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Addressing the Sharing Economy—Some (Potential) Inconsistencies of Its Emancipatory Defense

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Abstract: The sharing economy (SE) is a strongly contested idea, both conceptually and politically. This paper first explores multiple existing definitions, emphasizing the challenges in both conceptual and operational terms they usually entail. It is argued that most of the common definitions tend to exacerbate tensions between informativeness and veracity, resulting in the SE becoming a catch-all concept. Alternatively, it is often suggested to operationalize the concept by breaking it down among its main areas, such as consumption, knowledge, production, and finance. However, these kinds of classifications lack logical-formal consistency and substantive validity. The paper then addresses the political-normative debate by briefly presenting the three main existing perspectives on the SE: (i) as a more inclusive form of capitalism, (ii) as the advancement of the neoliberal agenda, and (iii) as a sort of emancipatory economy. The primary aim of this paper, however, is not to advocate for a singular viewpoint or scrutinize any particular author’s theory, but to examine three common errors that the emancipatory conception may easily fall into: (i) overemphasizing the role of communities in economic activity, (ii) attributing an inherent collaborative propensity to individuals, and (iii) understanding markets from an a-institutional and psychological standpoint. The conclusions suggest that to truly realize the emancipatory potential of the SE, the conception should distance itself from standard economic theory and adopt a more institutional approach akin to classical political economy.

Keywords: sharing economy; communities; markets; rationality; equality; emancipation



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1. Introduction

In 2008, thousands of people worldwide saw their economies eroded and therefore sought more affordable forms of consumption. In response, various market sectors tried to adapt to this shift. The effect was the increase in consumers and suppliers directly exchanging, selling, lending, or renting out goods and services, mostly driven by the sharp expansion of new digital technologies and, particularly, the exponential access to mobile devices as fundamental economic tools. Explanations like this describe the sharing economy (SE, hereafter) as a functional response to a crisis scenario, while others attempt to elucidate the historical dynamics underpinning it. In the 1990s, the largest economies saw falling profits, which boosted financial markets. The SE was then born as a response to these conditions. *eBay*, the first online marketplace, was founded in 1995, followed a year later by *Craigslist*, the first user-managed online classified advert platform. Three years later, *Napster*, the inaugural peer-to-peer music exchange network, was established. The bursting of the *dot.com* bubble in the 2000s facilitated the rise of Web 2.0, fostering a business model aimed at monetizing interactions between users. Subsequently, platforms such as *Zipcar*, *Carpooling* and *Couchsurfing* were created, followed in 2007 by *Airbnb* and *Uber*, which are now among the most prominent examples of the SE. Proponents argue that, derived from the aforementioned rise of digital technologies, the SE reduces the costs of certain products while allowing users to generate additional income by promoting forms of interpersonal exchange. This would be part of a new, more efficient, and ecologically

sustainable economic paradigm. Conversely, detractors assert that the SE represents yet another iteration of the capitalist economy's drive for value extraction, now propelled by the very interactions we weave into our daily lives. All this, they claim, leads to further capital concentration and increased precariousness of working conditions. As we shall see, definitions and interpretations of the SE are multiple and often contradictory.

Following this introduction, the second section of this paper delves into these definitions and argues that most are as weak in their logical-formal construction as they are in the substantive content they attempt to capture. As an alternative, the concept is often operationalized by breaking it down into its structural or constitutive components: consumption, knowledge, production, and finance. However, as will be shown in this section, operationalization also entails significant methodological complications. Therefore, our first conclusion sustains that the attempt to define, and alternatively to operationalize, this concept constitutes a highly challenging task, often resulting in rather meager results from a conceptual and epistemological viewpoint.

Aligned with the growing scholarly attention, the third section of this paper turns to its political-normative discussion by briefly presenting the three main perspectives identifiable in the debate: (i) the SE viewed as inclusive capitalism, (ii) as an advancement of the neoliberal agenda, and (iii) as an emancipatory economy. We introduce the two first perspectives very briefly as we would rather focus on the last one. Note, however, that we are not discussing against an imaginary contender. In other words, we do not assert the existence of a single emancipatory theory or paradigm of the SE that can be unified around clearly defined parameters distinguishing it from other intellectual positions, nor do we claim that this perspective constitutes a monolithic ideological program opposed to others. Likewise, we do not aim to subsume all cited authors under a single perspective or to exhaustively analyze their work to transform it into a strawman against whom to direct our criticisms. Such an approach would be as complex as it is unjust, given that the diversity of opinions and nuances is a fundamental characteristic of this debate.

Nonetheless, within most of the literature that emphasizes the emancipatory potential of the SE, certain shared, transversal elements can be identified that warrant our attention. They may lead to three main conceptual and methodological errors that *any* emancipatory view may easily encounter: (i) the prominence of communities in economic activity—to the detriment of public institutions and private agents; (ii) the assumption of individuals' natural collaborative propensity—which displaces the instrumental human rationality; and (iii) the a-institutional and psychological understanding of markets, thereby positing individual and decentralized participation as the primary factors underpinning the SE and the post-capitalist change it is expected to promote—in contrast with a more institutional strategy. Conclusions finally suggest that this perspective must disentangle itself from the conceptual framework of standard economic theory, and instead embrace a more institutional approach akin to classical political economy. This shift, it is finally argued, is essential to envision the truly emancipatory potential of the SE.

