

SHARING IS CARING? THE MEANING OF HUMAN WORK IN THE SHARING ECONOMY

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I. Introduction. – II. What is the sharing economy? – III. A disruptive business model. – IV. Ethical debates around the “sharing economy”. – V. The Catholic Social Teaching on the meaning of human work. – VI. From principles to applications in Catholic Social Teaching. – VII. The Uberization of the economy and the meaning of human work. – VIII. Conclusions. – IX. Bibliography

Abstract: the realm of human work has undergone profound changes derived from the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution. One of the salient expressions of this new economic paradigm is the sharing economy: an economic model that ushers a new way of accessing goods and services where digital platforms, apps and social networks act as intermediaries between consumers and service providers. Sharing economy-driven companies like Uber or Airbnb have grown exponentially in past years, causing a disruptive impact on the industries, regulations, labor conditions and contract policies of their respective markets. These undergoing changes have defined a new scenario in which traditional concepts and arguments regarding workers’ rights, just wage, capital and labor, no longer adjust to the existing reality. In particular, many of the applications of the Catholic Social Teaching concerning human work and social justice have become obsolete. In this paper I therefore examine how this phenomenon has affected the status of work and I advance an agenda for the future changes and reflections that the sharing economy might provoke.

Key words: **sharing economy, Uber, Catholic Social Teaching, human work**

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"Human work is a key, probably the essential key, to the whole social question"

John Paul II, *Laborem Excersens*, n. 3.

"Technology enables us to exercise dominion over matter, to reduce risks, to save labour, to improve our conditions of life. It touches the heart of the vocation of human labour: in technology, seen as the product of his genius, man recognizes himself and forges his own humanity. Technology is the objective side of human action[151] whose origin and raison d'etre is found in the subjective element: the worker himself."

Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, n. 69

"It is therefore necessary to look without fear, but with responsibility, to the technological transformations of the economy and life, and not to be resigned to the ideology that is gaining ground everywhere, that imagines a world where only half or maybe two-thirds of the workers will work, and the others will be maintained by social subsidies. It must be clear that the real goal to reach is not that of "income for all" but rather, "work for all". Because without work, without work for all, there will be no dignity for all."

Francis, *Meeting with the world of work at the Ilva Factory*, 27 May 2017

I. INTRODUCTION

The Industrial Revolution brought new things into social and economic life, affecting dramatically the conditions of work and employees in new large industrial organizations. Those *rerum novarum* triggered the intervention of the Roman Pontiffs, known as Catholic Social Teaching (CST), which has developed principles of Christian Moral Theology and social philosophy, and have contributed with specific applications of those principles to the varied circumstances of economic life.

In recent years, new technological disruptions and the promise of immediate breakthroughs at many levels have contributed to the narrative of a Fourth Industrial Revolution in the making, overcoming the ongoing Third Industrial Revolution. The expression—coined by Angela Merkel, German Chancellor—refers to a number of

interrelated innovations, “*characterized by a range of new technologies that are fusing the physical, digital and biological worlds, impacting all disciplines, economies and industries, and even challenging ideas about what it means to be human*” (Schwab, K., 2016; 7-8).

There is a growing social concern for the disruptive impact on the future of work by a new wave of technological changes—due to a mounting perception of inequality, unsafety and frustrated expectations for the future. Some of the most apparent implications are: new business models; massive technological unemployment, temporary or permanent (Susskind & Susskind, 2015; 126); issues regarding privacy and safety in an interconnected world; the transformation of professions, workplaces and dynamics; the unsuitability of most regulatory principles regarding employees; the accumulation of wealth in entrepreneurs and investors at the cost of lower quality employments; and of course, challenges to educational institutions and policy.

One of the dimensions of this transformation is the so-called *sharing economy*, the novel possibility of sharing resources among users through networked platforms. The concept is however discussed, since it is applied to other forms of economic interaction that are not shaped by sharing, but exchange in markets. The lack of a common definition among scholars, media and users has led to a widening of this concept, including in it all sort of activities, companies, and platforms. Some companies and start-ups claim to have adopted the spirit of this sharing economy, building their entire business model around this philosophy. Some of them, like Uber or Airbnb, have grown into huge companies, sidetracking traditional businesses based on conventional structures and models.

The disruption that these companies have caused in our way of consuming and working has received multiple and conflictive estimations. Companies like Uber and Airbnb are at the center of a social debate –with legal and regulatory implications– that poses a challenge to CST. These new realities affect deeply the way we understand and get involved in meaningful and dignifying jobs.

A Christian understanding of work is called upon to pay attention to these changing features in order to shed some light on the current transformations of the economic life due to technological innovations. It is pretty evident that many of the guidelines that CST has developed over time cannot be directly applied in this new context. Should the Church step into this debate with precise indications? Are the

principles of CST regarding human work still valid in the face of these new phenomena? Do we need to elaborate new principles or, at least, make the ones we already have more explicit? Who should take the lead in this updating: hierarchy, thinkers, business practitioners?

Being a novel phenomenon, the literature on the ethical and social aspects of the sharing economy is not lengthy yet. However, we do find numerous media articles. For this reason, in this paper I will rely on both scholarly research and media contributions. Regarding the definition of the sharing economy, and the wider framework of the internet age, I will draw on the expertise of Yochai Benkler, Russel W. Belk, Rachel Botsman, Fleura Bardhi and Giana M. Eckhardt, whose works rank among the most influential and cited publications, as well as on specific reports issued by independent institutes and organizations. Regarding the status of the labor force, working conditions and regulations, I will draw on the expertise of Trebor Scholz and Juliet Schor, who have greatly contributed to the field of digital labor, consumerism and working trends; Arun Sundararajan, researcher on the economics of digital goods, and Tom Slee, among others.

Concerning the Church's teachings on human work and social justice, besides the corpus of CST magisterial documents, I will mainly rely on the work of Arturo Belloc and Ángel Rodríguez Luño, for the purpose of understanding the nature and scope of CST.

