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The New Sharing Economy: Demise of Social and Labor Movements?

Peterson Nnajifor¹

IDEA Research Center

University of Lorraine Metz, France

peterson.nnajifor@univ-lorraine.fr

Abstract

This paper examines the new sharing economy as a matrix for social movements. Drawing from recent studies on the sharing economy worker's psyche, and the business mindset of the sharing economy companies and investors, we demonstrate that successful social movements may be practically impossible in a sharing-economy-dominated future. This premise is based on the tenet that the dramatic changes in the relationship to work by millennials, who contrary to their predecessors shun long-term engagement and physical communication, may ultimately render collective social movement and labor struggles unfeasible.

Keywords

Collaborative consumption, collaborative economy, disruptive economy, gig economy, labor movement, new serfdom, peer economy, renting economy, sharing economy, social movements, Uberization.

1 Introduction

Social and labor movements have been the most important vectors of social, political, and economic changes in the last two centuries for workers and the population in general. These movements depended on close communication and mobilization of people, notably the working class and lower middle class, in order to fight for and obtain the rights that we enjoy today. Labor movements and trade unions in the current neoliberal economic order have been on the decline. But this decline may be precipitated further in the nascent economic environment where the sharing economy is expanding and its *modus operandi* going mainstream.

Unlike their predecessors, millennials are popularly called “digital natives” due to their penchant for social media and IT communication, but most importantly due to the fact that they grew-up with the Internet and modern ICT and social media (Hershatter and Epstein 2010), and seem to be less inclined to engage with their peers and co-workers at the workplace. They tend to shun one-on-one physical communication, largely preferring virtual communication means like e-mails, instant messaging, and other social media applications. This preference for virtual relations appears to lead to increased social alienation, which in turn would make labor organizing more difficult.

Businesses in the sharing economy, which depends largely on virtual platforms and digital communication systems amplify this virtual relation by increasingly dematerializing human communication. They, like traditional corporations, focus on the maximization of profits. However, their philosophy, which stresses their difference from traditional businesses and shirking corporate responsibilities towards their workers, the state and society, if left unbridled, will ultimately lead to the demise of labor and social movements.

This paper will attempt to show how the actions of the different stakeholders in the new sharing economy are contributing to this demise, and most importantly how the attitudes and work ethics of millennials radically differ from those of previous generations, and are contributing to the transformation

¹ Peterson Nnajifor is an associate professor of English studies at the Department of Foreign Languages applied to Business (Département des langues étrangères appliquées) of the University of Lorraine in Metz, France, and a research fellow at the IDEA Research Center. His research interests focus on the activities of transnational corporations, their evolution and influence on the society at different levels.

of labor unions and social movements. Moreover, we will see how these elements are interwoven and interact to produce a new labor, social, and economic environment, which will ultimately influence and affect all generations.

2 Definition of Terms

A definition of the key terms used in this study is necessary to fully grasp the issues in this paper.

2.1 The Sharing Economy

The sharing economy, considered a misnomer by many scholars (Eckhardt and Bardhi 2015; Morozov 2013; Nnaji for 2017), is the renting of products or services mainly through an online platform in exchange for cash. This new economic system and method increasingly covers different sectors, but the transportation, hospitality, and finance sectors are where its disruptive effects are most prevalent². It is a system dominated mostly by millennials, who by choice or reason are adopting the business philosophy of the owners, investors, and executives of these businesses.

2.2 Millennials

A specific delimitation of the age group included in the classification of millennials is quite difficult to obtain. Various scholars and observers have identified and included different age brackets. Joel Stein (2013), in his popular article “The Me, Me, Me Generation.” classifies them as the people born between 1980 and 2000. Jean Twenge (2010) refers to millennials as people born between 1982 and 1999 (Pg. 1120). In her book the *Generation Me*, she analyzes the attitudes and beliefs of the new generation, arguing that most of the characteristics among the millennials actually started with the children of the 1970s. Notably the importance accorded to the self, the individual, and the important place occupied by narcissism, privilege, and the sense of entitlement (Twenge 2014). Tapscott (2009) focused on those born between 1977 and 1997 (Pg. 16). The percentage of people from this age group in the workforce has been on the increase, and will continue as more of them come of age. They are, however, already the dominant group both as users and workers in the sharing economy, and will continue growing in that domain. With a population of 92 million in the US alone, they represent the largest generation in history when compared to the 61 million of Generation X and 77 million of the baby boomer generation (US Census Bureau 2017).

