

**COLLABORATIVE CONSUMPTION: SHARING OUR WAY TOWARDS
SUSTAINABILITY?**

by

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ABSTRACT

Collaborative consumption (CC) refers to activities surrounding the sharing, swapping, or trading of goods and services within a collaborative consumption community. First, this MA thesis evaluates the factors contributing to the rapid increase of CC initiatives. These factors include technology, personal economics, environmental concerns, and social interaction. Second, the thesis explores the prospects and limits of CC in terms of sustainability. The most promising prospect is that CC seems to generate social capital and initiate a value shift away from ownership. However, institutional forces promoting growth limit this potential. The thesis concludes that CC itself is not enough to achieve sustainability, and therefore, more political solutions are needed. The paper ends with a critical discussion on the future of our growth-based economic model by suggesting that certain forms of CC could represent the roots of a “post-growth” economy.

PREFACE

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, S. Couture-Brière.

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Flying into Vancouver, I could see the majestic mountains overlooking the Pacific Ocean. During my master program I was lucky enough to explore and enjoy these snowy giants, but I also got to face my own metaphorical mountains, in my academic and personal life. My year in Vancouver was filled with beautiful and challenging academic projects, like this thesis. My passion, curiosity and hard work helped me along the way, but this thesis could never have been written without the great help of many people. First I have to offer my enduring gratitude to Peter Dauvergne, my supervisor, for his benevolent and generous help. You gave me great words of encouragement and clever guidance when I needed it the most. More than a great supervisor, Peter is a great human being. I could never thank enough my beautiful friend Sarah. Through our countless critical theory conversations, I learned so much on myself and on the world surrounding me. In moments of doubt, you always believed in me and provided me with a great amount of inspiration. I must also thank my great friend David, who kindly edited my work and shared with me his contagious curiosity and happiness. I owe a very special thank to Francis and Camille, who were a blessing on my Vancouver journey. You guys were my home away from home. Omar, your friendship has been so precious. You welcomed me to this new city with such warmth. I will be ever grateful for your hospitality. Finally, I must sincerely thank my family and friends in Quebec, who encouraged me and believed in me from the very beginning of this Master's adventure.

DEDICATION

For my beautiful family, Normand, Michèle and Émilie.

*We have bigger houses but smaller families;
More conveniences, but less time.
We have more degrees but less sense;
More knowledge but less judgement;
More experts, but more problems;
More medicines but less healthiness.
We've been all the way to the moon and back,
but have trouble crossing the street to meet our new neighbour.
We built more computers to hold more copies than ever,
But have less real communication;
We have become long on quantity,
but short on quality.
These are times of fast foods but slow digestion;
Tall men but short characters;
Steep profits but shallow relationships.
It's a time when there is much in the window
But nothing in the room.*

- Authorship unknown -

INTRODUCTION

On a cold morning of 2008, a crowd of approximately 2,000 shoppers was anxiously waiting outside of the Valley Stream Wal-Mart in the State of New York.¹ As the doors opened at 5am, a wave of humans flooded the halls of the store, trampling to death a 34 year old employee in the process. Blinded by the discounts, not one shopper stopped to aid the employee. This episode is sadly a glimpse into the phenomenon of “Black Friday”² which refers to the Friday following Thanksgiving Day in the United States, and is associated with the beginning of the Christmas shopping season. For the occasion, most retailers offer discounts similar to Boxing Day sales. During the holiday season in 2013, American costumers spent 3 trillion dollars in the retail industry.³ The sustainability consequences of this hyperconsumerism are significant. Research by the Stockholm Institute demonstrated that the total Christmas related purchases in the UK could result in more than half a ton of CO₂ (650kg) emissions per person, or 5.5% of their total annual carbon footprint.⁴ Traditionally, Christmas was centred on values such as family, simplicity, generosity and sharing. Yet, this holiday has become not only a symbol of our hyperconsumption society but also of the profound social disconnection among people living in the western world.

Thankfully, alternative forms of consumption are emerging. Bixi, the Montreal bike-sharing system, has 5200 bikes distributed in 460 stations, 60,302 members or occasional users, and

¹ Gould et al, 2008

² The hysteria generated by the event is even monitored on a website that calculated a total of 7 deaths and 90 injuries since 2006 (<http://blackfridaydeathcount.com/>)

³ [Statista, 2008](#)

⁴ The University of York News, 2007

more than 13 million trips have been made so far.⁵ Airbnb, a platform for individuals to rent living spaces and other short-term lodging to guests, has now over 300,000 listings in 192 countries.⁶ Memberships in car sharing services increased by 2.3 million in 2010, and are expected to rise to more than 12 million worldwide by 2020.⁷ In the first three months of January 2010, twenty-five million square feet of land were posted on SharedEarth, a web platform that links garden-less growers with people who own spare land.⁸ What these start-ups have in common is that they are part of a broader phenomenon named *collaborative consumption* (CC), which refers to activities promoting the sharing, swapping, or trading of goods and services within a collaborative consumption community. Such collaborative projects are usually actualized through online services that facilitate coordination among members of its online community.⁹ Botsman and Rogers distinguish three different types of CC: *product service systems*, *redistribution markets* and *collaborative lifestyles*. These authors argue that this “snow ball idea” has the potential to be as significant as the industrial revolution. Although this vision is probably farfetched, there is undoubtedly a growing excitement around this new type of consumption, with even *Time* magazine identifying CC as one of the top 10 ideas that will change the world.¹⁰ One might argue that CC is nothing new and that sharing is one of the oldest human concepts. Book exchange stores, food coops and car-pooling are not new phenomena. What differentiates CC from previous forms of consumption sharing is the use of technology (internet), which allows people to share with complete strangers (peer-to-peer) at a scale never before possible. The web platform collaborativeconsumption.com offers a repertory of some of

⁵ Bixi, 2014

⁶ *The Economist*, 2013

⁷ Automotive News, 2013

⁸ Botsman & Rogers, 2010, p. xvii

⁹ Young Global Leaders Task Force, 2013

¹⁰ Walsh, 2011

the CC start-ups existing in the world, from electronics, food, and entertainment, to equipment, skills and so on.¹¹ The diversity of what one can share seems almost infinite, and we are only at the very beginning of the “CC era.”

Can this rising tendency initiate a paradigm shift in consumption patterns? The current ecological crisis is arguably the biggest challenge ever faced by mankind. While the world demand for natural resources is incessantly growing, does CC represent a potential solution? This paper will try to answer the following question: *Why is collaborative consumption rising, and what are its prospects and limits in terms of sustainability?*

In the first part, I will argue that technology and the possibility to save money are the central factors explaining the rise of CC. Environmental concerns and a desire to connect with others are also important variables, but not necessarily for every type of CC. My central argument lies in the second part of this paper, where I state that the main prospect of collaborative consumption is its ability to generate social capital (through the collaborative lifestyles branch) and its potential to initiate a value shift away from individualism, and towards sharing (this potential is weak for redistribution markets but strong for collaborative lifestyles and product service systems). I will then nuance this argument by considering the institutional forces promoting growth that limit the potential of CC in terms of sustainability. I will do so by exploring the legal barriers that CC faces and its limits in the light of the concepts of individualization and commoditization. Finally, this paper ends with a critical discussion on the future of our growth-based economic model by suggesting that certain forms of CC could represent the roots of a post-growth economy.

¹¹ Collaborative Consumption, 2014

The nature of this paper is exploratory, and will approach CC with a general scope. The examples used in the thesis are focused on North America and Europe, where CC has spread more rapidly. Further research is needed to analyse the phenomenon in other regions of the world, where the social dynamics are significantly different. Consumption remains a marginal topic in the political science literature. The body of knowledge is nonetheless increasing, and more and more political science scholars are researching the issue.¹² CC is, however, a very new phenomenon, and it has attracted little attention from scholars, regardless of their discipline. So far, the few academic studies available are mostly from business and management schools. Thus, the aim of this paper is to build on the political science body of knowledge available in the field of consumption, and encourage further research on CC.