I will proceed as follows: In the first section, I will briefly explain the basic principles of this new sharing economy and, in the second section, I will examine its disruptive effect and its main differences with regard to the structure of the old economy. In the third section I will review the main benefits and critiques that the sharing economy has received with regard to the social environment, the creation and distribution of wealth and the working conditions. In the fourth section, I will review the core principles of the Catholic Social Teaching on human work and, in the fifth section, I will examine which practical guidelines can be extracted from these principles in order to assess this new landscape of the sharing economy. To avoid a purely abstract reflection, I will lastly analyze how Uber, the famous ride-hailing provider, exemplifies the principles of this new sharing economy and briefly propose how to read the challenges that it has brought from the point of view of a Christian understanding of work.

II. WHAT IS THE SHARING ECONOMY?

As pointed above, the novelty of this phenomenon and the wide range of practices, companies and trends that are part of it, constitute the main hindrances for developing a common definition. However, the context of its emergence and its various developments can be easily traced.

The phenomenon of the sharing economy¹ is strongly related to the development of a knowledge economy and the spread of digital systems. Yochai Benkler, one of the world's leading experts on industrial information economy and forms of social sharing, has thoroughly researched how a networked environment can affect the way of managing resources. In his book *The Wealth of Networks* (2006), he provides with an acute description of the broader context from which the sharing economy arises. There, he coins the term “collective production” to describe an economic paradigm that no longer relies “on markets or on managerial hierarchies to organize production” (Benkler, 2006; 60). While this “collective production” mainly applies to digitally-based sharing, Benkler has also taken a stand on sharable goods (Benkler, 2004).

Alongside the existence of a networked environment, Benkler also points to the symmetry in property as a core characteristic of “collective production”. By “symmetry”, he means that the resources involved in this type of processes are not owned by anyone in particular, and therefore there is no power structure governing them. When property is placed at “the institutional foundation of markets”, as it is in capitalist economy, the “power to decide how a resource will be used is systematically and drastically asymmetric. That asymmetry permits the existence of “an owner” who can decide what to do, and with whom” (Benkler, 2006; 61). *Wikipedia* or *Creative Commons* illustrate this process of “collective production” eased by an open source software and with no asymmetric property ruling over the resources.

When speaking about ‘shareable goods’ –he also analyzes the case of carpooling– Benkler identifies “sharing” as a modality of this same “collective production” that is likewise typified by a “radical decentralization of the capacity to contribute to effective action and the authority to decide on the contribution and reliance on social information

¹ Terms like “sharing economy”, “peer-to-peer production”, “collaborative consumption”, “collaborative economy”, “collaborative consumption”, “gig economy”, are often used interchangeably, though each term contain its own nuances. In the course of my exposition I will explain the meaning of these terms by tracing back their appearance and use in the works of different authors.

flows, organizational approaches, and motivation structures, rather than on prices or commands, to motivate and direct productive contribution” (Benkler, 2004; 331).

Rachel Botsman also addresses the transformation brought about by this “collective production” when she speaks about “collaborative economy” (Botsman & Roger, 2010; 41-66). For her, this collaborative economy consists in “an economy built on distributed networks of connected individuals and communities versus centralized institutions, transforming how we can produce, consume, finance, and learn” (Botsman, 2013). The rise of a collaborative lifestyle and the spread of technology systems would have unlocked within this collaborative economy a new economic model: what she terms as “collaborative consumption”, and economic model “based on sharing underutilized assets from spaces to skills to stuff for monetary or non-monetary benefits” (Botsman, 2013).

Bardhi and Eckhardt also talk about a socio-economic context where ownership is no longer the ultimate expression of consumer desire (Bardi & Eckhardt, 2012; 881). For them, over the last decade, markets have given way to networks and alternative modes of acquisition where consumers rather choose to access temporarily to goods and services than buying and owning them. They refer to this new mode of acquisition as “access-based consumption”, and they define it as “transactions that may be market mediated in which no transfer of ownership takes place” (Bardi & Eckhardt, 2012; 881).

Russel Belk represents another of the pioneering figures within this field, and has thoroughly studied the phenomenon of sharing, gift giving and market exchange from the point of view of an ego-centered model of social action. Belk argues that sharing -by definition- excludes financial remuneration (Belk, 2007; 127). He uses the term “collaborative consumption” to refer to sharing economy practices and he defines it as “people coordinating the acquisition and distribution of a resource for a fee or other compensation” (Belk, 2014; 1597), a compensation that does not necessarily need to be monetary. “Collaborative consumption” would thus occupy the middle ground between gift giving, where a permanent transfer of ownership takes place, and marketplace exchange, where compensations always take a monetary sign (Belk, 2014; 1597).

Eric Arnould and Alexander Rose have proposed to replace Belk’s definition of sharing by their concept of “mutuality” (Arnould & Rose, 2015; 76). They argue that phenomena like sharing or gift giving cannot be conceptualized from an individual, ego-

centered point of view and they advance a concept –mutuality– that acknowledges the “inherent sociality of what is called the self” (Arnould & Rose, 2015; 82). The arrival of this *mutualization* to the peer-to-peer transactions would have been enabled by three major drivers: 1) a behavioral trend that prioritize sharing over owning; 2) an easiness to access to online platforms and social networks on behalf of the consumers; and 3) the proliferation of mobile devices and electronic services (Ertz, 2015; 2).

Some related works briefly summarize the aforementioned changes that have led to the emergence of the collaborative consumption. For clarity’s sake, I include here some of them. According to Ertz, Durif and Arcand (2016; 1), collaborative consumption results from technological, economic, political and societal changes, namely:

1. The web transformed consumers’ relationship to objects.
2. Advanced economies are becoming more efficient through collaborative exchanges.
3. The withering of the State and its increased adjustment to the market ethos led citizens to mutate from political militants into engaged consumers.
4. Consumers view consumption as central projects in their lives.