As the sharing economy continues expanding, it will inexorably continue influencing corporate philosophy and modus operandi, as well as socioeconomic and political life in the future. Millennials increasingly coming into the job market are bound to come under the influence of this new system. Given their upbringing and their attitudes to work and human relations, they may play into the hands of these companies by not joining labor unions for their protection and benefits. In order to understand this risk, let us briefly analyze the psyche and attitudes of the “traditional” worker compared to the millennial worker.

3 Traditional Worker Psyche and Attitude to Work

Traditional workers in this study are those from generations before the millennials. For the purposes of this study, they are workers that were born before the 1970s. A good percentage of these workers known as the silent generation (born between 1928 and 1945), followed by the baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), had either direct primary experience or indirect secondary experience through their parents and relations of the hardships of World War II and of the Great Depression. A lot of them had some sense of the difficulties and poverty inherent in the society before the post-war economic boom. They were given life lessons and morals largely based on the religious and traditional beliefs of the time.

² See Botsman 2010, Nnaji for 2017, and Schor 2014 for more exhaustive definition and information on this subject.

3.1 Strong Work Ethic

They were taught from infancy the importance of hard work, which was considered as the surest way to economic success. Workers were expected to be punctual, and to work hard for their employer. In return they would be paid for their seriousness and hard work, and ultimately be promoted to higher positions with higher salaries. A 2010 Pew study found that the dominant work values of the silent generation includes honesty, organizational loyalty, conformity and a work ethic that incorporates hard work and moral values (Alexander and Sysko 2012:63). The following generation, the baby boomers, differed little from their predecessors. They were reported to possess and value “a work ethic driven by success, ambition, high achievement and a loyalty to their careers and organizations (Ibid).

For these previous generations, there was the belief in a bottom-to-top career trajectory, which during the boom years was attainable for a lot of workers. People would start at the bottom of the professional ladder and at times the social class ladder, and through hard work, talent, and industriousness moved up to higher positions. They were able to better their lives, and to provide for their families. Work was considered sacred and people worked dutifully for their companies. They were generally living to work.

3.2 Personal Sacrifice

This is another important element that distinguishes the traditional worker from the millennial. To accumulate wealth and secure one’s future and that of the family (notably by gaining access to home ownership, offering a good education to their offspring, and preparing for the future through retirement savings, etc.), workers were ready to, and did, sacrifice their personal life and happiness. They toiled long hours in often uninteresting and thankless jobs with the belief and hope that their sacrifice would pay off later.

3.3 Importance of Interpersonal Relations

These generations of workers, depended a lot on physical, one-on-one interpersonal communication and relations at the work places. They interacted with colleagues at work, extended family members, and neighbors. They participated actively in the activities of their communities and their companies. This made it possible for them to establish extensive informal social networks they depended on in times of need. The individual was an integral part of the group and the community, and was identified as such. These strong personal ties and involvement with other people were necessary in times of crises at home, or at the workplace when collective action became the only logical option.

Collective action was accepted as the best way of treating difficult and complex problems. This was why the labor unions were very important. The personal, professional, and social networks made joining labor unions easy and natural. Workers recognized labor unions as the principal avenue of channeling their grievances and protecting their interests. They availed themselves of the collective actions of the labor unions to mobilize coworkers, and confront company to achieve more rights and better working conditions.

The unions negotiated and obtained long-term guarantee for workers. This helped workers to better plan their future in and out of the company. It gave them the assurance of continuous future income that was a guarantee and security for mortgages and loans from financial institutions. Unions also won the right to challenge arbitrary dismissals, and the establishment in most developed economies of industrial tribunals where workers are judged by their peers in matters of conflict between them and their employers. Labor unions were, and remain in some countries, the most important pressure group that lobbies governments and employers in order to obtain labor friendly legislation and the protection of labor rights.