2. Informativeness and Veracity

2.1. *An Attempt at Definition*

The peer-to-peer or sharing economy can be understood as an economic model based on the sharing of underutilized assets, ranging from spaces and skills to goods, for monetary and non-monetary benefits. Once this baseline, standard definition is accepted, several subsequent clarifications often arise. It is argued, for instance, that the need for intermediaries in the SE would disappear, as an unbounded marketplace for efficient peer-to-peer exchanges between producer and consumer, seller and buyer, lender and borrower [1]. Other explanations emphasize this dynamic of efficient exchange by defining the SE as “the act and process of distributing what is ours to others for their use and/or the act and process of receiving or taking something from others for our use” [2] (p. 1596). Thus, the SE rests on a set of diffuse networks of connected individuals and communities that operate independently of centralized institutions, transforming the ways in which we produce, con-

sume, finance, and learn [3]. The practices embedded in this “new socio-economic model based on collaboration, access to, and the socialization of value production, facilitated by digital technologies” [4] (p. 276) are then usually highlighted.

According to these definitions, *Uber* or *Airbnb* may come to mind, but also cooperatives, *Wikipedia*, time-banks, or squatter houses. The issue, then, is that if we consider such disparate cases to be part of the SE, our definition may become a catch-all term that encompasses actors, institutions, platforms, and practices with very little, or even nothing, in common. Therefore, as Juliet Schor suggests, coming up with a robust definition of the SE in common usage is nearly impossible, given that the concept has a pragmatic rather than analytical character [5]. Similarly, Tom Slee warns that the current definitions “don’t take us very far when talking about something as fluid and rapidly changing as the SE”. However, he acknowledges that we “need to draw some boundaries around the topic to talk about it coherently” [6] (p. 11).

What Slee points out is that the conceptual breadth of the definitions which we use to define or explain our object of study encompasses such a diverse set of practices and economic phenomena that it is misleading to refer to them with a single label.

Should we include *Airbnb*, *Wallapop*, *Couchsurfing*, time-banks, open-source software, or the *Urban Company*? The informative content of our definition always depends on how many meanings it can exclude, meaning that the informativeness of a definition relies on its precision.¹ Therefore, the informativeness of a definition is often at odds with its truthfulness; that is, whether it “corresponds to reality” [8].² It follows that finding a precise definition that is both highly informative (very precise by excluding many possibilities, for example, *Airbnb*, *free software*, or both) and true (its content corresponds to what the SE is *regardless of our statements* in Searle’s terminology) becomes a highly demanding task in both methodological and conceptual terms.

The definitions we commonly use suffer from the confusing breadth of the field, precisely because the concept to be explained or defined “includes too many elements to allow proper theorization” [9] (p. 2). In response, some authors adopt a more restrictive conceptual strategy by defining the SE as an economy where “consumers grant each other temporary access to under-utilized physical assets [...] possibly for money” [10] (pp. 4–5). Under this definition, practices such as peer-production, second-hand sales, and business-to-consumer rentals typical of *Wallapop*, *Wikipedia*, or *Zipcar* would thus fall outside its scope. Similarly, the term “crowd-based capitalism” used by some authors [11] excludes activities previously included by others [3], such as food cooperatives, carpooling, time-banks or *coworking*. Other authors employ a similarly restrictive definition, referring to the SE as the space where goods “are amenable to being shared within social sharing systems rather than allocated through markets” [12] (p. 356). This would exclude *Airbnb*, *eBay*, and similar for-profit businesses. The problem is that the definitions we then employ lose much of their descriptive power, either because they are not restrictive enough—thus including cases that are too disparate—or because they are too restrictive—and so exclude too many interesting cases.

This, however, does not necessarily lead us to accept that finding an accurate way to define this concept is not possible. It only highlights that reaching a balance between inclusiveness and exclusiveness remains a significant challenge of our definitions and thus of our research agenda. Indeed, although the SE may become a true “definitional conundrum” [13] (p. 67), we must not abandon the task of trying to understand it because, as Aristotle stated, if we neglect our definitions “the research will produce no result” [14] (1025b). To get around this, the alternative is to operationalize what the scholastics called the formal object of study, which appears to be the most common scholarly strategy.

2.2. Operationalizing the Object of Study

A concept can be operationalized by identifying and classifying its constituent components or main parts. In the case of the SE, Russell Belk [2] differentiates the nature of collaborative practices of sharing, gift giving, and commodity exchange. Michel Bauwens [15]

and Yochai Benkler [16] classify it according to the types of goods or services being shared: either material resources, or intangible goods such as software, patents, or knowledge. Juliet Schor [17] distinguishes between for-profit or altruistic activities, the types of users involved, and the kinds of services provided. Rachel Botsman and Roo Rogers [1] focus on the process of income circulation and thus differentiate between types of consumption, modes of production, and financing methods.

These different analytical proposals raise some questions. For example: should the SE be classified according to the practices carried out, such as sharing, renting, or donating, or should it be based on the economic sectors it comprises, such as accommodation, transport, or knowledge? Should we focus on the economic agents operating within it, such as private individuals, business platforms, or cooperatives? Should we rather make a distinction, based on its geographical scope, between the in-person local and the global-digital space? Beyond these different methodological proposals, however, there seems to be a consensus around the main structural sectors the SE comprises.