The Economics and Statistics Administration of the *U.S. Commerce Department* (Telles, R., 2016) identifies the following four characteristics as the core features shared by most of the all the companies, apps and initiatives within this sector, particularly the for-profits:

1. They use information technology (IT systems), typically available via web-based platforms, such as mobile "apps" on Internet- enabled devices, to facilitate peer-to-peer transactions.
2. They rely on user-based rating systems for quality control, ensuring a level of trust between consumers and service providers who have not previously met.
3. They offer the workers -who provide services via digital matching platforms- flexibility in deciding their typical working hours.
4. To the extent that tools and assets are necessary to provide a service, digital matching firms rely on the workers using their own.

III. A DISRUPTIVE BUSINESS MODEL

All these key components of a sharing economy can be found in the case of Uber, the ride-hailing company. According to the original and widespread narrative, users all over the world just need to turn on their smartphones, open the Uber app and request a ride. A request that, within the next few seconds, will be subsequently displayed on the screens of the nearby driver-partners. In addition, users can choose the driver with whom they would like to ride by just looking into the comments and ratings given by other consumers. From the point of view of the service provider, the cab drivers, it is them who use their own car to provide the service as it is up to them to decide where, when and for how long they are going to work. All along this process, Uber's role is limited to provide the platform and the information to both consumers and service providers for them to connect as smooth and fast as possible.

But this portrait of Uber's activity is polemical. The disruptive elements of this model affect almost every stakeholder group in the market of local transportation. When all considerations are included in the picture, the resulting image is ambivalent, as we shall discuss in the next section.

Uber, and many other sharing economy-oriented companies, have brought forward new business models that affect the way we consume and work. I will now briefly review the main changes that this sharing economy introduces at an economic and organizational level. Again, I will provide first with some conceptual descriptions that might later help to frame more practical implications derived from these changes.

The emergence of this new way of provisioning goods and services—made possible through the technological changes brought by the digital age, and fostered by a growing consuming behavior that prioritizes temporarily access to goods and services over ownership—has had a clear impact on the economic activity, both at a macro and a micro level.

Benkler notes that the proliferation of networked environments “makes possible a new modality of organizing production: radically decentralized, collaborative, and nonproprietary; based on sharing resources and outputs among widely distributed, loosely connected individuals who cooperate with each other” (Benkler, 2006; 60). He refers to his new modality of production as “peer production”, and lists its three core characteristics: 1) decentralized conception and execution, 2) diverse motivation,

including a range of non-monetary motivations, are central, 3) organization (governance and management) is separated from property and contract (Bauer & Latzer, 2016; 92). At a governance and management level, this networked model amounts to the exclusion of exclusive ownership and formal contractual relationships.

McAfee and Brynjolfsson have thoroughly studied the likely impact of fostering a decentralized technological system for many of the activities that nowadays are still performed through different intermediaries: payments, contracts, management structures, companies, etc. Regarding the disruptive power of technology to displace established industries, they point that “early initiatives indicate that there’s a lot of demand for new ledger technologies. That may make existing business processes cheaper and faster and, perhaps more important, enable new ones” (McAfee & Brynjolfsson, 2017; 300). As seen in the case of the sharing economy, technological systems have the capacity to scale up in a matter of months new business models, creating a disruptive effect in whatever sector they burst in.

Regarding the likely effects that sharing consumption models can produce on established business sectors, Belk points that “new sharing ventures are likely to shake established industries to the extent that sharing and collaborative consumption result in fewer purchases or facilitate a shift from individual ownership to shared ownership” (Belk, 2014; 1598). The rise of short-term car rentals (Saussier, 2015; 23) or the skyrocketing growth of lodging solutions like Airbnb (Farronato & Levin, 2015; 6) are good examples of the shaking and scalability potential of these business models.

Many authors (Sundararajan 2014; Edelman & Geradin, 2015; Interian, 2015) have considered the disruptive effect of sharing economy business model from a regulatory standpoint. The regulatory issues regarding peer-to-peer business models range from service providing’s license, security, discrimination, to worker’s rights.

Others like Cohen & Krietzmann (2014; 280) see the gap in current legislations with regard to this type of companies as an opportunity to come up with sustainable solutions to city-based problems like population growth and density, drawing on the proven benefits of businesses like the carsharing or the bikesharing.

At a micro level, the emergence of sharing economy-oriented companies has also affected employment conditions. Seth Harris and Alan Krueger warn that most of the working relationships that have emerged within the sharing economy “do not fit easily

into the existing legal definition of “employee” and “independent contractor” (Harris & Krueger, 2015; 5). In terms of managerial structure, one of the immediate consequences caused by the sharing economy has been the elimination of any kind of middleperson in the process of provisioning good and services (Killic, 2015). Harris and Krueger argue that this new setting leaves those who work for these inborn companies without the benefits and protections that more traditional jobs have. They go on to state that a new legal category, which they call “independent workers”, is needed to address the current legal uncertainty that surrounds these workers (Harris & Krueger, 2015; 5).

Similarly, Arun Sundararajan tackles in his book, *The Sharing Economy: The End of Employment And The Rise of Crowd-Based Capitalism* (2016), the future of work and the rise of the micro-entrepreneur. For Sundararajan, the sharing economy represents an economic shift that may be compared with the Industrial Revolution (Sundararajan, 2016; 177). The question for him is whether the sharing economy will finally ensure an universal basic income and the empowerment of thousands of independent workers, or it will rather represent the end of high quality jobs and the impoverishment of labor conditions. He goes on to examine how current governments could reach feasible policies to bring forward a new social safety net for these workers (Sundararajan, 2016; 187).

IV. ETHICAL DEBATES AROUND THE “SHARING ECONOMY”

It is somehow evident by now that this disruptive business model carries some clear benefits for the economic activity, both at a micro and at a macro level. But it also entails some inevitable problems that should be addressed. In the following paragraphs, I will briefly review the main benefits derived from this ‘collaborative economy’, as well as the main critiques that has received. For clarity’s sake, I will divide this section in three parts: 1) how social and economic environment is affected; 2) issues of economic value and its distribution; and 3) working conditions.

