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Introduction: Ethnographies of Collaborative Economies across Europe

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Introduction

The terms "sharing economy" and "collaborative economy" have been commonly used in recent years to refer to a proliferation of initiatives, business models and forms of work: from the far-reaching corporate digital platforms that facilitate the organisation of cooperative practices, to local, regional and community-led collaborative initiatives in housing, tourism, transport, social enterprise, culture, the arts, etc. (European Commission 2016; Avram et al. 2017). As its name implies, the collaborative economy is considered as "a new socio-economic model based on collaboration, access to, and the socialization of, value production, facilitated by digital technologies" (Arcidiacono, Gardini and Pais 2018: 276). The concept is used to refer to a wide variety of very diverse practices from time banks and urban gardens, to global digital platforms and co-working spaces (Avram et al. 2017). At the same time, the

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controversial nature of the "collaborative economy" and its applications has triggered many debates (see Schor 2015; Slee 2016). Some authors embrace the collaborative economy as a practice that opens the possibility for a "more just and equitable society based on the logic of peer-to-peer collaboration" (del Moral-Espin and Fernandez-Garcia 2018: 401). Others take a much more critical view, arguing that the collaborative economy should be understood as capitalism's last stand" (del Moral-Espin and Fernandez-Garcia 2018: 401; see also Martin 2016). This controversy reveals the complex, changing and multifaceted nature of the collaborative economy and of its multiple impacts on local and regional economies and societies (Cheng, 2016), and raises questions regarding its governance (Teli and Bassetti 2021). As a subject of academic research, the collaborative economy has received much attention in recent years by scholars from diverse disciplines who have explored its practices, cultures, lived experiences, and socio-technical systems. Empirical investigations, including case studies and related data sets, document the realities, impacts and implications of the collaborative economy, and develop methodological and epistemological insights into its context. This book is a further contribution to the in-depth qualitative understanding of the collaborative economy phenomenon. It stems from a unique effort to capture the complexities of the collaborative economy in Europe through ethnographic research. The collaborative economy includes a broad range of economic practices, subjectable to the full gamut of epistemological and empirical approaches, including large-scale and/or quantitative studies (see, for example, Akande et al. 2020, and Sanna and Michelini 2021). This notwithstanding, we argue for the need for, and relevance of, adopting a qualitative stance to document and understand experiences, practices, and models of collaborative economy that involve individuals, groups, and communities. As the phenomena that can be identified as instances of collaborative economy diversify and span various platforms, media, organisations, and communities, the ethnographic approaches that explore these complex phenomena must unavoidably evolve. At the same time, it is crucial to document, share, and reflect upon the practices of ethnographic inquiry that examine collaborative economies, and the practices of finding dissemination. The ethnographies of collaborative economies provide rich accounts that contribute to the painting of a complex landscape that spans several countries and regions, and diverse political, cultural, and organisational backdrops. Due to this diversity, the reflection on the role of ethnographic researchers, and on their stance and outlook, are of paramount interest across the disciplines involved in collaborative economy research.

This book emerges from a long-term, multinational, cross-European collaboration between researchers from various disciplines (e.g., sociology, anthropology, geography, business studies, law, computing, information systems), career stages, and epistemological backgrounds, brought together by a shared research interest in the collaborative economy. The material and intellectual context of the book was provided by the COST Action "*From Sharing to Caring: Examining*

the Socio-Technical Aspects of the Collaborative Economy" (CA16121, 2016), a European initiative supported by COST – European Cooperation in Science and Technology, which lasted for four years (2017–2021). This COST Action (henceforth referred to as "*Sharing & Caring*") aimed at building and growing

> a network of actors (including scholars, practitioners, communities and policy makers) focusing on the development of collaborative economy models and platforms and on social and technological implications of the collaborative economy through a practice-focused approach (See https://sharingandcaring.eu).