1. Collaborative or consumer participation [18,19], as defined by traditional sharing, bartering, lending, trading, renting, gifting, and swapping, has been redefined through the advent of technology and peer communities. It is contended that collaborative consumption yields significant economic savings by granting access to goods without changing their ownership, while also saving time or space. Consequently, it would represent an efficient mode of consumption, as it valorizes underutilized assets or services. It encompasses platforms such as *Airbnb*, *Uber*, *eBay*, *Zipcar*, *Wallapop*, and *DogVacay*. Additionally, less commercial-oriented instances include *BitTorrent* and *The Pirate Bay*, citizen initiatives to exchange services or accommodation altruistically such as time-banks and *Couchsurfing*, the use of local currencies led by social movements or local business platforms, and practices like bartering, social lending, clothing swaps, co-housing, and peer-to-peer rental.
2. Open or common knowledge [16,20–22], i.e., the knowledge that “is free to use, reuse, and redistribute without legal, social, or technological restriction” [23]. Knowledge has always been produced collaboratively. The novelty is that now the “processes of production, power, exploitation, hegemony, and struggles take on the form of transnational networks that are mediated by networked information and communication technologies and knowledge processes” [24] (p. 180). The concept of “digital” or “cognitive capitalism” [25,26] is used to theorize the extent to which knowledge has become the new arena of political, economic, and ideological contention. Here too, a wide range of practices coexist: from altruistic and gratuitous acts, such as giving a talk for a civil association or contributing to create a *Wikipedia* page, to for-profit initiatives such as *SharingAcademy* and *Trip4Real*, or even protecting an academic manuscript with a *Creative Commons* license.
3. Collaborative, P2P production or co-production [16,27,28] is regarded both as an outcome of open knowledge and as its prerequisite. As extensively advocated [29,30], it entails a new industrial revolution that paves the way to a “transition from an economy of exchange and production to one of pollination and contribution” [31] (p. 143). Within this emerging “social factory” the new modes of production are so “dispersed throughout the unlimited social terrain that they outgrow the physical and temporal limits of the old Fordist factory” [32] (p. 53). Illustrative examples encompass urban community gardens, somewhat informal yet scarcely commodified shared workspaces, on-demand work platforms such as *Upwork*, *Wework*, and *99Design*, or even *YouTube*, *Flickr*, *Facebook*, and *X*, formerly known as *Twitter*.
4. Collaborative finance enables people to carry out economic transactions without a third-party intermediary [33]. It is purported to “replace credit cards and banks with lower-interest person-to-person loans” [6] (p. 21). They also include quite disparate examples. From non-strictly commercial initiatives like peer-to-peer microloans or microcredits, the contingency funds of some trade unions, and savings cooperatives such as *Coop57* or *FairCoop*, to *crowdfunding platforms* like *Lanzanos*, *Goteo*, or *Verkami*, as well

as international charity tools such as *GiveDirectly*. For-profit examples include equity crowdfunding platforms such as *Kickstarter* or *IndieGogo* matching entrepreneurial projects with venture capital, peer-to-peer lending platforms like *LendingClub* or *Prosper*, and even digital currency and blockchain tools like *Verse* or *BitSquare*.

As observed, there exists an inherent trade-off between informativeness and veracity within any definition. The issue with the aforementioned definitions lies in the exacerbation of this tension, either due to their polysemous nature that covers a too heterogeneous range of activities and agents, or due to their overly restrictive character that excludes too many practices. This does not imply that defining the SE is an insurmountable task nor that it is not even necessary to advance our research plan. Rather, we are simply underlining the considerable conceptual and methodological challenges associated with this endeavor, and the fact that—as a consequence—much of the existing conceptual proposals are poorly successful.

To avoid this, we may operationalize the concept by classifying its main sectors—in this case, its constitutive activities. As we have seen, the existing literature commonly divides our object of study between these four categories: consumption, knowledge, production, and finance. The problem lies in the failure of these classifications to adhere to the three logical-formal criteria that any classification, akin to a mathematical partition, must adhere to: (i) non-nullity—ensuring no subset of the partition remains empty; (ii) completeness—ensuring no element is left outside the partition; and (iii) exclusion—ensuring no element belongs to more than one subset. Nevertheless, while these formal criteria are a necessary condition, they are not sufficient because a correct classification must also demonstrate consistency in substantive terms. Classifying between consumption, knowledge, production, and finance appears to be a suitable analytical criterion; however, is it also correct in substantive terms?

Considering the above, it appears substantively impossible to separate open knowledge from collaborative production [34]. Likewise, collaborative consumption lacks significance without collaborative finance [35]. Open knowledge not only influences consumption but is integral to the very concept of “cognitive capitalism” [36]. Consequently, it prompts the question of the analytical utility and substantive validity gained by dividing the SE into these four sectors. In other words: should cooperatives be included in the SE, or are they a subset of it? Can *BitTorrent* and *Airbnb* be classified under the same subset of collaborative consumption? Are activities like teaching on *SharingAcademy*, writing a *Wikipedia* entry, or publishing a book under a *Creative Commons* license substantively comparable, despite all being formally categorized as open knowledge activities? Even though they all fall under the collaborative production sector, can we equate being an *Uber* driver, participating in a community garden, or joining a local currency network aiming to create a de-commodified payment system? In essence, “what are the criteria of inclusion/exclusion within these social formations?” [37] (p. 124). In substantive terms, the kinds of norms and logic guiding *Airbnb*, *Wikipedia*, the *Creative Commons Foundation*, and a community garden differ significantly. Although formally they may belong to the same subset of the SE (the collaborative consumption), it is substantively impossible to equate them. As a result, the definitions and classifications commonly employed represent weak tools for operationalizing analysis, both in substantive and in formal-analytical terms.

This trade-off between informativeness and veracity is inherent in any attempt to define and operationalize a complex concept. However, in the case of the SE, this is particularly challenging. This may stem from several factors, notably one quantitative and one qualitative. On the one hand, the socio-economic practices associated with consumption, knowledge, production, and finance within the SE have expanded and multiplied rapidly in recent years, largely due to the decreasing cost and increasing accessibility of new digital technologies. On the other hand, since it first began to be theorized and conceptualized, the SE has evolved from a set of more or less minor, marginal, and potentially disruptive initiatives, often operating outside the formal channels of the market economy, to now occupy a near-central position within global chains of production, distribution, and income

accumulation. As a result of both transformations, the polysemic nature of the concept of SE itself has increased exponentially, along with the challenges involved in defining and operationalizing it appropriately.