Social and economic environment

From the point of view of the social environment, the sharing economy presents a clear benefit: is “less resource intensive” (Frenklen & Schor, 2017; 7). The economic model underlying the sharing economy entails a lower demand for the production of new goods and infrastructures, which leads to a more efficient use of the already existing ones (Schor & Wengronowitz, 2017).

Similarly, the sharing economy also entails a lower demand for the use of already existing goods. The bike-sharing phenomenon, or car-sharing companies like Blablacar constantly point out to the ‘smart use of resources’ –why use four cars individually when you all can fit in one? – when advertising their services. In fact, the car-sharing business model has been proposed as a sustainable solution for mobility problems in cities with great population growth and increasing density (Cohen & Kietzmann, 2014).

However, the full economic effects caused by the changes in these consumption patterns might also involve a negative impact on industries within the same sector. As I will address later, these sharing economy practices somehow constitute a substitutive service or good that replaces an already existing one: for example, using Blablacar instead of one’s own car or using Airbnb to find accommodation instead of going to an hotel. Following this same example, this might amount to a decrease in gas consumption –in the case of Blablacar– or to a decrease in the number of hotel bookings (Zervas et al., 2016) –in the case of Airbnb–.

Wealth creation and distribution

Some authors have claimed that sharing economy practices pose immediate benefits due to the very nature of these practices. Either because one of them will generate a profit out of an underutilized item, either because the other part will access to a good or service in a faster and more efficient way. This is particularly apparent in the case of goods lending: in that scenario “there are few costs for the lender because the person did not need the product during the lending period, whereas the borrower gains access to the product without charge” (Frenklen & Schor, 2017; 6).

Broadly speaking, most of the benefits that consumers and service providers find in these sharing economy practices are derived from the elimination or lowering of transaction costs. Both parties now engage more easily in transactions because the traditional middleperson has been cut out or has been reduced to the very minimum (Benkler, 2004; 306-314). As Frenklen and Schor note, “millions of transactions now take place that did not happen in the past, because the transaction costs involved in stranger sharing were simply too high” (Frenklen & Schor, 2017; 6).

However, other authors have also pointed to the fact that the spread of these sharing economy benefits unevenly the different segments of the population. Entering in transactions where an underutilized item –be it a car, a house or a bike– is lent to another

person for a definite period of time requires, in most of the cases, to actually own a consumer good that can be spared. It turns out that most of those valuable consumer goods “are typically concentrated in a small group of well-off people” (Frenklen & Schor, 2017; 7; Piketty, 2013).

Moreover, the introduction of these practices can have a negative impact on already existing industries. This is very much the core of the controversy between conventional taxi drivers and Uber, a quarrel also replicated in the lodging industry between hotel and rental owners and Airbnb. Berger, Chen and Frey conducted a study across U.S. cities to measure the impact of Uber’s arrival on workers employed in conventional taxi services. Although they conclude that the taxi industry as a whole didn’t experience major changes, they affirm that Uber’s arrival “has reduced the earnings potential of incumbent drivers in point-to-point transportation services” (Berger, Chen, Frey, 2017; 1). In a similar study, Zervas, Proserpio and Byers examined the impact of Airbnb on the Texas hotel industry. They did notice some relevant changes in the economic performance of the hotel industry due to the proliferation of Airbnb rentals: “We estimate that its entry into the Texas market has had a quantifiable negative impact on local hotel room revenue. The substitution patterns we observe strongly suggest that Airbnb provides a viable, but imperfect, alternative for certain traditional types of overnight accommodation” (Zervas, Proserpio, Byers, 2014; 30).

Another issue raised by several authors is whether this sharing marketed-companies are actually sharing anything at all. Despite many of them advertised themselves as ‘sharing’ and ‘collaborative’, it is obvious that some of them constitute plain market exchanges. Moreover, there seems to be a clear asymmetry of profit between those who own the information and the platforms, and the ordinary consumers, which speaks about some structural problems. Frenklen and Schor raise a similar question:

Will the platforms share that wealth with users—on both the provider and user sides of the market? Will the platforms ensure widespread access—by expanding their user base beyond the mostly white, highly educated, able-bodied urbanites who have comprised the bulk of users in the first stage? Will they make good on their promises to provide decent livelihoods for providers, opportunities for so-called “micro-entrepreneurs” and will they continue to provide real value to customers? (Frenklen & Schor, 2017; 3).

Although Frenken and Schor conclude that it is still early to make a reasoned judgement, others like Eckhardt and Bardhi have taken a more critical stand against companies that take advantage of the positive reputation associated to ‘sharing practices’ to camouflage a raw capitalistic structure:

When “sharing” is market-mediated — when a company is an intermediary between consumers who don’t know each other — it is no longer sharing at all. Rather, consumers are paying to access someone else’s goods or services for a particular period of time. It is an economic exchange, and consumers are after utilitarian, rather than social, value (Fleura & Bardhi, 2015).

They take as example companies like Uber or Lyft, and they argue that these companies have only placed themselves under the sharing economy’s umbrella to develop a business model with lower profit margins than their rival industries to outperform them. They also conducted a study on Zipcar, another car-sharing company. They conclude that, from the consumer’s point of view, reasons like sociability, community or sharing were barely taking into account when opting for one of these mobility solutions. Efficiency and affordability were instead the reasons given by most users after being asked why they chose Zipcar (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; 890).

More serious, however, has been the criticism of Tom Slee, one of the harshest critics of the sharing economy. In his book, *What’s mine is yours: against the sharing economy* (2015), he charges against Uber and Airbnb, among others, and affirms without any doubt that these companies constitute a new form of corporate capitalism camouflaged under friendly labels like ‘sharing’, ‘trustworthiness’ or ‘sustainability’. By bringing together data from different sources, he explains how a big percentage of the net benefits of Airbnb or Uber don’t come from their sharing economy transactions:

Three out of every four dollars that Airbnb makes come from Entire Home rentals, and only 1% from Shared Room listings.... Most of Airbnb’s money comes from exchanges where the host and guest may never meet except to exchange a key (Slee, 2015; 37).