Many an employer have found their policies against the interests of their workers discarded due to the mobilization of unions. Thus, despite the criticisms against organized labor unions, which are valid at times, unions still remain the most efficient means of fighting the innumerable and often horrendous attacks against workers’ rights by employers and the state. Labor unions and social movements they

organize are recognized by traditional workers as the most reliable means of protecting their rights (Duffy 2015). Now, let us compare these beliefs and attitudes to those of the millennials.

4 Millennials' Psyche and Attitude towards Work

Several scholars have identified a list of common characteristics associated with millennials. In order to avoid oversimplification of the complex question of generational differences and specificities, we have chosen to use only the most common characteristics across the major studies. It is noteworthy that these characteristics cut across geographical and cultural differences. Thus, in the US this generation has been popularly labelled the "Me Generation." In Japan, they are an important part of the *Shinjurui* (new human beings) (Mead and Andrews 2009:69).

...who came of age during the 1970s and afterwards. They have had little or no experience with the postwar traumas their parents encountered. Quite the contrary, they have experienced only awareness of Japan as a rich country, success and the easy life. For this generation, hard work, devotion of oneself to the company and country, and the sacrifice of the present for the future are alien concepts. They have travelled abroad and seen other lifestyles, especially American, and they want to live the good life (Herbig and Burstuff 1995).

In China, owing to the government's One Child policy, a good percentage of them are labelled the "Little Emperors" because they were the only child in their families and this made a difficult situation even more complex. Liu Yi, a Chinese author and part of this generation stated:

We are the unfortunate ones, because we are only children. Fate destined us with less happiness than children from other generations. We are also the lucky ones—with attention from so many adults, we skip over childish ignorance and grow up. Simple-minded, we are unable to see the realities of life, and the lack of burdens denies us depth (Lim 2010).

4.1 Millennials' Work Ethic

Unlike the preceding generations millennials appear to differ on the issue of work ethic. They have been found to seek a work-life balance where personal and individual time are predominant compared to professional demands (PWC 2011). Personal liberty is considered more important than career success. They appear to abhor a professional life that limits personal enjoyment of leisure activities at or outside the workplace. Working hard without enjoying life is shunned by the majority of this group. Consequently, they are not keen on permanent long-term contracts that will tie them down to unfulfilling and uninteresting jobs even if the income is relatively fair. Unlike their predecessors, hard work and lengthy hours are nothing of which to be proud. Instead, flexibility and virtual presence at the workplace are valued (Pînzaru et al. 2016).

Next, they seem not to be keen on acquiring and owning the popular "badges of success," such as property, but expect access to luxurious, comfortable facilities and equipment such as comfortable accommodation, cars, electronic gadgets, clothing, etc.

Generally, they prefer to start somewhere at the top of the professional and social ladder and move up rapidly instead of starting from the bottom like their predecessors, and moving up gradually. They refuse strict hierarchical divisions and protocols and prefer an environment of relative equality, openness, and less hierarchical corporate protocols. They are said to be more tolerant of social and racial differences, more ecologically aware, and more accepting of diversity.

On the more personal side, the millennials are presented as relatively more narcissistic, self-absorbed, and with a high sense of entitlement compared to preceding generations (Twenge 2014). This belief in a certain sense of entitlement was highlighted in Saba (2007), cited in Alexander and Sysko (2012:129), noting "the mentality of entitlement to consist of short term financial goals, a sense of privilege, anticipation of long-term financial gains and an effort to command, not earn, respect."

Finally, all things being equal, they prefer salaried employment to self-employment.

Other scholars and observers (Gani 2016) have offered opposing and contradictory opinions regarding the findings above. Nonetheless, we need to briefly analyze the reasons underlying these characteristics one by one.

