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## The State and Critical Assessment of the Sharing Economy in Europe

Vida Česnuitytė, Bori Simonovits, Andrzej Klimczuk,  
Bálint Balázs, Cristina Miguel, and Gabriela Avram

### Introduction

This chapter summarises the theoretical and empirical analyses presented in the edited collection of papers ‘The Sharing Economy in Europe: Developments, Practices, and Contradictions.’ The majority of the chapters’ authors were actively involved in the COST Action CA16121 ‘From Sharing to Caring: Examining Socio-Technical Aspects of the Collaborative Economy’ (abbreviated as ‘Sharing and Caring’) that was a research network operative between 2017 and 2021 and supported by the COST

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V. Česnuitytė (✉)

Mykolas Romeris University, Vilnius, Lithuania

B. Simonovits

Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary

e-mail: [simonovits.borbala@ppk.elte.hu](mailto:simonovits.borbala@ppk.elte.hu)

A. Klimczuk

SGH Warsaw School of Economics, Warsaw, Poland

e-mail: [aklimcz@sgh.waw.pl](mailto:aklimcz@sgh.waw.pl)

(European Cooperation in Science and Technology) Association. This COST Action created a conducive and advantageous space for knowledge sharing and for lively discussion, which resulted in numerous scientific publications (Avram et al. 2019; Bassetti et al. 2019; Bødker et al. 2020; Fedosov et al. 2019; Light and Miskelly 2019; Klimczuk et al. 2021). The present edited collection is one of the final outcomes of the COST Action ‘Sharing and Caring.’

The main goal of this book is to provide readers with original and comprehensive approaches to the emerging phenomenon of the sharing economy. As a new conception, it raises plenty of questions. Therefore, authors from sixteen European countries and various academic backgrounds made efforts to answer the following questions: how is the sharing economy understood nowadays? What variations of its interpretations appear in theory and practice? How do harmonious or contradictory interrelations between the sharing economy and various contexts (public policies, legislation, digital platforms and others) occur? What are the specific issues for the functioning of the sharing economy in different economic sectors? What experiences and achievements are inherent for the selected European countries in the process of the integration of the sharing economy measures?

The current chapter, first, reviews the main findings presented in the book’s Parts II-IV (while Part I is dedicated for Introduction, and Part V is dedicated for Conclusions). Further, it discusses and critically assesses these findings through the lens of existing knowledge on the sharing

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B. Balázs

Environmental Social Science Research Group, Budapest, Hungary

e-mail: [balazs.balint@essrg.hu](mailto:balazs.balint@essrg.hu)

C. Miguel

University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden

e-mail: [cristina.miguel@ait.gu.se](mailto:cristina.miguel@ait.gu.se)

G. Avram

University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland

e-mail: [Gabriela.Avram@ul.ie](mailto:Gabriela.Avram@ul.ie)

economy in the context of scientific publications, political and legal documents, official statistics, and reports on social surveys. Finally, it provides concluding thoughts on the state of the sharing economy in Europe and includes some future directions.

## **Main Findings on the Sharing Economy in Europe**

### **Development of Conceptualisation and Regulation of the Sharing Economy**

Authors of the chapters included in Part II made efforts to review, firstly, the theoretical conceptualisation of the sharing economy since there is still no consensus on its definition (Dillahunt et al. 2017). Building on Wacker (2004), the authors of Chapter 2, Cristina Miguel, Esther Martos-Carrión, and Mijalche Santa, notice that such an ‘ill-defined concept’ may mislead practitioners and researchers and negatively impact their efforts. By applying the framework for theoretical meaningfulness, the authors identified the ‘essential’ features of the sharing economy. Based on these essential properties, they proposed the following definition for the sharing economy: ‘The sharing economy is a closed socio-economic system facilitated by digital platforms which match peer-to-peer service demand and offer based on the rules and culture of the platform actors.’ Then the status and situation of the sharing economy in the context of public policy and legislation were explored. It was noticed that the sharing economy is spreading rapidly and widely in today’s European societies. The sharing economy gained popularity because it maximises the efficiency of consumption (Hamari et al. 2016), as well as the redistribution of goods and services (Howard 2015). With sharing economy platforms, people have gained more opportunities to exchange goods with strangers over long distances, to consume a wider variety of goods and services at a lower price and with less formal barriers. At the same time, as an innovative phenomenon, the concept of the sharing economy still raises many disparities and issues such as sharing

and exchange for-profit or not-for-profit, monetary or non-monetary transactions, as well as regulated or unregulated activities (Slee 2015).

