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The Collaborative Economy, Tourism and Sustainable Development

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Introduction

This chapter explores the collaborative economy, tourism and sustainability. The emergence of the digital collaborative economy has had profound transformative effects on the structure, organisation and business logics underpinning contemporary tourism (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2017). It is opening up new business opportunities and livelihoods traditionally inaccessible to many individuals, and is driving deep transformation within existing industry practices. It is, however, not as new as many advocates claim, and can be best understood as an old economic model that has been transformed by the digitalisation processes associated with Industry 4.0 (Gilchrist, 2016; Smit et al., 2016). The collaborative economy has been claimed to be more sustainable than traditional business practices by lowering consumption and using existing resources more effectively (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). However, there is little evidence to support these claims, and for a variety of reasons, it has been difficult to undertake research to verify such assertions (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015). What is clear however, is that the collaborative economy is responsible for wide-ranging social and economic impacts and has proven to be very difficult to regulate. Despite these potential concerns, all indications are that it will continue to expand unabated. The impact and effects of the growth of the collaborative economy on sustainability is, therefore, a major issue that warrants further investigation.

Our departure point for this chapter is to explore the collaborative economy as a form of collaborative exchange through which tourism products, services and experiences are produced and consumed. We explore historical antecedents, arguing that the collaborative economy can be traced back through the millennia, and that the recent, and highly transformative iterations emerging as a result

of Industry 4.0, must be understood within this broader landscape. However, before we can start to discuss the effects and consequences of the collaborative economy and tourism on sustainability, we first need to define key terms and outline our own understanding of the sustainability challenge.

Scope of the collaborative economy

Definitions and concepts

In its contemporary framing, and the one that most readers will be familiar with, the collaborative economy is framed as a digital peer-to-peer global marketplace that facilitates real-time transactions enabling anyone with an internet connection and smartphone to engage in buying, trading, sharing or gaining access to goods and services (Dredge and Gyimóthy, 2017). Terms such as 'collaborative economy', 'gig economy', 'sharing economy', and the 'we-economy' are often used to capture these innovations. Various authors have drawn attention to the difficulty of defining the sharing/collaborative economy phenomena, arguing that the concept is much older and more diverse than this present framing. It is important therefore, that any discussion of the collaborative economy takes into account the diversity and depth of alternative collaborative economic forms irrespective of digitalisation (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2017; Frenken & Schor, 2017).

Taking a step backwards from this contemporary definition, it is important to understand that our economic organisation is socially embedded, and is anchored within social, cultural and political conditions and practices (Polanyi, 1944; 1978). Collaboration is the cornerstone of economic organisation regardless of the particular economic system in question, with Benkler (2004) drawing attention to modes of social sharing that range from utterly impersonal, loose affiliations to very personal transactions. Anthropologists and ethnographers have also been arguing that sharing, gift and barter economies have existed for millennia in various formats (e.g. Mauss, 1922/1990; Rehn, 2014). These forms of exchange usually focus their explanatory power on the social, cultural and moral value of transactions, regardless of whether the commodity that is traded changes ownership permanently or temporarily. In contemporary tourism settings, Germann Molz (2012) draws attention to this in her explorations of couchsurfing, and the collaborative, networked and technologized enactments of travel through which mobile sociality is practiced:

In detailing the way togetherness and intimacy are performed in these online social media spaces, and though the mediatized tourist gaze, I have aimed to uncover some of the nuanced qualities of mobile sociality. One of the things that

analysis indicates is that most travellers do not see their journeys as a solitary endeavour, but rather and collective experience. In this sense, the mediated tourist gaze is a collaborative project (Germann Molz, 2012: 78).

Germann Molz's (2012) contributions, drawing attention to the intangible but often world-making role of collaborative sociality, rarely enter into these public discourses about tourism because they are often seen as too intangible or 'fluffy' for economists and policy makers to grasp and incorporate in their work. As a result, the economic value of collaborative transactions dominate discussions.

In literature, the first mention of the collaborative economy can be traced back to Felson and Speth (1978), who were interested in understanding social and economic entanglements when, for example, a group buys a pitcher of beer because it is cheaper than the purchase of individual glasses. The contribution of these early discussions was to recognise that the social and economic values produced in the exchange process become entangled and hybridized, where the sum value is greater than the economic value alone. In this process, collaboration between the giver and the receiver is shaped by relational parameters, such as trust, reciprocity, proximity, and care (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2017). Contemporary forms of the digitised collaborative economy build upon these older ideas about collaborative exchange, however their increasing prominence in public discourses are most often linked to economic growth afforded by digitalisation, new jobs and employment growth, economic innovation, and workforce flexibility. Additionally, the collaborative economy is characterised by digitally mediated exchanges between parties that are often unknown to each other, by real-time transactions often across international borders, and by the incorporation of trust mechanisms such as reviews and feedback.

Investigations of the various business logics, motivations, emphases, transaction characteristics and values have led to a wide variety of terms and concepts that try to capture collaborative economy in the literature. Table 10.1 summarises alternative conceptualisations of the collaborative economy. The table is by no means a complete list of all the terms appearing in the literature, but provides an overview of the diversity in the way it has been conceptualised and the underpinning values and metaphors that have shaped its description. Examining these various terms and definitions in Table 10.1, four key aspects of collaborative economy cut across these conceptualisations, and which can be used to understand and characterise any particular model of type:

- The nature of the transaction itself (e.g. characteristics of the collaborative exchange, motivations for the transaction, the resources, assets, services exchanged, tools/techniques of mediation, and so on).