

**UNIVERSITA' CATTOLICA
DEL SACRO CUORE
MILANO**

Dottorato di ricerca in
Sociologia e metodologia
della ricerca sociale

Ciclo XXVI
S.S.D: SPS/08

**THE POLITICAL DIMENSION OF CONSUMPTION:
THE CASE OF ONLINE BARTER**

Tesi di Dottorato di :
GIULIA FEDERICA AIRAGHI
Matricola: 3911252

Tutor:
Prof.ssa Emanuela Mora
Prof. Nico Carpentier

Anno Accademico 2012/2013



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“You need a master. But what is a master? A master is not who tell you what to do or what not to do [...] This is the lesson of a true master, a true master is not an agent of discipline and prohibition; his message is not ‘you cannot’ is ‘you can’. What? You can do the impossible, what appears impossible within the coordinates of the existing constellation. A master is a kind of mediator who gives you back to yourself, who precisely delivers you to the abyss of your freedom. [...] And I think again, this is the lesson of a true master, the message of a true master is ‘you have the right to do it, do it!’. Now you will tell me, ‘but why can’t I decide this alone?’. No, I don’t believe in this power of autonomy, somebody has to kick you from the outside.”

(S. Zizek, “Economy: the vicious cycle of capitalist reproduction”, lesson taken at the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities, 25th November 2013)

To all the masters of my life.

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Chapter 1

An introduction to the study of the barter practice

“Barter may well be one of the most archaic and universal means by which people acquired needed or desired objects they lacked as well as products they had never seen before. It undoubtedly played a vital role in early hunting-gathering societies by establishing contact with peoples beyond their cultural and linguistic horizons. There is reason to believe that in prehistoric times, barter was one of the principal means of cultural diffusion.”

(A. Chapman, *Barter as a universal mode of exchange*)

1.1 Barter: a polythetic concept

This thesis explores the practice of contemporary online barter, with the aim of understanding how the practice is performed and to which extent barter can be considered a counter-hegemonic activity. The work, developed through the study of three barter websites, indicates the barter phenomenon as an emerging and increasing practice which constitutes an alternative way of exchanging goods. The principles at the base of barter exchanges are indeed dissimilar to the principles of predominant market exchanges: in this sense, the work explores the power of barter in contrasting the power both of money and of the market model of consumption, here considered as hegemonic by virtue of their pervasive influence in all spheres of life: social, economical, intellectual, political. Therefore, a counter-hegemonic practice is here considered whichever practice involving subjects who are able to produce alternative processes of signification, challenging the taken-for-granted knowledge of everyday life. Defining barter a counter-hegemony means, consequently, to focus not only on its economic side but also, and more importantly, on its cultural and social dimensions. Taking these two dimensions into consideration, also means dealing with barter from a particular, yet highly unexplored, perspective.

The incipit of a research always starts with a definition of the research object; however, the definition of barter represents a difficult task for all scholars who engaged in the matter. Indeed, an exploration of the available literature on barter reveals a number of problems and limits related to the task. Not only there is little or no agreement about what barter is, but there is also an impressive scarceness of works focused on the issue, as if barter was a forgotten scientific island, where scientists liked to land for a while, just to sail away after a rest. In the metaphor proposed by Chapman, barter “looked rather like a poor relative who had not ‘made it’ and kept showing up at family parties, whether invited or not” (Chapman 1980: 34). Surprisingly enough, barter is mentioned in an important number of anthropological and economic works which deal with gift, trades, or money (Barth 1971; Dalton 1982; Enzig 1966; Malinowski 2005; Marx 1995; Polanyi 2001; Sahlins, 1972; Smith 1976), but nonetheless, there are few works specifically focused on barter (Chapman 1980; Humphrey, Hugh-Jones 1992). In those works, authors assumed that the practice cannot be defined: “we provide no definition of barter. Instead we treat it as [...] a ‘polythetic category’” (Humphrey, Hugh-Jones 1992: 2). A definition of barter, they argue, may result only by “stripping it from its social context” (Humphrey, Hugh-Jones 1992: 1). Chapman herself, in her attempt to build a universal definition of barter, underlines the fact that a barter model is a theoretical construction which is barely representative of reality and that does not describe “barter [as] a transaction between two living human beings, or groups” that is, something that “always occurs in a social and psychological situation”. Indeed, the model “leaves the psychological as well as the social contexts undefined. They are considered non-pertinent in the model” (Chapman 1980: 36). Moreover, while anthropologists have been collecting tons of evidences related to communities organised on gift-based economies, and there are plenty of examples of societies – as today’s society – organised on market-based economies, no economy based on pure barter has never been discovered, hence no community or society organised on the basis of barter never existed. Nevertheless, barter is accounted to be a transversal phenomenon, whose presence has been detected in a substantial number of societies (primitive and modern): “barter is not just a historical institution or one peculiar to archaic or ‘primitive’ economies; it is a contemporary phenomenon which covers

both large and small-scale transactions and occurs within and between many different types of society” (Humphrey, Hugh-Jones 1992: 5).

Despite these alternative perspectives on barter leave the definition of barter open to specific social and cultural contexts, in an attempt to re-assess its role in our history, in classical anthropological and economic literature, focused on the study of gift, trades, or money, the analysis of the barter practice produced two kinds of extreme interpretations. In the first case, that is, in mainstream anthropology (Malinowski 2005; Sahlins 1972; Thurnwald 1932), barter is conceived as an a-social and a-political practice, usually mentioned to differentiate it from gift and to underline the fact that its nature resembles the nature of trades. In some cases (Sahlins 1972) it has been even described as a form of “negative reciprocity”, associated to robbery and selfish profiteering. An interpretation which gave space in the economic literature to an understatement of barter, described as the mere forerunner of international commerce, a moment in the history of human kind which actually led the way to the birth of money (Clower 1969; Jevons 1910; Menger 1892; Samuelson 1973; Smith 1976). There are even economists who maintained that barter never existed (Dalton 1982).

In the light of such contrasting interpretations, how is it possible to understand what barter really is? There is no doubt barter is about exchanging objects, hence it implies an economic dimension, since one of the motives why people engage in barter is the acquisition of desired, but not possessed, objects. Nonetheless, there are reasons to doubt the economic motivation being the core of the practice: “the economic is not the sole or primary motivation for the exchanges. The model of barter is not concerned with the general problem of the economic utility of all types of trade” (Chapman 1980: 42). Opposing the idea that the individual is a natural merchant (Smith 1976), what scholars maintaining an alternative perspective on barter stressed is the profound social nature of barter, which is in fact described, in their words, as a pattern of exchange defined by the relations established by the parties involved. Indeed, their assumptions are based on the idea that barter is just one possible form of exchange among others, but each act of exchange represents a social relation. Barter has been defined as a “neutral” exchange, that is, disconnected from social norms, only because the construction of a theoretical, abstract, model

gave it this role, but barter is never neutral, in the sense of social neutrality (Chapman 1980).

As Simmel (1983) puts it in fact, society does not exist as a stable entity apart from individuals: society is realized only when individuals establish reciprocal relations (Mora 1994). Society is considered, in Simmel's words, an "event" more than an entity and it is defined by the performing of exchanging actions which define the bonds supporting a collectivity. Exchanging is then a dynamical process and so Simmel insists:

not that 'society' already existed and then brought about acts of exchange, but on the contrary, that exchange is one of the functions that creates an inner bond between men – a society, in place of a mere collection of individuals. Society is not an absolute entity which must first exist so that all the individual relations of its members [...] can develop within its framework or be represented by it: it is only the synthesis or the general term for the totality of these specific interactions. (Simmel 2001: 174).

Against Smith's (1976) idea of an individual driven by a natural instinct to exchange, Simmel argues that people do not need to exchange, but people need to interact between each other. It could be argued that in the course of these interactions individuals are immediately exchanging, since Simmel (1983) noted that these are not only relations, but *reciprocal* relations. Nonetheless, proper economic exchange processes are always process of evaluation. Then, depending on how exchanges are performed these bonds change, generating different social forms, but there can never be a type of exchange where social relations are not supported, since exchanges are relational.

Supporting the alternative perspective developed by the afore-mentioned scholars, the scope of this work is to verify that the barter practice not only creates social relations, but that it gives space for a particular type of bonds. Differently from gift exchange which constitutes a "prestation totale" (Mauss 1990), barter constitutes equally total exchange (Strathern 1992) in the sense that, through barter exchange, individuals establish the value of those objects which determine a reciprocal sacrifice. In barter the exchange of sacrifices leading to the constitution of value (Simmel 2011) is performed on the basis of balanced relations. Since barter mainly exchanges

objects which are dissimilar (Strathern, 1992; Humphrey, Hugh-Jones 1992), the balance does not refer to the value of these objects, but to the value of the parties involved. A barter exchange is the only exchange where participants, although confronted in a direct relation (not mediated by money) do not establish a form of dominance as it happens in gift exchange – where the compulsion of the gift is exercised by forcing the other to enter into debt (Strathern 1992). There must be reciprocal esteem since the exchange is concluded only if both parts are satisfied about the negotiation, hence barter does not work with coercion, neither with compulsion. It does not imply the idea of debt, since it is performed through a mutual “payment”. This is due to the fact that transactors are quits at the end and this characteristic is what led many scholars to think that barter does not create social relations, because “it is possible to call quits and turn aside never to see the partner again” (Humphrey, Hugh-Jones 1992: 8).

Nonetheless, this possibility of quitting the relation just after exchange is the characteristic of barter which confuses the most. If this is true, it is also true that there are precise reasons why this is not the case. Indeed, “it is comparatively rare for opportunities for barter to happen quite spontaneously and by pure chance and then never occur again” (ibidem). Some anthropological works (Anderlini, Sabourian 1992; Humphrey 1985; 1992; Strathern 1992) identified the common tendencies of conducting barter exchange with known people in particular place and time, as Polanyi (2001) underlined in his work. Polanyi noted how, before the existence of internal markets, people met and exchanged their goods in external or local markets, held in particular time of the year and where exchanged were predetermined. The work of Anderlini and Sabourian (1992) demonstrates that this was to minimize transaction costs. The tendency to act fairly was due to the fact that it was convenient, under a social perceptive, to exchange with the same persons.

Not only people were exchanging with the same persons, but they were also exchanging with predetermined rates. Humphrey described the exchange ratio of the Lhomi community in the valley of the Arun river on the border of Tibet (1985: 57-61); Chapman indicates ratio as one of the five characteristics of barter (1980: 51-52); Einzig reconstructs the structure of several communities based on barter where there are exchange ratio. He even maintains that “in so far as the existence of fixed

barter ratios facilitates barter it contributed towards the survival of the moneyless system of trading” (1966: 356). The economical explanation over the birth of money (Jevons 1910; Menger 1892), and the consequential minor role attributed to barter, is based on the idea that, when the double coincidence of needs, typical of the barter practice, ceased to be an efficient system of exchange, people turned to the instrument called money in order to have a standard value and to have deferred payments. Now, the institution of exchange ratio contradicts this theory, since people were already exchanging with standard value, without the need to calculate through a third element the values of their exchanges. Furthermore, as Anderlini and Sabourian (1992) underline, if it is true that a barter system occurring in perfect simultaneity is almost impossible, it is also true that credits are the best instrument solving the problems connected to the barter practice. Although they recognised that money can solve some problems, it really does not solve them all:

a full credits system can be said to resolve difficulties of barter. [...] In the case of money, it is true that the difficulties of barter are in part resolved, but [...] the difficulty with money is that, while it will allow agents to purchase commodities in the future by selling commodities now, it will not suffice for the reverse. By holding money, traders can transfer wealth through time, but they will find it difficult to transfer to the present wealth which will be available to them in the future (Anderlini, Sabourian 1992: 82-83).

It is clear that time introduces the need to create trustworthiness, which is managed by credits. Trust is of paramount importance in barter because, although it does not create reciprocal independence, yet it should take place between people who interact on a regular basis (Hugh-Jones 1992; Humphrey 1992). Hence it seems impossible that barter is described by a negative reciprocity, or by an asocial form of exchange.

In any case, the important consideration made by Anderlini and Sabourian (1992) is that barter can be a pattern of exchange, as well as money can be a pattern of exchange, as long as people believe in money. Barter and money, as well as barter

and gift, can perfectly coexist, and there are evidences proving the fact that barter existed and still exists in monetary economies¹.

1.2 The contemporary barter practice

This returns us to the assumption at the base of this work: that barter could be considered a counter-hegemonic practice in the light of the hegemony imposed by other pattern of exchange and consumption. It is in fact evident that money did not destroy barter, it only imposed its pattern of exchange on the economic structure of a society, acting like an hegemony. Barter survived as a counter-hegemonic way of exchanging objects and establishing social relations. Humphrey and Hugh-Jones (1992) reflect on the various motives why people engage in barter, and identify three main reasons: the absence of a structured monetary system; the collective willingness not to use money and the shortage of money. If the first of these reasons do not apply in our contemporary society, this work tries to demonstrate that the second motivation can be as valid as it is the last, and most diffused², motivation. It also shows that they both allow the emergence of a practice that exposes the political nature of the economic order, by refuting the supposed naturalness and rationality of that order, based on money. The present research, describing how the contemporary practice of barter is performed, puts the accent on the political dimension of both the exchange and the consumption fields, with the aim of understanding in which way and how far this practice can be considered a counter-hegemonic practice. Unfortunately, as for barter as a general issue there is no so much literature, for contemporary forms of barter there is even less. With the awareness of the problems connected to the definitions of barter, here follows a definition developed through analysis and observation of contemporary practices.

¹ See, Hows (2010); Hoekman, Kostecki (2001: 111): “Any introductory textbook of economics will explain that barter is inefficient. Indeed, its inefficiency is one of the historical reasons for the creation of money. However, in international relations there is usually no money and nations are stuck with barter”.

² The few works on contemporary barter available, recognise this cause to be the most diffused, see Powell (2002); Noguera, Linz (2006); Cellarius (2000); Marin, Schnitzer (2002).

In the introduction to the collected papers of their volume, Humphrey and Hugh-Jones (1992) indicate five main characteristics of the barter practice, that are: a) the diversity of the objects exchanged; b) that the protagonists are free and equal; c) that there is no reference to abstract measure of value or numeraire; d) that barter can occur simultaneously or asynchronously; e) that the act is transformative, in the sense that objects exchanged are moving between different regimes of value (Appadurai 1986). In her work on barter, also Chapman distinguishes five characteristics, which she calls, mechanisms: “1) bargaining; 2) use of set or customary rates; 3) exchange without bargaining or set rates; 4) delayed exchange or credit; 5) use of money as a measure or standard of value” (Chapman 1980: 50). In the present work, all these characteristics are considered as valid dimensions of the contemporary practice and, starting from them, a new definition is provided. Therefore, barter is defined as the exchange of products or services, without the use of money, between two parties who negotiate within a relation of direct reciprocity. Nonetheless, the definition so conceived allows recognising three phases of the process, where each of the above-mentioned mechanisms is at work: a) a moment of acquaintance of the parties involved in the exchange; b) the moment of negotiation; c) the moment of exchange. Finally, the contemporary barter practice differentiates depending on the environment where it is performed (online or offline environment) and on the actors involved (individuals, businesses, or governments). It is important to stress right from the beginning that this thesis concentrates on the online barter between individuals. What follows is a brief description of each moment, differentiated by environment and actors: a richer description of the practice will be offered in the fifth and sixth chapter, in the light of the information brought by the empirical material.

1.2.1 Acquaintance

Barter system needs information to function properly (Aderlini, Sabourian 1992) and the moment of acquaintance allows this information to circulate among subjects involved in the exchange. In this moment, two types of information are shared: information referring to the quality and the status of the objects, and information

referring to the subjects. The information flow is bi-directional, since each of the two parties is, at the same time, “buyer” and “seller”.

The moment of acquaintance differs if barter is performed online or offline. In offline barter the moment of acquaintance is made by a face-to-face relation in a market place, where each single barterer enters in a communicational exchange with another barterer who shows an interest for objects exposed. On the contrary, in online barter the moment of acquaintance is influenced by a mediated communication which is subordinated by the registration into a barter website. The registration immediately connects the barterer to all other subjects registered in the online community, being the information given by the subject publicly visible. Hence, if in offline barter, acquaintance is related to the participation in a direct relation, focused on the acquisition of object's information, in online barter a subject can acquire information about both the object and the subject, without entering in a direct communicational relation. A user is in fact free to look at other users' pages without them being involved in a communicational exchange.

In the light of these differences, online and offline barter understand a different distribution of information. In offline barter, the communicational situation allows barterers to acquire information about the object: plus, the physical nature of the situation in which both parts are involved allows them to get direct information about objects proposed. In any case, information related to the subject remains scarce: none of the two parties are able to infer about previous behaviours and cannot consequently deduce potentially future attitudes. In other words, they cannot judge about the trustworthiness of the exchanging partner. Reputation hence plays a minor role, as in the case of pure barter situation (Aderlini, Sabourian 1992; Chapman 1980), where time exercises no or little influence on the relation. On the contrary, barterers exchanging online acquire less information about the object: the information given is the result of the owner's description and not the direct experience with the materiality of the object. Hence, this information is based on the subjective judgment released by a subject. The reliability of this information is measured by the trustworthiness of the subject who produced it, but in online barter information related to trustworthiness is available, contrary to offline barter. Indeed, on barter websites there is a generally higher circulation of information: all websites

function with a feedback system able to manage the burden of information related to users trustworthiness, and some websites maintain a public space for conversations, which are important sources of attitude's information.

With regard to the actors involved in the barter practice, individuals can meet both in the offline and online environment, while businesses can only meet on online platforms which are dedicated to the exchange of products or competencies. In this case, it is interesting to note that this form of exchange allows for a different circulation of information, especially related to the tax paying mechanism. As businesses exchange their competencies or products by means of negotiation, they do not leave traces of monetary transactions. Yet, tax payment is based on registered monetary exchanges. Hence, although it is not the focus of this work, it is important to consider this dimension which could be taken into account for further research. Governmental exchange of services is based on bilateral agreements which are in any case managed as direct relational exchange³ (Appadurai 1986; Chapman 1980).

1.2.2 Negotiation

During negotiation, the parties are involved in a struggle to define the measure of the sacrifices they are both willing to make, in order to separate from their objects and to acquire new ones. It must be stressed that, as it will be explained during the course of the thesis, parties are involved in a kind of agonistic struggle which do not relate them as enemies, but which allow a confrontation between adversaries (Mouffe 2005). Contrary to the definition of barter developed by Sahlins (1972), the two parties aim neither at eliminating the other, as it would be in robbery or physical violence (Chapman 1980), nor to maximise their profits by giving the less for the more, as it happens in market exchange. The moment of negotiation is in fact supported by an almost perfectly balanced relation where the equality does not refer

³ "barter in the contemporary world is on the increase: one estimate has it that an estimated \$12 billion a year in goods and services is bartered in the United States alone. International barter (Pepsico syrup fro Russian vodka; Coca-Cola for Korean toothpicks and Bulgarian forklifts are examples) is also developing into a complex alternative economy. In these latter situations, barter is a response to the growing number of barriers to international trade and finance, and has a specific role to play in the larger economy." (Appadurai 1986: 10).

to the value of objects but to the value of sacrifices, hence to the value of subjects. As Chapman noted: “The great ‘beauty’ of barter lies in its permissiveness. It allows for exchange of objects to take place irrespective of the social or cultural definition of the partners” (ibidem: 47). With regard to this last point, it must be noted that, contrary to what Chapman maintains (ibidem), barter does not liberate from social norms, which are indeed followed in all three phases of exchange, but it frees from unbalanced power distribution, hence from domination-subordination relations.

The difference between the online and the offline practice refers to the temporality and the relational dimension of negotiation. While in offline barter negotiation starts and ends in a limited lapse of time and is conducted between a single pair of subjects, in online barter negotiation is expanded in time and space. In online barter each subject can in fact negotiate simultaneously with many different subjects, as the object may in fact be requested by several subjects at a time.

Overall, negotiation is an important characteristic of barter, defining the nature of the practice. This characteristic allows in fact excluding other practices which may be found in a peripheral zone between bartering and sharing, but whose nature has not been clearly defined. In this sense, the example of the Time Bank (Amorevole et al. 1998; Coluccia 2001), or the example of sharing, from internet file sharing (Dei 2008) to any other forms of knowledge sharing, cannot be considered as barter exchange. The Time Bank is a worldwide phenomenon which started in England with the LETS system (Local Exchange Trading System) (Williams 1996) and which rapidly developed in all Europe. A Time Bank is a group of people which associate with the aim of exchanging time calculated in working hours, so that each member contributes in the system donating hours of her work by sharing the knowledge possessed: it may be babysitting, gardening, dog-sitting, elderly care, etc. Thus, it has been sometimes called the bartering of time or services, but the very important difference between proper barter and this practice is that the “exchange” is not preceded by a phase of negotiation and it does not imply a direct reciprocity between the parties exchanging. A subject can give a certain amount of time to a person and receive another quantity of time from another person. The mechanism activated by this practice resembles the mechanism of gift, instead of barter, as in the case of file sharing. Again, in file sharing there is no direct reciprocity between two parties,

neither a phase of negotiation. And although a project like the Trading School⁴ defines itself as “based on barter”, it lacks the fundamental characteristic of barter, which is negotiation: once again, this kind of phenomena can be better described through the concept of sharing, which is not, in any case, the subject of this thesis.

1.2.3 Exchange

The third phase of the barter practice is the moment of exchange, the moment where each party renounces to the object owned only to get another desired. The moment of proper exchange is the result of the negotiation and it is the representation of perfect balancing: although individuals have been through a struggle in the previous phase, in order to exchange the result of that struggle must lead them to share an equal amount of power, so that no one can impose a dominance on the other. Exchange is thus the consequence of the agonistic struggle (Mouffe 2005) which takes place during the negotiation phase.

This moment is particularly influenced by the element of time with regard to the difference between online and offline barter. In the offline practice, the parties involved move to the phase of exchange as soon as the phase of negotiation is positively concluded. Exchange can be considered indeed as the end of their relation, which can be reiterated in the future or can be intended as a single experience in time. On the contrary, in the online practice the moment of exchange can occur after a considerable lapse of time and, furthermore, in the majority of time it does not imply a face-to-face meeting between the parties. The exchange can in fact occur between geographically distant people who get to know each other and negotiate in a common online environment: the exchange is hence mediated by a third actor, the postal or courier service. In this sense, the online practice is mediated at two levels: the level of communication, which is performed through computer-mediated communication,

⁴ Trading School is a project born in New York in 2009 which promotes teaching based on barter, as its presentation runs: “teachers propose classes and ask for barter items from students. For example, if you teach a class about making butter, you might ask students to bring heavy cream, jars, bread, music tips, clothes, vegetables, or help with something like finding an apartment.” (tradeschool.coop/about). In the Trading School negotiation is practically absent since it is the teacher who asks for specific items and the student “sign up for classes by agreeing to bring a barter item for the teacher” (tradeschool.coop/about).

and at the level of exchange, which is performed by a shipping company-mediated exchange. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the distinction between online and offline barter maintains a higher heuristic validity, since the two practices cannot be defined as mediated and face-to-face barter: although the number of mediated exchanges in online barter is high, there is still the possibility of exchanging manually, and it is the precise willingness of some barterers to exchange only in this way (as it will be explained in the course of the thesis).

The most important consequence of the mediated exchange typical of online barter, refers to the reputational dimension. In online barter, reputation and trustworthiness are very important dimensions not only because of a lack of information related to objects, but also because of the possibility of postponing the exchange phase. Indeed, both parties must trust the other to accomplish to the agreement reached in negotiation by effectively shipping the objects. Furthermore, also the relation is expanded in time and does not conclude with the exchange: as the information about the objects exchanged is fully acquired only when objects are brought to subjects, both parts have the claim to extend the moment of negotiation after the moment of exchange.

Finally, if in the phase of acquaintance and negotiation, the nature of what exchanged does not influence the practice, the phase of exchange changes considerably if it is conducted to exchange objects or services. The exchange of objects refers to the idea that both parties renounce to something in order to acquire something else. On the contrary, in the exchange of service against object, the subject providing the service does not renounce to something, but she is directly and physically involved in the exchange. The relation established during the two previous phases, acquaintance and negotiation, is extended also after exchange: actually, it can be said that the moment of exchange, when services are exchanged, lasts for a longer period and it implies the fact that what is exchanged is never completely given away by the subject, being the subject itself. What is really exchanged in this case is the time and the knowledge of the person.

1.3 The structure of the research

After the definition of the research object, the work develops a theoretical framework, explained in Chapter 2, which refers to the phenomenological idea of a knowledge produced by the dialectical relation between the individual and society, where the former contributes in the construction of the latter, which, at the same time, imposes its structure of meaning on its producers (Berger, Luckmann 1991). This dialectical relation is thought to produce the universe(s) of meanings individuals use to interact between each other and constitute society (Simmel 2009). Nevertheless, interactions are here considered focusing on their conflictual nature, emphasising how the construction of reality and the precarious social order where everyday life manifests is nothing but the result of a constant political struggle. An antagonistic struggle which determines the ontology of the social forms described by Simmel (2009), and which always results in a unique, powerful set of values and meanings, dominating all others. The establishment of a social order is in fact the result of a cultural imposition, where a set of meanings dominates all contrasting one. In this sense, hegemonies are formed (Gramsci 1975a, 1975b), even though their imposition does not eliminate alternative perspectives, which still remain in society as forms of resistance, or better said, as counter-hegemonic forces (Laclau, Mouffe 2001).

It is with this theoretical tool that the exchange field is described, in Chapter 3, as a political field, where the practice of producing, exchanging, and distributing resources respond to different patterns, which periodically established their supremacy in the course of history. If the contemporary society is now dominated by the hegemony of the market and of money, primitive societies were dominated by the mechanism of the gift exchange. The chapter stresses the fact that the conflicting construction of reality tended to recognise the phase of production as the place where the value is created, while, as Simmel (2001) argues, it is more probable that value is generated in the phase of exchange and the entire chapter aims at revealing the political dimension of all exchange patterns by underlining how far different patterns establish different social structures. Hence, the chapter claims, the antagonistic struggles performed through the reciprocal relations established in gift exchanges,

are then transformed through barter exchanges in agonistic struggles, while in exchanges mediated by money the struggle seems to be completely eliminated, determining a post-political situation.

In the same way, Chapter 4 reveals the political nature of the consumption field. The chapter presents a brief history of the field, a reconstruction focused on the intersection between exchange and consumption: the two fields, although presenting their autonomous characteristics, are strongly linked together. As the history of international trades demonstrates, the conflicting exchanges of the East, or the exploitation of lands and people in the West, are only the beginning of a long process which finds its input in the European desire for commodities. Those commodities, once entered in the European markets, also entered the European culture by the practice of consumption. Hence, the chapter takes into consideration the way consumption plays a crucial role in the determination of culture by functioning as a tool for social representation, as exposed in the theory of the “leisure class” by Veblen (1975) and the theory of the “trickle-down effect” by Simmel (1996). Bourdieu’s theory of distinction is also presented as an indicator of the role played by commodities in social class struggle, together with the theories expressed by the scholars of the second Frankfurt School (Adorno 1954; Adorno, Horkheimer 2002). The cultural dimension of consumption is exposed through the theories of those scholars (Douglas, Isherwood 1996) who specifically tried to demonstrate how far consumption is a social and collective activity, instead of a solipsist satisfaction of a private desire. The political nature of consumption is narrated through the work of de Certeau (1990), one of the first authors who conceived the consumption field as a proper battlefield where consumers challenge the dominant power of producers, by playing with meanings embedded in commodities. The struggle of de Certeau’s consumers is then described in political terms by the theory of political consumerism (Micheletti, Stolle, Berlin, 2012; Tosi, 2009), a branch of research focused on those types of consumption habits developed to contrast the hegemony of a consumption model described as individualist and socially, as well as environmentally, irresponsible.

After the description of the hegemonic models, whose power barter is supposed to resist, Chapter 5 focuses on the empirical phase of the research, proposing a

methodological reflection. The chapter analyzes the characteristics of what is here defined as a non-standard approach, together with its limits and problems. As the research has been conducted through five months of digital ethnography and 22 biographic interviews, the strengths and the weaknesses of these two methods are discussed in the chapter, too. In this chapter the characteristics of the three websites selected after a preliminary mapping phase are described and commented. In particular, the description of Zerorelativo.it, Reoose.com and E-barty.it are developed with a focus on their hybrid nature, constituted by characteristics typical both of an e-commerce site and a social network site.

Chapter 6 presents the answer to the secondary research question of this work, that is, which are the characteristics of contemporary online barter, and how is the practice performed. Using the empirical material collected through observation and interviews, the chapter clarifies which are the motivations for engaging in barter and the differences between direct exchange and mediated exchange, underlining the role played by the third actor intervening in the exchange relation, that is, the shipping company. The two main dimensions of online barter are discussed: issues of time and trust, together with a debate over behaviours considered acceptable and not acceptable in this particular form of barter. Furthermore, mechanisms used to control and, if necessary, exclude misbehaving barterers are analyzed, revealing the process of trust construction and the role played by reputation in such a field. For this reason, the feedback system and the space for public conversations are regarded as specific tools of the online barter practice.

Finally, Chapter 7 answers to the main research question of this work, that is, how far barter can be considered a counter-hegemonic practice, in the light of the hegemonic models considered in the first part and in the light of the characteristics of the online practice. Five main counter-hegemonic dimensions are identified: 1) barter can in fact be considered as a counter-hegemonic practice because of its tendency to quits from the market logic, that is, barter is not market; 2) barter strongly rejects the idea of money, indeed barter reassigns to the individual the possibility of determining the value of objects together with other individuals; to a certain extent, 3) barter supports alternative production models, and, above all, 4) barter supports an alternative consumption model where the time dedicated to consumption and the

meanings related to consumption drastically change, in the construction of a more social and responsible model. This is why it is noticed how barter 5) creates alternative social relations, by allowing almost perfectly balanced relations and creating communities where the distribution of power tends to flatten. Each of these dimensions altogether present limits to the counter-hegemonic power of barter, presenting recurring hegemonic elements, which are analyzed in order to show to which extent counter-hegemonic practices are part of hegemonic symbolical spaces.

In the last chapter, three important conclusions are drawn: the chapter emphasises the dualistic relation between hegemony and counter-hegemony, the agonistic nature of the struggle performed through the barter practice and the level of participation, interaction and access, characterising online barter.

* * *

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Chapter 2

The social conflicting construction of reality

“domination in the most general sense is one of the most important element of social action. Of course, not every form of social action reveals a structure of dominancy. But in the most of the varieties of social action domination plays a considerable role, even when it is not obvious at first sight”

(M. Weber, *Economy and society*)

2.1 The phenomenological approach to science

The subject of this thesis is the practice of online barter, a research topic that lies between the fields of consumption and exchange. Study of this contemporary form of barter should enable a better understanding of how social actors construct the meanings related to the practices of exchange and consumption: how these meanings are created and assimilated, how and if they can change, how they are diffused, and what types of meanings circulate. This thesis seeks to provide evidences of their political nature. Studying an emergent phenomenon such as barter, requires analysis of its role in society, understood from different perspectives. Chapter 1 discussed some key theoretical concepts in order to guide the reader through the analysis of the two important fields of exchange and consumption from the perspective adopted by the researcher, and following her theoretical path which is discussed in the second part of the thesis, using empirical material collected during the research.

The understanding of contemporary barter practice is based on the fundamental phenomenological assumption that the reality is a social construction. The phenomenological approach to social science developed through contributions from Schutz (1979), Scheler (1970), Marx (1988), Dilthey (1967), Mannheim (1952), and Merton (1957), which had a major influence on the sociology of knowledge, aimed at understanding where and how knowledge is created. Scheler named this area of study,

while Marx's theories shed light on human being's consciousness and their determination by their social being. What concerned all these scholars was that, usual, individuals are confronted by a reality which is not outside-given, but which is constructed and is generated by the relations established between a single individual and all the others she is forced to interact with. Consequently, the scope of the sociology of knowledge is to understand how reality is created through the use of knowledge. Within this approach, reality is defined as a characteristic of phenomena that are recognized as independent of the will of individuals, and knowledge is defined as awareness that these phenomena are real, based on particular characteristics (Berger, Luckmann 1991). It should be stressed that the scientific interest of a cultural sociologist does not focus on understanding what reality is or on distinguishing what is real from what is not, which is mainly a philosophical interest. Instead, the sociologist concentrates on the fact that, depending on the culture in which a social actor is embedded, something is perceived as *real* based on her accumulated common sense that tells her so. Therefore, the work of the sociologist is to analyse and understand where that common sense which guides the actions of the social actor, originated and how it is maintained. In particular, the sociology of knowledge aims at understanding the processes that enables any kind of knowledge to be socially recognized as *reality*.

Alfred Schutz contributed to the development of the sociology of knowledge by taking Husserl's idea of phenomenology (derived from the Greek φαῖνομένον, that which appears, and λογος, the study of) and arguing that knowledge is socially distributed, making the mechanisms of this distribution an object of sociological analysis (Schutz 1962). Schutz focused on the fact that the subject does not simply reside in this world; she also participates in a construction of the world, a world that is unknown until it is shown through the categories that the subject herself is able to create. Schutz was influenced by the Weberian concept of ideal type, which he applied in his development of a theory of common knowledge. According to Schutz, the process through which common man understands and assimilates reality resembles the process characterizing the scientific study of reality, where categories are built and defined as types, the idea being that the common man and the scientist are both engaged in a process of "typification". This process is useful for enabling

the common man to understand reality, since types are simplified versions, that is, representations of reality. Types are useful when they are shared among individuals belonging to the same cultural community, because they facilitate interactions in the everyday life: since they represent reality, these categories help in the performance of an individual's daily routines, avoiding the need of continuous self-interrogation about the meaning of collective actions performed with other subjects. Were she to feel compelled to question the meanings attached to the performance of common actions, the individual would not be able to rise from her bed in the morning, wash, dress, choose what to eat, etc. Were she to feel compelled to question the meanings of every other person's actions this would result in an unbearable and endlessly extended moment of understanding external reality.

Thus, Schutz argues that, in the everyday life, the social actor suspends all types of doubts, taking for granted the majority of known facts, acting in the world of the obvious, using common sense to preserve an existential order that is perceived as natural, as given. The common knowledge, common sense, can be summarized in a "recipe book", whose instructions (recipes) provide the social actor with the directions required to act together with her social fellows. The perceived order is not natural, but is first created and then assimilated through the process of socialization. This process is described efficiently by Schutz (1962) in his "The stranger: an essay in social psychology" in which he describes a stranger trying to integrate in a new group with a different cultural background, who must get involved in the difficult task of assimilation of norms. He and the new group have different recipes, which prevent the stranger from establishing contact with the new group of individuals. The primary social norm is language; without a common idiom people cannot communicate. Language is one of the first cultural tools individuals assimilate directly from adult beings (normally parents) who usually care for the child: language is not given, human beings are not born speaking. Idiom is the result of collective action intended to assign meaning to concrete and abstract concepts, to allow the community to share this meaning and the individuals in the community to understand one another. The importance of the language as a cultural tool is manifested by the stranger's compulsion to find a common language with the new

community, or to learn the language spoken by the community in which she is trying to integrate.

