outlined in negative way – by the issues which will not be researched; and at last by the specific issues (p.16), which offer a more detailed look at thematic structure of the studied subject. The discussion to chosen research method is related to the above described “thematic field” of the study. Correspondingly, the formulation of research design is not problem specific, counts with the use of different methods and for this reason deals with general methodological issues of social science (different data sources, quantitative/qualitative methods). With reference to formulated subject and its holistic interpretation the chosen methodological design is understandable. But it does not justify qualify the attained findings to be social facts as the author often does (e.g. see pp. 13, 14, 44, 106, 229).

The text about digital transformation is well describing the origin¹ and development of digital transformations but rather in a perspective of its positive social (openness, participation, innovation, differentiation, wider distribution) and cultural impacts (formation of commons and altruistic orientations). Social studies of technology are, however, indicating, that cultural impact of current technology is not only direct and positive but also mediated by (and hidden in) various valuation patterns, discourses and legitimation claims which must be “discovered” before the positive impact of technology is assessed. The concept of common-based peer production assumes, that growing number of network or platform actors are “doing right thing” as well as assumes, that growing mass of “clicked” information is sufficient evidence for shaping of actors’ responsibilities and formation of commons. This statement could be understood as a first approximation to such normative issue only. Next comment is concerning the empirical stuff of the study – expert’s views about the studied issues (it is applied in the chapter four and the other chapters). I find it interesting and persuasive but see certain limits which are common to quantitative approaches to knowledge (discourse, opinion) assessment: counting assumes coding and normalizing. Using Kuhnian interpretation quantitative approach is appropriate for normal science (embedded knowledge and opinions) but not for a situation of paradigmatic change and cognitive conflicts and debates. Similar comment can be mentioned to chapter 6 in which the role of suggested drivers of sharing economy are ranked by views of selected experts. The presented findings are giving rich picture about interfaces among digital technology and emerging sharing economy and their cultural impact (on ideals of owning, freedom, autonomy, access to communal assets) but are not persuasive enough to verify a holistic explanation of the position and role of sharing economy. Similar doubt can be formulated also for the text in the chapter 5 where the ecosystem of sharing economy is discussed. Here, the institutional

¹ In my knowledge the “interneting” was used for the first time in the 40s of last century as a mean of coordination of the participation of US universities in the military program (Manhattan project).

environment of sharing economy is described in a narrow scope, rather in a scope of capitalist market economy and its (self-) regulatory principles (private ownership, competition and monetary valuation). This perspective is justified for an analysis of changes at the border line of economic institutions but is not sufficient to understand the role of other institutions and their specific (self-) regulatory principles, including their impact on (capitalistic) economic regulatory regime. The study of and understanding both the cultural implications of sharing economy and its holistic interpretation require a wider insight into functional and transformative issues of current societies (the interpretation of drivers is interesting but not sufficient).

My comment to the chapter 8 (Controversies and challenges) can be related to the second part of my comment – a proposal for alternative structural arrangement of the text. I am suggesting that this topic could find better cognitive position at the beginning of the thesis where the subject of the study has been formulated. The arguments of theoretical disputes could so better contribute to a different frame of the study: a holistic vision could be assessed as less productive and instead competing concepts could be used to monitor and assess different forms of impact of sharing economy on the dominating regulatory regime of capitalist market. An alternative approach which focused rather on impact- / consequences of sharing economy could see sharing economy as a social movement (rather than a system), as a field of social experimenting where positive (cultural) consequences are identified, performed and accepted while the other ones do not get through evaluative support. Such interpretation also helps better understand relationship between legislative measures and sharing economy activities and their legitimacy (discussed in closing chapters): legislative measures cannot be shaped *ex ante* to an envisaged issue; their power depends on an accumulated experiences (*ex post* knowledge) about the issue to be legalized; on the other hand the time without legislative rule, which is important for experimenting and innovation building, does not mean absence of any rules. The study is correctly documenting that certain level of social awareness and trust are important for acceptance of innovative role of sharing economy (pp. 183-192).

Summing up my review I can say the following: the thesis is giving evidence about author's capability to do research in the received scientific way: she formulates the subject of her research together with its main themes justifying the structure of the thesis; then the method of researching is explained; the main findings to the themes are presented in well-formulated chapters; the conclusion confirms the assumed systematic nature of sharing economy in a conditioned way: its socializing and communicative effects are partly forming an alternative to dominating capitalist market regulation and partly internalized by it. The first part of my review has underlined the findings which are in my reading related to the research aim of the author and the structure of the thesis but are also valuable for a wider field of social studies of current societies with dominating regulatory

role of the capitalist market. In the second part I have suggested alternative concept to the study of social transformation undergoing in the frame of sharing economy. The present thesis is well defendable, but before I suggest the rating of the thesis I would like to learn the response of the author to my comments.

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