Economies of Coworking: Sharing, Exchanging, and Buying as Acts of Commoning

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Abstract
The past fifteen years have seen a rapid growth in the number of coworking spaces worldwide. In the research literature, these spaces, in which start-up entrepreneurs and other self-employed people form professional and social networks, are often understood either as a manifestation of increasingly precarious forms of work within neoliberal capitalism or as a solidary alternative to this form of individualizing and competitive economy. Drawing on ethnographic research from a coworking space in Barcelona, we identify three forms of sharing—demand sharing, passion sharing, and public sharing—which simultaneously carry the potential for communal and passionate work and for instrumental and exploitative forms of collaboration in coworking. We show how coworkers balance acts of sharing, exchanging, and buying/selling their skills and knowledge in different ways, depending on their personal situations, experiences, and professional skills. Accordingly, we argue, in this setting coworking also involves forms of “differential commoning” through which coworkers can obtain—even if it is only momentary—a sense of being part of an intentional community that operates according to values of solidarity, care and passion, which intersects with yet differs from what they perceive as individualist capitalist work life.

Keywords: coworking, sharing, differential commoning, new commons, precarity

Introduction
For almost two months, Matías’s space of work had been Betahaus Barcelona—a so-called coworking space for freelancers, start-up entrepreneurs, and other self-employed people. Matías was a freelance graphic designer in his mid-20s, and for him Betahaus was far more than an office environment where people shared office space and office amenities. It was a place, he argued, in which “coworkers” helped and learned from one another through processes of exchange: “What’s happening is that we help each other perform better [...] you make me better, and I make you better because we learn. It’s reciprocal. [...] [It is] exchange of knowledge, of skills.” Matías felt that the members of Betahaus complemented each other professionally and that Betahaus offered a unique opportunity to be self-employed but at the same time part of a wider work community. For him, Betahaus was a place where passionate, creative, and ambitious people could realize their dreams jointly, rather than in competition with each other. He saw this approach to work, at once individualistic and collectivistic, as part of a new zeitgeist that he believed would only grow stronger in the future.

Where Matías described the forms of collaboration at Betahaus with words such as reciprocity, exchange, learning, and helping, Pierre, an intern in a small start-up business, emphasized a notion of sharing, arguing that coworking was part of a steadily growing sharing economy. For him, the sharing economy is based on social commitment to sharing your knowledge and skills and, thus, becoming part of something other than your own individualistic project. Accordingly, he criticized some members of Betahaus, for example, two computer programmers, for not committing to the work community: “They don’t care whether they meet other people, but when you’re part of the sharing economy, isolating yourself is self-contradictory.”

In autumn 2014, Mangor carried out four months of fieldwork at Betahaus Barcelona, where she observed and participated in day-to-day activities and interviewed members and owners of the house. Drawing from this fieldwork, we investigate how coworkers in Betahaus promote and negotiate different forms of collaborative relations: How do they “share,” “exchange,” “buy,” and “sell” knowledge and skills in the common office environment? How do they balance the potentially contradictory ideals of sharing and helping each other with personal needs to earn money and sell ideas and labor? To what extent do
they conjure an intentional community that offers an alternative to the profit-driven, capitalist work life of which many of them are critical.

In the research literature, coworking is often understood *either* as a coping mechanism for a growing precariat and, therefore, a new form of capitalist co-optation *or* as a distinct communitarian alternative to an increasingly individualized and capitalist ethic of work life (see e.g., Gandini 2015; de Peuter et al. 2017). However, the social life in Betahaus, we argue, is not so reducible to either of these positions. Ideologically, many coworkers were critical of the individualizing and profit-maximizing approaches to work, and in their everyday practices, they continually negotiated their work relations to find a suitable balance between communitarian values of care, solidarity, and competitive strategies for the promotion of their professional reputations and economic possibilities. We show how differently positioned coworkers engage in and shape coworking through a combination of sharing, giving, and selling/buying of knowledge or skills. Doing so, we argue that coworkers also engage in acts of “differential commoning” (Noterman 2016), through which Betahaus is partially and momentarily enacted as an intentional community based on communal values alternative to individualist capitalist work life.