In addition to Schutz's work on the process of socialization, Berger and Luckmann (1991) analyzed the process leading to the institutionalization of a common knowledge in *The Social Construction of Reality*. They suggest that human beings interact not only with their environment but also with a cultural and social order that initially is mediated by the important characters in their life, those adult beings who gave them life and who brought them up. This order is, in any case, continuously changing since, once assimilated, individuals participate in its maintenance, giving potentially different interpretations of meanings. According to Berger and Luckmann there is no prefixed human order that maintains the articulation of one individual's system of relations for ever. The cultural order is the product of individuals, who are then affected by the same order they contributed to creating and developing. The paradox is when the order created is then perceived as independent of man: "the relation between man, the producer, and the social world, his product, is and remain a dialectical one. That is, man (not, of course in isolation but in his collectivities) and his social world interact with each other. The product acts back upon the producer. Externalization and objectivation are moments in a continuing dialectical process" (Berger, Luckmann 1991: 78). Hence, Berger and Luckmann are describing the process through which the social and cultural order is created, assuming there is no natural order regulating human action which always is subject to a complex process of institutionalization.

The process of institutionalization occurs each time a reciprocal typification of habits is activated: habits are processes carrying a series of advantages for the lives of human beings. Each action that is constantly repeated crystallizes in a specific form that is easily replicable, reducing the effort required to reproduce the action in the same manner. The main advantage of this process is that it reduces the need to choose and to make decisions about the meanings of actions. Institutionalization does not occur every time a habit is established; it is a much more complex process based on a kind of reciprocity. Typification must be shared reciprocally by a number of individuals in order to create an institution: the example described by Berger and

Luckmann (1991) maintains a substantial heuristic validity. The authors imagine two subjects, A and B, interacting with each other:

as A and B interact, in whatever manner, typification will be produced quite quickly. A watches B perform. He attributes motives to B's actions and, seeing the actions recur, typifies the motives as recurrent. [...] from the beginning both A and B assume this reciprocity of typification. In the course of their interaction these typifications will be expressed in specific patterns of conduct. That is, A and B will begin to play roles *vis-à-vis* each other. This will occur even if each continues to perform actions different from those of the other. The possibility of taking the role of the other will appear with regard to the same actions performed by both. That is, A will inwardly appropriate B's reiterated roles and make them the models for his own role-playing (ibidem: 74).

Yet, the fulfilment of this process is reached when a third party comes in the relation:

the appearance of a third party changes the characters of the ongoing social interaction between A and B, and it will change even further as additional individuals continue to be added. The institutional world, which existed *in statu nascendi* in the original situation of A and B, is now passed on to others. In this process institutionalisation perfects itself. The habitualization and typification undertaken in the common life of A and B [...] now became historical institutions [...] In other words, the institutions are now experienced as possessing a reality of their own, a reality that confront the individual as an external and coercive fact (ibidem: 76).

This description understands institutions as historically embedded entities, endowing individuals with a behavioural scheme to participate in them:

institution also, by the very fact of their existence, control human conduct by setting up predefined patterns of conduct, which channel it in one direction as against the many other directions that would theoretically be possible, [thus] to say that a segment of human activity has been institutionalised is already to say that this segment of human activity has been subsumed under social control (ibidem: 72).

The same perspective seems to be adopted by Simmel (1983: 94) when he argues that society also exists outside individuals – not only in those relational events constituted by interactions – since those social elements individuals carry with them

reunite to form a “society”, whose organs, as an external part, oppose the individual with their claims. Hence, according to Simmel this gives space for a conflicting relation between individual and society.

2.2 A conflicting perspective

The process of institutionalization described by Berger and Luckmann is not a conflicting process. The relation between A and B describes a non-conflictual relation. The typification and assimilation mechanisms seem to work without conflict *only if* the two subjects are performing different activities, and not *even if* they are performing different activities. In the description of institutionalization proposed above, A is attaching a meaning to B’s actions, and vice versa, but the nature of their actions is different. What would happen were they to perform the same activity? Would this not result in the creation of conflicting meanings?

When a similar action is performed by both social actors, in fact, the resulting typification and the creation of habit would result from a competition between the two ways of performing the particular activity. The perfection of the process of institutionalization consequently implies that only one, among the two “ways of doing”, that is, a set of meanings, is passed on to the next generation⁵. The one which is not established as “habit” is consequently excluded and, it can be said, the other dominates the common sense. This process largely calls upon the idea of hegemony expressed by Gramsci, and recalled in Mouffe’s (2005) theory:

To put it in a Gramscian sense: common sense is always something which is the result of political articulation. Reality is not given to us; meaning is always constructed. There is no meaning that is just essentially given to us; there is no essence of the social, it is always constructed. The social is always the result of a hegemonic articulation; every type of social order is the product of a hegemony as a specific political articulation (Carpentier, Cammaerts 2006: 967).

⁵ Imagine, e.g., the meaning attached to the word “family”. There is ongoing debate on the notion of family; it involves the constitution of legal rights for homosexual couples who want their union, and the presence of child/children, to be recognized as a “family”. If family were to be accepted as based on habit, then as the number of homosexual “families” increased, their status would be institutionalized. Instead, there is a struggle to have the traditional idea of family changed.

Hence, the formation of meanings results from conflicting relations, which establish the very significances of our existence and the borders that indicate what is socially accepted as real and what is not. An individual's very identity is constructed through a similar process: the conflict taking place between the individual and society mentioned by Simmel (1983) is, according to the author, interiorized by the individual who then reiterates it within the process of identity construction. This last process always starts from a negative confrontation with the otherness, with the aim of defining what a subject is not in order to understand what a subject is. Identity and otherness are strictly coessential, the human being needs the other to become itself (Cesareo 2004: 11).

The passage of a one-way common sense described by Berger and Luckmann, is what Gramsci (1975a, 1975b) defines as the emergence of "hegemony". Indeed, according to Gramsci, the social has an incomplete and open nature where floating elements menace the stability of the structure of meanings, and where the system of differences is organized by articulating practices. Fixing meanings and establishing an order, which from the beginning is a temporally determined order, is the process described by Gramsci as hegemony formation.

A successful system of differences, which excluded any floating signifier, would not make possible any articulation; the principle of repetition would dominate every practice within this system and there would be nothing to hegemonize. It is because hegemony supposes the incomplete and open character of the social, that it can take place only in a field dominated by articulatory practices. (Laclau, Mouffe 2001: 134).

Therefore, what leads to the formation of hegemonies is the need to organize in consistent structures of differences, those disaggregated and dispersed elements floating in a social world. The sole articulation of those elements is nonetheless insufficient to the formation of a hegemony, "it is also necessary that the articulation should take place through a configuration with antagonistic articulatory practices. [...] Thus, the two conditions of a hegemonic articulation are the presence of antagonistic forces and the instability of the frontiers which separate them" (ibidem: 135).

The significance of the concept of hegemony as adopted in Gramscian theory, takes on a different meaning compared to, say, Leninist theory. Gramsci adopts the term hegemony, from the ancient Greek: it derives from the Greek verb ἡγεομαι (hēgeomai), which means to conduct, to be a guide, a leader. The term ἡγεμονία (hēgemonia) in ancient Greek, described the supreme conduct of the military (Gruppi 1972). However, in Gramsci's theory it has a wider meaning; a hegemony does not refer only to the political dimension of life, or describe the political organization of a society like Leninist society, characterized by a proletariat leadership. Gramsci understands the concept of hegemony as involving a political, intellectual and moral leadership which goes beyond the idea of class alliance (Mouffe 1979). Gramsci's idea of revolution is a philosophical matter representing an act which subverts not only the economic structure of a society but also the political organization of social life, in order to create a new cultural and idealistic order. "Come tale, essa non ha conseguenze soltanto a livello materiale dell'economia o al livello della politica, ma al livello della morale, della conoscenza, della «filosofia». Quindi, la rivoluzione è intesa da Gramsci come riforma intellettuale e morale" (Gruppi 1972: 11)⁶. The main purpose of Gramsci's work is to understand how a class can become the ruling class, analysing proletarian strategy to become hegemonic. He identifies two ways through which a class can establish its dominance: first, by dominating the opposing class, second, by ruling the allied class. The important point in his theory is that a hegemonic class can be defined as such only by letting its discourse become accepted by all social groups, and not by contrasting with any opposing discourses. Through analysis of the bourgeoisie's rise to power, he understood that they did not only succeed in overthrowing an already existing power, but assured for themselves the popular support needed to control the power relations that characterize a stable society. In this sense, the bourgeoisie's aim was not to impose their interests on the masses, but to let those masses perceive their interests as the interests of their own classes. This is the proper construction of hegemony, when other classes accept and believe in the values diffused by a unique, ruling class.

⁶ "As such, revolution influences not only the material level of economics and politics, but also the ethics, the knowledge and the «philosophy». Therefore, Gramsci understands revolution as an intellectual and moral reform." (Gruppi 1972: 11, my translation).

Gramsci (1975a, 1975b) indicates in his *Quaderni del Carcere* three main stages of the emergence of the political consciousness in a social class: a first – elementary – moment, defined as “economico primitivo: un commerciante sente di essere solidale con un altro commerciante, un fabbricante con un altro fabbricante, ecc., ma il commerciante non si sente ancora solidale col fabbricante”⁷. That is, the two subjects feel the homogeneous unity of the professional group, but do not feel the unity of the social aggregation. In the second moment the awareness of the economic interest shared by a social unit emerges even though the political equality may remain at an elementary level because the group only seeks to participate in the administration of the State. In the third moment

si raggiunge la coscienza che i propri interessi «corporativi», nel loro sviluppo attuale e avvenire, superano la cerchia «corporativa», di raggruppamento economico cioè, e possono e debbono divenire gli interessi di altri raggruppamenti subordinati; questa è la fase più schiettamente «politica» che segna il passaggio dalla pura struttura alle superstrutture complesse, è la fase in cui le ideologie germinate precedentemente vengono a contatto ed entrano in contrasto fino a che una sola di esse, o almeno una sola combinazione di esse, tende a prevalere, a imporsi, a diffondersi su tutta l’area, determinando oltre che l’unità economica e politica anche l’unità intellettuale e morale, su un piano non corporativo, ma universale, di egemonia di un raggruppamento sociale fondamentale su i raggruppamenti subordinati (Gramsci, 1975a: 457-458)⁸.

Hence, a hegemonic class is that class which is able to articulate the interests of other classes and transform them into its own interests through an ideological struggle (Mouffe 1979: 181). The important scientific legacy that Gramsci left to future generations, is the idea that a hegemony is established only when all dimensions of social life, not just the political dimension, are involved. A hegemony

⁷ “Economic primitive: a merchant sympathises with another merchant, a producer with another producer, etc., but the merchant does not sympathise with the producer”

⁸ “when the interests of a group, in their present and future development, overtake the group, that is, the economic formation, and they can and should become the interests of subordinated formations; this is the most truly political moment which defines the passage from pure structure to complex over-structures, it is the moment when previously generated ideologies meet and crash until only one of them, or at least only one combination of them, tend to prevail, to impose itself, to spread all over, determining not only the economic and political unity, but also the intellectual and moral one. It does it at a universal level, not on the mere formation and become the fundamental hegemony of the social formation imposed on subordinated formations.” (Gramsci, 1975a: 457-458, my translation)

does not interest only the political configuration of a State and does not concern only the political struggle fought among political parties: the hegemony is first of all a cultural hegemony, before being a political hegemony. Therefore, the emergence of hegemony is not only the result of a struggle occurring in the institutionalized political field but also a struggle that can occur in any field.

The plurality of struggles experienced in contemporary western societies, social, political, and economic struggles, seem no longer understandable when analysed according only to the category of social class. However, the concept of “organic crisis” may be a useful theoretical key to the analysis of certain contemporary phenomena. According to Gramsci, an organic crisis is

a conjuncture where there is a generalised weakening of the relational system defining the identities of a given social or political space, and where as a result there is a proliferation of floating elements [and which] reveals itself not only in a proliferation for antagonisms but also in a generalised crisis of social identities (Laclau, Mouffe 2001: 136).

2.3 The political nature of reality

Overall, the cultural dimension of hegemony is a crucial aspect of Gramsci’s theory. The hegemony is in fact established only if two aspects are taken into account: dominance and supervision.

Un gruppo sociale è dominante dei gruppi avversari che tende a «liquidare» o a sottomettere anche con la forza armata ed è dirigente dei gruppi affini e alleati. Un gruppo sociale può e anzi deve essere dirigente già prima di conquistare il potere governativo [...] dopo, quando esercita il potere e anche se lo tiene fortemente in pugno, diventa dominante ma deve continuare ad essere anche dirigente” (Gramsci 1975b: 2010-2011)⁹.

⁹ “a social group dominates opposing groups and tends to «defeat» them also with the armed force and it is the supervisor of similar and allied group. A social groups can and actually should be the supervisor yet before getting to the governmental power [...] then, when it exercises power and even if it holds it forcefully, it becomes dominant but it still must be supervisor” (Gramsci, 1975b: 20110-2011, my translation).

Although dominance, which can be obtained also through the use of violence, imposes a hegemony, this will be only a passive hegemony imposed through an act of terror and which usually does not last. The real hegemony, the expanding hegemony, is achieved by progressively addressing all social strata within the popular classes. The involvement of the popular classes presupposes the creation of a popular national will which gives space for a long lasting hegemony.

Real dominance is achieved when all social actors take a meaning for granted without questioning the possible existence of other meanings. Hence, hegemony is achieved when a dominating concept becomes part of the taken-for-granted of a group of people, that is, when the dominance is institutionalized. From this perspective it is understood that the construction of reality, an eminently social phenomenon, always starts with a political conflict and ends with a dominance of meanings. Furthermore, just as the individual in Berger and Luckmann's (1991) theory is considered the producer of her own social world, Gramsci recognizes the capacity of the individual to be a philosopher, that is, to produce a common (shared) sense:

Gramsci parte dall'affermazione che l'uomo, per il solo fatto di essere uomo, di avere un linguaggio, di partecipare al senso comune, di aderire ad una religione, magari nella forma più semplice e popolare, è filosofo. [...] Ogni uomo, per il solo fatto che parla, ha una sua concezione del mondo, sia pure non consapevole, sia pure acritica, perché il linguaggio è sempre embrionalmente una forma di concezione del mondo (Gruppi 1972: 85)¹⁰.

Being a philosopher is defined as having the capacity to make sense of the world, like Berger and Luckmann's individual, who, together with other individuals, is able to create the social world she defines as reality: together with others, the individual creates the same institutions in which she a-critically participates and regulates her living. Beyond the a-criticality of the individual's actions, she is the first producer of meanings of the same actions. Gramsci underlines the fact that each individual's

¹⁰ "Gramsci presupposes that man, only by being man, by owing a language, by participating in the common sense, by sharing a religious thought, he is a philosopher, perhaps in the most simple and common form. [...] Each man, simply because he is speaking, holds an understanding of the world, even if not consciously, even if a-critical, because language is always an early conception of the world" (Gruppi 1972: 85, my translation).

consciousness is influenced by the environment in which she is embedded, hence is subject to many different, sometimes contradictory influences. For this reason, the individual's consciousness is the result of a social relation, indeed it is a social relation in itself (Gruppi 1972).

In phenomenology the common man experiences reality as the scientist analyses the social world, hence through a process of typification; in Gramscian theory, indeed, the common man produces knowledge as the scientist does. Throughout his work, Gramsci continuously manifests a significant interest for popular culture and does not understand the production of philosophical concepts as a mere prerogative of scientists:

occorre distruggere il pregiudizio molto diffuso che la filosofia sia alcunché di molto difficile per il fatto che essa è l'attività intellettuale propria di una determinata categoria di scienziati specialisti o di filosofi professionali e sistematici. Occorre pertanto dimostrare preliminarmente che tutti gli uomini sono «filosofi», definendo i limiti e i caratteri di questa «filosofia spontanea», propria di «tutto il mondo», e cioè della filosofia che è contenuta: 1) nel linguaggio stesso, che è un insieme di nozioni e di concetti determinati e non già e solo di parole quindi in tutto il sistema di credenze, superstizioni, opinioni, modi di vedere e di operare che si affacciano in quello che generalmente si chiama «folclore» (Gramsci 2008: 12)¹¹.

Basically, what Gramsci describes through a political lens, is profoundly similar to what Berger and Luckmann describe as a sociological a-conflicting perspective. Nonetheless, the political dimension of the construction of reality should not be underestimated when trying to understand the proliferation of struggles in the many and different social fields beyond the political.

¹¹ “the very spread prejudice by which philosophy is something difficult only because it is the intellectual activity of a determined group of specialized scientists or of professional and systemic philosophers, must be removed. We must preliminary demonstrate that all men are «philosophers», by defining the limits and the characteristics of this «spontaneous philosophy», which pertains to the «entire world», that is, the philosophy entailed in: 1) in language itself, which is a set of determined notions and concepts, and not only a set of words. Hence, in all the system of believes, superstitions, opinions, point of views and way of acting which are normally refer to as «folklore» (Gramsci 2008: 12, my translation).

2.4 The hegemony and the counter-hegemony: a cultural struggle

According to Mouffe (2005) the social is always the result of a hegemonic articulation and is defined by a political struggle. Her theory is based on a clear distinction between “the political” and “politics” which is essential to comprehend the significance of her work. In her words, she defines the political as “the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies” while she defines politics as “the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political” (Mouffe 2005: 9). Fundamentally, she looks at the political as the space of power, conflict and antagonism, instead of considering it the space of freedom and public decisions. Every time a conflict between different alternatives forces the subject to choose between one of the alternatives, Mouffe maintains that the subject is dealing with a political matter. Choosing between alternatives does not represent a moment of dialogue and confrontation, instead, it forces the individual to declare a position, hence, to establish an identity. The political, then, is the realm of decisions, not of free discussion, and is the place where individuals are involved in the formation of opposing collective identities, identified by an “us” in contrast to a “them” (Mouffe 2005). Indeed, the political is the space where the two fronts defend their positions, engaging in a struggle whose result is a social structure lasting for a certain period, at least until the borders and frontiers of meaning start to fluctuate again and a new order must be established.

The process of normalizing struggle is the process leading to the creation of a social order. In this sense, Mouffe considers the political dimension to be ontologically constitutive of social life. In the process of institutionalization, where a choice is made among different alternatives, the majority of those alternatives is excluded, constituting the counter-hegemonies which may one day threaten the crystallized form of social order, and reshape it again. Hence, the difference between the political and the social, the latter being “the realm of sedimented practice, that is, practices that conceal the originary acts of their contingent political institution and

which are taken for granted, as if they were self-grounded” (Mouffe 2005: 17). The social field is political because it

is the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices. The frontier between the social and the political is essentially unstable and requires constant displacements and renegotiations between social agent. Things can always be otherwise and therefore every order is predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities. It is in that sense that it can be called ‘political’ since it is the expression of a particular structure of power relations. Power is constitutive of the social because the social could not exist without the power relations through which it is given shape. What is at a given moment considered as the ‘natural’ order – jointly with the ‘common sense’ which accompanies it – is the result of sedimented practices (Mouffe 2005: 18).

In conclusion, Mouffe argues that hegemonic practices are those practices that allow the establishment of a certain order and of the meaning of institutions created to maintain that order. Nevertheless, each order so constituted, can always be challenged by those excluded counter-hegemonic practices. Furthermore, while Schmitt (1972) maintains that the political can only be constituted by the enemy/friend relation, Mouffe suggests that this distinction “can be considered as merely one of the possible forms of expression of the antagonistic dimension which is constitutive of the political” (2005: 16), and that other distinction can be imagined, transforming the antagonism in something democratic, but still political. According to Mouffe the struggle must in fact be legitimized through a form of conflict which would not neglect the political association. This alternative form she calls “agonism” is opposed to antagonism since the latter is based on relations between enemies, while the former “is a we/they relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents. They are ‘adversaries’ not enemies.” (ibidem: 20).

At the same time, the process of institutionalization described by Berger and Luckmann (1991) might be considered a process of choice among alternatives, where one will eventually be imposed as the unique accepted discourse on reality, becoming a hegemony. The authors manifest no intention of providing a conflicting perspective over the analysed process, as Gramsci (1975a, 1975b) does. Nonetheless,

their work focuses on the problem of alternatives when they are describing the mechanism of knowledge distribution, the formation of social roles, and the creation of different sub-universes of meaning. These authors propose the idea that in a society characterized by a high level of division of labour, each “specialist” acquires a very peculiar knowledge by exercising her specific role. The more economic surplus a society is able to generate, the more heterogeneous the division of labour, and the more acute the institutional segmentation. These sub-universes must be organized by collectives that own the specific knowledge and constantly produce their objective reality, maintaining different meanings; the result is a highly heterogeneous universe, where many different groups engage in conflicting relations, focusing on the defence of their own meanings and interests.

such social conflicts are readily translated into conflicts between rival school of thought, each seeking to establish itself and to discredit if not liquidate the competitive body of knowledge [...] In advanced industrial societies, with their immense economic surplus allowing large numbers of individuals to devote themselves full-time to even the obscurest pursuits, pluralistic competitions between sub-universes of meanings of every conceivable sort becomes the normal state of affair (Berger, Luckmann 1991: 103).

Overall, Berger and Luckmann also recognize the constant production of floating elements which can challenge the fixed social order; for this reason, they maintain that the process of institutionalization is never irreversible, as Mouffe (1993) maintains that the process of democracy is a never ending process. Institutions must be legitimized by symbolic universes which also need to be preserved so that they become taken-for-granted. In any case, since social phenomena are historical constructions produced by human activity, any social order and any symbolic universe can never be taken for granted (Berger, Luckmann 1991). This fact becomes evident when a symbolic universe is confronted with its alternatives, empirically showing that this universe is neither unavoidable nor necessary.

Nonetheless, according to Mouffe, the imposition of a hegemony in such a disaggregated reality, composed by a large plurality of different groups, might be achieved in two ways: “the interests of these groups can either be articulated so as to neutralise them and hence to prevent the development of their own specific demands,

or else they can be articulated in such a way as to promote their full development leading to the final resolution of the contradictions which they express” (Mouffe 1979: 183). The second way Mouffe describes it is the mechanism used, for example, to empty the power of sub-cultures and counter-culture movements, by commodifying their sub-universe of meanings, as argued in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

Despite the negative connotation of hegemony, its existence can be positive, as Mouffe states. Hegemony is nothing but the consolidation of an order, without which individuals would live in a world with no order, dominated by a state of schizophrenia: “there would not be any form of meaning, any form of order. In other words, the question is not to get rid of power. Power is constitutive for the social; there is no social without power relations” (Carpentier, Cammaerts 2006: 967). All in all, the struggle these power relations carry with them, is considered by both Mouffe and Simmel as a positive dimension of life. From one side, Mouffe sees the struggle as an ontological dimension of life, from the other Simmel recognises the conflict as a form of association – which in Simmel’s words means as a social form. Contrasting the negative connotation usually implied in the word conflict, he actually defines the struggle as a movement toward a form of unity (Simmel 2009: 227). Consequently, he considers conflict a positive moment, compared to the real negation of the relation represented by its denial. Struggle is not only positive but, in Simmel’s analysis, it seems to be necessary, since “there could not be any kind of social unity in which the converging directions of elements would not be permeated inextricably by the diverging ones” (ibidem: 228). Therefore, according to the author, there cannot be a completely harmonious group based on pure “unity”, not only because it would appear as unreal, but also because it would not constitute a real life process. Indeed, “as the cosmos needs ‘love and hate’, attractive and repulsive forces, in order to have a form, so society needs some quantitative ratio of harmony and disharmony, association and competition, good will and ill will, in order to arrive at a specific formation” (ibidem). Society is not the result of sole positive social powers, but is generated out of both categories of interaction – positive and negative. Nonetheless, what is considered a negative thing between individual – conflict – can actually have a positive role in the totality of the relationship. According to Simmel, antagonism

eventually plays a positive and integrating role, as it allows the definition of collective identities so that “it would in no way always result in a richer and fuller community life if the repelling and, viewed individually, even destructive energies within it were to disappear (ibidem: 230-231).

The important consideration on which the present thesis is based, developed by the authors above mentioned, is that power relations are constitutive of any social dimensions and that every field of social activity is engaged in continuous conflicts among collective identities. Therefore, Mouffe suggests that the political cannot be restricted to the field of institutionalized politics. Indeed, Carpentier noted, there are always more social and cultural transformations which are not conceived in that realm. Instead, these transformations

grew out of a diversity of political practices that originated from actors that often were (strictly speaking) situated outside the realm of institutionalized politics. Whether they are called interests groups, old/new social movements, civil society or activists, these actors broadened the scope of the political and made participation more heterogeneous and multidirectional. In some cases these political practices were still aimed at impacting directly on institutionalized politics, but in other cases their political objectives diverged from the ‘traditional’ and were aimed at cultural change. In many cases, several objectives and ‘targets’ were developed in conjunction. [...] Not only do we witness a broadening of the set of actors involved in political activities, but also an expansion of the sphere that are considered political (Carpentier 2011: 22).

2.4 The logic of fields

The idea that there are many fields like the sub-universes described by Berger and Luckmann (1991), and that each is defined by a conflict, is clearly expressed in Pierre Bourdieu’s (1992, 1994) theory. The present dissertation does not claim to reconstruct an exhaustive analysis of Bourdieu’s work, which is very rich and complex, but it draws on those elements that are in line with the theoretical framework in the current thesis, and which have been helpful in guiding the analysis of the barter practice.

The most useful and important concept expressed by Bourdieu, is the notion of field. A field

peut être défini comme un réseau, ou une configuration de relations objectives entre des positions. Cette positions sont définie objectivement dans leur existence et dans les déterminations qu'elles imposent à leurs occupants, agent ou institutions, par leur situation (*situs*) actuelle et potentielle dans la structure de la distribution des différentes espèces de pouvoir (ou de capital) dont la possession commande l'accès aux profits spécifiques qui sont en jeu dans le champ, et, du même coup, par leurs relations objectives aux autres positions (domination, subordination, homologie, etc.) (Bourdieu, Wacquant 1992: 72-73)¹².

Different fields show different degrees of autonomy: if it is true that they do intersect sometimes, there are some fields, such as the political and the economic fields, which acquire a high level of independence (see Chapter 3).

Bourdieu compares field to sports field on which a game is played, whose players engage in competitive relations in order to “win” the stake of that particular field. Players accept the game and its rules and they share a belief (*doxa*) that the stake for which they are struggling with each other is worth the conflict. This is a very important part of Bourdieu's (1992) theory; he does not claim that social actors are engaged in a field according to a contract, but rather they are convinced by an “illusion” (*in ludus*, in game) that the game is worth the struggle: they invest in the game. Within a field, social actors develop strategies and struggle over available resources. To participate in the game of a particular field, social actors exploit their toolbox of “symbolic capital”, which comprises three types of capital: economic, social, and cultural. These are the “cards” individuals use to participate in the game. Economic capital is represented by the economic power of the actor; cultural capital is the amount of knowledge, specific and general, acquired by the individual; social capital is the degree of social relations established by the individual. Each field has its own rules and proposes a different stake. Hence, the combination of the capitals needed to acquire a powerful position in a field varies with the field. In *La*

¹² “can be defined as a network, or a configuration of objective relations between positions. Those positions are objectively defined in their existence and in the determinations they impose on their occupants, agent or institutions, by their present and potential situation (*situs*) within the structure where different spaces of power (or capital) are distributed, whose possession determine the access to specific profits at stake in the field. At the same time, they are defined by the objective relations they hold with other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.)” (Bourdieu, Wacquant 1992: 72-73, my translation).

Distinction (1980), Bourdieu analyses several fields and suggests that, depending on the field, the action of the social actors is driven by a different type of interest. The French author is not saying that social action is driven by a *rational* interest, but that social actors playing in the field assimilate its rules so as to move reasonably in the field. They are not constantly engaged in a rational calculation of their moves (which would be almost impossible, because of the impossibility for human beings to elaborate the huge amount of information presented by the reality), but they have a sense of the game, assimilated through several practical schemes of perceptions and evaluations which works as instruments to construct reality (Bourdieu 1994). This sense of the game is defined by Bourdieu as the “habitus”: “c’est-à-dire une certaine manière particulière de construire et de comprendre la pratique dans sa «logique» spécifique [...] cette sorte de transcendantal historique qu’est l’habitus, système socialement constitué de dispositions structurées et structurantes qui est acquis par la pratique et constamment orienté vers des fonctions pratiques.” (Bourdieu 1992 : 97)¹³. Through the notion of habitus, Bourdieu developed his social critique arguing that the capacity to understand the meaning of practices, the sense of the game, cannot be acquired or increased unlike the three forms of capital; it can only be passed from one generation to the other. Therefore, although Bourdieu does not agree with the Marxist idea of social class struggle, he recognizes that the struggle in which each social actor is involved is not performed in a fair system, where any kind of cultural meaning has the same opportunity to be diffused and assimilated by individuals. For higher class individuals who have more possibilities to acquire higher positions and dominate fields of social life, it is easier to repeat the kind of hegemony they assimilated.

Finally, having defined the construction of reality as a conflicting process, the result of which led to the emergence of hegemony, the next two chapters concentrate in explaining which are the hegemonies emerged in the field of exchange and consumption, demonstrating that both fields can be considered, from this perspective, political fields.

¹³ “this means a particular way to build and understand the practice within its specific «logic» [...] the habitus is a sort of historical transcendental, a social constituted system of structured and structuring disposals, acquired through practice and constantly focused toward practical functions” (Bourdieu 1992 : 97, my translation).

Chapter 3

Exchange is a political field

“it is, therefore, almost a tautology to say that exchange brings about socialization: for exchange is a form of socialization”

(G. Simmel, *The philosophy of money*)

Exchange is a complex concept that assumes different nuances depending on the perspective used to analyse it. The first aim of Chapter 3 is to understand what exchange is, trying to transcend the economic perspective that considers it a consequence of production, a minor step in the mechanism of resource distribution. The second aim is to demonstrate the political dimension of the exchange field, recalling the theoretical framework described in Chapter 2. According to Marx (1904), in fact, exchange comes into play only after a good has been produced, which, from the perspective of this German economist, means when the labour force of an individual is exploited to create a form of value able to circulate in the market. In Simmel's (2011) view, however, the source of value is not production, but the process production is supposed to generate, that of exchange. Simmel's argument concentrates on the sacrifice each actor must make in order to acquire the object, and hence considers the measurement of that sacrifice as the moment of the creation of the object's value. Ultimately, exchange is not about the exchange of objects, but rather about the exchange of sacrifices.

For the objectives of this dissertation, the largely accepted view regarding the supposed supremacy of production over exchange, is the first signal of a struggle which indicates how much the field of exchange shows a clear political dimension. Not only has the economic field, dominated by the liberal idea of a free market, acquired autonomy in scientific discourse, but the market, as one of the ways of exchanging goods, has become the hegemonic exchange modality. In order to reach

this dominating position, the market imposed itself on other modalities once commonly used in other forms of individual aggregations, but which gradually have (apparently) been pushed out. Gift exchange was the dominant exchange modality in primitive economies. Exchanges between different tribal chiefs, for example, established non-belligerent relations which could guarantee development as opposed to reciprocal destruction, demonstrating the extent of reciprocity as an aspect of the political dimension characterizing gift. What has long been considered a purely gratuitous act, a demonstration of the deep altruistic nature of human beings, actually reveals itself as a quite opportunistic way of establishing relation of dominance and subordination (Mauss 1990). In our contemporary society, gift seems to exercise a limited function compared to the market, but where it develops, individuals build strong relations. Barter exchange, on the hand, never succeeded in dominating any kind of economy, but was common among merchants exchanging not only precious goods but very often also cultural knowledge and, as in the case of other exchange modalities, the political dimension of barter is revealed when the mechanism of barter is analysed: the two parts in a barter exchange must struggle with one another to establish the value of what they are giving and receiving. The product of this struggle is a condition of reciprocal satisfaction which establishes a sort of balance between the two parties. The trust that is established is often a good pretext to continue exchanging with each other, and this leads to the creation of another kind of reciprocity, which is also representative of the political nature of barter.

The market, on its side, reveals its political dimension not only through the hegemony it has established over other modalities of exchange but also by the imposition of a specific instrument to carry out economic transactions: it is through the use of money that market hegemony is imposed, and this can be observed at different levels. From an historical reconstruction we know that money did not come out of barter practice, but was carefully imposed and introduced in everyday practices so as to become “common”. The imposition of price-setting, which establishes a value outside the exchange relation, immediately defines the practice of haggling as resistance. The development of financial and monetary policies actually questions the supposed freedom of markets, revealing, more than any other fact, how far the exchange field is political.

Throughout Chapter 3, the different nature of the struggles that occur in each of these exchange modalities is revealed: if gift exchange is considered an antagonistic struggle, barter is understood as agonistic. Activation of the gift mechanism, working on the basis of reciprocity, immediately establishes an unbalanced relation between the two parts. The aim of the gift is to enable domination of the other until a counter-gift is received, in an attempt to symbolically eliminate the counter-part by showing superiority. In contrast, barter exchanges are based on almost perfectly balanced relations, in which two parties struggle with no intention of either dominating the other, but with the intention that each ones' object should dominate the other's object. The conflict is shifted to objects, and barter can be performed only if the physical and symbolical integrity of both participants is guaranteed. This mechanism calls for a transformation of the struggle into an agonistic confrontation. Compare this to monetary exchanges where the situation is a post-political one since the struggle is removed from the actual relation, and is relegated to the means of exchange, that is, money. The use of money is the attempt to go beyond struggle, which then deprives the exchange of its fundamental conflictual nature.

3.1 The paradigm of production

Defining exchange can be complex if we think only, for example, Simmel's idea of exchange and an individual living in complete autarchy: "the isolated individual who sacrifices something in order to produce certain products, acts in exactly the same way as the subject who exchanges, the only difference being that his partner is not another subject but the natural order and regularity of things which, just like another human being, does not satisfy our desire without a sacrifice" (Simmel 2011: 81). Exchange may be defined also as that process involved in the reproduction of life, from a biological point of view, and the process in which all of us are involved in the reproduction of social life, from a sociological point of view. Beyond the complexity of its definition, what these few ideas show is that exchange cannot simply be reduced to a consequence of production.

This perspective is common in the economics field, and has been generated and reinforced by the idea that the social structure of a society strongly depends on the mechanism of production.

In Marx's (1904, 1988) analysis social relations are determined by production relations, which eventually determine the whole social structure. In this view, exchange – being a product of production – plays a secondary role, as a moment of mediation between production and distribution: “Since exchange is an intermediary factor between production and its dependent, distribution, on the one hand, and consumption, on the other; and since the latter appears but as a constituent of production, exchange is manifestly also a constituent part of production” (Marx 1904: 290). Marx in several of his works talks about the capitalistic way of production determining a certain typology of social structure and, thus, that this production is not common to all eras of human development. Nonetheless, his analysis moves always from the study of the production models which have operated throughout the history of human kind, to the relegation of exchange to a subordinate position, made clear in his *A contribution to the critique of political economy*: “a definite form of production thus determines the forms of consumption, distribution, exchange, and also the mutual relations between these various elements” (Marx 1904: 291).

In any case, in economic theories the paradigm of production is often used to analyse the development of the media of exchange, with the difference that in Marxist theory, the production model is analysed within an historical context, while other economists (Ricardo 1989; Schumpeter 1949; Smith 1976) tend to universalize their perspective. It is claimed that in the hunter-gatherer era, production was embryonic, indeed production was almost entirely absent apart from the “production” of individual personal objects – some economists argue that the manufacture of objects should be considered as such (Schumpeter 1994). According to classical economic theory (Smith 1976), there was also no division of labour in these ancient communities, and wealth was automatically equally distributed among the community. When man found ways to settle, humankind entered in the rural era, a period characterized by demographic increase due to better living conditions and above all huge improvements to production. People were able to ensure the wealth of

the community and to increase production above the necessary quantities of goods, to begin to produce so-called surplus. Exchange systems had to be modified to distribute this surplus, and barter emerged and was used to exchange surplus production with other communities. Thus, barter is generally seen as the forerunner to international trade, and the type of exchange used between strangers. As production increased, a greater variety of goods was introduced to the market, which meant that barter became too complicated a system to deal with the increased exchange capacity. Humans then devised a common tool, money, that would guarantee easier transactions and reduce transaction costs. In industrial societies, production increased further with the developments in technology enabled by ever more structured knowledge, so that goods began to be produced directly for distribution, and exchange served the purpose of producing profits. From this perspective (Ortino 2010), it follows naturally that the pace of evolution of exchange systems was in step with the pace of evolution of the technology, especially technology involved in production.

