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Ph.D. Thesis Review

Author : Esther Martos Carrión

Title : Historico-Sociological Analysis of the Sharing Economy
from its Early Digital Foundations to the Present

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Reviewer: Nicolas Maslowski, Ph.D.

General comments

Esther Martos Carrión wrote a Ph.D. thesis under the title of “Historico-Sociological Analysis of the Sharing Economy from its Early Digital Foundations to the Present” within the discipline of historical sociology. The character of this thesis is theoretical-analytical. It counts 218 pages of text and a list of references alphabetically classified of seven pages. The chapters are equilibrated. The work is rich in tables and figures. There are some formal weaknesses: the author abuses of bullet points, lists or elements that should be presented in the annexes, and disturb the normal reading of the text. For example, there are 10 pages of tables not interrupted (p.46-56), 22 following without interruption (p.199-206), or again 13 later (p.213-218). There are some confusing mistakes as well: we don’t know if there were 22 personal interviews (p.20), or 17 (p.142) or 16 (p.160). Despite these problems, the work is very rich in academic references and fulfill the formal requirement for a final thesis.

This PhD. Dissertation aims to mainly “embrace the in-depth analysis of the following subjects: social interactions via digital networks, consumer behavior, digital transformation, p2p exchanges, community building, social collaboration and reputation concerns.” (p.13-14). The topic is ambitious and, since the beginning, clearly limited to the internet era, that is a clear and logical choice.

The work is divided in 10 chapters: introduction, research methods, Digital transformation, Semantic transformation, Exploring the sharing economy in comparison with closely related socio-economic systems, Main drivers, Users’ motivations, Controversies and challenges, Case study 1: Monitoring the user evolution of 30 sharing economy platforms, Case study 2: Monitoring the user evolution of 13 buy/sell/trade Facebook groups in Europe. Conclusions.

The structure is very ambitious. The aim is to catch the social phenomenon, in a dynamical perspective, from various approaches. For the author, a technological transformation brought to a change of culture and of power relations, in interaction with individual motivations, what opens new debates. The case studies illustrate those phenomenon. The structure of this argumentation is clear and convincing. I will present them more precisely, underlining by the way some methodological and conceptual problems.

The methods are mixing qualitative and quantitative approaches, that is legitimate and largely accepted nowadays. Much more surprising is the fact that Esther Martos Carrión aims to provide case studies through the quantitative methods and constructs the final directing narrative through the analysis of the qualitative research (p.18 and p.25), when usually, the opposite is done: indeed, the qualitative approach normally serves to construct in-depth hypothesis and the quantitative method to verify this relative representativeness on a larger scale.

The primary sources are texts already published, semi-structured interviews and exchanges done during conferences (p.19). First, therefore, the author made a selection of publications on the topic to catch the interpretations of the evolutions. Then, she proceeded to 22 (?) personal interviews through skype, based on 12 questions. The way the “experts” were chosen is not totally clear. Esther Martos Carrión aims to transform those qualitative interviews into numeric tables used for quantitative analysis (p.21), believing that it is legitimate to combine the methods.

The secondary sources used are :

- web tracking systems, to observe how are changing the popularity of chosen web sites,
- research agenda and content outlines

The third chapter deals with the digital transformation. This chapter generally summaries the fact that the internet changed a lot the last 20 years, in parallel to the spread of the digitalization. The main findings presented are the facts that (p.39-40) :

- Internet is a mixture of information with commercial means and with informative means
- Internet became more and more inclusive
- Internet has influence on many aspects of the economic and social life.
- And that sharing economy is built on the digital realm, thanks to the
- p2p
- Computational and data-flow systems.

Internet changes as well as the traditional social relations by the creation of new platforms with new rules of the game (p.42-43). Therefore, Internet provoked a semantic transformation (chapter 4). Here, the author believes that internet gave the condition of possibility of the emergence of a new type of innovation, the sharing economy. The author presents a list of quotation of 17 authors with a short sum up of

their thought. She constitutes 12 characteristics of the sharing economy based on some arguments of selection of interviews. The methods of selections are not precised. The authors make a quantitative/ statistic analysis of these 12 criteria's in these 17 publications. The method is unclear and unjustified. The aims is confused as well, as the status of this source is not precised. Is it to make a critical analysis of the expert discourse, analyzing its evolution (like p.72-75) , or is she trying to understand the reality of the sharing economy by making statistics on arguments used by different authors, believing that the more repeated argument must be true (p.59-64)? Anyway, the representativeness of the literature or of the experts are not analyzed. We can, for instance, read that 79.3% of the arguments of those quoted books promote access over ownership (p.59).

