Disruptive Sharing Pt. 2

A few weeks back we took a look at some of the downsides of our new “sharing” economy. It’s worth taking a look at some of the really positive aspects of the expanding embrace of entrepreneurial enthusiasm.

I know a number of top-cut people who are entrepreneurs. I mean this with absolute sincerity and conviction; these are people who would bail my ass out of a crack without hesitation, people who give back and pay forward as a matter of character and habit. People with greater social compassion and engagement than I have to offer on my best day, and who do it pretty much without a break.

Some of my friends have or will spend their last dime and ounce of energy trying to turn an idea into something real and tangible. This is the core of entrepreneurship: taking an idea from the wisps of neuro-chimera and bringing it into the world in a form that can be seen, felt, heard, touched. Even the most committed democratic socialist can recognize the essential value in being able to take an idea from concept to actuality. Entrepreneurship is about getting things done.

And many of these people have created opportunities for other people to expand their own creative expression, to have jobs that offer both economic return and the chance to make a tangible difference through their work. As someone who spent too many years toiling in large organizations – a constant exercise of pouring from the empty into the void – this is a significant contribution to quality of life in our

communities.

And it ain't easy. Aside from competing entrepreneurs, you have to face a barrage of people telling you, every step of the way, that "that will *never* work".

Same thing in the "arts" – I know any number of writers, musicians, visual artists, &c. who have figured out a way to create a product that people are willing to pay for. Let's go ahead and say that *product* is a value-neutral term. *A Love Supreme* is a product. So is a Don DeLilo novel. The Bitter Southerner is an entrepreneurial project. Hell, even this bloggy little vineyard is an act of entrepreneurship.<fn>However feeble by the prevailing measure of entrepreneurial success.</fn> Whether the impulse to create these products was mercenary or driven by some other urge is irrelevant. Converting these ideas into something tangible was most definitely entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneurship is not in itself a bad (or even good) thing. It's a value-neutral mindset, just as likely to result in a cure for cancer or erectile disfunction as it is to bring us a more effective high-capacity semi-automatic weapon or herbicidal agent that happens to also cause birth defects in birds and mammals.

But if entrepreneurship *per se* is value-neutral, its practice is often anything but. Where one 'trep brings an innovative idea to bear on a long-standing need or problem, too many others use their ingenuity to deliver "disruptions" that are at best merely useless and wasteful; at their worst, too many bright ideas are downright predatory and damaging. (More on this in Part 3.)

It's a current hot fad to tout entrepreneurship as the silver bullet that will save us from everything that ails us. This is where the whole enterprise opens itself up to the schools of remora who are always ready to swarm the hottest new trend.

Worse, the presentation of the "principles" of entrepreneurship are often taught under the guise of value-neutrality despite their inherently value-rich underpinnings.

In Part 1, I linked to an article in *Jacobin* magazine, "The Entrepreneurship Racket", a hard look at higher education's headlong rush into the cult and fad of the entrepreneur. The driving force behind this new branch of academia is a direct outgrowth of decades of free-market propaganda that really took flight under the greed-is-good ethos of the Reagan raj.<fn>Remember…Reagan ruined *everything*.</fn> Under the rubrics of this approach to entrepreneurship, the only thing that matters is the amount of money an idea generates. The insidious aspect of this measurement is that it pretends to value neutrality, while other concerns (e.g., worker dislocation/exploitation, distortions of real estate values and availability, environmental or health issues, &c.) will be disregarded as squishy moral issues, consideration of same being a clear violation of so-called value neutrality. In this paradigm, areas of study that do not generate Return on Investment or produce alumni with abundant incomes that can be tapped for future donations are threatened with extinction under the value-neutral rubrics that are coming to define entrepreneurial higher-ed governance. Anthropology? Classical studies? Worse than useless.

The propaganda program behind the burgeoning entrepreneur fad continues a decades-long campaign against organized labor and any regulation that can be viewed as an imposition against those who would lead us unto the glorious free-market promised land. If you think this is hyperbolic, then you've never read the curricular materials disseminated by pro-business groups like American for Prosperity and the like.