Moreover, the sharing economy calls for intervention and regulation because of increasing problems related to its functioning, for example, (unfair) competition and (lack of) consumer protection, employment conditions, relations with social policy, or taxation of sharing economy companies (Thelen 2018). The authors of Chapter 3, Błażej Koczetkow and Andrzej Klimczuk, based on the literature review, identified three ways to solve those problems: (1) targeting of interventions and regulations to specific areas (e.g., accommodation, mobility, and agriculture), and avoiding universal regulations (Gautrais 2018); (2) building a set of good practices to regulate the sharing economy at various levels (local, regional, national, EU, and global) (Frenken et al. 2020); (3) interpreting the regulation of the sharing economy through the prism of assumptions of various theories on public policy (e.g., group theories, class analysis, and analysis of transaction costs) (Huising and Silbey 2011).

Kosjenka Dumančić and Natalia-Rozalia Avlona, the authors of Chapter 4, show that, apart from a broad European Commission Communication (2016), the sharing economy still lacks regulation at the European level. The situation creates an obvious opportunity for local, national, and EU legislation to respond to the phenomenon of the sharing economy. Though, the exploration of the cases of Uber and Airbnb reveal legal problems related to distinguishing transportation or accommodation services providers from digital platforms (Colangelo and Maggiolino 2018; Van Cleynenbreugel 2020) by the Court of Justice of the European Union. Such a *laissez-faire* approach left space for sharing and collaborative economy companies to grow globally without proper regulation. The authors of the chapter conclude that the re-opening pan-European consultation engaging the national legislators, the trade unions, and the workers' collectives are a necessity in order to respond to the void of legislation on sharing economy activities.

## Mapping Variety of the Sharing Economy Sectors

In Part III, the authors explored the contribution of the sharing economy in some selected market sectors in Europe. First of all, attention is paid to the mobility sector. Shared mobility is defined as an alternative trip that maximises the utilisation of mobility resources in society (Machado et al. 2018). Authors Agnieszka Lukaszewicz and co-authors (Chapter 5) state that the sharing economy manifestations in the transportation sector promote more integrated transport solutions and environmental sustainability. At the same time, they generate inequality among age generations, and across disadvantaged social groups, as a result of the digital divide and sometimes—even social exclusion. They also create traffic congestion, pollution, regulatory disputes, stakeholder conflicts, and other unwanted effects (UNPF 2015).

Another sector in which the sharing economy has been largely implemented is peer-to-peer (P2P) accommodation. Anna Farmaki and Cristina Miguel, in Chapter 6, identified P2P platforms with business models ranging from paid to not-for-profit, plus based on home exchanges. Authors found that both hosts and guests benefit from such sharing, particularly through obtaining authentic experiences, interaction with locals, and supplementing their income (Lutz and Newlands 2018; Bucher et al. 2018). At the same time, there are many negative impacts on local economies and communities, among which overcrowding from the influx of tourists, increased housing prices, higher pollution levels (Ioannides et al. 2019), as well as the impact on the performance of hotels (Sigala 2017).

Next, authors of Chapter 7, Bori Simonovits and Bálint Balázs, focus on the sharing economy in food supply chains, defined as the use of food surplus via online communities or donating vulnerable groups via food banks. A new way of food sharing is related to the novel, digitally mediated and for-profit iterations (Pottinger 2018). However, food supply via ICT platforms, often related to unregulated marketplaces, also hide from consumers the negative outcomes such as precarious jobs, unfair labour practices, generating overconsumption, and hiding ecological externalities (Frenken and Schor 2019).

The financial sector is further explored in Part III. According to Agnieszka Lukasiewicz and Mijalche Santa (Chapter 8), practices of sharing within the financial sector range from P2P lending to crowdfunding, involve start-ups and incumbent financial service providers and may achieve for-profit or not-for-profit goals. Authors notice that the expansion of the FinTech industry offers a variety of new tools and services to consumers and the financial market, such as donation-based platforms, reward-based funding, equity-based platforms, or lending-based platforms. At the same time, the disruption of the role, structure, and competitive environment for financial institutions, the markets, and societies in which they operate emerge (Löher 2017; Poetz and Schreier 2012).

Education, knowledge, and data sharing are also presented as part of the sharing economy (Pouri and Hilty 2021). Gabriela Avram and Eglantina Hysa, in Chapter 9, discuss the fact that these activities are seldom recognised as being part of the sharing economy due to their intangible, non-material nature. Meanwhile, almost ubiquitous access to the Internet extended the opportunities for learning, knowledge and data sharing, and generation of new information and knowledge, despite distance and professional backgrounds. The authors discuss new models of education supported by online platforms (Reich 2020; Schor et al. 2015): open learning, connected courses, co-creation of open textbooks with students, peer-guided learning, or networked environments learning. According to the authors, collaboration and knowledge sharing create value, while learning and community building contribute to the community and social capital creation, as well as to the common good.

