

The rise of collaborative consumption: A critical assessment of resistance to capitalism and its ideologies of self and property.

In early 2014, *Forbes* released an article predicting the top five trends for this year. The emergence of collaborative consumption was one of them. “There is a new rapidly evolving online-enabled movement called the *Sharing Economy* or the *Collaborative Economy* that will allow some organizations and individuals to preserve the assets they have and others to be able to use those assets, for a fee.” (Israel, 2014a) Forbes anticipates this will make markets more efficient and profitable, potentially becoming the biggest trend of 2014.

Rachel Botsman (2010), a global thought leader on the sharing economy, founder of Collaborative Lab and author of *What's Mine Is Yours*, argues that in addition to everyday forms of collaboration - sharing, bartering, lending, renting, gifting, and swapping - people are using technology to form online peer communities to realize the benefits of access to products and services over ownership. In doing so, they are saving money, space, and time, making friends and building offline communities and peer-to-peer trust (Botsman & Rogers, 2010, p. 11). She calls this groundswell ‘Collaborative Consumption’ and argues that businesses and governments should embrace it to revolutionize business and society.

However, could it be something more? Can the advent of collaborative consumption be read as a particular form of resistance? This paper will theorize whether collaborative consumption has the potential to be used in anti-capitalist resistance focussing on its potential power to change attitudes to *possession* and *ownership*, concepts that are central to liberalism and underpin free-market capitalism.

By using Karl Polanyi’s (1944) concept of the ‘double movement’ developed in *The Great Transformation* I suggest that collaborative consumption is a countermovement aimed at self-protection against the free-market pressures, by creating alternative exchange models, enabling access to a greater diversity of goods at lower prices. Jeremy Rifkin’s (2014) *The Zero Marginal Cost Society* supports this theory, arguing that the emerging ‘Internet of Things’ is creating conditions for exchange of goods and

services at low or near zero marginal cost. Accordingly, this global ‘Collaborative Commons’ can potentially transform the economy, argues Rifkin.

While there are gains from Rifkin’s research, he operates with a rather structural analysis of power, one where the everyday relations and embodied subjectivities of consumers are under theorised. To remedy this, the paper draws on Foucauldian conceptions of power relations and subjectivisation, arguing that the potential of collaborative consumption as resistance does not lie in its capacity to change existing economic structures, but in its capacity to transform the existing consumer subjectivities integral to the economic, political and cultural structures of the capitalist market society.

This paper considers how collaborative consumption exercises consumer subjectivities based on ideas of ownership and institutional trust that encompass liberal ideologies of the self and private property born out of Enlightenment philosophies of John Lock by comparing it to Anarchist-orientated anti-consumption practices. Consequently, this paper will address the following question: by moving from consumption based on ownership to practising consumption based on sharing and peer-to-peer trust, can the consent to the political and cultural system of liberalism be dissolved “from below” (Foucault, 1980, p. 95), therefore challenging the economic system of the capitalist free market?

The aim of this paper is not to assess the impact collaborative consumption has had on the capitalist system, but rather theorize and locate its potential as a form of resistance. Therefore, I will not speculate about its future, but rather give a theoretical account that can provide a foundation for future studies. By looking at David Graeber’s theories of debt, trust, social ties and currencies, this paper identifies theoretical synergies between what he calls “human economies” (2011, p.130) and what Botsman describes is the economic interaction like between the collaboratists. Rifkin calls these interactions “collaborative economies” (2014a). Therefore I suggest that future studies should embody long term ethnographic fieldwork on those practising collaborative consumption to analyse the formation of their consumer subjectivities with respect to ownership, imagination, trust, currencies and the everyday embodied relations to capital and technology; seeking to discover to what extent collaborative consumption economies are a form of human economies of the 21st century?

1. Collaborative Consumption.

1.1 What is it?

When *CouchSurfing* was launched in 2004, it was a pioneer in the movement later known as ‘collaborative consumption,’ the ‘sharing economy’ or ‘peer-to-peer economy.’ Back then, it seemed like a ‘hippie’ concept: if you have a spare couch or room, why not share it with a traveller willing to slum it for a night? (Farr, 2012) Since its success many similar sites have been set up. By using information technologies, enormous online marketplaces such as *eBay* and *Craigslist* are formed where entire communities worldwide can rent, lend, swap, barter, give and share products on an unprecedented scale shifting consumer values from ownership to access (Collaborative Consumption, 2014a). Collaborative consumption covers different sectors, such as, travel and transportation (*AirBnB*, *Lyft*), fashion and food (*GirlMeetsDress*, *Cookisto*), social to peer lending (*Zopa*, *Prosper*), and takes many forms, such as, collaborative inventing (*Quirky*), skills and knowledge sharing (*TaskRabbit*, *Zaarly*, *Quora*), swap trading (*Swap*), to name a few. It will soon affect the whole economy, forecasts Israel, claiming that *AirBnB*, a trusted community marketplace for unique accommodations, is predicted to eclipse Hilton to become the world’s largest hotelier this year, even though the five-year-old company doesn’t own any commercial property—not even a bed (Israel, 2014b). *Lending Club*, a peer-to-peer financial institution, has invested \$2.6 billion dollars in makers, ideas and people. It may not yet be the best-known lending institution, from customer feedback; but it may be the most trusted, reports *Forbes* (*Ibid.*).¹

The growing access to internet and communication technology is increasing participation. People and technology form a formidable new infrastructure — the ‘Internet of Things’ - connecting everything and everyone (Rifkin, 2014a). The current form of collaborative consumption, originating in the US, has gained popularity in Europe, Australia and the US where, according to *Internet World Stats*, 60-70% of the population are internet users. Thus, arguably, the phenomenon of the ‘Sharing Economy’ has developed

¹ As the number of sites are continuously increasing, any study on collaborative consumption should address such factors as the sector of operation, currency used, mechanism of protection and security, modes of governance, profit mechanisms, modes of exchange, levels of offline sociability, level of detail of users’ online profiles or levels of anonymity. This would lead to a better understanding of the principles behind collaborative consumption sites and the extent to which those of the sharing economy are different the orthodox offline free market.

largely due to capitalism and the existing technology enabling it to take place in the form and scale discussed in this paper. Simultaneously, it is important to recognise that the logic and impulse of sharing has a long history that predates capitalism and the market society supporting it, which will be examined in depth in the last section of the paper.