To evangelists of free-market doctrine, it is a matter of fundamental faith that our salvation lies in some sort of Randian utopia in which success and happiness depends solely upon the "value neutral" measure of RoI. The extent to which

this has become accepted as “common sense”<fn>A phrase that generally predicts an impending bullshit shower.</fn> is indicative of the success of a long-term program of indoctrination disguised as education.

The prevailing Gospel of Entrepreneurship is about getting things done that make money.<fn>Notwithstanding the sub-field of Social Entrepreneurship, which urges innovation that provides benefit to a vaguely defined common good. Not that this is bad; neither is it as purely good as its champions might suggest. More in Part 3.</fn> We’ve all but abandoned the critical thinking that lies behind the notion of ‘just because you can, doesn’t mean you should’ and replaced it with ‘if it makes money, just do it’. The boiler room in *Glengarry Glen Ross* is pretty much the naked id of value neutral entrepreneurship.

This is not a blanket indictment of the ‘trep spirit. I know too many good people who approach their business activities with sensitivity to environmental and cultural impacts, people who honestly treat their entrepreneurship as central to their commitment to responsible citizenship. Really good folks who are as unlike this smirking shitstain as water is from fire.

Possibly the most punchable face in America.

If you get right down to it, the only thing Martin Shkreli did wrong was to rub everyone's nose in his steaming pile of "success". His predatory disruptions were right in line with the free-market Gospel of St. Ronald. He's the poster boy for free-market entrepreneurship. He just forgot to use his indoor voice.

If hair metal is the result of too many people not realizing that *Spinal Tap* was a joke, the flood of Shkrelis in our midst may be a result of people not recognizing that Gordon Gekko was a villain, not a role model. Given the overwhelming success of free-market evangelism, this outcome should come as no surprise.

That Uber/Lyft or WalMart or Airbnb or Amazon offer products and services that "we" have enthusiastically embraced does not excuse the very real damage that each of these companies have imposed in the course of their disruptive triumph. There was a

sign hanging in a guitar repair shop I used to visit that said, “Fast. Good. Cheap. Pick two.” As a society, we have chosen. Cheaper, faster…we love that shit. It’s long since past time to take a look at the ‘good’ we are sacrificing.

Disruptive Sharing Pt 1

A couple of phrases that get tossed around pretty casually these days are *sharing economy* and *market disruption*. While these terms have been so overused as to disable any attempt at precise explanation, this same overuse makes it crucial to at least try to scrape some of the barnacles off. Allow me to declare at the outset that though I am likely to fail to penetrate to the hull, I might succeed at knocking away a small part of the encrustation.

Last week, the people of Austin, TX, voted to subject rideshare Leviathans Uber and Lyft to *some* of the same regulatory regulations that govern traditional taxi operations. From the coverage I’ve seen, we are to believe that this represents the irrational citizens of Austin flipping Uber/Lyft the electoral finger and “forcing” them to leave the riders of the nation’s 11th largest city stranded and bereft. Talk about disruption!

Forbes magazine has been especially exercised, with headlines like “By Losing Uber, Austin is No Longer a Tech Capital” and

“The Misplaced Celebration of Austin’s Victory Over Uber”. The *National Review*, in its typically sober and reasoned approach, declared that Austin has “…confirmed its status as a second-rate city by effectively banning Uber and Lyft from offering rides.”

In fact, the ballot initiative was sponsored by Uber/Lyft themselves in an attempt to exempt themselves from a regulation that requires drivers to undergo fingerprinting and background checking. Passed last year, this regulation came in response to multiple sexual assault charges against Uber/Lyft drivers. Uber/Lyft placed an exemption initiative on the ballot and spent around $8M on advertising. Their pitch came down to one simple claim: if the regulations stand, we will be “forced” to leave Austin, so give us what we want or fuck you.

The people – presented with epic corporate arrogance – voted the amendment down, decisively. So Uber/Lyft scarpered. Voluntarily. Nobody forced them.

Now it’s easy to see why Uber/Lyft tossed such an insulting ultimatum in the faces of the Austin voters. They’re used to getting their way; much as the Wal-Marts and manufacturing concerns extract massive concessions from local governments for the privilege of having them move to their community, Uber/Lyft muscles local governments for favorable treatments. Woe betide any locality that presumes to question the wisdom of the Leviathan.