¹² To name a few: Dauvergne on “shadows of consumption”; Maniates on “the individualization problem”; Princen on “sufficiency” and “distancing”; Stolle, Hoogue and Micheletti on “political consumerism”

PART 1: What is Pushing the CC Wave?

From a social science perspective, consumption can be understood as “the personal expenditure of individuals and families that involves the selection, usage, and disposal or reuse of goods and services”.¹³ Consumers select and use goods and services, which they pay for with earnings, savings, or credit.¹⁴ CC does not challenge this definition but rather highlights that consumption can be shared, and it is easier than ever to do so because of technology.

According to Botsman and Rogers (2010), we can differentiate between three categories of CC. First, the *product service systems*, which involves paying for the use of a product without owning it (car sharing, bike sharing, tool libraries, etc.). If we take the example of a tool library, members could either pay a yearly fee to rent tools or pay for each rental. Rentals could also be free if every member contributes to the library by offering tools of their own. A 2002 report by the consumption branch of the United Nations Environment Program Division defines product service systems as “the result of an innovation strategy, shifting the business focus from designing and selling physical products only, to selling a system of products and services which are jointly capable of fulfilling specific client demands”.¹⁵ For businesses it represents a new way of interacting with clients. The assumption behind product service systems is that consumers are primarily interested in the utility provided by products. It essentially boils down to buying a

¹³ International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences 2008, p.105

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ United Nations Environment Programme Division of Technology Industry and Economics Production and Consumption Branch 2002, p. 4 ; It must be mentioned here that in this report, the UN did not define product service systems exactly in the same sense as Botsman and Rogers. The two authors put more emphasis on the technological dimension of product service systems than do the authors of the UN report.

service instead of a physical good. Collaborative consumers do not want to own a car; they want the transportation function associated with it. This type of CC is usually operated by a private company, a non-profit organization or a cooperative. There are also *redistribution markets*, where a second life is given to unused products by re-selling or reusing them. Freecycle, craigslist, eBay and clothes swapping platforms are good example of redistribution markets. When the exchange is not monetary, these markets can be part of what is sometimes called the “gift economy” where you give away an item without expecting anything in return, which is the case for the Freecycle platform. Other initiatives are profit oriented and match the needs of buyers and sellers (often the case for eBay and craigslist). The third category is called *collaborative lifestyles*, where the sharing of goods and services involves human-to-human interaction, and where the product is not the sole focus of the exchange. Time, skills, space, money, and less tangible resources can be shared. Collaborative lifestyles can take various forms: co-working spaces, co-housing, errands sharing, skills sharing, crowd funding, social lending, garden sharing, art sharing, meal sharing, farmers’ markets, traveling (couchsurfing, wwoofing, Airbnb), and so on. This type of CC entails a high degree of trust between users.

In this section, we will look at both contextual factors and personal motivations of collaborative consumers. Addressing the causes of a new phenomenon like CC is not an easy venture since so little information is available. One of the main studies available so far on the motivations behind CC consists of a poll of 2103 adults that Ipsos Public Affairs conducted in the United States on behalf of Airbnb in 2013.¹⁶ Although the study is focused on the online sharing of property or belongings, it provides a general understanding of the motivations to participate in CC start-ups similar to Airbnb. According to the results, 30 % of adults under 35 reported to have shared

¹⁶ Ipsos Public Affairs , 2013

something online with a stranger compared to only 15% of those aged 35-54 and 8% of people aged 55 and more. The Sharing Project, another study that was conducted in the city of Vancouver in Canada, presents results and analysis from the closed survey of 505 Vancouverites.¹⁷ To my knowledge, it is the first research of this kind measuring sharing at a municipal scale. The study confirms that younger people are more involved in CC, since the respondents aged 18 to 25 were the most likely to use a sharing company or organization.¹⁸ To understand the rise of CC, let me first focus on its *raison d'être*: technology.

Technology

If there are an increasing number of people participating in CC, it is essentially because information technologies allow them to do so. The success of CC relies on the Internet, and especially on what has been described as “Web 2.0” which “refers collectively to websites that allow users to contribute content and connect with each other”.¹⁹ In Web 1.0, the delivery of information was unidirectional, which did not allow users/consumers to interact with each other. Here, technology must be understood more as an enabling factor that facilitates sharing by making it easier and more appealing, than a causal variable explaining the rise of CC. According to the study made by The Sharing Project, 92% of respondents “agreed that the presence of an online service makes it easier to lend and/or borrow with people they don’t know [while] 70% of this group of respondents agreed that sharing online has helped them share offline.”²⁰

¹⁷ Diplock et al. , 2013, p.13

¹⁸ Idem

¹⁹ Carroll & Romano, 2011, p.190

²⁰ Idem

Botsman and Rogers suggest that three critical factors, enabled by technology, make CC possible. The first one is the *idling capacity*, which refers to the unused potential of goods. There is an estimate of 50 million drills in houses across the United States while 80% of people use their drill less than once a month.²¹ The unused potential of those tools represent the idling capacity, and that potential could be released through an online neighbourhood tool-sharing platform for instance. The second principle is the *critical mass*, which refers to the “tipping point” where there are enough goods, services and products to make it appealing for consumers to participate in CC.²² The main obstacle to CC is the consumers’ fear that they might not have access to the product or service they want at the moment they need it. Diversity and quantity would be impossible without the web platforms. With redistribution websites such as Craigslist, specific second hand goods are easier to find because of the critical mass available online. The last principle is the *trust between strangers*. The role of the web platforms is mainly to create an environment (with rating systems, feedback mechanisms, pictures, etc.) where people can confidently share or trade with one another.

Technology also makes it a lot easier for entrepreneurs to launch a new project. Frédérique Marseille is a good example. She is a young artist who launched the international start-up artbangbang.com. Emerging visual artists often struggle to find exposure for their work since there is a large disconnection between the general public and art creators. As a result, Frédérique had several paintings stored in a closet, hidden from view and waiting for an exhibition. One morning, she decided to share pictures of her paintings on Facebook and offered them as rentals. She was astonished by the number of replies she got and soon realized that art consumption

²¹ Botsman & Rogers, 2010, p.83

²² Ibid, p.75

needed to be democratized. Frédérique then teamed-up with a friend with web design skills and artbangbang.com was born. The founders of the platform explain that “by harnessing the power of social networks, the artist can free share, rent and sell his/her artwork locally and abroad”.²³ They also present artbangbang as “a project that tries to remove the barriers between the public and the art creators (and) reinvent the art market by tapping into today’s technologies and online distribution”.²⁴ Here, we can see how, in less than a year, a very simple sharing idea can become a successful and innovative international platform. Internet and sharing seem to be on their way for a successful marriage.

Saving Money

Collaborative consumption is undoubtedly a cheaper way to consume. Economists would explain this by the collapse of transaction costs which Ronald Coase defines as the costs of making any form of exchange or participating in a market.²⁵ The erosion of transaction costs is particularly salient in the case of redistribution markets. Before the CC wave, second hand kitchen tables were only available in thrift shops or in springtime garage sales. The time and energy costs to find used tables would often convince consumers to buy expensive new ones. The simplicity of CC is that web platforms like Freecycle and craigslist can almost instantaneously match people’s needs. It decreases transaction costs both for the person who gives or sells the table, and for the one looking for a new piece of furniture. The economic benefit of participating in product service systems is also very intuitive. If we consider that transportation accounts for almost 20% of US

²³ art BANGBANG, 2014

²⁴ Idem

²⁵ Coase, 1937, pp.386-405

consumer expenses, car sharing is economically sound.²⁶ For an urban citizen, the costs associated with owning a car are very high: maintenance, insurances, parking lot fees, etc. With a car-sharing program, these costs are collectively spread among users. Of course, these savings are greater when other transportation options are easily available (public transport, biking, walking). The same logic can apply to collaborative lifestyles initiatives such as Couchsurfing which is more affordable than staying at a hotel. Wwoofing and carpooling are other examples of initiatives that allow users to lower the costs associated with ownership. In the case of Wwoofing, volunteers get free food and accommodations while farmers are offered free labour.

In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and in times of economic austerity, buyers are likely to look for more affordable ways of consuming. This economic context is fuelling the CC wave. Money is certainly a key variable, but one should not underestimate people's good will in terms of environmental consciousness.

