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Article

A new institution on the block: On platform urbanism and Airbnb citizenship

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Abstract
This article argues that Airbnb should be understood as a new urban institution that is transforming relations between market, state, and civil society actors. Taking the Airbnb Citizen advocacy initiative as my case, I examine how this transnational "home sharing" platform achieves such transformations, which in turn requires an investigation into the specific nature of Airbnb as an institutional form. Assuming the agenda-setting role of the urban "regulatory entrepreneur," Airbnb aims to co-shape the terms of current and future policy debates pertaining not just to home sharing/short-term rental but also to the very fabric of city life. It pursues this mode of "platform urbanism" by mobilizing its user base, which it frames as a community of entrepreneurial middle-class citizens looking to supplement their income in a climate of economic insecurity and tech-enabled opportunity. Yet, who is the "Airbnb Citizen" and what are the opportunities and risks associated with platform-mediated citizenship?

Keywords
Airbnb, citizenship, civil society, data, governance, platform urbanism, platforms, policy, regulation, sharing economy

> Platforms are what platforms do. They pull things together into temporary higher-order aggregations and, in principle, add value both to what is brought into the platform and to the platform itself [. . .] As organizations, they can also take on a powerful institutional role, solidifying economies and cultures in their image over time.
>
> —Bratton (2016: 41)

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Taking a cue from Benjamin Bratton's reflections on the practical ontology of platforms, this article develops the argument that Airbnb should be understood as a new urban institution that is transforming relations between market, state, and civil society actors in post-welfare societies. I examine how this transnational "home sharing"/short-term rental platform accomplishes such profound transformations, which in turn requires an investigation into the specific nature of Airbnb as an institutional form. Institutions, in North's (1991) classic definition, are "the humanly devised constraints [and, I would add, affordances] that structure political, economic and social interaction" (p. 97). Following Bratton (2016), platforms can be understood as new institutional forms that deviate from conventional public and private institutions in "the apparently paradoxical way that they standardize and consolidate the terms of transaction through decentralized and undetermined interactions" (p. 42). While undetermined, these interactions are nevertheless optimized insofar as they are "regularized by passage through the platform's established forms" and—when these forms are computational, as is the case for digital platforms—"that passage is the [centralized and] capitalized translation of interactions into data and data into interactions" (Bratton, 2016: 42; cf. Helmond, 2015). This ongoing, recursive process of data-driven translation and capitalization affords today's platform companies their growing institutional power, provided that they continue to offer value for their user base and manage to leverage this base, as well as their data assets, in interactions with stakeholders and shareholders.

As I will elaborate below, Airbnb's privileged avenue for gaining institutional power has increasingly been the world of policy and regulation. While Airbnb has been known to evade regulation and to litigate municipal governments aiming to restrict its operations (e.g. Kendall, 2016), the company has more recently sought to become a partner in urban policy- and rule-making (e.g. Woolf, 2016). This adjustment both reflects and further advances a broader transformation of international policy and regulatory landscapes over the past three decades, where top-down decision-making has been gradually losing ground to more experimental, "evidence-based" forms of (self-)regulation and policymaking, articulated in collaborative governance models that promote public–private partnerships and heterogeneous stakeholder networks (Peck et al., 2012). Assuming the more proactive and agenda-setting role of the urban "regulatory entrepreneur" (Pollman and Barry, 2016), Airbnb aims to co-shape the terms of current and future policy debates pertaining not just to home sharing/short-term rental but also to the very fabric of city life, from tourism to housing and urban planning (Ferreri and Sanyal, 2018; Gurran et al., 2018).

In the wake of neoliberal urbanism's gradual erosion of the "modern infrastructural ideal" that at least nominally promoted centrally governed universal services for city dwellers up until the late 1970s (Graham and Marvin, 2001; Plantin et al., 2018: 300–301), the last decade has seen a "platformization of infrastructures" resulting in the formation of "complex platform-based ecosystem[s] encompassing private and public organizations and citizens" (Plantin et al., 2018; Van Der Graaf and Ballon, 2019: 364). This, then, is where neoliberal urbanism reproduces itself as "platform urbanism," a condition "whereby platform-based business models ensure the generation of urban data largely takes place within proprietary data ecosystems" (Barns, 2017: n.p.). It is also where Pasquale's (2017) distinction between territorial and functional sovereignty

becomes instructive: by leveraging proprietary urban data and information asymmetries, companies like Airbnb exercise an infrastructural type of power that grants them increasing control over particular "functional arenas" (e.g. tourism, housing, urban planning) traditionally governed by state actors whose territorial sovereignty is punctuated (and might become supplanted) by border-crossing yet new boundary-setting platforms.[1] Consequently, this provokes a reassessment of the rights and responsibilities concomitant to a platform-mediated mode of urban citizenship in an era of ongoing welfare retrenchment. I argue that Airbnb pursues its own mode of platform urbanism by strategically mobilizing its valuable data assets as well as its "host community," which it frames as a collective of entrepreneurial citizens looking to supplement their income in a climate of economic insecurity and tech-enabled opportunity. I take the Airbnb Citizen initiative as paradigmatic of the company's efforts to establish itself as a thought leader in local as well as international public debates and policy circles. Part "advocacy channel," part public relations initiative, Airbnb Citizen has been responsible for organizing so-called Home Sharing Clubs around the world, producing Economic Impact reports, sharing Airbnb community data, and releasing a Policy Tool Chest as "a resource for governments to consider as they draft or amend rules for home sharing" (Airbnb Citizen, 2016a).

