

## Chapter 2

# New Forms of Economies: Sharing Economy, Collaborative Consumption, Peer-to-Peer Economy

**Abstract** The aim of this chapter is to provide a synthetic overview of those forms of unconventional economies known by a variety of terms including sharing economy, collaborative consumption, peer-to peer economy and on-demand economy. Currently, there is wide-spread discussion around this phenomenon and a number of crucial issues have drawn the attention of media and government. We will attempt to frame the boundaries of the sharing economy, outlining the related driving forces and its central features, and highlighting how this notion is problematic and blurred. We will also discuss emerging criticalities, such as tax avoidance and labour deregulation, by providing concrete examples. Finally, we will explore the social side of the sharing economy, which is central to a more effective framing of the diversity of public-interest services.

### 2.1 Attempts to Frame the Umbrella-Concept of Sharing Economy

The phenomenon of the sharing economy has undergone significant growth, especially since the 2008 crisis: both media and dedicated literature showed an increasing interest towards this umbrella concept whose boundaries are still blurred, which is why it is not simple to provide a unified and ‘official’ definition.

In fact, the name ‘sharing economy’ may be interpreted under different labels: collaborative consumption, collaborative economy, on-demand economy, peer-to-peer economy, zero-marginal cost economy, and crowd-based capitalism are just some examples of the different interpretations that are currently interconnected to the notion of sharing economy.

We wish here to briefly provide an initial assessment of the sharing economy, starting from the drivers that prepared and facilitated the emergence of this phenomenon, then exploring the meanings of the different labels, and finally including the most recent conceptualisations.

According to a study developed in 2010 by Latitude in collaboration with Shareable Magazine (one of the most prominent publications on sharing economy),

it is possible to distinguish four main driving forces that supported the emergence of the sharing economy:

- *Technology*: web and mobile technologies play a critical role in building large-scale sharing communities, because they offer speed of contact and of the supply-demand cycle. Practices of sharing, renting and bartering already existed before the internet, but it is evident that the emergence of new web and mobile technologies has accelerated and facilitated the rise of the sharing economy, enabling upscaling and enhancing economic impact.
- *Environmental concerns*: sharing and sustainability are connected concepts; many people who decide to adopt sharing practices consider their choices as being ‘better for the environment’. In times of scarcity, to share resources and assets means to collaborate for more sustainable ways of living.
- *Global recession*: the most popularly perceived benefit of sharing is saving money. This is particularly crucial in times of economic crisis (a crisis that affects not only the market but also governments and thus the welfare state), in which people lose purchasing power and, at the same time, gain increasing awareness about purchasing decisions, stressing practicality over consumerism. However, the idea of ‘saving money’ is not opposite to that of doing something ‘good for society and environment’, these two principles are both important for those people who decide to adopt sharing practices and use collaborative services.
- *Community*: the network paradigm can be seen as a re-enactment of the ancient concept of community. What is happening now is that online connectivity also facilitates offline sharing and social activities, allowing direct contact among people who live in the same area but do not interact.

Hence, the emergence of the sharing economy is the result of the interlinking of different drivers, in which global recession certainly plays a crucial role, but for the purposes of this book, the re-enactment of the ancient concept of community also deserves particular attention: we will examine it more deeply in the next paragraph, which is specifically devoted to analysing the social character of the sharing economy.

In order to explore the different labels under the umbrella concept of the sharing economy, we first introduce a practice-oriented definition, provided by Codagnone et al. (2016) in a Policy report by the Joint Research Centre, the European Commission’s in-house science service. They state that the expression sharing economy is “commonly used to indicate a wide range of digital commercial or non-profit platforms facilitating exchanges amongst a variety of players through a variety of interaction modalities (P2P, P2B, B2P, B2B, G2G) that all broadly enable consumption or productive activities leveraging capital assets (money, real estate property, equipment, cars, etc.) goods, skills, or just time” (p. 22).