**Coworking—An Alternative to or Co-opted by Capitalist Work Life?**

The phenomenon of coworking has been rapidly growing since 2005, when Brad Neuburg, a self-employed software developer, launched the first coworking space in San Francisco (see e.g., Botson and Rogers 2011; Gandini 2015). Because coworkers typically perform so-called immaterial labor, producing “immaterial goods such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge or communication” (Gill and Pratt 2008, 7), they are a flexible labor force, able to work from anywhere as long as they have laptops and Internet connections. As Waters-Lynch et al. have shown, the initial coworking movement from 2005 to 2008 was “led by young people, many in their twenties, who identified as ‘independent’ workers, generally ‘freelance’ creative knowledge workers, who were looking to address the challenges of social isolation associated with working from their private homes or public places such as cafés and libraries” (Waters-Lynch et al. 2016, 10). In coworking spaces, freelancers, start-up entrepreneurs, and other self-employed (and often young) people could access office-space services, interact socially, and form professional networks.

However, many coworking spaces aim to provide members with more than physical facilities and social relations; they seek to develop an alternative to an individualized, competitive, and capitalist ethics of work life. As Miranda Campbell has demonstrated in a Canadian context, young people engaged in small-scale entrepreneurship in coworking spaces are often just as dedicated to building a community of like-minded people through partnerships as they are to earning money (Campbell 2015, 44). Furthermore, many coworking spaces, including Betahaus, are based on a type of open source community approach (Loefrester 2009), in which bottom-up, peer-to-peer collaboration, a sense of community, and a public sharing of goods are highlighted as essentials in place of simple profit maximization. This is one of the reasons why coworking has also been described—as Pierre did above—as part of a new kind of sharing economy: an economy that, generally speaking, is understood to offer an ideologically based alternative to existing (and in this perspective, problematic and outdated) forms of consumer capitalism and private ownership (Botsman and Rogers 2011; Richardson 2015).

In contrast to this understanding, however, a number of researchers have argued that, most often, coworking spaces mainly come to serve as sites for professional networking and the building of personal reputations and corporate brands (see Gandini 2015). For example, de Peuter et al. (2017, 700–701) maintain that people tend to join coworking spaces for “emotional support and connections” in an increasingly competitive and individualized labor market, rather than based on an “ideological drive” to create an alternative to neoliberal work life. From this perspective, coworking becomes an individualized coping strategy for a steadily growing precariat (Standing 2011) of independent workers whose vulnerable working conditions are characterized by growing competition, financial insecurity, and short-term and temporary contracts (Gill and Pratt 2008; de Peuter et al. 2017).

As indicated above, attending to the specificities of coworking as a complex, shifting, and ambiguous set of practices moves beyond the dichotomous view of coworking as *either* a question of co-optation (by capitalism) *or* transformation (beyond capitalism). In the following section, after briefly outlining Betahaus’s history and structure, we explore the diversity of economic engagement and discuss the roles and meanings of these sharing, giving, and buying activities in the coworking space.

**Betahaus Barcelona—Cultivating Creativity and Community?**

The first coworking space in Barcelona was established in 2007, and in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, the number of coworking spaces in the city grew rapidly. Unemployment rates increased, a growing number of people became self-employed,
and ailing companies began renting out their premises as coworking spaces (Capdevila and Zarlenga 2015). In 2013, Betahaus in Barcelona opened its doors to its first members in the district of Gràcia, a vibrant urban area with a mix of residential buildings and businesses and a dynamic cultural scene and nightlife. Situated in a five-story former industrial building, squeezed between apartment buildings on a narrow street, the ground floor in Betahaus resembles a café area, with an open kitchen, music, and a mix of tables, chairs, couches, and armchairs. The other floors are more office-like with desks, office chairs, and meeting rooms.

At the time of fieldwork in 2014, Betahaus offered three types of membership, each paid monthly. The cheapest one allowed access to work from the café area. The second and third forms of membership allowed access to work from the office floors. Whereas the second and cheaper membership granted access to flexible seating, where you had to clean your desk at the end of each day, the third and most expensive form of membership gave members a personal desk. Apart from monthly memberships, it was also possible to buy a day pass that gave access to work from the café.

In 2014, Betahaus had approximately 150 members, with the possibility of expanding, as some of the five floors were still empty and would eventually be renovated. Its coworkers, relatively equally divided between males and females, came from all over the world, and foreigners made up the majority of the membership. Some had moved to Barcelona permanently, and others were there for shorter or longer periods. Most were white and in their late twenties to late thirties and had been in the labor market for a few years before joining Betahaus and were trained within IT or creative subjects such as graphic design and architecture.

As the name suggests, the Betahaus concept originates from Germany. The first Betahaus coworking space opened in Berlin in 2009; later, Betahauses also opened in Hamburg and Sofia. All Betahauses are owned and managed locally. “Beta” refers to what in software terminology is known as a beta version, that is, the test version of a piece of software before the final version is released on the market. The name Betahaus, therefore, pays tribute to the “beta phase,” which is characterized by experimentation and development and by an insistence that creative processes are more important than the finished product.