For now it is essential to recognize that *sharing* has gained a new *form* through communication technology and the internet. This has allowed people to see where resources such as a place to stay, a car to share, an aspiring chef, inexpensive office space or executive assistance can be found and used for a time (Israel, 2014b) on a scale like never before, sometimes expanding the potential of sharing beyond local networks. Although it enables internet users to research the available resources for sharing, one requires a particular mindset to go looking for them. “It is the young who are leading the way,” says Xavier de Lecaros Aquise, co-founder of *GirlMeetsDress* to the *Guardian*, “understanding that it is not the DVD they want but the movie it carries, not the drill they need but the hole it creates, and the needs or experiences these assets fulfil rather than the assets themselves.” (de Lecaros Aquise, 2014)

Although the emphasis placed by Aquise was on the mindset geared towards sharing, not having, it also indicates a certain level of material wellbeing, education and age amongst the collaboratists. Additionally, as these practices involve extensive web browsing, research and online negotiation, this may suggest that the majority of participants are students, part-time or unemployed people, or businesses based in the ‘Global North.’ However this is not to suggest that full time employees cannot also be regular participants. Race and gender generally seem not to be irrelevant.²

Since many of the peer-to-peer sites and companies are rapidly increasing their global reach, Rifkin identifies this as growth of the ‘Internet of Things’ – a game-changing platform connecting everyone everywhere enabling an emerging collaborative commons to flourish alongside the capitalist market by ushering in a collaborative economy (Rifkin, 2014a). He claims that these collaborative commons are

² To gain a better understanding of the social composition of collaborative consumption site users a demographically-specific research should follow, identifying the countries of origin, site founders and their motives. Conduct an inquiry into the accessibility of technology and the prevailing economic conditions to identify the principles or condition for participation. This together with the study outlined in ‘footnote 1’ would reveal the motives of collaborative consumers, as well as its principles of inclusivity and mechanisms for exclusion.

marked by the consumer ability to connect, produce and share their own energy, physical products, and services globally at a near zero marginal cost thus becoming ‘prosumers’ and disrupting the workings of capitalist markets (Rifkin, 2014b).

According to Rifkin, its success lies in the internal contradictions of capitalism, namely, the dynamics of competitive markets that drive the productivity up and marginal costs down, making some goods and services nearly free and no longer subjected to market forces (*Ibid.*). To illustrate, the rise in online music sharing and the decrease in profit for the record industry has not been accidental. He also points out to the current ‘underlying cultural conflict’ and power struggles ‘between the capitalists and collaboratists,’ characterized in a dialectic of ‘monopolization vs. democratization of everything’ (Rifkin, 2014c), and predicts that by 2050 the sharing economy and ‘prosumer’ collaborative approach will be “the primary arbiter of economic life in most of the world” dominating the current economic system and capitalist approach (Rifkin, 2014b).

To sum up, Rifkin views collaborative consumption as economic resistance to global capitalism that has born out of its inherent contradictions. Furthermore, the power struggles are located in the economic domain signalling a structural approach to power and to a dialectic relationship between capitalism and the sharing economy, which is seen to be more democratic. Another way to investigate this relationship and consider the sharing economy as part of anti-capitalist resistance is by way of Karl Polanyi and his concept of the ‘double movement,’ considered in the following section.

1.2 Capitalism and collaborative consumption: Polanyi’s countermovement and resistance.

In Polanyi’s (1944) analysis of how markets became disembedded from the rest of society, in *The Great Transformation* and after, he identifies the historical dialectic or ‘double movement’ whereby the drive of capitalism to escape from social constraints met the countervailing power of classes and institutions acting in society’s self defence (Hart & Ortiz, 2008, p. 3). According to a report produced by Zipcar, a car sharing company in the US, the main reasons given for hiring, rather than buying cars are financial. It is cheaper in terms of cost per use and many are not able to afford one (de Lecaros Aquise, 2014). Although this is quantitative data specific to the US and therefore not entirely accurate, it is a

starting point to establish the motivations of collaborative consumers. They do not seem politically charged or environmentally concerned, but rather economically preoccupied. This is supported by other collaborative service providers. “When we launched back in 2009, the recession mindset dominated. It meant that ‘cost per use’ was a huge driver, as being smart with money was highly regarded.” (de Lecaros Aquise, 2014). Therefore, collaborative consumption may be seen as a form of resistance, a countermovement to the economic violence of the free-market, aimed at self-protection by using the internet in order to create or engage in alternative to free market-exchange models allowing access to a greater diversity of goods at lower prices.

In contrast, Polanyi’s understanding of a countermovement was more policy orientated. Harmes (2001) suggests that, according to Polanyi, the attempt to create a self-regulating market (the first half of the double movement) was fundamentally unsustainable because of the ‘dislocations’ it produced for both capital and labour, which then gave rise to countermovements demanding implementation of measures of social self-protection (the second half of the double movement) (Harmes, 2001, p. 398). As he departs from the Marxist tradition, Polanyi’s and Marx’s approaches should be compared. “The former explains the capitalist dynamic in terms of a double movement in which the push for self-regulating markets is met with diverse, spontaneous and relatively disorganized counter movements that cut across class lines and seek to protect *social* interests. The latter focuses on class struggles based on a clash of *economic* interests.” (Maertens, 2008, p. 151) For Polanyi, governments should respond to popular pressures through new social protection policies; for Marx, however, – it is the politically conscious and economically disadvantageous workers’ body that aims to overthrow the bourgeoisie. However, both of these accounts risk excluding from their analysis *unintended* forms of resistance, perhaps such as collaborative consumption, aimed at individual self-protection, as well as movements with no obvious underlying aims or leaders. This also raises a wider question within anthropology, namely, whether a social movement *needs* to have a preconceived definite aim or identifiable key actors that determine it?