4.2 Synthetic Analysis of Some of these Points

First, the idea that millennials are less hard working compared to previous generations could be explained by the immense changes that occurred in the corporate world in the last few decades. Most notable among these changes are the ICT revolution, the automatization and increased use of robots in factories and offices around the world. These changes have made the necessity of physical human presence at the work less important. The younger generation, the millennials, grew with these changes, and integrated it rapidly in their world outlook unlike their predecessors. This new generation of workers do not consider it overly important to work too hard and spend long hours on positions and assignments that could be accomplished differently using new technologies and processes. The ICT revolution has made it possible to communicate instantaneously with colleagues, collaborators, and clients no matter where they may be in the world and at any time. For millennials, this means that reporting to the office each morning, and spending hours there make little sense since they can work from anywhere. What matters for them is getting the job done and meeting the deadlines, not necessarily being physically present at the workplace. Of course, this way of seeing work is applicable only to some sectors and some positions, and inapplicable in others.

Second, having witnessed firsthand the lives of their parents, who most of the time sacrificed their personal and family life in order to succeed in their professional life, most millennials have come to believe that the prize is not worth the price. The fact that they were brought up in a society that inculcated in them the importance of doing what you like and not what you must; a society that taught them that they are special beings living in a free and equal society, who can attain whatever goals they set for themselves, and that nobody is above others; and the fact that they know instinctively that their parents and close relations are always there to come to their rescue in case of hardship (Morrow 2008:130) have made them shun employment that demands sacrifice of their personal liberty, that consider them as common beings, and cannot offer them the satisfaction that they were taught to expect from life. It is worthy to note at this juncture that the various economic crises in the capitalist system of economy have not helped to allay the fears of workers in general and millennials in particular. The crises have shown that working hard and dutifully for your company would not guarantee your success, and that even your hard-earned savings and investments can easily be lost as was shown during the last financial and economic crises of 2007/2008. All these coupled with the fact that the distribution of wealth is highly lopsided in favor of the immensely wealthy, comfort millennials in their attitude toward corporate careers and work in general.

Third, the high level of education that they obtained has made millennials the most educated generation in history. This high level of education coupled with the availability and easy access to strategic information have made it difficult to justify the old maxim of starting from the bottom and making it to the top. Millennials expect to start their professional career at the level of responsibility and remuneration relatively equivalent or in line with their academic qualification. This may explain their tendency to shun low-level positions in organizations even at entry level.

Fourth, their preference for electronic and virtual means of communication as opposed to physical one-on-one communication may be directly linked to their upbringing and the society they live in. They were born into a world of information and communication technology and social media; a world of virtual digital communication. It seems normal for them to bring that world to the workplace despite the disruptions and difficulties this may bring.

Fifth, millennials have seen the upsides and downsides of their parents sacrifice for their professional careers in order to acquire the badges of success through long-term mortgages, savings for children education, and retirement plans. Having witnessed firsthand the massive failures of some of those plans due to economic crises and corporate restructuring policies, millennials believe those costly acquisitions

and long-term investments are not worth the price they need to pay in the form of long years of toil for an organization that does not necessarily bear their interests at heart. This also appears to be the underlying reason for their lack of interest in long-term business contracts and personal engagements. It is noteworthy here to mention the result of a 2012 study that reported that only 15 percent of millennials considered the purchase of a house extremely important in their life, while 25 percent would only purchase one if they really needed it (Goldman Sachs 2016:3). In that same study, only 30 percent intended to purchase a car in the near future, and only 23 percent are married and living on their own, as opposed to 56 percent of the same age bracket in 1968 (Ibid: 2).

Finally, their preference for salaried jobs instead of self-employment is related to the reason above concerning the price to pay to succeed. This last point however needs to be nuanced because the majority of workers in the sharing economy, where workers are classified as independent contractors, ergo quasi-entrepreneurs, are millennials as we mentioned earlier, but it is still difficult to ascertain that these independent contractors chose their contract by choice rather than by socio-economic obligation.

All these reasons have led to immense upheavals in the social, political, and economic situation for workers in general, and for millennial workers in particular, leading the latter to adopt certain attitudes. These changes in attitude and beliefs is starkly seen in their position towards labor unions, social mobilization, and collective action in general as we are going to see below.

5 Millennials, Labor Union, and Collective Action in the Sharing Economy

Labor union membership has been on a continuous decline for decades now due to various reasons. However, this decline may be nothing compared to the risk of the literal demise of unions dominated by the ideologies of the sharing economy. The following statistics from the UK Office of National Statistics, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the International Labor Organization may help us to better apprehend the arguments in this paper.