During fieldwork, three partners owned Barcelona’s Betahaus. As a private business, it was meant to be financially sustainable for its owners, and the so-called “members” or “coworkers” were their customers, buying access to the house and its various services, depending on the membership tier they purchased. Betahaus, however, was not only the owners’ company; it was also their workspace, and they sought out in-house peer-to-peer relations and collaborations. While decision-making power regarding the governance of the coworking space was ultimately in the hands of the owners, they ran the place based on ideals of user participation, emphasizing that the members’ initiatives and wishes should shape the place. Upon opening, they held a “summit” for the members to voice their wishes and opinions on how to form the place. From then on, they consulted their members on an informal basis and over Facebook, encouraging their involvement in the space’s everyday running and development. On the front page of the Betahaus website in 2014, they claimed: “Betahaus is more than a coworking [space], it’s a happy family living in an amazing house. We’re looking for people with ‘beta spirit.’ Each applicant should pass through a personal interview with a Betahaus team member in order to be accepted.”

One of the owners, Javier, was usually in charge of assessing aspiring members. Typically, he accepted them without further ado, based on a somewhat casual conversation and a house tour. On a few occasions, like with a small group of photographers interested in turning the yet-to-be-renovated fourth floor into a photographic studio, he rejected prospective members, complaining that they primarily seemed interested in Betahaus as a workspace that could satisfy their personal needs rather than those of a community to which they would contribute. Apparently, they did not possess the sought-after “beta spirit” that would help to develop the caring kin-like relation of “a happy family.”

Javier also argued that developing a well-functioning community of dedicated coworking members was more important to the owners than earning the maximum amount of money: “We [the owners of Betahaus] are always open [to negotiate the terms of membership]; nobody leaves Betahaus because they can’t pay for it.” He gave an example of two members who, in a period of low-income generation, had not been able to pay for their membership: “So what we do is, for example, they came to me and I said okay, I can give you like three or four months where you are not gonna pay, but then you give me something in return; for example, I need a campaign [for Betahaus]. [...] I think that’s the best way of doing it.”

Javier presented this form of payment in kind in a tone of care and community. Nevertheless, it should be noted that because of the asymmetrical rental relationship, such arrangements potentially also work as a form of appropriation where the owners can aggregate (unremunerated) value. None of the coworkers Mangor talked with raised this
Coworking as Learning and Demand Sharing

New start-ups, like Matías’s, often distributed their working hours between routine tasks for others, which brought in money, and work on their own businesses, which did not yet provide any profits. For them, Betahaus often became an important learning space where they could rely on help from more established entrepreneurs. Chiara, a woman in her thirties who had recently started her own business specializing in offering guided tours of Barcelona, explained that she had primarily joined Betahaus to learn from experienced entrepreneurs. In addition to advice on how to manage a business, she found it valuable to have access to graphic designers and software programmers, whom she could ask for advice (free of charge) about the layout and design of her business website. Likewise, Matías, who worked from shifting stations in the café, enthusiastically talked about how he often received valuable assistance from a more established freelancer a couple stories further up the building: “There is this guy called Pablo on the third floor, and I can just meet up with him and he’ll explain everything he knows to me, completely openly, and if he can, he will also help me out. It’s like wow! It’s almost like a school here.”

Matías’s requests for help and advice and Pablo’s openness to helping him can be understood as an immaterial version of what Widlok (2013) calls “demand sharing,” that is, a situation in which the person whom Widlok calls the “taker” initiates the transaction by requesting that another person share something. In contrast to classical approaches, where sharing consists of transferring material products (e.g., the harvest or hunting prey) to another person, in a coworking context you share immaterial resources in the shape of knowledge, experience, and skills—resources that you do not lose yourself by sharing them.

Several coworkers talked about showing “solidarity” with and helping newcomers. They knew from experience how difficult it could be to start a new enterprise, and, therefore, if a newcomer asked for advice, they were willing to give it without expectations of getting something in return. Even though, from a job-market perspective, you could lose competitive advantage by helping a potential upcoming rival, this rationale was rarely present in the rhetoric between the coworkers. In contrast to both barter, where participants directly exchange services for other services, and gift-giving, which instills a sense of indebtedness and moral obligation within the receiver to offer something in return at an unspecified later point (cf. Mauss 1990 [1924]), in sharing, no such social contract or bookkeeping is established (see Widlok 2013; Peterson 1993). Instead, as also argued by Widlok (2019: 37), demand sharing offers opportunities of access to a resource—a resource, which, in the case of coworking, could be understood as a pool of knowledge, skills, and experience that exists within a work community.