The argument is elaborated in three parts. Part 1 addresses the rise of what has been termed "regulatory entrepreneurship," especially among tech companies that are taking advantage of the new collaborative opportunities provided by urban governance policies. It subsequently introduces Airbnb Citizen and the company's Policy Tool Chest as primary examples of this development. Part 2 shifts the argument's focus toward an examination of Airbnb's role as at once a business and a platform, investigating how it manages and frames its relationship to its user base. It zooms in on the position of Airbnb hosts, who are encouraged to assemble into local Home Sharing Clubs and become Airbnb Citizens acting in defense of their economic interests and liberties, which ostensibly are structurally aligned with Airbnb's own interests and objectives. Finally, part 3 critically interrogates the Airbnb Citizen figure promoted in the company's carefully orchestrated social imaginary, as it queries the distribution of opportunities and risks concomitant to platform-mediated citizenship in cities faced with the impacts of regulatory devolution and rising platform power.

The ascendency of regulatory entrepreneurship

Over the past three decades, global policy and regulatory milieus have experienced a broad shift from a paradigm of centralized government to one characterized by distributed *governance* (Jessop, 1997, 2016). Writing within the field of legal studies and assessing the US context, Orly Lobel (2004) usefully surveys this shift as follows:

> The adoption of governance-based policies redefines state-society interactions and encourages multiple stakeholders to share traditional roles of governance [or what I call government]. Highlighting the increasing significance of norm-generating nongovernmental actors, the model promotes a movement downward and outward, transferring responsibilities to states, localities, and the private sector—including private businesses and nonprofit organizations

[. . .] Scaling up, facilitating innovation, standardizing good practices, and encouraging the replication of success stories from local or private levels become central goals of government. Legal orchestration is achieved through interpenetration of policy boundaries, new public/ private partnerships, and next-generation policy strategies such as negotiated rulemaking, audited self-regulation, performance-based rules, decentralized and dynamic problem solving, disclosure regimes, and coordinated information collection. (pp. 264–265)

According to Lobel (2004), the strength of this new governance model is that it transcends the "false dilemma" of choosing between centralized regulation and deregulatory devolution (p. 263) while also suggesting that—at least in principle—economic efficiency and democratic legitimacy can be mutually enforcing (p. 264). Governance blurs the lines between public and private, local and global, exposing a variety of new actors ("stakeholders") to the responsibilities and risks of government while streamlining its methods and outcomes so that they are translatable across time and space. Before I detail how Airbnb claims to make good on the promise of governance to establish economic efficiency and democratic legitimacy as two mutually enforcing policy goals, consistently associating "the discourse of everyday entrepreneurialism with a higher civic purpose" (Stabrowski, 2017: 340), it is necessary to first have a brief look at the rise of what has come to be known as "regulatory entrepreneurship." According to Pollman and Barry (2016), a regulatory entrepreneur is a company for which changing the law forms "a material part of its business plan" (p. 387). This definition is important, because it highlights how regulatory entrepreneurship differs from conventional corporate lobbying activities. Whereas corporate lobbying is generally a reactive venture, one that tries to protect existing interests against adverse regulations and is usually not of critical importance for the survival of the company, regulatory entrepreneurship is a more proactive affair with higher stakes: without changing certain laws the company would not be able to operate—at least not legally (Pollman and Barry, 2016: 392–393). Furthermore, there is also a significant difference in style and strategy: while traditional lobbying efforts take place behind closed doors, away from public scrutiny, contemporary regulatory entrepreneurs tend to "make an issue as salient as possible, rally the public to their cause, then use their popular support as leverage to win the change they want from resistant officials" (Pollman and Barry, 2016: 387).

Unsurprisingly, then, many of today's most prominent regulatory entrepreneurs hail from Silicon Valley. Not that companies like Uber or Airbnb refrain from lobbying local and national governments—quite the contrary, in some jurisdictions, these companies' representatives outnumber and outspend other tech firms (Borkholder et al., 2018), but this activity is no longer their only or necessarily their most important instrument to achieve regulatory change. Likewise, although these firms have become rather infamous for engaging in regulatory arbitrage, or the practice of taking advantage of regulatory loopholes, and even ignoring local laws altogether, they have more recently taken it upon themselves to engage lawmakers and other public officials with the express goal of *transforming* the regulatory landscape to meet their bottom lines. As such, Uber and Airbnb are spearheading a wave of so-called "reformer startups" that are taking advantage of the now hegemonic governance paradigm, not just by publicly challenging legislative institutions but also by pursuing collaborative partnerships with regulators and

policymakers in need of expertise and data, thus becoming valued institutional actors in their own right (Pollman, 2017). Regulators increasingly stimulate technology-driven innovation by allowing startups to experiment in so-called "regulatory sandboxes" where they can test their products/services under the supervision and (often informal) guidance of regulators that grant them temporary, conditional exemptions from standard regulations (Pollman, 2017: 19–20). Ideally, these coordinated test drives will generate pertinent data that can then be shared with other stakeholders, albeit conditionally and subject to proprietary and technical restrictions, providing the input for participatory, "evidence-based" rule-making and policymaking. From a reformer startup's perspective, the primary goal of such a "regulatory hack" is to become a dependable liaison in both local and global public policy networks, which in many cases require the creation of a standardized and modular "toolkit" or a set of policy-oriented strategies, activities, and documents that can be quickly mobilized in different regulatory situations and environments (Pollman, 2017).[2]