Thus, according to classical economic theories, exchange was born after division of labour and private ownership was established in complex social organizations, so that exchange and barter, in particular, emerged as a result of external relation between different communities:

it is widely assumed that, after the phase of food-gathering by isolated individuals or families, original communism was the earliest stage of evolution. There was division of labour within the family, but since the family is regarded as one single economic unit this division of labour is not generally accepted as such in the economic sense of the term. Gradually the family expanded into the tribe which was, to begin with, just a larger family, and the head of which assigned among his relatives the work to be executed, it was not until the tribe became much larger and the family ties looser that a certain degree of division of labour in the generally accepted sense was supposed to have developed. Such specialization of occupation was accompanied by barter. [...] according to the popular conception of barter, it is first supposed to have developed between various communities before it existed within the communities concerned. [...] This contention, according to which foreign trade preceded home trade, is based on a mistaken notion of the division of labour, and on the idea that division of labour, in the sense of specialization in particular branches of production, must necessarily precede barter." (Einzig 1966: 338).

Hence, the division of labour was based on other variables than just specialized tasks; it was based on geographical and gender variables, and different individual attitudes (Polanyi 2001). Furthermore, Einzig's work shows clearly that the division of labour should not be considered a precondition for exchange, since within the family and within larger clans of individuals, there were complex forms of exchange which are normally considered gift exchange. Gift exchange is rarely studied as a form of exchange since the paradigm of production does not recognize it as a form of economic activity: of course, from a utilitarian point of view, gift is not economic exchange, but this does not exclude the fact that it is exchange. Hence, in order to get to the fundamental meaning of exchange, rather than considering it to be a moment of production, it should be understood as a proper – and absolutely indispensable – dimension of human life. According to this theoretical perspective, it seems clear that value is created through production, and that value, for Marx in particular, is the product of labour force. For this reason, a more important role is accorded to production, which is where the stake lies.

From a sociologically different perspective, value originates within the exchange – not before it or after it. It is important not to confuse what is normally meant by economic value with the kind of social value exchange produces: value does not derive from the satisfaction of personal needs and desires, but it is immediately generated by the willingness to exchange, as Simmel (2011) describes in his *Philosophy of Money*.

3.2 The value of exchange

“we are unable to create either matter or force; we can only transfer those that are given in such a way that as many as possible rise from the realm of reality into the realm of values.”

(Simmel 2011: 84)

The notion of value in Simmel's conception, is described through a process which determines social relations and social structure. Contrary to the Marxist theory of

value (as generated from labour force) and contrary to the marginal theory of value¹⁴ (Marshall 1961), according to Simmel, objects are not exchanged because of their intrinsic value, but because their physical exchange assigns value to them. In an exchange, the parts involved in the process establish a connection primarily with objects that they desire, and measure the sacrifice needed to possess them. Only in a secondary moment do they establish an exchange relation, achieved by exchanging their reciprocal sacrifices. Hence, exchange cannot be reduced to a consequence of production since it is the very mechanism of exchange that produces value.

We are indebted to Simmel (2011) for the application of a sociological and cultural perspective to the study of exchange: in Simmel's view, exchange is a fundamental condition of human life, and perhaps the most important dimensions of social life. We, as subjects in a community or a society, cannot avoid engaging in exchange relations, in fact

it should be recognised that most relationships between people can be interpreted as forms of exchange. Exchange is the purest and most developed kind of interaction, which shapes human life when it seeks to acquire substance and content. [...] every interaction has to be regarded as an exchange: every conversation, every affection (even if it is rejected), every game, every glance at another person (ibidem: 82).

Simmel was so strongly focused on this approach that he elaborated a whole theory of value in his *Philosophy of Money* (2011), in which money serves the purpose of starting a reflexion on society. The *Philosophy of Money* is not actually a treatise on money, or at least is not just about money; it deals with the ontological dimensions of social life in an attempt to further the construction of Simmel's sociology of forms. In fact, Simmel writes that money is just the starting point, the form that reflects the structure of society, and there has nothing to be explained in itself, rather it is the content of everything else that can be found in society. Exchange is such an important activity that Simmel recognizes it as the main source of the creation of value, which contrasts with Marx's (1904) statement that value is generated after the labour force needed to produce the object. Simmel's concern is

¹⁴ In marginal theory of value, the value of an object is measured according to the utility perceived by the subject of acquiring a marginal quantity of the object.

with the distance that exists between object and subject. As the distance increases the subject perceives an augmented desire to possess the unreachable object and, thus, the object itself is charged with value. What is important for Simmel is not to confuse desire with value. Thus, he underlines that value neither derives from desire nor is it an intrinsic feature of the object, it is not like the colour or the temperature of an object, which are its qualities, instead it is something taken from the subject and given to the object as an external feature. Indeed, Simmel considers value to be a metaphysical category and as such “it stands as far beyond the dualism of subject and object as immediate enjoyment stands below it” (ibidem: 65), since the act of desiring places the content of our desire outside ourselves. In this sense, the category of value must be understood also in light of that dialectical method which permeates Simmel’s sociology, like the idea of the individual who is integrated in the society, but at the same time stands against it (Cosser 1983). According to Simmel, the category of value then is a meta-category: “the form taken by value in exchange places value in a category beyond the strict meaning of subjectivity and objectivity. In exchange, value becomes supra-subjective, supra-individual, yet without becoming an objective quality and reality of the things themselves” (Simmel 2011: 75).

Nonetheless, the role played by desire is of the utmost importance in Simmel’s theory especially in the definition of the demand mechanism. Although there are some interpretations of Simmel’s work that depict a utilitarian bent in his theory, it seems fairly clear how far the author tends to position himself from such an approach, starting from his idea of utility and scarcity. The construction of his theory of value in fact starts from the basic assumption that the concept of utility is not useful when trying to explain the mechanism of demand. In economics terms, utility and scarcity are the constituting elements of value, utility being necessary for an object even to exist, and scarcity being necessary for the object to acquire any form of value, thus “if economic values are regarded as being determined by supply and demand, supply would correspond with scarcity and demand with utility” (Simmel 2011: 91). Nonetheless, he argues that not everything that has been demanded has real utility, and not everything that is useful will definitely be demanded. What really motivates our choices and constructs “demand” is related much more to desire. We desire the

possession of objects which acquire, in the very moment of our craving, an economic value for us: “We desire, and therefore value economically, all kinds of things that cannot be called useful or serviceable without arbitrarily straining ordinary linguistic usage” (ibidem: 91) ¹⁵. The strength of desire increases as distance and obstacles are inserted between subject and object. According to Simmel, we actually desire an object only when it is difficult to reach and when there are substantial obstacles preventing us from enjoying possession of it, for “desire is equated with the exertion to overcome the distance” (ibidem: 91) and “we desire objects only if they are not immediately given to us for our use and enjoyment; that is, to the extent that they resist our desire” (ibidem: 63). For this reason, value is assigned a particular position within this subject-object relation: as already mentioned, it is not an intrinsic characteristic of the object nor is it a product of the subject. Value is like a third category which results from the relativity embedded in demand: “for the object in demand becomes a value of practical importance to the economy only when the demand for it is compared with the demand for other things; only this comparison establishes a measure of demand. [...] without the category of equality [...] no ‘utility’ or ‘scarcity’, however great, would bring about economic transaction” (ibidem: 91-92). Overall, Simmel’s theory confirms that the reality is socially constructed. As argued in Chapter 2, for Berger and Luckmann (1991) reality is defined only through social interaction and, thus, objects cannot have a value assigned aprioristically, as if people were driven to exchange because of the existence of this value. The imposition of value through the mechanism of price is a mere forced standardization that hides the social process of construction of value which is inherent in exchange. It is because people exchange them, that objects acquire value.

Value is, thus, the exchange of sacrifices: it becomes effective when is equivalent to another value, thus “equivalence and exchangeability are reciprocal notions, which express the same state of affairs in two different forms, in a condition of rest and in motion, so to speak” (Simmel 2011: 90). In any case, in order to acquire and retain an economic value, the distance between subject and object must be kept within

¹⁵ The fact that demand is pushed by desire and not by utility is demonstrated by current marketing and advertising objectives to mould our perception of utility and make us desire certain things.

certain limitations, since if the distance becomes too great the subject will cease to feel the impulse of desire for the object, while if the object is too close and possessing it would be as easy as breathing, it would cease to be an object of desire (ibidem: 69).

In this light, according to Simmel, exchange may also occur between man and nature, thus in an autarchic environment since

this activity is not affected by the secondary question as to whether the stimulus comes from the nature of things or the nature of man, whether it operated in a subsistence or a market economy. Every enjoyment of values by means of attainable objects can be secured only by forgoing other values, which may take the form not only of working indirectly for ourselves by working for others, but often enough of working directly for our own ends" (ibidem: 81).

Exactly because exchange generates value, and not the reverse, Simmel finds improbable such a theory, which postulates that the calculus of gains and profits is what motivates the exchange: "The idea that a balancing of sacrifice and gain precedes the exchange and must have resulted in an equilibrium between them is one of those rationalistic platitudes that are entirely unpsychological" (ibidem: 91-92).

According to Simmel's theory then, we should recognize that exchange is not promoted by economic interest, and that individuals do not engage in exchange activity *primarily* because they are attracted by the value of an object. Since the moment of exchange is the moment when value is created, depending on the ways used to exchange goods or services different kinds of value will be generated. For example, gift exchange, barter or monetary exchange would result in different values emerging from the exchange and it would be an oversimplification to consider them all as involving (the same) economic value.

In a way, Simmel's words reveal the paradox underlying classical economic theory when it states that economic interest is based on economic value: if the value is generated within the actual exchange then the theory is stating that what motivates exchange is something that is created after exchange. Furthermore, it continues to relate the notion of interest to the notion of economic profits and gains, whereas interest does not concern only a mere rational calculating attitude.

Hence, exchange cannot be explained only in economic terms although there appears to be some kind of exclusivity related to the economic literature on exchange.

3.3 On the theoretical autonomy of the economics field

The problems we face in studying exchange, therefore, derive from what is usually called «economism», that is, consideration of the rules of the economics discipline applied to any other social field; in this case, we apply to various social fields the notion of interest as intended by economics. In other words, this is a reductionist approach which seeks to relate any form of social action to economic action, drawing a parallelism between interest and profit. On closer inspection, this not only is forcing a concept through an a-historical perspective, it is also trying to ignore the fact that the separation between different fields of collective life has been a progressive process, and that in ancient societies, when the demarcation line was more labile, there was just one multifunctional field (Bourdieu 1994). This process of separation of various fields is described by Durkheim (1982) who sees the progressive separation of religion from science, art, economy, etc. with the consequent development of a particular *nòmos* regulating the universe, which Bourdieu (1994) recognizes as autonomous fields.

Hence, the economics field works like any other social field: it has its rules and is followed by players who compete for a stake. The problem with the economics field is that scholars who focused on understating its mechanisms have tried to depict universal schemes which constructed the myth of autonomy of the field, which is not only apparent but also does not help to be fully understood: “And as for economics, we are similarly in the presence of a generalized organization for which the supposition that kinship is ‘exogenous’ betrays any hope of understanding” (Sahlins 1972: 182). In reality, as Bourdieu underlines,

It was only very gradually that the sphere of commodity exchange separated itself out from the other fields of existence and its specific *nòmos* asserted itself - the *nòmos* expressed in the tautology ‘business is business’; that economic transactions ceased to be conceived on the model of domestic exchanges, and hence as governed by social or family obligations (‘there’s no sentiment in business’);

and that the calculation of individual gain, and hence economic interest, won out as the dominant, if not indeed exclusive, principle of business against the collectively imposed and controlled repression of calculating inclinations associated with the domestic economy” (Bourdieu 2005: 6).

This autonomy was, in any case, constructed out of a process of differentiation of various dimensions of human life, and produced a differentiation in the interests at stake in those areas: as Bourdieu explains, the field of art adopted as its fundamental rule the denial of economic rules, thus the art for art. Also, in the bureaucratic field, the fundamental law is the public service, which is a denial of the personal interest.

This perspective is based on the economics creed relating to the existence of universal categories, which does not take into consideration the development of the economic agent and the fact that his actions are the result of a long collective history. The problem with the science of economics is basically its a-historical nature, which is manifested in the practice of building theoretical models of universal heuristic value where the action is always performed according to a spirit of calculation. In the *rational action theory* we are confronted by an individual who is considered to be rational by virtue of his capacity for calculation involving his interests, represented by equally universal concepts of needs and economic capital. The idea aligned to this type of theory is that each calculus is actually the result of what Bourdieu would call habitus (see chapter 2), which is acquired historically and which tends to hide the socially constructed nature of the economics field. It is only because an individual learns through innumerable practices, the rules of the game and its stake, that he is able to move in the economics field (as well as in other fields), and the interest which lies beneath his action, economic interest, is just the form interest takes in that field, even if we reduce any form of interest to an economic one: “The most basic economic dispositions – needs, preferences, propensities – are not exogenous, that is to say, dependent on a universal human nature, but endogenous and dependent on a history that is the very history of the economic cosmos in which these dispositions are required and rewarded” (Bourdieu 2005: 8).

The spirit of calculus is an example which shows how a concept can be transformed to look the same despite the different context in which it is used. Far from being an economic constant, it is actually an anthropological variable which is

at work in any kind of exchange and represents the force which puts in motion the circulation of objects and individuals. In Chapter 4 we see that the social value of objects is the expression of social relations and, at the same time, it is able to shape them exactly by virtue of an interest expressed by individuals for a plurality of motives which go beyond the economic behaviour typical of capitalistic societies (Mora 2005). Hence, considering interest at the base of exchange does not mean considering it a utilitarian activity; rather, it is a perspective that reveals the fundamental anthropological nature of exchange itself. Again, Pierre Bourdieu sheds light on this important dimension when he maintains that each practice (even the most disinterested action) answers to a logic of interest which must be understood not only in opposition to the concept of disinterest or gratuity, but which is in direct opposition to the idea of indifference.

Pour comprendre la notion d'intérêt, il faut voir qu'elle est opposée non seulement à celle de désintéressement ou de gratuité mais aussi à celle d'indifférence. Etre indifférent, c'est être non motivé par le jeu : comme l'âne de Buridan, ce jeu me laisse indifférent, ou, comme on dit en français, cela m'est égal. L'indifférence est un état axiologique de non-préférence en même temps qu'un état de connaissance dans lequel je suis incapable de faire la différence entre les enjeux proposés. [...] Autant dire que le concept d'intérêt tel que je le conçois est totalement différent de l'intérêt transhistorique et universel de la théorie utilitariste, universalisation inconsciente de la forme d'intérêt qui est engendrée et exigée par une économie capitaliste." (Bourdieu, Wacquant 1992: 92)¹⁶.

The notion of interest is intended by Bourdieu as the opposite of non-interest, which is the idea that the social agent is interested by an *illusio*, he is involved in the game and recognizes its rules. He may not appreciate those rules, but having an interest means that they must be accepted for the sake of the stake. Being *in ludo* means being interested in the game, showing a willingness to participate and to follow the rules that regulate the game simply because it is worth it (Bourdieu 1994:

¹⁶ To understand the notion of interest, this must be opposed not only to the notion of non-interest or gratuity but also to the notion of indifference. Being indifferent, means being not willing to participate in the game: like the Buridan's donkey, the game leaves me indifferent, or participating or not does not make a difference for me. Indifference is an axiological status of non-preference and, at the same time, a status of consciousness where I cannot distinguish between stakes proposed. [...] The concept of interest as I know it, is totally different from the trans-historical and universal interest of the utilitarian theory, an unconscious universalization of the interest generated and demanded by a capitalistic economy." (Bourdieu, Wacquant 1992: 92, my translation)

135). This means that the game produces a non economic value, and the exchange, which according to Huizinga's (1971) theory can be considered a game, works according to its rules, which are followed by whomever is interested in the game of exchange, that is, by those who want the stake. Weber (1978) is also convinced that human action is profoundly determined by interest, and he too confirms the idea, opposing Marx's theory, that interest is not determined only by economic factors: thus, interest is not connected only to profit and gain. However, his construction of the four ideal types of action reflects this assumption: if it is true that rationality moves human action it is no less true that rationality may be related to different interests – the interests of reaching an aim, of following cultural values, of respecting traditions or of answering affective stimuli. The anthropological study by Mauss (1990) is another piece of research aimed at demonstrating that there is no such thing as a “free gift”. Considering interest as a concept strictly related to the economic notion of gain and profit indeed creates the risk of not recognizing any other form of interest, immediately defining those alternative forms as altruism or gratuity.

3.4 On the practical hegemony of the market

That particular form of interest, recalling a utilitarian approach, can be applied only to a particular form of exchange. There is no other situation in which it can be applied except in the context of the market institution. In any case, what is important is that the market, as we know it today, is not a natural form of exchange that emerged out of everyday practices, and probably is also not the most efficient way of managing resources within a society. The market, like any other institution, is a social construction that has been accepted as the only way to control exchanges, but this, as Polanyi (2001) demonstrates, is the result of political intervention.

According to Polanyi (2001), the structure of our contemporary society is almost unique in the history of human kind, due to the fact that our economic system is definitely controlled by the market. The difference between «economy» and «market economy» might seem irrelevant when we are accustomed to living in a context where the market operates with its own special rules, but before the development of

what Polanyi calls the internal market this was not at all evident. Polanyi properly states that there is no possibility for any kind of society surviving without a form of *economy*, or the organization merely of the distribution of resources. In any case, what Polanyi finds peculiar is that

no society could, naturally, live for any length of time unless it possessed an economy of some sort; but previously to our time no economy has ever existed that, even in principle, was controlled by markets. In spite of the chorus of academic incantations so persistent in the nineteenth century, gain and profit made on exchange never before played an important part in human economy. Though the institution of the market was fairly common since the later Stone Age, its role was no more than incidental to economic life (Polanyi 2001: 45).

He refuses Smith's idea of a man naturally inclined to commerce, whose natural instincts led him to develop the division of labour (in order to exchange) and to create the market (in order to have a place to exchange); instead Polanyi is convinced that the history of the development of markets should be reconsidered from the other direction. People used to exchange in external and local markets, which were physical places kept isolated from the rest of the community. External markets emerged in the 15th century after the commercial revolution and were places where merchants stopped to rest during their journeys; internal markets were where individuals exchanged what they could not transport. Both market types were non-competitive and were highly regulated by social norms, rites and rituals which limited their expansion¹⁷. As Weber suggests: "the freedom of the market is typically limited by sacred taboos or through monopolistic consociations of status groups which render exchange with outsiders impossible" (Weber 1978: 638). In Polanyi's view, this represented a society where economic activity was *embedded* in social activity: on the contrary, the type of market which characterizes our economy is a so called internal market, a highly competitive institution which has been created by a

¹⁷ "[T]he market must be visited on market days. If any occurrence should prevent the holding of the market on one or more days, business cannot be resumed until the market-place has been purified. . . . Every injury occurring on the market-place and involving the shedding of blood necessitated immediate expiation. From that moment no woman was allowed to leave the market-place and no goods might be touched; they had to be cleansed before they could be carried away and used for food. At the very least a goat had to be sacrificed at once. A more expensive and more serious expiation was necessary if a woman bore a child or had a miscarriage on the market-place. In that case a milch animal was necessary. In addition to this, the homestead of the chief had to be purified by means of sacrificial blood of a milch-cow. All the women in the country were thus sprinkled, district by district" (Thurnwald 1932: 162-164)

State intervention, and in which competitiveness is justified to allow self-regulation. But when the economic organization of life is based on an autonomous institution, Polanyi insists that then society serves the purposes of the market, instead of the other way round, hence society is in a subordinate position:

instead of economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system. The vital importance of the economic factor to the existence of society precludes any other result. For once the economic system is organized in separate institutions, based on specific motives and conferring a special status, society must be shaped in such a manner as to allow that system to function according to its own laws (Polanyi 2001: 60).

In order to understand the political dimension of exchange we should take some distance from this perspective and understand that, no matter how far the autonomy of the market is celebrated and theoretically pursued, we know that it remains, and will always remain, a social construction like any other institution that regulates social activity. Authors such as Polanyi and other economic sociologists (Keynes 1971; Ingham 1996; Weber 1978; Wray 2000), provide evidence that “market processes are rarely pure, but rather that economic action is a form of social action, that economic action is socially situated, and that economic institutions are social construction. More specifically, markets are constantly influenced by the ways in which they are embedded in social networks and institutions” (Spillman 1999: 1050-51).

Overall, these authors confirm that there cannot be a completely gratuitous action in the sense of an act that is not motivated by interest, since the same involvement in an action testifies to the interest of being *in ludo*. In this light, we can claim that every form of social action is moved by an interest which can be different in nature, and that exchange, too, as one fundamental kind of social action is not moved only by what we previously defined as economic interest, but has its origins in what we can call a social or political interest, that is, a calculation of the social benefits that exchange can bring.

3.5 The political nature of gift and barter exchange

Interest can take many forms and, as in the case of the market, the form it takes is maximizing profits at the lowest possible monetary cost; in other types of exchanges there are other forms of interest. Although market institutions became hegemonic, this does not mean that other forms of exchange have been completely eliminated from society, as evidenced by the existence of barter and gift in our contemporary society. Stressing the concept of interest can be helpful for understanding these different modalities and their political dimensions. These two forms of social actions are based on different types of interest, mainly the interest of establishing specific types of social relations, and, consequently, they express different forms of value.

Gift and barter in fact have a political nature which normally is hidden, and goes beyond the supposed gratuity of the former and the profit-oriented and calculated spirit of the latter. Indeed, there is a part of pre-Maussian anthropological literature which sees gift as the representation of human solidarity, and gratuity as opposed to the rational self-interest of barter, which is considered to be the forerunner of international trade. Barter exchange, in contrast to gift, leaves no space for the social aspect of the relation seeking to maximize the benefit out of an exchange of objects “*without* reference to money and *with* maximum feasible reduction of social, cultural, political, or personal transaction costs” (Appadurai 1986: 9, my emphasis), and for this reason it has for long been claimed that barter emerged as a form of exchange between strangers, that is *between different* communities instead of *within* the same community (Einzig 1966; Appadurai 1986). In contrast, gift exchange has always been regarded as a gratuitous act since the giver does not obtain anything from the receiver, hence his act cannot be driven by any form of interest or calculation, and gift was intended as the main form of social organization of primitive, pre-industrial societies. However, there are various authors who disagree with this perspective (Appadurai 1986; Enzig 1966; Sahlins 1972) referring to the work of Mauss (1990), who basically started a new branch of research on the “opportunistic” side to gift.

Furthermore, through Bourdieu’s analysis of the concept of interest, we see that there cannot be a completely gratuitous act and it is again Bourdieu (1977) who

underlines the small relevance of differentiating between barter and gift by stressing the temporal mechanism of the two forms of exchange: if barter transaction presupposes the immediate reciprocity of objects exchanged, in the gift mechanism this reciprocity is dilated. Whoever is donating is always expecting the other to reciprocate the gift and the receiver will donate a counter-gift in response to a calculus of its costs and benefits rather than to supposed kindness. What matters is the social positions of the parts involved in the gift mechanism, which can be translated as the possibility of preserving those alliances and social bonds that protect the whole community to which the subjects belong. The cost, in the case of gift, is paid in order to acquire the political benefits of avoiding war and violent physical conflicts. In other words, the cost of not exchanging is war: “all their dealings are treaties of peace. All the exchanges, that is to say, must bear in their material design some political burden of reconciliation” (Sahlins 1972: 182).

This mechanism is clearly described in the most famous work on gift, that is, Mauss's (1990) *The Gift*, which is the subject of an interesting piece of work by Sahlins (1972), who finds an almost incredible correspondence between Mauss's description of the interest underlying the gift mechanism, and Hobbes's considerations on the origin of the social contract. According to Sahlins, the kind of mechanism described by Mauss can evidently be considered a social contract which regulates the use of force and violence between rival tribes, transforming reciprocal violence into reciprocal exchange of gifts: “for war of every man against every man, Mauss substitutes the exchange of everything between everybody [...] The gift is alliance, solidarity, communion – in brief, peace, the great virtue that earlier philosophers, Hobbes notably, have discovered in the State. [...] The primitive analogue of social contract is not the State, but the gift.” (Sahlins 1972: 168-169). In Mauss's work exchange seems to be driven by political and social interests, and its functioning shapes social bonds resulting in a particular kind of society, a society out of the state of nature, where each individual sacrifices something he owns for the benefit of the whole community. The state of nature is already, according to Sahlins, a form of society where each individual has the *right* to use violence against any other, in order to protect his personal interests or to defend himself: “a society in which the right to give battle is retained by the people in severalty. But this must be

underlined: it is the right which endures, not the battle” (ibidem: 172). Abandoning this state of nature actually means establishing a new order, which is normally achieved by transferring the use of violence to a third super-party authority, which is legitimized to exercise power in the name of all the individuals in the community. The use of gift exchange, a mechanism which presupposes the avoidance of personal violence, similarly regulates relations among individuals: gift bonds the two parts to avoid war and at the same time to reciprocally ensure protection in case of need (either because of external attacks or because of food scarcity), and it does so by developing proper social norms whose infringement will lead one of the parties to lose power over his group, that is, to lose reputation.

Sahlins further underlines, beside the initial quasi animist explanation of the *hua*, the spirit of gift. By the end of the treaty, Mauss recognizes the fundamental political nature of gift which is profoundly related to the use of reason. The mechanism of gift is no mystery, but rather the clear application of a calculus between non-monetary costs and benefits: “It is by opposing reason to feeling, by pitting the will to peace against sudden outbursts of insanity of this kind that peoples succeed in substituting alliance, gifts, and trade for war, isolation and stagnation.” (Mauss 1990: 105). Gift emerges as a reasonable act, the product of the reason of individuals which pushes them to seek peace instead of war: “the gift is Reason. It is the triumph of human rationality over the folly of war” (Sahlins 1972: 175). Through gift exchange, men emerged from isolation and stagnation which is why, according to the author, gift expresses the real liberating potential of society and, above all, of culture. Appadurai (1986) shows us that as goods circulate, they are charged with cultural meaning which then is shared and assimilated, transformed and handled by whomever is involved in the exchange mechanism. Thus, Sahlins (1972) maintains that individuals activate a mechanism of reciprocity in order to achieve peace, and not because of a supposed feeling of purity and friendship: they find the cost of renouncing the right to use individual violence more convenient. “I stress again the political character of Hobbes's argument. The commonwealth put an end to the state of nature but not to the nature of man. Men agreed to surrender their right to force (except in self-defence), and to put all their strength at the disposal of a sovereign, who would bear their person and save their lives” (ibidem: 179).

To summarize, if barter is the exchange of goods or services then, in this perspective, it is more difficult to distinguish between barter and gift: also, the redistribution systems within primitive communities could be considered a barter system since the individual performs various services for the community (such as hunting) because he knows that he will receive something in return from the community itself. Also, the feudal system could be considered a form of barter rather than a gift mechanism: “tribute was paid by vanquished, but exchanges on a more equal basis were continually arranged between kingdoms to assure stability and peace, and in any case the ruler’s booty from whatever source was expected to be shared as gifts both to his warriors and to his gods. And one gift called for another in return” (Goldthwaite 1993: 152). Not surprisingly, among anthropologists the idea diffused that different forms of exchange are difficult to distinguish, and that above all, there is nothing so simple as the theory of utility which can explain the real reason that moves men to exchange between each other:

I have on purpose spoken of forms of exchange, of gifts and counter-gifts, rather than of barter or trade, because, although there exist forms of barter pure and simple, there are so many transitions and gradations between that and simple gift, that it is impossible to draw any fixed line between trade on the one hand, and the exchange of gifts on the other (Malinowski 2005: 135).

At the same time, criticisms moved to Mauss’s work underline the fact that after his work, developed after a questionable use of ethnographic material¹⁸, gift was conceived only as that political activity guaranteeing stability and social relations, in a bid to eliminate any possibility of gratuity. Mauss’s work has been in fact criticized for being a functionalist approach to the study of gift, which is eventually interpreted only as an instrument to eliminate conflicts. Indeed, as Matteo Aria and Fabio Dei (2008) demonstrated in their work on gift, the example of blood donation testifies to the continuing existence of a free gift. In this collection of papers, the authors try to show how far interest in gift is only a part of the story, probably the most interesting

¹⁸ See, Dei (2008). Basically, Mauss refers to profoundly different ethnographic phenomena like “kula”, “potlatch”, and “hau” and compare them taking parts of the interpretations from one phenomenon and parts from another, eventually creating a brand new category, the gift. Again, as Dei noted, Mauss’s use of the comparative method is a peculiar one, which allows him to reveal a entire new phenomenon out of the confrontation of different data and cultural contexts.

and the one, which for long was denied (at least until Mauss revealed it), but considering only this aspect would lead the interpretation of gift to a problematic essentialism. Reciprocity is an important dimension, but there are some types of gift which evade this mechanism: think of sending a bullet in mail. This gift is clearly not meant to be reciprocated, but still has strong symbolic power. The political dimension of gift is revealed when the system adopts the mechanism to prevent reciprocity: thus, both in blood donation and in sperm donation anonymity must be guaranteed by authority. In the case of sperm donation an authority must be imposed to preserve the anonymity of the donation (Shanley 2002), since, despite the economic reward that is sometimes given, who would donate was the system not to guarantee anonymity and to impose parental responsibility on the donor? In the case of blood, people may start to refuse blood from people they would dislike for several reasons (political belonging, ethnical origins, etc.) causing problems and limits to donation. The intervention of institutional authority is what allows the system to work smoothly but, inevitably, is also what transform the act of donating in a pure gift, that is, an act which does not guarantee any kind of reciprocity.

On the other hand, the distinction between barter and gift, which sees barter as the form of exchange separated from social or political norms, should be questioned as well. As it was shown in the introduction of this work, an alternative perspective on barter developed in the 80's of the last century, arguing that barter definitely is a social activity. Weber maintains also that "The completed barter constitutes a consociation only with the immediate partner. The preparatory dickering, however, is always a social action insofar as the potential partners are guided in their offers by the potential action of an indeterminately large group of real or imaginary competitors rather than by their own actions alone." (Weber 1978: 635-36) and Appadurai states that "the determination of what may be bartered, where, when, and by whom, as well as of what drives the demand for the goods of the 'other', is a social affair" (Appadurai 1986: 11). Thus, gift and barter are both political, but their political nature is expressed through different aspects. Reciprocity is one aspect of gift which, to an extent, seems to be absent from barter.

3.6 The norm of reciprocity

Reciprocity is the political dimension regulating gift exchange, but perhaps there might be reasons to see reciprocity working also in barter exchange. In gift exchange, the time that passes between gift and counter-gift is what creates a proper domination of one party over the other, while in barter the conflict for power is compressed into a shorter period of time to generate power relations that work only in the moment of exchange. This does not mean that there is less or more conflict, because both have precise aims: in both cases, exchange is aimed at eliminating physical violence, but while in gift, violence should be eliminated as long as possible, in barter it is enough to exclude violence for the time of the exchange¹⁹. In barter each of the parties seeks to possess an object and decides to go opt for dickering rather than reciprocal violence, and in the gift mechanism the parties are trying to establish social bonds that will allow them to receive support, and avoid belligerent relations. The institutionalization of these practices differs because of the different fields in which they are exercised, and they give birth to different cultural hegemonies, that is, cultural models through which human relations are developed. On the one side, there are close relations that need to endure for the entire life of an individual and, therefore, should be managed by the imposition of hierarchies of power; on the other side, there are much more ephemeral relations between strangers, which last for the moment of the bargaining. The two institutionalizations hence develop two different kinds of reciprocity.

Reciprocity is a core theme in the work of Gouldner (1960). Following a functionalist approach, the author recognizes the stabilizing function of reciprocity, and determines the existence of a continuum based on the degree of reciprocity present in a relation that for one side is a totally balanced exchange, that is, the value exchanged is either heterogeneous, heteromorphic reciprocity, or is an homogeneous value in a homeomorphic reciprocity. At the other extreme, is the least possible degree of reciprocity, which is exploitation. In any event, functionalist theory sees reciprocity as a function for maintaining balance and cohesion in the social system,

¹⁹ It is important to note that barter can exist *only* if violence is excluded from the relation, since otherwise we would encounter exploitation and theft instead of exchange.

so quantity is intended to represent the force that reciprocity exercises to keep the system stable. In this perspective, the concept of stability is too much related to the equality of the relation: according to the theory, if we have a very low degree of reciprocity the relation tends to be less stable, as in the case where one part gets something without giving something back. There is no real reason why the latter case should not be considered stable as well. Gouldner refers to Marx to prove his theory right, but even though Marx refers to exploitation to address the issue of instability and change, he regarded an exploited relation as a place where conflict and tension could arise, opening the path to instability, but did not see it as an unstable relation in itself. *Mutatis mutandis*, the relation superordinates-subordinates, can persist forever: not coincidentally, Marx stressed the necessity for a moment when the proletariat acquired the notion of their class interests, turning from a «class in itself» to a «class for itself», in order to open the class struggle. Hence, it is difficult to compare Marx's theory and Durkheim's analysis on the cohesion brought by the division of labour, as Gouldner does in his paper.

In the analysis that Sahlins (1972) develops on reciprocity, he seems to ignore the fact that reciprocity can be found outside of gift. Like Gouldner, Sahlins draws a continuum of reciprocity where at one end we find a completed disinterested act and at the other a self-interested act: “at one end of the spectrum stands the assistance freely given [...] at the other pole, self-interested seizure, appropriation by chicanery” (Sahlins 1972: 191). Sahlins goes on to distinguish different reciprocity subtypes ranging from “generalized reciprocity” or “diffused reciprocity” typical of altruistic transactions, those that could also be defined as «pure gift», “balanced reciprocity” where the parts reciprocate equivalent types of goods in the same amounts, to “negative reciprocity” which is expressed in those transactions where there is an attempt to “get something for nothing with impunity” and where “the participants confront each other as opposed interests, each looking to maximize utility at the other's expense” (ibidem: 195). According to Sahlins, barter exchange belong to this last category. Nonetheless, this continuum seems to conflict with his previous statement that gift is reason if he then proceeds to hold that the redistribution of wealth in a primitive community should be considered free exchange of goods for the sake of kinship and friendship. Furthermore, the idea that

reciprocity expressed in kinship relations is “weak”, as he suggests when describing diffused reciprocity, does not take account of the fact that the entire redistribution system is based on friendship: if we agree on the fact that the redistribution of wealth is also based on a gift mechanism (the individual engages in activities for the community just to receive something back from the community itself, whether material or social reward) then it is evident that this is the strongest form of reciprocity found. Indeed, were the value of reciprocity not so strong, the individual would not sacrifice his personal power for the sake of the community, and traditional power (in the Weberian sense) would not be legitimated²⁰. The fact that barter works according to a mechanism of “negative reciprocity” also seems problematic. Indeed, the value of what is exchanged is generated within the exchange relation itself, thus, there cannot be a part which is not satisfied by the exchange concluded, since the exchange takes place only after a complicated phase of bargaining which states the agreement of the parts. An act of exploitation or a theft might be more representative of negative reciprocity or, even better, of cases characterized by the absence of reciprocity. Negative reciprocity instead refers to the kind of transaction where the parts extract something from one another that was not intended to be exchanged: this is the case of vengeance, or the *lex talionis* for example, the law by which any kind of crime must be compensated for by an equal punishment. In the context of vengeance, Mark Anspach (2007) takes the origin of gift back to vengeance, in this way unconsciously stressing the political use of the gift. In his book he shows that the typical negative reciprocity characterizing murder, expressed in the equation to kill (who murdered) = to kill (who applies vengeance), gradually changed to positive reciprocity characterizing gift, expressed in the equation to sacrifice = to donate to (who will donate back) (Anspach 2007: 14-22). According to Anspach, escaping from the vengeance mechanism emerged as a need for primitive communities, and slowly turned to sacrifice, that is, to gift exchanges. The same reference to equivalence as expressed by Gouldner, emerges again in Sahlins’s work without this quantitative reference really being necessary in the description of the mechanism of reciprocity, since, as Simmel states: “There is, probably, not a single interaction in

²⁰ Enzig (1966) clearly describes how far Inca society was based entirely on this kind of mechanism. The Incas did not own any private property, and the state assumed a completely centralized structure.

which the things that go back and forth, in the reciprocity of giving and taking, are exactly equal” (Simmel 1950: 390). The balance in reciprocity should refer to the parties involved, not the objects exchanged.