This pragmatic definition is broad and neutral, quite distant from the first enthusiastic analysis found in the work of the pioneers of the sharing economy, such as Rachel Botsman and Lisa Gansky.

In 2010, Botsman and Rogers published the first book about the sharing economy: *What's Mine Is Yours—the rise of collaborative consumption*, providing a general definition of: traditional sharing, bartering, lending, trading, renting, gifting and swapping redefined through technologies and peer communities.

They also explain how the sharing economy may become more than a niche economy, because it may be considered as a veritable market that produces sizeable numbers and increasing turnovers. Indeed, the sharing economy has been named by TIME as one of the '10 Ideas That Will Change the World', highlighting the enormous social, economic and environmental potential of this phenomenon.

AirBnB (a platform for the rental of private accommodation), Zipcar (one of the first car sharing companies) and Taskrabbit (a platform to directly broker personal services) are just some examples of how the sharing economy can grow and provide a wide variety of services that shift from ownership to access and build upon distributed networks of connected individuals and communities.

In their book, Botsman and Rogers propose the following distinction between different forms of the sharing economy:

- *Collaborative consumption*: an economic model based on sharing, swapping, trading, or renting products and services, enabling access over ownership. It is reinventing not just what we consume but how we consume. It has three distinct systems: redistribution markets, collaborative lifestyle, product service systems.
- *Collaborative economy*: an economy built on distributed networks of connected individuals and communities versus centralised institutions, transforming how we can produce, consume, finance, and learn. It has four key components: production, consumption, finance and education.
- *Sharing economy*: an economic model based on sharing underutilised assets, from spaces to skills to items for monetary or non-monetary benefits. It is currently talked about mainly in relation to P2P marketplaces but equal opportunity also lies in the B2C models.

In a way, this first attempt to distinguish different forms of the sharing economy shows how it was difficult to outline the concept from the very beginning.

Among the first attempts, we may also include the work of Lisa Gansky who introduces the notion of 'mesh' in her book, *The Mesh: why the future of business is sharing* (2010). This is a type of network that allows any node to link in any direction with any other nodes in the system. Hence, it is about the sharing or meshing of talents, goods and services, in which the reference model is based on a series of transactions, on sharing something over and over. The central strategy described by Gansky is 'product multiple times', meaning that multiple sales multiply profits and customer contact, and multiple contacts multiply opportunities for additional sales and for deepening and extending relationships with customers. Gansky also creates an online directory (meshing.it) of existing collaborative systems/services/initiatives on a global scale: it is constantly evolving and it offers a variety of categories, such as education, energy, entertainment, food, real estate, travel etc.

Botsman and Rogers have created a similar directory on their website and there is also a specific Italian directory of collaborative services ([collaboriamo.org](http://collaboriamo.org)), developed by Mainieri (2013), who is the author of the first Italian book on this topic.

Since 2006, Bauwens, has talked about P2P economy, starting with a definition of peer-to-peer dynamics: he states that P2P refers to those processes that aim to increase the most widespread and equal participation by participants. P2P processes create use-value through the free cooperation of producers who have access to distributed capital: they produce use-value not for the market, but for a community of users that governs these processes making use-value accessible on a universal basis. In this sense, he talks about third mode of production, third mode of governance and third mode of ownership. Which is why P2P can be termed as the sharing economy: “you contribute what you can and take out what you need”. This is not a freeware economy: it is necessary to give a little to have access to the whole, and in Bauwens’ view, major issues facing the world today, such as protecting the planet, can only be successfully tackled by a P2P economy and thus a P2P society.

To complement this brief overview of the first attempts to define the sharing economy, we summarise a more recent study developed by Pais and Provasi (2015), who describe six classes of different sharing economy practices.