Arguably then, collaborative consumption can embody politically intended as well as unintended resistance aimed at self-protection, organized via new online networks, groups and institutions enabling

offline exchange and socialization, thereby directly improving one's economic and often social conditions.

On the other hand, collaborative consumption is seen as another element of the market complementing the business models of capitalism. For example, the Disruptive Innovation Festival this Autumn facilitated debates about collaborative consumption as an innovative business model (Velshi, 2014). In so far as it uses the distribution networks, business or marketing models characteristic of capitalism, this argument is valid. However, when one considers the micro, rather than a macro level, the elements of resistance become evident. The forms of exchange celebrating sharing are not descriptive of capitalism or market society in which self-interested individuals seek to fully utilize the scarce resources, an idea put forward in contemporary economics textbooks such as *Principles of Microeconomics* (2011) by Mankiw. In fact, they find more similarities in communist or traditional modes of exchange, arising from the old communist principle "from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs" (Roos 2013). However, according to Graeber even in the genuinely communist societies which are marked by a predominance of sharing, hierarchy and exchange will never fully disappear, but rather become subordinated to a different cultural and systemic logic (*Ibid.*). Nonetheless, he asserts, there is potential for the logic of sharing to take precedence when social priorities are radically rearranged.

It is evident that there is a dialectic relationship between the capitalistic and collaborative approaches to exchange, which are in an indefinite countermovement with each other. This raises the question, whether the collaborative approach or 'the logic of sharing' will rise to dominate over the capitalist approach or decrease to a bare minimum or be subsumed by the free-market engines posing no threat to the capitalist market system? With regards to some commentators who identify the rise of collaborative consumption as evidence of a shift in consumer values, it is also a self reinforcing process replacing the capitalist logic of buying with the logic of sharing. This is because its participants and advocates are producing and reproducing this logic both practically and discursively by talking, blogging, tweeting, researching and forming groups, labs and online communities such as the *collaborativeconsumption.com*, *peers.org* and others. Therefore it must be seen as a self perpetuating force that uses communication

technology to shift and rearrange social priorities needed to support itself and perhaps to dominate the capitalist logic.

To conclude, there are two sides to collaborative consumption as a form of resistance. Firstly, it is, as identified by Rifkin, a platform of ‘collaboratists’ operating as a countermovement to economic violence disrupting the self-regulating market and current patterns of recourse distribution. Secondly, it is a platform for practising exchange forms based on the logic of sharing and for negotiation of social priorities and values seen to be in opposition to the prevailing capitalist free market logic. In what follows, this paper will investigate the prevailing social priorities and values in liberal capitalist societies such as the US and the UK, examine their shift by collaborative consumption, and assess the implications of this for anti-capitalist resistance and formation of alternatives.

2. The Liberal Self and social priorities in liberal capitalist societies.

In this paper the ‘Liberal Self’ is taken to mean the social identity composed of values and virtues necessary for a functioning global civil society (Hopgood, 2000, p. 20). The examination of the formation of ‘the hegemonic ideological coordinates’ (Žižek, 2010, p. 194) of the Liberal Self will be offered in this section. As these coordinates govern state systems and market structures, shape individuals participating in institutionalized exchange systems, they also pre-determine the possible modes of resistance.

2. 1 Locke: private property, liberalism and capitalism.

Doyle defines liberal states by the legal equality of citizens, a representative government, private property, and a market economy (Doyle in Jahn, 2005, p. 180). These qualities of liberal democracies have their origins in the European Enlightenment philosophy of John Locke. “His influence on the way we think about ourselves and our relation to the world we live in, to God, nature and society, has been immense.” (Aarsleff in Uzgalis, 2014) Moreover, Locke is iconic for Western intellectual tradition. In the *Two Treatises of Government*, he defended the claim that men are *by nature* free and that people have ‘natural’ rights, such as the right to life, liberty, and *property* (Aarsleff in Uzgalis, 2014) [Author’s emphasis].

Locke sees the environment as ‘God-given’ and describes its alteration as follows: “His labour hath taken it [a good] out of the hands of nature where it was common . . . and hath thereby appropriated it to himself.” (Locke, 1946, p. 16) In other words, the consumption follows a certain logic of appropriation, namely, taking a common thing and turning it into private property and only *then* disposing of it. “So the artisan can say, ‘As these chairs are mine, I get to say who can and who can’t sit in them.’” (Sparks & Isaacs, 2004, p. 93) It is evident how the acquiring of goods is fundamental for Locke and how the political condition of human life springs out of the production of private property (*Ibid.*, p.92). Additionally, Hopgood states that because ownership was intimately related to the mixing of one’s labour with the material world, Locke bolstered crucial ideological pillars of capitalism, private property and market exchange, which are seen to be a fundamentally private and not public matter (Hopgood, 2000, p. 4). Liberalism encompasses the logic of appropriation and serves as the ideological support for market capitalism and ‘modern state,’ dominating in America whilst spreading across Europe and other parts of the world ever since the nineteenth century, influencing governments, populations and the environment (*Ibid.*).

2. 2 Internalized logic of appropriation in the consumer subjectivity of the Liberal Self.

When Locke talks about the “uniquely human capacity to radically alter our environment,” most interpretations surround such considerations as the “human power of governance,” obligations to do so and moral considerations on how to (Sparks & Isaacs, 2004, p. 92). However, it can be argued that Locke’s point may be viewed as human capacity for consumption. Moreover, “altering environment” can be seen not only as engagement with the environment, but also as engagement with the Self. In other words, consumption may be seen to encompass practises which incorporate the usage of material and non-material elements of the environment with a preconceived perception of the world and, in turn, constitute a certain one. Ultimately an engagement with the environment generates subjectivity. Therefore, one can argue that institutionalized consumption produces effects on subjectivity, ways of perceiving, understanding, and relating to the world (Read, 2011) that adhere to the institution by

internalizing its values, virtues, rights and expectations. In the case of a Liberal Self they are ownership, citizenship and the logic of appropriating.