What is political about barter, though, is the fact that the two parts involved must struggle against each other to reach an agreement over value. In this struggle for value, their relation must be perfectly balanced for two reasons: first, because the conclusion to the negotiation leading to proper exchange must leave both satisfied, hence they must have the same space for negotiation, that is, a balance of power of expression. Second, because to have an exchange (and not, it must be stressed again, a robbery) there must be no trace of superiority between the two. This is the reverse of the gift relation where it is exactly because the two parts find themselves involved in an unbalanced relation, that the mechanism of reciprocation is kept going. Nevertheless, those two parts are affirming their value as individuals. Hence, contrary to gift exchange the struggle is performed to determine the value of objects instead of subjects, and reciprocity consequently works between objects instead of between subjects.

Thus, the norm of reciprocity regulates gift as well as barter exchanges, but since both exchanges establish a different type of value, reciprocity works on different levels: one refers to individuals – gift exchange, the other refers to objects – barter exchange: “the fact of economic exchange, therefore, frees the objects from their bondage to the mere subjectivity of the subjects and allows them to determine themselves reciprocally, by investing the economic function in them” (Simmel 2011: 77). In this perspective, it emerges how far every relation entails a conflicting dimension: what change are the terms of confrontation which must be reciprocated.

3.7 Struggle

Although both modes of exchange are based on a positive reciprocity, the result of a perspective of exchange oriented towards the future instead of the past, this does not mean that the political dimension is less evident, or that the struggle is eliminated. Indeed, conflict is an ontological dimension of our reality, not a problem to be solved

and there is no reason to eliminate it if it does not create a certain form of control. The only way to eliminate struggle is by imposing standards that prevent individuals from debating over their decisions. In the exchange field, we see that this is the function performed by money, depriving the exchange relation of its conflicting dimension. Indeed, Chantal Mouffe states clearly that “conflict, in order to be accepted as legitimate, needs to take a form that does not destroy the political association” (Mouffe 2005: 20), which means that conflict should not be eliminated, but that it must find a place where it can be performed according to some preconditions:

this means that some kind of common bond must exist between the parties in conflict, so that they will not treat their opponents as enemies to be eradicated, seeing their demands as illegitimate, which is precisely what happens with the antagonistic friend/enemy relation. However, the opponents cannot be seen simply as competitors whose interest can be dealt with through mere negotiation, or reconciled through deliberation, because in that case the antagonistic element would simply have been eliminated. [...] While antagonism is a we/they relation in which the two sides are enemies who do not share any common ground, agonism is a we/they relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents. They are ‘adversaries’ not enemies. This means that, while in conflict, they see themselves as belonging to the same political association, as sharing a common symbolic space within which the conflict takes place. (ibidem: 20).

Hence, barter exchange is a mechanism enabling performance of the struggle for power through an agonistic rather than an antagonistic means. The difference between gift and barter, is that barter produces balanced relations while gift produces much more unbalanced relations, that is, it produces dominating and dominated parties, although it seems to be supported by altruism and collaboration: “domination in the most general sense is one of the most important elements of social action. Of course, not every form of social action reveals a structure of dominance. But in most of the varieties of social action domination plays a considerable role, even where it is not obvious at first sight” (Weber 1978: 941). The gift mechanism is the act through which a subject is able to subjugate another subject with the highest social costs. If the gift is refused or if it is not reciprocated, the receiving subject can encounter serious social damage, such as being completely excluded from social activity (as in

the case of an entire tribe represented by a chief refusing the gift, or refusing to reciprocate the gift, which can lead to the exclusion of the tribe from every social network, and hence to the death of the tribe)²¹. Anspach is quite clear on this point, saying that as the murder refuses to exchange violence by offering a gift, those who refuse an exchange of gifts will receive violence (Anspach 2007: 37). Thus, Bourdieu (1977) states that during the time lapse between gift and counter-gift, dominance is performed. The fact that in gift exchange the parts involved reciprocally try to dominate each other is shown in the description of the potlatch mechanism in North America communities. In this ritual the value of the tribal chiefs is determined by their actions in this tournament of gift exchange, demonstrating that the value of subjects is created through exchange. According to Mauss (1990), potlatch and other gift mechanisms, are a total system of giving that are performed through competitions where the honour of both parties is at stake, or as Appadurai calls them a kind of “tournament of value”, aimed at satisfying individuals’ interests and establishing social hierarchies. “Tournaments of value are complex periodic events that are removed in some culturally well-defined way from the routines of economic life. Participation in them is likely to be both a privilege of those in power and an instrument of status contests between them. The currency of such tournaments is likely to be set apart through well understood cultural diacritics.” (Appadurai 1986: 21).

For this reason gift can be defined as a hegemonic practice, that is, “the articulatory practices through which a certain order is established and the meaning of social institutions is fixed” (Mouffe 2005: 18). Gift is indeed that mechanism which ensures the traditional authority²² described by Weber (1978), and, in this sense,

²¹ Not only may they need help in the case of a natural disaster, which would not arrive were they isolated, they also would not benefit from protection in the case of an attack, and would be attacked immediately after a refusal to socialize.

²² See, e.g. the organization of the Inca society, which, despite being rich in metals (gold and silver), had no knowledge of the use of money. Its economic and social structure was ultimately based on gift exchanges. A subject gave to her community because she knew she would receive something back, and vice versa. “the life of people was planned from cradle to grave. On the basis of statistical material regularly collected, the central administration at Cuzco prescribed in minute detail what everybody was to produce and how their products were to be allocated. Money did not come into the production or distribution of goods at all. The producers of food, cloth, etc., had to surrender a determined share of their output to the political and religious authorities, and the State provided for the requirements of those who did not take a direct part in production. There was no profit motive and

barter represents a form of counter-hegemony since it frees the subjects from reciprocal obligations investing the objects with the reciprocal function. This is why it has been perceived by a neutral activity, although it is clearly embedded in social relations. Nevertheless, in barter exchanges, the subjects are in a much more equal position in the struggle being fought between objects, which must determine their value within the exchange itself, while in gift the value of the subjects is being produced. This is why Mary Douglas underlines the importance of Mauss's work stating that "He also discovered a mechanism by which individual interests combine to make a social system, without engaging in market exchange [...] Gifts are given in a context of public drama, with nothing secret about them. In being more directly cued to public esteem, the distribution of honour, and the sanctions of religion, the gift economy is more visible than the market" (Douglas 1990: xviii)

Overall, in gift and barter exchange the struggle finds the place to be performed within the relation itself, even if it is performed in two different ways, an antagonistic way in gift, and an agonistic way in barter. In any case, the parts involved in it have the possibility of experiencing the conflicting dimension of their relations. An experience that instead is neglected is the form of exchange most familiar to us, that is, monetary exchange.

3.8 The hegemony of money

"never has an object that owes its value exclusively to its quality as a means, to its convertibility into more definite values, so thoroughly and unreservedly developed into a psychological value absolute, into a completely engrossing final purpose governing our practical consciousness."

(Simmel 2011: 232)

The social construction of market, and its hegemonic nature, depends also on the social use of the instrument the market adopts, that is, money. Although in economic

no individual initiative. Wages and salaries as such were unknown. Everybody was entitled to be provided for adequately even if through some misfortune he had lost his working capacity. Possessions were redistributed from time to time, so that there was no scope even for using a standardized store of value [...] Judging by the high stage achieved by the Inca civilization at the time of the Conquest, the absence of money had certainly not been an obstacle to progress" (Einzig 1966: 335).

theories money is conceived as a pure apolitical device, its political nature emerges from the historical, philosophical and sociological literature, which developed a critical analysis on the issue. Understanding what money is and from where it originated are the subject of a wide-ranging debate that cannot be entirely exposed here; however, its main arguments help to disclose its political dimension. Furthermore, no matter the specific discipline to which authors interested in money belong, all agree that it is a very complex issue to deal with: “There is no denying that views on money are as difficult to describe as are shifting clouds” (Schumpeter 1994: 289). In what follows, the textbook definition of money is given to reveal its political aspects. Hence, it is demonstrated how far money is a social construction and how the State imposed it by means of law. Finally, it is shown how money deprives the exchange relation of its conflicting dimension, turning monetary transactions in post-political practices.

The starting point of an examination into the political dimension of money should logically be its conventional definition, as proposed in the majority of economic textbooks, stating that money is that object performing these four functions: a) it is a medium of exchange; b) it is a measure of value or a unit of account; c) it is a store of value, which means that money keeps its value over time; d) it is a standard for deferred payment (an implicit function which derives from the other three) (Ferrari et al. 2012). Economic textbooks describe the media of exchange as if they were normal goods which are exchanged not with the purpose of being consumed: while in a barter economy goods are exchanged because of their use value, media of exchange are considered only for their trade value. Money can be further distinguished into two categories: the money-good and the money-sign. Money-good is an object commonly used for its specific intrinsic value derived from its physical and/or functional characteristics. A clear example of money-good are coins made of gold or silver, whose value corresponds to the amounts of the metals they embody. This kind of exchange medium is mint, by a State, a King or any authority that takes responsibility for guaranteeing the value of the medium itself. Money-sign is the medium of exchange that has no intrinsic value, or has a minimum value compared to the greater value of the goods it is exchanged for. This second type of money, which is the money we currently use, gains its value and legitimacy from different

credit operations which may give birth to: a) a legal tender (or fiat money) which is generated by the “act of a subject (State) who, exercising its own sovereign powers, states the liberating power of the payments done with the transaction of that specific money. [...] The State forces the acceptance of money in economics transactions taking the responsibility of guaranteeing to legal money an unlimited liberating power.” (Ferrari et al. 2012: 53, my translation)²³; b) a trust money, which is a “private debt with no legal liberating power, for that the payment done with this medium of exchange is subordinated to the creditor consensus” (Ferrari et al. 2012: 54, my translation)²⁴. Paper money is an example of the former, and bank accounts are an example of the second type of money-sign. The most relevant characteristic of money-sign is that it functions at a very high level of trust. If it is true that fiat money is established by law, it is also true that a citizen using that kind of money for his everyday transactions has to trust that the State will be able to guarantee unlimited liberating power. In other words, this definition suggests that there is a possibility that the State might not do so, reducing the value of money we use to the value of the paper is made of - almost nothing! The very birth of paper money, by the way, rests on a trustee assumption that the value indicated on the paper will be converted into a precise number of coins. The second case is self-explanatory, that the value of money, namely “trust money”, rests on the agreement that a subject establishes with a credit institute, which guarantees that the money will be transformed into legal currency at any time. As this definition shows, the dimension of trust plays an important role in the use of money.

According to mainstream neoclassical economics (Menger 1892; Samuelson 1973; Schumpeter 1994;), money is no more than a numeraire that helps the mechanism of the market. It has been described as a “lubricant” in a model based on analysis of a “real” economy, and as a “veil” because it merely hides the real functioning of the economy which is not affected by it: “money enters the picture only in the modest role of a technical device that has been adopted in order to

²³ “atto di un soggetto (Stato) che, nell’esercizio dei propri poteri sovrani, sancisce il potere liberatorio dei pagamenti effettuati con il trasferimento di quella specifica moneta. [...] Lo Stato ne impone l’accettazione nei rapporti economici assumendo l’impegno di assicurare alla moneta legale un illimitato potere liberatorio”

²⁴ “è un debito privato senza potere liberatorio legale, per cui il pagamento effettuato con questo mezzo di scambio è subordinato al consenso del creditore”.

facilitate transaction [...] so long as it functions normally, it does not affect the economic process [...] thus, money has been called a ‘garb’ or a ‘veil’ of the things that really matter” (Schumpeter 1994: 277). Furthermore, this model, focused on the real economic factors, considers money like any other objects circulating in a market, consequently reducing complex market economies to pure barter system (Samuelson 1973). Although some economists have developed another theory where money is conceived as a “special” commodity (Menger 1892), in fact it is reduced to a pure number. Nonetheless, Hahn (1987) suggests that looking at money as just a unit of account does not explain why individuals use that particular commodity rather than some other. Hahn thinks of money in terms of a Nash equilibrium showing that it is “advantageous for any given agent to mediate his transactions by money provided that all other agents do likewise” (Hahn 1987: 26). The paradox in this analysis is that “money is an advantage to the individual only if other use it; but, according to the theory, they can only rationally use it if it can be shown to be an individual advantage” (Ingham 1996: 515). Considering the social and political dimensions of money, allows an escape from this paradox and shows the many facets of money.

3.8.1 Money is a social construction

The fact that money needs trust to function correctly, and that a subject uses it only if others use it, demonstrates that, far from being an apolitical device, money is social relation (Ingham 1996) or, better, it is a social construction: “any act of exchange involving the use of money (sale) is a social action simply because the money used derives its value from its relation to the potential action of others. Its acceptability rests exclusively on the expectation that it will continue to be desirable and can be further used as a means of payment” (Weber 1978: 636).

There is a reason why, in many languages, there are two different ways to refer to our medium of exchange: in English we call it «money» or «currency», in Italian «denaro» or «moneta», in French «argent» or «monnaie», in Spanish «dinero» or «moneda», etc. This is because it is not *only* a medium of exchange; money is primarily an ontological concept. The concept described by the word money is the very idea of wealth, and the device we call money is just one of the forms in which

the ontological concept crystallized (Turri 2009: 18)²⁵. Hence, we can draw a distinction between money as a symbol and money as a sign. Being a sign is the first necessary condition for the existence of money as a tool, but the ontological origins of money as a symbol are strictly connected to a social behaviour, since it is a concept that operates and acts on reality through many forms (Turri 2009). In this sense, money is a social object, the product of a social agreement legitimized by a process of institutionalization. “Collective intentionality assigns a new status to some phenomenon, where that status has an accompanying function that cannot be performed solely in virtue of the intrinsic physical features of the phenomenon in question. This assignment creates a new fact, an institutional fact” (Searle 1995: 46).

Money as we know it, has been institutionalized by authority: through the mint of a currency, the State or the King, has taken away the dimension of social agreement which determined the value of money, and has split apart the sign from the symbol. Authority’s intervention in the origin of money is perhaps more important than neoclassical economics admits. In particular, some scholars (Keynes 1971; Knapp 1924; Ingham 1996; Weber 1950, 1978; Wray 2000) have developed a theory on the origin of money which decidedly contrasts the idea that money originated out of barter exchanges.

²⁵ In fact, in his book devoted to the study of the diffusion of money in Middle Ages, Le Goff underlines how money changed the idea of wealth. In the period the author defines as the “long happy 13th century”, wealth no longer derived from the possession of land, and the wealthy were no longer land owners or lords. A new social class represented wealth: bourgeoisies, merchants, and those usurers who were shortly to become bankers (Le Goff 2010).

3.8.2 The political origin of money

“what money is and where did it come from?”

“we all know the traditional answer to these question. Our homogenous-globule-of-desire forefathers were inconvenienced by barter until they spontaneously hit upon the idea of using tobacco, furs, huge rocks, landmarks, and wives as media of exchange. Over time, greater efficiency was obtained as homo economicus coined precious metals, and market efficiency was enhanced by free banks, which substituted paper money backed by precious metal reserves. All would have been fine and handy expect that evil government came along, monopolising the mints, creating central banks that debased the currency, and interfering with invisible hand of the market. This finally resulted in abandonment of commodity money, substitution of a fiat money, and central-banking induced inflation. If only we could return to the Peter Pan Never Never Land (laissez-faire), free of Capitan Hook and Crocodile (central bank and government), we practically supplied free bank money raising the mighty wheels of entrepreneurial commerce! The problem is that the Never Never Land imagined by the Paul Samuelson and other textbooks writers simply never, ever, existed.”

(Wray 2000: 42)

When economists argue that money is just a unit of account, they refer to the fact that “double coincidence of needs” became unbearable at a certain point in history. As Wray ironically puts it, this is a very contested perspective over the history of money. Although Knapp’s (1924) “State theory of money” has been largely contested, it follows directly the idea that money is a social construction, demonstrating how political is its origin. Knapp coined the word «chartal» in *The State Theory of Money* (1924), to indicate that money is any object which is derived by a law that legitimizes its power. Precisely he states:

when, however, in any society, for example, a State, it is a custom gradually recognised by law that all goods should be exchanged against definite quantities of a given commodity, e.g. silver, then in this instance silver has become an exchange-commodity in a narrower sense. It is called, therefore, within the range of its use, a general exchange-commodity. The general exchange-commodity is, accordingly, an institution of social intercourse; it is a commodity which has obtained a special use in society, first by custom, then by law” (Knapp 1924: 3).

Fundamentally, Knapp’s argumentation insists that any kind of money is the direct emanation of an authority, which assimilated the use of an instrument already diffused among a community or a society. In Weber’s analysis of *Economy and*

Society (1978), the definition of money is based largely on Knapp's theory, but Weber goes further, arguing that the constitution of rational authority typical of a State, is achieved as the State monopolizes the use of power. Holding the monopoly of physical violence, in particular, is what guarantees the dominance of the State over its citizens, yet its authority is also guaranteed by the monopoly of the economic power that accrues to the State by minting the legal currency. "The modern state has universally assumed the monopoly of regulating the monetary system by statute; and almost without exception, the monopoly of creating money, at least for coined money" (ibidem: 166). In any case, the control of economic exchanges is another way to monopolize the physical force, since market exchanges are the opposite of appropriation of good by means of coercion. (ibidem: 640), and this type of control, according to Weber, is a form of domination by authority (ibidem: 942-943).

As Bobbio underlines, the political power of a State is in fact defined by the means it owns to exercise its dominion:

la definizione del potere politico come il potere che è in grado di ricorrere in ultima istanza alla forza (ed è in grado di farlo perché ne detiene il monopolio) è una definizione che ha riguardo al mezzo di cui si serve chi detiene il potere per ottenere gli effetti voluti. Il criterio del mezzo è quello più comunemente usato anche perché permette una tipologia insieme semplice e illuminante, la tipologia cosiddetta dei tre poteri, economico, ideologico, politico, ovvero della ricchezza, del sapere, della forza. Il potere economico è quello che si vale del possesso di certi beni, necessari o percepiti come tali, in una situazione di scarsità, per indurre coloro che non li posseggono a tenere una certa condotta" (Bobbio 1985: 72)²⁶.

Apart from the evidence provided by these authors, the political origins of money were also documented by the work of those medievalists who focused on this issue (Bloch 1933, 1954; Braudel 1981; Le Goff 1997, 2010). In particular, Le Goff

²⁶ "defining political power as the power which is able to ultimately use force (and it can do that because it own the monopoly of force), means referring to the mean used by who owns power to obtain desired effects. The criterion of the mean is the most used since it allows a simple and enlightening typology, the so-called typology of three powers, economical, ideological, political that is, the power of wealth, of knowledge, of force. The economical power is the one which refers to the ownership of certain goods, which are necessary or perceived as such, in a situation of scarceness, in order to convince those who do not own them to behave in a certain way" (Bobbio 1985: 72, my translation).

clearly argues that the very constitution of the State depended on the power acquired with money:

Parmi les grands domaines où se manifeste le mieux dans l'apogée du long XIII siècle l'essor de l'argent figure la construction de ce que l'historiographie appelle l'Etat. [...] L'Etat se manifeste spécialement dans un domaine où l'argent prend au XIII siècle une importance spéciale : la fiscalité. A côté des redevances seigneuriales, les princes et les rois bénéficient en général des revenus d'un domaine propre, des bénéfices du droit supérieur de monnayage qui leur est reconnu, et de la levée d'impôts particuliers (Le Goff 2010: 83)²⁷

Historians identified the fixed taxation system as the mechanism that enhanced the diffusion of money. Taxes started to be essential for Kings, Lords and Cities to empower their authorities since through the money so collected they could finance wars, alliances, urban development and their prestige (Le Goff 2010). The imposition of taxes is another political aspect of money that is once again revealed by the fact that it encountered strong resistance from the population, such that no stable fiscal system is recorded before the 16th century (ibidem: 117).

In addition, as Keynes (1976) supported Knapp's theory, some post-Keynesian economists (Ingham 1996; Smithin 1994; Wray 2000) expanded it. Ingham's works describe money as the emergent property of a configuration of social relations, and in Wray's analysis the idea of a state theory of money, can be traced back to Adam Smith's work (1976).

Finally, the philosopher Turri has no doubt that

di fatto, la coniazione della moneta è stata indubbiamente uno dei modi con cui l'autorità ha esercitato la propria sovranità [...] Nel momento in cui è lo stato a decidere materia e forma della moneta, allora viene meno l'espressione diretta dell'intenzionalità sociale, non essendo più l'intenzionalità sociale diretta a decidere che una specifica merce, con determinate caratteristiche, è moneta (Turri 2009: 51-52)²⁸.

²⁷ "Among the areas where the development of money is best revealed, during the climax of the long 13th century, we find the construction of what historiography calls the State. [...] The State manifests itself especially in an area where money got a special role in the 13th century: the tax system. Beyond feudal dues, princes and kings generally benefitted from revenues from their own areas, higher benefits from mintage, and from the imposition of special taxes." (Le Goff 2010: 83, my translation).

²⁸ "Actually, there is no doubt mintage was a way through which authority exercised its power [...] When is the State who decides about the substance and shape of money, then the direct expression of

Hence, the creation of a legal or State money, deprived the collectiveness of the power to decide which token should be assigned the value of money. Furthermore, the use of a legal money within a market set authority (see Polanyi in paragraph 3.4), but deprived the individual of the possibility to establish, together with another individual involved in an exchange, the value of objects. As a consequence, the haggling practice, which was common in local and external markets, immediately become a form of resistance to the imposition of money.

3.8.3 Aprioristic reciprocity

As mentioned previously, Anspach's (2007) explanation of the origin of gift describes it as a form of positive reciprocity which was developed to substitute for the negative reciprocity implied in vengeance. Instead of killing the killer of a member of the community (reciprocity towards past), the member of primitive tribes started to donate to who would donate in return (reciprocity towards the future). In both cases, their actions started an almost endless mechanism which had disastrous effects in the first case, and led to substantial benefits in the second case. However, another perspective suggests that there might have been another way to stop the so-called blood feuds (Wray 2000), creating still another type of reciprocity, typical of money. The establishment of tariffs to compensate for the killing of a member of a community, called *wergeld*, is similar to the mechanism of prices (Grierson 1977). What the *wergeld* indicates is the value of a person, in light of her position in a community (so that a free person is worth more than a slave, for example). What *wergeld* does, is creating a measure that puts all subjects in relation to one another, creating a ratio²⁹. Looking at Simmel's theory, this is exactly what money is

social intentionality is neglected, not being the direct social intentionality who decides that a specific commodity, with precise characteristics, is money, anymore." Turri 2009: 51-52, my translation).

²⁹ The practice emerged in order to solve disputes and to reduce the practice of vengeance which was very common in mediaeval societies. The *wergeld* is founded as a law in the Salic Law of the old Germaic populations and, in particular, in the *Edictum Rothari*, the first written collection of Longobards's laws edited in 643 BC. In other words, it "comprised the scales and tariffs of compensation for injuries used as an alternatives to socially and economically debilitating blood feuds and *lex talionis*" (Grierson 1977: 28). For a further analysis of the law of *wergeld* see Grierson, *The Origin of Money* (1977).

supposed to do, to create a value that is determined aprioristically instead of within the relation itself.

When Simmel states that it is the exchange that creates value, and not vice versa, he is saying that: “The process of exchange consists in the mutual determination of taking and giving, and it does not depend upon a particular object having previously acquired a value for particular subject.” (Simmel 2011: 88). Although Simmel does not believe money is generated from barter, if it is, it must have been not to facilitate exchange, but in the moment when the object was no more related only to another object, but was exchanged against many others, becoming the common denominator to calculate the value of each unit of several things (*ibidem*: 125). According to Simmel’s view, the economic value of an object (expressed by its price) is not an intrinsic quality of the object, but a measure of its degree of exchangeability with the aggregate of all other commodities in a market (*ibidem*: 119). Money is, hence, the neutral object par excellence, since it stays in the middle of relations working as a universal equivalent. Being the expression of aggregated relations, “money is not only the absolutely interchangeable object, each quantity of which can be replaced without distinction by any other; it is, so to speak, interchangeability personified (*ibidem*: 122).

Just as the reciprocal mechanism, which worked in gift exchange as well as in barter, was acting upon subjects involved in the exchange, in monetary transaction it is money that stands for reciprocity. Money is not value in itself, it is the expression of value determined by relations, so money is the expression of relations that have been crystallized in the instrument and, hence, are deprived of the possibility of renegotiation. Working as the representation of all relations in the market, money presupposes the existence of an abstract subject who, together with all other subjects, constitutes aggregate demand and supply. This abstract subject has a role in the mechanism only as an economic agent and, for this reason, “money objectifies the external activities of the subject which are represented in general by economic transactions, and money has therefore developed as its content the most objective practices, the most logical, purely mathematical norms, the absolute freedom from everything personal.” (*ibidem*: 126). Since it is the most impersonal thing, money creates a distance between subject and object, and as the subject craves the object

(thus giving a value to it), as long as it is positioned away from him, money creates value. Ultimately, Simmel argues that, in this way, money, which should be a mean, is perceived as an objective. He calls this the metempsychosis of the ultimate aim, that is, the capacity for money to be recognized as the means able to reach infinite objectives, hence becoming the ultimate aim (Cavalli, Perucchi 1984).

Overall, Anspach argues that money does not guarantee the mechanism of positive reciprocity of giving, receiving and giving back, hence the State must intervene to set rules which are not established in a so-called free market (the invisible hand is not just invisible, it does not exist). Nonetheless, according to the author, reciprocity is not eliminated, it is just shifted to a meta-level, that is, a political level (Anspach 2007: 67).

Chapter 4

Consumption is a political field

“Dans le cas de la consommation, on pourrait presque dire que la production fournit le capital et que les utilisateurs, comme des locataires, acquièrent le droit de faire des opérations sur ce fonds sans en être les propriétaires.”

(de Certeau, 1990, p. 55).

Chapter 4 moves away from the political dimension of the exchange field, to the political dimension of the consumption field. Different arguments are presented to validate this perspective. Before the critical analysis of the political dimension, a brief history of consumption is presented. First, the key elements of the history of consumption are discussed. Explaining what consumption is and how it developed to becoming a current practice in which we are all involved. In the second part of the chapter the argumentation which reveals the political side of consumption is developed: the geopolitical aspects of consumption; the relation between consumption and social class; the cultural nature of consumption; and work on political consumerism and consumer activism.

Determining the origins of consumption was not an easy task for those scholars (Braudel 1981; Bryson 2011; Campbell 1983, 1989; Capuzzo 2006; McCracken 1990; McKendrick, Brewer, Plumb 1982; Mukerji 1983; Sombart 1967) who were interested mainly in challenging the well-diffused historical reconstruction that suggested that the French and industrial revolutions had promoted the consumer society but failed to consider the events related to a perhaps more relevant revolution, the consumption revolution. Some of the problems were related to the definition of “consumption revolution”, which was neither a precise, extraordinary event shared by a great number of individuals (like the French revolution), nor an introduction of a single artefact that changed people’s habits for ever (like the invention of the steam engine). The evolution of consumption comprised a gradual modification to cultural paradigms. Hence, if we define a revolution as the fulfilment of a series of drastic

changes which led to a reconfiguration of the social structure, then the 18th century is the historical moment in which the consumption revolution is located, since it was the moment when the frequency and quantity of consumption changed completely and became diffused through every social strata. However, if we define a revolution as the long period of time during which a series of social, economic and political variables concur in preparing the field for a great change, then we have to consider the expansionary thrust of the great European empires since the 14th century and the motives behind that thrust, as the real revolutionary moment that gave birth to the field of consumption.

Whichever point of view is adopted, the very causes and consequences of the consumption revolution are testament to the political dimension of consumption. This political dimension is visible in the history of colonization which actually allowed consumption to develop, and also in the representations of social classes which encompass the mechanisms of conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1975) and emulative consumption (Simmel 1996). Evidence that consumption is culturally determined is another valid way to show how profoundly political it is, as the anthropology-based work of Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood (1996) demonstrates. De Certeau (1990) and Appadurai (1986) argue explicitly that the field of consumption is defined by the struggle between producers and consumers, and Fiske (1987) and Hebdige (1988) describe the resistance upon which all sub-cultures and counter-cultures are based. Finally, the political aspect is core to the political consumerism literature (Micheletti, Stolle, Berlin 2012; Tosi 2009) and studies of consumer activism (Cammaerts 2007; Carducci 2006; Kozinets, Handelman 2004; Harold 2004) focus on the organization of the political use of consumption.

4.1 History of consumption

Studying the history of consumption is fundamental in understanding to what extent we can argue that it is a political field. First, reconstructing its history allows a clear understanding of the meaning of consumption itself, a concept that often is ambiguous. Indeed, beyond being the mere act of buying a good, consumption is a

complex process which starts with that act and develops through a series of practices each concurring to a definition of the field. The history of consumption reveals another side to consumption which broadens it to include the period *before* the act of buying. This is the period of production and distribution, which, as Marx stressed, are intertwined processes each depending on the other. Hence, to understand consumption and, above all, its political nature, one must consider all its related aspects. However, considering production and distribution to grasp the meaning of consumption is not to say that consumption depends directly on production, as if it were a mere consequence of production; the opposite can also be argued. Production and consumption are two faces of the same coin; they cannot be set apart nor considered according to a hierarchy of importance. Nevertheless, one of the problems related to studying consumption is that it often is considered as a consequence of production, as the history of the industrial revolution shows.

The industrial revolution and the French revolution were two important events in the history of human kind and are frequently related to the advent of the consumer society. These two events were of huge importance because of the changes they wrought upon western societies, and because of the rapidity with which these changes emerged. Not by chance have these two events been recognized by social scientists (Jedlowsky 2009; Di Nallo et al. 2006) as the starting point of what we tend to call “modernity”.

What we identify as the 18th century industrial revolution, describes a period when some key discoveries related to the development of industrial machines deeply changed not only the way of producing goods but the nature and quantity of the goods produced, thereby modifying the very structure of society, which had to adapt to this new means of production. The industrial revolution enabled the production of larger numbers of disposable goods and, especially, for greater differentiation of the products available in the market. It gave an incredible drive to the market itself, establishing the basis for the growth of a capitalistic system.

In the same century, the French revolution had caused a great change in the life of humanity. What happened in one country in Europe produced a terrific effect on the structure of all other societies, such that the very concept of society changed for ever. The structure of the power-shaping human relations, considered “normal” up to that

point, was delegitimized and a completely new set of values was imposed on human life. For the first time in history, human beings were born having equal rights and, being part of a “State”, they shared the same right to participate in the political life of it: this vision legitimized another type of power, based on the consensus of civil society, rationalized laws and obedience to freely elected rulers or representatives. Those laws, which regulated the stratification of society, presented as immutable because of their holy nature, were discredited on the assumption that law derives from confrontation among free men.

Thus, the industrial revolution and the French revolution had two important consequences: huge transformation to the ways of producing goods which consequently was accompanied by an abnormal increase in the numbers of goods available in the market³⁰, and great transformation to the social structure with the beginning of a process that would lead to the end of estate society as it was known. Hence, the common belief that as the quantity of goods grew, and as more people were free to accumulate the economic capital necessary to access to those goods, consumption became a common activity generating the basis for the materialistic culture characterizing contemporary societies.

In this reconstruction, what is often forgotten or at least underestimated, are the changes that occurred in the field of consumption to generate this dramatic effect; it is easy to talk about a proper “consumer revolution” as well as an industrial revolution, but it is not clear enough whether one came before the other, or the two were different steps in the same process. Nevertheless, we can be sure of the overemphasis put on the industrial revolution and the coincidental uprising of the puritan ethic (Weber 2001), but we know now that the importance reserved to the industrial revolution is an historical and scientific artefact, the result of a spoiled perspective of economists and historians, who “underestimate the cultural reasons for the increased aggregate demand for consumer goods that was also essential to the spread of capitalism in early modern Europe” (Mukerji 1983: 2). In the first part of this chapter a different perspective is adopted to study the history of consumption,

³⁰ We will see how transformation to the production of machines influenced global trade so that not only were we (European society) able to produce more but also we could import more things from the East and from the new developing markets in the West.

following the reasoning of those scholars who gave credit to the idea that consumption played an important role in history.

McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb (1982) attribute an economic nature to the origin of consumption, maintaining that we can talk about consumption as a significant social phenomenon only when masses of people gained access to consumer goods. They recognize the importance of the industrial revolution, at the same time emphasizing the other side of the coin, that is, the fact that such a great revolution could not have occurred without a basic propensity to consume. Effectively, researches show that during the 18th century in England a plethora of goods invaded the market and more and more people, including those from the lower classes and women, were more frequently involved in the act of consumption; this period is attributed to the birth of the consumer society. The whirlpool of consumption was activated by a frenetic will to demonstrate individual economic possibility, and to loosen the tangles of the strictly hierarchical structure of the English society. Access to goods was one of the biggest drivers of a never experimented social mobility, since, for the first time in history, the individual could buy what he desired instead of having to wait to inherit valuable objects. McKendrick (1960) notes also that this kind of “epidemic madness” which infected English society, produced such important changes that they can be considered the basis from which our contemporary western society developed. One thing assumed fundamental importance above all: the idea that goods could be substituted by other goods, without their being broken or too old to be used, speeding up the process of obsolescence, now so familiar to us. Furthermore, the criteria by which an object become desirable changed from being related to a utilitarian concept, to the idea of novelty. In other words, fashion was introduced into the lives of people. It has been documented by Shammas (1994) that the investment in goods, following constant increase in the 14th and 15th centuries, did not continue to grow in the following two centuries. This introduction was supported by the emergence of a new kind of information diffusion, which was to become pretty important in the next centuries. In this period we can recognize the birth of marketing techniques, developed with the clear objective to drive demand. In a fascinating study on the role of marketing and advertising in that period, McKendrick (1960) introduces us to Josiah Wedgwood, a

pottery producer who clearly understood the mechanism of the trickle-down effect and tried to affect the taste of the social class from which fashion usually emerged, the upper class. Josiah was a careful observer of his contemporaries and his intuitions became the foundations of the art of influencing consumers' demand and tastes, an art that was exercised by this smart entrepreneur, and gradually was manifested through different means such as fashion magazines and fashion dolls (Taylor 2013). The power of these forces was so strong that McCracken states that:

it is difficult to know how much of the 'epidemic' of spending of the eighteenth century was indeed a response to these new forces, and how much must be attributed to other factors external to the marketplace. It is likely that new tastes and the new means to manipulate them existed in a dialectical relationship, one encouraging the other while the two worked together to create the consumer revolution of the eighteenth century (McCracken 1990: 19).

