Book Review

Tom Slee

What's Yours Is Mine: Against the Sharing Economy
Toronto, Canada: Between the Lines, 2016

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

From the sixteenth-century Levellers through the nineteenth-century utopian socialists and on to present-day dissenters from neoliberalism and globalization, idealists of every description have dreamed about and occasionally taken abortive steps to implement new, equitable and emancipatory social arrangements. They have sometimes championed not merely equality and equity, but the very existence of private and even personal property, preferring a society in which people would hold "all things common." In these circumstances, everyone would contribute to the common weal according to their abilities, and they would "make distribution unto every man according as he had need." The preceding quotations, by the way, are not from a tract by the ever-optimistic Karl Marx, though similar sentiments can be found in his far-famed *Critique of the Gotha Program* (1875); rather, they are from the fourth chapter of the Christian New Testament's *Book of Acts*, verses 32 and 35. Call it Early Christian Economics 101.

Currently, somewhat less romantic, but nonetheless impressively ambitious efforts are once again being made to encourage a "sharing economy" (henceforth, I shall follow Slee's lead and refrain from the repetitive use of terms such as "alleged" or what he correctly calls "annoyingly frequent scare quotes; instead I will express my scepticism or, at least, my sensitivity to ambiguity by capitalizing the Sharing Economy.

The phrase relates to proposed innovations or, perhaps, reclamations of earlier egalitarian principles that have been promoted in such up-to-date forms as "charity-style" food banks and volunteer medical clinics as well as in local lending societies in which neighbours purchase household appliances or gardening tools for common use. It also applies to more complex practices such as consumer co-ops, civic crowdfunding projects, resident-owned condominium apartments, worker-owned businesses, credit unions and other well-established institutions that fall far short of "commune"-ism, but that nonetheless provide producers and consumers with viable alternatives to "exploitative" private owners and "bureaucratic" state controllers of the means of production and distribution of goods and services.

For the most part, efforts in support of sharing are motivated by the individual savings that can be accrued by pooling wealth, exercising participative management and "grass roots" control, and cutting out the "middle man" in programs of mutual assistance. The basic goal is to avoid providing profits to big business and submitting to government regulations by conducting transactions among a society of friends or, at least, putative equals. In some cases, modernized barter systems are in place. In others garage, yard or street sales achieve similar purposes on a small scale. Some participants, however, go several steps further and speak of the values of social justice, democracy and environmental sustainability as crucial aspects and aspirations of the Sharing Economy. So far, so good.

Among the many examples of larger scale social innovations are the Japanese town of Kamikatsu, which will soon become the country's first Zero Waste community as a result of a local recycling and repurposing program (Johnson, 2016). It is complemented by Berkeley, California's achievement of 80% waste reduction due to grassroots mobilization (Johnson, 2016). Likewise, by combining apparently different, but largely complementary objectives, urban and even regional initiatives can revitalize the venerable notion of "laboratories for democracy." Even on this larger scale, however, there can be keen awareness of the inherent dangers of overgeneralization, routinization and what Kenneth Burke (1961) famously warned against: "the bureaucratization of the imaginative."

So, as Gar Alperovitz (2016) writes, some of the most successful modern innovators are opting out of grand narratives with immense economic planning strategies and government welfare programs in favour of more manageable efforts to restructure both economic regulation and social relations on a more human scale.

> Innovation, by its nature, needs to be nimble and quick … [unbounded] by the bureaucracy that can be present in large organizations. – Jo-anne Marr, 2016

Alperovitz has been instrumental in encouraging successful worker-owned, locally-sourced and community-responsive projects such as the Evergreen enterprises in Cleveland, Ohio (Alperovitz, Williamson & Howard, 2010). He applauds those who are "bringing a similar idea to life as they experiment with … 'bio-regional efforts that anchor economic, social, and environmental developments in natural regions can be found in places as diverse as the Connecticut Valley and the Ozark Mountains. The Kansas Area Watershed Council, for example, supports sustainable development in the prairie region through a range of projects and community-building events" (Alperovitz, 2016).

What distinguishes these projects and programs is their commitment to success without undue concern about whether they fit nicely within either public or private corporate models, but rather whether they are pragmatic and participative in their attempts to involve citizens in decisions that don't merely affect their lives, but also engage them in formulating action that will solve problems. Contrary to both the market model of private enterprise and the customer satisfaction metrics of the no-long-so-new public satisfaction calibrations, genuinely innovative and effective enterprises are non-formulaic in approach and non-ideological in formulation. Tom Slee, I am sure, is on board with all of this.