However, acts of sharing are often circumscribed by expectations that if you have shared something over the duration of your (work)life, and if your situation changes, you will also legitimately be able to request others in the community to share with you. In this sense, sharing resonates with what Marshall Sahlins (1972) has called “generalized reciprocity,” which include forms of unsolicited sharing. A central question, to which we shall return, therefore, becomes if or to what extent senses of community are cultivated at Betahaus, where such a broad and generalized reciprocity can exist.

Both Mathiás and Chiara indicated that there were limits to how much, how long, and from whom one could receive solidary assistance and services without giving something in return. These limits, though, were unclear and dependent on the individual coworker’s personal situation, their relations and professional skills. Based on an assessment of the needs of the demander/taker, as Widlok also shows (2013, 2019), a request for sharing is deemed legitimate or not. Different coworkers, therefore, also considered when, how, and whom to ask for help. A newcomer like Chiara, for example, described it as a process of learning what was appropriate to ask of others. She said:

When you ask someone for a favor, you don’t know whether or not you should pay, do you? It’s collaboration, right? And I’m learning that people generally only help you out in the beginning, and then [later], you evaluate together how much you have to pay. But in the beginning, everyone just helps you out, or maybe not everyone, but I’d say that almost everyone really wants to help, even if you don’t pay them.

The notion of collaboration in Chiara’s statement seems to encompass both paid and unpaid services between coworkers. When new in the community and just beginning a start-up business, requests for help or advice are more likely to be perceived as legitimate;
Accordingly, people are more willing to help and share without expecting payments or direct counter services. However, after a while, you become more obligated to reciprocate directly, either by negotiating an appropriate price or by offering a counter-service. In this way, initial acts of demand sharing and unsolicited generalized reciprocity tend to shift toward barter, gift, and commodity economies; and in such economies, not all types of knowledge and skills are equally marketable and valuable at Betahaus. Chiara explained:

I have studied cultural management and therefore I don’t really have much to offer in return … my skills might be relatively useless here … that’s what it depends on, isn’t it? If I want to ask for something, I have to be very specific, and I cannot say, “Okay, you do this for me free of charge, because you like the project, I mean, I don’t have anything to give you in return.” Okay, I have knowledge, I possess a lot of knowledge about theater, music, how to organize events, etc., but sometimes people just need a designer.

Whereas a lack of valuable skills could be an important limitation to the establishment of a reciprocal work relation of barter or gift exchange—as Chiara felt in her case—other personal and professional circumstances, as we describe below, also influence how coworkers viewed requests for sharing or gift giving.

Sharing and Gift-Giving—A Luxury for the Privileged Few?

Not everyone had the time and money to (continue to) show “solidarity” with other freelancers and entrepreneurs and offer favors and services without payment. For some coworkers, like Fabio, a movie director in his mid-thirties, collaborations that did not involve monetary transactions, were a “luxury” that only some coworkers, and especially the young ones with new start-ups, could enjoy.

Many people here are in the start-up phase with their business, and in these beginnings, solidarity is very much like [people asking around], “Is there anyone who can make a video?” And of course, at 36 and with two kids to pay for at home, I’m the one who says “yes.” But when we then meet [to talk about the video], it’s “Ah, it’s not a paid job” and all that stuff, and then I say to myself “this is the labor market, isn’t it?” Any collaboration of this [unpaid] kind could potentially give you customers in the future. But then you can end up spending your whole life collaborating in this way [and hoping] that, maybe tomorrow … And there are some people who want to and can keep on working like this, but there are others who don’t have that luxury.

For many coworkers, like Fabio, who had been self-employed for a longer period and, for example, had family obligations, the objective was being at Betahaus was no longer just to “learn” from or help other coworkers and cultivate a work community beyond commercial market logics. Rather, the aim was to establish contacts that could lead to paid jobs. Put differently, requests for help were assessed based on an “investment” rationale, hoping or expecting that a favor would act as a gateway to future jobs. In this way, the meaning of a particular activity is dynamic, negotiable, and changeable over time. The provision of good advice or an unpaid service, which initially appears to be framed within a logic of demand sharing, could potentially, over time, and depending on the shifting situation of the participants, translate into an exchange relation and lead to a paid job. To Pablo, collaborating without payment, therefore, is not just an act of “solidarity” where you, unsolicited or on demand, share your knowledge and skills to help another; it becomes an “investment” in future opportunities where you give in order to receive something in return later.