It is worth clarifying, however, that we are not asserting the impossibility of finding an accurate definition or achieving effective operationalization. Rather, we are merely underscoring the considerable conceptual and analytical challenges inherent in these tasks. Nevertheless, the primary challenge may be rooted in something much simpler than the aforementioned conceptual, logical, and analytical issues, namely that in the field of the sharing economy, as in many others, practices often precede concepts.³ Nevertheless, it is worth noting that, in addition to the quantitative and qualitative transformations that the SE has undergone in recent years, which we have identified as two possible reasons explaining the difficulties in defining and operationalizing this concept, a third factor should be added. Indeed, what makes the SE truly challenging to apprehend conceptually and analytically is not merely its highly polysemic nature but also, and perhaps most significantly, its multiple and contradictory political-normative implications and interpretations, which have also increased enormously along with the same quantitative and qualitative transformations the SE itself has undergone.

3. Beyond Conceptualizing: Political Conceptions on the Sharing Economy

Thus far, our discussion has centered on the complexities involved in defining and operationalizing the concept of the SE. Henceforth, and to continue to understand SE adequately, we propose to approach it not from discussing its epistemic status (by discussing its conceptual or analytical dimension), but rather from the real or substantive implications it entails—that is, from its political dimension. In this regard, what is particularly noteworthy is that the SE is a strongly contested concept [4,9,13,35,39], and as such, the debate surrounding it carries profound political-normative implications that few can resist pronouncing on.

The economy is not neutral, but “suffused with values and beliefs about what constitutes proper activity, regarding rights and responsibilities of individuals and institutions” [40] (p. 206). Because of this, the SE must also be thoroughly analyzed from a political-normative point of view. In this regard, most opinions on the SE can be grouped around three predominant perspectives, which are quite representative of the ongoing scholarly and advocacy debate. While we briefly outline these perspectives here, our primary focus is not delving into their intricacies. Rather, we aim to concentrate on the latter one and, more specifically, highlight three main conceptual shortcomings it may encounter.

3.1. As Inclusive Capitalism

The SE is sometimes perceived as a means to address the dysfunctions inherent in capitalism through the adoption of more efficient, equitable, democratic, sustainable, and inclusive practices [35,41–43]. During periods of crisis, the SE would exert counter-cyclical effects by bolstering aggregate demand, reducing the cost of certain goods and services, and generating additional income for users. It could also enhance the added value of services such as on-demand consumption or just-in-time production, as well as optimize exchanges through the digitization of trade processes. Thanks to this, it would then generate “a more efficient economy that would better satisfy the desires and needs of consumers” [44] (p. 19), thus promoting a more efficient, fair, and inclusive form of capitalism. Therefore, the SE would not be positioned as an alternative, but rather as a simple remedy for a hyper-consumerist culture [43]. In short, the “SE aims to provide more alternatives to the system rather than serving as an alternative to it” [45] (p. 22). However, it is often questioned whether the SE tends to challenge or rather reinforce the capitalist mode of production.

3.2. As an Advancement of the Neoliberal Agenda

Indeed, “what started as an appeal to community, person-to-person connections, sustainability, and sharing, has become the playground of billionaires, Wall Street, and

venture capitalists" [6] (p. 163). The SE would thus be more aptly labelled as "neoliberalism on steroids" [46], "neo-feudalism of cognitive capitalism" [36], or simply as "platform capitalism" [47,48]. This way, it simply emphasizes the concentration of power in the hands of managers of large digital monopolies at the expense of the economic, digital, and labor rights of the majority [49–51]. Companies such as *Uber*, *Airbnb* or *Deliveroo*, to mention just a few, have been denounced for wielding excessive power, enabling them to "circumvent various forms of regulation and erode labor rights internationally" [52] (p. 1395). Similarly, the technological revolution accompanying the SE has been accused of betraying the utopian promises of the internet by fostering unprecedented economic polarization [53,54]. Nonetheless, in contrast to this perspective, the SE is often attributed a much more emancipatory character.

3.3. *As an Emancipatory or Post-Capitalist Economy*

Beyond the above perspectives, an alternative vision could instead envisage modes of production, distribution, and consumption that promote participation and cooperation as a pathway toward a post-capitalist horizon. New initiatives within the SE are guided by that old utopia of preserving and enhancing life, expanding freedom, strengthening equality, and promoting fraternity [55], whose ultimate motivation is to bring about a change for a democratic society [56–59]. From this perspective, the SE would involve transitioning from "a centralized and highly asymmetric production economy, to a more balanced economic system based on diffuse information, knowledge, learning and production" [44,59,60]. The horizon is for the SE to lead us to a new regime of production and consumption that is more egalitarian, more sustainable, and generates greater social cohesion [4,5,61,62]. In this line, it is argued that the SE may promote a post-capitalist scenario that challenges traditional notions of property, where new dynamics of reciprocity complement money as a means of exchange and expression of value [57]. By "disrupting the entrenched master-servant relationship prevalent in many economies" [60], the SE could contribute to build more democratic, post-capitalist economies [63].

While these three perspectives do not necessarily align with any specific school of thought nor encompass the entirety of existing viewpoints, they do provide a comprehensive overview of the main political-normative stances around which most opinions can be grouped. As stated above, however, this paper does not seek to discern which perspective is the most accurate regarding the actual development of the SE nor even defend which is the most preferable from a normative point of view. Similarly, our objective is neither to provide a comprehensive definition of the emancipatory proposal nor to conduct a critical and detailed exposition of all its potential characteristics. Rather, we aim to critically examine some of conceptual and methodological limitations challenging the third perspective.