1. *Rental economy*: an economy that comprises rental schemes run by companies specialising in goods, which are generally under-used when the users have exclusive private ownership of them (example: car sharing such as ZipCar).
2. *Peer-to-peer economy*: an economy that concerns goods that are also under-used but which are offered directly by their owners (platforms such as AirBnB).
3. *On-demand economy*: an economy characterised by the use platforms that broker personal services provided by professionals and non-professionals (platforms such as Uber, Blablacar or TaskRabbit).
4. *Time banking and local exchange trading system*: similar to the previous one in terms of the services offered, but this shows a fundamental difference in the lack of money in the transactions, employing instead forms of barter based on the use of alternative currencies or time as the unit of value of the services exchanged (platforms such as TimeRepublik).
5. *FLOSS—free/libre open source software*: the oldest of the sharing economy experiences related to the free or open source software programs produced by communities of advanced developers and users (Linux).
6. *Social lending and crowdfunding*: it is about the application of finance to a sharing economy including direct loans between people and platforms that help raise the capital necessary for the development of a new idea among those potentially interested in it (platforms such as Kick starter).

According to Pais and Provasi (2015), these categories are useful in outlining the boundaries of the sharing economy, providing some indications of the magnitude of the phenomenon that is constantly growing. A recent study developed by

consultancy firm PWC (2015) estimates that the sharing economy generates a value of 15 billion dollars compared with 240 billion by the traditional economy for the same sectors, and by 2025, the amount is expected to reach about 335 billion dollars, equivalent to 50% of the total value.

To conclude this overview, we take into consideration two other recent analyses that led Rifkin (2014) to frame the concept of ‘zero marginal cost economy’ and Sundararajan (2016) to outline the idea of ‘crowd-based capitalism.’ Both conceptualisations deepen the relation between the sharing economy and the current capitalist system, even if they predict different scenarios. While Rifkin, taking some risks, talks about the end of capitalism, Sundararajan prefers to draw a possible transformation of capitalism in a crowd-based perspective.

On the one hand, Rifkin (2014) argues that the emergent sharing economy will overthrow capitalism, which is currently experiencing a value crisis based on a revolution in marginal costs that is destroying the profit rate. This means that economy and society will re-orient themselves around a collaborative commons, with a more peripheral role for the market dynamics: a third industrial revolution is on its way, thanks to the emergence of the internet of things that is leading us to an era of almost free goods and services and accelerating the rise of the collaborative commons. According to Rifkin, by 2050, the collaborative commons will likely settle in as the primary arbiter of economic life in most of the world: prosumers are producing and sharing their own information, entertainment, green energy, 3D-printed goods, and enrolling in massive open online courses on the Collaborative Commons at near zero marginal cost. They are also sharing cars, homes, and even clothes with one another via social media sites, rentals, redistribution clubs, and cooperatives, at low or near zero marginal cost.

Various experts have criticised this idea of zero marginal cost economy, for example Ogden (2014) points out that Rifkin seems to ignore issues of political power and economic incentive that shape our daily lives and our future, and also argues that the so-called sharing economy (especially in reference to cases such as Uber) is still a form of capitalism.

More cautious than Rifkin, Sundararajan (2016) does not predict the end of capitalism and he states that there is no single model for these new economic forms, but that, considered together, they create a shift in how we think about everything from utility to capital to labour to employment.

Sundararajan rather talks about a new form of capitalism that is crowd-based capitalism, a sharing economy based on peer-to-peer commercial exchange that may supplant the traditional corporate-centred model. In describing this transformation, he focuses particularly on how government regulation, jobs and social fabric may be affected by this new blurred commercial exchanges. He draws attention to those working in the sharing economy, who may range from empowered entrepreneurs who enjoy professional flexibility and independence to disenfranchised digital labourers who use platforms in search of the next job.

In short, Sundararajan stresses how policy choices are critical and proposes new possible directions for self-regulatory organisations, labour law, and funding of our social safety net.

The aim of this brief overview was to highlight the controversial character of the sharing economy, showing how difficult it is to provide a single definition. In spite of this complexity, we have attempted to establish a rough framework, in order to draw attention to some distinctive dynamics and to show how discussion around this phenomenon is increasing.