The solidarity and care economy is the last sector discussed in this section of the book. Authors of Chapter 10, Penny Travlou and Anikó Bernát, explored how recent crises, such as austerity after the 2008 economic crisis, the arrival of the numerous refugees/migrants, and the COVID-19 pandemic, interrelated with the sharing economy. The authors found that the crises highlighted the contribution of the sharing economy to the creation of solidarity involving the personal networks to cope with material deprivation: community kitchens, housing squats, and volunteer activist and grassroots organisations were created or repurposed for this reason. On the other hand, the latter activities contributed

at a rather different level in various countries, particularly, higher in Greece and lower in Hungary. Identified trends revealed and highlighted the potential of the sharing economy in the face of the crises.

## **Diversity of the Sharing Economy at the Country Level**

Part IV is dedicated to the exploration of selected country-specific cases. Seven country-focused chapters in which specific sectors of the sharing economy are highlighted were included. First, the case study of the Netherlands was introduced as the pioneering country in the sharing economy with distinguished sectors of mobility (car- or bike-sharing) and gig work platforms. Martijn de Waal and Martijn Arets, authors of Chapter 11, pay special attention to the fact that the sharing economy was initiated with the hope of contributing to social cohesion and sustainability, i.e., from the perspective of society. Though, in the last years, discussions in relation to the spread of the sharing economy started focusing on the safeguarding of public values, as well as on the quality of the services, and the efficiency of the commercial platform operators, i.e., mostly raising economic aspects. Meanwhile, a suitable answer on the regulation of these platforms has not been found yet.

Further, an alternative governance model within the sharing economy, platform cooperativism, is analysed in the context of the French sharing economy. Authors of Chapter 12, Myriam Lewkowicz and Jean-Pierre Cahier, focus on the analysis of platform cooperatives in three emblematic domains: meal delivery service, carpooling, and energy. In order to develop sustainable sharing activities, their initiators needed to match social demand with economic models, legal conditions, appropriate social and organisational forms, as well as software components. As a result, such an economic model created jobs and confidence. It is also economically sustainable in the long run. Even more, shared activities create a natural synergy between public action and public policy.

The third country presented in this part of the volume is Austria, with its well-developed tourism and accommodation. Malte Höfner and Rainer Rosegger, in Chapter 13, discuss the development of the

sharing economy in the mentioned sectors and highlight its strong effects on traditional provider structures and the local labour market. As the authors state, alternative business models in the P2P accommodation sector are more important than ever before, especially in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic situation. At the same time, the debates of national regulation's power over global players are in full swing.

Later, regulatory issues of the sharing economy are discussed in the context of the Italian sharing economy environment. Italian legislation, as Giulia Priora and co-authors (Chapter 14) state, is still not adapted to regulate the sharing economy. Legal gaps create uncertainty among all stakeholders and obstacles for future development. According to the authors, the main priorities in a prospective process of sharing economy development in their country are the following: definition of the role and obligations of platforms and service providers; prevention and fighting of discrimination across the involved economic sectors; common taxation system; principles of social sustainability, environmental protection, and community welfare.

The United Kingdom is the home of over 200 time banks, a noteworthy sector of the sharing economy. In Chapter 15, Rodrigo Perez-Vega and Cristina Miguel note that timebanks started as community-led initiatives. They create opportunities for people to exchange and trade their generic and specialist skills. However, the discussion focuses on whether these time banks operate efficiently. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the ability of time banks to contribute to providing needed skills (e.g., psychological support to frontline workers) in a historically challenging period.

The sharing economy in Poland is presented in the context of coping with the problems of trust and legal regulation in relation to the sharing economy activities within big, global businesses, but also in smaller, local initiatives. As Agnieszka Lukasiewicz and Aleksandra Nadolska, the authors of Chapter 16, notice, sometimes the local initiatives, especially when it comes to specific niches, are doing even better than global corporations. Though, together with opportunities, the sharing economy creates issues that require solutions, such as competition, labour law, regulation, and conflicts among stakeholders.



Finally, Eglantina Hysa and Alba Demneri Kruja, authors of Chapter 17, describe the role of the sharing economy implementation in Albania, both in the agriculture and accommodation sectors: it will decrease operational costs, reduce unfair and unequal informality and competition, enlarge their markets, and better serve customers. The country has made progress in adapting national strategies focused on ICT development and digitalisation. Moreover, the contribution from academia in innovation and innovative business models support this overall process. Additionally, increased awareness and trust in the benefits of P2P consumption at the societal level are decisive at this point.

## Final Reflection: Critical Assessment of the Sharing Economy

Online platforms for the sharing economy (or collaborative consumption) have been rapidly growing in Europe in various sectors and services. As described throughout the book, the underlying causes are multiple, most importantly related to environmental issues and labour market changes, and the growing demand for sustainable consumption and flexible lifestyles. On the one hand, some scholars view the recently emerged collaborative platforms as a positive paradigm change from the conventional economic business model, with a potential of democratisation of socio-economic relations (Belk 2009; Sundararajan 2016; John 2017). On the other hand, there are scholars who are more concerned about the potential ‘neoliberal nightmare’ of the sharing economy (Arnould and Rose 2015; Martin 2016) and who highlight how disadvantaged people are excluded from sharing economy activities (Schor 2017).