In *What's Yours Is Mine* (and despite the explanatory subtitle, *Against the Sharing Economy*), he shows himself to be acutely sensitive and sympathetic to the powerful attraction of "sharing" as a moral precept and as a viable tactic for humane, equitable, environmentally responsible and participatory social development; but, there is a hook. Tom Slee's defining insight is that he sees the reality behind the cleverly deployed euphemism. Sharing is assuredly a fine principle, but it has been overused and misapplied by individuals and institutions who cunningly use it to describe modes of exchange that are inspired and promoted in interests that have little to do with reciprocity, communalism or economic justice and, in many cases, either seek to replace official public services or, more likely, avoid government regulations in the interest of community health and safety.

I

Tom Slee has seen enough naked emperors to distinguish between inspirational rhetoric and laudatory reviews on the one hand, and avaricious motives and reprehensible practices on the other. Avaricious interests have been known to profit from compassionate, humane and egalitarian impulses in the past; so, caution is always to be recommended when assessing innovations that seem too good to be true. In Slee's case, moreover, we are not encountering a chronically dyspeptic misanthrope seeking cynically to tear down aspirational institutions for the sake of his own narcissistic self-importance and sense of moral superiority. Tom Slee really cares about making things better, offers a grounded explanation of why they often aren't, and makes some very convincing arguments about how they might be; but, he pulls no punches and that can make excessively optimistic people and potential predators uncomfortable.

What's Yours Is Mine has correctly been described as a lucid and rigorous dismantling of the façade of the sharing economy. It offers a finely honed critique of businesses such as Lyft, Airbnb, TaskRabbit, Uber and other enterprises that claim to be reshaping the corporate capitalist economy in the interest of consumers and the transformation of the corporate economy to make it better attuned to individual needs and wants, more flexible and efficient and, of course, less expensive all the while providing workers with tremendous opportunities to shape their employment to their personal lifestyles.

Using smart business models, innovators from Bill Gates and Mark Zukerberg on down claim to deliver enormous technological, social and even spiritual benefits. They congratulate themselves on having abandoned antique socialist analyses, unworkable social planning mechanisms and repressive regulatory regimens. They eschew any schemes promoted by social engineers enfolded in "old-left" slogans who are being increasingly outdistanced by true reformers who welcome new and disruptive technologies. That, at least, is the story they tell. Slee's main argument leads elsewhere.

> Despite the claims of ecological sustainability embodied in ideas like 'access over ownership' and the re-use of excess capacity, the on-demand sector is instead encouraging a new form of privileged consumption: 'lifestyle as a service.' – Tom Slee

Tom Slee demonstrates in plain and forceful words that "there is a contradiction built into the name 'sharing economy.' We think of sharing," he explains "as a non-commercial, person-to-person, social interaction." The notion of sharing exists outside the commercial realm and implies transactions that are "motivated by generosity, by a desire to give or to help." Money may be involved, but the pursuit of profit isn't. "Economy," in the alternative, "suggests market transactions—the self-interested exchange of money for goods or services." A "sharing economy" is therefore an oxymoron.

There is more to this than a semantic squabble (not that it's unimportant to be careful about our language; after all, if we don't define our words properly, we literally won't know what we're talking about).

The (post)modern sharing economy has largely been a by-product of the Internet. An early example was the "sharing" of documents, video and music—often in apparent violation of copyright laws. The practice was celebrated as a species of "openness," much to the annoyance of authors, filmmakers and musicians and the corporations which held the right to copy their work. According to Slee, the pertinent effects were, firstly, that such practices disrupted existing modes of production and markets," usually to the immediate benefit of the consumer; but, secondly, that they created new markets with tremendous technological reliance on Internet Service Providers. This second step transformed the Sharing Society from groups of friends exchanging bits of information and entertainment into *doppelgänger*s of the old corporations in the form of new high-technology companies assuming the same roles and behaving in the same way as their predecessors: old capitalist wine, new capitalist (virtual) bottles.

Among the many elements in the misleading rhetoric of openness is the concept of "open data." Educators are all-too-familiar with the drive toward "open education," which was initially promoted as a democratic innovation aimed at providing free education for all through Mass Open Online Courses (MOOCs). They allowed anyone with Internet access to learn from the finest lecturers at Harvard, MIT and other top-ranked institutions. What began as a kind of upscale audio-visual aid, however, quickly became a perceived threat to local colleges and universities which have been bullied into giving academic credit for, essentially, watching TV.

> Open data … should be recognised as an initiative that also aims to enable the marketisation of public services, and this is something that is not readily apparent to the general observer. – Jo Bates, 2012

And, of course, the seductive concept of openness also penetrated the public sector. Going far beyond the exchange of words, images and music, Slee provides several striking examples of how the technological transformation public record keeping can have calamitous effects. He cites, for example, the Indian economist Bhuvaneswari Raman, who shows how "a program to standardize, digitize, and centralize land records … [a] program pushed by the World Bank as a pro-poor, pro-transparency initiative" wound up being an "open data" innovation that led to the eviction of poor landholders, vast corruption and a bonanza for large land developers. Sharing quickly turned into a system of bribery, further impoverishment and large-scale real estate promoters eager to capitalize on the expanding residential housing market in the proximate city of Chennai.