This substantial availability of goods was also due to the explosion of markets which literally changed the space of the city, now reconfigured to host shops offering the most differentiated kinds of items. The impact of a new consumer attitude was so important that it also changed the architecture of houses and homes: a new idea of privacy was emerging pushing people to feel the need for private spaces, a totally uncommon idea in previous centuries. In the 16th and 17th centuries, for example, England and the Netherland registered an expansion of private houses, built using new materials and, above all, with new structures testifying to the new trend in the bourgeoisie fashion to create private spaces (Bryson 2011; Capuzzo 2006). Also changing deeply was the concept of the persons that English society was creating: as more and more people were involved in the act of consuming, they had to learn how to gather information about consumption goods and how to *be* a consumer. Hence, people were beginning to learn to think in an individualized way, focused on the satisfaction of their individual desires and needs which, at the same time, were being emphasized by marketing, rather than directing their actions toward the family's traditional necessities. In this wave of change, the social order was questioned since the subordinate class was finally able to participate in the same practices as the upper class, giving the illusion of a reduction in the distance separating the two; for this

reason we can say that goods started to carry new kind of status meanings. However, concerning the function goods fulfilled, McKendrick's analysis shows there was a limit: he considers the birth of consumer society as mainly due to the existence of a trickle-down effect and a conspicuous consumption focused only on communicating status. In fact, it is highly probable that goods were acquiring a different, much more complex role, which refers directly to their capacity as carriers of cultural information of all kinds, not only related to status. It might be possible also that in a society characterized by an increasing level of anonymity goods conveyed both status meaning and proper social information able to express social identity (Sahlins 1976).

The work of McKendrick allows some reflection on a few key features of the 18th century which are of the utmost importance to an analysis of consumption's history: a deep change to the concepts of space and time, which were reconfigured to allow space for consumption activities, to the detriment of social activity; a growing individualism visible in consumption choices which were directed to the satisfaction of a present desire, instead of being focused on the acquisition of goods for the next generation; a consequent increase in the obsolescence of goods and frequent re-purchase in the life time of an individual; the need for a greater amount of information with which the consumer would guide his activity; the emergence of a proper "world of goods" (Douglas, Isherwood 1996).

Historical analysis also shows us that in this period there was a wider diffusion of goods due to their lower prices, but at the same time a shorter life cycle of goods, which might be understood as a two-way trends. On the one side, there was a reduction in the economic value of goods, and on the other side an increment in their symbolic value of consumption (Capuzzo 2006).

Few doubt that the industrial revolution effectively represents a crucial step in the history of the relation between production and consumption. Before the revolution, the pre-industrial economy was oriented to a kind of subsistence production able to satisfy limited needs and self-consumption; the introduction of a mechanized system of production allowed the use of huge capital, and the creation of standardized goods, expanding the market immensely. However, not all scholars agree with the perspective that these changes were the origins of the consumer society, and many

social scientists have wondered about the possibility of the arrival of such a great change without the pre-existence of a cultural background, ready to receive those transformations, or have provided evidence that these transformations had occurred in the field of consumption, and the “consumption revolution” had already taken place before the 18th century. It should be taken into account also that fashion, in its wider meaning, is an activity involving numerous factors – raw materials, production processes, transportation, social hierarchy, cultural meanings, etc. – and its development determines the development of all these aspects. Even at the time of sumptuary laws, costume and fashion were reminders of social position, hence representing a cultural model (Braudel 1981): ignoring this factor means missing some key aspects of the origin of consumer culture.

If we look at McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb’s theory, this fact seems not to emerge: according to them, in the Elizabethan period there was no evidence of annual fashion while we know that fashion had played an important role in the previous century and had driven consumption. It seems highly improbable that, all of a sudden, people started to be interested in consuming goods and, moreover, although affecting a small part of society – mainly the richest part, consumption of luxury goods was a practice dating back to Roman and Greek time, and detectable also in the mediaeval period.

A different theory is proposed by Grant McCracken (1990), who concentrates his analysis on a definite space and time. He explains how, in the last quarter of the 16th century consumption experienced an incredible outburst in the England of Elizabeth I. Not only did the monarchy increase its level of expenditure, engaging in a level of consumption never before reached, but also the whole aristocracy increased its standard of living, changing even its patterns of hospitality³¹, beyond the immense expenses devoted to luxurious wardrobes. This eruption was due principally to the choice of Elizabeth I to use expenditure as a means of government, as had become common in Italy during the Renaissance (Braudel 1973). The idea was to create a space that would function as a stage on which power was displayed: a space that had to gather all the indispensable characters of a theatrical spectacle, which included

³¹ “A favourite device was the ante-supper. Guests sat down to this vast banquet only to have it removed, dispensed with, and replaced by a still more extravagant meal” (McCracken 1990: 11).

noblemen together with a wide variety of objects: “Objects, especially in the context of a highly ceremonial court, could be made to communicate the monarch’s legitimacy of rule, aspirations for the kingdom, qualities of power and majesty, and, finally, godlike status as an individual seen increasingly in mythical, religious, and literary terms” (McCracken 1990: 11). In order to achieve the aim of presenting to the rest of Europe one of the greatest and most powerful courts, while at the same time not eroding the finances too much, Elizabeth I cleverly persuaded the nobility to contribute to her expenditure on ostentation. Until that time, the aristocracy in this era had received its benefits through the middle-person who travelled the monarch’s territories, visiting counts’ and marquises’ residences. At a certain point, Elizabeth commanded their physical attendance at court in order to receive the queen’s trust and to continue to receive their honours. Her choices were based not on specific criteria, but rather on the individual’s sympathies: she considered the best noblemen to be those who showed a direct involvement in the ceremonial order of the court, which meant attendance at receptions, hosting parties in new city residences, being dressed always in new outfits, etc. This meant that the aristocrats were automatically confronted with a kind of competitive consumption in order to stand out from the immense crowd of aspiring beneficiaries.

This device caused dramatic change in the very structure of the aristocracy’s finances: the most valuable good possessed by a nobleman was “territory”, but now territory was no longer a sign of status, since everyone was evaluated, in the same space by the means of objects and goods. This caused a riot of consumption, in which the pressure of status competition played a fundamental role. But, the most dramatic effect of this change, fell on the very structure of the aristocratic family. The status of an aristocratic family depended on the amount of goods accumulated and passed from one generation to the other. Indeed, “purchases were made by the living but the consumption unit included the dead and the unborn” (McCracken 1990: 13). For this reason newness was not the mark of prestige it is today; on the contrary the “patina” of use was a sign and guarantee of standing. Thus, goods were acquired at a completely different pace: few goods had to last for very long. Thus, when noblemen were forced to compete for prestige and social status on a daily basis in the court of Elizabeth I, their fortunes began to erode more quickly and their

investments in goods were designed to give them advantages in the immediate present, not the distant future.

The effects were not only to the family structure of aristocracy, they extended also to the community in which the nobleman lived and within which he spent his money. In feudal systems “his stage was not the city or, except, rarely, the court, but his country seat amidst the possessions that constituted his wealth. His household, therefore, was the centre of his attention, where he received both his peasants and his peers” (Goldthwaite 1993: 154). Indeed, the “locality” was both the nobleman’s fortune, and was dependent on the nobleman’s expenditure. So, once his spending was relocated to the court instead of the locality, the tastes of the two groups, superordinates and subordinates, diverged dramatically. The competitive consumption in which the aristocracy was involved had two consequences: it demolished the structure of family bonds and social bonds between superordinates and subordinates, which “became distant, estranged and dissimilar betrayal of the cult of the family status created a change in the consumption unit, shifting it from family to the individual” (McCracken 1990: 16).

In relation to the changes described above, the sociologist Grant McCracken has no doubts about considering the 16th century and the Elizabethan court as the time and space of the consumption culture’s origins, although it should be remembered that several important works show how much the characteristics of the Elizabethan court were already present in the Italian courts of the Renaissance period. Braudel’s (1973) analysis, for example, focuses on the Italian courts exactly to seize the political use of consumption in its full meaning, and insists on the fact that the Italian’s territory configuration had obliged noblemen to live close to each other in urban spaces since the 14th century, which forced them to engage in a kind of competitive consumption.

Although McCracken’s analysis captures an important temporal consideration which is missing from McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb’s, limiting the consumption revolution to the court of Elizabeth I seems to be stretching the interpretation to the origin of consumer society. Returning to Braudel’s analysis, it is immediately evident how much consumption and the exhibition of luxury was celebrated outside of English society, and before the 16th century. Chandra Mukerji (1983) for example,

emphasizes the great importance the commercial revolution played in the history of consumption, recognizing that the discovery of the New World triggered a trade expansion which not only would determine an increase in consumption, but which is regarded also as a proper cultural revolution. It is supremely interesting to note that Mukerji focuses her discourse on the cultural dimension of consumption, maintaining that the industrial revolution marks an important historical moment where production changed from being limited and focused on self-production, to mass production, but that the cultural origin of this event must be searched for in the moment of colonization where cultures mixed through the discovery and use of goods: “the new scale and variety of objects offered opportunities for new uses of goods and new cultural values for regulating their use” (Mukerji 1983: 10). In other words, colonial expansion created a cultural background which allowed both the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism: in this sense, according to Mukerji, the commercial revolution gave birth to a proper “materialist consumer culture”³² fostered by the introduction in the European market of exotic goods carrying the symbolic taste of scarcity and exclusivity: “as the new system of trade grew to the extent that it overshadowed other social institutions and became the central organizing force in social life, the value placed on accumulation began to gain priority over other cultural values” (Mukerji 1983: 9), and “this bias of attention and proliferation of new meanings is what is discussed here as ‘materialism’. Its growth in early modern Europe can be seen as bred by the problem of meanings that the commercial revolution and European expansion brought to light. It was itself the system of meanings developed to make sense of the plethora of objects” (Mukerji 1983: 21). A profoundly different perspective is required to look at consumption as a cultural production beyond the more visible parading function, a perspective that considers consumption goods as tools to communicate and create a symbolic universe able to generate a wider range of expressive codes. Referring to Douglas, and to the fact that

³² “[H]edonism and asceticism seem, on the surface [contradictory, but they share one feature: an interest in material accumulation. The pure ascetic rationalist of Weberian theory accumulates capital goods, while the hedonist consumer revels in amassing consumer goods. The two types can be envisioned as extremes on a continuum of materialist tendencies, suing opposite system of values to organize and make sense of material accumulation.[...] both acted as economic innovators in the early modern period replacing a traditional pattern of hoarding wealth with new ways to use it, to make it a more active part of social and economic life” (Mukerji 1983: 4).

“exchanges of objects are acts of communication”, the author suggests that the commercial revolution was supported by such a great development in communication techniques that we can see easily that the

cultural analysis of economic behaviour can unveil patterns of culture that one might not otherwise see. It suggests, for instance, that the expansion of trade in early modern Europe constituted a revolution in communications as well as a commercial revolution. Economists who define transportation systems as communications and point to the growth of road and canal systems in this period unwittingly provide some support for this idea. They imply that these innovations in material culture necessarily created a new basis for human exchange (Mukerji 1983: 11).

Also, Mukerji’s studies find confirmation in the work of Fernand Braudel, who shows that the changes occurred in the Renaissance brought, together with new products, a proper social culture focused on the development of social mobility, and promoted an attitude towards change and a different conceptualization of time and space (Braudel 1983)³³.

Mukerji further underlines the existence of a hedonistic culture³⁴ which pushed people to consume, not only in English society but also in that protestant society that Weber described as devoted to ascetic behaviour and committed to saving and soberness:

the role played by Europe’s hedonistic culture of mass consumption in the social changes of the early modern period is neglected in most sociological writings, but it is too important to forget – not only because it challenges the view that mass consumption was the product of industrial capitalism, but also because it contradicts the usual image of the sixteenth century as the birthplace of that ascetic rationality (the ‘Protestant Ethic’) that Max Weber describes as the source for the spirit of capitalism (Mukerji 1983: 2).

³³ “[T]he lively trade in books, paintings, and other artworks in Italy fed off a consumerist demand for such goods, even while their content expressed a kind of rational calculation. [...] renaissance collections in museums display the simultaneous rationality and hedonism of the period, and show the complementarity of these factors in producing a cultural flowering” (Mukerji 1983: 3).

³⁴ “[T]he hedonistic culture of mass consumption was probably as crucial in shaping early patterns of capitalistic development in Europe as the asceticism usually associated with this era. Hedonism was to consumer what asceticism was to entrepreneurs; it provided the cultural rationale for increased interest and participation in economic activities” (Mukerji 1983: 2).

In this light, Mukerji's thesis not only sets the origin of consumer society in a different period but reverses the most diffused and presumed thesis that consumerism followed capitalism: "Mukerji uses this discovery to argue that consumerism helped to create the capitalism it is conventionally supposed to have followed. According to this new account of the genesis of modern Western society, consumerism was present in the very beginning" (McCracken 1990: 9).

Mukerji is not the only person to question Weber's thesis, as we see in the work of Sombart (1967) or Campbell (1983; 1989). However, while Mukerji openly criticized Weber, because she attributed greater importance to the emergence of an ethic devoted to consumption rather than Puritanism, Campbell does not disagree with Weber's analysis. Instead he supports it and believes that it had to be implemented and to focus not only on production (effectively enhanced by the puritan ethic) but also on consumption, developed as a consequence of a hedonistic ethic.

Werner Sombart (1967) emphasizes a dimension of consumption that has been mentioned, but not explored by the authors cited above. To understand Sombart's thesis we need to take a theoretical step back and consider the historical process which led to the origin of capitalism. Sombart agrees with Marx in assuming that capitalism is a specific historical formation although he does not support Marx's thesis on the dialectical nature of the historical process. According to Sombart, the passage from a feudal to a capitalistic economic structure was not linear and consequential, since there are usually many economic formations, not just one. These different forms of production are based on the spiritual behaviour towards economic activity in which genesis and collapse are related to exogenous factors instead of being caused by internal conflicts. In the specific case of the rise of capitalism, Sombart recognizes, as the main factor of its genesis, change in use of land rents, which became investments: in other words, what drove a change in the economic paradigm was men's different approach to money and different attitudes to social life. This change in attitudes is recognizable in the desire for luxury and conspicuous consumption, which is nothing more than a reorganization of the social structure and a way to solve the symbolic conflicts that emerge within it. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the emergence of a new social class, called "nouveau rich", was partially

integrated in the nobility through the acquisition of noble titles bought with consistent economic capital, that is, there was a transformation of material capital to symbolic capital. This new social class had every interest in moving social conflict from the hereditary characteristics of a noble lineage to the characteristics made visible through consumption, which consequently became a certification of social value. For this reason, expenditure on luxury goods became important for showing the social power of an individual to the point that the concept of time also changed: in order to show and exhibit one's prestige and power the consumption is required to happen continuously, in order also to differentiate definitely one's class from that class of nobility not able to follow the same rate of consumption because its fortune lay in inherited goods.

In this sense, Sombart does not agree with Weber's thesis: it is not that Sombart did not recognize the important role played by the puritan ethic, but that he does not give it a central heuristic role in the explication of the birth of a capitalistic culture that was focused not merely on production, but that also was required to be supported by a high level of consumption in order to function properly. Put differently, if it is true that pre-capitalistic societies were characterized by a strong influence of the puritan ethic, then it must be accepted that those same societies were the expression also of a clear hedonistic inclination.

4.1.1 The paradox of romanticism

The expressed aim of Campbell's analysis is to examine the industrial revolution from the perspective of a consumption revolution, given that, in the author's opinion, it seems rather improbable that a revolution in the way of producing, was not sustained by a change in the way of consuming; consequently it would seem evident that both revolutions coincided. Campbell maintains that just as the industrial revolution was supported by cultural and ethical prerequisites, as Weber shows, so was the consumption revolution. Thus, instead of questioning the idea that consumerism occurred together with industrial capitalism, which Campbell chooses

to take for granted, he tries to understand in what way this revolution in consumption took place:

Of course consumerism needed specific economic, social and technological innovations. There are no doubts that without mass production and advertising techniques, a consumer society would have not been possible. At any rate, if we limit our analysis to those factors, consumption remains unexplained and in a certain sense, irrational. Of course we do not want to frame a consumer culture analysis in a rational context, as economists like to do, but we must try to understand the ethic which lays beneath it (Campbell 1983: 283).

There is no doubt that this period represents the moment when production and consumption became two separate activities, but it is nonetheless true that both have always been regulated with the same strictness. Campbell underlines that consumption is strictly controlled by social norms and cultural models as it is evident when we take account of alimentary practices: even in the remotest pre-modern tribe, people would never eat or drink, even in situations of starvation, what is considered taboo, despite its nourishing potentialities. Hence, he agrees with the assumption that a completely new ethical and cultural perspective was needed to break with traditionalism and give space for new cultural models, such as the one described by Weber, who theorized that only a puritan ethic – an ethic that pushed people to work hard and never indulge in leisure activities – could have been the origin of the birth of capitalism. These values have been considered to be the engine driving the breakdown of economic traditionalism, thus, it seems logical that they could not also serve the opposite purpose of inspiring people to adopt a consumerist approach to life. According to Campbell, some other major ethical drivers must have worked towards that aim and, in analysing the characteristics of modern consumption, he tends to identify the Romantic movement as responsible for the birth of consumer society.

What distinguishes modern from pre-modern or traditional consumption is that the notion of wants is restricted to needs, which are themselves limited, while contemporary attitudes toward goods are of an imperative to possess in a social reality that, from the first months of an individual's life, teaches the individual to be a consumer: "The crucial feature of the role of modern consumer is the primary obligation to want to want under all circumstances and at all times irrespective of

what goods or services are actually acquired or consumed. This fact is not rooted in human psychology but in the culture of our civilization and constitutes the ethical basis of consumerism” (Campbell 1983: 282). Campbell goes further, stating that the consumptive experience became an end in itself driving a continuous search for novelty, leading eventually to a constant feeling of dissatisfaction and frustration, a feeling that produces a desire to desire. Although economists have tried to show the basic rationality underlying consumer behaviour while psychologists and other scholars tend to classify it as irrational and impulsive, Campbell prefers to depict it as a kind of behaviour based on “a strong sense of duty, an obligation to engage in ‘want satisfaction’ as end in itself” (ibidem: 284), proposing the idea that demand is as subject to norms and rules as is production.

Since these are the attributes of modern consumerism according to Campbell, the ethic which inspired the movement called Romanticism might be the one that effectively produced such a great change in our cultural models. Romanticism is that pattern of thoughts, attitudes and beliefs that diffused through Europe between the 18th and 19th centuries, the period of the industrial revolution, and was a movement meant to contrast the model industrialization was creating. The ideas that this movement was supporting should be seen as an attempt to contest the values inherited from The Enlightenment, thus opposing an hyper-rationalization with the primacy of feeling, the cult of the individual, and a new appreciation of nature. Above all, what distinguished Romanticism was the stress put on the uniqueness of each individual, contrasting the sense in which all men shared a common status which guaranteed common rights.

The focus on the inner individual together with the accent on the distinctiveness of his or her personality led to a different appreciation of experience which became the only acceptable way of experiencing reality alongside the idea of a society released from social norms generating a new concept of freedom, a “freedom from” instead of a “freedom to” (Campbell 1989). Hence,

What the romantics did was to redefine the doctrine of individualism and the associated idea of improvement or advancement. Instead of individuals improving themselves in this world through hard work, discipline and self-denial they substituted the idea of individuals ‘expressing’ or ‘realising’

themselves through exposure to powerful feelings and by means of many and varied intense experiences” (Campbell 1983: 287).

Although Romanticism was mainly an artistic movement generating a bohemian subculture, it was on the middle classes that its effects were most visible and were most important for the purposes of our discourse. In its opposition to the industrial revolution and its effects – seen as disastrous, together with utilitarianism, materialism and rationalism, Romanticism stimulated the individual to express herself especially through the consumption of cultural products as exemplified by the practice common to that peculiar social class of “semi-romantic bourgeoisie women” who became greedy consumers of romantic novels (Campbell 1989; Habermas 1991). The expression of the self, the clearest and most evident link between Romanticism and modern consumption, must not, in any case, be confused with the simple expression of an already existing self. Campbell emphasizes the cultural aspect of the mechanism by which there is also a construction of a sense of self by means of the act of consumption. Of course there is a paradox, but it does not concern Campbell’s theory but the Romantic movement: The Romantic movement was born to criticize and to combat the new emerging form of industrial production, hyper-rationalization and a materialistic society, and unconsciously provided the element to facilitate consumerism.

Looking back to the work of Fernand Braudel (1983) we find evidence that consumption could not have been a consequence of capitalism. The author suggests that we should understand the consumption impulse as originating long before the industrial revolution; he quotes Quesnay who in 1766 observed that

there will never be any shortage ‘of consumers who cannot consume as much as they would like: people who only eat black bread and drink water would like to eat wheaten bread and drink wine; people who never have eaten meat would like to do so [...] what is more, this mass of consumers is constantly increasing. *Mutatis mutandis* then, one could argue that there is always a potential consumer society” (Braudel 1983: 177).

What Braudel is stating is that even if there are several types of demands, which can be distinguished between frivolous and fundamental, their existence obliged us

to make important discoveries and developments in the field of science and technology in order to respond to these desires. If we think only about the technology involved in the transportation system that was needed to move primordial as well as luxury goods, we can understand the power of consumption practice.

Achievements such as the transportation of rice, salt and wood from the southern provinces of china all the way along the imperial canal in the north and as far as peking; the transport by sea of rice from Bengal to all parts of India, or the overland carriage of rice and grain by caravans consisting of thousands of oxen; the transport throughout the west of grain, salt and wood. Salt from Peccais in Languedoc travelled all the way up to Rhone to Seyssel; salt from Cadiz, Setubal, and the bay of Bourgneuf travelled from the Atlantic to north sea and the Baltic. The united provinces could have been brought to their knees if their supplies of salt had been blocked at the end of the sixteenth century (ibidem: 177-178).

The same applies to an analysis of what mankind did in order to acquire and transport such futile goods as sugar, alcohol, tobacco, coffee, tea and cocoa. We are used now to thinking of them as common constituents of our diet, goods that we will usually find on our tables and in our supermarkets, but these goods were very exotic in the 16th century, and were one of the motives for great empires to pursue colonization, exploitation, trade and massacres. For this reason it is important to look briefly at the history of such goods in order to find a link between the above debate and important historical facts.

4.2 The political dimension of consumption

The first part of this chapter was dedicated to showing that, although there are different interpretations and diverging theories related to the origin of consumption culture, there are some common milestones in the history of consumption which are undeniable and which have been indicated by various authors (Braudel 1973, 1981, 1983; Capuzzo 2006; Mukerji 1983) as important steps in the development of a practice, and which are thus important limits that define the field of consumption. Briefly considering the history of trade allows us to understand a particular aspect of consumption, that is, its macro political dimension. The second part of this chapter

analyzes the underlying geopolitical struggle over commercial routes and the territories where basic raw materials were produced. We then consider the micro political dimension of consumption and the role played by consumption in constructing social classes, creating cultural meaning and expressing political claims.

4.2.1 Consumption and geopolitical configurations

Having stated that consumption activity in pre-modern societies cannot be compared to consumption activity that developed after modernity (mainly because of the number of people involved), we need now to underline that, no matter the period considered, consumption goods have always been the product of a political struggle, resulting sometimes even in physical battles and wars. We can say that many wars and a number of scientific innovations were caused by the willingness of men to acquire what they were not able to produce directly (and only secondarily to diminish the burden of hard work).

Global trade expansion is a crucial element in understanding contemporary consumption since the movement of goods recorded in early modernity involves neither just an increase in the number of items nor only a geographical extension of the routes of trade. Instead, it represents the proper configuration of a thick network of power relations that manages and controls those human and material resources which become necessities for European consumers. New articles entered European markets never to leave them, and to affect the everyday habits of millions of people including their diets, clothing, social practices, which were changed dramatically. The history of trade goes together with the history of colonialism and orientalism, and is linked directly to the changes and developments in the field of European consumption. Before looking at the phases that characterized this history it is important to note that a sort of global trade (at a time when the globe did not imply the existence of the New World) already existed at the time of the Roman Empire, but disintegrated when the latter collapsed. For example, the Romans received silk from China having established a long lasting relation with the Far East, testified by the famous silk route created by the silk merchants. It was mainly due to Portuguese

expansionist actions that this connection between Europe and India was restored, and it was mainly due to their extreme yearning for spices that the Portuguese succeeded in circumnavigating Africa, bringing significant developments to sailing techniques (Bernstein 2008).

Spices are an interesting case in the history of commerce because they are a good which initially was not commercialized for its utility but rather for its symbolic meaning and its capacity to symbolize status. As already stated, what is of crucial importance in the history of trade is that we are dealing not only with a commercial development but also with the establishment of a global power structure which changed the shape and the nature of the world. As Capuzzo underlines in his reconstruction of the history of global trade “l’espansione del commercio mondiale riversò nuovi prodotti sui mercati europei e il loro crescente consumo favorì una specializzazione delle attività produttive e una regolamentazione dei flussi di merci nel mercato globale promosse dai grandi attori del capitalismo commerciale, al prezzo di continui scontri militari” (Capuzzo 2006: 20)³⁵. In trade, we can observe how much the political power of a State played a crucial role and how the flux of goods to and from Europe and the Far East redefined the geopolitical aspect of the globe. As more and more goods entered Europe, and as more and more people gained access to those goods, a redefinition of power relations took place, where countries owning important facilities, such as the big commercial harbours of northern Europe, gained considerable advantages over other countries. As a result, as trade grew, the Mediterranean countries (including Spain and Portugal), which had given the initial boost to international commerce, lost their power. During the expansion of trade, the nature of the imported goods changed constantly including from spices to Indian fabrics. Different items were reaching European markets because of the competition between the great powers; however, goods could vary also according to which kinds of territories big commercial companies were able to conquer. Below, we discuss how the great powers colonized large portions of

³⁵ “the global trade expansion brought new products in European markets. The increasing consumption of these products enhanced a specialization of productive activities and the regulation of the flux of commodities promoted by the main actors of the global trade, generating continuous wars” (Capuzzo 2006: 20, my translation).

American lands allowing them to produce sugar at lower cost, which meant a diffusion of the good also to the lower strata of the population. The two directions that expansion followed show different characteristics. Colonization of the Americas was relatively easy despite being considered one of the bloodiest and aberrant periods in human history, while when Europeans tried to go east and penetrate an already consolidated, thick network of commercial relations, the struggle for power was much harder.

In general, we can state that the armed trade, supported by State forces, is what made Europe the conqueror of commercial exchanges³⁶. When the Portuguese reached the Indian Ocean they found a very animated environment characterized by already existing conflicts between merchants in the area. Nonetheless, they did something completely unknown in the commercial culture of the local merchants: they introduced the principle of power over sea, which hitherto had been considered free and available to everyone (Bertstein 2008; Pomeranz, Topik 1999). The aid of the State army characterized commercial companies such as the VOC (Vereenigde Geocroyeerde Oostindische Compagnie), which, despite being a private firm, was supported by the State and had sovereign power over conquered territories. Not surprisingly, it represented an extraordinary tool of political and commercial penetration by virtue of its mixed nature between state authority and capitalist company (Boxer 1988). Compared to the EIC (East Indian Company), VOC gained more power and more rapidly, since the English company did not benefit from any kind of State support (although it had a monopoly over the importation of Asiatic goods to England). The EIC rapidly adopted the strategy of armed conflict in order to dominate Asian populations (Wilbur 1945). The result of the competition in which the two companies engaged was an increase in the volume of imported goods, and differentiation in the items entering the European market.

gli esiti della prima fase dell'espansione europea mostrano chiaramente la crucialità del commercio armato garantito dalle compagnie monopolistiche, che furono in grado di assicurare continuità di approvvigionamento e prezzi decrescenti attraverso il controllo dei mercati asiatici, di avviare la

³⁶ As Carlo Cipolla (1965) notes in his book *Guns, Sails, and Empires*.

produzione coatta di determinati beni e, come si avrà modo di vedere, anche di orientare parzialmente i consumi interni al fine di proteggere il proprio core business (Capuzzo, 2006: 35)³⁷.

The use of force and violence was necessitated mainly because the Asiatic people did not much appreciate the goods that Europe could offer them, and asked for items that they considered to be more valuable: silver and even gold. Unfortunately, silver came from Mexico, which had been a Spanish colony since the Toredillas Treaty of 1494.

On the other side of the globe, colonization was easier, but involved more violence to achieve power: Europeans did not find populations familiar with commerce and were thus free to exploit their territories without encountering any kind of resistance. “la schiacciante superiorità militare, l’ossessiva ricerca di tesori e ricchezze, il fanatismo religioso che ispirava i conquistatori scatenarono nei confronti delle popolazioni americane una violenza che ha pochi eguali nella storia, creando le basi per la distruzione delle istituzioni sociali ed economiche locali e la trasformazione del continente americano” (Capuzzo, 2006, p. 36)³⁸.

The violence used was so extreme that large numbers of the populations of South and North America were wiped out, leaving vast portions of these lands to the Europeans who had neither the will nor the human resources required to work them. In order to solve this problem, another population had to suffer terrible consequences: millions of Africans were enslaved and deported to Brazil and the Caribbean Islands resulting in the so called Afro-American population. In spite of being a shameful page in Western history, the slave trade gives an idea of the importance of the political dimension of consumption, described by Montesquieu (2005: 250) when he stated that: “the people of Europe, having exterminated those of America, had to make slaves of those of Africa in order to use them to clear so much

³⁷ “the result of the European expansion’s first phase clearly shows the importance of the armed trade which was guaranteed by monopolistic companies. They were able to guarantee continuity in supply and decreasing prices thank to the control of Asiatic markets, to start the forced production of certain goods and, as we will see after, also to partially guide national consumption, in order to protect their own core business” (Capuzzo 2006: 35, my translation).

³⁸ “the decisive military supremacy, the obsessive search for treasures and wealth, the religious zealot inspiring conquerors generated such a violence toward American populations, which has few parallels in history, giving space to the destruction of the social and economical local institutions and the transformation of the American continent” (Capuzzo 2006: 36, my translation).

land. Sugar would be too expensive if the plant producing it were not cultivated by slaves”.

This statement not only explains the extent to which the struggle for power was taken seriously in the context of trade but also shows that the reasons for this struggle lay in the potentialities the European market was about to offer in early modernity. The upper classes were greedy for new, exotic products which then became the desire of the lower classes and eventually diffused throughout the population thanks to lower costs of production, the result of an unbalanced power relation between different social groups.

These two waves of colonization resulted in an increase in the quantities of goods entering the European market, and in the entry of a novelty element constituted by the exotic nature of those goods. The relative scarcity that characterized the imported articles immediately charged them with symbolic meaning and their use consequently became political. A reconstruction of the consumption habits of that period shows that regulation of demand for sugar, tobacco, coffee, cocoa and tea testifies to the need to exercise control over the reconfiguration of power relations which was made possible thanks to the social use of goods. Hence, the political dimension of consumption emerges at both the macro level in the field of international relations, and at the micro level through the changes it generated in the everyday lives of millions of people on different continents, as the next part of the chapter shows.

After spices, which were the first goods to become the objects of intense desire among the European upper classes, the increase in naval expeditions brought new unknown foods to the attention of noblemen, foods that have now become common in our everyday diet. Sugar had been available to the nobility since the 15th century, due to the large-scale use by Arabians of the plant which was cultivated in the Mediterranean lands. The Arabian monopoly over the sweetener was challenged by sugar cane plantations on the island of Madeira in the Atlantic Ocean, off the coast of Africa in the 16th century (Galloway 1989). It was Columbus who introduced sugar cane to the other side of the Atlantic, to Brazil, when Madeira and other African islands became unstable due to slave riots. The Europeans decided it would be better to move the slaves from these lands to Brazil (which also offered larger areas and

richer soils) in order to have better control over them. The Dutch and the English were importing slaves to the Caribbean Islands which, at the beginning of the 17th century, were devoted entirely to sugar cane cultivation. The diffusion of the sugar cane plantations and, above all, the use of a free workforce, allowed an increase in sugar production and decreased costs which resulted in a cheaper good for the European market. Consequently, what previously was regarded as a luxury spice gradually became affordable by the middle classes and eventually became a common good which the lower classes also frequently consumed. This changed the use people made of it: sugar passed from being a spice, like pepper, ginger, and nutmeg, hence rarely used as a dressing, to being used as a sweetener for those drinks which were at the same time invading the market (Capuzzo 2006).

The history of sugar is in fact related to the history of those other exotic foods discovered by the European thanks to colonial expansion. Coffee is one of the drinks that deeply changed the social habits of Europeans and which was responsible for real cultural change, especially in English society. Looking at its history allows us to understand to what extent the political dimension of consumption is relevant. “la vicenda del controllo di caffè è istruttiva dell’influenza che può avere il controllo dell’offerta sulle abitudini di consumo. [...] questo esempio ammonisce sui limiti di una lettura unicamente culturale del consumo che va invece compreso nel quadro complessivo dei rapporti di potere che si misurano nella sfera della produzione e commercializzazione dei prodotti” (Capuzzo 2006: 59-60)³⁹. Coffee was introduced into the European market in the 17th century but, again, Arabian production, which extended close to the Yemenite city of Moca, soon became insufficient to satisfy European demand. Both the Dutch and the French tried and failed to cultivate the plant in their colonies, the plant being more delicate than they had thought. Plantings diffused through East Asia, the Caribbean and South America, leading to companies such as VOC exporting from Java around 4-5 million lbs of coffee a year at the beginning of the 18th century (Capuzzo 2006). Apart from the increasing amounts of

³⁹ “the issue over the control of coffee is helpful in understanding how far the supply control can influence consumption habits. [...] this example warn us against the limits of a purely cultural perspective on consumption, which instead must be understand within the overall framework of power relations which are found in the sphere of production and commodification of goods” (Capuzzo 2006: 58-60, my translation).

coffee being consumed, what is fascinating for the present discourse is the uses to which people put it, which were clearly differentiated according to the social milieu in which it circulated. When it first entered aristocratic environments, coffee was the perfect drink allowing exhibition of the so called «chinoiserie» and the construction of a new ritual. In contrast, the rising bourgeoisies appreciated the physical effects of the caffeine content, and drank it to obtain the psychophysical advantages it provided. Coffee was seen as a real antithesis to the vast number of alcoholic drinks which were part of everyday consumption, and was rapidly adopted by the bourgeoisies to distinguish themselves from the working class, who were mostly tipsy from morning to evening. Furthermore, the diffusion of a puritan ethic did nothing but encourage the consumption of a drink which could empower the intellect of persons involved less in physical and more in mental activity; it thus became the main beverage drunk by the middle classes in the morning at breakfast. It was not until towards the end of the 18th century that coffee became available to the working class, which desperately looked for it and sought its physical benefits.

A similar story characterizes tea, which however could be cultivated in none of the European colonies and had to be exchanged with the Chinese, the only people who seemed able to produce it. Apart from the use made by Europeans of tea, this demonstrates the political dimension of commerce and the logic of power that lay beneath trade: in the game of power for the conquest of tea, the colonists were always in an inferior position since the tea plantations were far away from sea coasts and the expense of military intervention against the Chinese Empire far outweighed the benefits it would bring. Thus, the Europeans were subject to the will of the Chinese Emperor who did not contact them and delegated management of these prickly relations to a merchants' oligarchy which succeeded in keeping the foreigners outside their territories, and China in a state of isolation necessary to avoid an imbalance in the country's social and political assets (Capuzzo 2006).

The histories of tobacco and cocoa are similar; both were discovered in the 16th century among the populations of South America. Their introduction into the European market promoted harsh debate over the effects caused by their consumption. The medical élite approved their use while the State, worried about the social unbalance likely to be generated, initially prohibited them, supported by the

church which was worried about the physical effects of cocoa and the massive use of tobacco.⁴⁰ However, the kings and rulers of European countries discovered that the tax revenues on tobacco had too great an effect on state finances to renounce its use, hence its consumption was allowed.