Sharing & Caring was joined by researchers and practitioners from various academic and non-profit institutions based in over thirty countries. The research collaborators studied the sociotechnical systems and human practices involved in the complex landscape of the collaborative economy in Europe, and compared between, and reflected upon, local, regional, national, and international initiatives. In regular meetings and workshops, the participating researchers discussed elements of the current discourse on the collaborative economy, worked together on the deliverables of the Action (reports, white papers, case studies, and toolkits), and formulated a European agenda of research on the socio-technical aspects of the collaborative economy, including the design of future technological platforms, the technical infrastructure, and the legal, ethical, and financial implications. The Action participants thus articulated a European research perspective on the collaborative economy, based on the EU values of social innovation and in line with the Europe 2020 strategic objective of achieving a smart, sustainable, and inclusive economy. One of the four *Sharing & Caring* working groups, WG1, aimed to systematically analyse practices of digitally-mediated collaborative economy through a series of in-depth ethnographic studies that contributed "*insights on the practices involved and on the forms community aggregates around these practices*" (see https://sharingandcaring.eu/). This research underpinned the development of a multifaceted perspective on sharing and caring practices, and informed the conceptual framework for interpreting and classifying different instances of collaborative economy.

The WG1 produced an online repository of ethnographic case studies and initiated a directory of people involved in various aspects of the European collaborative economy. The goal was to provide a systematic and comprehensive theoretical perspective that aligns the collected findings and can serve as a taxonomy and guide for further research. Within *Sharing & Caring*, ethnographic research was recognised as pivotal for understanding and unpacking the complexity of models and patterns of the collaborative economy. For this purpose, the WG1 team also developed an ethnographic methodological toolkit that can be used by researchers within and beyond the COST Action to provide a descriptive mapping of the collaborative economy landscape. In addition, this

toolkit provides a broad set of research directions and thematic categories that could inform future empirical research. The themes included in the toolkit are not meant to be exhaustive; they merely outline prospective research directions and offer a snapshot of the *Sharing & Caring* members' research interests. More specifically, the toolkit concentrates on two distinct, and, arguably, mutually incompatible, types of collaborative economy: transglobal digital platforms (such as, for example, the short-term rental service Airbnb and its alternatives) and local bottom-up initiatives (Fedosov, Lampinen and Travlou 2020).

To further capture the breadth of ethnographic research on the collaborative economy in Europe, the editors of this book and WG1 participants organised an international conference at the University of Edinburgh (*EthnoCol 2019*, held on October 25th 2019 and supported by the Action). The origins of this book can be traced back to that event: the presentations of current research and the lively discussions between attendees from several countries and disciplines, provided fertile ground for developing the chapters that make up this book.

For *EthnoCol 2019*, we solicited short papers contributing ethnographic accounts and understandings of collaborative economy practices and communities. We also welcomed contributions focusing on the methodological aspects of collaborative economy research, such as collaborative ethnography, participatory action research, co-design, etc. To document the complexity and richness of ethnographic research on the collaborative economy we sought ethnographic accounts of practices and/or of forms of community aggregation in collaborative economy settings; ethnographic case studies of collaborative economy initiatives, frameworks and platforms; instances of ethnographically-informed design of collaborative systems in support of collaborative economy practices; reflections on the theoretical, epistemological, and methodological challenges of studying the collaborative economy ethnographically. Post-conference, some authors were invited to extend their short papers into the chapters that make up this volume. This book, the first publication on the ethnography of the collaborative economy in Europe, covers a trans-national range of European projects analysed through a cross-disciplinary perspective.

Themes and Open Issues in This Book

Each chapter represents a timely contribution to the current state of the art in the identification and analysis of the broad range of phenomena that constitute the collaborative economy. Together, the book chapters reflect the variegated character of the collaborative economy and the diversity of its themes and practices. The chapters fall within four main themes (as represented in the four parts of the book): a) ethnographies of sharing economy practices; b) ethnographies of grassroots local initiatives; c) ethnographies of co-designing collaborative economies; and, d) ethnographies of spaces for collaborative economy.