Uber enthusiasts attribute the company’s success to its technology and the efficiency with which it matches drivers and rides, but this misses much of the story. Uber’s success also owes a lot to avoiding the costs of insurance, sales tax, mechanical vehicle inspections, and providing an universally-accessible service. Its ability to provide a cheap and effective service for consumers

comes from its ability to run at a loss while pursuing its lavishly-funded quest for growth. Uber's success comes from being parasitic on the cities in which it operates (Slee, 2015; 59).

Although it is difficult to assess yet whether this economic model advances genuine unfair practices or fosters at a larger scale social inequalities, I believe that the critiques raised so far against it provide enough reason to pay a closer attention to the phenomenon of the sharing economy and examine carefully the morality of the its core elements.

Working conditions

The arrival of the sharing economy was received amid great expectations, such as the advent of the universal basic income and a turning point in the history of the micro-entrepreneurship (Sundararajan, 2016; 187). As the years have passed by, some scholars have started assessing how such arrival has affected the labor conditions, jobs quality and the overall state of employment. While some have claimed that the appearance of sharing economy-oriented companies has contributed to the deterioration of labor, others are more reluctant to make a definite judgement.

As mentioned above, the sharing economy has brought with it some clear benefits for both consumers and users. When speaking about employment, these benefits amount to flexible working schedules (as in the case of an Uber driver who chooses where and for how long to work), and the possibility of making a profit of the idle hours, apartments, cars, etc. to build income (as in the case of a student who needs financial aid to pay for his studies or parents that look for flexible work schedules).

In a study conducted to examine Uber's driver-partners in the United States, Krueger and Hall provide relevant information regarding the driver's motivation to join Uber's fleet. According to their findings, "87% of drivers said one of the reasons for joining Uber was 'to be my own boss and set my own schedule'" (Hall & Krueger, 2016; 11); 61% had another part-time or full-time job and only 8% were unemployed before joining Uber. In view of this data, Hall and Krueger conclude that "most driver-partners do not turn to Uber out of desperation or because they face an absence of other opportunities in the job market, but rather because the nature of the work, the flexibility, and the compensation appeals to them" (Hall & Krueger, 2016; 2).

In response to the conclusions drawn by Hall and Krueger, Eisenbrey and Mishel state that companies like Uber have directly contributed to the deterioration of labor conditions (Eisenbrey & Mishel, 2016). Moreover, they argue that the third legal category –the “independent worker” category– proposed by Krueger (Harris & Krueger, 2015; 5) it is not justified, since the study conducted to assess its suitability failed to account for one crucial thing: the cost of operating the car (Peterson, 2015; O’Donvan & Singer-Vine, 2016). According to Eisenbrey and Mishel, advancing a new employment category for these inborn part-time jobs does not justice the reality of the worker’s schedules:

Harris and Krueger have laid out a case for what makes gig work different enough to warrant different treatment under law, and their proposal for an independent worker category between employee and independent contractor has elevated the policy debate about the appropriate labor protections for gig workers [...] Nonetheless, our analysis of their assertion that the work hours of gig workers are immeasurable suggests that their case for a third work category is flawed. Harris and Krueger’s primary example rests on a mistaken assessment of an Uber driver’s situation (Eisenbrey & Mishel, 2016).

Krueger’s proposal has also been criticized by the progressive-leaning Center for Economics and Policy Research, which calls into question the study’s reliability: the study may have been commissioned directly by Uber and Krueger himself may have been biased toward the company (CEPR, 2015).

Other authors have been more reticent to point to the sharing economy as the cause of the impoverishment in labor conditions. Bernhardt, for example, notes that, although there is a “strong intuition that the nature of work has fundamentally changed, contributing to the deterioration of labor standards” (Bernhard, 2014; 15), we are not yet in a position to rigorously assess the whole picture of employment in the twenty-first century. She identifies some major data gaps and research questions in the current state of research that need to be filled to better understand and assess the changes underlying the working environment in the digital age. Without denying that significant changes have taken place in the employment status, she advises to “focus on specific industries and regions in assessing when and where pernicious forms of nonstandard work have grown, and which groups of workers have been most impacted” (Bernhardt, 2014; 15).

Penn and Whibbey are also cautious in issuing a final statement on the labor status. They stress that the increase in the number of part-time and insecure jobs is a trend that

predates the arrival of the sharing economy (Penn & Whibbey, 2016). Thus, the sharing economy would have only scaled up the preexisting labor problems.

Regardless of the lack of data to issue a comprehensive summary reporting measurable changes in the way we work, and regardless of the suitability or unsuitability of introducing a third legal category for the workers in the sharing economy, some other authors have warned about the need to review the legal framework that encompasses part-time jobs and entrepreneurs, as this way of working might be growing exponentially for the next decades.

Arun Sundararajan addresses the issue of the micro-entrepreneur and examines what can be done in terms of social policies to guarantee to these workers a ‘social safety net’ (Sundararajan, 2016; 187). For him, the existence of a regulation and mechanism is needed to prevent “inefficient, inequitable, or insufficient outcomes” from the market place (Sundararajan, 2016; 138). The sharing economy might well be the opportunity to develop “more rational, ethical, and participatory models of regulations”, models that successfully combines the undergoing changes with regards to work, namely a “greater flexibility in contracting, as well as a greater flexibility in job mobility” (Sundararajan, 2016; 189), with “important worker protections like health coverage, insurance against workplace injuries, paid vacations” etc. (Sundararajan, 2016; 187).

In a similar way, Rachel Botsman lists five key characteristics of a truly collaborative, sharing-driven company, out of which one refers directly to the labor force status: “The providers on the supply-side should be valued, respected, and empowered and the companies committed to making the lives of these providers economically and socially better” (Botsman, 2015).

The attention and the coverage that the state of employment in the sharing economy has received tells us about a changing environment whose final form we cannot yet foresee. However, as the authors brought here claim, the time has come to start addressing this issue from every possible angle: from the regulatory standpoint to the ethical one.

It is apparent that the issues discussed above are at the core of CST concerns about the conditions of work (such as the definition of a just wage, worker’s rights or division between labor and capital) and at the same time define a somehow new scenario. In the coming sections I will review these debates from the perspective of CST.

V. CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING ON THE MEANING OF HUMAN WORK

This is not the place for a full exposition of the principles and applications of CST on human work. A very brief reminder is however necessary. In the historical development, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between a generally valid principle, and a contingent application of that principle.

Departing from the Thomist and modern Scholastic assumption that work should be considered as a commodity exchanged for other economic goods, CST has developed a sense of the intrinsic meaning and basic conditions for a dignifying work, given the dramatical changes in social realities brought by the industrialization process. Accordingly, labor relationships could no longer be considered simply as a matter of commutative or contractual justice, but as a matter of distributive justice, with certain rights and duties that oblige both parts in labor contracts.

Early CST documents focused on pressing questions posed by industrialization and workers' rights: working conditions, salaries, rest, social services, education and culture, unionization, etc. The basic assumption was that workers are hired by the owners of capital and managers working for them, in an asymmetrical relationship that needs to be balanced. Thus, further issues of participation in the governance and in the profits of the firm became an important topic, although never became clear what should be the solution for that problem.

Over time, Catholic spirituality and the magisterium paid closer attention to the role of work in human life and in the building of the Kingdom of God and sanctification, in a process parallel to other cultural and philosophical movements. Traces of this can be found in the documents of the II Vatican Council and in Paul VI.

Eventually, John Paul II contributed with his *Laborem Excersens* to a personalistic account of the nature of work, emphasizing the subjective dimension of work over the objective dimension, which has become a landmark in CST. This teaching was echoed by Benedict XVI in his *Caritas in Veritate*, and a similar and vivid position is found in Pope Francis' interventions, mainly in his social encyclical *Laudato Si*. John Paul II also underlined the creative dimension of human work, and recognized that aspect as present in entrepreneurship and management, within the market economy (*Centessimus Annus*).

A principle that has been affirmed many times is the superiority of labor over capital, while reminding that all members of businesses organizations are a human community: “This principle directly concerns the process of production: in this process labor is always a primary efficient cause, while capital, the whole collection of means of production, remains a mere instrument or instrumental cause. This principle is an evident truth that emerges from the whole of man's historical experience” (*Laborem Excercens*, 12).

The evolution of the economy in the second half of the 20th century led to new challenges that received an answer stemming from the same principles, like these mentioned by the Compendium of the Catholic Social Doctrine:

New, much more subtle forms of exploitation of new sources of work, to over-working, to work-as-career that often takes on more importance than other human and necessary aspects, to excessive demands of work that makes family life unstable and sometimes impossible, to a modular structure of work that entails the risk of serious repercussions on the unitary perception of one's own existence and the stability of family relationships. If people are alienated when means and ends are inverted, elements of alienation can also be found in the new contexts of work that is immaterial, light, qualitative more than quantitative, “either through increased sharing in a genuinely supportive community or through increased isolation in a maze of relationships marked by destructive competitiveness and estrangement (*Centesimus Annus*, 41).

In sum, work is the original vocation of mankind, a basic dimension of human flourishing, full of social implications. But it is intertwined with ambivalence -which the Book of Genesis accounts-: working is hard, and might very well become instrument of alienation, physical, psychological and spiritual exhaustion or simply self-aggrandizing babelian hubris. Human work demands being done in a certain way, with rectitude of intention. Those conditions are to be deduced from the real nature of work.

Professional work is the way in which each individual serves others and society in a specialized way. What is the purpose of that service? Work as an external activity is not an end in itself, in the same way play is: something that can and should be done for its own sake. Work is not an exercise of self-expression. It is bound to its nature as service, and measured by it. Good intentions are not enough.

However, the purpose of work is not purely instrumental and does not only consist in making profit, gaining prestige, not even paying a certain service to others. In exercising the activities that constitute work, the world is changed (objective dimension) but overall, the worker is transformed (subjective dimension) and the full set of human relationships is shaped (intersubjective dimension). There is not a conflict between these three dimensions, all the contrary: the meaning of work can only be provided by the larger meaning of human life—the multiple dimensions of human good, cultivated in communion with others. This is the reason why the subjective dimension has priority over the objective. But without the objective dimension, the notion of work disappears, dissolved in a self-referential activity. This is also the reason why work is at the core of the social fabric, with a specific logic complementary of the other three basic forms of community (Hittinger, 2017): Church, the polis and the family, and other forms of human association. Man is not made through work completely, but nonetheless it is internally shaped by his or her efforts in working, and overall by the relationships cultivated in it.

The structural reference of work towards other human goods -such as health, family, or spiritual life- is the source of moral principles affecting the way work is exercised, from which rights and duties arise, bounding not only the worker himself, but any other person related to him or her. The alternative is reducing the moral relevance of work as another sphere of individual autonomy, which would be severely conditioned, as existentialist analysis have shown (Ashman & Winstanley, 2006; Argawal & Malloy, 2000).

These rights and duties received a concrete expression in labor law and policy. The question is whether those norms are enough to allocate the dilemmas around sharing economy. Three main alternatives are at hand: 1) a conservative or even reactionary resistance to change, reinforcing existing rules as the only way to protect the basic rights and ultimately the basic good of human work; 2) a credulous progressivism hand on hand with raw utilitarianism defending the overcoming of any rules limiting the logic of markets and contractual justice; 3) some sort of adaptation of current regulations, that are able to foster efficiency and justice at the same time. This third option sounds almost necessary, as long as most people recognize the inefficiency and injustice -at least, perfectibility- of our current framework. The question then is what should be the principles of justice ruling these changes, and what its implications would be here and now, in the face of the dangers of the uberization of the economy.