Just as an act of helping another coworker can have multiple meanings—ranging from a form of demand sharing to a gift or investment that carries the hope of receiving something in return later—an act of buying a service from a coworker is not to be understood simply in terms of economic commodification. Indeed, sometimes the buying/selling of services internally between coworkers at Betahaus was also understood as a sort of gift for the community and a way of developing and maintaining particular forms of community-based resources.

Producing and Receiving from a Shared Resource?

Tom, an architect and self-taught software developer who had been a member for approximately four months at the time of fieldwork, was a dynamic player at Betahaus. He collaborated with many different coworkers and was among the well-established entrepreneurs who were able to buy services from others. For him, however, buying such services was about something more than simply getting the job done at a good price. For example, he explained that the reason why he had hired another member of Betahaus, a graphic designer, to make his newly established business website, was that he knew that this person had worked as a freelancer for less than a year and had had difficulty finding jobs. Tom wanted to help and motivate the other member, whom he liked and found skillful, by offering him the job. He said: “I found out approximately two weeks ago that this person now also has another project with
another person at Betahaus, an app project ... And I'm not saying that what I did was a great inspiration, but I think that, in a way, it contributed to the fact that there are opportunities here, you know, to actually collaborate with people here.”

In this way, helping newcomers in Betahaus is not only a question of offering free advice and services. Based on an assessment of a coworker (incl. their personality, skills, and character at work), it is also about offering a coworker a paid job, if you are able to do so—thereby contributing to the creation of a larger working community full of “opportunities.”

In coworking, as we saw above, acts of demand sharing offer opportunities of access to a certain kind of resource, namely a pool of knowledge, skills, and experience. Interestingly, Tom explicitly described Betahaus as “a resource you can utilize.” However, to Tom, the resource is not only something from which you can extract or receive; it is also something you have to produce and contribute to. In his perspective, Betahaus ideally becomes a shared or common resource that is produced by and available to all coworkers through active engagement and in multiple forms of paid and unpaid working relations. Accordingly, it becomes relevant to explore the extent to which Betahaus as a shared resource takes the form of a “commons” that challenges capitalist work life characterized by competition and profitmaking.

Traditionally, the concept of the “commons” has been used to describe a common (natural) resource (water, land, etc.), which is accessible to and managed by the members of a particular community (Ostrom 1990). Recent literature, however, defines commons more broadly to also include intangible resources and knowledge. Here, Internet-based open-source platforms have become the iconic example of such new forms of knowledge commons, which, as a shared resource, is not only available to a group of people but is created, shared, and managed by this same group (Hess 2008).

In this sense, commons are different from both “public spaces,” which are owned and managed by “the authorities” (such as the state or a municipality), and from “private spaces,” which are owned by (groups of) individuals who allow others to use the space, often on the condition of monetary exchange. Indeed, in capitalism-critical analyses, the concept of the commons is understood as a “common good.” It is based on ideals of social justice, transparency, and democracy, and on the cultivation of a community that is clearly distinguished from the ownership and optimization rationales of the private market. David Harvey, for example, argues that commons are both “collective and non-commodified—off-limits to the logic of market exchange and market valuations” (Harvey 2012, 73).

As we have demonstrated, Betahaus does not exclude market exchange but is characterized by a mix of sharing, bartering, gift giving, and selling/buying. Indeed, to some coworkers, as we saw above, with Fabio, contributing to the development of Betahaus as a free common resource is a “luxury” that they cannot afford. Furthermore, three partners own Betahaus, which other coworkers pay to use, and even though they aim to create a collaborative nonhierarchical member-driven space, they ultimately have decision-making power regarding the governance of the space. Consequently, Betahaus is not a “commons” in Harvey’s sense. However, because of the strong focus on nonmonetary collaboration in Betahaus, it is relevant to explore if and how solidarity and social community-oriented values are cultivated in a manner that could be characterized as practices of commoning (cf. Bruun 2015), that is, as practices and activities through which coworkers collaboratively develop and share knowledge and skills for the good of both the individual and the community. As a verb, commoning indicates something unstoppable and always in the making, rather than a stable, finite resource—a social practice of continual negotiation of values and frames of access and use (cf. Linebaugh 2008). Such were the negotiations that continually took place at Betahaus.