Nevertheless, to conduct this analysis appropriately, it is first essential to acknowledge that there exists no singular emancipatory perspective on SE to which we can refer in the singular. Due to the inherently polysemous nature of this concept and the varied, often contradictory, political-normative interpretations it has generated, it is epistemically unfeasible to identify a singular, comprehensive, or monopolistic theory that might be regarded as "the" emancipatory theory of SE. Rather, when reviewing the literature and predominant discourses on the subject, we encounter a bulk of views, diagnoses, and proposals that share certain common and cross-cutting elements, allowing us to identify, group, and differentiate among diverse conceptual approaches. Thus, what we observe is not a unified and conceptually coherent "theory" but rather a broad "perspective" under which various more or less comparable and commensurable—yet also divergent and at times contradictory—conceptions are gathered. Indeed, politically considered, the SE is itself a contradiction [64]. Nevertheless, this difficulty in identifying a singular, unified conceptual and normative framework is not unique to the emancipatory perspective, nor to the two alternative perspectives of the SE; rather, it is an inherent challenge in any attempt to address, define, and characterize complex constructs, such as, "capitalism", "emancipation", "inclusivity", or "neoliberalism." In light of these challenges, this paper

does not endeavor to provide an exhaustive or singular definition of what constitutes the “emancipatory perspective”, primarily because it is, in essence, a highly conflictive (and probably, unfeasible) task. It rather aims to identify and discuss certain conceptual deficiencies or limitations that may arise in much of the literature grouped under the label of the “emancipatory perspective of the SE”.

4. Some Shortcomings of the Emancipatory View

However, despite these conceptual difficulties, any attempt to define and to defend the SE from an emancipatory or post-capitalist understanding must confront numerous real socioeconomic challenges, including new forms of labor and workplace exploitation, income inequalities and tax evasion, wage stagnation, or negative externalities on local economies and the environment, among others. Despite these issues fall beyond the scope of this paper, they underscore the complexities inherent in pursuing an emancipatory vision of the SE. Beyond these factual challenges, defending or conceptualizing the SE as something (at least potentially) emancipatory must also contend with several conceptual and normative challenges precisely because they purportedly stand in opposition to more conventional pro-market, capitalist understandings of the SE. We aim to discuss three of these conceptual challenges that are of particular interest to scholars of philosophy and social theory, given their prevalence in many emancipatory claims about the SE: (i) the prominence of communities and the understanding of the equality principle; (ii) the collaborative propensity attributed to individuals as their primary rational feature; and (iii) the a-institutional and overly psychological conception of the economy and subsequently, the role of the individual and decentralized participation as the key factors driving the SE and its supposed advancement toward post-capitalist change. By addressing these conceptual challenges, we hope to contribute to a deeper understanding of the emancipatory potential and limitations of the SE within broader debates about social and economic transformation.

4.1. Collaborative Communities and the Equality Principle

Collaborative communities play an undeniable central role within the SE. Indeed, “the technological function and the marketing language of SE platforms are oriented around community” [39] (p. 124). Thus, from an emancipatory standpoint, a more egalitarian sociability must be forged in these community spaces insofar they are far detached from corporations, centralized institutions, and commercial platforms’ interests. However, to what extent do such emerging communities really advance non-capitalist modes of exchange? For some, there is no doubt: communities would perform “as an alternative in addition to, as a substitution for, or as oppositions to the capitalist landscape” [39] (p. 123). Accordingly, they would set up a kind of “grassroots economies based on non-hierarchical and non-monetary forms of exchange” [37] (p. 124), opposed to business platforms, corporate concentration, and the political establishment [65]. Given their prominence, it seems pertinent to inquire into the economic role that the emancipatory perspective of the SE attributes to these communities and whether they possess the capacity (or indeed the mandate) to supplant other kinds of institutions or economic actors, alongside their more capitalistic, non-egalitarian “sociability” patterns. Friedrich Hayek’s avowed rejection of any form of communitarianism is widely acknowledged and it is also quite useful here to develop our critic:

Only civilization brought individualization and differentiation. Primitive thought consists mainly of the common feelings of the members of small groups. Modern collectivism is a relapse into that wild state, an attempt to rebuild those strong bonds that exist in limited groups. [7] (p. 127)

We will come back to Hayek’s reflection later on. Before that, it is imperative to first elucidate the question concerning the economic role of communities and their associated egalitarian relational patterns. In this regard, it is worthwhile to examine the multiple types of societal organization that may exist and their corresponding relational patterns. According to the anthropologist Alan Page Fiske, individuals across all cultures utilize only

four primary relational models to generate most forms of social interaction, evaluation, and emotional responses: communal sharing, authority ranking, equality matching, and market pricing [38]. These models, in turn, are intricately linked to four cognitive patterns of processing relational information: relations of equivalence, hierarchy, para-equality, and proportionality.⁴

1. Equivalence occurs in communities where the guiding distributive principle is epitomized by the Saint-Simonian maxim *to each according to his/her need, from each according to his/her ability*. These communities comply with the principle of exclusion of mathematical partitions: that one is a member implies that another is not, akin to dynamics observed in familial or affective relationships, or within groups of hackers like *Anonymous*.
2. Hierarchical relationships are typically associated with centralized institutions founded on authority, wherein members are organized according to a lexicographic stratification of the type *to each according to their rank*. Examples include armies, monotheistic religions, or the bulk of teams comprising events like the football World Cup.
3. Equality relationships are typified abelian groups such as carpools, babysitting cooperatives, or the very concept of citizenship.⁵ Its distributive pattern, *one man one vote*, diverges from metrics and hierarchical rankings. The idea of basic income—granting cash to all unconditionally, would be an example, as well as the rotational system of public office in Athenian democracy.
4. Proportionality, or “geometric equality”, as Aristotle [66] (1132a) would put it, is associated with the practice of market pricing, underpinned by the principle of *to each according to their contribution*. Examples include capitalist market transactions like wages and salaries, bank interest rates, contributory benefits, or consequentialist analyses.

