

Track #6: Ökonomik und Emanzipation

Alternative: Track #9: Emanzipation durch Innovation?

Collaborative consumption as a contributor to transition to more sustainable consumption

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Progressing towards more sustainable forms of consumption and production seems inevitable, i.e. forms that would lower the environmental impact, and steer our socio-economic systems away from inequitable distribution of benefits and costs. The starting point of the debate over sustainability of our consumption and production patterns can be seen in the 1980s and the publication of “Our Common Future”, a report by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987). Ever since, a broad range of negative environmental and societal consequences of consumption and production have been broadly recognized issues (Sanne 2002; Michaelis, 2003; Briceno and Stagl 2006; Nash, 2009). The current problematic situation can be ascribed to two misconceptions: the belief in unlimited natural resources and natural sinks that could endlessly absorb environmental pollution, along with the concept of continuous and limitless economic growth (Jackson, 2009). Thus, changing the status quo is challenging. The existing infrastructures and deeply-rooted habits reflect the above misconceptions (Tukker et al., 2008) and add to the challenge of getting out of this lock-in. In other words, consumption and production patterns are deeply situated in the structures we live in, and are intricately interwoven with our daily choices and practices (Briceno and Stagl, 2006; Mont 2007; Røpke, 1999). Consequently, the role of consumers and their actions for steering the change and transition process is of key value.

Within the dominant consumption (i.e. product-purchase) patterns, consumers’ decisions relate to the notions of ownership and attachment to possessions (Belk, 2007). As Belk (2009) points out, in consumer research there seems to be a neglect of sharing as an alternative to private ownership, which is a fundamental omission in understanding consumption itself, as well as transitions that take place within it. Sharing behaviours have become more visible through the growth of collaborative consumption (CC), i.e. a range of economic models of sharing, swapping, renting, re-invented through e.g. globalization, the pressures of financial crisis, or the omnipresence of Internet. CC reinvents not just WHAT we consume but HOW we consume, placing access over ownership. Importantly, it is not anti-business, anti-product or anti-consumer – it is simply a novel approach to consumption concerned with the urgent need to re-define and re-construct our mindsets about consumption and entrepreneurship.

This paper analyzes collaborative consumption from the viewpoint of transition theory and its multi-level perspective (Geels and Schot, 2010) seeing the concept as a niche-innovation challenging the incumbent ownership-based consumption regime. The following questions are asked:

- Given the current scale and characteristics of the concept, what transition scenarios could be realized in the case of collaborative consumption?
- Who are the relevant actors creating and stimulating the development of collaborative consumption?

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