Bracketing the Market—Doing “Exciting Stuff” and “Having Fun”

As we have seen, the owners granted access and membership to almost all applicants, and they did not interfere with or control coworkers’ everyday work lives once they were there. In everyday life at Betahaus, therefore, coworkers continually negotiated the social values of the workspace and had different ideas about the kind of community that should be cultivated and maintained in Betahaus. Such negotiations of central but potentially conflicting norms and values became clear when Michael, a well-established and successful businessman who had been at Betahaus for a couple of months, posted an article in the closed Facebook group of the workspace. The article discussed how and why some people achieve financial success, and Michael wrote that he hoped it could inspire and motivate other coworkers to be ambitious and believe in their own financial success. The post occasioned massive criticism and debate. For example, one member wrote: “Raking in money is the least of my priorities. That’s why I am here at Betahaus. Because I’m focusing on doing and creating exciting stuff. Like most other people here. I think you chose the wrong target group.”

Michael apologized many times and wrote that he had mistakenly thought that “Beta(haus) was a group of entrepreneurs who were motivated by money.” Then others responded by telling him not to
apologize, because Betahaus, in their opinion, should be a place with room for differences of opinion and different approaches to work life. In this way, the post became a catalyst for making explicit two central but potentially conflicting values and ideals at Betahaus: on the one hand there are the ideals of Betahaus as an open, inclusive, and accessible space with a diversity of people who had to be able to come, go, and prioritize their time and forms of engagement as they pleased; on the other hand are the ideals of creating a particular kind of passionate and caring intentional community, which was not primarily shaped by market logics and profit-making.

Indeed, most of the coworkers that Mangor talked to emphasized values and ideals of passion and creativity in their (work) life, namely, “doing and creating exciting stuff,” regardless of any associated financial gain, as the coworker above maintained. Matías, the freelance graphic designer whom we met earlier, described his work life at Betahaus as “fun” and said: “Because you have a good time when you love what you’re doing, that’s important. Here, everyone, and that’s true, everyone loves what they do. This is very interesting; no one here is like ‘oh, I have a shitty job.’ People here earn more or less money, but everyone here loves their work and they are passionate people.”

The values of being passionate and having fun were cultivated and promoted in various ways in Betahaus—sometimes more explicitly through different events or happenings organized by some of the coworkers. For example, one morning when people were working quietly in the café and everyone was focusing on their own laptops, coworker Miguel spontaneously decided to go for a ride on one of the couches (which was equipped with wheels) in the narrow streets around Betahaus. He asked Daniel, an animator and his good friend, to film it with his phone. Afterward, Miguel posted the video in the private Betahaus Facebook group with the accompanying text: “Go out! Have fun!” Later, when Mangor asked what the video was for, Miguel’s answer was short and simple: “for fun.” Miguel explained that coworking is not necessarily easy, because you do not have a steady salary, fixed working hours, or a clear separation between work life and social life. However, it is, he argued, “much more fun.”

The couch ride provides an example of a general celebration among most Betahaus coworkers and of a creative subjectivity involving the disruption of (what is perceived as) ordinary and boring (work) life. “Having fun” and being “for fun” connotes a playfulness and a distancing from the mundane, which, from the perspective of profitmaking, can appear useless and involving a lack of productivity. It seems to require a cultivation of a certain approach to work life that resonates with the artistic and creative subjectivity found with artists who, as the anthropologist Win (2014: 3) has shown, make their work meaningful by ascribing to it an intrinsic artistic value that cannot be measured in financial terms.

But “having fun” can also involve a more hedonistic, self-centered, almost consumerist approach to life, where wider social and economic responsibilities are bracketed or ignored. In this sense, as a constructed alternative to “ordinary” and boring work life, being passionate or “having fun” does not necessarily involve the creation of a caring community that challenges individualized forms of ownership. It might also be a “luxury” that is reserved for the few, as Pablo said earlier. Put differently, the emphasis on fun and passion does not necessarily involve practices of “commoning” and the cultivation of a wider sense of community engaging in collaboration beyond market logics and valuations. However, some coworkers indeed made extra efforts to cultivate such a sense of community.

Community-Building, Passion Sharing, and Public Sharing

At one point, some coworkers had approached the owners with an idea of making a collective product over a weekend at Betahaus, so that the members could get to know each other and collaborate. The owners supported the idea, made available the needed house facilities, and during the weekend, around 30 members collaborated in developing an app called FromTo—a free guide to Barcelona that offered tips from Betahaus members about places to visit and experience in the city.