## **2.2 Emerging Problems: Lack of Legal, Fiscal and Labour Regulation**

As stated, the sharing economy is a critical concept with many meanings and several important features have drawn the attention of governments and the media, especially in the last years, in which it has been possible to experience a more mature ‘version’ of many sharing economy services.

The most widespread peer-to-peer platforms such as AirBnB and Uber are currently facing serious problems relating essentially to two main issues: tax avoidance and deregulation of the labour market.

It is well-known that AirBnB provides an online platform to allow individuals to rent out their rooms or apartments to visitors: although this is not in itself illegal, in many cases the rentals advertised on the site fall foul of local housing laws and regulations. Currently, AirBnB is facing legal problems with several city authorities around the world: in particular, it has long had a contentious relationship with the city of New York, but we can also quote Barcelona, Berlin, Paris and Amsterdam, among others (The Guardian 2014; The New York Times 2015; The Atlantic City Lab 2016). Although New York City was the first market for AirBnB in the US, the city’s government has never welcomed the \$30-billion company (Skift 2016): according to local regulations, owners or tenants can legally rent their apartments just for short periods, more specifically less than thirty days. This strict regulation caused a long controversy, the last stage which is that, soon after Governor Andrew M. Cuomo of New York signed a bill imposing steep fines on AirBnB hosts who break the regulations, the company sued the city, its mayor, and the state attorney general.

In Europe, Barcelona has one of the toughest official attitudes to vacation rentals: landlords have to acquire a permit from the city to rent their property out, and, in December 2015, AirBnB was sanctioned with high fines for listing apartments that didn’t have this licence (The Atlantic City Lab 2016). It is interesting to note that Barcelona’s restrictions came after a wave of popular protest against exploitative landlords and harassment of tourists.

This controversy has not yet been solved and we are in the middle of a long dispute that clearly highlights the lack of a shared legal and fiscal regulation that is capable of managing the specific situations.

But, probably, the most ‘famous’ contention related to the sharing economy is the case of Uber: this is a ridesharing service that originated in San Francisco and is

now available in many other cities in the world. The company uses a mobile app to connect passengers with drivers of vehicles for hire and clients request rides and track their reserved vehicle's location using the same app. According to The Telegraph (2016), Uber is currently worth more than \$60 billion, making it the most valuable startup in the world.

Over the last few years, Uber has expanded across the world and has been embroiled in very public, sometimes violent protests, in particular on the part of taxi drivers and taxi companies who believe that ride-sharing companies are illegal taxicab operations that engage in unfair business practices and compromise passenger safety. Since 2014, protests have been staged in many countries, including the US, England, Germany, India, Taiwan and Australia. In 2015, there had been at least seventy different disputes around the world relating to Uber, most of them concerned with regulatory action, but it has also been sued dozens of times by city governments and taxi unions (The Telegraph 2016).

Uber also faced protests from its own drivers as they feel they have been misclassified as independent contractors instead of employees, and that they should receive certain expenses and benefits from the company as compensation. This is probably the most obvious 'revolution': Uber, and more broadly, the app-driven labour market, is creating a great change in the notion of work, transforming traditional jobs into a set of micro tasks that can be assigned to individuals when they are needed, which means they do not have salaries, expenses or benefits such as healthcare and insurance, as does a full-time employee.

This is the so-called 'uberisation of work', that, according to Sundararajan (2016), is defining a new category of work, which is not full-time employment nor is it about running your own business. He maintains that these 'new jobs' blur the lines between the personal and the professional, changing the meaning of what it means to have a job, and affecting the economy, the government and the social fabric.

The cases of AirBnB and Uber essentially illustrate the same problem: a lack of legal and fiscal regulation, together with a total deregulation of the labour market.

