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## Theorising the dynamics of collaborative consumption practices: A comparison of peer-to-peer accommodation and cohousing

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### ABSTRACT

This article aims to make a contribution to a more nuanced, theory-based interpretation of current dynamics of Collaborative Consumption (CC). First, I develop my own definition of CC practices, highlighting the engagement of at least two individuals who get involved in direct interaction and make use of the same units of goods and services. This conceptualisation leads me to a compilation of some exemplary CC practices. Empirical data shows a very uneven diffusion of these practices in France and in Germany. Social Practice Theory (SPT) is suggested as very fruitful theoretical framework to explain these diverging dynamics. To illustrate the usefulness of this approach, I then compare two specific CC forms, P2P accommodation and cohousing. My analysis shows that P2P accommodation has formed a highly attractive practice configuration with very good chances to 'recruit hosts', while cohousing presents a rather demanding 'practice-as-entity' with rather restricted opportunities to find practitioners. To conclude, I suggest to complement SPT with insights from the Multi-Level-Perspective in order to better account for 'systemic', vertical processes, which affect the 'availability' of practice elements.

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### 1. Introduction

In recent years, major newspapers and magazines have reported extensively on practices often referred to as Collaborative Consumption (CC), such as peer-to-peer (P2P) car renting, carpooling, P2P goods lending, bartering and reselling, P2P accommodation, home exchange, cohousing, food sharing, community supported agriculture, and community gardening (c.f. [Amberger, 2013](#); [Baumgärtel, 2014](#); [Belot, 2011](#); [brandeins, 2013](#); [Bund, 2011](#); [The Economist, 2013](#); [Metzger, 2015](#); [Ratzesberger, 2012](#); [Walsh, 2011](#)). In parallel, these consumption forms have appeared on the agendas of some major cities (declaring themselves 'sharing cities', e.g. Seoul, San Francisco, Amsterdam ([City of Amsterdam, 2016](#); [McLaren and Agyeman, 2015](#); [Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2012](#))) and EU policy making ([European Economic and Social Committee, 2013](#)).<sup>1</sup> This strong public attention is reflected by a growing number of recent academic works dealing, for instance, with organi-

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<sup>1</sup> CC is often discussed as part of an overarching new 'collaborative economy' or 'sharing economy', which comprises also cooperative knowledge creation (cf. Wikipedia), finance (crowd-funding, social lending, alternative regional currencies), software and goods generation (open source software, FabLabs) ([Sharing Economy Working Group, 2013: 4](#); [Bauwens et al., 2012: 16](#)).

sational/business models, the potential environmental, social and economic impacts of CC practices, as well as with value orientations/motivations and narratives underpinning them (c.f. Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Belk, 2014; Daudey and Hobian, 2014; Gsell et al., 2015; Martin and Upham, 2016; Martin, 2016; Piscicelli et al., 2014; Schor and Fitzmaurice, 2015).

Some observers, both from science and public, have euphorically welcomed CC as promising consumption trend which is able to profoundly change our life. Thus, Botsman and Rogers (2011) argue that a 'Generation We' is about to create a society where access to goods predominates over exclusive ownership and use. Jeremy Rifkin (2014) expects the rise of a new hybrid economy around 'Collaborative Commons'. Novel and Riot (2012) see a 'co-revolution' ongoing, which spans consumption practices, but also inter-organisation relationships and company management. Désert (2014: 5) finds that CC practices are about 'to shatter the foundations of our economic system',<sup>2</sup> while Bauwens and colleagues argue that CC is part of a new collaborative economy, which presents 'a deep transformation of economic practices' (2012: 4). Finally, the Time Magazine (Walsh, 2011) characterised CC as 'one of the 10 ideas that will change the world'.