Labor union membership has been on a steep decline since the late 1970s in most developed economies with the exception of Norway, Canada, Belgium, and a few other countries where union membership is slightly higher (ILO 2014). A survey conducted by the United Kingdom's Office of National Statistics and published and commented by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (DBEIS) noted that trade union membership in the UK had fallen by 4.2 percent in 2016 alone, bringing union membership to a record low. UK labor unions lost 275,000 members in 2016, bringing the total number of members to 6.2 million (Topping 2017) compared to a peak of 13.2 million members in 1979. Trade union leaders in the UK attributed this huge loss to "loss of good-quality jobs in the public sector and rise of the gig economy" (Ibid). This decline is witnessed across all sectors, with the private sector shedding 66,000 union members, bringing it to a low of 2.6 million, while public-sector union membership fell by 209,000 bringing it down to 3.6 million.

In the US, according to statistics from the International Labor Organization, trade union membership has fallen from 17,717,379 in 1983 to 14,528,000 in 2013 (ILO 2014). Figures from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics indicate that 25 percent of the labor force in 2011 were millennials. This group is expected to represent 75 percent of the US labor force by 2030. However, only 4.2 percent of the 16-24 age bracket (millennials) were labor union members in 2013, which is the lowest representation among all generations of workers (Duffy 2015). This is quite striking when compared to the 55-to-64 age bracket that represents the highest rate of membership at 14.9 percent of union members.

This huge generational difference in labor union membership is what prompted us to warn about the demise of labor and social movements in the near future dominated by the ideologies of the sharing economy. Steve Turner, a UK labor union leader observed that "good jobs tend to be unionized but when they go they are replaced by insecure work, which is difficult to organize," (Topping 2017). As more and more good jobs are being destroyed and replaced by precarious ones, the difficulties encountered by labor unions will multiply. This coupled with the millennials preference of virtual communication over physical communication (PWC 2011:9) would ultimately play into the hands of the owners and investors of the sharing economy and some employers in general who have shown their willingness to exploit every opportunity and every legal loophole to maximize their profits at the expense of workers. The cases of

several sharing economy companies, notably that of Uber and its founder, serves as a case in point to illustrate this.

6 Sharing Economy Executives' and Employers' Psyche

Due to its rapid expansion and highly disruptive business practices, Uber, the ride-hailing platform and company, has come to embody and symbolize the epitome of sharing economy companies and organizations. Its co-founder and previous CEO Travis Kalanick's mantras, "growth above all else" and "take no prisoners" (Isaac 2017) give a brief idea of the industry's state of mind, which has been seen in the business practices of the company and of the sector in general. Several legal suits are ongoing in different parts of the world against the unscrupulous activities of sharing economy companies with Uber at the forefront. *The New York Times* portrait of Mr. Kalanick listed the companies' "borderline business practices" including duplicity (against Apple), sabotaging competitors (Lyft), surge pricing, sexual harassment, and the use of a secret tool called Greyball to trick some law enforcement agencies, etc. (Ibid).

Other sharing economy companies such as Airbnb are equally facing a lot of legal procedures against them. Notably for unfair competitive advantage, discrimination, monopolistic tendencies, unfair labor standards, and poor treatment of their collaborators. These companies generally refuse to recognize the rights of their collaborators as bona fide workers, thus depriving them of the labor protections and benefits to which they would otherwise be entitled. In addition, they refuse to be classified as traditional companies, making it possible for them to refuse to pay corporate taxes as real companies do. Simply put, these companies want to enjoy the financial and social benefits of companies, but without any of the accompanying responsibilities.

In essence, they are creating a new economic system with practices inherited from the rugged capitalists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries whereby the company owners reap immense profits and wield immense socio-economic and financial power, while their workers barely subsist on meagre wages (Nnaji for 2017). The laissez-faire policies or absence of policies on the part of the government protects them. For now, it has proven very difficult to challenge these companies. Individual workers trying to defend themselves against these companies have often found themselves outmatched by their highly efficient legal teams. Those workers that had better cases have essentially been bought out by the companies through out-of-court settlements and payouts³, a strategy that conveniently avoids judicial decisions on their practices and their unscrupulous actions. The only main obstacle they have are the labor unions who have continued mobilizing their members and the general public against the nefarious practices of these companies. These efforts have pushed governments and states to start working on legislations to check the unbridled practices of these companies.