VI. FROM PRINCIPLES TO APPLICATIONS IN CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

CST has sometimes been understood as a compendium of the natural law tradition of social philosophy, or as a third way between capitalism and socialism—a socio economic model alternative to them. Recent magisterial interventions reject these approaches, defining CST as a branch of Catholic Moral Theology, which explicitly does not propose technical solutions nor economic models. This paragraph of Pope Benedict is worth quoting:

The Church does not have technical solutions to offer and does not claim “to interfere in any way in the politics of States.” She does, however, have a mission of truth to accomplish, in every time and circumstance, for a society that is attuned to man, to his dignity, to his vocation. Without truth, it is easy to fall into an empiricist and skeptical view of life, incapable of rising to the level of praxis because of a lack of interest in grasping the values — sometimes even the meanings — with which to judge and direct it. Fidelity to man requires fidelity to the truth, which alone is the guarantee of freedom (cf. Jn 8:32) and of the possibility of integral human development. For this reason, the Church searches for truth, proclaims it tirelessly and recognizes it wherever it is manifested. This mission of truth is something that the Church can never renounce. Her social doctrine is a particular dimension of this proclamation: it is a service to the truth which sets us free. Open to the truth, from whichever branch of knowledge it comes, the Church's social doctrine receives it, assembles into a unity the fragments in which it is often found, and mediates it within the constantly changing life-patterns of the society of peoples and nations (Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, n. 9).

This doctrine is structured at various levels of truth or abstraction: “The Church's social teaching proposes principles for reflection; it provides criteria for judgment; it gives guidelines for action” (Catechism, 2423; quoting John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*). The closer applications are to prudential decision making and technical solutions, the more important the principle of the relative autonomy of human knowledge becomes (Second Vatican Council, *Pastoral Constitution Gaudium et spes*, 36), and the more acute is the need for respect to political and economic freedom of Catholics, particularly the laity, as well as their specific responsibility in (Second Vatican Council, *Pastoral Constitution Gaudium et spes*, 43).

In the previous section we outlined the basic principles around the nature of work, but also criteria and guidelines stemming from those principles, developed over time in response to the shifting landscape of economic development. On the eve of dramatic changes in the economic environment provoked by the sharing economy and other innovations the ultimate question is what should CST say about this, and who should say it and at which level? A specific Christian voice is needed into the conversation on human work and the ambivalences of the sharing economy, explained above.

Building on the principles mentioned in this section, and following Arturo Bellocq (2012) and Rodríguez Luño (2014) we see an interplay among three levels in CST contributions, which is interesting to keep in mind, to apply the classical principles to new challenges.

At the top, as the major premise of the reasoning, we find the principles, stemming from the Bible and Christian tradition, and shaped by the perennial social philosophy. Those principles have been affirmed by successive documents, with some terminological instability. However, some of the concepts are well established and have made fortune, becoming repeatedly used by Popes and Christians in intellectual discussions.

In business and economic practice, however, those principles are obviously too broad to allow a unilateral reading. At the bottom -playing the role of conclusions in the syllogism- we find the specific applications of the principles that are the result of a prudential judgement (moral, legal, political, economic), at various levels (broad principle, specific rule, decision in a particular case).

The contribution of Rodríguez Luño -following Martin Rhonheimer (2013) - has been to point out that the leap between principles and applications is mediated by another intermediate epistemological level that works as a minor premise in the syllogism. This minor premise is constituted by the political and economic models that work as analytical tools of social reality.

I find two problems here: first, that these models are usually not mentioned explicitly whenever an ecclesiastical authority intervenes in practical issues. Arguably, absolute moral and legal limits to human action are valid this intermediate level notwithstanding. But even then, the way these limits are expressed usually assume a certain intellectual framework (like the language of human rights). The second problem is that CST explicitly declares not having economic or political models, but only a basic

philosophy that could illuminate social discussions. At these levels there is disagreement within Christians, and a legitimate one, which is not the same as thinking everything is relative or in other words, that models are not true or false, useful or damaging.

In analyzing the new realities, the basic principles should be useful and illuminating. However, a sharpening of intellectual rigor and precision would be helpful—moreover: it is demanded by the complexities of new phenomena. The minor premise of socio-economic models is even more evidently subject to revision in the face of social change. These models have been elaborated in certain contexts, with a language and common references that might need revision after major disruptions.

The contribution of a Christian perspective on work is also in need for translation, if it is going to have an influence in current debates. It is therefore interesting to note that there is a growing literature on the meaning of work in the field of business ethics that draws on Christian humanism (Neo-aristotelian and Thomistic approaches, complemented by insights from personalist philosophy, sometimes with explicit mention of CST). These authors have delineated a framework (Melé, 2009), and put this philosophy in dialogue with contemporary theories of the firm (Fontrodona & Melé, 2002; Argandoña 1998); some others have explicitly addressed human work as the common good of the business firm (Sison & Fontrodona, 2012; 2013). There is also a whole branch of this literature that draws from Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) contributions on the nature of practices and institutions, led by Geoff Moore (2017).

At a different level, a dialogue between this normative and philosophical approaches and the contributions of psychology in the field of meaningful work is on the making. And there has also been attempts to put CST perspectives on work and spirituality in dialogue with another branch of current scientific literature on workplace spirituality (Calleja & Díez, 2015).

VII. THE UBERIZATION OF THE ECONOMY AND THE MEANING OF WORK

In the face of the challenges of the sharing economy and other elements of the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution, mainly issues regarding regulations and working conditions, I propose the following research guidelines to make CST teachings on work relevant and operative:

First, we should distinguish the three levels of any practical syllogism. The major premise is constituted by section V of this paper, where I have sketched the principles that should guide any further reflection. The circumstances and conditionings are described in sections II and III. The voice of a Christian view of work should enter into dialogue with current debates on the sharing economy, as sketched in section IV. In applying section VI discoveries, we obviously need to make an explicit mention to the intermediate socio-economic model that plays as a minor premise of the syllogism.

Second, a deeper reflection on the Christian understanding of human work leads to the following conclusions: a) work is an intrinsic human good and not only an instrumental activity, or a source of self-expression; b) that this good is to be cultivated in cooperation and communion with others within firms and markets, not only in cooperative not-for-profit or not structured settings; c) that work as a practice and its demands is not exclusive to employees, but should be applied to other elements of business firms and markets, such as entrepreneurs, investors, managers, etc.; d) dignity in human work should not be confused with current legal protections towards employees, however important these are in certain situations, and besides their historically prominent role.