A Growing Environmental Concern

Environmental awareness is an important variable to consider. In the Ipsos poll, 24% of "sharers" said they saw online CC as a means to promote sustainability.²⁷ The Sharing Project study conducted in Vancouver echoes similar findings. The report mentions that "although social & environmental impacts were reported to have less influence than other factors, their effect on the sharing equation is by no means small, increasing at least 69% of people's willingness to borrow

²⁶ Litfin, 2014, p.93

²⁷ Idem

from their peers”.²⁸ Further, the report indicates that 70% of respondents are more likely to share with their peers if they know it will lessen their environmental impact.²⁹

The importance of the environmental concern of collaborative consumers obviously varies depending on the type of CC activity. What motivates a person to sell a pair of used skis on craigslist is very different than what motivates someone to volunteer on an organic farm (WWOOF). Hence, the ecological motivation is arguably weaker in the case of redistribution markets initiatives, such as eBay and Kijiji that are essentially driven by economic incentives. Yet, some of these networks, such as Freecycle, clearly entail a goal of environmental activism and community building since their mission statement expresses the desire to “build a worldwide gifting movement that reduces waste, saves precious resources & eases the burden on our landfills”.³⁰ A study published in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, suggests that freecycle users are “indeed less materialistic and brand conscious”.³¹ When asked why they joined the freecycle community, 33 percent of respondents explained that they were motivated by environmental values and voluntary simplicity.³²

One could argue that in the case of product service systems such as bike and car sharing, the central motivation is more likely to be related to convenience and the possibility of saving money. A study on Zipcar in the city of Boston, published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, confirms that the sharers were primary motivated by self-interest and not anticar or

²⁸ Diplock et al., 2013, p.19

²⁹ Ibid, p.23

³⁰ Freecycle 2014

³¹ Nelson et al., 2007, p.141.

³² Ibid, p.149

environmental concerns.³³ A study made on Montreal's bike-sharing program (Bixi) reached similar conclusions. Through a survey distributed among users, the authors of the study concluded that the factor that had the greatest effect on their likelihood of using the bike-sharing system was the proximity of their home to the docking stations.³⁴ Users also indicated that they liked Bixi's trendiness and thought using Bixi was a great way to avoid bike robberies.³⁵ Yet, some product service systems seem to be more clearly driven by environmental concerns as confirmed by a study conducted among 397 toy libraries³⁶ in New Zealand that shows that 52% of their users are driven by anti-consumption attitudes.³⁷ Similarly, the Vancouver tool library³⁸ mention in their mission statement: "We are motivated by a vision of our community empowered by the tools and skills needed to transform our homes and communities into vibrant spaces that reflect a commitment to sustainability".³⁹ Even if the principal motivation is often not ecological, further research is needed to confirm the influence of environmental concerns on the motivation to participate in product service systems.

When we turn to collaborative lifestyles, the environmental concern appears to be more palpable and widely spread. Sustainability is often the central objective of many collaborative lifestyle start-ups. For instance, SharedEarth, a not for profit corporation comprised entirely of volunteers, states in its mission that their passion and dedication is based on their belief that they can

³³ Bardhi & Eckart ,2012, p.14.

³⁴ Bachand-Marleau et al., 2012, p.66

³⁵ Idem

³⁶ A toy library is understood as a place (building, space) where children can borrow toys as they would borrow books in a library.

³⁷ Ozanne & Ballantine, 2010, p.495

³⁸ Through the Vancouver tool library, members can borrow to a wide variety of tools. They can also take workshops and host community events.

³⁹ Vancouver Tool Library, 2014

“change the way land is used and food is grown – one garden at a time”.⁴⁰ Another well-known platform, WWOOF, describes itself as a “worldwide movement linking volunteers with organic farmers and growers to promote cultural and educational experiences based on trust and non-monetary exchange, thereby helping to build a sustainable global community”.⁴¹ Although ecological awareness is evidently a key driver in the previous cases, the diversity of collaborative lifestyle start-ups and the lack of research do not allow us to generalize this causal factor to the phenomenon as a whole. For instance, environmental concerns are unlikely to be the main motivation to participate in couchsurfing, skillsharing or art lending. What is unambiguous in the case of collaborative lifestyles is the desire to meet people, to connect with other members of a community.

Connecting With Others

Ipsos poll confirms that while the primary reason to share is to make money, the motivation tends to switch for those who continue to participate in CC. For 36% of “sharers”, the top motivation is rather philosophical and “tied to the ability to help others”.⁴² One quarter of them believe that the chance to meet people is also a good reason to share.⁴³ The Sharing Project’s survey confirms that Vancouverites’ desire to connect with others is a key driver of their motivation to participate in the sharing economy. The report explains that sharers “found more meaning in organizations who offered a space in which members could connect over their mutual passions”⁴⁴, while 76% of respondents believed that “lending would help build social

⁴⁰ SharedEarth, 2013

⁴¹ WWOOF, 2014

⁴² Ipsos, 2013

⁴³ Idem

⁴⁴ Diplock et al., 2013, p.27

relationships”.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the study made in New Zealand concluded that 77.8% of the toy libraries members surveyed saw the social and community benefits of participating in a toy library.⁴⁶ This social dimension of CC will be further developed in the second part of this paper.

In the light of our analysis, we can conclude that technology and the ability to save money are factors explaining the rise of CC. The picture would however be incomplete if we did not include social and environmental concerns in the equation. These variables are undeniably important in some sectors of CC, but cannot be generalized to the phenomenon as a whole.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p.23

⁴⁶ Ozanne & Ballantine, 2010, p.493.

PART 2: The Prospects

Before delving into the analysis of the prospects and limits of CC, the concept of sustainability must be defined. Sustainability is usually associated with sustainable development, which is defined by the 1987 Brundtland Commission as a way to “meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.⁴⁷ Sustainable development would then consist of a balancing act between the environmental, economic and social sphere. There is certainly no consensus on the practical implications of the concept. Sustainable development is interpreted differently depending on whether the emphasis is placed on the social, economic or environmental dimension. I would argue that sustainable development is a proposed path to achieve sustainability.

A crucial dimension that was included in the Brundtland Report but that is too often forgotten is the idea of limitations. In the next two sections of this thesis, sustainability will be understood as the ultimate goal of sustainable development, but with a special emphasis on the idea of environmental limitations. Kate Raworth, a former Senior Oxfam Researcher, developed the concept of “Doughnut Economics” which is quite helpful to visualize sustainability through the lens of ecological limitations. As illustrated in Figure 1, Raworth identifies nine essential ecological boundaries that must be respected. According to her calculus, the “ecological ceiling” has already been broken for three of these dimensions (climate change, biodiversity loss, and nitrogen and phosphorus cycles).⁴⁸ This doughnut shape model combines 11 social dimensions