The birth of specific rite of consumption is what characterizes these goods and it is the most interesting aspect of the social history of consumption. As noted above, coffee, tea and tobacco were used by the bourgeoisies to emulate the upper class and to distinguish themselves from the lower classes, according to the trickle-down effect described by Simmel (1996) and Veblen (1975). This consumption necessitated a proper space, since the bourgeoisies could not exploit the same spaces used by the aristocracy to practise the exhibition of their power. This led to the birth of coffee and tea houses, whose numbers rose dramatically across most of Europe, between the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th centuries. England saw the biggest increase in these sites, and Jurgen Habermas (1991) has no doubt that they gave birth to public opinion. In coffee and tea houses, rich men from the middle classes used to meet to talk over political and economical matters, with a lucidity enabled by these beverages rather than the fatigue provoked by alcohol. As these meetings assumed greater importance, more and more men participated in them, and the discourses and the debates which developed were written down firstly in bulletins which could be distributed among those unable to participate in the discussions, and then in the form of actual newspapers. Men especially discussed goods prices and taxation, and about the way government managed trade policies, but the political dimension of consumption extended also to the influence it had on the architecture of private houses: the appearance of the living room in the houses of the bourgeoisie was a direct consequence of the willingness to create a private space devoted to the consumption of those goods, which also became the tools used to create a bourgeois culture.

Many scholars besides Habermas have underlined the social function of coffee and tea houses in creating a place for the rising bourgeoisie to distinguish itself from

⁴⁰ Tobacco was not initially smoked but chewed, resulting in people spitting almost continuously: during church services, the congregation kept coming and going from the church, missing the ceremony. In addition, the tobacco was less refined than that available today, and had a more powerful effect on the body.

the popular clientele of taverns. Also, those goods generated real public discourse among a number of different social actors such as doctors, rulers, priests and private citizens, and resulted in the publication of a series of laws. The most interesting aspect of the phenomenon is that the public discourse in coffee houses, was not focused on the good, but rather its use and accompanying rituals. It can be said that it was not the place that was the centre of debate but rather that the debate sought for and found a place in these coffee houses (Capuzzo 2006). The subjects of the arts and literature were also discussed in coffee houses, which made them places devoted to the most active intellectual exercise.

4.2.2 Representation of social class

The political dimension of consumption is also shown through the consumption practices of consumers, and in the way consumption defines the economic divisions in society. “Social class” is a term used to indicate the existence of differences between groups of individuals. These differences determine the ultimate structure of a society, thus “social” rather than “economic” classes, although in practice, they depend on the economic capital owned by the members of each class. In other words, social classes refer to the individual capacity to spend, that is, to consume.

Although some scholars (Bourdieu 1980; Simmel 1996; Veblen 1975) made this explicit in their theories, stressing the social dimension of consumption, they were obliged to subsume the perspective of consumption that was political and that showed consumption was an individualized activity. This economics approach to consumption, describes it as the result of a rational decision made by an individual keen to maximize her economic capital. The difference between the two approaches is that in the economic approach only one type of capital is involved in the consumption activity, mainly economic capital, while the former approach crucially includes cultural and, above all, social capital.

One of the objectives of classical economic theory⁴¹ is to explain economic development in a period of dramatic change, in this case, when the industrial revolution led the way to a new configuration of society – one where markets were no longer strictly related to the will of a dominant subject (State, a king, etc) but were about to experience a substantially increased freedom. The main issue was to understand which direction the production system would have taken were every individual free to make a calculation of the monetary gain she could expect from certain choices in the market place. Such free markets (as they began to be called) were supposed to be able to regulate themselves without the intervention of any kind of authority that imposed laws and rules upon its functioning. The regulation would be in the shape of the famous invisible hand described by Adam Smith (considered to be the father of classical economics), leading the market to reach a natural equilibrium between supply and demand. Attention then focused on the creation of a measure represented by price. Determination of prices is one of the main points of interest in classical economic theory and is described as the interaction between aggregate demand and aggregate supply. By analysing how the first economics scholars (Ricardo 1989; Smith 1976) interpreted this interaction, we can understand how the role of consumption was understood by these early economists. Supply determined the price of goods, while demand determined only the quantity of the good that should be supplied to the market at that price. According to Say (2001), supply also created its own demand (Say's Law). It is clear that, in the economics field, production was a much more important dimension than consumption. In a society where production was the ultimate goal of the economic process, it was evident that demand of goods was subordinated to the achievement of scope and, consequently, economics was much more interested in understanding how developed the mechanism of production was, than looking at the mechanism of consumption.

This theoretical framework continues to be based on an assumption that the consumer is a particular subject: she is a rational agent able to choose the best good which will maximize her utility in terms of its costs and gains. In this sense, the

⁴¹ Classical economic theory is the economic theory espoused by original thinkers such as Smith, Ricardo, Say, Mill, Malthus. They are described as classical economists in order to differentiate them from Keynesian economists.

economic approach is also profoundly political. The agent it describes is actually freed from the social stratification tangle through her access to a new kind of richness, a wealth that now can be produced and is no longer subject to the traditional mechanisms of inheritance. Through the means of capital everyone can break free of the chains of a crystallized social order based upon prescribed ranks which could determine the whole life trajectory entailing a very low level of social mobility.

Economics on the one side were depicting the field of consumption as governed by atomistic rational agents, and on the other side were subordinating this activity to the more important production. If it can be argued that production was really more important in the sense that it was a much more structured dimension of social life, it can be argued also that such a rational subject as this theory predicts, does not exist. The consumer is not a calculating subject, just as the market is not a world of numbers, figures, statistics, etc. The market is something more complicated than the mere exchange of objects (or services); at least, there is more than just an exchange of objects. Thus, the action and meaning of consumer choice was conceived related to the fact that the consumer is a person, and people have tastes and preferences, and became a view that economists were unwilling to tackle.

Economists then moved on to an important critique of utility theory, recognizing that it was not able to explain the majority of consumer behaviour, especially that which showed neatly that, in the calculation of costs for benefits, other variables mattered (such as the luxury goods market), and variables connected much more to the social than the economic aspects of human life.

Consumption is not that solipsistic activity described by Marx (1988), used by the subject to fill that void in her relation with the object: according to the author that process of objectification (which acquired the utmost importance for Hegel) had been distorted in industrial work because the proletarian worker could not rejoice in and appreciate the results of her work, because she did not see the final product of her effort. The reward for her fatigue was measured only in monetary terms; through that tool, money, she could then establish a relation with the object through the act of consumption. In this sense there is no struggle involved in consumption since the place of conflict is elsewhere, in another dimension, and the field of consumption is

considered part of a superstructure considered to be influenced by the far most important structure of the relations of power. Consumption in Marx's analysis is not understood as a place of negotiation, nor of active action and, above all, is not intended to be a type of cultural production. The value of the objects exchanged in the market place is profoundly economic in nature and is based on the act of exchange instead of the utility of the objects to the subject, since the only purpose allowed to the subject is to exchange her salary for goods. There is no cultural meaning produced by the act of consumption, and the consumer is not a defined subject.

Not far from this perspective is the Frankfurt School's approach (Adorno 1954; Adorno, Horkheimer 2002), which does not neglect the rationality underlying consumption, but in a logical continuity with Marxist thought conceives that rationality as the rationality of a powerful élite of producers directing and imposing the consumption activity on society, since the very objective of human life is production. This transformation brought by capitalism, led the way to an approach to life as entirely dedicated to production, in which human life is a mere appendix. Adorno and Horkheimer, in particular, focused on the commodification of culture, which surely was a consequence of the commodification of human beings described by Marx. Marxist theory makes it clear that the individual has an illusionary feeling of freedom through the mechanism of goods exchanges, and Horkheimer developed this idea considering the whole leisure industry as a place for the manipulation of the masses, where culture is assimilated through objects which actually are carriers of specific cultural meanings, which legitimate the unbalanced social order and let the naïf consumer adapt to the prescribed social order, hence accepting all social inequalities and injustices. The consumer thus described is a very passive subject and critiques of "mass production" and "mass communication" refer especially to this characteristic. The apparent democratization of the consumption field is actually an ideology (to use Marxist terminology), since the fact of receiving standardized information and production does not give to the consumer greater power: she is not put in the position of contributing to, or at least deciding the content of, what she obtains from the market, and the homogenization of production actually does not allow for a sane identity differentiation. Indeed, authors use the metaphor of an

“amphibian” to describe this mechanism which led to the masses being unable to “hear with their own ears what has not already been heard, to touch with their hands what has not previously been grasped; it is the new form of blindness which supersedes that of vanquished myth” (Adorno, Horkheimer 2002: 28-29). What is more, these scholars depict a precise interest in the entertainment industry, of stimulating people to increase consumption activity: they argue that the main principle upon which capitalism is based, is the presence of never satisfied consumers who are always willing to get more, so that, on its side, production has no limits. In this case, consumption is perhaps worse than in Marxist theory, since for the Frankfurt scholars every possibility of revolution is erased because the power of production is too strong for consumption to respond to, and the working class becomes transformed into a consumerist class.

One of the first authors who took some distance from this individualized perspective on consumption, was Thorstein Veblen (1975), who proposed a much more critical approach to society, and analysed it in terms of conflicts between different social groups. He showed how consumption made this struggle explicit through the act of consumption, and described the willingness to consume as a parade of one’s social status through the possession of goods. In this struggle, objects acquire symbolic power, which is used by the higher classes to manifest their availability of economic capital both by buying expensive goods and by showing that they have the time to consume. Consequently, Veblen’s theory refers to them as the leisure class. Members of the leisure class are kept constantly busy by abundant consumption of goods, which is seen as an efficient method to distinguish themselves from the working class which, for its part, tries to reduce the distance created by this distinction by engaging in emulative consumption, but never accessing those goods and services the higher class can afford. This last process is the object of discussion in Simmel’s (1996) work on fashion, and is described by him as the «trickle-down» effect. This is a phenomenon involving the tastes of the higher classes determine the production of goods in society, eventually attributing political meaning to taste. While the products chosen by the elite to represent their status become status symbols, the same products, when in the possession of the lower social classes, cease to be considered as such. This can be depicted as a cascade process describing the

life of objects and their political uses, with the higher social classes described as in a perpetual search for novelty, which, according to Simmel, is unachievable. As soon as novelty starts to be possessed it turns to obsolescence; furthermore, as soon as a fashion diffuses among the higher class, the lower one will try to copy it, and it will cease to exercise its distinguishing power. Hence, another fashion must be invented, that is, tastes must be changed again, in an endless cycle of distinction. Although Veblen's theory has been constructed in order to show the conflict within society, it implicitly reduces the struggle when arguing that in practice the lower classes have no possibility to contrast the conspicuous consumption of the higher classes. Simmel, too, seems to be describing a lower class that is unable to choose anything for itself but only to follow the higher class's tastes, without contesting them or creating their own particular tastes. However, these authors established a branch of study that shifts the perspective on consumption from an individualistic to a collectivistic description. They made it clear how the struggle is fought between groups of social actors, and provided descriptions of how the logic of hegemony works: that hegemonic ideology must not be imposed on the masses, and can diffuse only if the masses accept it without perceiving it as an hegemonic force or ideology. What neither Veblen nor Simmel are arguing, is the possibility for the lower classes to express *their* particular cultural meaning and tastes (which would become the object of research in Cultural Studies on subcultures and popular culture). In any case, their focus on distinction represents a first step toward a culturalist approach to consumption, which was developed by Bourdieu whose work is situated in between social status and the cultural explanation.

In *La Distinction* (1980), Bourdieu analyses not only how economic capital and social capital determine the social position of an individual, but also how cultural capital plays a crucial part in this. Cultural capital, in fact, determines the taste of an individual whose consumption practices are then influenced by it. Hence, different consumption practices are directly linked to different social classes, which are related to each other according to the amount of power they possess. Thus, Bourdieu is arguing that tastes are not just a psychological aspect of the individual; they are an example of cultural hegemony. In fact, the tastes of the higher classes tend to be some distance from the taste of the lower classes. The reproduction of these tastes,

which passes through the education received by the main socialization agencies (school and family), determines the reproduction of the social and cultural structures of the elites.

4.2.3 Culturalist approach to consumption

“Goods are neutral, their uses are social: they can be used as barriers or as bridges.”

(Douglas, Isherwood 1996: xv)

In the culturalist approach to consumption, its political dimension is completely revealed. The authors who dedicated their work to analysing the relationship between culture and consumption not only prove how far the practices of consumption are fundamental to the creation and the circulation of cultural meaning (Douglas, Isherwood 1996; McCracken 1990), they also demonstrate how the meanings created through these practices are profoundly political in nature (Appadurai 1986; Campbell 2005; de Certeau 1990; Fiske 1987). These authors describe the struggle between powerful elites of producers of mainstream cultural models against minority groups of consumers who, playing with meaning, symbols, commodities, eventually formed subcultures and counterculture (Hall 1981; Hall, Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1979). Furthermore, those consumption practices which are performed explicitly to produce political consequence, have been conceived by some (Micheletti 2002; Micheletti, Stolle, Berlin 2012; Tosi 2009) as particular forms of consumption, establishing a new strand of research on political consumerism and consumer activism.

Consumption described by Veblen and Simmel is intended as a form of language which can only communicate one type of message: that of distinction and of the status quo. However, the perspective of the anthropologist Mary Douglas sheds light on the field of consumption suggesting a controversial hypothesis: “instead of supposing that goods are primarily needed for subsistence plus competitive display, let us assume that all materials possessions carry social meanings and to concentrate a main part of cultural analysis upon their use as communicators” (Douglas, Isherwood 1996: 38).

Douglas's work, developed in collaboration with the economists Baron Isherwood, must be framed in a period in which mass consumption had already been strongly contested, but where the academic literature reveals just the frivolous and egoistic side of consumption. Thus, Douglas brings some positive contributions from anthropology, that explain that other side of the coin which, at the time, was still hidden or at least was underestimated, that is, the important cultural role played by commodities. In Douglas's view, the very notion of consumption must be reconsidered, not as an emanation of production, a consequence of work, but as the possible impulse to work and, as part of that social system, a manifestation of the social need for people to get in contact with each other, to find ways to communicate and establish social relations. The objective of Douglas and Isherwood's work is to contest the basic economic assumption of the consumer represented as a rational agent: in their opinion the very idea of rationality is completely immune from social life and, therefore, cannot constitute the paradigm upon which an analysis of consumption is built. This idea is a too extreme abstraction from real life, which does not consider the fact that there is no universal human being, but that there are only human beings embedded in their age and culture: "the falsely abstracted individual has been sadly misleading to Western political thought" (Douglas, Isherwood 1996: 42). According to these authors, it remains a valid concept to explain consumer behaviour, since it implies rational choice, but it must be embedded in a world that holds a particular rationality and coherence which is made visible through the objects of consumption. This assumption is based on the idea that reality is a social construction, that we have explored in previous chapter, but the innovative assumption is that goods are those material and physical indicators which tell the subject what is real and what is the common sense shared with fellow subjects: "we shall assume that the essential function of consumption is its capacity to make sense. Forget the idea of consumer irrationality. Forget that commodities are good for eating, clothing, and shelter; forget their usefulness and try instead the idea that commodities are good for thinking; treat them as a nonverbal medium for the human creative faculty" (Douglas, Isherwood 1996: 40-41). Commodities, consequently, are the representation of logical categories we use to give sense to reality.

The basic assumptions of this work are thus the fact that consumers are not sovereign agents (i.e. consumption is not a totally free activity) and that consumption is not a private matter. Instead, the authors define consumption as a vital source of culture, and a field where a battle to define culture and give it shape has been fought. This is justified by the fact that culture is not a stable and defined element, but is constantly changing, as people are changing, and the sense that they share is changing with them. In particular, the use we make of objects is a narrative of what characterises our culture, as Douglas describes in this passage:

the housewife with her shopping basket arrives home: some things in it she reserves for her household, some for the father, some for the children; others are destined for special delectation of guests. Whom she invites into her house, what parts of the house she makes available to outsiders, how often, what she offers them for music, food, drink, and conversation, these choices express and generate culture in its general sense. [...] ultimately, they are moral judgments about what a man is, what a woman is, how a man ought to treat his aged parents, how much of a start in life he ought to give his sons and daughters; how he himself should grow old, gracefully or disgracefully, and so on (Douglas, Isherwood 1996: 37).

Hence, according to Douglas and Isherwood, the concept of consumption must be related to the concept of a specific cultural context, as phenomenology suggests, since the subject of consumption is directly connected to a social context and “knowledge is never a matter of the lone individual learning about an external reality. Individuals interacting together impose their constructions upon reality: the world is socially constructed” (Douglas, Isherwood 1996: 42). Only in this sense is the consumer a rational agent, since it is a characteristic of the human being to give sense to the world he lives in, and goods are a perfect tool to accomplish this task: they are tangible, visible, suitable for all, and thus perfect vehicles for cultural meaning. Goods are positioned in rational categories of sense and used according to this scheme, which is evidently shared by the community.

But what does it mean to give significance to a cultural context, and how can the process of consumption do this? Douglas and Isherwood argue that social life is based on continuously mutating shared significances which social actors try to fix for a while. To try to accomplish this, human beings have always used rituals which are

conventions tracing visible collective meanings: “Before the initiation there was a boy, after it a man; before the marriage rite there were two free persons, after it two joined as one. Before admission to a hospital, the doctor’s certificate of ill health; before the formal declaration of death, the dead is accounted alive” (Douglas, Isherwood 1996: 43). But while some rituals are visible because they are represented by signs (documents such as a death certificate), other are mere verbal rituals and, thus, use objects to fix meanings, not fixed by documents; for this reason objects are rituals’ accessories: “consumption is a ritual process whose primary function is to make sense of the inchoate flux of events” (Douglas, Isherwood 1996: 43). Being an anthropologist, Douglas concentrates on rituals, since they are an important dimension of the origin of human community, but even more evidently she stresses how far objects belonging to primitive communities are able to describe the social structure of the community itself, as Appadurai suggested: “Douglas has the advantage over Baudrillard of not restricting her views of consumption as communication to contemporary capitalistic society but extending it to other societies as well” (Appadurai 1986: 31).

Defining consumption as a ritual activity is, hence, the most important point of this work (Douglas, Isherwood 1996), and its importance is re-stated when considering the fact that, even in its solitude, the subject would never avoid responding to particular social criteria: no one would consume raw meat, and even when eating alone, we would not invert the typical sequence of dishes and eat the dessert before the main course. For this reason, they state that “consumption uses goods to make firm and visible a particular set of judgement in the fluid process of classifying persons and events.” (Douglas, Isherwood 1996: 45). In this sense, beyond social class, objects define space and time: they fix the temporal arch and “goods, then, are the visible part of culture” (Douglas, Isherwood 1996: 44).

In addition to the contribution made by Douglas and Isherwood’s theory, we are still faced by an explanation of consumption which is completely immune from any discourse on power and struggle. In the reality just described, every object has the same possibility of becoming part of a system of meanings that is commonly understood and shared by everyone: objects are produced, they become goods when they are inserted into the market and, from that moment on, their use by consumers

will determine a particular cultural meaning. The whole process seems to happen easily, and the meanings related to the use of objects appear to be emerging only from the use of consumers, as if producers were involved in the process only through creating goods for the market.

What this theory basically lacks, or at least underestimates, is that *some* meanings have more chances to circulate compared to others because society experiences an uneven distribution of power, and there are social classes, ethnic groups, gender group, etc., able to impose their cultural meanings on the cultural meanings of others. As we saw in Berger and Luckmann's example in Chapter 2 of this thesis, of two individuals confronted to pass knowledge to the next generation, in the consumption field there is a struggle to determine which specific meanings are attached to the use of goods. According to de Certeau, this is visible in the struggle in which consumers are involved, against the dominance of producers. Thus, we can say that de Certeau explores that political dimension which, according to Mouffe (2005), is always present in human relations.

The work of Micheal de Certeau (1990) seems to start again from an atomistic point of view having fixed its goal of exploring and analysing the everyday practices of the common man. Nonetheless, de Certeau refuses to acknowledge this historical postulate which, according to him, characterized social sciences for more than three centuries. On the contrary, his aim is to construct a clear analysis of the mechanisms and behavioural schemes that organize social life rather than understanding the single director of those processes. De Certeau in fact identifies the single individual as already the result of a relation, the representation of his relational determinations: it is the relation which determines its factors, not the reverse: "Ce travail a donc pour objectif d'expliciter les *combinatoires d'opérations* qui composent aussi (ce n'est pas exclusive) une «culture», et d'exhumer les modèles d'action caractéristiques des usagers dont on cache, sous le nom pudique de consommateurs, le statut de *dominés* (ce qui ne veut pas dire passifs ou dociles). Le quotidien s'invente avec mille manières de *braconner*" (de Certeau 1990: XXXVI)⁴².

⁴² "this work hence aims at explaining the combinatory mechanisms which constitute (not solely) a culture, and to reveal the models of action which are characteristic of users to whom we give, with the

Consequently, his *Arts de faire* refers to those actions taken by these just apparently passive consumers in order to play with objects and their meanings, transforming consumption in a proper production, sharper and more hidden compared to the most evident and bold production activity, but able to create the space for a process of re-signification: “A une production rationalisée, expansionniste autant que centralisée, bruyante et spectaculaire, correspond une *autre* production, qualifiée de «consommation»: celle-ci est rusée, elle est dispersée, mais elle s’insinue partout, silencieuse et quasi invisible, puisqu’elle ne se signale pas avec des produits propres mais en *manières d’employer* les produits imposés par un ordre économique dominant” (de Certeau, 1990: XXXVII)⁴³. This quote shows that de Certeau’s theory also includes the *way* of using goods that determines the means for the construction of cultural meanings, which in this case must face a top-down imposition of procedures, emanating from who owns the power to establish a cultural setting.

Referring to Foucault and to his idea of diffused surveillance, de Certeau tries to demonstrate that there must be a set of procedures (tiny and ordinary) that can be adopted to avoid being caught in this web of discipline and to allow exercise of a resistance activity, and that these procedures are part of our everyday life consumption behaviours through which we can as simply as determine a different use for an object, for example. The counter activity of dominated subjects, is not always made evident or expressed, it is not aimed at constructing conflicting actions, but can be more subtle and can exploit the very potential of a dominating language to create its own meanings. The purpose is not to escape from a dominating power, but to make other use of tools through which this power is exercised in order to weaken dominations. The importance of these actions derives from the fact that consumers should no longer be considered at the margins of the economic process because in fact they are a “marginalized majority” which owns incredible power:

chaste name of consumers, the status of dominated (which does not mean passive or submissive). The everyday is invented through a thousand way of poaching” (de Certeau 1990: XXXVI, my translation).⁴³ “a rationalized, expansionist and centralized production, nosy and spectacular, is parallel to another production, defined as ‘consumption’: this is cunning, scattered, but it gets everywhere, quietly and invisibly, because it is not shown by its own products but through the way it uses products imposed by an dominant economic order” (de Certeau 1990: XXXVII, my translation).

Le figure actuelle d'une marginalité n'est plus celle de petits groupes, mais une marginalité massive; c'est cette activité culturelle des non-producteurs de culture, une activité non signée, non lisible, non symbolisée, et qui reste la seule possible à tous ceux qui pourtant paient, en les achetant, les produits-spectacles où s'épelle une économie productiviste. Elle s'universalise. Cette marginalité est devenue majorité silencieuse (de Certeau 1990: XLIII)⁴⁴.

Of course, this does not mean that de Certeau intends the majority as an homogenous entity because he is conscious of the fact that those actions are performed within power relations and depend on different social situations, thus the necessity to distinguish actions taken inside the consumption field, and to understand the room for manoeuvre allowed to social actors to exercise their "art". In this sense, the author depicts a harsh conflicting relation between producers and consumers, supporting the definition of consumption given to Douglas as a field where the battle to define culture occurs; and he goes further, stating that:

comme le droit (qui en est un modèle), la culture articule des conflits et tour à tour légitime, déplace ou contrôle la raison du plus fort. Elle se développe dans l'élément de tensions, et souvent, de violences, à qui elle fournit des équilibres symboliques, des contrats de compatibilité et des compromis plus ou moins temporaires. Les tactiques de la consommation, ingéniosités du faible pour tirer parti du fort, débouchent donc sur une politisation des pratiques quotidiennes" (de Certeau 1990: XLIV)⁴⁵.

These tactics have a precise role according to de Certeau, of defining the paths and the shape of the space dedicated to consumption. Since consumers cannot arrange and manage the boundaries of the space, they try at least to trace lines which become proper sentences that make up different languages.

⁴⁴ "the present picture of marginality is not represented anymore by small groups, but by a massive marginality; it's the cultural activity of non-producers of culture. This is an activity which has not been signed and cannot be read nor symbolized, which remains the only possible for those who can pay, and buy the spectacular products within a productive economy. The activity is now universalized. The marginality became a quite majority" (de Certeau 1990: XLIII, my translation).

⁴⁵ "like law (which is a model), culture defines conflicts and alternately legitimizes, moves or controls the reason of the most powerful. Culture develops within the element of tensions and, often, of violence, to which it provides symbolical balances, consistency agreement and more or less temporary compromises. The tactics of consumption, the cleverness of the weak to benefit from the strong, hence open to a politicization of the everyday practices" (de Certeau 1990: XLIV, my translation).

De Certeau's idea is, thus, to distinguish between the action taken by those subjects who are aware of their power and calculate the power relations needed to maintain it – the strategies and those actions taken in the same context defined and given by powerful actors which exploit a space that is always the space of the other, in order to pursue different objectives. That is, there is a struggle between consumers and producers, the former moving in the space owned by the latter, but carrying different amounts of power for being able to exploit the space of the others. In de Certeau's words:

J'appelle «stratégies» le calcul des rapports de forces qui devient possible à partir du moment où un sujet de vouloir et de pouvoir est isolable d'un «environnement». Elle postule un lieu susceptible d'être circonscrit comme un *propre* et donc de servir de base à une gestion de ses relations avec une extériorité distincte. La rationalité politique, économique ou scientifique s'est construite sur ce modèle stratégique. J'appelle au contraire «tactique» un calcul qui ne peut pas compter sur un propre, ni donc sur une frontière qui distingue l'autre comme une totalité visible. La tactique n'a pour lieu que celui de l'autre. Elle s'y insinue, fragmentairement, sans le saisir en son entier, sans pouvoir le tenir à distance (de Certeau 1990: XLVI)⁴⁶.

Thus a strategy entails a form of control which derives from the ability to determine a space of action where dominant discourses are created: those discourses are able to articulate the physical places where these same discourses occur. Three places are constructed – place of power, physical place, and theoretical place, and the role of strategy is to combine them in a way that presupposes the fact that each dimension controls the others.

In this sense, it is argued that a tactic is determined by a weak power, something characterized by a counter-power nature, while a strategy is based on power. Tactic is related to slyness since it is based on the ability to manifest itself at once, breaking

⁴⁶ "I define 'strategy' the calculus of force-relations which becomes possible starting from the moment when a subject of will and power can be isolated from an 'environment'. The strategy constitutes a place that can be considered as its own and that can thus serve as the base for managing relations distinguishing from the exterior. The political, economic, and scientific rationality is based upon this strategic model. On the contrary, I call a 'tactic' a calculus which cannot count on its own, 'proper' space, nor thus on a border which distinguish the other as a visible totality. The tactic has nothing but the space of the other. A tactic insinuates itself, fragmentarily, into the other's place, without taking it in its entirety, without keeping it distance" (de Certeau, 1990: XLVI, my translation).

a prefixed order and revealing its effect just for a moment, a moment of destabilization.

De Certeau refers to the example of Spanish colonists to confirm the strength of his ideas, describing what he means by saying that consumers have tactics which work in a field which is owned by another social group, but which are able to subvert an imposed order of meanings to create their own production of significance. In a passage from his work, de Certeau reminds us about how native Indians were able to use the colonists' rules and usages in other ways, neither contrasting nor transforming them, but rather using them for other purposes. The metaphor works brilliantly for popular culture, he claims, since popular culture grows out of an environment which does not allow its workings to be recognized, but that is able to manipulate the imposed symbols in order to get a proper significance from that sly work:

ils métaphorisaient l'ordre dominant: ils le faisaient fonctionner sur un autre registre. [...] A un moindre degré, le même processus se retrouve dans l'usage que le milieu «populaires» font des cultures diffusées par les «élites» productrices de langage. Les connaissances et les symboliques imposée sont l'objet de manipulations par les pratiquants qui n'en sont pas les fabricateurs. Le langage produit par une catégorie sociale dispose du pouvoir d'étendre ses conquêtes dans le vastes régions de son environnement, «déserts» où il semble n'y avoir rien d'aussi articulé, mais il y est pris aux pièges de son assimilation par un maquis de procédures que ses victoires mêmes rendent invisibles à l'occupant" (de Certeau 1990: 54)⁴⁷.

According to de Certeau, in this scenario it seems plausible to consider goods as the "capital" consumers use to work, to produce other goods which are far more symbolical rather than tangible. A quick look at the literature on subcultures and countercultures tells us how effectively consumers play with objects and goods at the

⁴⁷ "they metaphorized the dominant order: they made it functioning on another register. [...] To a lesser degree, the same processes are found in the use made in 'popular' milieu of cultures diffused by elites producing languages. The imposed knowledge and symbolism are the object of manipulation of practitioners who are not producers. The language produced by a social category owns the power to extend its conquests into vast areas surrounding it, 'deserts' where nothing equally articulated seems to exist but in doing so it is caught in the trap of its assimilation by a jungle of procedures made invisible to the conqueror." (de Certeau 1990: 54, my translation).

point of creating something completely new (Fiske 1987; Hall, Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1979).

The image of consumers provided by de Certeau is of a group that is able to produce cultural meanings, but which is not really able to articulate its work in coherent actions (since the resistance is a pre-linguistic dimension in his idea), and fails to reach that organization which is required, in a Gramscian sense, to impose its own order. Consumers, in any case, remain subject to producers who still fix the “rules of the game” and control the social space in which culture circulates. The lack of articulation is the sign that reveals the lack of awareness experienced by the group of consumers, and the fact that producers’ interests are still those that are shared also by consumers. In any case, the trajectories they trace in this field represent the possibility of alternatives which never disappears, the existence of which is enough for us to say that a struggle is carried on, and that this struggle tells us about the politicization of consumption. We know that these practices are ephemeral in a sense and lack the articulation needed to be replicated at the point of being institutionalized, but they still are the narratives of different interests and desires expressed by many creative forms of cultural production:

Producteurs méconnus, poètes de leurs affaires, inventeurs de sentiers dans les jungles de la rationalité fonctionnaliste, les consommateurs produisent quelque chose qui a la figure des «lignes d’erre» dont parle Deligny. Ils tracent des «trajectoires indéterminées», apparemment insensées parce qu’elles ne sont pas cohérents avec l’espace bâti, écrit et préfabriqué où elles se déplacent. Ce sont phrases imprévisibles dans un lieu ordonné par les techniques organisatrices de systèmes. Bien qu’elles aient pour matériel les *vocabulaires* des langues reçues (celui de la télé, du journal, du supermarché ou des dispositions urbanistiques), bien qu’elles restent encadrées par des *syntaxes* prescrites (modes temporels des horaires, organisations paradigmatiques des lieux, etc.), ces «traverses» demeurent hétérogènes aux systèmes où elles s’infiltrèrent et où elles dessinent les ruses d’intérêts et de désirs *différents*. Elles circulent, vont et viennent, débordent et dérivent dans un relief imposé, mouvances écumeuses d’une mer s’insinuant parmi les rochers et les dédales d’un ordre établi (de Certeau 1990: 57)⁴⁸.

⁴⁸ “unknown producers, poets of their businesses, contrivers of paths into the jungle of the functionalist rationality, consumers produce something which take the shape of those ‘lignes d’erre’ described by Deligny. They trace ‘undetermined trajectories’, apparently meaningless because they are not consistent with the built, written, and constructed space through which they move. These are unpredictable sentences within a place ordered by the organizing techniques of the systems. Although

In conclusion, de Certeau recognizes that consumers' everyday life practices are tactics in the sense that they escape from their settings, they circulate in a space that is too wide for them to establish some kind of order, but which at the same time is too organized because they have the possibility to escape from it or to create a new space. They must confront with it, within the space, and can try to create something which might last just for the moment of its break from the system, which is then able to recompose itself. Nonetheless, for that brief moment, consumers show the existence of some space for confrontation and action.

Furthermore, in Fiske's (1987) work, the power of counter-hegemonies is underlined, and the way that the tactics of the consumer create a real alternative semantic field is made explicit. Eventually, resistances are ideologies which are able to guarantee a form of power to subordinated social classes. As Foucault points out, power is not a unidirectional force, but goes in a top-down as well as a bottom-up direction: it is a bidirectional force (Fiske 1987). Since power works in two directions, there is no possibility of finding any social space which has not been characterized by conflict, that is, a political dimension, and consumption is no exception. Therefore, according to Fiske, although it might be true that hegemonic producers of cultural meaning have larger amounts of capital (both economic and social) to impose themselves, it is not true that their power depends on specific cultural capital, since the masses also possess cultural capital despite its being popular cultural capital.

Moreover, we become aware of the fact that resistances, which are deviations from the usual way of using goods, can take many forms, as Fiske suggests:

As social power can take many forms, so too can the resistances to it. There is no singular blanket resistance, but a huge multiplicity of points and forms of resistance, a huge variety of resistances.

they us as their material the vocabularies of established languages (those of television, newspapers, supermarket, and urban planning), although they remain within the framework of prescribed syntaxes (temporal model of time, paradigmatic organization of places, etc.) these 'traverses' remain heterogeneous to the systems they infiltrate and in which they draw the guileful ruses of the different interests and desires. They circulate, come and go, overflow and drift over an imposed terrain, like the waves of a sea, they insinuate within the rocks and the defiles of an established order" (de Certeau 1990: 57, my translation).

These resistances are not just oppositions to power, but are sources of power in their own right: they are the social points at which the powers of the subordinate are most clearly expressed. It may be helpful to categorize these resistances into two main types, corresponding to two main forms of social power - the power to construct meanings, pleasures, and social identities, and the power to construct a socioeconomic system. The first is semiotic power, the second is social power, and the two are closely related, although relatively autonomous (Fiske 1987: 315).

In the field of consumption we can list a number of alternative paths, of tactics, of deviations, which emerged as temporary ruptures in a dominant system, but which eventually organize their structure turning into consistent practices. Analysing these expressions of resistance means entering a debate on the different significance of resistance and hegemony.

There are several critiques of de Certeau's work, focusing especially on the vast power of action he attributes to the masses and the greater cultural role he gives them compared to what some authors argue was the real power of consumers and their consequent behaviour. These critiques are only in part acceptable since de Certeau's theory does not aim at depicting the mass consumer as a powerful agent, nor does he state anywhere in his text that the masses hold solid power against the dominant *élite* of producers. Instead he suggests that in the unbalanced relation where consumers and producers meet each other, there is a possibility for the consumer to break the structure of power, and to act to create a moment of alternative. Certainly, what de Certeau does not specify are the characteristics of such a consumer able to perform a tactic: from his discourse it seems that any consumer might be able to generate that rupture within the predominant system, and this perspective effectively might seem too optimistic. What are the instruments, the conditions, the setting, that allow for the consumer's tactics? And what happens when the rupture is effectively achieved?

This is the object of research developed by the branch of Cultural Studies whose work concentrates on the definition of culture, and the difference between popular and high culture (Crane 1992; Hall 1981; Gans 1999), to prove the semiotic power of subcultures and counterculture (Hall, Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1987).

