

Redlining the Adjacent Possible: Youth and Communities of Color Face the (Not) New Future of (Not) Work

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Preface: The Future of Work and the Sharing Economy (2.0)

The direct impacts of the expected exponential shrinkage of conventional work opportunities are evidencing themselves in the present faster than we want to admit. Faced with this epoch change in the future of work, young adults are rapidly imagining, creating and embracing new solutions. From the “sharing economy” to urban agriculture, “hack-a-thons”, and DIY trends ranging from micro-brews to 3-D printing, they are being celebrated for a wave of innovation. They are also being richly rewarded, according to capitalistcreations.com: “In the last decade, due to the rapid growth of the internet and technology as a whole, the young minds of our society have been benefiting more than ever – to the extent where some have become millionaires, and even billionaires, from their intuitive ideas.”¹

These young entrepreneurs and hackers are at the forefront of what theoretical biologist Stuart Kauffman referred to as the “adjacent possible”— a term he used to describe how new possibilities build on existing ones. As popular science author Steven Johnson elaborates, “The adjacent possible is a kind of shadow future, hovering on the edges of the present state of things, a map of all the ways in which the present can reinvent itself.”² In this case, the young entrepreneurs leading the way are not just responding to the work climate and economy at hand, but changing it (and the future) profoundly as well. Companies like airbnb, uber, and craigslist have used adjacent possibilities— primarily the prevalence of smartphones with location services and apps—to create new ways of sharing, traveling and getting by. Similarly, they use these same adjacent possibilities to launch and fund their new ideas--as funds are needed to launch new technologies, new technologies are created to find funds (kickstarter, for example). As new technologies require new government policies, new approaches are created to change policies (mobilizing on twitter, MoveOn, etc.)

Their openness to using new technologies and their desire to share rather than own is widely championed. As the website *thepeoplewhoshare.com* lauds the new Sharing Economy:

Whilst the Sharing Economy is currently in its infancy, known most notably as a series of services and start-ups which enable P2P exchanges through technology, this is only the beginning: in its entirety and potential it is a new and alternative socio-economic system which embeds sharing and collaboration at its heart – across all aspects of social and economic life.

The Sharing Economy encompasses the following aspects: swapping, exchanging, collective purchasing, collaborative consumption, shared ownership, shared value, co-operatives, co-creation, recycling, upcycling, re-distribution, trading used goods, renting, borrowing, lending, subscription based models, peer-to-peer, collaborative economy, circular economy, pay-as-you-use economy, wkinomics, peer-to-peer lending, micro financing, micro-entrepreneurship, social media, the Mesh, social enterprise, futurology, crowdfunding, crowdsourcing, cradle-to-cradle, open source, open data, user generated content (UGC).³

But can anyone really say the sharing economy is in its infancy? Perhaps it's only called "the sharing economy" when you share by choice? Because communities of color and poor communities have been in the sharing economy for centuries. It just looks a bit different, and it isn't celebrated by society at large (and sometimes not by the sharers either). With limited access to jobs, communities and young people of color have been sharing, hustling, hacking, crowdfunding and most definitely redistributing with the best of them. This paper will take a closer look at how race and class play out in what is adjacent and what is possible when it comes to how low-income young people of color face the not-new future of not-work.

Part 1: The (Not) Future of (Not) Work, aka the Original Sharing Economy

This so-called "future of work" (i.e.—future of not-work) that is all the talk today is old news in most urban communities of color. James Boggs (1919-1993), an African-American activist, auto worker and writer in Detroit, foretold much of this crisis in his

seminal 1963 book, *“The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker's Notebook”*:

Today the creative work of production is being done by the research engineers, the program planners, the scientists, the electronic experts....What they are creating is a mode of production which, as long as the present system continues, excludes more and more people from playing any productive role in society. This means that our society, as we have known it, is just as finished as feudal society was finished by the time capitalism arrived on the scene. It means not only that hundreds of thousands are yearly being displaced from production, but also that millions are outsiders to begin with....young men and women who have never held any jobs at all and who live from hand to mouth, either by charity or by petty crime: in other words at the expense of those who are working. They cannot be integrated into society unless they work, and there is no prospect of any work for them. What is more, the social measures which made work for such people in the days of the New Deal are completely silly in an age when you can dig ditches, lay bridges, and build buildings merely by pushing a few buttons.⁴







Since then communities of color have experienced significant unemployment and underemployment. For example, in an article entitled “Neighborhoods that Don’t Work”, authors Allison K. Rodean and Christopher H. Wheeler showed startling hyper-local statistics from St. Louis, MO: “Unemployment also varies substantially from one residential area to another. For instance, among the 6,100 ‘block groups’ (neighborhoods consisting of approximately 500 households and 0.33 square miles of land, on average) that make up the St. Louis metropolitan area, the unemployment rate in the year 2000 ranged from 0 percent in one neighborhood to 100 percent in another.”⁵ As renowned science fiction author and culture maven William Gibson is known to say, “The future is already here – it's just not evenly distributed.”⁶