I’ve had great luck with Uber. It’s a pretty convenient and affordable way to get around. (I have not used Lyft yet.) It’s easy to understand how it has gotten so popular, so quickly. Yes, taxi cabs are often slow, run down, expensive. Uber provides prompt, economical, and not-necessarily-sincere-yet-reliably cheerful service.

But.

Their success rests upon a couple of less-than-admirable

business practices. One is its absolute insistence that Uber/Lyft be exempt from many of the regulatory practices that have, admittedly, made traditional taxi service so problematic. Worth recalling that this regulatory system arose in response to abuses and safety issues of their own as the network of cabs, hacks, and ‘gypsies’ grew without curb. There were very real problems that demanded some kind of remedy.

The other is that Uber/Lyft is profiting greatly by classifying their drivers as independent contractors, thereby evading the basics of employee obligation to its workers. No benefits. No overtime. No job protections. All terms dictated by the employer, upon whom the worker is solely reliant. (Recall as well that labor and employment law has also developed in response to significant abuses and safety issues.) Uber/Lyft claims, more or less accurately, that their drivers enter into this agreement willingly, so it should be up to them and their drivers to sort it out.<fn>One might also suggest that over the years, many other high-risk/lo-pay workers have assumed their jobs “voluntarily”. Nobody ever put a gun to a coal miner’s head. Unless they went on strike.</fn>

This is the sharing economy at work. As with the low, low prices at WalMart that force smaller businesses to the ground, the cheapness/convenience of Uber lies not so much in the inherent genius of the folks at the top as it does with the ongoing knuckling of the little guy at the end of the chain. The guy who accepts his fate “voluntarily”.

Shutting down a hugely profitable operation in Austin simply to avoid a requirement that drivers get a background check seems damn near hysterical, response-wise. Reckon that’ll teach the rubes who’s boss. Just as when compromise boils down to “giving me what I want”, sharing here aligns with a “what’s mine is mine and what’s yours is mine” equation.

Employment law has pretty well devolved to this condition: you are free to work, or not. But if you want to work, the

conditions will be set by the employer with no practical limits to the terms that they wish to impose. That this will often be – especially in fields demanding higher levels of education and expertise – characterized in terms that makes it feel less indenturing<fn>Hey, we're all in this together! Everybody needs to sacrifice for the team! We're a big *family!*</fn>, the reality is no less harsh. Employers know that decent paying jobs are scarce; that most college graduates of the past 10 years are carrying gargantuan levels of student loans; and that if you won't take that job at half what it costs to live, you can bet someone else will. You are free to stay. Or go. Whatevs. You're just a worker. Workers are commodities. Enjoy the foosball table, widgets.

That's sharing.

Uber/Lyft drivers scramble to deliver an awesome experience, often pleading with the customer to go online and *rate* the worker, which in turn determines whether the worker receives (un)favorable treatment in the future. The key currency in this arrangement is anxiety.

Never mind that Uber/Lyft retain the right to change compensation and rate agreements at any time, without prior notice. The "independent" driver, who is "freely" participating in this out-of-balance arrangement – because jobs and wages have gone to shit – is perfectly free to shove off if she doesn't like it. Perhaps the dissatisfied Uber driver would like to try her luck in one of the farther-down-the-ladder professions, such as chicken processing.

> *Many of them said they were forced to urinate or defecate where they stood or leave the line without permission, because no help arrived. At some plants, workers have come to expect no relief, leading them to take embarrassing measures to withstand the conditions.*

Any guesses what happens to workers who "leave the line

without permission”?

On a related tangent, the NY Times continues its series this weekend on the rampant spread of forced arbitration clauses across our society, in this case its widespread implementation among “startup” companies. The gist is this: an employer or vendor like Google, or Verizon (or your doctor) can require you to sign away your rights to seek redress through due process in the courts in the event you have a “dispute”. Often, this clause is buried within multiple pages of 8 pt. type; in other cases, like with a former doctor of mine, they are right up front about what they are doing, and you are invited to piss off if you don’t like it.<fn>I pissed off.</fn>

One of the dirty secrets is that the arbitration hearings are conducted by “independent”<fn>There’s that word again.</fn> companies who are under contract to the vendor/employer. The party adjudicating the dispute is paid by one of the parties to the dispute. I would urge us to perish the cynical thought that this might lead to bias or partiality, except that the numbers sure do point to a statistical likelihood that the arbitrators will find for the defendant (your boss or doctor, the guy paying the adjudicator) in a disproportionate percentage of cases. Probably just a coincidence.