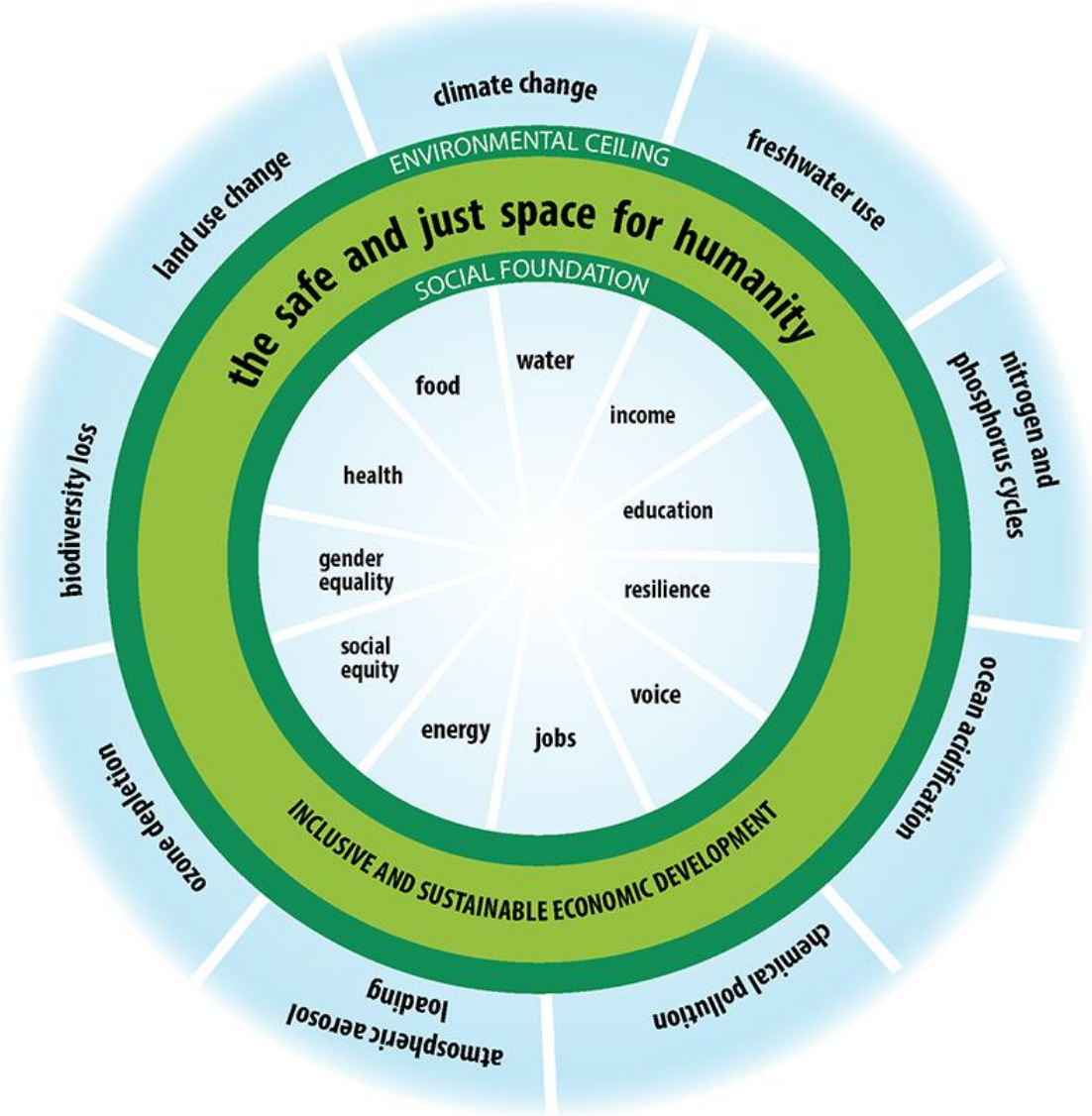
⁴⁷ World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p.43

⁴⁸ Ibid, p.14

within the nine ecological boundaries. These social dimensions are based on the priorities set by governments, prior to the 2012 Rio+20 Summit. The middle of the doughnut represents *the safe and just space for humanity* where true sustainability is possible. This understanding of sustainability is certainly not perfect, but is specific enough to allow me to evaluate the prospect and limits of CC by using a general scope. In the fourth part of the paper, I will present a more critical vision of sustainability by discussing the concept of “post-growth economy”. But for now, let us explore in what ways collaborative consumption could help us meet our social and economic needs while staying inside our planetary boundaries.

FIGURE 1: The Safe and Just Space for Humanity

Source: Raworth, 2010, p.15



Reducing Consumption?

In the second half of the 20th century, we have witnessed a transition away from certain collective services towards private ownership. For instance, individual cars replaced tramways and individual washing machines replaced Laundromats. This move to a “self-service” society has obvious implications in terms of resource use. In that sense, CC could represent a form of return to a more collective approach to consumption. The idea of reducing consumption through sharing is intuitive, but very difficult to measure. With product service systems, the utility of a product is maximized. According to a 2008 survey led among North America’s biggest carsharing organizations, carsharing significantly lowers the number of vehicles owned by members.⁴⁹ Across the sample, members owned a total of 2,968 vehicles (0.47 vehicles per household) before signing up for carsharing. After joining a car sharing company, the sample owned 1,507 vehicles (0.24 vehicles per household). This decrease in the number of cars can be explained mainly by one-car households choosing not to have a vehicle anymore.⁵⁰ Considering the 2009 carsharing membership base, the study also suggests that, between 90 000 to 130 000 vehicles have been removed from the North-American roads.⁵¹ The authors argue that these statistics “contributes to mounting evidence that carsharing is lowering GHG emissions by providing people with automotive access on an as-needed basis”.⁵² These results have to be nuanced if we consider that, in the United States alone, close to 253,639,3900 vehicles were

⁴⁹ Martin & Shaheen 2011, p.24

⁵⁰ Idem

⁵¹ Martin & Shaheen 2011, p.70

⁵² Ibid, p.71

registered in 2012, which is 531,000 more than in the year before.⁵³ Carsharing is certainly hopeful, but it is not yet reducing significantly the number of vehicles in North America. In his book *Automobile Politics: Ecology and Cultural Political Economy*, Matthew Paterson argues that the ubiquity of cars in modern society is the result of deep cultural and political-economic forces.⁵⁴ The author believes that we must invent a system “without the car at its socio-technological heart”.⁵⁵ Bike sharing is certainly interesting in that regard. According to a survey conducted by the city of Paris in 2008, 28 percent of Vélib users (the local bike-sharing program) were less likely to use their personal car.⁵⁶ The result increased to 46 percent in 2009. Many other bike-sharing programs take great pride in contributing to the reduction of CO2 emissions. Montreal’s Bixi reported to have saved over 3,000,000 pounds of greenhouse gases in the first few months after it was launched.⁵⁷ The city of Lyon declared that its program helped to save the equivalent of 18,600,000 pounds of CO2 between 2005 and 2009.⁵⁸

A similar logic can be applied to redistribution markets. Sound waste management is often associated with the three “R” rule (reduce, reuse, recycle). Redistribution markets are obviously associated with the second “R” since the potential impact they can have on waste reduction is significant. Through the Freecycle start-up, 25,000 items are given away every day and as a result, over 500 million pounds of material have been kept out of the landfill so far.⁵⁹ Since buying used goods can substitute for buying new items, redistribution markets can help reduce the amount of goods produced. As for collaborative lifestyles, the environmental impact is more difficult to quantify and there is not much data. For some sectors like carpooling (ridesharing),

⁵³ Statista, 2014

⁵⁴ Paterson, 2007

⁵⁵ Paterson, 2007, p.226

⁵⁶ Demaio, 2009, p.45

⁵⁷ Idem

⁵⁸ Idem

⁵⁹ Freecycle, 2010

the reduction of fuel consumption is a direct consequence of sharing. Consumption reduction is likely but more difficult to estimate in initiatives like garden sharing, Airbnb or coworking spaces.

We will discuss the limits of this apparently beneficial impact on consumption reduction in the third part of the thesis. Ultimately, the real prospect lies more in the *value shift* that CC could generate. Shifting to a “using” instead of an “owning” mentality has a strong potential in terms of consumption reduction. As Russell Belk argues: “Shaking loose of the former wisdom that, ‘You are what you own’ and converting to a new wisdom, ‘You are what you share,’ indicates that we just may be entering the postownership economy.”⁶⁰

Bridging the Social Ravine?

In his book entitled *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies*, Yale professor Robert E. Lane analyses social recession in 10 Western countries. He concluded that as prosperity increased, there was a significant erosion of family solidarity and community integration. He also noted that individuals were becoming more and more distrustful of each other and of their political institutions.⁶¹ Similarly, Robert Putnam’s findings provide evidence of an overall deterioration of human interactions in the USA, or what he calls a *social capital* decline. He draws his conclusions on evidence including 500,000 interviews over the last 25 years. His social capital concept refers to “the trust, norms, and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions”.⁶² In the research he conducted prior to publishing his

⁶⁰ Belk, 2013, p.1599

⁶¹ Lane, 2000

⁶² Putnam, 2000

book, Putnam notes that people “sign fewer petitions, belong to fewer organizations, know their neighbors less, meet with friends less frequently, and even socialize with (...) [their] families less often”.⁶³ Echoing Putnam’s findings, a recent survey shows that three quarters of Americans do not know their next-door neighbors.⁶⁴ Similarly, in the UK, a BBC report concluded that 6 out of 10 people did not know their neighbors’ names.⁶⁵ On a local scale, The Vancouver Foundation surveyed 3,841 people across metro Vancouver and came to the conclusion that there was a growing sense of isolation and disconnection in the city. One-third of the people surveyed said it was “difficult to make new friends” in Vancouver, and one in four said they were “alone more often than they would like to be”.⁶⁶ The erosion of social capital in the western world is certainly not good news for our ability to tackle the current ecological crises. Social and ecological resilience go hand-in-hand, the former being a *sine qua non* for the latter.