7 Future Effects and Consequences

However, in the current labor environment where many workers shun labor union membership, and the future trend in a millennials-dominated labor force where precarious short-term contracts may be the rule, millennial workers may not be motivated enough to mobilize and fight for their rights. You fight when you believe your destiny is linked with that of your company through long-term contracts. Millennials generally do not expect to stay for years in a single company as their parents did, so they may not necessarily consider it worth their while to fight for better conditions in a job they consider a gig. In addition, their preference for virtual communication and artificial human contact would make it practically impossible to muster the necessary opposition to challenge and fight against the unfair practices of these sharing companies and the corporate world in general. All things being equal, these workers appear to be prepping for a life of social and professional alienation that would render real labor mobilization and social movements basically impossible. Unfortunately, the increasing precarious jobs and massive destruction of jobs due to the use of more robots and job automation systems will most

³ See Kaine and Josserand (2016) for more exhaustive information on sharing economies litigation.

probably lead to more mass unemployment. That would empower investors and employers to the detriment of workers.

If left unchecked, the short-term and long-term consequences would most probably be disastrous for all. The demise of unions would lead to the situation, like in the past, where every worker would be on his or her own. Zero-hour contracts, independent contractors, temporary contracts, and other precarious contracts would become the rule rather than the exception. The US Government Accountability Office reported that around 40 percent of workers are contingent employees who lack full time employment (Lobel 2017:5). Companies aiming for the maximization of their profits would most likely find it more lucrative to adopt the sharing economy model popularly known as “urbanization.” This would make it possible for them to pay even less taxes and less wages to their work force. Less taxes means less money for government budgets needed for social and economic policies, less resources and funding for social welfare and social good, and less construction and maintenance of public infrastructure. Precarious jobs and less pay and benefits for workers due to the shirking of their responsibilities by companies mean less social protection for all. Unbridled expansion of precarious jobs for millennials would augur well neither for the millennials nor for other generations who would ultimately depend on the contributions of the younger generation for their pensions, social security allowances and health insurance. Precarious jobs cannot fund good retirement plans in the future. In essence, inaction today would lead to the destruction of the social, economic and political contract that maintains peace and security in our societies.

8 Conclusion

The brief analysis presented in this work led us to the conclusion that the various factors that we saw from the changing attitudes across generations in the society and at the workplace could not and should not be treated lightly because they portend dire consequences for the society in the future. We are already experiencing aspects of their effects today that could give us an inkling to their full ramifications tomorrow. The current decline in labor union membership appears to be a precursor of things to come and should be responded to with all the seriousness that it requires. Francis Duffy could not have put it better when he states that:

The union movement has a rich tradition and espouses universal values: a living wage, work with dignity, mutual caring, and achievement through collective action. Unions have conducted themselves democratically for over a century; everyone from the union president to the shop steward is elected. Few of our other institutions can say as much. Employers might even rue the day the last union folds, for with it will go a vital buffer protecting them from the conflicts that arise naturally between worker and owner (Duffy 2015:6).

Several actions, we believe, must be taken to avoid the catastrophic consequences of a sharing-economy-dominated corporate world. Serious mobilization by workers in general will help in educating and creating awareness among the general public and the millennials in particular. This could be achieved with well-planned organizing at all levels and strategic confrontations through industrial actions and general strikes in order to pressure corporate and public decision makers into positive and worker friendly policies. But most of all, serious rethinking and reevaluation of our fundamental values concerning job in all its facets, be it individual, social, economic, gender, political, or religious, must be undertaken in order to redefine its importance and place in our society. This is simply because the great upheaval ahead, where over 40 percent of jobs are slated to be lost to automation and robots alone, cannot be apprehended and tackled using the parameters and paradigms of the present. Finally, further research on the issues touched in this paper is wanted, and needs to be urgently undertaken.

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