You are, of course, “free” to decline to sign, at which point your employer (or doctor) is “free” to tell you to go pound salt. It’s all free choice!

Except of course it isn’t, as any prat can see. The power balance is skewed, making the concept of “freedom” a farce. Won’t sign the arbitration agreement? Take your critical illness elsewhere. Find a job somewhere else.

> *The law, in its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread.*

> *— Anatole France*

Freedom, bitches!

But there's always the time-honored option of Bohemianism, of choosing a life of the artist, the writer. Let us embrace the modern-day version of living like Baudelaire or Kerouac, free of the restraints of our perhaps-benevolent overlords.

A terrific essay by artist/critic Hito Steyerl called *Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy* <fn> Thanks to swallowawindchime for the tip.</fn> looks at the role of contemporary art as a reflection of and comforting balm to what our current shorthand calls the one-percent.

As with other willing participants in the sharing economy, our creatives come to the enterprise of serving the one percent with gusto, making the best of a bad situation:

> *Thus, traditional art production may be a role model for the nouveaux riches created by privatization, expropriation, and speculation. But the actual production of art is simultaneously a workshop for many of the nouveaux poor, trying their luck as jpeg virtuosos and conceptual impostors, as gallerinas and overdrive content providers. Because art also means work, more precisely strike work. It is produced as spectacle, on post-Fordist all-you-can-work conveyor belts. Strike or shock work is affective labor at insane speeds, enthusiastic, hyperactive, and deeply compromised.*

As long as it pays (a little) or provides the all-important "exposure", it's all good. Right?

The phrase "strike work" has its origins in Stalinist efforts to induce a jump in production by bringing in "superproductive and enthusiastic" cadres who will deliver a shock to the enterprise.

> *This accelerated form of artistic production creates punch and glitz, sensation and impact. Its historical origin as format for Stalinist model brigades brings an additional edge to the paradigm of hyperproductivity. Strike workers churn out feelings, perception, and distinction in all possible sizes and variations. Intensity or evacuation, sublime or crap, readymade or readymade reality—strike work supplies consumers with all they never knew they wanted.*

"All they never knew they wanted." And at such low prices.

Steyerl's invocation of Stalinism as an analogue of current labor conditions is no accident, and represents a vast improvement to the overused, overwrought Overton impulse. (As dense as her prose can be, she offers no shortage of laugh-out-loud relief.) The apropos comparison of latter-day capitalism to the bugaboo of Communist authoritarianism is a telling condemnation of the fantasy of "freedom" in our economic relations.

As with labor in all areas of our economy, the deck is stacked, a situation made worse by the legions of well-meaning and ambitious folks willing to work for little (or nothing) just for the chance to prove their chops, all in the hope that paying work will follow. Alas, the future work is just as likely to go to the next (low cost) ambitious person in the queue. We are all lined up, ready to parade our talents one after the other. We have made a choice, freely. That this condition applies equally to those who choose to string words together, or perfect a performing art, &c., goes without saying. We are all too eager to place our talents in the hands of whatever entity is willing to pay. And we will do so with enthusiastic superproductivity!

<fn>There is a perfectly appalling tv ad these days for some new pharmaceutical. It stars a manic pixie dream girl in leotard as the antic embodiment of a person's irritable bowel

syndrome. (Enthusiastic productivity!) It is likely the best payday this actress has seen (or will) in ages. I'm sure she was grateful for the income and exposure. I wonder how she will feel in 20 years when she's remembered as "that explosive diarrhea chick". (Perhaps that offer to star in a porno wasn't all that bad. At least her parents don't have to watch "Texas Dildo Masquerade" or "World's Biggest Gang Bang 2" with the nightly news.) There are any number of female actors portraying gastric distress these days. Why no men? But, I digress. Again.</fn>

Last week, *Jacobin* magazine published "The Entrepreneurship Racket", a not very favorable look at the hottest trend in higher education. It's far too much to summarize here, so give it a read. It is basically an examination of how the buzzwords of the "startup" revolution (and we're back to "sharing" and "disruptive") have permeated the programs and curricula of academia, with special emphasis placed on the "entrepreneur", a mythical creature who is part Edison, part Galt, part Savior and Guru. Is it any accident that the highest attainment possible for one of these creatures is to become a Unicorn?