The emancipatory perspective of the SE may encounter its initial limitation in the misunderstanding of these four institutions and their corresponding relational patterns. Our lives and cultural and symbolic frameworks are constantly permeated with metaphors [67]. For example, the term “collaborative community” may encompass both the *Airbnb* hosts and guests.⁶ Similarly, “household economy” is commonly conflated with government national accounting. Metaphors play a pivotal role in establishing “causal interpretations” [69]. Therefore, does the assertion of the centrality of community and family imply a claim to their centrality in the causal mechanisms of the economic system? If so, two conclusions arise. On the one hand, that communities (or families) should substantially supplant markets (and states) as key economic institutions. On the other, that the relational patterns associated with the former (equivalence and para-equality) should prevail over those associated with the latter (proportionality and authority) as the fundamental behavioral patterns of a post-capitalist economic system.

Communities can be highly efficient as they “may solve problems that both markets and states are ill-equipped to address, especially where the nature of social interactions or the goods and services being transacted makes contracting highly incomplete or costly” [70] (p. 385). However, this does not make them, or the entirety of the SE, fundamentally different from business as usual, inherently good, and potentially transformative from an emancipatory perspective. The fact that equivalence and para-equality relations may be preferable moral standards from this perspective does not imply that hierarchy and proportionality are not necessary. For example, is it feasible for a mechanism such as the national social security to work exclusively through user communities? Can macro redistributive policies exist without a hierarchic authority that democratically imposes measures to combat fraud and tax evasion? Advocating for an economic system led exclusively by communities whose members solely operate under relations of equivalence confuses means with ends and reveals a naïve understanding of the economic functioning of any real-world complex economic society.

Similarly, suggesting that communities should replace hierarchical or centralized institutions in roles that exceed their scope (such as distributive justice or macroeconomic policies) does not seem reasonable, particularly from an emancipatory perspective. The same reasoning applies to proportionality. From this perspective, proportionality should be

defended to assess what we socially value, such as experience (with increasing salaries to recognize length of service), training (recognition of excellence), or certain specific activities (due to inherent health risks they entail). We can turn back to Hayek now to point out that, while he was probably wrong in asserting that “Modern collectivism is a relapse into the savage state”, he was mostly accurate in associating “strong ties to limited groups”.

This critique does not imply that the role of communities may not be fundamental to the advancement of an emancipatory economic model, nor does it imply that they are, in fact, a necessary condition for transitioning toward it. Collaborative communities can, and indeed must, be capable of coordinating and federating to address complex organizational challenges and undertake macro-level tasks that would otherwise be unfeasible if approached in isolation or without any coordination. Indeed, the literature in this field has largely proposed institutional designs aimed at enabling community-based initiatives in economic innovation and democratic deepening to achieve high levels of organizational efficiency and operational effectiveness [48,71]. What we are pointing out here in particular is that most emancipatory visions of the SE appear to assume, somewhat naïvely, that the strong ties and para-equality relations characteristic of locally based communities can and should scale effortlessly to the macro-social level. In doing so, they overlook alternative organizational structures and relational patterns that, indeed, may be equally or even more effective than community structures and para-equality relations for advancing toward greater levels of socio-economic justice and emancipation.

4.2. Motivational Monism

There exists another feature pervasive across much of the literature that may easily constitute a second major limitation of the emancipatory perspective of the SE, namely a misunderstanding of human rationality and its role within economic theory. In contrast with the *homo economicus* ideal, an emancipatory view may easily tend to exaggerate the idea of the *homo reciprocans*, which would operate on the premise *I give/do something for you, and you give something in return to me or to a third party according to your possibilities*. According to this supposedly natural attribution, individuals “have the real and great opportunity to infect other subjects by acting according to the principle of reciprocity” [72] (p. 221). This influence would consequently “form a critical mass beyond which” the capitalist system itself and the “functioning of economic organizations will surely come to be different” [73] (pp. 9, 12). Through collaborative communities, individuals would establish dense networks of cooperative and collaborative relationships, often altruistically or disinterestedly, at almost zero cost, in a nested and virtuously coordinated way with their peers. In this regard, Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is certainly relevant for our expositive purposes:

However selfish human beings may be supposed to be, there are evidently some principles in their nature which make them interested in the fate of others and make their happiness necessary to them, even if they derive from it nothing more than the simple pleasure of contemplating it. [74] (p. 9)

Smith’s quote serves to illustrate that, in this case, the emancipatory view of the SE paradoxically employs part of the conceptual toolkit of neoclassical economics and, therefore, tends to repeat its mistakes.⁷ Mainstream, standard economic theory assumes that the human mind is ontogenetically designed to maximize the individual utility functions. Individuals are presumed to always seek to maximize their preferences by means of an inferential cost-benefit calculation: given information A and preferences B, the individual aims to maximize B regardless of others’ circumstances and preferences [77]. Smith was right: the motivational monism underlying the atomistic anthropology of conventional, neoclassical economic theory is widely refuted by empirical evidence showing that human cognition is actually based on a “system of multiple incentives, not just one” [78].

The emancipatory perspective may be right in rejecting the *homo economicus* model described by neoclassical theory, yet it paradoxically tends to adopt the same motivational monism. A neoclassical economist may argue that *since subjects are rational, if they compete*

without interference, they will achieve a pareto-optimized market. Similarly—*ceteris paribus*—, the emancipatory perspective may defend that *since individuals are naturally collaborative, if they are not interfered with, they will achieve a fair and equitable economy*. Both deductive inferences are equivalent in logical-formal terms. They are also perfectly truth-conservative: if the content of their premises is true, then necessarily so is their conclusion. The problem lies not in their logical formulation, which is certainly correct, but in the substantive content of their premises, as both assume a similar motivational monism: instrumental rationality in the first case, collaborative in the second. The problem is not that humans cannot be selfish or altruistic, rational, or collaborative, but rather that their cognition is multi-motivational: neither self-interest nor collaboration has a monopoly over human behavior.⁸