This event obtained an almost mythical status at Betahaus for celebrating the cultivation of a spirit of passionate collaboration and joint ownership. The weekend took place before Mangor’s fieldwork commenced but was often discussed among coworkers and described to potentially new members with pride and joy. For example, one day over lunch, Felix, one of the organizers of the weekend, told Manolo, a software developer and new member of Betahaus, about the event. He explained how the participants had divided tasks among themselves, relative to their professional skills, and how “it was a process where no one was the boss.” Everyone, he said, contributed their respective skills, and Abril, sitting on the other side of the table, added that it had required quite some organizing to make it work. They agreed that it had been a unique experience, and Sergio, who also took part in the conversation, pointed out that Betahaus had gained many new members since then, so they should do something similar again soon. Sergio attached special importance to the FromTo project’s collaborative process. In contrast to the movie nights and after-work
beers that also took place regularly, the FromTo process did not only work to create a sense of belonging and community; it also allowed the coworkers to collaborate on a joint project with shared ownership. In this way, the development of the FromTo app could be seen as what Benkler and Nissenbaum (2006, 395) have described as “commons-based peer production [...] a collective effort of individuals contributing towards a common goal in a more-or-less informal and loosely structured way. No single entity ‘owns’ the product or manages its direction.”

Here, the activity is commons-based because questions about profit and ownership are downplayed in favor of the social and creative aspects of joining together and taking part in a common project. In this way, the FromTo weekend can be understood to involve and cultivate—even if only momentarily—practices of commoning. Or, to be more precise, it could be understood to involve a form of “differential commoning” (Noterman 2016) in the sense that only some members participated and that it was not necessarily based on equal and fully engaged participation by all members. More generally, it could be argued, commoning practices are always differential; and in Betahaus, as shown throughout this article, a coworker’s ability and willingness to help, collaborate, or exchange knowledge (paid or unpaid) with others is also shaped by their professional and personal situation, including their skills, experiences, and potential family obligations.

As mentioned, Mangor did not participate in and observe the actual FromTo event, and therefore does not know if specific conflicts or power hierarchies manifested during the weekend. Nevertheless, the high status and value attributed to the FromTo app among members illustrates Betahaus’s strong ideal to create a horizontal collaborative space in which creativity and passion can unfold, and with joint ownership, without having to be directed toward the requirements of a paying customer.

Practices of creative and passionate collaboration and commons-based peer-production like the FromTo app, we suggest, can be understood as a different form of sharing than the demand sharing already described. In the joint project, (ideally) coworkers do not engage as demand sharers, nor as givers or sellers; they engage as equal participants who, out of passion, both take and give ownership of the process. In such cases, to share knowledge and skills, therefore, becomes a question of sharing in and taking part—of engaging oneself passionately in a joint creation-project that also cultivates a sense of community. Here, collective passion, shared ownership, and creativity, rather than solidarity or reciprocal exchange relations, are supposed to be the driving forces for the collaboration. In this way, one could argue that the FromTo weekend brings forth the potential for a type of sharing that could only occur sporadically during the everyday and routine lives of the coworkers. A type of passion sharing that many coworkers appreciated and sought to cultivate and maintain in their work—and which, at several levels, was crucial for the establishment of coworking as a communal alternative and creative space that, even if only momentarily, could bracket market-based or instrumental rationalities.

However, the app had not obtained its mythical status only as an example of a special form of collaboration, but also because it was produced via open-source software and because the final result was made freely available—and thus shared—online. In this sense, it activated yet another kind of sharing, which notions like the “sharing economy” or the “new knowledge commons” often seem to emphasize, namely, sharing as free online access. This form of sharing also extends the group of people who can benefit from what Widlok calls “the good implicated in a resource” (Widlok 2013, 16). In the case of the FromTo app, it involves a kind of public sharing where parts of the “good implicated in the resource” of Betahaus are extended and made available to an undefined public user-community. The fact that the app also created arguably good marketing for the three partners as owners of Betahaus shows, once again, how practices of commoning do not necessarily exclude aspects of individual branding or profit-making.

Conclusion

In this article, we have shown how different practices of sharing, giving, and selling/buying intertwine and are central to coworking at Betahaus. Depending on their personal situations, degrees of experience, and professional skills, different coworkers engage in sharing, gift giving, and buying/selling relations with other coworkers. New start-up entrepreneurs can often engage successfully in demand sharing, requesting help and advice and obtaining the opportunity to learn from more experienced entrepreneurs. At some point, however, they are also expected to participate in reciprocal exchange relations with their fellow coworkers, through unpaid or paid services. In this respect, some coworkers do not (feel they) have equally relevant skills or knowledge to offer to other coworkers and therefore are only able to share or exchange their knowledge to a lesser extent. Others, who need to prioritize making an income, feel that the provision of unpaid help and services are a “luxury” reserved the privileged few, but nevertheless find it difficult to reject or avoid such relations since they potentially can lead to a future paid job.