Airbnb's toolkit has been at least 5 years in the making. Its beginnings can be traced back to Airbnb's Community Compact, an initial set of public policy principles, released in 2015, proffering three broad commitments to city governments: paying a "fair share" of hotel and tourist taxes; building an "open and transparent community" by providing cities with anonymized data on listings that can inform policy decisions; and promoting "responsible home sharing to make cities stronger" by educating Airbnb's user community in order to develop and legitimize forms of self-regulation—frequently monitored in the context of local public–private partnerships and agreements (Airbnb Citizen, 2015b). Released a full year before the official launch of Airbnb Citizen, the Community Compact is an early illustration of how Airbnb has been coming to terms with its rapid growth and expanding role as an institutional actor in policy and regulatory circles. Airbnb Citizen, previously called Airbnb Action, was inaugurated in November 2016 to function not just as "a tool for advocacy" but as "a more expansive site for the growing home sharing movement, offering resources for staying informed and taking action" (Airbnb Citizen, 2016b). Presenting the then new and improved initiative as "home sharing's new home," Airbnb emphasized its commitment to fostering this "movement"—ostensibly a grass-roots phenomenon—in order to achieve positive change worldwide:

> Airbnb Citizen promotes home sharing's potential to help solve many of the economic, environmental and social challenges we face today. It highlights the values that inspire people to choose home sharing and the good their choice does. It features the work of leading sharing-economy thinkers alongside home sharing news from around the world and research on the impact of home sharing in the communities where we operate. And it will continue to provide our community and others who feel passionately about home sharing with ways to come together, act, and make belonging anywhere a solution that's available everywhere. (Airbnb Citizen, 2016b)

Since then, the company has followed through on its commitments by establishing (provisional) partnerships, memoranda of understanding (MOUs), and other agreements in all three areas of focus, which resulted in the publication of its Policy Tool Chest (in December 2016) as a resource that encapsulates "insights gained, lessons learned, and

policy options developed through these hundreds of collaborations across five continents" (Airbnb Citizen, 2016a). Airbnb's Policy Tool Chest offers four thematic sets of policy tools, also called "options," that elaborate on its earlier Community Compact and are intended to help officials "at every level of government" craft "fair and progressive"—or "modern"—rules for home sharing (Airbnb Citizen, 2016a). By formulating concrete, road-tested suggestions and recommendations with respect to tax collection, neighborhood responsibility, accountability and cooperative rule-making, and anonymized data-sharing, the Tool Chest essentially articulates a number of best practices that proactively shape home sharing as a practice in need of "smart policymaking" that can unlock its problem-solving potential. Importantly, Airbnb is careful to note that its Tool Chest should not be seen as "a one-tool-fits-all policy prescription or model legislation," but rather as constituting an "adaptable framework" that can be tailored to the needs of specific local jurisdictions (Airbnb Citizen, 2016a; cf. Peck et al., 2012). To underscore this point, the document also includes "use cases from a sample of the hundreds of communities where these concepts have been tailored successfully" (Airbnb Citizen, 2016a).

Now, instead of doing a deep dive into Airbnb's Policy Tool Chest and analyzing its various recommendations and use cases, which is beyond the scope of the present article, I want to end this section by gauging its general discursive logic, or promise. The main wager that Airbnb's Policy Tool Chest aims to communicate is that *platform-facilitated home sharing markets form the solution to a plethora of problems faced by cities and their inhabitants*. Its story, perfectly summarized in the document's cover note written by Chris Lehane—Airbnb's Global Head of Policy and Public Affairs and former Obama Administration official—is one of economic *and* civic empowerment (whereby the former fuels the latter) through tech-enabled, decentralized market-making. Besides "economic opportunity," the key term here is "democratization": Airbnb ostensibly "democratizes capitalism" by "empowering people to use their homes to earn extra income" and thereby "fostering entrepreneurship"; it allegedly also "democratizes travel" by giving "more people and more communities the opportunity to benefit from tourism's growth"; finally, it "democratizes revenue" by generating "new tax revenue that governments can dedicate to existing critical services" or use to invest in Airbnb-assisted "new programs" that address local social challenges (Airbnb Citizen, 2016a). In other words, "everyone can win"—individuals, households, neighborhoods, communities, and cities are all empowered to leverage the Airbnb platform, which seeks to "align their interests in creating economic opportunity" (Airbnb Citizen, 2016a). For individuals and households, the platform provides easy—yet highly ordered and carefully delineated—access to home sharing markets by lowering entry barriers and transaction costs.[3] Meanwhile, cities can use the platform's data-rich compliance and enforcement tools not only to collect more taxes but also to expedite and automate zoning and land use regulations, while promoting "sustainable tourism" by spreading tourist flows outward from traditionally popular areas in city centers to peripheral neighborhoods whose communities are seeking economic revitalization. This, then, is the "social value proposition of home sharing as an economic solution" (Airbnb Citizen, 2016a), and this is how Airbnb claims to make good on the promise of governance to establish economic efficiency and democratic legitimacy as two mutually enforcing policy goals; by reconciling everyday

entrepreneurialism with a sense of civic purpose and conflating private and public interests, *both of which are premised on the marketplace*. As the next section will discuss, such a conflation works in Airbnb's strategic advantage, to the extent that it allows the company to identify itself with its users—the "demos" in whose name the public good has traditionally been defended.