Another characteristic of standard, neoclassical economic theory is its reliance on instrumental rationality as a constitutive factor in explaining the functioning of markets. The emancipatory perspective does not necessarily fall into this fallacy. But to avoid doing so, it must question whether the individuals' preferences and the articulation of different relational patterns (equivalence, hierarchy, equality, and proportionality) can be conceived without first considering the institutional context in which these individuals operate. Jon Elster noted this: "cooperation and coordination may emerge by decentralized, uncoerced action". However, he also observed that, "they may also be centrally imposed by social institutions backed by force" [80] (p. 101). Accordingly, the emancipatory SE perspective must critically question whether it is feasible to envisage collaborative rationality as a constitutive factor of a more just economy without previously acknowledging the existence of such coercive institutions or the significant costs in terms of class, gender, origin, education, or culture that such collaboration always entails in the real world.

This is not a matter of whether individuals who compete or collaborate free from interference can achieve an optimal economy or a just society, but rather that the instrumental rationality of the *homo economicus* would only be plausible if it were found *ex-ante* in a competitive context where the costs to maximize individual preferences were zero. The emancipatory SE perspective can easily fall into the same trap: it is not that collaboration cannot contribute to a fairer society, but that "collaborative rationality" is only plausible when its cost is zero. In short: both the rational individual and the collaborative hypotheses are flawed as they presuppose the existence of a predefined institutional and distributive context. It can legitimately be hoped that collaboration lead to a fairer economy, but it cannot be arbitrarily assumed that "collaborative rationality" can be able to fulfil that end by itself. If we reject the ideal of *homo economicus* as the causal variable to explain the emergence of capitalist markets, we should also reject *homo reciprocans* as a constitutive factor of an emancipatory economy.

4.3. A-Institutional Markets and the Psychologization of Economic Life

Thus far, we have seen the prominence of communities, alongside their intrinsic egalitarian relational pattern, as the main forces of economic activity. Subsequently, we delved into the concept of *homo reciprocans* as key and constitutive factor of a more equitable and a fairer economy system. Now, we aim at discussing the leading role of the individual and the ensuing psychologist perspective—in contrast with a more institutional approach—when explaining the SE from an emancipatory viewpoint.

As it is often suggested, the SE "creates more democratic production processes as well as more open cultures of participation" [34] (p. 694). These cultures are expected to be formed around a multitude of open-minded individuals capable of initiative, imagination, and rapid response [50]. This notion of autonomous collective individual action would provide for a "self-organizing system of order comprised of self-inventing and self-sustaining individuals" [39] (p. 123). These individuals bear resemblance to what is termed peer progressives, i.e., "your equals, the ones whose respect and judgement you seek [that] believe in social progress. Peer-progressive networks would therefore be the most powerful tool to advance the cause of progress" [81] (p. 32). It logically follows that peer progressive "do not believe that markets are capable of satisfying all of our human needs" and that

government institutions do not either. “Instead of building a large government agency, it [the peer progressive response] tries to build a peer network around it, a system of dense, diverse and decentralized exchange” [81] (p. 38).

The emphasis on the individual(ity) factor and on the networks that emerge from it in explaining economic phenomena sharply contrast with other traditions of economic thought. In the mid-twentieth century, for instance, the original institutional economics approach was at its zenith. Figures like John R. Commons, one of its foremost proponents, posited three fundamental axioms that every economy fulfils: (i) its functioning does not derive from universal laws, but is historically contingent on cultural, legal, and social conditions; (ii) markets are inherently political and legal constructs, thus imbued with conflict stemming from informational and power asymmetries; and (iii) states and governments play the primary role as economic agents. Commons criticized marginalist economic theory as it had broken away from the tenets of classical political economy.⁹ Paradoxically, much of the emancipatory perspective of the SE seems to have broken with this tradition as well. From Aristotle to Marx, classical political economy was always interested in distributive justice—the allocation of income, wealth, and productive resources—as a prerequisite for further income distribution and price formation. In contrast, neoclassical and marginalist economic theory focus on income distribution as a consequence derived from the process of income distribution and price formation *within* markets. In other words, for the classical economists, income and wealth distribution are politically determined *from outside* the markets [83]. Conversely, for neoclassical ones, and it would seem, for much of the emancipatory perspective of the SE, distribution is rather economically determined from *within* the market: for the former, by the laws of general equilibrium of supply and demand [84]; for the latter, as we have observed, through collaborative and decentralized processes lead by peer-progressive networks [42,48,85].

In 2014 in US alone, the hourly net rate of an *Uber* driver ranged between \$10 and \$13 [54], while the platform reported revenues of over \$1.7 billion [86]. Does this stem from the process of income and wage allocation *within* markets, or are there exogenous factors at play, such as the erosion of labor protection policies or the implementation of tax breaks for large corporations? Neoclassical economists would favor the former hypothesis, while classical economists would lean toward the second. The emancipatory perspective should align with the latter, yet it often seems not to be the case. The mistake here lies in the fact that, like to neoclassical economic theory, this perspective endorses an a-institutional and highly individual, psychological view of market functioning, which underestimates the role of political, economic, and social institutions, starting with governments. Once again, the institutionalist insight of John R. Commons remains pertinent:

Either the state, or a corporation, or a cartel, or a holding company, or a cooperative association, or a trade union, or an employers’ association, or a trade association, or a joint trade agreement of two associations, or a stock exchange, or a board of trade, may lay down and enforce the rules which determine for individuals this bundle of correlative and reciprocal economic relationships. [87] (p. 649)

Among the factors determining whether an economic system yields to more or less just distributive outcomes are the existence and the pressure exerted by trade unions and employer organizations, the size of the public sector, the presence of cooperatives and public corporations, or the government’s tax and monetary policy, among many other factors. The bulk of the emancipatory perspective of the SE tends to ignore these factors and instead places greater emphasis on the virtues of peer-progressives and spontaneous collaborative communities as the linchpins for progressing toward an emancipatory or post-capitalist economy. In doing so, it reproduces an a-institutional and individual, psychological bias in its comprehension of the economy. By entrusting its emancipatory aspirations solely to the greater efficiency in coordinating individuals’ preferences through collaborative platforms and decentralized networks, it neglects the broader institutional and structural determinants that shape most economic outcomes.