Many scholars have examined the links between social capital and sustainability and found that SC accumulation could make a difference in achieving sustainability. Dale and Newman (2008) looked at case studies in Canada and Australia, and came up with the following conclusion: “collaborative networks designed to bridge the political boundaries and traditional power and conflict dynamics of different levels of government are basic to resolution of broad horizontal, cross-cutting issues such as sustainable development”.⁶⁷ If they recognize the importance of social capital as a necessary condition for sustainable community development, they also note that SC is not always enough. A larger “social safety net” is also critical for local community

⁶³ Putnam, 2000

⁶⁴ McKibben, 2007, p.117

⁶⁵ Cited in Botsman & Rogers, 2010, p.43

⁶⁶ The Vancouver Foundation 2012, 7

⁶⁷ Dale & Newman, 2008, p.17

development initiatives.⁶⁸ Emiko Kusakabe (2012) is another author who researched the relationship between SC and sustainability. He used a case study in Japan to understand under what conditions SC accumulation can encourage collective action. Equally to Dale and Newman, he concludes that social capital accumulation can indeed make a difference in in terms of sustainability.⁶⁹ In her recent book *Eco-Villages* (2014), political scientist Karen Litfin explores the relationship between community and ecological resilience. Through her research, she tries to understand what can be learned from eco-villages in terms of sustainability and how their successes can be applied to a global scale. Her answer is quite simple: “sharing – sharing material resources, ideas, dreams, skills, stories, joys, and sorrows. We don’t need to be in eco-villages to share. And if we did share, then our communities would begin to look like eco-villages”.⁷⁰ In that regard, collaborative consumption seems to be an appropriate tool to scale up the eco-village experience.

The collaborative lifestyle branch of CC proves to be very promising in terms of social capital building. A high degree of trust between people is necessary for activities such as ride sharing, garden sharing, meal sharing, etc. Relationships are more likely to be strengthened when you meet people face-to-face and share assets like time, skills and space. According to WWOOF’s data bank, 919 organic farms hosted 4,216 volunteers in 2010,⁷¹ which suggests that WWOOF encourages the building of a network of solidarity around organic farming.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p.1

⁶⁹ Kusakabe, 2012, p.1043

⁷⁰ Litfin, 2014, p.32

⁷¹ WWOOF, 2014

When we take a look at the tool sharing start-up NeighborGoods' mission, we see the same intention of creating a network of connections: "NeighborGoods helps members live less wasteful and more connected lives".⁷² Couchsurfing further exemplifies this aspect of collaborative lifestyles. In their mission statement, the organization envisions "a world made better by travel and travel made richer by connection, [where] Couchsurfers share their lives with the people they encounter, fostering cultural exchange and mutual respect".⁷³ So far, 5,6 million nights were "couchsurfing", and the community has grown to reach 7 million people in 100,000 cities across 207 countries.⁷⁴ A study by Rosen et al. on couchsurfing published in *New Media & Society* suggests that hosting couchsurfers had a positive relationship with trust in the community.⁷⁵ Couchsurfing is not limited to hosting or staying at another person's place. Members of the online community also organize gatherings. Rosen et al. mention that these gatherings allow "members to develop a tangible sense of the social capital afforded to them via the CouchSurfing community".⁷⁶ A good example of such events is the *Mundo Linguo* gatherings which started through the couchsurfing platform and are free weekly multilingual cultural exchanges with local people and internationals. These events allow people to connect with others and practice another language. Other areas of CC like skills sharing platforms also focus on building social capital. E-180 is a Montreal based peer-to-peer platform that creates online and offline tools to facilitate what they call "brain dates". These dates are organized between people looking to share their knowledge in person, one-on-one. Their founders explain

⁷² NeighborGoods, 2014

⁷³ Couchsurfing, 2014

⁷⁴ Idem

⁷⁵ Rosen et al., 2011

⁷⁶ Rosen & al., 2011, p.993

that “ E-180 stems from the hard-held belief that all humans possess the power to develop their full potential autonomously, with a little help from their community”.⁷⁷

The previous section highlights the importance of a higher degree of human interaction in order to truly build social capital, which is often not the case with product service systems and redistributive markets where the nature of the exchange is mostly transactional and does not leave much room for community building. Collaborative lifestyles are therefore a lot more promising for generating significant social capital. Yet, it must be mentioned that Putnam’s social capital theory has received a fair share of criticism. In her book *Diverse Communities: The Problem With Social Capital* (2006), Barbara Arneil argues that social capital is problematic because of its exclusionary potential. She contends that social capital is a normative neo-republican concept that can hide deeper social problems such as economic inequality, racialized discrimination, sexism and homophobia. Arneil believes that “any discussion of social capital must acknowledge the historical reality of exclusion, assimilation and eradication of the civic life of America, and recognize the particular justice claims made by various minorities in society”.⁷⁸ Arneil argues that the increased level of mistrust in the United States is the result of growing social and economic inequalities rather than of a lack of social contact. I have to agree with Arneil’s critique that a narrow view of social capital could undermine the development of a just and resilient society. This is why I suggest that we should have a pluralistic and multicultural understanding of social capital. Therefore, the type of CC initiatives that truly encourage more resilient communities are the ones who build more inclusive forms of social capital.⁷⁹ I would

⁷⁷ E-180, 2014

⁷⁸ Arneil, 2006, p.211

⁷⁹ Social and economic inequalities are not the focus of this paper and another study is certainly needed to assess this crucial dimension.

argue that some forms of collaborative consumption initiatives do build integrative forms of social capital. If these initiatives can expand significantly enough, we can hope to aim towards a more resilient and united society. Yet, to confront the ecological crisis, social capital alone will unlikely be enough. As we will discuss in the next sections, the solution to the consumption problem is ultimately a political one.

PART 3: The Limits

Bending the Law

As the sharing economy expands, many legal problems arise. By connecting people directly to one-another and therefore collapsing transaction costs, collaborative consumption challenges our legal institutions and the structure of the economy. Corporations and mainstream companies do not appreciate when their businesses are threatened by CC initiatives and they often complain that these start-ups have unfair advantages in the market place in terms of taxes, permit requirements, insurance rules and other regulations. For instance, Airbnb has been accused of disloyal competition by the hotel industry in New York.⁸⁰ SideCar, a ride sharing start-up, stopped operating in NY after a judge concluded it was an unlicensed taxi service. Sidecar CEO Sunil Paul responded with a blog post: “SideCar is not a taxi company. SideCar is a smartphone application that instantly matches people for peer-to-peer ridesharing”.⁸¹ These fines and regulatory barriers represent a great cost for the sharing economy. For instance, RelayRides (a peer-to-peer car rental initiative) takes 40% commission on every rental, most of which goes for insurance coverage.⁸² In July 2014, Airbnb received its first fine in Europe of \$38,500 for violating a regional law introduced by the government of Catalonia that forbids renting individual rooms for tourism purposes.⁸³

⁸⁰ Tuttle, 2013

⁸¹ Tuttle, 2013

⁸² The Economist, 2013

⁸³ Minder & Scott, 2014

The legal structure framing the economy seems to be slowly adapting to the reality of collaborative consumption. Paris, Amsterdam and Porto decided to pass laws designed to allow their citizens to use platforms like Airbnb to rent out their homes, as long as they respect certain security guidelines.⁸⁴ In early September 2014, a court in Frankfurt overturned the national ban on Uber, a car-sharing service.⁸⁵ In the long run, it seems as if legal barriers are not likely to stop the CC wave. The magnitude of the CC movement is already forcing legislators to adapt the legal structure of the economy. Although beneficial for the collaborative economy, most of the legal changes that we see happening are pushed by CC initiatives that are seeking to make money in part by sidestepping regulations. Thus, these profit-driven start-ups do not challenge the foundations of our economic system. As we will see in the following sections, deeper constraints inherent in capitalism and the growth economy pose a clear limit to the potential of CC in terms of sustainability.