Most of the activities under the umbrella of the sharing economy are positioned within this 'grey area' because the current legislation of many countries does not consider their existence (neither do transnational laws, such as EU law, even though some attempts have been made<sup>1</sup>). Sometimes it is possible to refer to old and generic rules, in other cases rules are totally missing and here, as has been said, there is, room for disputes, especially with 'traditional companies' that feel threatened by what they deem as unlawful competition. There is, as yet, no shared way of addressing these situations, each city/country is currently considering such issues in different ways. The lesson learned from these disputes is probably that it is

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<sup>1</sup>With the 'Communication on the European agenda for the collaborative economy', issued on June 2016, the EU provides clarity on applicable EU rules and policy recommendations to help citizens, businesses and EU countries fully benefit from the new business models and promote the balanced development of the collaborative economy. This hopefully represents a first step towards a clearer and more precise EU regulation on the sharing economy.

not possible to return to the previous situation: the sharing economy seems not to be a reversible change, because on the one hand, citizens are getting used to these conveniences and on the other, the emerging companies have grown and have increased their businesses significantly in recent years.

For this reason, we look to Codagnone et al.'s study (2016), which outlines four possible evolutions for the sharing economy, leaving room for further observations and research:

- *Great transformation*: this is the most optimistic evolution which coincides with the early utopian views on crowdfunding and the sharing movement. It coincides with a community-led path that leads to green, social, and fair economic prosperity. In this, the re-embedding of the economy occurs through changes in behaviour and culture: on the part of people and firms, who internalise the principles of collaboration and sustainable consumption, and on the part of governments, which can use platforms to provide public goods and services.
- *Regulated sustainability*: in this path, governments are protagonists because they push for the re-embedding of the economy through regulatory and traditional interventions, aiming to guide society towards sustainability and to solving the main issues related to the disempowerment and inequality developed by the sharing economy.
- *Growth-oriented globalisation*: in a way, this is the status quo development path, characterised by minimal government intervention: market forces are left uncontrolled, leading to increasing inequality and social polarisation. People and companies are empowered in a more competitive and individualistic way, under the imperative of economic and globalised growth, contributing to the creation of human capital specialisation and ‘virtual labour migrations.’
- *Barbarisation*: this is the path in which the sharing economy totally flows into ‘uberisation’: an evolution without government intervention, in which “traditional firms and work are dis-intermediated, decentralised, and parcelled, to be re-intermediated through algorithms” (Codagnone et al. 2016, p. 29), leading to a scenario in which unemployment and inequality rise to unprecedented levels.

For the purposes of this book, the two first evolutions seem to be particularly significant, and, therefore, a more extensive reflection on the social side of the sharing economy was found to be necessary and is addressed in the following paragraph.

## 2.3 Exploring the Social Side of the Sharing Economy

The notion of the sharing economy is central to a better depiction of public-interest services: as previously said, it is closely connected to the interlinking of active citizenship, social innovation, new forms of economies and new forms of welfare,



because it is precisely this interconnection that is the main object of reflection in the first part of this book (and also corresponds to the structure of these first chapters).

In this paragraph, we wish to explore the social character of the sharing economy, by briefly discussing its most important features and, more specifically, by focusing on the concept of social reciprocity.

In their article entitled ‘Sharing Economy: A Step towards the Re-Embeddedness of the Economy?’, Pais and Provasi (2015) argue that the failure of the two most important economic models of the 20th century (the Keynesian and the neoliberal) left a vacuum that, in a way, is being filled by the sharing economy. This is happening because the previous models contributed to ‘disembedding’ economic relations from their social ties and, now, the sharing economy seems able to occupy this vacuum “by experimenting with collaborative social forms able (at least potentially and ideally) to embed economic relations once again in social ones” (p. 353).

Pais and Provasi developed a working hypothesis that the sharing economy may help in remedying these failures by experimenting with new forms of relationship between economy and society. In order to investigate this issue, they built on the work of Polanyi (1944, 1957) who analysed three forms of integration between economy and society: exchange, reciprocity and redistribution.