A parallax view

Public–private partnerships are ideal arrangements in the governance paradigm, but when regulators are less inclined to cooperate and make exceptions (which tend to become new rules) because they have doubts regarding Airbnb's "everyone wins" narrative, the company has demonstrated that it is exceptionally well equipped to take a more antagonistic approach to its regulatory entrepreneurship.[4] Given that its main product is a digital platform that enables commercial transactions between users who in most cases derive value from their exchanges, Airbnb possesses an unprecedented capacity to mobilize this user base—particularly its "hosts"—as a scalable political force. While my thinking on the subject of tech-enabled regulatory entrepreneurship owes a lot to Pollman and Barry's insightful contribution, I also believe they take for granted a certain distance between the platform company, as regulatory entrepreneur, and its user base. That is to say that they elaborate extensively on strategies that allow the regulatory entrepreneur to effectively leverage its users, thereby making a clear distinction between the entrepreneur and the user while neglecting the fact that many users of platforms like the one operated by Airbnb *are also (regulatory) entrepreneurs in their own right.* Most significantly, many Airbnb hosts are committed to changing legislation in order to maintain their business, which depends fully on the success and legality of Airbnb's platform business model. Moreover, this dependency is clearly mutual, given that Airbnb's business model can only succeed as long as hosts are willing and able to "share" their home on the platform. What I am getting at here is that the interests and objectives of Airbnb can be seen to converge with those of its entrepreneurial hosts: in the cosmology of the "sharing economy," it is markets all the way down. Consequently, it becomes trickier to discern what we are dealing with: Is Airbnb a business engaging in regulatory entrepreneurship by instrumentalizing its user base to fight for its cause, or is it a platform facilitating a grassroots movement that fights for *its own* cause, which happens to be structurally aligned with Airbnb's cause? The short answer, likely to be unsatisfactory, is that it depends on one's vantage point, or where one's analysis is situated. Put differently, we are confronted with a parallax view. To illustrate how this view's focus is trained by Airbnb, we should have a look at how it frames its relation to what it calls Home Sharing Clubs, of which there are now over 200 operating worldwide according to Airbnb's website.[5]

Still basking in the afterglow of the company's recent victory in San Francisco, where it successfully mobilized its user base to defeat the controversial "Proposition F" that would have restricted short-term home rental in the city, the then newly appointed Chris Lehane made the following boastful declaration in a blog post dated 5 November 2015 (6 days before the publication of Airbnb's Community Compact):

> [. . .] this election may have been the first time that the broader public understood what we already knew—Airbnb hosts and guests are not just a community, they represent a people-to-people movement that is getting stronger as the days grow longer. (Airbnb Citizen, 2015a)[6]

To cultivate this budding movement, Airbnb had announced a day prior that it would "support the creation of 100 *independent* Home Sharing Clubs in 100 cities around the world in 2016" (Airbnb Citizen, 2015a; emphasis mine). As Lehane elaborates,

> Many of these organizations have already been formed. In other places, we've heard from hosts who want to get involved, but just need a little assistance. To help out and support the creation of these Home Sharing Clubs we will:
>
> • Give our community the freedom to do what works for them. We will provide host clubs with support and information, but these organizations will be independent and free to make their own decisions.
>
> • Give our community access to the finest grassroots organizing training, tools and support. We've worked closely with former Obama Administration officials and organizing experts. Now, we'll make these experts available to the Airbnb community.
>
> • Provide dedicated Airbnb staff to help our community. Our team in San Francisco will be available to our community and offer advice and support to hosts and guests who are organizing in communities around the world. (Airbnb Citizen, 2015a)

There is a clear tension here between the existence of Home Sharing Clubs as "independent" organizations whose de facto formation has in many cases preceded Airbnb's efforts at formalization and as such can be labeled "grassroots," and the extensive support structure the company is rolling out to (further) organize, train, educate, advise, and support these Clubs. However, the platform idiom and model helps to alleviate this tension: as a platform, Airbnb aims to become an increasingly central part of global urban infrastructures—a data-intensive operating system on which other services can run. One significant quality of infrastructures is that they tend to become invisible over time, as their invisibility is generally proportional to their ubiquity. Applied to Home Sharing Clubs, this means that Airbnb's role in their expansion and development should be similarly understood as infrastructural, insofar as its support is—ideally—both ubiquitous and invisible.[7] This allows Airbnb to position itself as a "people-to-people platform—of the people, by the people and for the people" (Airbnb Citizen, n.d.) while simultaneously minimizing its presence as a business corporation. The source of all the activist energy and agency is, from this perspective, located not in the company's San Francisco headquarters, in Silicon Valley, or even in Washington DC, but originates from individuals and households assembled in local Home Sharing Clubs that "advocate for fair and clear home sharing regulations in their city, share best practices around hosting and hospitality, organize community service activities, and can serve as a forum to connect those who share a passion for home sharing."[8] In this sense, and again from this perspective, Home Sharing Clubs are vital examples of civil society's "institutional core constituted by voluntary associations outside of the state and the economy" (Flyvbjerg, 1998: 210). Airbnb,

in turn, operates as a platform that facilitates and optimizes such voluntary associations, while its own institutional logic likewise is "not reducible to those of states or markets" (Bratton, 2016: 41).