This is exemplified in the liberal encounter with the 'North American Indians'. For the Indians the 'natural' rights were non-automatic, they were congruent with US citizenship. They were entitled to these rights *only after* meeting the entry criteria of citizenship which encapsulated the notion of 'civilisation' and liberal virtues (Hopgood, 2000, p. 15) [Original emphasis]. Their culture, virtues, logic and priorities had to change before joining the US liberal civil society. In other words, they had to internalize the logic of a liberal civil society's citizen and only then they could enjoy their 'natural' rights. For Michel Foucault (1982) this categorization of the individual, marking him by his own individuality, attaching him to an identity, and imposing a law of truth on him is a form of power which turns the individual into a subject. This makes the individual subjected to someone else by control or dependence, in this case, to the political and economic institutions of the US; and ties it to his own identity by conscience of self-knowledge (Foucault, 1982, p. 781). That is, the acquired North American identities were politically constructed and encompassed certain virtues central to a specific understanding of civilization corresponding with specific ideas of consumption.

Other studies illuminate a similar process of identity construction to achieve the same aims, but by different means in present-day America. For example, McGovern (2006) links the successful integration of the advertising industry into the structures of capitalist American with the production of consumer-based subjectivities. "Advertisers viewed themselves as guardians of greater values and they linked consumption to national progress, which entailed the forward advance of higher civilization through ownership of goods. [...] Long before the Cold War's contrasts of capitalism and communism, "underdeveloped" was made synonymous with "underconsuming." (McGovern, 2006, p. 27-8)

Moreover, Owen Jones (2011) identifies the efforts of the 'New Labour' in the UK to establish a particular understanding of aspiration in the working-class people as self enrichment with an ethos of earning and owning. 'The non-aspirational' thus describes someone who has failed to "jump on the Thatcherite, property-owning, endlessly aquisitative bandwagon." (Jones, 2011, p.90) Moreover, the

'New Labour' politicians would frequently diagnose a 'poverty of aspiration' in working-class schools to explain poor school results or generational poverty, blaming underconsuming classes for the effects that the collapse of industry, lack of jobs and other socio-economic factors have had on the population (*Ibid.*, p.91). As a consequence some of the targeted class are increasing consumption to achieve the promised illusory escape from their class circumstances.

The cases illuminate how what appears to be a natural process - autonomous individuals pursuing their freely chosen self-interests - is a result of aggressive social construction aimed at deconstruction of diverse identities and construction of a particular one. A self, that is compatible with the state and the economic system (Hopgood, 2000, p. 15). Consequently, 'actually-existing identities' and heterogeneity are endangered (*Ibid.*); and production of 'own to consume' subjectivities that correspond to the political and economic institution is achieved.

The liberal self holds the idea of private property central to its legal, economic and cultural life. It represents the force of government, the logic of appropriation and the ideas of consumption as progress. In short, the logic of "consuming via acquiring" supports a larger economic structure, namely, capitalism, and consent to its supporting political base, i.e. liberalism. In short, during the eighteenth century the "coordinates" of liberalism were pinpointed in the ideas of ownership and private property, consumption, progress and now - upward class mobility. Thus formation of supporting institutions and consumer subjectivities rest upon property relations. At the micro level, property relations form myriad ways in which people build up their social identities through holding and using a variety of 'things'; and at the macro level they form the political power and control over distribution of 'things' in society (Hann, 1998, p. 3). It follows that there are politically organized and institutionalized as well as self-subjecting forms of power to be considered when theorizing the potential of collaborative consumption as a resistance.

2. 3 Institutionalized exclusion vs. direct democracy.

According to Nitzan and Bichler (2009) private ownership is "wholly and only an act of institutionalized exclusion and institutionalized exclusion is a matter of organized power." (2009, p.228)

This resonates with David Graeber's experience with the Direct Action Network (DAN) in New York between 2000 and 2002 when it was given a car as a gift. The DAN is a decentralized network, operating on principles of direct democracy within a consensus process whilst existing purely in a political space with no concrete resources, not even a significant treasury (Graeber, 2007). It also operates with the capitalism-opposing exchange logic, namely sharing, not owning things. The DAN encountered difficulty when it was given a car, because "cars can be owned by individuals, or they can be owned by corporations, which are fictive individuals – not by networks." (Graeber, 2007, p. 4) Unless the DAN was willing to incorporate itself as a non-profit corporation (which would undermine its egalitarian principles) its only option was to find a volunteer to be the owner for legal purposes. This would subjugate the network to individualizing powers creating hierarchical order that they were opposed to. This lead the DAN to abandon the car as ownership could not have been incorporated into its egalitarian principles due to structural strains (*Ibid.*).

"Why is it that projects like DAN's — projects of democratizing society — are so often perceived as idle dreams that melt away when they encounter anything that seems like hard material reality?" (Graeber, 2007, p. 4). It seems to Graeber that the 'reality effect' comes from the fact that radical projects tend to founder, the moment they enter into the world of large, heavy objects: buildings, cars, tractors, boats, industrial machinery. This is not because these objects are somehow intrinsically difficult to administer democratically; it's because, like the DAN's car, they are surrounded by endless government regulation (*Ibid.*).

This institutionalised exclusion is at the heart of liberal democratic states working in the form of organized power disrupting direct democracy. When one is asked to be "realistic," then the reality, one is normally being asked to recognize, is not one of natural, material facts; neither is it really some supposed ugly truth about human nature. Normally it is the recognition of the effects of the systematic threat of violence (Graeber, 2007, p. 5). He concludes that "all these regulations — regulations that almost always assume that normal relations between individuals are mediated by the market, and that normal groups are organized hierarchically — seem to emanate not from the government's monopoly of the use of force,

but from the largeness, solidity, and heaviness of the objects themselves.” (Graeber, 2007, p. 5) In other words, the ‘market logic’ is internalized by people under the constant threat of structural violence.