In order for the individuals and the workspace to survive financially, Betahaus necessarily also has to be a marketplace in which coworkers can exchange,
buy, and sell knowledge and competencies. However, such marketization is constantly balanced against the cultivation of solidarity, caring community building and a sense of being able to work passionately on projects without directing them toward the immediate needs of a market. Events and happenings, such as a couch ride or the joint development of a free app, are aimed at making coworkers recollect and continually cultivate a spirit of playful and passionate engagement in and as a community, even as they reject the primacy of market logics and valuations in their work life.

In the article, we have outlined three kinds of sharing—demand sharing, passion sharing, and public sharing—all of which are important for understanding Betahaus as a space that could carry the potential for an alternative (work) life. Within economic anthropology, “sharing” has often been understood as the most fundamental and original social function, as a precondition, for example, for gift exchange and commodity exchange (Widlok 2013). Likewise, in literature on the “sharing economy,” sharing is often celebrated as an alternative economy to individualistic competitive capitalism (Richardson 2015). However, the different forms of sharing identified here all refer to practices that can easily shift toward or be interpreted as instrumental and exploitative forms of collaboration.

For example, the free distribution of the FromTo app discussed above could be understood as an investment, similar to what Fabio argued about offering unpaid services to other coworkers, and as a means to attract new customers and coworkers. Likewise, demand sharing and passion sharing could be understood to bring forth a form of exploitation of fellow coworkers. However, we must also be careful not to reduce all activities to a market-oriented interpretation by default. Doing so, as argued by Gibson-Graham, risks (re)producing a “capitalocentric economic discourse” (Gibson-Graham 2020, 16) as the backdrop to everything we do and “continue[s] to marginalize (by ignoring or disparaging) the plethora of hidden and alternative economic activities that contribute to social well-being” (Gibson-Graham 2008, 618). If we want to understand what is at stake in experimental and diverse economies, such as those potentially emerging in coworking spaces, we need to explore the ways seemingly oppositional and contradictory values and practices combine and intersect in people’s everyday lives.

In a coworking context, sharing gains value in relation to, and simultaneously with, the use of different types of exchange, not as a more genuine or basic form of sociality but merely as one of several socioeconomic relations required to maintain and develop a collaborative work environment. It is too simple to argue either that coworking spaces like Betahaus offer an alternative to existing capitalist work life or that they make possible the exploitation of a steadily growing precariat and, as such, represent yet another space co-opted by neoliberal capitalism. In a way, coworking does both—and more.

In addition to continually negotiating and balancing monetary and nonmonetary relations, coworkers most often highlighted notions of being passionate and having fun as central to coworking as something different from “ordinary” work life. But passion and fun do not necessarily involve the cultivation of an alternative intentional community or the cultivation of a “commons”—a shared resource—by, to, and for all. As we have argued, in everyday activities and various events organized by coworkers, acts of commoning do take place—even if they are only momentary. The extent to which such forms of commoning will gain prominence depends on specific coworkers, their personal and professional situations and their ability and willingness to engage with one another. Hence, processes of commoning are and always will be “different” within the group. To many coworkers, the development of a community based on alternative communal values to individualist capitalist work life seems to be a horizon toward which they orient themselves—and as such, a potentiality that can be realized, at least partially or momentarily, through shifting acts of commoning.

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Notes

1 Parts of this article draw upon empirical material that we have also analyzed in a Danish-language article (Mangor and Nielsen, 2019). The two articles, however, develop different arguments about the role of sharing and commoning in coworking.

2 All names and nationalities of people in this article have been anonymized. Conversations in Betahaus took place in both Spanish and English, and people switched between the two, depending on language skills. Following the choice of the interviewees, the fieldwork interviews were conducted in either Spanish or English.

3 In “generalized reciprocity”, the social side rather than the material side of the transaction is key. Here, a person does something for another (often family or close friend), based on the assumption that the other person would do the same for them. Therefore, there is no explicit obligation
to reciprocate (and, thus, Widlok and others believe that Sahlins is extending the concept of reciprocity too far). What we describe as “gift giving” in this article resonates with Sahlins’s (1972) notion of “balanced or symmetrical reciprocity” in which there is a moral obligation to reciprocate. Otherwise, the relation is compromised.

References


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