Indeed, the sample is too small for a precise statistical analysis and for the discourse spread, as we should analyze as well the number of readers of each book or article, when some popular American authors and some other less known.

The author proposes then a sharing economy typology. It is a 5-pages long description of three books typology. It is not explained why those books have a different status than the 17 publications quoted earlier. But based on these three publications, Esther Martos Carrión proposes a figure and a fusion of the three models.

The 5th chapter explores the sharing economy in comparison with closely related socio-economic systems. It means its relations to the circular economy, the gig economy, the platform economies, the gift economy, the block chain system. This part is probably the less controversial of the thesis.

The 6th chapter is titled "Main driver". It seems to be an analysis of the evolution of the sharing economy based on differences of conception of the authors, depending on the date of publication of their analysis. The idea in itself is interesting, even though we could expect here a more developed methodological reflexion and sophistication. The author here presents an analysis on digital technologies as sharing tools, the shift from individual ownership to common access. There is here a belief that the 2008 financial crisis changed the sharing economy. But maybe it made it just more attractive for authors? What if the tools chosen were speaking more about the relation to a type of argumentation than about an objective evolution? The author here, without reflecting this possibility, believes that the sharing economy is transformed by the interconnection of its driver. She proposes here an interesting analysis of the relations between technology, access, ownership and excess of stuff, that looks like the beginning of a more economic analysis.

The chapter seven is dedicated to users' motivations. It is based on a statistical analysis of already mentioned 17 semi-structured interviews (p.142). We discover that 41.1% are motivated by facilities of digital technologies, 94.1 by saving or gaining money, 47% by the community experience, and 29.4% by environmental issues. A table (nr8) analyzes statistically the different issues that the sharing economy currently faces, on the basis of 16 interviews. One of the example concerns the airbnb case in European

cities and related issues. The problem of the status of a statistic analysis based on calculating the % of use of some arguments in a small number of interviews (done on a qualitative way) is real again. Actually, the author, pretending to use quantitative methods on these interviews, is not totally doing it (there is no margin of error calculated...). These qualitatively interviews are an interesting information on motivations and should be analyzed differently. The 30-50 minutes of interviews are really underexploited. And actually, an imprecisely given proportion of the motivations (like "a large part of the interviewed experts") would have been much more convincing to build hypothesis that a precise percentage ("79.1%"), confirming us that there is a confusion of status of this source.

The first case study, chapter 9, has explored 30 relevant platforms, according to their monthly number of clicks. 70% have increased their nr of click, 30% have problems. These findings seem to be intuitive for an actively growing and dynamically changing branch of the economy. There is a list of figures, presented without analysis (p. 199 to 206), that should probably be presented rather in the annexes.

The chapter 10 presents the case study nr2, analyzing the buy/sell/trade Facebook groups in Europe. The observed FB platforms had rather successful evolution as well. Once again, there are 6 pages of figures, one after another (P 213-219) that should figure in annexes as well. The findings were that: Facebook is progressively approaching sharing economy values and principles (220). The existence of those values and its analysis are not clear or convincing for me.

In her conclusions, the author presents a rich argumentation, and I will mention only a few points. The web constitution helped the sharing economy. The sharing economy embraces only a specific stage of the whole circular economy process, particularly the phase of consumption and reutilization of assets. She points out as well that the gift economy is comparable to this sharing economy. This sharing economy creates platform capitalism, sharing ownerships, platform cooperativism, public platforms. The for-profit sharing platforms are run by gig workers. The block chain technology develops a more collaborative sharing economy.

The work is very rich and documented. The author thinks by herself and tries to catch a complicated and very current topic. The research design is more problematic. Some esthetic elements of redaction could be improved.

My opinion on the level of this Ph.D. Thesis will depend on the oral defense of the author.



Nicolas Maslowski