Moreover, the ‘reality effect’ identified by Graeber is the imposed “law of truth,” that Foucault describes as “ensembles of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true.” (Foucault, 1980, p. 132). One of the important traits of the “political economy of truth in societies like ours” is that “it is produced and transmitted under the control of a few great political and economic apparatuses,” for example, university, army, media, government, that establish “regimes of truth” (*Ibid.* p.131-3) Although there are struggles for production of truth, these authorities often stay unchallenged. The ‘reality effect’ or “truth” in cases similar to the DAN’s car, prevent people from reimagining ownership, consumption and society all together, which constrains the possibility of direct democracy or other alternative economic or social organization.

It must be recognized that some aspects of consumption are, in fact, regulated and determined by the state or other institution; nonetheless, if we see power as embedded in the very structure of society, it becomes difficult to see how social forces can escape the inherent tendencies imposed by structures (Knafo, 2010, p. 493). Besides the State and the market, there are many other points in society where power is exercised such as the formation of identities and subjectivities, as pointed out by Foucault (1982) in *the Subject and Power*. Consequently, if Foucault’s understanding of power is right, one can argue that collaborative consumption is a social force that tries to escape the inherent tendency of ‘acquire to consume’ logic, and the ‘reality effect’ by allowing its participants to negotiate their values and priorities, constructing new consumer subjectivities and, perhaps, regimes of truth. Thus, it encompasses power struggle against forces of subjection and enables heterogeneity, direct democracy, and new channels of distribution of resources.

If Foucault's understanding of power is not correct, then perhaps the potential power of collaborative consumption must be understood in a different manner. If that is so, then this data presented here will be usefully employed therein. There are other sources where the transformative potential of collaborative consumption has been sought, such as, the market structure, as Rifkin suggests. However, as a result of

the existing evidence discussed above, Rifkin's understanding of its structural capacity to disrupt the free-market system appears questionable. Thus I turn to the analysis of collaborative consumption as a countermovement to the individualizing and subjecting forces of liberalism and capitalism, and theorize it with respect to its capacity to reorganize the way people consume, think of themselves and others, and understand reality and illusion.

3. Assessing the potential of collaborative consumption as anti-capitalist resistance.

On the one hand, Polanyi claims that the object of violent social struggles over power and social reorganization is the distribution of resources (Hart & Ortiz, 2008, p. 3). Moreover, Rifkin sees the critical battle of the twenty-first century taking place in the economic domain (Rifkin, 2014b) and Graeber identifies the systemic threat of violence emanating from the government and its endless regulations (Graeber 2007). On the other hand, Foucault suggests that there are struggles against that power which tie the individual to himself and submits him to other, namely, struggles against subjection and submission (Foucault, 1982, p. 781). These struggles cut across a broad social terrain because according to Foucault and other poststructuralists, power works like intersecting networks rather than hierarchy and does not emanate from one source, i.e. the State or the Economy, as critical theorist would claim (May, 1994, p. 50). It can be argued that collaborative consumption encompasses both of these types of struggles, namely, the ones that contest the free-market structure by reorganizing the production and distribution of resources and the struggles against subjection and submission to the consumer subjectivities that are built on the logic of ownership acted out in the process of consumption. In the following section both of these sides of resistance will be examined.

3.1 The three functions of the economy and collaborative consumption.

To begin with, the three functions of the economy must be identified, namely, production, distribution, and consumption of economic goods (Narotzky, 1997, p. 100). Analytically, collaborative consumption can be approached from each of these perspectives; however, at the heart of this paper is

the function of consumption as it is central to the formation of consumer subjectivities. However, I will initially discuss production and distribution briefly.

3.1.1 Production.

Regarding the production of goods and services, an analysis of collaborative consumption can be done following the strands of Marx or Polanyi. One could take on Marx's criticism of the capitalist antagonism, namely, the opposition between the use and exchange-value (Wolff, 2011) and examine how collaborative consumption affects this opposition and where value accrues to the collaborative producers as well as consumers. In capitalism generally the exchange-value acquires autonomy transforming into a self-propelling speculative capital which sees the productive capacities and needs of actual people only as its dispensable temporal embodiment (Žižek, 2010, p. 190). Interestingly, amongst the collaborative consumers an appreciation of 'cost per use,' namely, the use-value is observed as the main reason (60%) to proactively engage in the sharing economy (de Lecaros Aquise, 2014).

Meanwhile, "according to Polanyi the problem of capitalism is that land, labour and capital are 'fictitious commodities' in that they are inputs of production rather than commodities produced for sale and, consequently the supply/demand price mechanism cannot be applied to them in the same way." (Polanyi in Harmes, 2001, pp. 398-9) Inquiry into such websites as the peer-to-peer lending site *Prosper*, collaborative inventing site *Quirky*, skill exchange sites *TaskRabbit*, *Zaarly*, and the knowledge exchange site *Quora*, could be undertaken to understand what is defined as 'commodity' or 'property' by the collaboratists, what price mechanisms these sites place on the 'fictitious commodities' and what social impact that has on its participants. Additionally, perhaps some collaborative consumption sites operate as middlemen taking commission or setting the prices, potentially undermining the collaborative principle reducing the power of the producers. Thus when conducting such research each website must be examined individually and the impacts observed on a long term basis.