Many universities are plowing huge sums into creating Entrepreneurship programs that reach across the range of what used to be quaintly known as academic disciplines. Partnerships with corporations and private foundations provide funding, often in return for some degree of control over curriculum and, in some especially grim cases, faculty hiring decisions. Programs will be assessed not just on graduation rates, but on job placements and average earnings. Programs that develop patentable inventions – that the University will own and administer – are especially favored as they create revenues for the institution, thereby making them less reliant on taxpayer funding. It all comes down to the Benjamins.

The dynamics of market economies are well understood, and the incentives of this arrangement can lead to both genius innovations as well as clever-but-benighted ideas that,

nonetheless, accrue fantastic profits.<fn>e.g., bottled tap water</fn> It's a little senseless to argue against the logic of a market economy, just as it is blindly optimistic to believe that such an economy can operate absent some set of rules or norms that will curb the excess that is its inevitable result. And yes, these rules will impose conditions that trigger their own market dynamics, which might lead to new efforts to curb excesses, and so on ad infinitum. But in general, the "market" is a more or less effective means of approaching questions of value as long as none of the parties in the exchange accrue an inordinate advantage of wealth or power. There's the rub, eh?

But where we've managed to get off track – where this exaltation of the Galtian superhero entrepreneur sends us down a blind alley – is our gradual and all but complete adoption of a market *society*, wherein all of our relationships and values are subject to the dictates of the market, the tyranny of the spreadsheet.

Our every decision must establish itself on the ground of market-driven logic. That library? A hopeless money sink. A public park where there could be a private, membership driven club that produces revenue? A violation of the government's duty to optimize taxpayer investments. That museum or small theater operating under grants and subsidies? Sorry, folks, that space could better serve as a venue for Toddlers & Tiaras or a mud-wrestling pit. Hey, the numbers don't lie.

One of the great degradations of the Reagan years occurred when arts advocates agreed to defend the merits of "the arts" on economic grounds. Once "we" ceded the ground of the debate, the game was up. There's no way to make, say, an arts facility more impressive on a spreadsheet than a Jimmy John's or a mattress store. Ergo, the arts are worth less than a cardboardish-drenched-in-mayonaisse-sandwich or a new posture-firm-ortho-tastic dream machine with memory foam and adjustable sleep settings. The numbers are cold and clear.

It’s endemic. The calculations underlying the prevailing discourse tilt the game in favor of a gross, libertarian-esque evaluation of our social relations. If someone can afford to buy a state park and demonstrate it’s vitality as a commercial concern, who are we to stand in the way of this creative disruption with our soft bromides about natural beauty or stewardship for future generations? Such talk is, well, it’s downright irresponsible.

And it will be as long as we accept the tyranny of the market as the arbitrator of what we will hold dear as a society.

And fwiw, your angstifying Narrator is no less complicit in the farce than the sharpies who founded Uber or who opened the fifth mattress store on a single city block. I just got less to show for it. YMMV

COMING SOON: Part 2, a further examination of the language of entrepreneurship and some of its more attractive and positive elements. No kidding.

How Can We Miss You…

Frank Sinatra died 18 years ago today. It’s like he never left. Really. Books, and re-releases, documentaries and tribute albums. Even Bob is in on the act.<fn>YMMV</fn> Frank

is everywhere, still. And that's pretty great. I grew up listening to Sinatra. My dad loves him, and every Saturday night at martini time, we would listen to *Sinatra at the Sands*, with the Count Basie Orchestra. Great, great stuff.

But this ramble isn't really about Frank.

Yesterday, for no reason other than idle intertubing that led me down a rabbit hole of 70s pop hits<fn>Spurred by a search for the Staples Singers' *I'll Take You There.</fn>*, I found myself listening to Jim Croce.

