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Food waste and sustainability: distributed responsibility – constructing a sharing economy?

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Food waste and sustainability: distributed responsibility – constructing a sharing economy?

In recent years notions of ‘sharing’ and ‘circular’ economies have emerged as new ways of moving towards sustainability. Alongside the rise of new values, trends and technologies these ideas are closely aligned through the joint focus on reducing and reusing scarce resources. In this paper we explore these connections through empirical material collected during research to examine the attempt to initiate a sharing economy in Kirklees in the north of England.

The marketing literature has tended to focus on the nature of the exchange of goods and services among participants of the sharing economy (e.g. Corciolani & Dalli, 2014; Scaraboto, 2015). The issue of ‘sharing’ has thus received considerable attention and critique (Arnould & Rose, 2016; Belk, 2016) with some claiming that the sharing economy isn’t about sharing at all (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2015; Stokes et al., 2014) – an issue also raised by sociologists (Schor 2015). We contribute to this debate by focusing on the process of sharing to move beyond reified notions of sharing ‘subjects’ and ‘organisations’. Focusing on the issue of food waste and Kirklees Council’s attempt to foster sharing between local charities and supermarkets to reallocate wasted food to the increasing number people in ‘crisis’ (Trussell Trust 2013), we explore the emergence of ‘distributed responsibility’ and a ‘food waste discourse coalition... contingent on the involvement of supermarkets’ (Evans et al. 2017: 13).

In September 2014 Kirklees Council won €1m in the Mayor’s Challenge at Bloomberg Philanthropies in the US. The award was to help implement Comoodle, an initiative that envisages a revolution in the way public services are delivered via sharing. A key feature of Comoodle is the desire to stimulate the sharing of underused local resources in the form of ‘*stuff, space and skills*’ (Kirklees Council, 2015). During 2015 we conducted an ‘ethnographic case study evaluation’ (Robson 2000) of three pilots set up to test initial Comoodle assumptions about sharing. Here we focus specifically on the pilot for *space*, which centred on the Welcome Centre in Huddersfield – a charitable organisation and food bank that provides food and other items to individuals and families in crisis.

At the time, the need for *space* was paramount if the Centre was to accept waste food donations from supermarkets. A short-term offer was secured from market services at the council, who agreed to share ‘space’ (cold storage) in return for ‘stuff’ (waste food) and ‘skills’ (from the centre). As an interviewee from the Centre stated: ‘*What they’re offering is they provide us with space and... we in return, at no cost to them... provide a crisis support service for the people of Kirklees.*’

The offer was withdrawn when other market traders complained about the Center getting something for nothing, yet supermarkets were neither approached nor offered to provide an alternative. Their role was a taken for granted assumption, which for us begged questions about the motivation and pressures to develop a sharing economy. This becomes all the more pertinent when we consider the vast amount of food supermarkets waste: last year Sainsbury’s donated 3,000 tonnes of food, just 7% of their surplus overall (Stuart and Jarozs 2017). Yet the benefits to Kirklees of getting

this ‘sharing’ pilot to work – at a time when they were subject to massive funding cuts from central Government – were such that they felt compelled to pursue it.

Where does this leave us? Well, in their work on the politics of sustainability, Evans et al (2017) trace the changing discourses around food waste campaigning in the UK across two periods. The insights that emerge, are instructive, we argue, in this instance at least, for the light they shed on the attempt to construct a sharing economy.

In the first period (2007-2013) the involvement of a range of governmental and non-governmental actors in a new governmentality of food waste – linked to the publication of *The Food We Waste* report from WRAP (2008) – was a central theme. During this period, Evans et al (2017) argue that ethical responsibility was used to problematize everyday patterns of consumption and secure the responsabilization of consumers through a range of political (food waste) rationalities. An unintended consequence of this approach, they argue, was a growing awareness of food waste and subsequent calls for greater collective responsibility, with food waste thus being recognized to be a systematic rather than an individual problem.

In the second period (2013-2015) Evans and colleagues show that ‘politics of blame’ underpinning supermarket waste strategies lessened considerably as environmental debate – including an intervention by Pope Francis – increased awareness of food waste globally. However, they claim that the subsequent emergence of ‘distributed responsibility’ should not simply be seen as a ‘triumph of shared over individual responsibility’ (2017, 10). The emergent ‘food waste discourse coalition’ of governmental and non-governmental actors was still contingent, they argue, on supermarket participation, and on the individual consumer. Yet in this period the discursive focus was no longer simply about what the individual consumer could do to reduce food waste and enhance sustainable consumption, but on what supermarkets could do for the consumer.

In this context, as Evans et al (2017, 12) note, when it comes to food waste ‘the consumer’ is now used as a ‘rhetorical device to mediate the relationships between strategic and collective actors’. In is our contention that the notion of ‘sharing economy’ was used in a similar way in Kirklees to mediate relationships and find policy solutions to pressing local problems through engagement with the ‘food waste discourse coalition’.

What does this say about food waste, sustainability and the assumed links between sharing and circular economies? Well, if supermarkets really want to address the food waste problem, and move toward a circular economy, we conclude that they need to cut food waste at source rather than depending on charities and food banks (Stuart and Jarozs 2017). Sharing is potentially a useful adjunct to circular thinking, but as our analysis demonstrates, ‘sharing initiatives’ are not always about sharing.

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