Home Sharing Clubs share Airbnb's ambiguous political identity to the extent that they are, like civil society at large, neither fully public nor completely private entities. In the Habermasian view modulated by Airbnb, they are rather composed of private individuals coming together to contribute to a public sphere that forms a counter to state and market powers. More specifically, Home Sharing Clubs agitate against repressive local regulations that stifle innovation and redistributive economic growth while speaking truth to the power of industry incumbents (i.e. the hotel lobby). Yet what if we adopt a Foucaultian perspective here? For Foucault, as is well known, civil society is an arrangement of liberal governmentality in which *homo œconomicus* can be "appropriately managed" (Foucault, 2008: 296). As he writes, "*Homo œconomicus* and civil society are therefore two inseparable elements. *Homo œconomicus* is, if you like, the abstract, ideal, purely economic point that inhabits the dense, full, and complex reality of civil society" (Foucault, 2008: 296). Although a central feature of civil society is that it forms "a spontaneous synthesis within which the economic bond finds its place" (Foucault, 2008: 303), and it thus operates structurally like a marketplace that obviates the need for a social contract and its renunciation of rights, it also exceeds the realm of merely economic interests and transcends the egoism of "economic men" that would otherwise threaten to fissure the social fabric.[9] Furthermore, whereas the bond between economic subjects is essentially "non-local," civil society's "bonds of sympathy and benevolence between some individuals" always exist "in the form of ensembles at the same or different levels which bring individuals together in a number of units" (Foucault, 2008: 301–302). This leads Foucault, following Adam Ferguson, to declare that "[c]ivil society is not humanitarian but communitarian" in nature (Foucault, 2008). Consequently, then, "if it is true that civil society is already there, that it ensures its own synthesis, and that it has a sort of internal governmentality" guided by communitarian values and sentiments, it is reasonable to ask, "Does civil society really need a government?" (Foucault, 2008: 310). Can it not better govern itself, through a pragmatic mix of economic and moral calculations/relations which ensures that "there is reciprocity between the whole and its components" (Foucault, 2008: 300)?

I would argue that this is exactly the political question posed by Airbnb's Home Sharing Clubs, at an opportune moment when neoliberal urbanism—through the rising governance paradigm—increasingly seeks "the recruitment of civil society to serve its objectives" (Lazzarato, 2009: 111), which include the progressive downloading of public responsibilities and risks to private "partners." The so-called "disruptive innovation" introduced by Airbnb is to provide a digital platform that makes this process not only more "frictionless" but also turns it into a profitable enterprise for its users, whose interests are now represented locally by Home Sharing Clubs. These Clubs represent a civil society movement that not just advocates for the *right* to rent out private homes—that is, appealing to the "juridical structure of power" (Foucault, 2008: 304)—but also supposedly democratizes capitalism from the inside out and thus obviates the need for government interference beyond ensuring the optimal conditions for platform-mediated market-making and self-regulation. The ambiguous political identity of Home Sharing

Clubs—neither fully public nor completely private—hence does not so much derive from how these ostensibly autonomous associations form a counter to state and market powers, as the Habermasian view would have it, but is instead predicated on *the way they question the very legitimacy of the regulatory state through the gospel of redistributive market power*. This gospel, which posits the Airbnb platform as a formally neutral technical system that merely facilitates such redistribution, is carefully orchestrated by Airbnb itself. To properly grasp this, however, we need a gestalt switch that removes us from the company's preferred vantage point and returns us to an analytical perspective that brings the company's institutional power back into clear focus.

After a decade of development and expansion, it is both timely and urgent to critically examine how Airbnb's institutional power is articulated into something that could be called a "political program." Importantly, following Bratton's insights, such a program "is not only to be found in the legal consensus (or dissensus) and policy admonitions of traditional 'politics' but also in machines directly" (Bratton, 2016: 44). What this means is that Airbnb's politics are *intrinsic to and indissociable from* the operations of its platform, whose purportedly empowering and redistributive affordances reconfigure and expedite the political program of market-based risk- and responsibility-sharing that is central to neoliberal urbanism and its attendant governance paradigm. Airbnb's platform-orchestrated "deep capture"[10] campaigns are therefore deeply sociotechnical exploits, which is what gives them their extraordinary power:

> Platforms are generative mechanisms—engines that set the terms of participation according to fixed protocols (e.g., technical, discursive, formal protocols). They gain size and strength by mediating unplanned and perhaps even unplannable interactions. This is not to say that a platform's formal neutrality is not strategic; one platform will give structure to its layers and its Users in one way, and another in another way, and so their polities are made. This is precisely how platforms are not just technical models but institutional models as well. Their drawing and programming of worlds in particular ways are means for political composition as surely as drawing a line on a map. (Bratton, 2016: 44)

By setting the terms of participation in areas such as short-term property rental, user-driven policy advocacy, and urban tourism markets according to protocols (from API documentation to commercial partnership and user agreements) that are less fixed than *fixing* insofar as they remain adjustable to meet changing needs and requirements, Airbnb actively contributes to the recomposition of urban polities. In cities around the world, the company participates in the ongoing reorganization of relations between market, state, and civil society actors, which have seen their traditional roles transform under the aegis of the governance paradigm. As the public good and private commercial interests become rhetorically conflated and materially entangled in Airbnb's political program, public officials are increasingly struggling with the question of who, exactly, benefits from (a lack of or a change in) regulation. Meanwhile, as more people join the platform and aspire to become Airbnb Citizens, and as this self-reliant figure comes to subtly express a kind of model citizenship in post-welfare times, we should ask, with Barns (2017: n.p.), "whether the urban spaces of technology-enabled citizenship today orient us towards risks associated with vertical integration, as much, if not more so than

heralding the disruptive possibilities of a participatory public sphere?" It can indeed be called ironic that the horizontal governance networks favored by neoliberal urbanism are increasingly interspersed with vertically integrated platforms engaged in their own political programming. So what *are* the risks and opportunities of platform-mediated and increasingly data-dependent citizenship in cities faced with the impact of regulatory devolution and responsibilization? This will be the topic of the final section.