The emancipatory view of the SE seems to naively entrust its legitimate aspirations to the emergence of virtuous collaborative communities formed by a spontaneously self-organized mass of collaborative peers based on equality and altruism, who would be able to achieve efficient distributive outcomes oriented toward economic and social emancipation. It thus forgoes any attempt to unravel the institutional and structural relations of power dynamics and structures of domination that permeate the political and economic spheres. Instead, it seems to easily rely largely on a sort of “sovereign consumers” [88], now turned peer-progressive individuals and networks, who operate detached from institutional and structural constraints. In adopting this stance, it therefore forsakes any attempt to scrutinize the institutional and structural relations of power and domination inherent in society. Consequently, it veers away from the historical program of social and economic democratization movements. Indeed, its “complete neglect of the history of collaborative and cooperative movements is one of the reasons it has been so easy for business to co-opt” [6] (p. 175).

5. Conclusions

The above is not to suggest that all proponents of an emancipatory understanding of the SE inevitably commit these same errors nor that there exists a single emancipatory theory which systematically reproduces all of them. Rather, it indicates that most of those endorsing this view tend to ascribe excessive explanatory significance to collaborative practices, overlooking the macro-causal dynamics and institutional mechanisms that underpin the economic and political structure of our market societies. Consequently, they fail to acknowledge that, far from transforming capitalism into a more benevolent and equitable system, the SE instead becomes something more “dangerous to work relations, consumer welfare, distributive justice, and regulatory compliance” [65] (p. 104).

Does making economic activity more collaborative or increasing its scope for relations based on equality and equivalence guarantee fairer and more equitable results? Can peer collaboration alone solve issues such as increasing economic inequality and polarization? The blind faith that collaborative mechanisms and devices (platforms, communities, individual rationality, technology, etc.) will solve the main social and economic problems on their own presents an obstacle precisely for the SE’s very emancipatory potential.

Collaborative practices have always been present in all social institutions, including states and markets. For the historian and anthropologist Karl Polanyi, any economic system is constituted by three primary elements: nature, money, and labor-power. The way in which these “fictitious commodities” are embedded in society determines how emancipatory an economy may be.¹⁰ The fact that an economic system is more collaborative and provides more scope for communities does not necessarily entail a fairer economy. Rather, its fairness is subject to the degree of commodification to which the natural resources, medium of exchange, and employed labor force are subjected. If the SE is to deploy its full potential to advance the cause of a much more progressive and emancipatory economic system, then its proponents should better embrace a more Polanyian, classical political economy approach to consider the way fictitious commodities are embedded in SE dynamics, as well as the extent to which institutional and structural factors do actually affect individuals’ capacities, communities’ roles, and the features of human rationality.

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Notes

- 1 “A theory –positive or normative–, is all the more informative the more possible worlds are incompatible with it” [7] (p. 117).
- 2 The conception of “truth as correspondence” stated by John Searle can be understood as “the idea that our true statements are made true by the way things are in a real world that exists independently of the statements” [8] (p. xii; 199–226).
- 3 According to Alan Fiske, “people construct complex and varied social forms using combinations of these models implemented according to diverse cultural rules” [38] (p. 689). In fact, however, no institution embodies a single behavioral pattern: families, for example, do not operate exclusively in an egalitarian way, nor does the state function solely based on hierarchically subjecting its citizens.
- 4 See note 3 above.
- 5 The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines “abelian groups” as groups whose operation is commutative. In algebra, it is conventionally referred to as addition rather than multiplication operations, which it is the reason why they are also sometimes called “additive groups”.
- 6 For an accurate critic of the term “community” associated to the *Airbnb* hosts and guests and their socio-economic consequences on real neighbor communities and local economies, see: Allyson E. Gold [68]. I am in debt with one of this journal’s reviewers for the reference.
- 7 Neoclassical economics could be defined in several ways, as each of them emerged as a result of various historical, methodological, and econometric critic. One of the most succinct ways to understand it is by using an operative strategy that underlines—or decomposes—the most basic theoretical axioms that almost all variants of neoclassical economy must stick to: i.e., (i) methodological individualism (socio-economic explanation must be sought at the level of the individual agent); (ii) methodological instrumentalism (all behavior is preference-driven); and (iii) methodological equilibration (axiomatic imposition of equilibrium in theoretical and economic reasoning). For a further development of these axioms, see: Christian Arnsperger and Yanis Varoufakis [75]. Additionally, for a historical account of the term “neoclassical economy”, see: Tony Aspromourgos [76].
- 8 Empirical evidence shows that “warm connotations of reciprocity are only part of the human story. Anthropological scholarship includes many examples of manipulative forms of reciprocity [...] in certain cases, it is actually the withholding of reciprocity that strengthens societal bonds” [79] (p. 1103).
- 9 To further expand Commons’ critical perspective of neoclassical economics and extend it to the a-institutional character of the emancipatory view of the SE, see: Antoon Spithoven [82] and Rodrigo Constantino Jeronimo et al. [33]. I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for suggesting these valuable references to me.
- 10 As the same Karl Polanyi observed, “the emergence of the market to a ruling force of the economy can be traced by noting the extent to which land and food were mobilized through exchange, and labor was turned into a commodity free to be purchased in the market” [89] (p. 255).

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