Third, work in our current socio-economic landscape is more entrepreneurial-like: less structured in terms of schedule (as in the case of Uber's driver-partners), workplace, peer relationships; flexibility makes work/life balance to draw more on individual decisions and context pressures, creating opportunities and risks. These trends are ambivalent. Entrepreneurial activities have always been like that. The problem here is that the chances of getting a stable job—that allows to prosper in other aspects of life without necessarily becoming rich—is becoming a scarce good. A certain model of human life is fading away (Harari, 2015; 305-370).

Fourth, besides individual decisions, there are two levels of normativity that CST should address: 1) the cultural environment, not totally homogeneous; 2) and the legal framework, pluralistic by definition, except in cases of widespread international or supranational agreements. Regarding the cultural environment—which shapes consumer but also investors, workers and managers decisions in the markets, beyond any notion of self-interest and rationality—a reflection on the classical principles of human action in society should contribute to a healthy skepticism regarding the “unseen technological disruptions” of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. There is a myth on the making here, that

has connections with materialistic and progressivist ideologies—sometimes called transhumanism (Harari, 2015; 21)—which should be unveiled. “There is nothing new under the sun” (Eccles. 1,9). A pondered understanding of the scope of the ongoing changes would be very helpful in this regard, avoiding conjunctural distortions of reality and the corresponding crazes. Huge income differences, incredible growth rates, etc., are not a sign of intellectual superiority on the side of certain elites, but most probably a symptom of a cultural distortion—sometimes with perfect awareness—which might eventually collapse.

Regarding the legal level affects various aspects of the problem, in the Uber case we could just mention two: a) regulatory boundaries to certain markets, designed to provide certainty and guarantee certain public services; and b) the application of labor laws and labor protections to contractors supplying their vehicles and services. On these two topics, there is no globally valid response. On the first issue, what is clear to me is that a reasonable and negotiated accommodation should be pursued between regulated providers of services and new providers. Objectivity is necessary, though should not be expected in dealing with these negotiations in front of public opinion. Political leadership and social awareness on the side of business are needed, two attitudes that are typically lacking in our societies.

In what regards to labor rights, it is reasonable to expect a double movement: on one hand an expansion of legal protections to contractors -the European Court seems to be moving in that direction-; and a parallel effort to reform labor laws to allow more flexibility, while paying a specific attention to vulnerable groups of population. To a substantial extent this is a prudential call, which depends on many contextual factors, and a reason why these problems should not be allocated at a very large scale, or determined at the level of principles or guidelines on the side of CST.

Uber and other platforms have adopted an aggressive business strategy that entails *regulatory piracy*: entering new markets massively -a critical mass is needed for their services to be efficient- without getting any permits, or without negotiating regulatory adaptations. This attitude has created a corporate culture and a leadership style that ultimately has led to the dismissal of Uber’s founder and CEO Kalanik, and to a series of drawbacks in different jurisdictions. In other words, it has proven effective short-term, but is damaging the reputation and social legitimacy of the business. On the other hand, given the rigidity of current regulations and the power structure that defends them, some

maneuvering was needed to offer transportation services that could benefit from technological advances. However, a more conscientious approach would have been recommended, pursuing the common good and not just predated benefits, moving from regulatory piracy to a constructive norm-maker approach.

Fifth, the inevitable overlapping of principles and contingent social conflicts, might have caused some confusion around these ideas when reading CST documents. For that reason, it would be positive to have a magisterial document showing the relevance of CST in contemporary debates by reinforcing certain elements of a Christian understanding of work. At the same time, for reasons explained above, such a document should not try to provide answers and settle disputes at the level of public policy, legislation and/or business practices, but rather open a space for reflection and prudential decision making in what affects the future of human work.

This aspect of my proposal is convenient for reasons of clarity, for respecting the freedom and responsibility of lay people, and considering the complexities, contingency and rapid changes in these matters. But this will only be possible, if the document provides a clarification of the implicit socio-economic models that are used to translate the high-level principles into guidelines and suggestions for public policy and private practice. In particular, CST is still in need for an understanding of Economics that puts human work at the core, as the measure for all economic rationality, which is different from a socialist dialectic between work and capital, within which it is many times interpreted.

In other words, a reformulation of the implications of that doctrine -in protecting human work from exploitation and other forms of corruption- pertains mainly to lay people involved in economic activities, as well as politics and regulation, and demand from them a solid effort in understanding the essence of human work. In this task they should count on the counseling of other colleagues of good doctrine and moral prestige, as well as theologians, thinkers, experts in social science, and shepherds.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

Sharing is caring, so goes the popular saying. The priority of the common good and the logic of gift are usually interpreted as privileging forms of socio-economic interaction that are explicitly cooperative. The sharing economy *sensu stricto* is a good

example of that spirit of gratuitous cooperation. However, most of the well-known businesses under this label -and Uber in particular- are in fact something very different, even when they use the same platform technologies.

This does not mean that everything is negative in businesses like Uber. On the contrary, innovative technologies allow much more efficient uses of assets, fast exchanges of money and information, resulting in much better services for consumers, and other social benefits. These new business models are transforming the way many people work, moving from being employees within corporate structures, into being contractors in the market. This might sound like ownership of the means of production, freedom in the workplace and the primacy of creativity, which are good *prima facie*.

However, the new conditions of work have its downsides, and in some situations, might turn into corrupted forms of human labor. Current labor law and sectorial regulations are often outdated, provoking unfair inefficiencies in markets, reinforcing the power of certain interest groups at the expense of other social actors. Therefore, applying old regulations in a defensive mode is not a solution. The same can be said of CST applications, shaped to suit a landscape of economic and legal relations that are being dismantled for good.

A new synthesis on the meaning of human work is needed to ground any future socio-cultural or legal norm. CST should contribute to that at the level of principles, and Christian inspired scientist, lawyers and policy makers and business practitioners, should get inspired by those principles, to prudentially apply them to a shifting reality.

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