A house is not a home

When, back in July 2014, Airbnb's CEO Brian Chesky revealed the company's new slogan and thereby inaugurated its rebranding strategy in a Medium blog post, he made the following distinction between houses and homes:

> For so long, people thought Airbnb was about renting houses. But really, we're about home. You see, a house is just a space, but a home is where you belong. And what makes this global community so special is that for the very first time, you can belong anywhere. (Chesky, 2014)

In contrast to the short-term rental of housing property, which consists of nothing more than sterile and discrete economic transactions of the kind engaged in by the *homo œconomicus*, home sharing overflows the economy by creating a sense of global community where anyone (who can afford it) can belong anywhere. The transnational civil society imagined by Airbnb thus reimagines cosmopolitanism by countering its traditionally "thin conception of social life, commitment, and belonging," instead offering "an account of how social solidarity and public discourse might develop enough in [. . .] wider networks to become the basis for active citizenship" (Calhoun, 2002: 878–879; cf. Roelofsen and Minca, 2018). Nevertheless, as civil society is an ensemble in which the economic bond always finds its place (Foucault, 2008: 303), the forms of active citizenship and solidarity promoted by Airbnb Citizen are articulated with a celebration of economic empowerment and entrepreneurialism. So who is the quintessential Airbnb Citizen? Although it is essentially a dual figure composed of the "host" and the "guest" who together shape its community marketplace, the host's side of the equation has taken precedence ever since Airbnb's policy priorities have shifted the pendulum from its guests' desire to belong anywhere to the needs of middle-class households leveraging its platform to make ends meet. The company's "economic empowerment agenda" is clear about how its platform serves as a de facto social safety net:

> Our people-for-people platform allows ordinary people to use their house—typically their greatest expense—to generate supplemental income to pay for costs like food, rent, and education for their children. [. . .] While governments are debating the best way to support groups such as seniors and the middle class, Airbnb is generating real money for families right now. (Airbnb Citizen, 2017)

While a house is not a home, a home evidently still remains a house—a significant expense that, with prudent policy and regulation, can also be turned into an asset that finances the rising costs of social reproduction.[11] I therefore argue that Airbnb's model

citizen is the middle-class homeowner seeking to provide for his or her family, a subject whose contours become sharply visible when positioned against a background of neoliberal welfare reform. What I have been calling "post-welfare societies" are the product of concerted efforts to restructure—and roll back—the welfare state as some used to know it and substitute a regime of privatized "asset-based welfare" for the public provision of social security. As Doling and Ronald (2010) explain,

> The principle underlying an asset-based approach to welfare is that, rather than relying on state-managed social transfers to counter the risks of poverty, individuals [and I would add households[12]] accept greater responsibility for their own welfare needs by investing in financial products and property assets which augment in value over time. (p. 165)

As a result of enduring state-mandated campaigns to increase homeownership rates in North America and Northwestern Europe and an attendant rise in housing property values that was only temporarily disrupted by the 2007–2008 mortgage crisis and the subsequent recession, one favored speculative asset has been the home. Even in the aftermath of the crisis, during which so many households were forced to default on their mortgages, it remained a common practice to treat one's home as an investment that can generate returns in the form of access to welfare goods such as pension plans, education, and childcare facilities, which can be purchased by tapping into housing wealth.

Importantly, this is not only a matter of drawing on the home as a financial asset but also entails exploiting housing property as a consumption asset, for instance, by subletting a room in order to pay the bills (Jarvis, 2008). Airbnb has effectively scaled and standardized such practices while retroactively positioning itself as a beacon of entrepreneurial opportunity amid a post-crisis climate of economic insecurity. In other words, the platform company derives its institutional power not just from how it takes advantage of the regulatory devolution accompanying the governance paradigm, but also from the way it manages to capitalize on emerging housing-based welfare regimes—both of which are predicated on similar neoliberal rationalities centered on responsibilization and the downloading of risks pertaining to social reproduction. Its professed public service to post-welfare societies is the provision of a platform on which home-owning households—that familial unit of "active welfare subjects" now rebranded as Airbnb Citizens (Jarvis, 2008: 217)—are enabled to safely optimize the monetization of their "underutilized" domestic assets. In this way, it offers the operating system for "a fundamental reworking of social relations of property" (Stabrowski, 2017: 328), by normalizing and intensifying household practices of financial calculation, competition, and (micro-)enterprise and thereby shoring up the popular appeal of asset-based welfare (cf. Allon, 2011).