The Iron Cage of Consumption

GDP growth, the central pillar of our capitalist economies, relies on the continuous rise of the consumption of goods and services. In his book *Prosperity Without Growth*, Tim Jackson refers to the consumption iron cage as the structural and psychological forces that lock society in a race for ever-higher levels of consumption.⁸⁶ Studying capitalism, economist Joseph Schumpeter suggested that *novelty*, understood as the process of innovation, is the keystone of economic growth. He states that capitalism proceeds through a process of “creative destruction”, where

⁸⁴ Idem

⁸⁵ Id.

⁸⁶ Jackson, 2011, p.87

new products and technologies constantly replace old ones.⁸⁷ The imperative to perpetually innovate and sell more goods stimulates rising level of consumption.⁸⁸ It is made possible because consumers seem to have a psychological tendency to be addicted to novelty and material goods. Psychologist Russell Belk uses the term *cathexis* to describe the “process of attachment” that makes us feel as if our material possessions were extensions of our inner selves.⁸⁹ Moreover, according to psychologist Phillip Cushman, our “empty selves” are in perpetual need of being “filled up” with more consumption.⁹⁰ I would argue that this tendency is a socio-historical construction driven by an ideology: capitalism. Yet, this structural/psychological paradigm is an obvious limit to lowering consumption levels, even through CC. It also renders the cultural shift away from ownership and towards sharing very difficult. Across the world, the lifestyle promoted by the media, Internet, and governments is centered on material accumulation and individualism. Such a ubiquitous and hammering message can discourage consumers to participate in CC

The concept of “rebound effect” exemplifies this limit. Stanley Jevons first presented the theory in his book *The Coal Question* (1865), where he demonstrates that an efficiency gain in coal use (leading to lower costs) in Scotland paradoxically generated a higher consumption of the resource. A classic example is fuel consumption efficiency in the automobile sector. If I buy a more fuel-efficient car, it will be cheaper to go from point A to point B. I will therefore be tempted to increase the use of my vehicle to cover longer distances. The environmental benefit of my fuel-efficient car might even be cancelled, if not worsened. Applied to CC, it is arguable that

⁸⁷ Schumpeter cited in Jackson, 2011, p.96

⁸⁸ Jackson, 2011, p.96

⁸⁹ Russ Belk cited in Jackson, 2011, p.98

⁹⁰ Cushman in Jackson, 2011, p.100

the money people save through car-sharing for instance, might be used to increase their consumption in another sector of the economy. A study commissioned by Airbnb on its economic impact in the city of San Francisco found a “spillover effect”. Because renting on Airbnb is cheaper than staying at the hotel, people stayed longer in the city and spent an average of \$260 more than hotel guests.⁹¹ This “spillover effect” can be, in that case, another expression for “rebound effect” because guests end up consuming more than if they had stayed at the hotel. In sum, as long as CC is embedded in the iron cage described above, its prospects in terms of global sustainability are rather limited.

Banking on Sharing

Another potential limit of CC in terms of sustainability is made explicit by Jack Manno’s concept of commoditization, which he describes as “the continuous pressure to transform as much of the necessities and pleasures of life as possible into commercial commodities”.⁹² He argues that commercial commodities have increasingly replaced other forms of needs satisfaction, which accentuate the pressure on the earth’s resources.⁹³ We can observe this process of commoditization in the CC world while some companies are certainly “banking on sharing”. Airbnb makes most of its revenues from booking fees by charging 3% to hosts and 6–12% to guests.⁹⁴ As a result, the company is now valued at around \$10 billion.⁹⁵ eBay’s

⁹¹ Geron, 2013

⁹² Manno 2000, p.13.

⁹³ Manno, 2000

⁹⁴ Karmin, 2014

⁹⁵ Idem

revenues are estimated at \$3,9 billion.⁹⁶ Carsharing can also be a lucrative business, if we consider that Zipcar was bought by Avis for \$500 million in 2013.⁹⁷

There is therefore a credible threat that institutional forces are slowly debasing sharing and turning it into another commodity. For example, Couchsurfing is not profit-driven and could qualify as “authentic” sharing whereas it could be argued that commoditization is partially responsible for the rise of Airbnb, which is undeniably profit-driven. The risk would then be that initiatives such as Couchsurfing eventually lose ground to more lucrative ones like Airbnb who tend to be less centered on the human experience. Commoditization could also explain the corporatization process observed in the car sharing industry while multinational car rental companies like Avis, Hertz and Daimler decided to enter the market. Seeing the opportunity of making profits, big corporations could potentially overtake collaborative consumption. It is possible to envision CC as a way to “bend” the capitalist model towards a more sustainable path. However, as the ‘iron cage of consumption’ suggests, the fundamental obstacle to sustainability lies in the institutional force of growth, which feeds on ever-rising levels of consumption, and commoditization pushes in the same direction.

Manno further explains that “those things that are difficult to commercialize are usually so because they involve specific relationships of caring and mutual aid between people or relations of connection between people and a particular place, culture, or ecosystem”.⁹⁸ This is often the case of not for profit collaborative lifestyles initiatives such as EarthShare and WWOOF. Manno goes on saying that to counter the power of commoditization, governments must adopt legal and

⁹⁶ Belouezzane, 2013.

⁹⁷ Macalister, 2013

⁹⁸ Manno, 2000, p.13

political instruments. These measures should serve the non-commodity satisfaction of human needs.⁹⁹ We could extrapolate Manno's thought by stating that in order to protect the essence of CC, governments could subsidize not for profit CC start-ups. Manno almost envisions this when he calls for "cooperative and collective approaches to need reduction".¹⁰⁰ He states that neighborhoods and communities should be organized around resource sharing (tool library, central work sheds, cooperatives, and other mutual-aid arrangements).¹⁰¹ As we will see in the next section, such a reorganization of society is only possible through collective political action.

The Individualization Problem

Another interesting lens to look at the consumption problem is Michael Maniates' concept of individualization. In his paper entitled *Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the world?*, the author argues that the US society is increasingly focusing on consumer-based solutions to the environmental crisis. This "green consumption" movement encourages the *individualization of responsibility*, which leads to the depoliticization of environmental degradation, and the legitimization of the existing political-economic institutions.¹⁰² He reasons that this obsession for consumer solutions blinds us and stops us from "thinking institutionally" and weakens our "collective imagination". The narrative is that the more eco-friendly products you buy, the better the planet will be. This non-political solution is seductive because it suggests what Maniates calls a "struggle free eco-revolution".¹⁰³ But what is actually the result is the

⁹⁹ Manno, 2002, p.97

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, p.69

¹⁰¹ Idem

¹⁰² Maniates, 2002

¹⁰³ Ibid, p.41

expansion of the consumer-product growth industry. Maniates urges citizens to see “that their control over [their consumption] choices is constrained, shaped, and framed by institutions and political forces that can be remade only through collective citizen action, as opposed to individual consumer behavior”.¹⁰⁴ The author therefore questions the potential of consumption as a political force able to “save the world”.