The debate developed within this strand of research was generated by the conflicting definitions of culture – between who was considering culture as a standard of excellence, and who intended culture as a whole way of life (Hebdige,

1987: 7) – and eventually led to the idea of the existence of a popular as opposed to a high culture. The difference acquires a political nature since forms of popular culture are meant to resist and oppose the imposition of a hegemonic, homogeneous, mainstream culture, which, as Hall and Jefferson (1976) argued following a Gramscian idea of hegemony, on its side, has to be constantly reproduced and sustained to be accepted by the masses, and replicated. The struggle is thus fought in the cultural field, in order to get the control over the production of meanings. In this struggle, subcultures emerge as an interruption in the normal development of the hegemonic action, adopting a mechanism of repossession of commodities and discourses, finalized as the creation of new meanings. This is clearly shown in Hebdige's (1987: 18) work where the author introduces the study of "style" as a way to observe the alteration of meaning achieved by the punk subculture: "style in subculture is, then, pregnant with significance. Its transformations go 'against nature', interrupting the process of 'normalization'. As such, they are gestures, movements towards a speech which offends the 'silent majority', which challenges the principle of unity and cohesion, which contradicts consensus" (ibidem: 18). The difference between popular and high culture has been progressively abandoned by several authors (Crane 1992; Gans 1999), while it has remained the focus of analysis for others (Hall 1981) who stress the continued importance of society's distinction in social classes in the understanding of the cultural struggle.

Nonetheless, the political dimension of consumption does not emerge only at this meso level of conflict but, according to Campbell, it can be extended also to the single individual. The author introduces the idea of a politicized consumer, shifting attention from masses to the individual, in a description of what he calls the "craft consumer" (Campbell 2005). This is a consumer involved in a proper activity of production, who uses material objects to produce new meanings. His definition of a craft consumer refers to the idea that the individual producing something has total control over the process of production, hence expressing her personality in the object produced: "That is to say, the craft consumer is a person who typically takes any number of mass-produced products and employs these as the 'raw materials' for the creation of a new 'product', one that is typically intended for self-consumption" (Campbell 2005: 28). Like the group of individuals represented in subcultures, the

description of a craft consumer reminds us of de Certeau's "tactic", those activities which exploit the language given by the other, as if it were raw material to create something else. In any case, in Campbell's theory not every form of personalization and customization can be considered a form of craft consumption. He has no doubts that consumption involves a ritual process of possession as in McCracken's (1990) analysis, but at the same time Campbell underlines the fact that not every possession ritual is a form of craft consumption, and that not every consumer is a craft consumer. Referring to Bourdieu, he states that beyond time and wealth a consumer needs to own a certain cultural capital in order to be a craft consumer: "More specifically, one can say that a certain kind of cultural capital is needed in order to envisage commodities as 'raw material' that can be employed in the construction of composite 'aesthetic entities'. [However], it is important to note that for some aspects of craft consumption, this capital may indeed be populist rather than elitist in nature" (Campbell 2005: 35-36).

These authors offer a new perspective on what consumption is, and the understanding that commodities circulate in our societies, not as mere objects and not as mere goods satisfying our needs or desires; rather and more precisely they have a kind of social life. We use them to communicate cultural information as well as to receive cultural meanings which we then assimilate in order to give coherence to the reality that belongs to us. Hence, the objects of our consumption have the power to differentiate us as well as to position us in relation to one another, which basically means that they are instruments to construct our social identities. Through the consumption of goods we claim our position in the social world, attributing to consumption a precise political role. On the other hand, Appadurai (1986) argues that those very objects, once acquired values and meanings, then set up social hierarchies depending on their social biographies. Individuals give meanings to objects, but in turn are then determined by those meanings. Appadurai catches the importance of the political dimension of consumption more than the authors previously discussed, because although their contributions are important and allow us – today – to see goods as important vehicles of culture, Appadurai is able to show how much the circulation of those very objects follows precise political rules, being affected by a specific kind of class interest. In this way Appadurai attributes solid autonomy to the

field of consumption since his perspective drives him to state that a dialectical relation between consumption and production exists, where “on the one end, demand is determined by social and economic forces” and “on the other, it can manipulate, within limits, these social and economic forces” (Appadurai 1986: 31). In the work *The Social Life of Things* Appadurai describes the political dimension of consumption, drawing assumptions on the basis of the theory mentioned previously, building his hypothesis on a notion of demand (and consumption) clearly opposed to the one normally shared and diffused by economists. Appadurai agrees with the authors referred to above, in stating that consumption is “eminently social, relational, and active rather than private, atomic, or passive” (Appadurai 1986: 31) because consumption is based on demand, which is itself detached from mere desire and need and instead is a direct dimension of the general political economy of society. Demand should not be understood as a mysterious representation of human needs nor as an automatic answer to precise mechanisms of social control, as on the one side economic theories describe it and on the other as critical perspectives on cultural industry put it. Instead, it “emerges as a function of a variety of social practices and classifications. [...] Demand is thus the economic expression of the political logic of consumption and thus its basis must be sought in that logic” (Appadurai 1986: 29-31).

This last point derives from the willingness to contrast the erroneous idea that desire for goods is a personal and limitless activity, completely disengaged from culture: evidence of this perspective comes from Appadurai’s anthropological studies where it is evident that it is not the amount of money available that determine the desire for goods, as in the Muria Gonds tribe described by Alfred Gell (1986). In this tribe, for example, showing personal richness is seen as a despicable behaviour since it goes against sociable accepted consumption behaviour focused on acquiring traditional items, generating a reverse consumption model compared to the one described by Veblen: the aim of each member of that community is to engage in a kind of “conspicuous parsimony” (Appadurai 1986), rather than a “conspicuous consumption”. Hence, Veblen’s idea that consumption’s function is to show one’s position in the highest class of society (a practice that is reiterated unsuccessfully among the lower classes) should be corrected by saying that, in a particular type of society that bunch of values is transmitted to the whole society in order to socially

regulate desire for goods, but that the important point to note is not “the particular type of values”, but instead the fact that there is an attempt to regulate the desire for goods, which is to regulate demand. In our contemporary western societies it happens that those social classes who have interests in controlling demand, share those particular values, but in other ages and spaces the transmitted values were/are other. However, this is what is meant by the political logic of consumption, that is, the fact that there is no mystery beyond demand, but clear structures of power.

Demand in contemporary society is determined no less by strict rules as under sumptuary laws, what has changed is the variability of the criteria compared to ancient ones. The fact that it is more rapidly changing not only gives an illusion of the possibility for self-determination, while underneath there still are subjects owing the power to dictate which are the requisites of good taste. Demand is not at all “an artefact of individual whims or needs [but] a socially regulated and generated impulse” (Appadurai 1986: 32), or, even more:

demand is thus neither a mechanical response to the structure and level of production nor a bottomless natural appetite. It is a complex social mechanism that mediates between short-and long-term patterns of commodity circulation. Short-term strategies of diversion might entail small shifts in demand that can gradually transform commodity flows in the long run. Looked at from the point of view of the reproduction of the pattern of commodity flows (rather than their alternation), however, long-established patterns of demand act as constraints on any given set of commodity paths. One reason such paths are inherently shaky, especially when they involve transcultural flows of commodities, is that they rest in unstable distributions of knowledge (Appadurai 1986: 40-41).

What Appadurai is arguing is that the circulation of commodities is determined by some cultural rules which sometimes may be infringed, creating different – alternative – circulation paths. In other words, “the flow of commodities in any given situation is a shifting compromise between socially regulated paths and competitively inspired diversions” (Appadurai 1986: 17). However, this assumption is based on his peculiar definition of a good of not an object in itself, but rather a moment, a phase in its social life. Not every object will become a good; some may become so for a brief period, others are born precisely to become goods, but, by

accident, may be transformed back into mere objects⁴⁹. Whether an object becomes or does not become a good, depends on those paths which were created subsequently, but which are escapable and which consequently are defined as the mechanism of commodification.

The most important point in Appadurai's thesis is for us to understand that these patterns are built specifically to create a social order or, better, to guarantee the status quo as clearly happens in the *kula* system of the Trobriand Island, described by Malinowsky (1922)⁵⁰. Natives of the island refer to the system as *keda* because of its circulatory characteristics. Of central interest to the discourse in this chapter is not the structure of this mechanism, but that the system *kula* was created to give wealth, power and reputation to those men involved in it. Hence, it is a system created to establish paths of commodification which respond to specific political interests: "the path taken by these valuables is thus both reflective and constitutive of social partnerships and struggles for preeminence" (Appadurai 1986: 19). Linked to the *kula* system, which involves individuals living on different islands (e.g. in different communities), there is the *kitoum* system, which regulates some kinds of exchanges within the same community. *Kitoum* represents a deviation from the usual paths of valuables, but together they create the whole politics of value of the Massim society. Thus, Appadurai suggests *kula* should be seen as "tournaments of value", that is, a system where the value criteria are established and where "forms and outcomes are always consequential for the more mundane realities of power and value in ordinary life [...] in such tournaments of value generally, strategic skill is culturally measured by the success with which actors attempt diversions or subversions of culturally conventionalized paths for the flow of thing" (Appadurai 1986: 21).

⁴⁹ Goods are classified by Appadurai, as follows: "(1) commodities by *destination*, that is, objects intended by their producers principally for exchange; (2) commodities by *metamorphosis*, things intended for other uses that are placed into the commodity state; (3) a special, sharp case of commodities by metamorphosis are commodities by *diversion*, objects placed into a commodity state though originally specifically protected from it; (4) *ex-commodities*, things retrieved, either temporarily or permanently, from the commodity state and placed in some other state" (Appadurai 1986: 16).

⁵⁰ "[T]he *kula i san* extremely complex regional system for the circulation of particular kinds of valuables, usually between men of substance, in the Massim group of islands off the eastern tip of New Guinea. The main objects exchanged for one another are of two types: decorated necklaces (which circulate in one direction) and armshells (which circulate in the other)." (Appadurai 1986: 18).

Following this reasoning, we can see how much deviations exercise power over the movement of objects and, since those tournaments of value are played out by actors, they have the power to alter the cultural meanings that these same objects carry. In other words, in the intricate context of exchange there are dominant paths that work as hegemonic cultural routes imposed on objects in order to create a hierarchical system of social status. Individuals sharing a common set of cultural rules and common knowledge maintain the circulation of objects within these paths, until different interests overtake to become the drivers of the creation of alternative circulation paths, which emerge to challenge the previously dominant ones. Deviations can produce new circulatory movements which might end up being the new institutionalized and, hence, dominant, paths: “deviations, however, are not to be found only as parts of individual strategies in competitive situations, but can be institutionalized in various ways that remove or protect objects from the relevant social commodity contexts” (Appadurai 1986: 22). And even though deviations usually are used to reintroduce objects which have been removed intentionally from the commodities cycle⁵¹, there are also example of strategic movements of goods in the area of commodification: “diversion, that is, may sometimes involve the calculated and ‘interested’ removal of things from an enclaved zone to one where exchange is less confined and more profitable, in some short-term sense” (Appadurai 1986: 25). Later, we will see how far contemporary barter corresponds to this mechanism of deviation, of trying to reintroduce objects that have been forced out of the commodities circuit by virtue of a dominant path which imposed a shortening of the social life cycle of the goods.

In this sense, the deviation described by Appadurai resembles what de Certeau earlier defines as tactics, ways of moving in a field owned by some other power, using different interpretations of the available cultural meanings with the aim of producing new ones, in an open challenge to the dominant system which adopts its strategies to define which is the apparatus of power. Not surprisingly Appadurai also underlines that “diversions are meaningful only in relation to the paths from which they stray. [...] The relationship between paths and diversions is itself historical and

⁵¹ Like the trade in relics in early mediaeval Europe cited by Appadurai (1986: 46).

dialectical [and] diversions that become predictable are on their way to becoming new paths, paths that will in turn inspire new diversions or returns to old paths” (Appadurai 1986: 29).

While de Certeau was able to identify those hidden tactics of consumers, Appadurai goes further by giving us an explanation of the weaknesses of paths, and the consequential emergence of deviations. As already mentioned, he argues that the distribution of knowledge in society is fundamentally unstable. The so called “market for lemons” (Akerlof 1970) or second hand cars is evidence of this. This example is used in economic analysis to explain the concept of the uneven distribution of knowledge between the two parts in an exchange. It demonstrates the problem of free riding, that is, opportunistic behaviour by a subject, taking advantage of the asymmetric information characterizing an agreement (e.g. an exchange):

in each of the examples I have discussed, the commodity futures market, cargo cults, and mining mythology, mythological understanding of the circulation of commodities are generated because of the detachment, indifference, or ignorance of participants as regards all but a single aspect of the economic trajectory of the commodity. Enclaved in either the production, speculative trade, or consumption locus of the flow of commodities, technical knowledge tends to be quickly subordinated to more idiosyncratic subcultural theories about the origins and destinations of things. These are examples of the many forms that the fetishism of commodities can take when there are sharp discontinuities in the distribution of knowledge concerning their trajectories of circulation” (Appadurai 1986: 54).

So, there are gaps in the knowledge about the trajectories of the circulation of commodities. That is, different amounts of knowledge allow for different uses of goods, which can lead to the emergence of deviations. To fill those gaps, mythologies are invented (from different perspectives and to serve different interests) in order especially to reach a good level of control over demand. It now should be clear that paths and deviations are the result of the fact that, as Simmel (2001) explained at the beginning of the last century, it is the exchange that generates value, not the reverse. Any form of value production must be kept under control by those who are willing to exercise some kind of power over society, which this is why, for example, as “an expression of the interests of elites in relation to commoners we

have the politics of fashion, of sumptuary law, and of taboo, all of which regulate demand” (Appadurai 1986: 57). Demand is regulated because it constitutes an immense source of value, and this regulation testifies to the existence of a broad political dimension behind each social construction, since

politics (in the broad sense of relations, assumptions, and contests pertaining to power) is what links value and exchange in the social life of commodities. [...] these many ordinary dealings would not be possible were it not for a broad set of arrangements concerning what is desirable, what a reasonable ‘exchange of sacrifices’ comprises, and who is permitted to exercise what kind of effective demand in what circumstances. What is political about this process is not only the fact that it signifies and constitutes relations of privilege and social control. What is political about it, is the constant tension between the existing frameworks (of price, bargaining, and so forth) and the tendency of commodities to breach these frameworks. This tension itself has its source in the fact that not all parties share the same *interests* in any specific regime of value, nor are the interests of any two parties in a given exchange identical” (ibidem: 57).

The tension is kept constant by the fact that commodities move beyond the boundaries of a specific culture or of a specific regime of value, threatening the mechanism of control and pushing those in power to invent strategies to “freeze the flow of commodities by creating a closed universe of commodities and a rigid set of regulations about how they are to move” (Appadurai 1986: 57). An example of how producers create sets of rules to establish how commodities should flow is represented by the contemporary form of fast consumption: fast food, fast design, fast fashion, etc. In particular, the case of fast fashion (Cietta 2008; Ghemawat, Nueno, Dailey 2003; Segre Reinach 2005) shows clearly how the passage from sumptuary law to fashion, instead of liberating the subject from the strict rules of consumption and behaviour, actually imposed another set of rules. The difference between sumptuary laws and fashion laws is that the former concentrate on creating a closed universe of commodities from which consequently derives small shifts in the criteria of appropriateness, while the latter is based exactly on a criterion of high turnover, which constrict the paths commodities follow. In a capitalistic economy, fashion objects have a very short and unidirectional life: they are produced, distributed, consumed (briefly) and thrown away. The higher the control over taste

and demand, the faster the flow of the commodity. Thus, the mechanism of fast fashion is the representation of the fact that “the establishments that control fashion and good taste in contemporary west are no less effective in limiting social mobility, marking social rank and discrimination, and placing consumers in a game whose ever-shifting rules are determined by ‘taste makers’ and their affiliated experts who dwell at the top of society” (Appadurai 1986: 32).

At any rate, the real tension is between the willingness to keep this system close, and the desire to improve the potential for commodities to lose the rules that control the system, giving space for a change of value. In this sense Appadurai shows that not only production but also consumption are related to politics.

4.2.4 Political consumerism and consumer activism

While Appadurai reconstructs the political dimension of consumption, the authors considered in the last part of this chapter adopt another perspective to deal with it; they shift the attention to the political use of consumption. The idea is that specific acts of consumption are considered as proper forms of political participation. Hence, political consumerism is defined “as the evaluation and choice of producers and products with the aim of changing ethically, environmentally or politically objectionable institutional or market practices” (Micheletti, Stolle, Berlin 2012: 145). The subject involved in this type of consumption is a person who considers “material goods as embedded in a multitude of power relations that may involve issues of human rights, environmental protection, workers’ rights and gender equality” (Micheletti 2002: 219). Scholars of political consumerism agree on four ways depicting how consumers engage in this practice: boycott, buycott, discursive action, and lifestyle choices. The first two are forms respectively of negative and positive consumption, entailing the decision to not buy something, with the intention of criticising the attitudes of a company, or the act of buying something to acknowledge the good ethical behaviour of the producer. Discursive action type of political consumerism refers to the communication activity performed by a subject to express, in a variety of ways and places, an opinion on corporate policy in an effort to spread consumer consciousness. The second two forms of political consumerism are

adopted by those who want to make their private lives a sphere of responsibility being assumed, and common values shared (Micheletti, Stolle, Berlin 2012). Although we find evidence of various forms of political consumerism throughout history, today, more and more people are engaging in it. In analysing the history of commerce (Berstein 2010), we can see that clear attempts were made by unsatisfied consumers or by producers to change the rules of market (once governed by political institutions); what we are observing now, is an active involvement of a wider group of citizens, who might not be directly affected by the consequences of certain kind of commercial activity, but who still get involved in these kinds of protests. For example, there are people who do not buy certain products because their production implies exploitation of human (often child) labour, in appalling working conditions. Even though neither these protesters nor their relatives or loved ones are the exploited workers, that is, they do not have a direct interest, they believe it is their responsibility not to encourage such production.

Taking responsibility is the key feature here, because is exactly what institutionalized politics is supposed to do. Beyond the form of a global politics, which gives more and more power, to some actors, to play a crucial role in the market, this field has became politicized also because of the inadequacy of political parties' responses to citizens' demands. These structures are supposed to articulate and aggregate the interests of groups of the population while, at the same time, establishing a space for the formation of collective identities. Giving membership to a particular political party provides assurance to the citizen that its opinions will be represented, but at the same time means that responsibility and responsible action are delegated to the organization (Micheletti 2002).

In political consumerism, the "consumer-citizen" (Micheletti 2002) is no longer willing to accept a collective act of responsibility-taking, and the citizen creates his own political setting based on everyday life choices, including consumption choices. Micheletti used the term "individualized collective action" to describe this attitude and she defines it as: "the practice of responsibility-taking through the creation of everyday settings on the part of citizens alone or together with others to deal with problems which they believe are affecting what they identify as the good life" (Micheletti 2002: 229).

The lack of trust in governmental institutions is referred to by Beck (1992; 1997) when he theorizes the emergence of “active subpolitics”. He maintained that politics was moving from the classical and traditional places of political participation, to the public and private spheres of subpolitics. This is seen by many scholars as threatening the political involvement of citizens, the precondition for a healthy democracy. However, citizens have found other ways to express their political opinions, and other means to participate and defend their instances. Thus, political consumerism practices are forcing us to reconsider the very notion of political participation underlying the transformations occurring in the political field (Carpentier 2011, p. 22).

Examples of these political practices are all types of consumer activism, including cultural jamming (Cammaerts 2007; Carducci 2006; Kozinets, Handelman 2004; Harold 2004) which refers to “a tactical effort by a consumer activist or activists to counter or subvert pro-consumption messages delivered through mass media or other cultural institutions [and consists of] creating anti-advertising promotions, graffiti and underground street art, billboard defacing and alteration, holding events such as spontaneous street parties or flash mobs, as well as social parody and satire” (Ritzer, Ryan 2010: 116). The aim of cultural jamming action is to organize a series of meaning alterations so as to confound the consumer about the meaning of what she is experiencing, for example, by producing a totally distorted version of reality diffused as mainstream news, or parodying government and institutional websites.⁵²

Although it is now recognized as an important research field, many scholars suggest we should not overestimate political consumerism and should be wary of describing consumption as one subpolitical sphere. They argue that “consuming is not voting” (Sassatelli 2008), referring to the fact that consumption is not organized as a direct political action, but often is related to specific private interests and strongly connected to our need for distinction (Bourdieu 1980). Most of us are involved in consumption in order to satisfy a self-interest or to solve a private problem, and even those buying some sort of “political” good (see, e.g., Fair Trade

⁵² See the “Yes Men” movement (Hynes, Sharpe, Fragan 2007).

products) still need a particular conceptual framework to perceive their consumption as political.

The limits to this definition must be searched for in the fact that defining some forms of consumption as political immediately implies that other forms are not. Hence, the consumption field is not conceived as a political field; however, this chapter consistently demonstrates the contrary. It shows that this is a field where the battle for cultural is fought, that is, where there is a struggle between different groups, owning different interests and power.

Being political does not refer only to consumers' awareness of the injustices involved in allowing production, it also means using goods in different ways, creating a struggle over the definition of their use and, hence, the definition of their meaning. It should be emphasized that, according to de Certeau, rupture may emerge each time a consumer interprets the use of a particular good in a way not intended by the producer. Thus, a tactic is exercised when a fast fashion tee shirt is used in a way not intended by its producer (i.e. if a consumer buys a new tee shirt once a year, she is adopting a tactic that goes against the producer's strategy, which is that the consumer should buy a new tee shirt every week). Politics is not just about the political; politics is the existence of a struggle to define social reality.

Consequently maintaining that consumption is a political field, confirms the perspective adopted by those scholars of the sociology of culture, who have for long tried to demonstrate how far consumption is a collective rather than an atomistic activity. In a political field, the definition of a collective identity is the first premise for the activation of a confrontation which might result in a struggle, hence in the emergence of a social structure, and the consumption field represents a source of experiences through which active subjects give shape to a place where collective forms of identity arise. Moving beyond the juxtaposition between passive and active subject, the consumer is recognized as the individual who is able to act in a kind of communicational meta-environment (Di Nallo, Paltrinieri 2006), participating with others for the construction of spaces that allow formation of an identity. Put differently, consumption is the place where collective identities may take consciousness of themselves through a participating activity performed by the use of goods.

Overall, in the struggle for the definition of social reality, hegemonic models of consumption are imposed, and counter-hegemonic models resist this imposition. It is possible to outline the characteristics of the hegemonic model of consumption through the work of those authors dealing with alternative models of consumption (Giaccardi 2006; La Rosa, Morri 2006; Leonini, Sassatelli 2008; Lunghi, Montagnigni 2007; Mora 2006; Musarò 2006; Paltrinieri 2006; Paltrinieri, Parmiggiani 2005; Rebughini, Sassatelli 2008; Sassatelli 2006). Mainstream consumption is a highly individualistic and unlimited model of consumption. It is focused on the self and on her satisfaction, and it implies constant purchase of commodities whose use is intended to be short-lived. In contrast, the counter-hegemonic model of consumption, which emerges in the works of these authors, is a consumption that implies lower quantities of purchases and higher awareness of the consequences of the acts of consumption. This model of consumption is adopted by consumers who concentrate on the environmental effects produced by over production, which is necessary to sustain over consumption, and the effect that the rapid turnover of commodities and hence the ever shorter life-cycle of objects, has on the production of polluting wastes. Reducing consumption then is a way to protect themselves and the environment. These consumers also share a desire to promote equal and fair human relations, contrasting with the side effects that delocalized production has on human rights, that is, the creation of conditions for a new mass of “slaves” to work in unacceptable working conditions.

All in all, the study of online barter practice focuses on understanding how this model might be considered as opposing the hegemonic model of consumption.

Chapter 5

Methodology, methods and techniques

This part of the dissertation is devoted to the research methodology, and a discussion of methods. Marradi (2007) underlines that methodology should not be a description of the method, but a discourse on methods, as the word's Greek origins suggests: μέθοδος (*methodos*) and λογος (*logos*)⁵³. Thus, the first part of the chapter describes the approach adopted, and explains its choice over other possible approaches. The basic principles, benefits and limitations of non-standard research⁵⁴ are considered. The word non-standard research is used instead of qualitative research, as the latter definition is considered too problematic and limited. In light of its limitations, a reflection on the appropriateness of the selected approach is developed, its suitability in relation to the type of research questions informing this thesis, and the nature of the research object itself.

The second part of Chapter 5 presents the methods used to conduct the research, and considers the limitations encountered as well as the benefits they brought to this work. The process of data gathering involved different methods, which are described

⁵³ Marradi considers it important to distinguish between method and methodology, arguing that the habit in American sociology of defining the "methodology", the single technique, has permeated European sociology. The difference is clear: method defines the means used to conduct the research (the Greek word means "path"); methodology describes the reflection on the use of that particular method.

⁵⁴ Ricolfi (1995), Marradi (2007), Bichi (2001), and Nigris (2003) argue that the opposition between "qualitative" and "quantitative" is fundamentally incorrect. Standard methods and techniques of research are those that allow the collection of data that can be managed within matrixes; non-standard research methods and techniques are those that allow the collection of information that cannot be reduced to data matrixes (Caselli, 2005).

and discussed, including, in particular, the processes of digital ethnographic observation and interviewing. Finally, the data analysis method and the strengths and weaknesses of the technique adopted are presented.

In the third and last part of the chapter, the characteristics of the cases are described in details, focusing on the peculiarities of barter websites, which are structured as a hybrid between a social networking site and an e-commerce website, and on the history and technical features of the three selected cases.

Chapter 5 also offers a reflection on the process of triangulation and its capacity for guaranteeing a high level of validity in non-standard research. In research methodology, “data triangulation involves using different *sources* of information in order to increase the validity of a study” (Guion et al., 2002). This chapter describes the selection of the three cases, the five-month digital ethnographic observation, the writing of field notes, and the 22 in-depth, biographical interviews. It is made clear that all these methods were necessary to understand the nature of the barter practice: the phenomenological approach was adopted to understand the meanings that the practice assumed for the subjects involved, through biographic interviews; the ethnographic approach was aimed at revealing behaviours implied in such little known practice.

Chapter 5 provides evidence from the process of social science research, which is a process that always implies continuous dialogue between theory and empirical research. In order to avoid the production of a completely abstract social theory on the one hand, or merely descriptive empirical research on the other, the social scientist needs to create a circular relation between theory and empirical research, that allows the two to “talk” to each other (Merton 1983).

5.1 Non-standard research

Studying contemporary barter involves approaching a field that is practically unexplored. In dealing with an emergent phenomenon, the research questions need to address its phenomenology – “how” the practice is performed, “why” people engage in the practice, “what” are their motives, and “who” are the social actors that take

part in this activity. The study of this non completely explored practice can provide important information on cultural changes occurring within the society. This kind of analysis, because of its peculiar characteristics, requires a non-standard approach.

When the founding fathers of sociology were establishing the foundations of this new science, an important methodological debate emerged over how it could respect the criteria of validity, reliability, generalizability that a science must guarantee. Through the work of Comte (1877), Spencer (1967), Durkheim (1947), and others, the origins of sociological research assumed the positivist character of a scientific method based on pure objectivity related to the analysis of facts. At the same time, in its early birth phases, several authors, above all Weber (1978), proposed an epistemological explication of sociology. Influenced by Dilthey and Windelband, Weber focused a conspicuous part of his *Economy and Society* (1978) on criticizing those approaches to society that consider it to be the result of the aggregate actions of individuals, adopting a so-called methodological individualism. According to Weber, sociology should not determine functional connections between facts and rules of human action. Instead, “sociology (in the sense in which this-highly ambiguous word is used here) is a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences” (Weber 1978: 4). Weber’s notion of sociology is hence of a science that understands the actions of individuals; it is an “understanding” science. It does not explain action, but it seeks to *comprehend* the sense individuals put into their actions. According to this approach, social action acquires a particular understanding in Weber’s analysis: it is defined as, “‘social’ insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course” (ibidem). Following this reasoning allows Weber to argue that it is evident how far social science cannot be objective, since the researcher, like the subjects she is studying, is a social agent, who gives a different meaning to her actions, depending on her objectives. Nonetheless, while the initial process of comprehension of a phenomenon in social science, undoubtedly is influenced by the values and hypotheses of the researcher, a rigorous method can be applied in the process of analysis, in order to guarantee an a-evaluative explication. Weber is aware that objectivity as it is performed in the natural sciences, cannot be achieved in social science, therefore, he proposes

construction of ideal-models of reality which, although they simplify phenomena, might in any case help the scientist to understand them.

Weber laid the basis for what has been called the qualitative approach to research, but eventually this approach still sought to rely on facts. If for Durkheim social facts are similar to natural phenomena (like those study by the natural sciences), and need to be investigated as such, for Weber social facts must be analysed starting from a reconstruction of the intentional meaning of the subject acting in society. However, Weber is much more focused on rational action rather than everyday action and also is trying to recognize an objective dimension to science, where the researcher's values are hidden (Bovone 2010).

In the 1960s and 1970s, sociology experienced a "communicative turn" (Bovone 2000, 2010), in the sense that, through the work of some authors (Gadamer 1984; Garfinkel 1967; Goffman 1959; Mead 1963; Schutz 1979), a new perspective on everyday life actions emerged, and communication finally was understood as the moment of the creation of knowledge.

Those post-Parsonian authors developed different perspectives on the purposes of sociology, and consequently adopted new kinds of methods for the investigation of social reality. Laura Bovone (2010) reconstructs the main differences between classical sociology and alternative, non-classical, approaches: the phenomenological sociology of Alfred Schutz, and the American radical microsociology represented by the ethnomethodology by Harold Garfinkel, the dramatic approach of Ervin Goffman, and the symbolic interactionism of George Hebert Mead. These differences can be summarized in a series of dichotomies that represent the passage from modern to post-modern sociology (Bovone 2010: 27-41).

The first main difference is between the idea of a reality given to subjects, an independent existence of external entities, and the opposing idea of a social constructed reality, where the ways to understand reality are the same as the methods use to construct it (Berger, Luckmann 1967; Schutz 1979). In particular, according to Goffman (1959, 1967), the reality is constructed through interactions. Hence, meaning is no longer intended as the meaning of the single action, since meaning is constructed together with others and can be understood only in retrospect. Then the only way to orient social action is to use the common sense assimilated through

socialization which becomes our taken-for-granted (Schutz 1979). From this perspective, the dimension of reflexivity emerges as one of the most important dimensions, allowing subjects to reconstruct the sense of their actions. Also, while Schutz defines reflexivity as the gaze toward the past, according to Garfinkel, reflexivity is part of the present, a typical communicational dimension (Bovone 2010).

Basically, this new type of sociology is interested in the performance of everyday life, the forms of the micro-actions (which sometimes reveal macro-structures) that construct reality and give sense to the social action. In other words: “L’oggetto della teoria della comunicazione è lo spettacolo della vita quotidiana, il farsi del presente, una dinamica sottoposta alle regole dell’interazione, costruita passo passo dai suoi partecipanti, proprio come passo passo si costruisce un discorso” (ibidem: 39)⁵⁵.

As a consequence, these new approaches in sociology led to the development of new methods of enquiry. If the focus is shifted to everyday life, if the meaning is socially constructed, then it is in the field that the sociologist should gather her data, and collect those accounts that define and construct social reality and the meaning of social action. The aim sociology attributes to itself then, is giving voice to social actors not trying to interpret the meanings of their choices, and with the awareness that the voice of the sociologist is always the lead voice in the narration she is constructing through her research: “il compito della sociologia è un compito comunicativo, mette in relazione, lascia o fa parlare, ascolta e fa da cassa di risonanza, rielabora rendendo conto di ciò che gli altri dicono” (ibidem: 97)⁵⁶.

To summarize, it can be said that non-standard methods differ from standard methods on the basis of the five principles in Denzin and Lincoln (1994)⁵⁷. Although both standard and non-standard methods originate from a positivistic approach to

⁵⁵ “the object of the theory of communication is the spectacle of the everyday life, the becoming of the present, a dynamic subject to the rules of interactions, built step by step by its participants as well as step by step a discourse is constructed” (Bovone 2010: 39, my translation).

⁵⁶ “the task of sociology is a communicative task, it relates, it lets or makes other talking, it listens and works as a sounding board, it re-elaborates considering what other say” (Bovone 2010: 97, my translation).

⁵⁷ According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994: 5-6), these five principles turn out to be different ways of tackling the same issues, which are: 1) uses of positivism; 2) acceptance of post-modern sensibilities; 3) capturing the individual’s point of view; 4) examining the constraints of everyday life; 5) securing rich descriptions.

science, they make a completely different use of positivism. In particular, non-standard research adopts different post-modern sensibilities which consider classical positivist criteria (generalizability, validity, reliability) as largely irrelevant for the type of work they do. In post-structural, constructivist and post-modern school of thoughts, scientists think that those criteria produce only a certain type of science and they “seek alternative methods for evaluating their work, including verisimilitude, emotionality, personal responsibility, an ethic of caring, political praxis, multivoiced texts, and dialogues with subjects” (ibidem: 5). The scope of non-standard methods is to capture, as far as possible, the individual’s point of view, while the scope of standard methods is focused on people’s aggregate points of view. Consequently, while non-standard scientists are committed to an emic, idiographic science, concerned with the peculiarities of particular situations, standard research responds to a nomothetic science based on probabilities, whose objective is to formulate laws (Marradi 2007). In order to accomplish their aims, sociologists must delve into reality using appropriate instruments.

Among the methods developed by non-standard research, ethnography and interviewing are those used in this specific research. Their characteristics are now presented, together with a consideration over their problems and limits.

5.1.1 Ethnography

The ethnographic method was first applied by anthropologists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, to understand non-Western cultures. The method initially focused on the study of primitive societies as communities living in different *cultural* world, and emerged as a way to address the methodological problem of whether and how other cultures could be understood (Atkinson, Hammersley 1994). Although definition of the term ethnography has been the subject of debate, we can say that the main objective of an ethnographer is to interpret “the meanings, functions and consequences of humans action and institutional practices, and how these are implicated in local, and perhaps also wider, contexts” (Hammersley, Atkinson 2007: 3).

Initially, the method was strongly influenced by positivism, as early anthropologists (Boas 1929; Malinowski 1922; Radcliffe-Brown 1952) perceived their work as guided by the law of natural sciences, and their role as detached from the communities in which they were living (Denzin, Lincoln 2011). In the 20th century, anthropologists and sociologists shifted their attention from primitive communities to study of their own society, and found that there were different cultures living in their own metropolitan areas. Scholars of the Chicago School (Mead 1963; Park 1963; Whyte 1955) were pioneering researchers in adaptation of this method to the context of the city, some key works being *Street Corner Society* by William Foote Whyte, the result of an ethnographic study of the Italian quarter of Boston, Massachusetts, at the beginning of the 1940s; and Lynd's work *Middletown* (1956), a portrait of an "average" American town in the mid 1920s. These milestones in the historical development of ethnography describe what the work of an ethnographer implies. The researcher has to live with the studied community, participate in their activities, observe and talk to them, produce thick description (Geertz 1973) of their shared beliefs, behaviours, languages, rituals, etc. Although ethnography tends to be conducted in less "immersed" ways, its principles persist. The ethnographic method is, in fact, not only about *observing* but implies a tangible experience of the researcher directly involved in the object of her research. During the course of her observations, the ethnographer must deal with cultural behaviours, cultural knowledge and cultural artefacts (Spradley 1980), in order to understand what people do, what they know and what they produce or use.