Polanyi’s studies are currently undergoing significant revaluation and various authors reference his work: the notions of exchange and redistribution are quite clear (exchange is mainly associated with market dynamics and redistribution is mainly connected to state-based ones, i.e. centralization), leaving reciprocity as a third area that is not defined at all.

Put simply, the notion of reciprocity may be linked to non-economic forms that we can find in pre-modern societies, operating in terms of the symmetry of the different social groups (families, clans, communities), but, as Pais and Provasi (2015) argue, one of the merits of Polanyi lies in his having intuited that reciprocity may be important even for modern societies.

Reciprocity is already present in modern societies in the form of primary relationships (such as friendship, kinship or proximity) and it has been associated with the so-called ‘economies of the gift’ investigated by a number of authors (Mauss 1924; Malinowski 1922; Gui and Sugden 2005; Bruni 2008).

Pais and Provasi (2015) are continuing to explore the notion of reciprocity in modern societies by connecting it to what is happening around the perimeter of the sharing economy. For this purpose, they distinguish three different types of reciprocity:

1. *Reciprocity in the strict sense*: this type of reciprocity is an asynchronous and non-equivalent exchange, very close to the forms of reciprocity defined by the economies of the gift. A person who begins a cycle of this reciprocity combines instrumental interests with intrinsic willingness to cooperate, accepting the risk of not being repaid. If we look at the current sharing economy, some activities may be included under the label of the reciprocity in the strict sense, such as

couchsurfing (a form of hospitality among strangers) or types of crowdfunding that are donation based.

2. *Collaboration*: this is intended as a weak form of reciprocity, because it is a short cycle (the return is soon made and is equivalent to what has been given) and instrumental motivations prevail over intrinsic ones. Both parties benefit from the collaboration, but they are not obligated to enter into a relationship that goes beyond the current situation. A form of indirect trust is established thanks to the capacities of the institutional context (in which the collaboration takes place) to provide the proper tools in order to continuously manage such collaboration. The service BlaBlaCar (a car pooling system in which a motorist provides free places in his car) is an example of a sharing economy activity that falls under this type of reciprocity; as do the platforms of ‘social eating’ in which a food lover organises a dinner in his home and a group of strangers join the event. What matters in this collaboration are the characteristics of the owner, in other words his/her reputation, which is built through an algorithm that processes the ratings made by earlier users.
3. *Common-pool arrangements*: this type of reciprocity aims to create new communities of interests or values. These communities are composed of people who share a strong sense of belonging and make a motivational investment in the group, generating trust. Part of their individual freedom is sacrificed in order to receive in exchange an identity and a shared aim, establishing moral obligations towards all members of the group. If we look at the current sharing economy, some examples of common-pool arrangements are quite old, such as activities related to open source, and others are more recent, such as those connected to open design and manufacturing, where distributed communities collectively design a new object or service that is made available with a creative commons licence.

In this work, the notion of reciprocity, and more specifically, its interpretation as common-pool arrangements, are central, because they show a clearer picture of the possible social and institutional innovations of which the sharing economy is capable. For example, the Italian phenomenon of the Social Street (informal groups of residents of the same street coordinated through a closed Facebook group) may be included within common-pool arrangements. In this case, digital relationships enhance real ones and activate a community who shares items/services and collaborates to reach different possibilities.

The creative communities described in the first chapter of this book are not dissimilar to the Social Street, in that they exercise various types of reciprocity in which the common-pool arrangements represent a change in relationships not only among individuals, but also between citizens and institutions.

Hence, the ‘social character’ of the sharing economy described here is an integral part of the scenario of public-interest services that we are attempting to outline. Creative communities, active citizens, social innovators and common-pool arrangements are all part of the same phenomenon: a system of services placed in a hybrid area between amateur and professional, public and private, market and

society, profit and not-for-profit. This area does not represent a new model, but, using the words of Pais and Provasi (2015), it experiments with the ‘re-embedding’ of the economic relations in the sphere of social reciprocity and, thus, it establishes a different equilibrium among market, state and society.

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