

## Collaborative economy – theories of social practice approach

The unsustainable nature of our current consumption and production patterns has become a widely recognized issue, particularly due to the impact of consumption and production on the eco-systems, the pressures that those processes pose on natural resources, as well as their effects on human well-being and equality. Consumption and production are interwoven with our everyday choices and practices. Believing in a pure freedom of choice with regards to our everyday functioning seems rather naïve, as choices are shaped by a range of various factors inherent to our industrial, political, or broadly understood socio-economic structures, as well as values and aspirations. These elements all together hold a secure place among the causes behind the unsustainable nature of consumption and production. However, the awareness of the urgent need to redefine current economic paradigm keeps rising, which is reflected in the panoply of small-, less often large-scale, changes affecting our everyday functioning.

Looking into our decisions in terms of lifestyles, the already existing and emerging practices that foster more sustainable lifestyle can be grouped along the dimensions of efficiency (achieved through changing habits, or by upgrading, reusing or recycling products), sufficiency (reducing individual consumption and ecological/carbon footprint), and different consuming (change from ownership to access and sharing systems)<sup>1</sup>. The latter dimension is linked to collaborative economy, or what is often claimed to be an expression of the shift away from hyper-consumption, bringing a promise of change in terms of ecological, economic, and social benefits. The concept of collaborative economy is currently under debate, which is reflected even in the very array of terminological choices between collaborative economy, collaborative consumption, or sharing economy, to name just a few. In the paper, perhaps the more fortunate term ‘collaborative economy’ is adhered to, and refers to the resurgence of traditional models of consumption, production, and service provision embodied in sharing, lending, swapping, bartering, trading, and gifting. Those are additionally facilitated by technological developments matching supply and demand for products and services, particularly in the area of social networks, mobile, and location-based solutions, putting the technological developments among the crucial drivers of the development in question. The resurgence of community, higher cost-consciousness, as well as the rejection of materialistic attitudes are other typically-mentioned drivers. Through placing access over ownership, collaborative economy claims to reinvent both what and how we consume and produce. The attempts of categorizing ‘sharing’ activities are plentiful, with various suggestions of differentiation into e.g. 1) redistribution markets, collaborative lifestyles, and product-service systems<sup>2</sup>; or 2) recirculation of goods, increased utilization of durable assets, exchange services, and sharing or productive assets<sup>3</sup>.

With the research into collaborative economy steadily growing, this paper suggests looking at ‘sharing’ through the lens of theories of practice. Built into Giddens’<sup>4</sup> theory of structuration prominent for its input on the structure-agency dichotomy, practices (or, in plain terms, the ways of sayings and doings) become the key domain of interest or the “basic ontological unit for analysis”<sup>5</sup>. Such a perspective, then, enables a shift in focus from individuals to wider forms of behavior. Briefly speaking, practices can be defined as co-products of the complex relations between consumers, producers, and systems of provisions<sup>6</sup>, or, in an even broader view, not only are they the ‘sites’ of interaction but rather “ordering and orchestrating entities in their own right.”<sup>7</sup> In terms of change and

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<sup>1</sup> Backhaus et al. (2012): *Sustainable Lifestyles: Today's Facts and Tomorrow's Trends*. Sustainable lifestyle baseline report. SPREAD: Sustainable Lifestyles 2050 project.

<sup>2</sup> Botsman, R. and Rogers, R. (2010): *What's Mine Is Yours. How Collaborative Consumption Is Changing the Way We Live*. London: Collins.

<sup>3</sup> Schor, J. (2014): Debating the Sharing Economy. *Great Transition Initiative*. October 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Giddens, A. (1984) *The Constitution of Society. Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Cambridge: Polity.

<sup>5</sup> Röpke, I. (2009): Theories of Social Practice – New Inspiration for Ecological Economic Studies on Consumption. *Ecological Economics*, 68: 2490-2497.

<sup>6</sup> Spaargaren, G. (2011): Theories of practices: Agency, technology, and culture. Exploring the relevance of practice theories in the new world order. *Global Environmental Change*, 21: 813-822.

<sup>7</sup> Shove, E., Walker, G. (2010): Governing transitions in the sustainability of everyday life. *Research Policy*, 39: 471-476. Quote: 471

transformation, studies of practices differentiate between relatively stable practices with rather predictable trajectories, and more unstable and flexible new practices, taking the process of emergence and stabilization of the latter, with the disappearance of the former, as potential directions of inquiry. The emergence of a new practice, or alterations to an existing one, involves re-configurations within the elements of meaning, material and competence, together comprising the notion of ‘practice-as-entity’ (or a set of bodily-mental activities glued together by the elements listed)<sup>8</sup>, with technical change often playing a central role as well.

In the paper, the intensification of collaborative economy with its ‘old’ and ‘new’ (technology-enabled) sharing activities is considered from a practice perspective. In particular, the element of meaning behind the practice is taken under scrutiny. Even a brief look into the meaning shows a wide span of discussed aspects in relation to sharing, from resurgence of community spirit, environmental concerns, participation and empowerment, weakening of traditional hierarchical institutions, co-creation, sustainability, and cost-consciousness, to name just a few. The supporters of the concept often claim that practicing sharing is a way of detaching ourselves from the neoclassical concept of *homo oeconomicus* with self-interest as the primary decision-making logic - the main point of attack for those who criticize it. The meaning behind the practice is, thus, in need of deeper understanding, specifically in terms of more and less highlighted values, ideas and beliefs shaping the practice with the materialistic and post-materialistic character. Those are elaborated on the basis of qualitative content analysis of the key global communities/networks supporting the collaborative and sharing movement (i.e. Collaborative Consumption, OuiShare, Shareable) and their sources of information, updates, and collaborative discourse. Moreover, interviews with sharing practitioners from a definition-focused research project – case study of Vienna – complement the data sources. As a result, an attempt of rendering the meaning ingredient of sharing practices is made, with perspectives on the direction towards which they can evolve.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, Røpke 2009.