Yet, again, we should be careful not to take Airbnb's account of itself at face value. What disrupts the company's narrative of middle-class economic empowerment, which has increasingly been driven by its own Economic Impact reports that provide "evidence" (based on proprietary, unauditable data) for the platform's support of women and minority communities, are recurring claims that a large part of the company's revenue is generated by a relatively small share of high-volume hosts—so-called "multi-listers" who own and market multiple properties (Cox and Slee, 2016). Despite its repudiation of

critical reports and its claim that its "One Host, One Home" policy should take care of this issue,[13] Airbnb has been confronted by independent studies that demonstrate the company's complicity in the ongoing gentrification of cities, by taking long-term housing stock off the market and consequently driving up house prices and rents (e.g. Wachsmuth et al., 2018; Wachsmuth and Weisler, 2018). Multi-listers, often not your typical homeowner but rather so-called "enterprise customers" such as commercial property managers, are the disavowed but logical outcome not just of Airbnb's business model and platform evolution (cf. Hein et al., 2018; Helmond et al., 2019) but also of its entrepreneurial citizenship imaginary: after all, capital begets capital. While successful hosts could, in this imaginary, theoretically reinvest their earnings in a new property, it is more likely that multi-listers operate on behalf of real estate agents with access to (institutional) investors looking to purchase portfolios of housing properties whose management can be fully outsourced (Moore, 2018)—including properties located in minority neighborhoods (Cox, 2018). Such professionally managed properties with high turnover rates—like those promoted through Airbnb Plus[14]—are economically much more appealing to Airbnb than homes that are intermittently and/or partly rented out, which is why the company has been expanding its platform infrastructure and API-based tools that allow businesses to "optimize listings at scale with professional features."[15] In terms of scalability and revenue, then, a house is most certainly not a home. By developing its platform-centric ecosystem to the advantage of enterprise customers who are thereby empowered to monetize their extensive housing assets, Airbnb can indeed be said to contribute to rising wealth inequalities in cities across the globe, compounding and intersecting with the impacts of neoliberal urban policy experimentation. In this sense, and in true neoliberal fashion, the actual Airbnb Citizen lifted up by the platform is not the middle-class homeowner but the business corporation.

Meanwhile, the risks of Airbnb's platform-mediated citizenship are largely borne by precisely those groups the company champions in its Airbnb Citizen campaigns: middle- and working-class families, women, and people of color, all seeking to—as Airbnb's Economic Empowerment Agenda phrases it—"stay afloat during tough times" (Airbnb Citizen, 2017). In these tough times, which continue to be tough for many low-income families in spite of proclamations that we have entered a post-recession era of economic growth, Airbnb can indeed form a vital lifeline on which households grow to depend for supplemental income. Over time, this dependence is likely to increase due to the process of "generative entrenchment" that gives platforms their unique power to set norms and standards in an expanding array of settings. As Bratton (2016) explains, generative entrenchment is a mechanism

> by which one platform's early consolidation of systems (formats, protocols, and interfaces) decreases a *User*'s opportunity costs to invest more and more interactions into that particular platform, while it increases the costs to translate earlier investments into another platform's (at least partially) incompatible systems. (p. 47)

It is a process that exposes both the opportunities and the risks of Airbnb's vertically integrated platform, to the extent that it does not only provide the means through which hosts can generate income, enhance their profile and reputation, and engage with their

peers, but at the same time makes it increasingly costly to deviate from the platform's standards and rules or to transition out of the system altogether (Leoni and Parker, 2018).

What happens when Airbnb decides to make (sudden) changes to its Terms of Service agreement, its hosting standards, or the way it algorithmically determines the visibility of its listings? The potential impact of such moves would surely be most severe among segments of the host community whose economic survival is structurally tied to the platform. Although a growing body of scholarship documents how Airbnb's interface design can facilitate and potentially counter discrimination as a peril affecting both hosts and guests on the platform (e.g. Edelman et al., 2017), there is a need for more critical research on the risks attendant to the structural power imbalance between the platform and its user base. Like many other platforms, Airbnb offers little in terms of accountability vis-à-vis its user base, who can only report incidents and appeal decisions that are immaterial to the company's core business operations. And despite Airbnb's rhetoric of democratization, it offers its users no substantive mechanism for collective bargaining or decision-making: Airbnb Citizens may be economically supported by the platform (some more than others) but within its domain they have no political representation, just varying levels of privilege predicated on differential access to a set of data-driven tools. This ultimately makes Airbnb a risky platform for micro-entrepreneurial citizens, especially the more precarious among them. Does Airbnb have their back, and if so for how long? Will it use its technological and institutional power in the service of its most vulnerable citizens or will it further re-set the terms of participation to their disadvantage? As we debate emerging types of platform urbanism, it is of crucial importance to keep in mind that platforms like Airbnb are not just exploring the soft power exercised through urban policy and governance but also experiment with new and still dimly registered forms of sovereign power that secure them a lasting grip on the socio-material fabric of contemporary cities and their households.

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Notes

1. According to Plantin et al. (2018: 294, 296, 306), some main qualities, or characteristics, of infrastructures include ubiquity, reliability, invisibility, operating as gateways, generating dependency, embeddedness, durability, and extensibility. After a full decade of global growth and extensive market capitalization (Sherwood, 2019), Airbnb has managed to acquire many of these infrastructural qualities in its largest markets (including London, Paris, and New York city) and will likely develop these features in many other urban regions where its presence still has room for growth. While Airbnb's ubiquity, reliability, embeddedness, extensibility, and its propensity to operate as a gateway that generates dependencies have so far primarily impacted urban tourism and hospitality markets, the company's strategy of "negotiating [its] 'programmability' towards specific stakeholder groups" (Helmond et al., 2019:

125) and deploying boundary-crossing partnership programs are also affecting housing and urban planning policy in many cities (e.g. Gurran et al., 2018). It is in these domains that, as this article argues, Airbnb seeks to becoming increasingly infrastructural. One interesting example of how Airbnb leverages its host community to experiment with public infrastructuralization, tentatively and selectively taking over functions that have traditionally been organized by state agencies, is the company's OpenHomes initiative (https://www.airbnb.com/openhomes). OpenHomes supports (while making a moral claim on) hosts to make their homes available for humanitarian purposes and provide free accommodation to refugees, victims of natural disasters, and people traveling for medical reasons.

