Workshop MAB20

Proliferating micro-entrepreneuring technologies
Overflowing the governance of urban (re)production with the proliferation of socio-economic dissidences

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Our urbanities now account for the work of online peer-to-peer platforms like Airbnb. These complex assemblages of matching algorithms, terms and conditions, pricing and advertisement tools, marketing campaigns and ordinary homeowners affect the city residents live in in beneficial and controversial ways. Beyond the technical and material interference in the (re)production of urban life, it is also a pervasive assemblage of micro-entrepreneurship discourse that (re)fashions our shared comprehension of urban livelihoods. This spur in diverging careers, marketizing practices, sources of value first challenges modes of governability before generating riches.

**CCS CONCEPTS • **Empirical studies • Sociology • Economics

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INTRODUCTION

Airbnb's mission is to "create millions of micro-entrepreneurs" (Chesky, 2013). Over the past decade, online peer-to-peer (P2P) platforms like Airbnb have brought marketplace technologies to the masses. Property owners and managers have become cyborg city dwellers, populating urban areas worldwide with short-term rental offers. The negative socio-economic externalities on local communities are now well documented in the literature (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2015; McKee, 2017) and provide evidence for ongoing discussions on local regulation (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015; Dolnicar, 2018; Frenken & Schor, 2019). However, micro-entrepreneurship is much more than just an economic activity. It constitutes a 'social technology' involving material and discursive arts of world-building (Rindova, Barry, & Ketchen, 2009; Beyes & Holt, 2020; Jones & Spicer, 2009; Hjordt & Holt, 2016). The rise of P2P platforms like Airbnb will affect the (re)production of civic spaces beyond the mere reconfiguration of the built environment or the diversion of economic value flows. By adding extreme heterogeneity to typologies of space, transactional practices and valuation protocols, the democratisation of micro-entrepreneurial technologies bears both positive and disruptive potentials for local governance.

One could argue that the online P2P platforms operating across the globe represent nothing more than opportunistic neoliberal models (McKee, 2017). Nothing more than "neoliberalism on steroids" (Morozov, 2013). City centres were already the speculative ground of wealthy global elites and corporations (NYT, 2020; Sassen, …). Urban and regional governance bodies are already equipped with legal authorities, tourism departments and planning regulations to regulate the use of residential units and protect rental market prices. After only a decade, legal negotiations between local authorities and international platforms have already begun to produce updated and consistent legal frameworks to tax homestay activities, ensure visitor safety and neighbourhood peace, or curb the expansion of short-term rental offers in cities (Hajibaba & Dolnicar, 2017; von Briel & Dolnicar, 2020). In addition, the hotel industry and property managers involved in these markets may contribute to professionalise the whole market and, in so doing, institutionalise good practice, representative bodies or labour protection mechanisms.

However, viewing online P2P platforms as mere marketplaces is misleading. The distributed platforms that enable P2P hospitality activities are actors equipping ordinary residents and non-professional homeowners with advice on hospitality services, market information, pricing techniques, and even access to the many professional outsourcing services for cleaning, photography, customer service or insurance (Schor & Cansoy, 2019; Ridchardson, 2015). In addition, platforms adjust and optimise the matching of foreign travellers with local people or neighbourhoods (Dredge & Gyimòthy, 2017; Hamari, Sjöklint, & Ukkonen, 2016). In doing so, their algorithmic technologies (re)produce forms of discrimination and gentrification (Hajibaba & Dolnicar, 2017; Ladegaard, 2018). Beyond algorithmic work, platform operators are actors who reconfigure neighbourhood categories, invest in a network of non-profit activities, federate individual host clubs or sponsor Olympic games. The rhizomatic and pervasive effects of these global players can be seen right down to the development of local regulations regarding housing, tourism, even employment or transparency of user data (Altura, Hashimoto, Jacuby, Kanai and Saguchi, 2020). The market assemblages of P2P hospitality economies challenge the (re)production of urban spaces, urban governance or urban livelihoods. Taking the recent Airbnb IPO as an indicator, this assemblage has a high degree of attractiveness despite the strict travel restrictions following the COVID-19 pandemic.

This short article wishes to focus on micro-entrepreneurship as another area of concern for urban worlds' (re)making. More than just the renovation of vacant spaces, outdated residential regulations or mass-produced tourist experiences, a platform like Airbnb claims to create millions of micro-entrepreneurs (Chesky, 2013). By facilitating the proliferation of micro-entrepreneurs, platforms do more than equip homeowners and residents with business-like tools and advice. They stimulate diverging and multiplied entrepreneurial practices.

The literature recognises that entrepreneurship is not limited to the heroic figure of the Schumpeterian entrepreneur (Rindova et al., 2009; Beyes & Holt, 2020; Jones & Spicer, 2009; Hjordt & Holt, 2016). Apart from the fast-growing business creation practices of a few, entrepreneurship is a widely shared practice (Aldrich & Ruef, 2018). Everyday entrepreneurship is tactical and occurs in all sorts of places, in informal settings, at home, in refugee camps, ... Indeed, beyond the production of utility through risk-taking, entrepreneurship consists of an ability to interpret opportunities in context and make sense of the world as it happens (Sarasvathi, 2002). The recent literature also recognises that entrepreneurship is less of an individual trait than it is often portrayed. Instead, entrepreneurship is distributed in context, an art of doing with what is at hand (Hjorth, 2005). It is a verb, entrepreneuring (Steyeart, 2007; Rindova et al., 2009). In this sense, micro-entrepreneurship is a 'social technology', an art of creating distributed worlds among socio-material assemblages, strategically directed by discursive assemblages. Micro-entrepreneurship can be conceptualised as more than a human object.

When a platform operator like Airbnb pushes for the creation of millions of micro-entrepreneurs, it contributes to the proliferation of this social technology (or a particular set of it, oscillating between

neoliberalism and cooperativism). Observation of non-professional hosts reveals that they avoid operating as purely commercial entities and invent alternative modes of accommodation (Ikkala and Lampinen, 2015; Schor and Cansoy, 2019). These include gift-giving, creating spaces, opening free cafés for neighbours, etc. Some host groups create 'clubs' of their own or forms of cooperatives (e.g. see FairBnB, HotelduNord). Local authorities may consider rewarding the creation of local customs or evaluating the contribution to the local ecosystem. Although these non-economic activities open up avenues for (re)inventing local sociabilities, they also represent an increase in the heterogeneity of forms of spaces, practices or value generation. By venturing into liminal spaces, non-professional hosts produce and recover non-standardised and ephemeral modes of functioning. The counter-effect of increased creativity is an increase in heterogeneity in a given urban area. As micro-entrepreneurship discourse gets appraised and legitimized widely, this resulting surge of diversity may overflow current modes of urban governance.

CONCLUSION

The effects of P2P platforms activities that disrupt the (re)production of the urban must be understood as more than mere accommodation marketplace mechanisms. Although ruling on residential unit orientation and neighbourhood composition are needed, P2P economies are about micro-entrepreneurial social technologies more than mere platformisation. Said otherwise, beyond the material assemblages of platform activities, the discourse legitimising liminal micro-entrepreneurial practices produce both creative spaces, alternative sociabilities and customs of hospitality, as well as a wide proliferation of constantly divergent practices, independent actors or distinct ways of accounting for value creation. The P2P hospitality economy is a material-discursive assemblage that may nurture non-capitalist lifestyles or overwhelm local urban governance capacities.

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