Maniates’ argument poses a limit to the sustainability potential of CC, primarily for redistribution markets and product service systems that can easily correspond to what the author calls “individual consumer behaviours”. According to Maniates’ logic, even if consumers participate in redistribution markets and product services systems for environmental reasons, it will not be enough to generate a social movement contesting the institutional framework responsible for the environmental crisis. The main weakness of these two types of CC, emphasized here by Maniates’s argument, would be their lack of a collective political dimension. Indeed, they represent individual consumption choices and do not generate much social capital. Therefore, CC as whole can hardly be understood as a “political” or “social movement”, which is defined by the *Encyclopaedia of Political Theory* as “collective, sustained challenges to state and non-state systems of political, economic, or cultural governance”.¹⁰⁵

Yet, as discussed in part 2, collaborative lifestyles could possibly be an exception to Maniates’ thesis on *individualization*, mainly because of their ability to generate social capital among “sharers”. Logically, the more connected and politically engaged are the members of a CC network, the more likely they are to bring about collective citizen actions that can challenge the

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p.50

¹⁰⁵ Balsiger, 2010

institutions. The effervescence of these types of initiatives is arguably a source of “collective imagination”.

The limits discussed in the part 3 of the thesis are all linked to the problem of growth. Therefore, to analyse the true potential of CC in terms of sustainability, we must turn to a different framework of analysis. In the next section, I will argue that we should use the values and principles of a post-growth political project to determine what type of CC initiatives have the strongest sustainability potential.

PART 4: Discussion on a “Post-growth” Economy

“Anyone who believes in indefinite growth on a physically finite planet is either mad, or an economist.”¹⁰⁶ - David Attenborough -

As we have seen in the previous section, the institutional and socio-cultural forces pushing our growth-based capitalist economies seriously erode the potential of collaborative consumption in terms of sustainability. This begs the question of whether growth and sustainability are even compatible. The common definition of sustainability does not identify growth as one of the causes of our socio-environmental crises and therefore does not really challenge the current economic system. The concept of sustainable development seems to satisfy everybody by suggesting that sustainability can be achieved without fundamentally changing our lifestyles (in the western world). All over the world, big corporations now have ambitious sustainability policies; a situation that evokes serious questions among political science scholars. In their book *Eco-Business* (2013), Peter Dauvergne and Jane Lister demonstrate how the world’s biggest and most powerful corporations became “sustainability champions” in order to serve their growth interests. According to the authors, this “big brand takeover of sustainability” is ultimately about sustaining businesses, not ecosystems. Thus, I suggest that as long as we remain in a growth-based economic system, true sustainability is not achievable. As I will argue, certain types of CC initiatives could represent the seeds and perhaps an interesting foundation for a post-growth economy.

¹⁰⁶ cited by Rosen, 2012

The idea of a post-growth system is rooted in the degrowth intellectual movement. Once a very marginal topic in academia, the literature on degrowth is rapidly increasing since the turn of the 21st century and attracts the interests of scholars from multiple academic spectrums.¹⁰⁷ This intellectual movement proposes to think outside of the dominant economic paradigm, to collectively reinvent a more sustainable future by first breaking from the growth dogmas that are inevitably leading us to social and ecological collapse. It suggests reducing the *quantity* of the goods produced and focusing instead on the *quality* of these goods. According to Yves-Marie Abraham, the degrowth intellectual stream identifies three fundamental problems¹⁰⁸ caused by our growth-based economic system:

1) Growth is ***destructive*** because it disintegrates both our planet and our social cohesion by systematically putting humans in competition with one another. Psychologically, this constant rivalry is accused of causing stress, burnouts and depressions.

2) Growth is ***unjust*** because it creates social inequalities among current generations, it does not consider the wellbeing of future generations, and it disregards the interest of non-humans such as plants and animals.

3) Finally, growth is ***alienating*** because it is rooted in techno-scientific progress. We become dependant of machines and technologies but also of the system itself. We are forced into a system based on productivity whether we want it or not.

The label “degrowth” is obviously problematic because it is often interpreted as “going backward”. Yet, degrowth must not be understood as a “recession” but rather as a planned and socioeconomically viable way out of society’s dominant economic paradigm, towards a sustainable steady state. “Degrowth” is a provocative word rather than an end in itself. The

¹⁰⁷ To explore more in depth the “degrowth” literature, see: Martínez-Alier et al., 2010; E. Rees, 2014 ; Daly, 1996.; O’Neill, 2012

¹⁰⁸ Abraham, 2012

premise is that degrowth is inevitable and it is therefore in our best interest to prepare ourselves for a different system instead of having a crisis imposed on us. This ideology consists of a democratic and equitable downscaling of production and consumption that will enhance the human condition by promoting social justice and the preservation of the biosphere. The degrowth project is rooted in the values of: *justice between beings; preservation of life on earth; and autonomy*.¹⁰⁹ It manifests itself through plans, projects and actions that respect these values but also the following four principles¹¹⁰:

1) **Democratisation**: Who is deciding and on what basis? Is an elite deciding for everybody? The definition of what a “good life” means has to be decided collectively by taking in account future generations and non-humans.

2) **Auto-production**: To produce frugally and to aim at meeting our needs rather than solely pursuing economic enrichment and overconsumption. Who is producing what and to serve what purpose? Entailed here is the idea of a more localized system of production and consumption.

3) **Communalization**: To move away from private property and encourage collective production and consumption systems based on sharing.

4) **Cooperation**: To eliminate relationships of dominance and exploitation between humans and encourage relationships based on mutual aid, sharing and reciprocity.

Overall, degrowth is a socio-political project that challenges our definition of ‘the good life’ by promoting values rooted in voluntary simplicity. It encourages a shift that William E. Rees describes as “a deliberate rewrite of contemporary society’s grand cultural narrative”.¹¹¹ Thus, degrowth is mostly a theoretical alternative to sustainable development and its practical

¹⁰⁹ Abraham, 2012

¹¹⁰ Abraham, 2012, p.11-12

¹¹¹ Rees, 2014, p.6

application still needs to be clarified in many ways. For example, the need for production reduction is obviously not the same in western countries as in the less affluent world, where increased production of certain goods and services is essential to meet social needs. Yet, we can observe many different CC initiatives in the western world that respect the spirit and values behind the degrowth project. These experiments are perhaps the seeds of a new economic paradigm. I decided to call this paradigm a post-growth economy rather than a degrowth economy because of the negative connotation of the prefix “de”.

Since most forms of CC are not compatible with true sustainability, the hope lies in the branch of CC that tries to embrace the degrowth values and principles. I call this category *post-growth collaborative consumption*. This type of CC should be an integrative part of an economic system that would respect the four principles of sustainable degrowth mentioned above. This *post-growth economy*, as represented in Figure 2, should be initiated by a political movement inspired by the values of degrowth (justice, preservation of life on earth and autonomy) and rooted in its four key principles (democratization, auto-production, communalization, cooperation). This politico-economic project should aim to meet key social needs while respecting the ecological limits of our planet, as highlighted by Kate Raworth’s idea of a *safe and just space for humanity* (explained in the part 2 of my thesis).¹¹² Hence, *post-growth* collaborative consumption initiatives are the ones which embrace the values and principles mentioned earlier and therefore represent the seeds of a different economic story.

Sustainability is fundamentally an anthropological problem; it is about *how we* live. Karen Litfin went all over the world to study ecovillages, which she describes as “seeds of hope sparsely