3.1.2 Distribution.

For the purpose of this paper distribution will be taken to mean redistribution of wealth generated by collaborative consumption sites in order to examine the argument set out above that some sites operate like middlemen. The increasing popularity of collaborative consumption has attracted investor attention. For example, according to *Technology Quarterly* (2014) *ZipCar* led a \$14m investment in *Wheelz*, a peer-rental firm, in 2012. *ZipCar* was in turn acquired by Avis, a conventional car-rental firm, in January 2013 for \$491m, giving Avis a stake in *Wheelz*. This gives *Avis* exposure to a new model that threatens to upend its business (Unknown, 2013). Another example of this is the *CouchSurfing* case which illuminates how a not-for-profit organization became a B-Corporation with a for-profit structure (Farr, 2012). The fact that collaborative consumption has been discovered by and exposed to the financial markets demonstrates its value and growth potential and is evidence of the opportunity for investment in the media through which things are shared, such as *Wheelz* and *CouchSurfing*. The integration of collaborative consumption in the finance sector raises concerns about its compatibility with the existing market and for-profit system.

Similar concerns are expressed by Carrier (2012) about Free Trade and about “what happens when companies take notice of it [ethical consumption] and it becomes an element of commerce.” (Carrier, 2012, p. 26) For Carrier using the “competitive market” and “its economic motive” to achieve ethical means is problematic (*Ibid.*). This is because when the consumer “signals” are caught by companies, they develop a “desire to appear more ethical than they really are.” (*Ibid.* p. 27) There is a “systemic cause” for this, linked to investors and the stock market - when the US companies announce commitment to ‘sustainability,’ to a value that many of fair traders and collaborative consumers might share, its stock price falls, adversely affecting the pay of its senior management (*Ibid.*). In other words, when ethical image attracts consumers, ethical practice repels investors and management. Suggesting that when fair trade and, perhaps, the sharing economy enter into the capitalist profit-orientated economic system, its capacity for bringing about change adhering to ethical values is effacing due to the concentration of

decision-making in the hands of the financial sector. As collaborative consumption has proved to be an attractive field for investment, this renders the structural side of it as resistance questionable.

As Rifkin argues “the struggle between investor capitalists and prosumer collaboratists over control of the Internet of Things is shaping up to be the critical economic battle of the first half of the twenty-first century,” although he remains convinced that the sharing economy will triumph (Rifkin, 2014b), there are indicators to doubt that, as in the case of Fair Trade. It is important to note, however, that whilst fair traders *purchase*, the collaborative consumers share, give, trade and swap to achieve their economic aims. Therefore, they not only “inject social value into the economic realm” (Carrier, 2012, p. 6) as fair traders do, but also practise different exchange modes. Arguably, in the case of collaborative consumers the use of the economy to bring about change takes a different trajectory to that of the fair traders, which is based on the experience of consumption. Consequently, the remaining focus of the paper will be placed on the experience of consumption and the second type of resistance, namely, the struggle against the subjection to consumer subjectivities built on the logic of ownership.

3.1.3 Consumption.

Consumption, out of the three economic functions, is seldom the object of empirical research or theoretical analysis: it appears as an epiphenomenon of production and distribution (Narotzky, 1997, p. 100). This fails to identify its many dimensions and generates a misleading conception of economic processes. It is clear how neoclassical notions of consumption as utility maximization has narrowed down its definition and debate (Shah, et al., 2007), limiting the capacities to conceptualize it in other ways. Moreover, in many discourses the agency of the ‘consumer’ has been stripped away leaving it at the receiving end of marketing or policy-making spectrum. By ‘re-embedding’ the economic within the social, political and historical discourses and redefining consumption, the agency and creative capacities of ‘the consumer’ can be revealed.

Moreover, the objects of consumption, the material things, also deserve some attention as pointed out earlier by Daniel Miller (2005) and evidenced by David Graeber. The less we are aware of them the more powerfully they can determine our expectations and ensure normative behaviour (Miller, 2005, p. 5).

Such a perspective is described as ‘material culture’ - a multidisciplinary vantage point into human–object relations (Woodward, 2007, p. 4). This transition towards a new perspective on materiality is important in terms of understanding the process of consumption. Moreover, it enables resistance studies to move beyond the various figures through which one engages with politics - the citizen, worker, or militant – that, according to Badiou, have become exhausted of their meaning (Badiou in Read, 2011, p. 113).

According to Portwood-Stacer, many scholars of consumer culture have shown that people who identify with a particular political project often cultivate a coherent, recognizable body of consumption practices that are meant to make material their desires for altered social conditions (2012, p. 87). By examining anarchism-orientated anti-consumption practices in the US, she seeks to explicate how habitual practices of anti-consumption are enlisted by politicized individuals in their everyday lives, and how these practices can be understood as tactical actions aimed at political change. Further practices of collaborative consumption will be juxtaposed with anarchism-orientated anti-consumption in order to investigate whether collaborative consumption fits within the discourse of politicised anti-capitalist resistance.

3.2 Collaborative consumption and Anarchist-orientated anti-consumption: ‘Share not Shop.’

Portwood-Stacer points out that, anarchists actively reject the need for such ‘luxury’ consumer items as cars, for example, by choosing to ride a bicycle or to share a car. They aim to reduce their commercial consumption because they understand most consumer desires to be the product of false consciousness, induced by corporations, in the interest of promoting rampant material acquisition (2012, p. 90). Additionally by doing so, they reduce incentive to earn money, thus releasing themselves as much as possible from the intrinsically exploitative conditions of wage labour (*Ibid.*, p.95).

The technology-enabled collaboratists are practicing peer-to-peer exchange and sharing as an alternative to acquiring goods in the commercial marketplace. This has a similar effect on commercial consumption although their motivations generally do not appear to be as ideologically charged. To illustrate this, 1.7 million people globally are members of car-sharing services and consequently, according to *NY Times*, the number of private vehicles has halved amongst car-sharers; and millions of

people are now using social media sites and networks to share not only cars but also homes, clothes, tools, toys and other items (Rifkin, 2014a).