Faced with high unemployment, communities of color pioneered (and continue to use) many of the solutions which are suddenly considered new and innovative when other communities use them today. From the so-called Sharing Economy to sustainable living, green jobs, micro-enterprises, and the DIY (do it yourself) aesthetic, the ingenuity of communities of color has more frequently been condemned than condoned or celebrated. Families aiming to share apartments were hit with new policies that limited tenant numbers. Gypsy cab drivers, aiming to make some income sharing their car with strangers (sound familiar?) were hit with anti-competition policies (like no-hailing) and

rampant ticketing.⁷ Micro-entrepreneurs like street vendors faced daily harassment. Likewise, for their pioneering work in home-based industries, communities of color have not been rewarded by investments but by restrictive licensing policies on everything from hair-braiding to home based childcare, home brewing and even home cooking.

For a quick overview on the race and class politics of what is condemned and what is condoned when it comes to the sharing economy and other creative responses to challenging economic times, see the chart below (photo credits at end of paper):

	<u>Condemned</u>	<u>Condoned</u>
Apartment share		
Bike share		
Urban chickens		

<p>Car share</p>		
<p>Hacking</p>		
<p>Micro-business</p>		

Part 2: Redlining the Adjacent Possible

Ta-Nehisi Coates, Senior Editor for The Atlantic, explains how redlining was born out of the founding of the Federal Housing Authority in 1934:

“Neighborhoods where black people lived were rated “D” and were usually considered ineligible for Federal Housing Authority backing. They were colored in red. Neither the percentage of black people living there nor their social class

mattered. Black people were viewed as a contagion. Redlining went beyond FHA-backed loans and spread to the entire mortgage industry, which was already rife with racism, excluding black people from most legitimate means of obtaining a mortgage.”⁸

The adjacent possible has been correspondingly redlined, with youth and communities of color barred in a variety of ways from moving into safe, legal and financially successful responses to the future of work. We can start with Stephen Johnson’s helpful analogy for the adjacent possible:

“The strange and beautiful truth about the adjacent possible is that its boundaries grow as you explore them. Each new combination opens up the possibility of other new combinations. Think of it as a house that magically expands with each door you open. You begin in a room with four doors, each leading to a new room that you haven’t visited yet. Once you open one of those doors and stroll into that room, three new doors appear, each leading to a brand-new room that you couldn’t have reached from your original starting point. Keep opening new doors and eventually you’ll have built a palace.”⁹

It is an inspiring description, but an ironic one when we overlay how youth and communities of color have traditionally been redlined out of such beautiful homes and neighborhoods. As we think about it in terms of the adjacent possible, it is clear that *adjacent* is a loaded term. What might be adjacent to an aspiring young white entrepreneur—access not only to new technologies but to resources, relationships, credit, internships, travel—is often not at all adjacent to a young person in a low income community of color. To the contrary, even when young people of color see their family members and community members making something out of nothing, they see how these possibility spaces are dismissed, condemned, restricted, unfunded or made illegal.

Part 3: “DIY” and the Hustle Economy

Young people of color may be redlined out of many adjacent possibilities, but since redlining is nothing new to their communities, they have their own adjacent possibilities to address this conundrum. They can look around and see their communities’ rich and creative history in facing not just economic challenges, but

the racism and xenophobia that prompts redlining and all such responses to who they are and who they are becoming. In this case, the adjacent possibilities might stem more from the ingenuity of the hustle economy—the adjacent possibles of the customized, the bootlegged, the hooked up, the “it’s not where you come from, it’s where you’re going” swagger type of adjacent possible. To this end, Tatiana Thieme’s work with youth doing “waste work” (combing through dumps to find things they can resell) in the slums of Nairobi, Kenya is insightful. She describes their response to a liminal, formally workless economy this way:

The people that I’ve been working with the past few years call themselves hustlers, and they very much sit on this very blurred line between what would be deemed licit versus illicit work. And who are the people—the dominant authorities—to judge on that? In many ways these young people are creating a rupture with these normative understandings of what it is to be an adult, what it is to have a proper job, what it is to be part of the city, if you will.¹⁰

And perhaps this has always been the outsiders’ response to worklessness, to the dilemma Boggs described this way: “*They cannot be integrated into society unless they work, and there is no prospect of any work for them.*” So youth of color continue to hustle on the fringes of work/not-work and the adjacent possible. They exploit the new, the edges, and the unexplored as fast as anyone else. They constantly have new hustles that flow from new technologies—flipping sneakers on ebay, hacking computer games, “unlocking” and reselling phones, etc. Like the hustlers who came before them, many make ends meet along the fringes of legal and possible. In America’s “future of work”, youths’ ability to hustle might be their primary survival asset and new work identity. In this case, the challenges that communities of color and low income communities have faced for decades may give their youth a wide array of experiences and role models. We are interested in finding ways to capitalize on these adjacent possibilities and support youth in navigating the double-edged sword of the hustle-economy.