CC is frequently expected to have multiple positive effects, not least on environmental protection (Heinrichs, 2013). In its 'global call for sharing', STWR argues that, due to its 'versatility, commonality and wide applicability', sharing may be a potential 'solution to the world's problems' (Share the World's Resources, 2014: 2), amongst them climate change and resource depletion. Botsman and Rogers (2011: 74) argue that CC may result in unintended positive environmental side effects – and hence free our societies to some extent from the burdensome work to reduce our environmental footprints: 'Sustainability is often an unintended consequence of Collaborative Consumption. It is unintended in the sense that the initial or driving motivations (...) may not be about "being green". (...) These positive unintended (...) consequences happen because sustainability and community are an inherent, inseparable part of Collaborative Consumption and not an afterthought or add-on'. In addition, CC is also expected to have positive effects on social cohesion and community building (Désert, 2014; c.f. European Economic and Social Committee, 2013; Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2012).

While such very optimistic accounts of new societal trends are probably pretty common (and meanwhile, a growing number of observers portrays CC and the Sharing Economy more critically<sup>3</sup>), they also point to two important shortcomings of the current debate. First, scholars have only started to analyse CC practices empirically, which will enable stronger, evidence-based descriptions of current dynamics. Second – and this is the central concern of this article – these fairly unbalanced presentations of CC also reflect a lack of conceptualisation and theorisation of CC practices. Currently, new buzz words are appearing in the debate, such as 'gig economy', 'rental economy', 'platform capitalism' and 'on-demand economy' and add on the already considerable collection of existing terms such as 'cooperative economy', 'access-based consumption' and 'peer economy'. This further obscures the picture and makes nuanced interpretations of current CC dynamics difficult. With my paper, I want to contribute to a debate which is grounded on clear conceptual demarcations and informed by theory. My objective is to develop and illustrate a theoretical framework, which can explain why CC practices differ strongly in their dynamics. This can allow for a more differentiated assessment of CC practices' potential to transform our societies.

I will first develop my own definition of CC, which is taking the (few) existing definitions and their weaknesses as starting point (Section 2). My conceptualisation of CC excludes some frequently cited practices, for instance B2C services and fairly conventional services disguised as 'sharing'. Based on this definition, I present a (non-exhaustive) compilation of currently debated CC examples from different consumption sectors. Available empirical data on the current engagement with these practices shows a highly uneven development (Section 3). The remainder of the article is then concerned with how we can explain these very variable dynamics. I suggest Social Practice Theory (SPT) as very fruitful theoretical framework, which offers insights into how different elements of meaning, skills, material and rules form novel configurations and into how practices 'recruit carriers' or not (Section 4). To illustrate the usefulness of this approach, I compare two specific CC forms, P2P accommodation and cohousing, with regard to their current dynamics, drawing on existing empirical studies (Sections 5 and 6). To conclude, I then discuss one major limitation of SPT: With its focus on the 'circulation of elements' it takes more 'systemic' elements only insufficiently into account, notably the role of supply systems, regulations and related power relations. More vertical approaches such as the Multi-Level-Perspective might hence complement SPT to further enhance our understanding of diverging CC dynamics (Section 7).

## 2. What is collaborative consumption?

The term Collaborative Consumption is nowadays widely used, but, surprisingly, there is no commonly agreed-on definition, as Rachel Botsman (2013), one of the main contributors to its popularity, has recognized herself. It was coined by Felson and Spaeth who defined 'acts of collaborative consumption (...) [as; the author] events in which one or more persons consume economic goods or services in the process of engaging in joint activities with one or more others.' (Felson and Spaeth, 1978: 614) As examples the authors cite 'drinking beer with friends' or 'driving to visit someone'. The authors' main criterion for defining CC was hence the event of joint activities – which can, but must not necessarily involve the use of the same goods, for instance when several friends sit together, each one with a glass of beer of its own. While I sympathise with

<sup>2</sup> Translated from French.

<sup>3</sup> Though, a growing number of critical voices challenge these promises and point, for instance, to the likelihood of rebound effects and the risks of a pauperisation through sharing services (c.f. Baumgärtel, 2014; Cagle, 2014; Leismann et al., 2012; Lobo, 2014; Lotter, 2013; Scholl et al., 2013; Schultz, 2014; Servet, 2014).

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