In the following, we discuss some of the major problems related to the sharing economy. From a legal point of view, the various models provided by the sharing economy can raise certain legal and ethical labour-related concerns. According to Zrenner (2015), the practices of numerous sharing platforms create concerns with regard to market competition, legality, and consumer protection. At the same time, the fact that the sharing platforms claim to only facilitate transactions between people outlines the potential approach of these companies

towards responsibilities. Cohen and Sundararajan (2015) stress the relevance of self-regulation issues in peer-to-peer platforms, stemming from the information asymmetry between the service provider and the consumer, negative and positive externalities, as well as the blurred boundaries between the personal and the professional.

From an economic perspective, the spread of sharing economy platforms changed practices related to consumption, displaying benefits as well as potential risks. An essential change in consumption is represented by the shift in consumer choices when it comes to owning assets versus using them on-demand, the latter being facilitated by the sharing economy. According to a comprehensive analysis in the context of the sharing economy (Codagnone et al. 2016), consumer welfare is increased due to the capacity of service delivery and lower prices. In contrast, a widespread critique is that the sharing economy has nothing to do with sharing (Slee 2015; Scholz 2017), as Airbnb is basically a short-term renting platform, and Uber is operating as an unregulated taxi company. Sundararajan (2016) also highlights the way some companies, while considered to be car-sharing platforms, do not have a significantly different business model from traditional car rental companies (e.g., Zipcar and car2go in comparison to P2P Turo). Certain scholars use the term ‘sharewashing,’ meaning a marketing strategy, where the business is based on an idea of sharing and pro-social behaviour, rather than on profit-oriented principles. According to the ‘sharewashing critique,’ Airbnb is much closer to a rental agency and Uber to an unregulated taxi service than to sharing economy initiatives (Tu 2017; Schormair 2019). It is worth noting here that other economic models are emerging at the moment, such as the social and solidarity economy, the creative economy, the silver economy, and the circular economy (Klimczuk 2015). It is essential to highlight that some of these concepts are much more focused on justice and equality.

From a social policy and sociological perspective, a series of critiques have been linked to the problems of inequality, discrimination, and social exclusion of certain minorities. Even though in most online sharing economy platforms, racial or any other kind of discrimination are prohibited—either by anti-discrimination policies (e.g., Airbnb, Uber, and Lyft) or by rules of conduct that articulate desirable behaviour

(e.g., BlaBlaCar), in practice, discrimination still exists. Simply because there is a built-in selection mechanism that results in unintended consequences, namely discriminating platform users that belong to certain groups or minorities as both users and service providers can choose with whom they want to share their rides or apartments. Several audit studies (based on control field experiments, see, e.g., Cui et al. 2017; Edelman et al. 2017; Ge et al. 2016; Simonovits et al. 2018) have proven that discrimination (primarily based on ethnicity and race) is prevalent, i.e., unequal access to certain services (Airbnb, Uber, and other ride-sharing platforms) remain a serious policy concern.

Yet creating trust is crucial in order to minimise risks within the newest forms of peer-to-peer transactions because the sharing economy does not involve the only direct sale or simple sharing, but mutual participation. To create trust in response to these risks, users tend to provide more robust information on newer forms of collaborative consumption platforms (Ert et al. 2016; Sundararajan, 2016). To sum it up, creating social links and building social capital have crucial roles in the sharing economy organisations, especially in those platforms which offer risky, ‘high-stakes’ offline experiences, such as ride-sharing companies or Airbnb. Trust signals and the use of digital trust are a required and essential resource for sharing platforms (Botsman 2017). In online interactions, trust has to be approached differently, as the level of trustworthiness is not known (Chen and Fadlalla 2009).

To conclude, from a scientific perspective, the book provides a better understanding of the sharing economy in Europe. It reveals that the sharing economy is still a novel and innovative phenomenon. Hence, it is no surprise that unsolved critical issues encourage the continuation of its investigation, discussions, and debates from various perspectives: economic, legal, political, social, ecological, and others. Meanwhile, considering the comprehensive and up-to-date materials collected and analysed in this book, it may become an outstanding source of knowledge and tool in the process of expansion of the sharing economy in Europe and beyond. From a global economic perspective, it seems that societies are entering an era where multinationals and globalisation

are shaping the playing field for industry and business players within the sharing economy. Simultaneously, highly innovative local initiatives are growing and spreading throughout Europe. Will the sharing economy continue to provide new solutions for more environmentally aware consumption and help build more community-based and caring lifestyles? We can only hope so.

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