Part 4: New and Adjacent Possibilities

As we have shown, what youth of color need is not new technologies (they have them), but equal opportunity to build on these technologies, to deploy their own creativity, and

to amplify their entrepreneurial spirit and hustle. Youth of color are ready and willing to be more than consumers: to learn code, use 3-D printers and digital fabrication, “hack” new styles into clothes, create new uses for social media, etc. They need opportunities that build on their skills, knowledge and existing social practices—respecting the ingenuity of current hustles, building on the skills they’ve taught themselves in regards to entrepreneurship, technology, and networking. They also need access to the types of investment that many young white entrepreneurs have. It is not a coincidence, considering the history of redlining, that online articles about successful young entrepreneurs overwhelmingly feature the faces of young white men.¹¹

It is interesting, in this context, to look at some approaches being tried in Detroit, a post-industrial city which is itself trying to imagine a new future of work. Communities and activists there have come together with cutting edge new solutions, new perspectives and new identities. Most recently the “New Work New Culture” Conference took place in Detroit in October, 2014. The conference looked at using both old school and ultra-modern technologies to empower communities to create their own goods and meet their own needs and desires. The “new work new culture” model includes learning skills that can be used to access high-tech jobs, but also that can build towards communities that are self-sustaining. For example, Incite Focus, a fabrication lab on Detroit’s east side, has partnered with Detroit’s Blanche Kelso Bruce Academy to offer their students hands-on experience in the areas of digital fabrication, permaculture, aquaponics, solar energy, and technology. As Executive Director Blair Evans says, “So that is entrepreneurial...[but] it’s entrepreneurship for the purpose of developing solutions and opportunities for your family and your community to more fully live life to the maximum.”¹² We can only imagine the adjacent possibilities that could open up to youth armed with digital fabrication tools, solar energy capacity and more.

But the (not) new future of (not) work is not just about what youth of color can learn from Blair Evans or others like him. It is also and very critically about what folks like Blair can learn from youth. Since the “new work new culture” economic model hopes to “empower people to pursue work that prioritizes themselves as the primary economic

drivers as opposed to using their labor for the maximum benefit of someone else,”¹³ it can certainly learn from the Kenyan youth who share a similar goal but put it more succinctly: “I want to work, and I don’t want to be someone else’s donkey.”¹⁴ To this end, these youth have figured out how to sidestep informal work options that put them at the mercy of others and in so doing have used their hustle and ingenuity to “reconfigure youth identities in relation to the ways in which informalized work and poverty are politicized in the city... [and] in ways that both contest social injustices epitomized in slums while taking advantage of their marginalized status to assert their place and alternative vision of urban life by making more visible the ghetto, as they would call it, as a place within its own right.”¹⁵

Conclusion

The future of work may be shaped by new technologies, but the future of humanity’s ability to adapt to it may be shaped by young people and communities of color. In a future economy with little need for workers, how do we avoid the outsider future foretold by James Boggs? In a current economy that has already seen the bankruptcy of his city, how do we turn to its residents—and those of so many other cities—for new solutions? We believe that this conversation has a lot to learn from youth and communities of color and from their decades of resiliency, shape-shifting, and hustle, but we are well aware that the current conversations about the future of work do not include their voices. Likewise, current solutions continue to ignore or condemn adjacent possibilities with the cultural logic and flair of the hustle-economy.

To think of new solutions, we must have new tools and new problem-solvers. With the same folks at the table, we stumble into old habits and old beneficiaries. As Ta-Nehisi Coates explains:

*Plunder in the past made plunder in the present efficient. The banks of America understood thisIn 2010, the Justice Department filed a discrimination suit against Wells Fargo alleging that the bank had shunted blacks into predatory loans regardless of their creditworthiness. This was not magic or coincidence or misfortune. It was racism reifying itself.*¹⁶

Just as the history of redlining reared its racist head in these subprime lending scandals of the 2000s, these same communities are being redlined out of work and even out of conversations about work. To remedy this, we propose an increase in resources towards engaging youth and communities of color in being co-researchers and co-experts with those already sitting comfortably “at the table”. We would like to see more research done with communities about existing social practices, including the hustle economy and its adjacent possibilities for new work, new technologies and new cities.

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