Part one starts with Ann Light's discussion on the concept of trust within local initiatives (Chapter 1). Ann Light interrogates how transitions in trust between strangers may affect engagement, looking specifically at the growth of 'relational assets' (Light and Miskelly 2015). Her chapter draws material from neighbourhood-level case studies, proposing a range of ethnographic forms to deepen our reading of these social aspects of transaction, including a place for our own response to new types of transaction. In Chapter 2, Dicte Frost examines sharing and collaborative practices in ecovillages across five European countries (Spain, Slovenia, Ukraine, Germany, and Denmark). In this cross-European, multi-sited study, Dicte Frost carried out in-depth interviews with different stakeholders to document the practices of sharing in ecovillages: the experiences and methodologies of sharing, its enablers, and the limitations to sharing practices in the communities. She found that, in contrast to settlement arrangements that push their members towards competition, ecovillages incentivise collaboration and sharing: ecovillage communities thus merge collaborative and market-based economies, and function as intermediate, or transitioning, spaces. Dicte Frost's research stresses the importance of aligning the individual values of sharing and collaboration with those of the communities. Using a single local case study in Scotland, in Chapter 3, Catherine Lyons and Morgan Currie describe *Easy Sharing*, a pilot service from the Edinburgh Tool Library (ETL). *Easy Sharing* introduces an alternative economic infrastructure, a Library of Things, that can engender sharing over time. Through ethnography and surveys, Catherine Lyons and Morgan Currie investigate the drivers and barriers to participation in the sharing economy, and interrogate the receptiveness, capacity, and barriers of those who use the Library of Things over retail consumption. The authors conclude that a platform-mediated sharing economy would be not so much an innovation as in fact a restoration of historic social bonding, mitigating the pressures of current deprivation by introducing infrastructure to strengthen community. In Chapter 4, Samantha Cenere investigates collaborative workplaces through her ethnography of the situated practices of organising a Fablab in Turin, Italy. Fablabs (short for Fabrication Labs) are workshops for digital fabrication, where members can use a variety of shared tools and resources to construct smart devices on a small scale or just for themselves. The author argues that collaborative economies could be understood as the emergent outcome of the interaction between economic theories and heterogeneous socio-technical arrangements: it is through this interaction that collaborative economies are brought into being, demonstrating how economics performs the economy. In her chapter, Samantha Cenere also highlights how this process of actualization is never stable, and can sometimes fail.

The second part of the book comprises three chapters on ethnographies of local grassroots initiatives. In Chapter 5, Anikó Bernat looks at solidarity as it was manifested within grassroots groups in Hungary during the 2015 'migration crisis'. Through her ethnographic study, Bernat explores the model of 'going online to acting offline': she investigates how the efficient use of social

media platforms fueled, and interacted with, the offline activity of solidarity-driven humanitarian aid movements during the aforementioned 'crisis'. One of her key findings is that the use of social media platforms (predominantly Facebook) enabled volunteer grassroots groups to form very rapidly, operate with extraordinary effectiveness, and exercise wide influence, at a level that has never been experienced before in a humanitarian crisis in Hungary. In Chapter 6, Vera Vidal presents her ethnographic fieldwork with *La Comunicadora*: a training programme for socio-economic innovation and technological sovereignty for collaborative economy projects in Barcelona. The author reflects on how, in the context of municipalism, the State is attempting to channel sharing economy initiatives to promote alternative social economies. From a similar perspective, in Chapter 7, Olga Orlíc, Anita Čeh Časni, and Kosjenka Dumančic discuss community as a focal point in the solidarity economy. Their exploration is grounded on their interdisciplinary study of community-supported agriculture, food citizenship, and solidarity economy in Croatia.

In the three chapters that constitute the third part of the book, the focus shifts onto ethnographies of co-designing collaborative economies. Chiara Bassetti (Chapter 8) presents the case study of Santacoin (SC), a digital complementary currency co-designed, implemented, and deployed at a 10-day performance art festival in Italy. The author provides an ethnographic account of this collaborative intervention and its main results, and reflects on two key dimensions of the SC project: the intersection of 'moneywork' and caring practices as explicitly thematised in the public space, and the role social interaction, relationships, and communities in collective imagination experimentations. In Chapter 9, Justin Larner discusses the methodological challenges of studying the collaborative economy ethnographically in order to develop new business models and platforms. His discussion focuses on annotated portfolios, a human-computer interaction technique that enables worker experience to inform business model design. Larner demonstrates how annotated portfolios can also be used by researchers to articulate designs latent in ethnographic data gathered from engagement with workers, and how this application can inform the design of new business models in the collaborative economy. The last chapter (10) in this part of the book, written collaboratively by five authors from three different institutions and countries (Italy, Portugal, and Denmark), Maria Cristina Sciannamblo, Roberto Cibin, Petra Žišt, Chris Csíkszentmíhalyi, and Maurizio Teli explore the concept of care within the ethnographically-informed design of collaborative systems in two European projects and uncovers how this design can support care-based practices of social collaboration in different contexts.