Collaborative consumption enthusiasts are forming online-based groups and communities like *peers.org* and *collaborativeconsumption.com* to promote these practices, organize workshops to improve their operation and negotiate their aims and values. Subsequently, the main objectives of collaborative consumption as a movement have now been framed. For example, *peers.org* claim that “the sharing economy is not only helping us pay the bills and work flexible hours, but meet new people and spend more time with our families. Additionally, consuming directly from people we can trust is more affordable, more social and less wasteful.” (Unknown, 2014c) Moreover, they identify collaborative consumption as a shift “from a world where we’re organized around ownership to one organized around access to assets.” (Gansky, 2014) Furthermore, *collaborativeconsumption.com* states that sharing economy “describes the shift in consumer values from ownership to access;” that their team works to “create a global network for entrepreneurs, businesses and governments” that would “transform business, consumerism and the way we live for a more fulfilling and sustainable quality of life.” (Collaborative Consumption, 2014b)³

Whereas, *collaborativeconsumption.com* and *peers.org* both acknowledge the transformative power of collaborative consumption, neither regard it as a resistance, thus not situating it politically. Arguably, due to its apolitical appearance, it has the potential to attract more people from diverse backgrounds and be left out of the political scrutiny of governments, self-proclaimed political movements or other authorities.

3.2.2 Trust: From problem to strength.

When anti-consumption is not possible, anarchists may utilize extra-commercial means of obtaining goods by sharing and trading with friends, re-using goods that still hold use value or scavenging for

³ Like the creation of any network, this case raises questions about inclusion, exclusion and democracy. Future studies should seek to answer such questions as ‘who gets to participate in these networks and who is excluded?’ and ‘how democratic are these networks?’ as well as ‘who owns or controls the means of production or the mediums of distribution of goods that can be consumed by the collaborative consumers?’ The answers would give an important insight into the inner mechanisms of the sharing economy and its potential to be used in resistance to the existing power mechanisms of free market capitalism.

discarded goods, enabling consumption without providing financial support to capitalist corporations while protesting against the wastefulness of the commercial retail system (Portwood-Stacer, 2012, p. 94). Collaborative consumers engage in similar practices, but with strangers. People are motivated to establish social ties with the use of things, engaging in what might initially be considered “risky business.” Sydney-based innovation consultant Rachel Botsman explores the currency that makes systems like *Airbnb* and *Taskrabbit* work: trust, influence, and what she calls ‘reputation capital.’ (Botsman & Rogers, 2010, p. 204) Moreover, she claims that trust and online credibility is crucial for success because ‘the reviews say it all.’ (Skarlatos, 2013) *Cookisto*, an online home-made food sharing community is a good illustration. A few months following its launch it had attracted 12,000 cooks in Athens, turning into a success story what began as a master's degree thesis for a Greek entrepreneurship student, Michalis Gkонтas. (Skarlatos, 2013) It has also been launched in London. Although Gkонтas says he came up with *Cookisto* “to solve his greatest daily problem - access to delicious homemade food,” Nikki Finnemore, handling the UK launch, emphasises that this peer-to-peer marketplace is more than just about dinner; “just like *Airbnb* is not just about accommodation, but also about friendship, *Cookisto* is not just about food, but about coming together as a local community and sharing the fruits of your labour,” she says to *BBC News* (Skarlatos, 2013). “It's the experience of trusting a relative stranger to make a meal for you and to then meet for a face-to-face exchange,” Finnemore asserts. Botsman claims that “these sites generate the social glue of trust between strangers; and ultimately, a shift is happening from institutional trust to peer trust.” (Botsman & Rogers, 2010)

Botsman somewhat echoes Graeber (2011) and his theories of money, social ties and debt. Put briefly, in *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, he criticises the state and credit theorists for claiming that money is essentially ‘an accounting tool,’ (2011, p.46) an ‘abstract unit of measurement,’ (*Ibid.*, p.46) that provides equivalent exchange of goods, services, and even lives (*Ibid.*, p.103). This, according to him, has lead to a ‘demystification of money.’ (Maurer, 2013, p. 6) Instead, he argues that money is “not the measure of the value of an object, but the measure of one’s trust in other human beings.” (Graeber, 2011, p. 47) It is one’s trust in the next person to recognize and accept the “money” in whatever shape or form given to

her/him in the first place. “Money” as we understand it today is an institutionalized ‘accounting tool’ verified by the state and a Central Bank, with a given numeral value and an exchange rate. However, in theory “money” can also take the form of ‘online credits,’ ‘reputation,’ or ‘reviews’ as long as it is recognized and embodies trust. Botsman argues that, on collaborative consumption sites the transformation of the idea of money is happening. “Reputation capital has become so important that it acts as a secondary currency—a currency that claims, ‘*You can trust me*’” (Botsman & Rogers, 2010, p. 204) and that holds a real-world value. There are theoretical synergies between Botsman and Graeber regarding currencies.

Graeber utilizes a range of anthropological and wider literature from historical and religious sources to analyse what was called the ‘primitive money,’ a term he replaces with ‘social currencies.’ (Graeber, 2011, p.130) He shows these currencies are not used for buying or selling things, but to create, maintain, and otherwise reorganize relations between people: to arrange marriages, establish the paternity of children, head off feuds, console mourners at funerals, seek forgiveness. “These currencies are extremely important, so much so that social life itself might be said to revolve around getting and disposing of the stuff,” says Graeber (2011, p.130) echoing a Material Culture perspective. Evidently, he describes the creation of social ties with the use of things. He calls these “human economies” – systems primarily concerned not with the accumulation of wealth, but with the creation, destruction, and rearranging of human beings (Graeber, 2011, p.130) This is not the case for market economies, which according to him, ‘sprang up around ancient armies’ (*Ibid.*, p.50) and were constructed by ‘governments’ or ‘kings,’ that created “currency” and “money” as we know it, becoming ‘guardians of the debt that all citizens have to one another,’ which is, in turn, ‘the essence of society itself.’ (*Ibid.*, p.56). The transformation of “human economies” into “market societies” has been a long and often violent process. The legal systems and the social lives and logic had to be adjusted to the new market economy where ‘a market’ was seen as a detached domain of payable and quantifiable debt, with self-interested, rational individuals using material things for accumulating wealth, not for furthering human relations or creating inter-dependent communities.