¹¹² Raworth, 2012

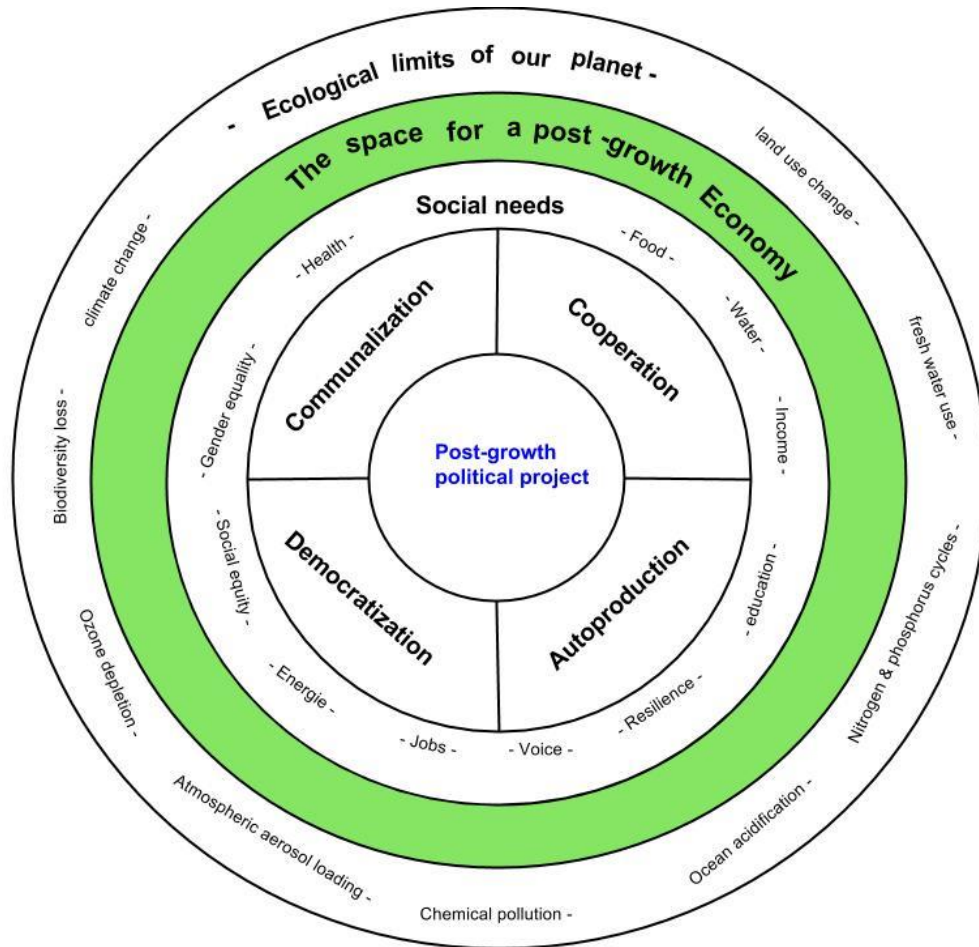
sown across the global landscape”.¹¹³ An ecovillage is defined as “an intentional or traditional community that is consciously designed through locally owned, participatory processes to regenerate social and natural environments [where] the 4 dimensions of sustainability (ecology, economy, the social and the cultural) are all integrated into a holistic approach”.¹¹⁴ Ecovillages can hardly be replicated in cities, which make up 12 percent of the earth’s land and consume 83 percent of the planet’s resources.¹¹⁵ Yet, what can be scaled up is *sharing* and *community trust* as a model for small and large cities. Collaborative consumption could therefore be a great medium to reach some form of post-growth society. Through collaborative consumption, people can build more connected lives and thus build a more resilient future. Yet, the potential of CC in terms of sustainability is quite gloomy as long as we stay inside a growth-based economy. The principles and values of degrowth are then very useful to identify the CC initiatives that are the most hopeful in terms of sustainability.

¹¹³ Litfin, 2014, p.32

¹¹⁴ Global Ecovillage Network, 2014

¹¹⁵ Litfin, 2014, p.172

FIGURE 2: The Post-Growth Economy



This diagram is inspired by Raworth’s representation of sustainability. As indicated by the circle in the middle of the graph, the path towards a *post-Growth Economy* first starts with a political project inspired by the values of degrowth (justice, preservation of life on earth and autonomy). This project must then favour initiatives rooted in degrowth’s four key principles (communalization, democratization, autoproduction and cooperation). The post-growth economy aims to fulfil fundamental human needs while staying inside the ecological limits of our planet. The green zone in the graphic indicates where such an economy can exist. *Post-growth collaborative consumption* could be a key driver to reach the space for a new economic system. For more information on the 9 ecological limits and the 11 social needs, see Raworth 2012.

CONCLUSION

In the first portion of this paper the reasons behind the rise of CC were elucidated. Technology and the possibility to save money seem to be common factors to all forms of CC. Environmental concerns and a desire to connect with others are also important variables, but not necessarily for every type of CC. We then turned to the complex question of CC and its implication in terms of sustainability. The connection between the two looks promising, as it has been seen that CC can generate social capital and initiate a value shift away from ownership and towards sharing. However, these prospects are shadowed when considering the institutional pressure created by our growth based economic model. By underlining the problem of *individualization*, Maniates suggests that the sole act of participating in CC will not change the institutions generating the environmental crisis while Manno warns us of the *commoditization* of sharing. Both authors point in the direction of an institutional reform to solve the consumption problem, the solution being eminently political.

Consumption is a very complex issue as it questions the sustainability of the capitalist model. CC is often seen as a “non-ideological” idea that will benefit everyone. Yet, the limits mentioned above indicate that CC alone is unlikely to generate global sustainability. These limits also suggest that the institutions in place need to be challenged and reformed. This thesis highlights that post-growth collaborative consumption has a stronger political dimension and thus could represent the seed of a new economic system in line with a degrowth political project. Unfortunately, the road to global sustainability and a *safe and just space for humanity* will

unlikely be an apolitical and struggle-free journey! (For a summary of the argument please refer to Table 1)

The burden for political scientists is to analyse social phenomena with a critical eye, which restrains us from offering “ready-made” solutions or a definitive way forward. By presenting the possibility of a system beyond growth in which CC could have a key role, my humble hope was to offer a constructive reflection on the gigantic sustainability puzzle that we are dealing with.

Finally, it must be said that CC is a very new topic in the academic literature. Much more research is needed to better understand this blossoming phenomenon. More research should be made on specific CC initiatives by using a degrowth framework of analysis. Other political dimensions of CC should also be explored: Can CC function in less affluent countries? How does culture affect CC? What impact does CC have on social and economic inequalities? These are some of the many questions that need to be answered.

TABLE 1: Summary of the argument

Type of CC	Enabling Factor	Why is it Rising?	Prospects	Limits	Examples
Product Service Systems		<p>Saving money (SM): Sharing is a lot less expensive than owning</p> <p>Environmental concerns (EC): Not the main motivation</p> <p>Connecting with others (CO): Not a strong causal factor</p>	<p>Consumption reduction (CR): Maximizes utility. Evidence of CO2 reduction for car and bike sharing programs</p> <p>Social capital (SC): Weak SC building</p> <p>*Strong potential for a value shift away from owner ship</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strong <i>individualization of responsibility</i>, no collective political dimension. - Strongly influenced by <i>commoditization</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Car sharing: - Peer-to-Peer Car Sharing - Bike sharing - Toy Rental - Fashion - Peer Rental: - Neighborhood Rental
Redistribution Market	T H E C N O L O G Y	<p>SM: Key variable. Brings down transaction costs</p> <p>EC: Generally less important</p> <p>CO: Not a strong causal factor</p>	<p>CR: Can potentially lower consumption and waste.</p> <p>SC: Weak SC building</p> <p>*Weak potential for a value shift away from owner ship</p>	The Iron Cage of Consumption: The structural/psychological paradigm that promote consumption (GDP growth)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strong <i>individualization of responsibility</i>, no collective political dimension. - Strongly influenced by <i>commoditization</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Big marketplaces: craigslist, eBay, Flippid, Gumtree - Free exchanges - Swap websites for book - Swap websites for baby goods and toys - Clothing swaps - Swap websites for media (DVDs, books, games)
Collaborative Lifestyles		<p>SM: Less expensive than traditional consumption</p> <p>EC: Strong for certain start-ups and less tangible for others</p> <p>CO: Strong causal factor</p>	<p>CR: Likely to reduce consumption. Impact varies.</p> <p>SC: <u>Strong</u> potential to build SC</p> <p>*Strong potential for a value shift away from owner ship</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Because they generate social capital, could overcome the <i>individualisation</i> problem, enhance our “collective imagination”, and promote collective action. - Strongly influenced by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coworking - Social Lending - Social currencies -Peer-to-Peer Travel - Ride sharing - Bartering - Gardens - Skill sharing - Shared Studios/Workshops - Parking spots
Post-growth Collaborative Consumption		<p>Driven by a desire to change the current paradigm based on growth and hyperindividualism</p>	<p>Embodies the political project of degrowth and therefore directly challenges the current socio-political paradigm. Represents the seeds of a new system.</p>		<p>Because the dominant paradigm is based on growth, post-growth CC will have to live with great contradictions and a serious lack of public support.</p>

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