II

A central problem is that the Sharing Economy is mistakenly associated with the ancient idea of a "commons," whereas economics has much to do with the modern concept of "capital." Even such seemingly benign enterprises such as Airbnb, which purport to connect travelers with inexpensive accommodations and the added advantage of living "like the locals" anywhere on the globe, can have nefarious consequences. Not only are the service providers—the Internet entrepreneurs, intermediaries, packagers and retailers—becoming huge profit centres, but they disrupt more than the economies of expensive hotel chains. By "trading on the commons," which is to say, encouraging hordes of tourists to partake of a local community, the residents of those communities may find themselves expelled as the influx of tourist dollars make the initial tourist attraction—the quaint local community—unaffordable and unsustainable. Whole cultures and subcultures are thus sacrificed. As Slee puts it, "the Sharing Economy belief in the natural synergy of commons and commerce turns out to be simplistic and self-serving; the relationship between commons and capital is fraught with contradictions."

Tom Slee frankly acknowledges that "the main impulse that drove the writing of this book was a sense of betrayal: that what started as an appeal to community, person-to-person connections, sustainability and sharing has become a playground for billionaires, Wall Street and venture capitalists extending their free-market values into our personal lives."

> Whilst democratic ends are claimed in the desire to enable 'the public' to hold 'the state' to account, … [it] does not differentiate between citizens and commercial interests. – Jo Bates, 2012

Some of the results of the Sharing Economy are now literally being played out on our streets. In France, the attempt to introduce Uber (ride-sharing) as an alternative to well-regulated taxi services has resulted in something approaching civil strife as taxi drivers' protests have blocked the streets of Paris and prompted disruption and the threat of violence (Toor, 2016, February 3; Toor, 2016, February 9). In my own city of Toronto, Canada, Uber openly defies city by-laws and seems successfully to have cowed the local municipal authorities into softening lawful regulations about such matters as having drivers screened for criminal histories, compelling vehicle inspection, requiring driving tests for operators and keeping proper records so that the taxes paid by legitimate taxi companies would apply to Uber as well. The result has been what at least one local journalist (James, 2016) has called a "sellout" and a return to "the days of bandit taxis."

Tom Slee has done a commendable job of exposing the realities behind the sustaining beliefs and sometimes unscrupulous behaviour of what has been celebrated as a liberating change in the way that we do both public and private business. Riding the crest of the new wave in information technology and allegedly putting bureaucratic red tape into the dumpster of history, we find instead the giddy new world order is little more than a digitized mechanism to undermine public space and encourage creative destruction of both public services and public regulation.

Though advertised as a victory for individual citizens and consumers, the new technologies are mainly concerned with imposing callous market practices on previously protected parts of our lives as citizens. Substituting private sector for-profit providers and tearing down public regulations in the interest of market choice has permitted a few wildly successful entrepreneurs to begin refashioning our lives, both in intimate, personal relationships and in large-scale patterns of production and distribution of goods and services.

Equally important, especially in light of the recent purported outrage/denial about tax evasion by individuals and corporations as a result of the dissemination of the so-called "Panama Papers," is the fact that one of the aspects of the Sharing Economy is that, like the so-called Underground Economy (MacDonald, 2015), it is increasingly a kind of "black market" economy operating on the fringes of the law and committing economic crimes against the community that are not at all "victimless crimes."

Perhaps we ought to have paid more attention when university sophomore Mark Zukerberg started a website called "Facemash" which posted photos from Harvard University's Facebook and invited those who cared to rate the attractiveness of the students by placing two photos side-by-side and voting which one was "hot" and which one was "not." As Zukerberg—now hailed as a "philanthropist" as well as a lifestyle innovator—posted at the time (Schwartz, 2003) "Yea, it's on/ I'm not exactly sure how the farm animals are going to fit into this whole thing (you can't really be sure with farm animals …), but I like the idea of comparing two people together."

With this kind of attitude, how could we ever have imagined that Facebook would give us *real* friends, that breaking down bureaucracies would make us happier and healthier (never mind more liberated), and that the Sharing Economy would turn out to be anything more than an elaborate tax dodge in which corporations redefine workers as subcontractors, pay few if any benefits to employees (dishonestly categorized as "independent contractors"), escape responsibility for corporate income and sales taxes (thus enjoying a citizen subsidy) or, at best a Potemkin Village allegedly inspired by the community design of Robert Owen's "New Harmony" (Carmony & Elliott, 1980: 161-261)?

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