2. For a definition of "regulatory hacking," see the website of 1776, which presents itself as "the Northeast Corridor's largest network of entrepreneurial incubators": https://www.1776.vc/regulatory-hacking/ (accessed 13 November 2018). In a recent article, Lobel (2016) argues that

    under a new governance framework, smart regulation aids positive evolution of policy and prevents ossification. The advanced technological capabilities of the platform economy can be revolutionary in aiding this practice by allowing better data collection and analysis. The business of regulatory agencies becomes more about regulatory research and development than rule-making and enforcement. (p. 160)

    Lobel's take is too optimistic, insofar as it assumes that platforms will unproblematically enable "better data collection and analysis" by cooperating with regulatory agencies in a transparent manner, disregarding the way that platforms build their power through the creation of information asymmetries and regulatory capture. It also underappreciates how the negative impacts ("externalities") of platform-facilitated commercial exchanges such as home sharing continue to require strong public institutions engaged in "rule-making and enforcement" (cf. Gurran et al., 2018).

3. In 1994, Philip Agre (1994) already offered "an analysis of capture as an institutional phenomenon" in which he theorized how "information technology reduces transaction costs by imposing more clearly defined—less ambiguous and less uncertain—relationships upon the parties to economic interactions," thereby encouraging the expansion of market-based relations (pp. 753–754). Julia Tomassetti (2016) has recently offered a critical reassessment of this theory, in the context of Uber's business model:

    The Uber narrative speaks in the argot of Coasian firm theory, and yet is largely nonsensical within it. Rather than reduce the costs of market exchange between drivers and passengers, a Coasian analysis suggests that Uber has lowered market costs between Uber, as a seller of transportation services, and passengers. (p. 78)

    Drivers, meanwhile, are faced with *higher* transaction costs to the extent that they have to navigate structural information asymmetries that impede on their agency as market actors by preventing informed decision-making (cf. Rosenblat and Stark, 2016).

4. Airbnb has faced fierce and tenacious public resistance against its operations in some crucial markets, such as New York City, Berlin, and Barcelona. While some of these initiatives were funded by the hotel lobby, many protests have been independently organized by housing rights advocacy groups and citizens concerned about the gentrification and livability of their neighborhoods. It should thus be noted that Airbnb's success as a regulatory entrepreneur is globally uneven and partial, also taking into account the fact that in many other cities around the world there has so far been little necessity for the company to proactively engage in public

policy at all (given that these markets are still too marginal or because there are few available options for institutional engagement).

5. See https://www.airbnbcitizen.com/clubs/.
6. Lehane's evocation of a "people-to-people movement" is reminiscent of the Eisenhower Administration's People-to-People Program, established in 1956 to "enhance international understanding and friendship through educational, cultural, and humanitarian activities" (see https://www.dwightdeisenhower.com/399/People-to-People-Program). Eisenhower's program encouraged civil society—including the business community—to self-mobilize and generate transnational associations between citizens of friendly nations, in an effort to enroll them in "the project of Cold Ward international diplomacy and soft power" (I owe this phrasing and insight to one of the anonymous reviewers).
7. Airbnb currently hosts all its support resources and peer communication tools in its platform's Community Center: https://community.withairbnb.com/t5/Community-Center/ct-p/community-center.
8. This quote is taken from a Frequently Asked Questions document made available via Airbnb's Community Center: https://community.withairbnb.com/html/assets/ClubsFAQ.pdf (accessed 13 November 2018).
9. Foucault (2008) writes,

   [C]ivil society is characterized by bonds which are neither purely economic nor purely juridical, which cannot be superimposed on the structures of the contract and the game of rights conceded, delegated, and alienated, and which, in their nature if not in their form, are also different from the economic game. (p. 308)

10. Corporate deep capture campaigns are "replete with astro-turf organizing, the maintenance of front groups, and the sponsorship of knowledge production" (Yosifon, 2006: 598), all with the objective of capturing the hearts and minds of the public at large—influencing collective dispositions, structures of feeling, and modes of reasoning.
11. As Foucault (2008)—ventriloquizing the German Ordoliberals—asks, "What is a house if not an enterprise?" (p. 148).
12. Allon (2011) writes,

    In the context of a much wider risk shifting agenda, the responsible self-management of the household has been re-defined so that it now encompasses a diverse range of obligations, from meeting governmental environmental sustainability agendas to the wise and effective management of personal finance and investment opportunities. (p. 133)

    Consequently, the household has been repositioned as a unit of production that forms a crucial "shock absorber" of economic and financial risk (Allon, 2011).

13. Airbnb's "One Host, One Home" policy was initiated in 2016 as a token of good will toward local regulators and formalizes the company's commitment "to removing commercial operators from the platform," particularly multi-listers who signed up with the platform after 1 November 2016 (Airbnb Citizen, 2016c).
14. See http://airbnb.com/plus.
15. See https://www.airbnb.com/b/host_pro.

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