Croce had a couple of #1 hits and was on a rocket trajectory until his charter plane crashed on takeoff after a concert in Natchitoches, LA, in 1973. He was everywhere back then – *Midnight Special*, *The Tonight Show, Dick Cavett*, *The Helen Reddy Show*, Don Kirshner's *In Concert* – and on top of some tightly crafted pop songs, he was a pretty amiable storyteller. He was good and popular and likely would have gone on to bigger things. And then he was gone.

But this post isn't about Jim Croce, either.

Because alongside Croce in that video – and on every appearance you can find – is a very unassuming guy named Maury Muehleisen. This post is about him.

Back then, as a fledgling guitar player, I loved this guy. His touch and timing – even though I didn't really know about that kind of thing then – was just fantastic. Listening last night, I realized that the arrangements they were playing were pretty clever and tight. And that apparently came from Maury.

He was the guy who brought that sense of structure and sophistication to the music everyone knew as Croce's. His harmony singing is subtle and lovely. Here was a guy, very soft-spoken, who barely moved when he played and sang, just delivering the goods with no undue fuss. And it made what

would have been a more-or-less novelty folkie into something a little more.

I'm not going to oversell this. Croce's was pop music, albeit at a time when pop music could actually deliver a surprise or two. He wrote entertaining lyrics and was by all accounts a genuinely good guy. And this song, though played to death over the years, is really wonderfully constructed. It's a damned model of a pop song.

I spent hours trying to figure out Maury's part on this tune. I never got there.

Maury Muehleisen. The guy was the real deal, a true musician who was happy to sit in back and make everything sound better, never hungry for a spotlight, a player who worked the road and died from it.

How can we miss you if we don't remember?

Bored of Education

Having conquered the long-standing challenge of developing our flowering youth into a robust and world-dominating work-force, the nation's Boards of Education have turned their attention to more pressing concerns.

SALISBURY, NC – High school students will be allowed to carry

> *mace in the 2016-2017 school year after the Rowan-Salisbury Board of Education agreed to remove prohibitive language and amend its policy.*

Now before we go reflexively shouting "WHAT IN THE NAME OF POO FLINGING MONKEYS IS THAT ABOUT", let the good burghers of Salisbury explain.

> *Board member Chuck Hughes was in favor of the sprays on campuses, saying that in his mind, they were purely defensive. He also referenced HB2, saying that the sprays might be useful.*
>
> *"Depending on how the courts rule on the bathroom issues, it may be a pretty valuable tool to have on the female students if they go to the bathroom, not knowing who may come in," he said.*

What could possibly go wrong?

> *The board's lawyer, Ken Soo, said that there have been few cases of a student using Mace against a teacher.*

The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the tears of teachers and administrators. Freedom, bitches!

But stay your outrage. These sober guardians of our youth turned to yet another sharp concern of chin-stroking importance.

> *Wagner then directed the discussion to razors. The board previously agreed that straight-edge razors should be prohibited, but felt some discussion should be given to disposable razors…"To me it's absurd for even a student not to have a disposable razor . . . it certainly doesn't make sense for staff," Wagner said.*

The right to tidy your whiskers shall not be abridged.

Moving along to another hamlet that has apparently solved ALL

THE PROBLEMS, let’s look in on the no-doubt-conservative-fiscally denizens of McKinney, TX.

> *Voters in McKinney, Tex., have given the go ahead to build a nearly $63 million high school football stadium after months of contentious debate in the suburban city north of Dallas.*

Since ALL THE PROBLEMS have been solved, it makes sense to handle the other overweening, towering needs of this earnest village of 160,000 souls.

> *Supporters have acknowledged that the old stadium, the 7,000-seat Ron Poe Stadium built in 1962, has provided more than enough room to accommodate fans, even if the parking lot is too small.*

That parking lot sure was a problem, a goddamned embarrassment, really.

> *In debates and online comment threads, opponents argued that it represented a misplaced priority on sports over academics. Some mentioned concerns about football-related concussions.*

Namby pamby latte sipping pinheads, all. Fortunately, the good people of McKinney were not duped by these fifth columnist com-symp feminizers of our nation’s young pigskin warriors.

> *In a vote on May 7, nearly two-thirds of McKinney residents endorsed a $220 million school bond measure that included plans for the stadium,*

And all is right in God’s plan.

It is to despair. As soon as I stop laughing.