Despite the fact that ‘for most of human history human economies have predominated’ (*Ibid.*, p.130), this transition has been successfully encoded not only in many national legal systems, economic models, but also in the social imaginary of many communities as remote to the birthplace of markets as Madagascar. The French conquered it in 1901; consequently a currency, the Malagasy franc, and a tax, the “moralizing” tax, were imposed. Graeber reads the imposition of the tax as a method designed “to teach the natives the value of work,” in other words, wage labour and the “realities” of the ‘market’ (Graeber, 2011, p. 51). Interestingly, the colonial governments were concerned about the peasants having some money left over after tax enabling them to purchase thus get accustomed to minor luxuries – lipsticks, cookies – now available. They would consequently develop new tastes, habits and expectations, laying foundations of consumer demand that would keep Madagascar forever tied to France long after independence (*Ibid.*).

This is similar to the integration of the North American Indians into ‘modern’ American society with respect to altering ideas or patterns of consumption. In this example, however, the colonial power explicitly recognizes and exercises the experience of consumption as a long lasting and self perpetuating force of subjection. The established new tastes and experiences in combination with adjustments to legal and economic systems subject communities to imperial powers in individual and systemic ways.

As Graeber has argued, societies and the economic processes have been organized in different ways for most part of the history. Moreover, for him and others those alternative ways continue to exist, off to the side, therefore it is necessary to spot them, recuperate them, and imagine a future with them (Maurer, 2013, p. 10). This reimagined future is “not about calculation, debt, state and market, but about our own truly human economies.” (*Ibid.*)

In summary, people engaged in the collaborative economy are using its sites and networks to enable large scale international sharing, generating social glue between strangers and creating new consumer subjectivities. In the process collaboratists develop new tastes and habits valuing access over ownership in order to get around economic difficulties or to socialize, thus using things mainly for building ties with

people they can trust rather than for accumulation. What follows is that, arguably, collaborative consumption is emerging as a form of ‘human economy’ of the 21st century.

If Foucault’s (1980) analysis of power is correct, then one must examine the monopolizing forces of interpretation, in this case, of how things should be consumed and locate collaborative consumption within these struggles. Arguably, the constructed consumer subjectivity which has internalized the logic of appropriating is being challenged when engaged in collaboration based on the logic of sharing. This would lead one to question the importance, necessity and neutrality of private property.

If it is the experience of consuming collaboratively, building relationships using things, replacing institutionalized trust with peer-to-peer trust that produces new heterodox consumer subjectivities, which open capacities for re-imagining social and economic lives, then, to what extent this experience can do so? Who is more receptive to these changes?

For Shukaitis, politics is not external to the relationships and interactions we have (Shukaitis, 2011, p. 45) and Negri argues that, affect, developed through interaction and care, is a power of freedom that constructs value from below (Negri in Shukaitis, 2011, pp. 45-6). It has been demonstrated how people’s experiences of identities, social relationships and economic interactions are influenced by the individualizing and subjecting forces of the state, the market or other institutions striving to monopolize the interpretations of how people should consume, think of themselves and others, and understand reality and illusion.

Furthermore, it is argued that struggles over imagination, thus interpretation, are central in struggles over power and that, in themselves, will be defined by the ability of various groups to make radical values a reality (Haiven, 2014). Collaborative consumption can thereby be theorized as a form of anti-capitalist resistance, due to its capacity to rearrange social priorities and values for the logic of sharing to take precedence over the logic of ownership, reimagining the need, the use and the purpose of stuff. This could potentially usher in social changes in the form of decreasing reliance on institutions and customs that hold consumption of private property at their core by weakening consensus to the logic of buying

and ownership “from below” (Foucault, 1980, p. 94) and by strengthening the imaginative capacities for building a future of “truly human economies” (Maurer, 2013, p.10).

However, to what extent is sharing a ‘radical’ value and how does the believed shift from market economies to human economies change the way we think of ourselves as consumers and humans? What impact could these changes have on the debate of the Liberal Self with respect to philosophies of such Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke? These are points for further inquiry into the topic of the rise of collaborative consumption and its potential to be used in anti-capitalist resistance.

Conclusion

For Rifkin it is the success of capitalism that has created these web-based facilities enabling the exchange of products at a near marginal cost leading to a creation of ‘collaborative commons’ where people directly produce, share and exchange bypassing big corporations. He predicts that these new commons will expand to encompass more and diverse sectors ranging from information to “stuff” ultimately transforming the economy. Whereas his reading of the transformative power of collaborative consumption is focussed in its structural capacity to disrupt the free-market system, I remain convinced that it lies in its potential to transform the consumer subjectivities of its participants enabling their agency and imagination for creating spaces and structures for exchange facilities based on sharing and trust undermining the free-market economy.

Despite Rifkin’s strong argument grounded in the expansion of the collaborative commons, there is, nevertheless, compelling evidence suggesting that these modes of exchange can be subsumed within the current economic system fuelled by the entrepreneurial drive of its actors. Furthermore, it may not initially have a fundamental and material impact on the consumers, but it has the potential in the longer term to have a more permanent effect by changing the perceptions of ownership and its position in the economic and social life. According to Botsman a shift in consumer values from ownership to access is happening, thus, arguably, this may result in a shift in self perception from possessive individual to a trustful and trustworthy fellow enabling people to imagine *alternatives* not previously considered. Because “until now corporations, politicians and most people have assumed that ownership was a defining feature

of high quality living; if it grows, the sharing economy may prove that ownership isn't everything, and share and share-a-like is another way of looking at the whole world." (Day, 2014)

Against this background, I argue that, by challenging the fundamental principles upon which consumption is based, resistance to the prevailing economic, political and cultural systems is performed by creating collaborative commons in which the new consumer subjectivities and social identities can be exercised. These identities and collaborative subjectivities adhere to values that contrast with those of liberalism, thereby empowering people to imagine and form new countermovements to the structural and economic violence of the free-market capitalism. This revitalizes the creative capacities of individuals necessary for building a 'new world.'

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