In the fourth and final part of the book, the focus turns to the spatiality of the collaborative economy, with three chapters dedicated to its urban dimension. In Chapter 11, Alena Rýparová looks at sharing practices as manifested in social and/or environmental initiatives in Brno, Czech Republic. She examines the organisation of these initiatives into communities or networks, their access to resources within these networks, and the motivation of people to

participate – a motivation that does not include that of financial profit. This examination offers an insight into the fundamental question of what makes us share services, goods, knowledge, etc. with others, even with strangers. In Chapter 12, a two-city case study of Airbnb, Cristina Miguel and Rodrigo Perez-Vega examine the experiences and views of relevant stakeholders in the Airbnb sphere in London and Barcelona: hosts, guests, Airbnb public policy managers, rental apartment companies, council representatives, and other local authorities. In this study, the authors unpack questions pertaining to Airbnb as a sharing economy platform and the barriers to, and opportunities for, ethical practice that this platform generates. Miguel and Perez-Vega identify the challenges stemming from their comparative research in two different urban settings and the controversial nature of the Airbnb phenomenon, and articulate research strategies for overcoming some of these challenges. In Chapter 13, the discussion moves to the struggles against Airbnb by grassroots housing activist groups in Athens, Greece. Dimitris Pettas and Penny Travlou explore a conflict between two distinct actors at the different ends of the collaborative economy spectrum: Airbnb, a sharing economy platform with a global reach and economic impact, and housing activists inspired by the principles and values of solidarity and care economy. The authors argue that, despite their common framing as parts of the collaborative economy, 'platform capitalism' and grassroots collaborative practices are the materialisation of different – and contrasting – visions concerning the organisation of production, consumption, and social reproduction, affording fundamentally different capacities and possibilities of empowerment.

The chapters that make up this edited book follow, respond, and expand upon the literature and debates on the collaborative economy. They offer novel insights into the open questions of collaborative economic practice, substantiated by original ethnographic research across several European countries. By examining the collaborative economy through the common lens of ethnographic methods, this book sheds new light on the complexities of both the collaborative economy and of its ethnographic exploration. Along these lines, "collaboration" becomes problematised as a phenomenon of varying reach, actors involved, and values aspired. Hence we refer to "economies" and "ethnographies" also in the plural to acknowledge such diversity of thrust. Collaboration is also manifested in the authorship of the chapters and in the nature of the research: a coming together of disciplines and of multiple actors including researchers, activists, community representatives, policymakers, and/or local authorities.

Furthermore, the book demonstrates how inter- and trans-disciplinary perspectives, informed by transnational collaborative research in geography, sociology, economics and management, computer-supported cooperative work, and collaborative computing (among other scholarly fields), can enrich the current debates on the collaborative economy.

This book can be read through different keys: not only disciplinary ones, but also in terms of positionality. We envision a varied readership (such as

policymakers, members of communities, activists, and students and researchers) that can take away insights from it. From the various disciplines coming together we can learn of the importance of 'joined-up', multi-faceted and in-depth examination of contemporary phenomena. Ethnography becomes common epistemological ground for such rich exploration reflecting on the fact that situated knowledge can help view and learn from case studies over time. The different ethnographic studies the chapters discuss offer a unique opportunity to look holistically at the theme of the collaborative economy, from various perspectives, voices and narratives.

Finally, we acknowledge that this book has been written during the life of the *Sharing and Caring* COST Action (2017–2021), with work documented in the chapters having been conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world. Much has changed since. The landscape of the collaborative economy, at the level of both global networked platforms and locally-driven sharing initiatives, has been significantly impacted by the pandemic. At the time of completing this Introduction in May 2022, Europe is also affected by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and ongoing conflict, with new movements of people and aid, and collaborative solidarity initiatives, as well as profound changes in the economies of many European countries.

While we acknowledge that these events have changed the landscape of the collaborative economy in Europe, we believe that this volume's contributions are still useful to lead to impact to readers approaching this in the future: they represent a model for the thoughtful and rich examination of other multi-faceted phenomena involving communities, digital platforms, and collaborative processes that may emerge going forward. Furthermore, they represent the potential of local collaborative economy initiatives to create more sustainable and 'slow' futures, as well as the risks and challenges of large scale platform-based economies. They can inspire future scenarios when it comes to facing and tackling other crises such as the climate and humanitarian crises.

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