Participant observation has a higher degree of involvement in the field of enquiry than non-participant observation, albeit the former has different degrees of involvement. Non-participant observation suggests a type of ethnographic observation that does not imply any form of contact with people, and no involvement in their activities: it is enacted only by observing and taking notes. Spradley (1980: 59) cites the example of a researcher involved in the ethnographic observation of television programmes: she is neither interacting nor participating, but she is providing some interesting comment on representations in "soap operas", for instance. Also, there are some who would not classify this kind of observation as non-participant. For example, Dorothy Smith argues that: "There is no such thing as

non-participant observation. The detached observer is also at work in making what she observes. Her detachment is a specific constituent of its ongoing social organization. She stands in a determinate active relation to what goes on and that structures her interpretive work” (Smith 1990: 87-88). It could also be argued that watching a TV programme means being involved in the activities of other people involved in the research (Gatson, Zweerink 2004). For this reason, Junker (1960) describes this type of ethnographic work as “complete observer”, to take away the emphasis on the absence of participation.

Nevertheless, within participant observation there are different degrees of involvement – from passive observation (Spradley 1980: 59), which means that the researcher is present in the field, but does not interact with anybody. This normally applies to observation in public places and implies fact that the research position is covert: none of the social actors in the field knows her real identity, or even that she is researching. In this case the ethical problem of revealing the research objectives is less evident, since the researcher is noting the activities being performed in a public place. Junker (1960) defines the researcher involved in this type of ethnography as “observer as participant”. The situation changes if the researcher participates in the activities of the group but decides to remain covert. Moderate participation (Spradley 1980: 60) is described as where the researcher tries to balance observation and participation, while active participation (ibidem: 60) means the researcher purposely seeks to participate in the activities of the group, and to be not only accepted but also to adopt the same cultural behaviour. These last two types are referred to by Junker as “participant as observer”. Finally, complete participation (ibidem: 61) defines that type of ethnography where the researcher participates in a field in which she was formerly a participant before entering as a scientist. In line with Spradely, Junker also defines this “complete participant”: perhaps the most difficult type of observation since “the more you know about a situation as an ordinary participant, the more difficult it is to study it as an ethnographer” (ibidem: 61).

Such deep participation in the research object, in which the distance between scientific subject and object is completely eliminated, represents the opposing approach to research with respect to the detachment proposed by the scientific method. At the same time, it can be problematic for conducting research both for

ethical reasons and because of the difficulties involved in noting all the cultural aspects of the field. The product of ethnography is field notes, taken during observation and participation, which represent texts in which the researcher accurately describes the culture observed and her relation with the actors involved (Cardano 2004). Ethnographic notes constitute only a part of the empirical materials: the researcher can also rely on interactions with key informants, and interviews with selected subjects, which then require analysis for the cultural universe of meaning to emerge.

5.1.1.1 Digital ethnography

A particular type of ethnographic observation developed in more recent non-standard research is the so-called digital ethnography⁵⁸ (Murthy 2008; Gatson, Zweerink 2004; Gatson 2011). The development of digital ethnography is part of the wider changes to research methods wrought by the introduction of Information and Communication Technology not only in the everyday lives of individuals (ICT as a research object) but also in the everyday performance of science (ICT as a research tool). In this thesis, the role played by the internet can be traced at three levels: a) as the first source of information about the research object; b) as the environment where the analysed practice is performed; c) as the tool used to conduct specific types of interviews. The role of the internet in research is part of a wider debate involving all digital technologies, from mp3 audio recorders to the construction of digital bibliographies, from web-based surveys to the sampling of online communities. The changes brought by these instruments have been accompanied by a degree of concern

⁵⁸ It is important to underline the difference between digital ethnography and netnography. Although some studies emphasize the huge advantages of so-called “netnography” such claims are not consistent with sociological research conducted according to a non-standard approach to everyday life. Netnography is a not well defined method, that is used especially in marketing research and resembles a kind of participant observation, but which does not follow the guidelines specific to this method. Kozinets (2010) in particular, justifies use of a neologism rather than a modified definition of the term *ethnography*, since he considers that the traditional notion of a field site as a localized space is outdated and that ethnography can successfully be applied also to computer-mediated networks of relations. In my view, the “virtual space” is localized as the “real space”, and I prefer not to consider the “virtual” and the “real” as differentiated places, but rather to see them as two dimensions of the same complex reality. Consequently, I see little point in describing an ethnography that analyses the relations constructed using the world wide web, using different terminology.

about their application to the methodological field – a concern that undoubtedly is reasonable, but which should not stop the researcher from exploring use of ICT as a valuable research instrument. Every change should be analysed in order to avoid enthusiasms that transcend the basic methodological rules which guarantee the legitimacy of science. Nonetheless, it is evident that a researcher, being first of all a social agent, like any other social agent, is influenced by the changes affecting the society in which she is embedded and to which she contributes. Therefore, when Pedroni (2012) talks about a digital native researcher he is referring to the fact that researchers are people who use digital technologies in almost every aspect of their everyday lives. They were born using them and continue to use them in their professional lives. Some of these instruments offer advantages over traditional instruments (consider an audiocassette recorder compared to an mp3 recorder enabled by a usb connection) and their use should be encouraged although with serious consideration about their strengths and weaknesses. In addition, the study of certain research objects directly involves the use of certain methodological instruments: consider a researcher involved in research on an online community, it is quasi obvious that he will use the instruments the community uses, to conduct his research and, hence, blogs, chats, forums will figure in the research in a dual role. On the one hand, they are the environments where the community expresses its identity, hence they are research objects, on the other they are communication instruments, and are used as such.

Although traditional ethnography and digital ethnography are similar methods, their contexts are slightly different. The difference basically regards the type of researcher's involvement and the reason for labelling ethnography digital may be because ethnography in a digital field might be perceived as non-participant observation. As the distinction between participant and non-participant observation shows, it can be deduced that the idea of non-participation derives from the fact of not being *physically* in the field. It has been underlined how far the term non-participant has been criticized, and has been substituted by the more appropriate complete observer, but digital ethnographers argue that the so-called observation is already participation in the context of the web 2.0 environment. On this point, Gatson (2011: 250) argues that “the content of any particular subfield site within the

Internet may be unfamiliar, but the method of becoming an entrant will not be”, which means that the ways to access the internet and to explore websites are something that must be learnt from both researcher and user. This is knowledge that is shared by both parties and shows how far the researcher is already participating in the cultural activity of her subjects. Hence, although the context changes, the objects of digital ethnography and traditional ethnography are the same, that is, study of the behaviour and cultural norms of a group of people belonging to a community. The difference is that, in the former case, the community studied, is an online community. The first example of digital ethnography is Rheingold *The Virtual Community* (1994), where he coins the label “virtual community” to describe the “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships” (Rheingold 1994: 5). In fact, virtual communities are created in a space that inherently is more permeable and less physically bounded than an offline site (Gatson 2011). Furthermore, ethnographic observation poses more ethical issues than traditional observation, since the online environment is characterized by an ambiguous partly public and partly private character. It has been suggested that, because the online site is already inscribed text, a researcher moving between the lines of that text is behaving unethically since she is benefiting from subjects’ opinions without having sought their permission. This idea of a supposed higher ethical implication is rejected by Gatson who, after considering a number of ethical implications, in various of his published articles argues that: “the idea that the online field has special ethical boundaries is often taken for granted. However, when reading the ethics sections of just about any work presenting itself as ethnographic, we find the same sorts of boundary-establishing behaviours outlined; indeed they are not inherently different than those found in offline ethnographies” (Gatson 2011: 251).

Although the ethical implications related to digital ethnography may or may not be different from those related to traditional ethnography, it is important to note that the texts produced on the internet are not identical. Only practice makes it possible to draw up specific ethical guidelines for researchers related to what is allowed and

what is forbidden on the web⁵⁹. For example, although in face-to-face ethnographic relations the researcher's identity can be distorted (i.e. she lies about some personal information), the level of anonymity achieved in computer-mediated-communication is much more extreme (Manzato, Soncini 2004). In digital ethnography, it is ethical to ask permission to use empirical material; similarly, in a public forum or other environment where texts are shared, the researcher must seek permission to use material.

5.1.2 Biographic interview

“interviewing is a paramount part of sociology, because interviewing is interaction and sociology is the study of interaction”.

(Fontana, Frey 1994: 361)

Among the methods used by non-standard research, interviews are one of the most efficient when the researcher's aim is to construct empirical evidences based on subjects' accounts. It is important to note that the term “interview” is used to describe different types of communicative situations, which can be distinguished according to three dimensions: directivity, standardization and structure (Bichi 2002).

Directivity usually refers to the possibility allowed to the researcher to determine the content of the interview; in other words, the interviewee is not free to choose the content of her answers (ibidem: 20). For instance, a closed questionnaire (an interview instrument in standard research) has the highest degree of directivity: the interviewee can select only among (usually one of) the answers proposed by the interviewer. At the same time, a questionnaire has the highest level of standardization, since the questions and their order are fixed for all interviewees. Standardization measures the homogeneity in the order and presentation of the questions/stimuli (ibidem). How far an interview is structured is a dimension that refers to the interview scheme. A structured interview is an interview that adheres to

⁵⁹ Ethical decision-making and Internet research (2002); Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research. Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee (Version 2.0) (2012); Ethical Electronic Research Guidelines (1997).

a very detailed and precise interview scheme (ibidem)⁶⁰, or interrogative instrument used to conduct the interview, that is, the operative grid that contains the list of questions, stimuli or themes to be presented to the interviewees (ibidem: 19). In semi-structured and biographical interviews, the levels of directivity and standardization are very low, but while the former is less structured, the latter is highly structured.

In general, both interview modes seek to collect a narrative from the interviewee, but the semi-structured interview uses a list of questions, presented in a predetermined order, which is fixed for all interviews, while the subject is free to answer as she prefers/ to voice an opinion.

The instrument used in this thesis research is the biographic interview; its main characteristics and limits are discussed below. Rita Bichi (2002) underlines that the term “biographic interview” describes a type of interview that has been variously labelled, depending which aspect the researcher wants to highlight. Hence, there are methodological descriptions of research claiming to use in-depth interviews, hermeneutic interviews, narrative enquiry, non-standard interviews, non-structured interviews, qualitative interviews, free interviews, etc. (ibidem: 25). Choice of the label biographic interview, denotes the intention to focus on the narrative character of the interview.

The technique derives from a theoretical scientific discourse which, as already discussed, considers reality as a social construction, a product of the interaction between individuals. The aim of the biographic interview is to develop an interpretative model able to explain and comprehend social action, change, and the process of production and reproduction of the social world (Bichi 2002: 48). The researcher seeking to grasp the meaning social actors attach to their actions and behaviours, can directly ask those actors to describe those meaning: this creates a particular situation, the “interview situation”. What is particular about it is that it defines a communicative moment where a special “pact” (Lejeune 1979) is established between interviewer and interviewee. According to this pact, the

⁶⁰ It should be noted that some authors use the label “structured interview” to refer to standardized interviews (Fontana, Frey 1994). These authors generally do not focus on the type of interview scheme.

interviewee agrees to tell the story of a part of her life (life account) or her entire life (life story) (Bertaux 1998), trying to be as honest and precise as possible. It implies that the interviewee trusts that the information collected by the interviewer will be anonymous when it is shared with the scientific community, and that the interviewer can trust in the interviewee's honesty. Nevertheless, an account is always a reinterpretation of a life experience: it is the product of the subject's reflection upon her activities, and the meaning so constructed can change each time the reflection process is repeated. This means that an interviewee's account cannot be judged to be right or wrong, the researcher should not be concerned about the authenticity of its content.

The pact between interviewer and interviewee implies even more. The interview is based on understanding what the other is saying, without processing the content of the interviewee's account through the researcher's pre-conceived notions of issues. Hence, the interviewee trusts in the interviewer's ability to listen and to suspend any form of the judgement that usually applies to everyday life conversation⁶¹. It is fundamental that the researcher suspends her personal judgement over an issue in order really to understand the nature of the research object. During the interview situation the interviewee must be considered the carrier of specific knowledge about the *reality* she has experienced: her point of view is the object of research and the way she decides to construct it, is part of this object.

The aim of the interviewer then, is to let the universe of the interviewee emerge from her account, in the most natural way possible. In other words, although the interview scheme used in biographic interviews has a rich and detailed structure, the subject's account must be as free flowing as possible. The researcher should avoid direct questions and should rather guide the conversation by asking the interviewee to explain in more detail what she relates in her account. Thus, it is crucial that, during an interview, the researcher must both listen and take careful notes of identify key words and phrases in the interviewee's account in order to be able to refer specifically when posing her questions.

⁶¹ This type of interview is commonly used in research into sensitive delicate issues, e.g. prostitution, drug addiction, uncommon diseases and other diffuse social stigma. Not only must the interviewee, in accepting the interview situation, be confident of preservation of anonymity, she must be assured of absence of judgement, otherwise the interview method will fail.

Allowing the meaning universe of the interviewee to emerge is far from straightforward. The problem is that, no matter how far removed researcher and subject are, on a semantic level, there will always be shared knowledge. Individuals construct reality together, thus, beyond each individual understanding of reality, there is a meaning individuals share to reach a successful understanding of each other, that is, a successful communication. However, the interviewer's aim is not achieving a successful level of communication, but instead understanding the other's meaning of action. Hence, the interviewer should always avoid the "taken for granted" in Schutz's (1979) sense. This applies both before and during the interview. Construction of the interview scheme is a crucial moment related to the interview, since it is the construction of a taken for granted structure, which will guide the entire interview. The more detailed the scheme, the more the researcher will be able to provoke the subject to be more specific about her meanings.

The product of biographic interviews is texts, that is, transcriptions of interview recordings. Non-standard researchers conceive analysis of those texts in at least five ways, according to Demazière and Dubar (1997). The three main approaches to interview analysis are explicative, restructuring and analytical. In the explicative approach, the words of the interviewee are used to confirm the theoretical assumptions: the researcher can produce a content analysis or a thematic analysis. The former implies thick description of the word content, the latter implies creation of a scheme of themes and subthemes according to which interviews can be categorized. The restructuring approach is typical of ethnomethodology and considers interviewees' words as already charged with social meanings. Therefore, the scope of the analysis is to let these meaning emerge. The analytical approach tries to reconstruct the universe of meaning of the interviewee. This approach seeks to overcome the shortcomings of the other two where researcher's categories may obfuscate interviewee's sense.

Finally, similar to the way that ICT has changed ways of conducting participant observation, it has been adopted also to facilitate non-standard interviews. In the e-research literature, the online interview is usually defined as a structured or semi-structured interview conducted in synchronous or asynchronous mode, involving one or more subjects. Depending on these characteristics, we could conduct chat

interviews with one subject, or with more than one subject, or online focus groups, one-to-one e-mail interviews, email-based group interviews, web-based group interviews (discussion forum, online Delphi) (Di Fraia, 2004). As Pedroni (2012) notes, face-to-face interviews conducted using the VoIP (voice over IP) system are not considered in this literature, although why not is not apparent. Considering the definition of a biographic interview (Bichi 2002), there are no elements of it that should prevent the researcher from interviewing the selected subjects using an instrument such as Skype. Use of these devices is part of that technological change that is interesting the research world and, as already mentioned, which must be thoroughly understood in order to benefit from the advantages they bring without risking sacrifice of scientific rigour. Di Fraia (2004: 13-20) specifies the strengths and weaknesses of online interviews; there is a need for others to contribute their own experience of interviews using VoIP, to construct a debate on how much these instruments effectively enhance social research. This research contributes in the debate by providing a detailed explanation of the experience the researcher developed in interviewing some participant with a VoIP device, as it is described in paragraph 5.2.3.

5.1.3 Problems and limits

Non-standard methods of social research give the researcher the advantage of exploring themes and phenomena which are beyond the scope of standard methods. It is important to note that their supposed higher quality does not put them in opposition to standard methods; rather they should be considered complementary ways to conduct research (Caselli 2005). Both approaches have strengths and weaknesses related to the particular research object the researcher wants to understand. Hence, if standard methods produce data which are easily generalized and processed through the use of statistics, there is a risk that reality will be distorted to the point of losing important nuances in the analysed phenomena. With regard to some specific research objectives, standard methods cannot give precise information about people's opinions or describe the mechanisms of the processes and practices.

Although non-standard methods can delve deeply into the meaning of reality, and without imposing any kind of distortion, they also have some serious limitations⁶².

5.1.3.1 Generalizability

Generalizability indicates the extent to which the findings of a research study can be applied to other settings. This data feature is usually connected to the type of sampling involved in the research. Hence, if the sample is derived from a statistical process, the data gathered for that sample will be generalizable. Probability sampling indicates that each element of a population has the same probability as any other element, to be sampled; or the known probability is different from zero (Caselli 2005). Probability sampling involves working on a complete list of the elements related to a population. In many cases, and in most non-standard research, these are not available. Non-standard research is based on non-statistical sampling techniques. The limitation of non-standard research, therefore, is that the results so obtained cannot be generalized to all the subjects in a population. The experience a subject relates in a biographic narrative, in interview, should be considered valid only for that specific subject because of her particular characteristics. Note that the objective of non-standard research is to develop an exploratory enquiry of an emergent phenomenon, not to generalize data with regard to a population. In any case, Yin (1989) suggests that these methods can be generalized, but to theoretical propositions rather than populations. In this sense, biographic interviews and ethnographic observations, do not “represent a sample, and the investigator’s goal is to expand and generalize theories (analytical generalization) and not to enumerate frequencies (statistical generalization)” (ibidem: 21).

This is reflected in the type of sampling non-standard research adopts: the representativeness achieved does not seek to be statistically consistent, but rather to achieve social representativeness (Bertaux 1998; Bichi 2002). Non-standard research uses different types of sampling techniques (Bichi 2002: 78-88), but all respond to

⁶² Daniele Nigris argues that, in general terms, standard methods can seize phenomena on the strength of a vocabulary, while non-standard methods create analytical categories starting from the items of that vocabulary (Nigris 2003: 43).

the criterion of case saturation (Bertaux 1998; Bichi 2002). Basically, this criterion presupposes that sampling should stop whenever the next case does not provide further information on the research object.

5.1.3.2 Validity

Strictly connected to the concept of generalizability, is the concept of validity, which refers to the extent to which data collection methods accurately measure what they were intended to measure (internal validity), and the extent to which research findings are really about what they profess to be about (external validity). This criterion has been strongly criticized (Kincheloe, McLaren 1994) by non-standard researchers since it refers to a positivist idea of rigor that hardly describes the nature of non-standard research; suggested alternative criteria include trustworthiness and anticipatory accommodation (ibidem: 151)⁶³. The major problem in non-standard research is the researcher bias, that is the confirmation of researcher's ideas through selective observation and selective recording of information (Johnson 1997), and the strategy adopted by non-standard researcher to transcend this limit is reflexivity. By engaging in a reflexive process, researchers can lower their bias, increasing the level of trustworthiness, which also include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln, Guba 1985). The latter can also be achieved by adopting different types of validity criteria.

For instance, non-standard researchers developed different type of validity based on alternative criteria. For example, Maxwell (1992) and Johnson (1997) suggested at least three alternative criteria, considering that "the most prevalent alternative is a realist conception of validity that see the validity of an account as inherent, not in the procedures used to produce and validate it, but in its relationship to those things it is intended to be an account *of*" (Maxwell 1992: 281). The criterion of descriptive validity, which refers to the accuracy in reporting descriptive information. This form

⁶³ Critical trustworthiness involves the credibility of portrayals of constructed realities, while anticipatory accommodation refers to the Piaget's notion of cognitive processing. It states that in everyday situations individuals do not construct generalization as the notion of external validity implies, hence "through their knowledge of a variety of comparable contexts, researchers begin to learn their similarities and differences – they learn from the comparison of different contexts" (Kincheloe, McLaren 1994: 152).

of validity may be achieved by producing thick description of what has been observed and by using investigator triangulation: as more than one perspective is adopted to record information about phenomena, the information collected acquire an higher level of validity. Another suggested criterion is the interpretative validity. In this case, the concept of validity refers to accuracy in reporting the meaning attached by participants to what is being studied. In other words, it refers to the researcher's capacity of portraying the inner worlds of participants. This can be mainly done by conducting in-depth – or biographic – interviews with subjects taking part to the research, and analysing the verbatim of interviewees. Finally, the criterion of theoretical validity may be applied. This is the degree to which the theoretical explanation developed by the researcher fits the data: if theory describes how a phenomenon works and why does it work, then empirical information should represents what the theory described. In order to meet with this criteria, researchers should engage in extended fieldwork or adopt theory triangulation (looking at the same research object from different theoretical perspectives).

Although internal and external validity, as intended in standard research, do not represent a non-standard research's objective, they can be still be achieved by adopting the criterion of anticipatory accommodation. This would not guarantee a population or ecological generalizability (Johnson 1997), but it allows for comparison of similar contexts.

5.1.3.3 Reliability

Reliability refers to the extent to which the data collection technique or techniques will yield consistent findings, or that similar observations could be made by other researchers and similar conclusions reached, or transparency in how sense has been made of the raw data.

In non-standard research, the majority of methods concentrate on gathering information about a precise phenomenon, at a precise moment in time, which means

that “the value of the case study is its uniqueness” (Janesick 1994: 216)⁶⁴. The concept of reliability, therefore, does not make much sense in this type of approach. Since reliability presupposes the idea of total transparency of the research, it is important that the researcher is clear about her work, and omits no research activity from the presentation of results. This is not to enable replication of the research, but to enable an understanding of where specific information comes from, and how it was obtained.

5.1.3.4 Ethical issues

a) Interview

There are several ethical problems associated with interviews unless they are conducted in strict accordance with the basic norms outlined above. The first of these is related to how the researcher uses the information gathered from account narratives. The researcher has a precise duty to ensure anonymity of the interviewees even if this is not requested. Including names of people, places or events that could be used to identify the subject could be damaging.

In addition, since text analysis is a highly subjective process, it is important that the researcher does not mystify the texts collected. Also in standard research it is possible to mystify numbers, but in non-standard research is even more important that the selection of excerpts from interviewees’ narratives should be done with care to ensure that the sense of the complete text remains unaltered. Using a quote from a piece of conversation (oral or written) can mystify or change the implication of the text, unintentionally.

The interview pact is a crucial component of the interview situation and it includes providing the interviewee with the most accurate information on the research process. Interviews are normally recorded in order not to lose a single word or nuance; the recordings are then transcribed to produce texts, but this should be the

⁶⁴ Janesick (1994) argues that there is a real *methodolatry* in research, referring to the fact that the positivist triad works as a hegemonic force within the field of social research, imposing criteria which are not valid for assessing the quality of non-standard research: “Methodolatry is the slavish attachment and devotion to method that so often overtakes the discourse in the education and human services fields.” (ibidem: 215).

only use made of them. Recordings should not be shared with others – not even other members of the research team: the pact is between the subject and the researcher (interviewer), not the whole team. It is important also for the subject to be cognisant of the fact that the interview is being recorded and of the use that will be made of the resulting material. Although it is not possible to reveal the aims of the research before the interview (to avoid the subject being influenced)⁶⁵, it is important that she is aware at least of the general theme. This information is needed for the subject to be able to decide whether to take part in the interviews or not. At the end of the interview, the researchers must explain what she is doing, the purposes of the research, the customer (if any), the academic context (where the researcher works, etc.).

There is a final ethical aspect related to biographic interviews which refers to the scientific world, not the subject being interviewed. There is a substantial risk of underestimating the difficulties related to conducting an interview: this can be damaging not only to the results of the particular interview but also to the whole research and, ultimately, the credibility of the method adopted. Working with matrixes, numbers and statistics may be difficult and complex, and may seem more difficult than building an interview scheme. However, building an interview scheme and conducting a biographic interview can be as difficult as doing statistics. For example, if the interview scheme is not sufficiently precise, or if it is too detailed or not detailed enough, this can destroy the entire interview situation. Furthermore, while with number mistakes can usually be spotted comparatively easily, it is more difficult to understand whether an interview has been conducted correctly or incorrectly.

b) Digital ethnography

As already mentioned, ethnography and digital ethnography are extremely vulnerable to ethical issues. Doing ethnography means physical immersion in the reality of those subjects who produce and reproduce it through interactions. The physical presence of the researcher, even conducting covert observation, inevitably

⁶⁵ See reactivity in Caselli (2005: 65).

changes the construction of reality. This will not be a problem so long as it is taken into account by the researcher.

Covert observation would seem the most problematic type of ethnography with regard to ethical issues, and there are ethical issues related also to digital ethnography. The norms proposed by Spradley (1980) (consider informants first; safeguard informants' rights, interests and sensitivities; communicate research objectives; protect the privacy of informants; do not exploit informants; make reports available to informants) for traditional ethnography, apply also to digital ethnography.

The problems with digital ethnography, as already mentioned, are that the nature of the internet environment is ambiguous – public/private, and this environment makes huge amounts of information directly available to the researcher. The existing ethical guidelines developed to guide the researcher are the product of many researchers' efforts to report their personal experiences and share them with the scientific community. At a time when debate over the ethical principles related to digital ethnography is still open, it is important to adhere to the existing guidelines, based on others' experiences, and propose new ones resulting from developments of the method.

5.1.4 Triangulation

To cope with the limits discussed above, non-standard researchers usually adopt triangulation techniques. Triangulation is a heuristic research tool which guarantees a holistic view of the research setting. The term derives from the topographic technique used to locate a point using three other points, and in social science refers to the possibility of using different methods in the same research. Different non-standard methods may be used simultaneously or sequentially, provided that they are not mixed (Morse 1994). Also, standard methods and non-standard methods can be used to allow a better understanding of the phenomenon being analysed, which is in line with the idea that standard and non-standard research are complementary and not opposing. Denzin (1978), identifies four different levels of triangulation: data triangulation, use of different data sources in a study; investigator triangulation, use of several researchers; theory triangulation, use of multiple perspectives;

methodological triangulation, use of multiple methods. Janesick (1994) adds interdisciplinary triangulation, referring to the possibility of using perspectives from different disciplines.

5.2 Procedures

The second part of this chapter focuses on the description of the procedures applied to adopt methods: thus, the analysis of the mapping process applied at the beginning of the research, the selection of the analysed cases, the process of digital ethnography, the process of interviewing, and the process of analysis. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the limits and the problems encountered during research as those particular methods were applied. Hence, the chapter proposes a thick description – in order to guarantee descriptive validity – of the cases studied by analysing field notes written in the first phase of moderate participation, the phase where the researcher did not interact with participants, yet. The analysis of the second part of digital ethnography – active participation, and the analysis of the information collected through biographic interviews are the subject of Chapter 6 and 7, where descriptive and analytical themes are discussed.

5.2.1 Case study selection

The first step in the research was digital mapping to search for cases of online barter practice. The mapping process resulted in a list of 19 websites from which three cases have been selected. Table 1 presents the list of cases revealed by the mapping⁶⁶.

The mapping procedure shows whether websites were active or not active, that is, registering no signs of exchanges among members. This demonstrates positive and negative aspects of the web: on the one hand it is not reliable for producing a consistent mapping of existing practice since it finds non-active websites which are containers of abandoned experiments. On the other hand, the internet represents a

⁶⁶ Which was conducted in September 2012.

valuable archive of information, allowing partial historical reconstructions. The “skeleton” information provided by the web signal the direction of some of the ongoing societal changes.

The initial plan was to contact each website to determine its origins and the causes of its success or failure. However, this proved impossible because some sites were completely abandoned and did not respond to contact requests.

The three cases selected from the list of these websites have specific characteristics. Zerorelativo is the oldest and most populated website in the Italian context. Reoose represents a particular case of barter practice. It is a relatively young website (launched September 2011) and hosts a particular barter modality, described by its creators as “asynchronous barter”. The term emphasizes the temporal aspect of this practice, where the time lapse of exchanges is extended through the use of a credit system. The third case, Ebarty, is an important example in the Italian context in relation to number of users, and hybrid barter modality combining pure exchange with a credit system.

	Website	Internet address		Website	Internet address
1	Baratto Facile	http://www.barattofacile.com	11	Persoperperso	http://www.persoperperso.com
2	Baratto online	http://www.baratto-online.com	12	Reoose	http://www.reoose.com
3	Brattaopoli	http://www.barattopoli.com	13	Riciklo	http://www.riciklo.com
4	Cianfrusoteca	http://www.cianfrusoteca.org	14	Scambioo	http://www.scambioo.it
5	Coseinutili	http://www.coseinutili.it	15	Soloscambio	http://www.soloscambio.it
6	Dropis	http://www.dropis.com	16	Swapclubitalia	http://www.swapclub.it
7	e-barty	http://www.e-barty.it	17	Swoppydo	http://www.swoppydo.com
8	Ideasharing	http://www.idea-sharing.it	18	Yourec	http://www.yourec.it
9	Permute	http://www.permute.it	19	Zerorelativo	http://www.zerorelativo.it
10	Permutonline	http://www.permutonline.it			

Table 1 – List of online barter websites

5.2.2 Process of digital ethnography

Ethnographic observation was conducted over a period of five months. The first month was spent on observation of each website with no involvement of the researcher in the barter activity, in order to gather data on the functioning of the practice and the characteristics of the specific modalities proposed by the websites.

In the succeeding months, the researcher became directly involved, moving from pure observer to active participation or participant as observer.

In the registration phase, the researcher created a profile on each of the websites (three profiles) using her real name and giving personal information (age, gender, address, email address, telephone number, job). She uploaded a number of objects on each site in order to get in contact with other users.

Starting with Zerorelativo, the researcher proposed to users who contacted her for an exchange to exchange the object for an interview, that is, for an amount of time. In the participation period, she also adopted the position of someone looking for an object, and embarked on the negotiation phase of offering an object or trying to satisfy another's request. However, she requested interviews only from users who asked for her objects. The researcher then moved to exchanging objects for objects, because of a technical problem encountered during the observation phase (see paragraph 5.2.5). This way of exchanging goods and getting in contact with users conforms to the participation experienced in the second case and, therefore, was preferable to the first way adopted: this created in fact a certain homogeneity in ethnography. During this period, she observed the debate in the website's dedicated space, which is not a proper forum, but allows users to address questions to staff members and comment on their answers or the comments of other users.

On Reoose, the deals are different and objects are exchanged for credits, so that the researcher could not propose the same deal proposed in the previous case. The researcher exchanged a number of objects for credits which subsequently were used to acquire other objects and make contact with other barterers. This digital ethnography did not allow for participation in public debates since, although there is a blog connected to the website, it is not frequented by users. Webmasters post news and comments which usually do not provoke any responses, hence, there is no public debate on this site. However, during participant observation on the E-barty website, the researcher had the opportunity to observe and participate in a proper public forum. She created her profile and exchanged objects as on the other two websites, but was also able to collect opinions from public debates in the online forum which is split into thematic discussion groups: "the e-barty sitting room", "wish list", "problems with e-barty", "black list", "communication", "the barter world", "collecting corner".

In addition to observing conversations and debates developed on the public forum, the researcher intervened in discussions, presenting herself as researcher and starting a debate on barter. The materials thus collected, both conversations between users and comments to the researcher's post, are used to analyse barter practice.

In all three cases, the participant observation was covert, during performance of an activity, such as negotiation and exchange, and users were not aware of the researcher's profession. Her identity was made explicit when users were asked to take part in the interviews. All subjects contacted for exchanged were asked to participate in the research, therefore all subjects who got in contact with the researcher were informed about her identity⁶⁷.

In order to conduct the participant observation, the researcher had to carefully select objects to exchange, according to some precise criteria. Exchange objects undoubtedly constituted the medium through which contacts were established and which, conversely, mediated the relation between subjects and researcher. Hence, objects could define the type of barterer the researcher could approach, that is, the type of experience she could collect. In this sense, each object refers to a particular universe of consumers which may or may not intersect with other universes of consumers. For example, it is likely that any kind of broken electronic object will attract a certain type of user who, at the same time, will not be interested in, say, baby clothes. This does not mean that there is no-one interested in both electronic objects and baby clothes, but it was highly probable that each of these items will attract a certain category, partially intersecting with other categories. As well as finding people interested in only one item type during the ethnography the researcher could have found:

- A. users interested in both electronic objects and baby clothes;
- B. users interested in both jewellery and electronic objects;
- C. users interested in both jewellery and baby clothes;
- D. users interested in jewellery, baby clothes and electronic objects.

⁶⁷ It must be noted that not all subjects contacted actually accepted to take the interview.

It was important for the researcher to be aware that the choice of a particular object might preclude contact with subjects whose experience might consistently diverge from the experience of others. The researcher reflected on the identities that objects were communicating and, on this basis, decided to include objects that seemed to be related to gender, age, social position. For this reason she offered: men's clothes, toys for young children, electronic materials, books in varying narrative styles, furniture, kitchen appliances, etc.⁶⁸.

Each object proposed attracted requests from a number of users. A list of criteria was developed to decide with whom to engage in a barter negotiation. While users normally embark on an exchange on the basis of specific criteria (discussed in Chapter 6), the researcher was interested in users with extended experience of barter, evidenced by the number of concluded exchanges and other criteria which are discussed in next section. It should be noted, that although there are differences in the motives for researcher's selection and other users' selections, the experience was not distorted since the practice was conducted in the same way as other barterers.

5.2.3 Process of interviewing

Participating in barter activity on the website allowed the researcher to make contact with users. Initially, the researcher decided to propose an object exchanged for one hour's interview time. This was consistent not only with the idea of overt participant observation from the moment of the initial contact, but was consistent also with the idea of exchange which is fundamental to the biographic interview. As explained in the first part of this chapter, a biographic interview is based on a pact between interviewer and interviewee, which implies that each trusts the other – for different reasons. This reciprocal trust works according to rules of exchange, and could be defined as a trust exchange. The subject's account is rendered to the

⁶⁸ The objects exchanged were: an incense holder; a phone charger; a kitchen aid; a broken Hoover; several items of men's and women's clothing (teeshirts, tops, coat, shoes, sandals, shirts, sweaters, belts); three bags; a backpack; five books (academic and narrative literature); two plants (mint and lemon balm); home-cultivated rosemary and sage; kefir; two face creams; shampoo and bath foam; climbing frame; two pairs of earrings, a bracelet and an anklet; a pair of cotton sheets; some ornaments; two items of baby clothing; a toy for little children; some DVDs; three metal boxes; some candles; two phones.

researcher as a kind of gift, which means that the interview pact is an agreement that leaves the researcher richer in information and the subject apparently emptied of her profound feelings and opinions. It could be argued that, in this situation, the subject benefits from the occasion offered by the interview. Indeed, subjects gain from experimenting with a guided inner reflection, which usually leaves them satisfied. Nevertheless, the major gainer from the pact would appear to the researcher. For this reason, providing an object that the subject desired and chose among those available, seemed a good way to balance the relation and to achieve some sort of equality in the positions of the two parties. One of the problems that researchers can encounter is failure to gain an interviewee's trust because the cultural distance between the two is perceived to be a barrier. The approach of providing an object that the subject was keen to acquire reduces this distance and, from the outset, generates confidence implied by simultaneous participation in the same activity.

In the second phase of the participant observation, contact between researcher and users was established with covert position. The researcher acted like any other user, proposing objects and responding to requests. After completion of the first exchange, the researcher established private communication with the user. Starting from this private communication, the researcher revealed her position, asked for an interview and explained the purposes of the research, which was described as exploratory research on the emergent practice of online barter. She gave details about the academic context of her PhD research and provided information on the use that would be made of the material collected. The E-barty website allowed the sending of private message even before making contact through an exchange; some highly experienced barterers were contacted in this way.

As already mentioned, in order to decide who to negotiate with, some criteria were established based on the available information. The number of previous exchanges was the first criterion, allowing contact with the most experienced barterers on each of the three websites. Geographical location was another criterion. Although not statistically representative, which would be typical of standard research, the researcher selected people from different parts of Italy since the ethnographic observation revealed substantial variety in geographical origins of barterers. Therefore, the sample includes subjects from the north, south and centre of Italy. The

third criterion was gender: it was evident that most users were female. Thus, as a minority group, the opinions of male barterers was of particular interest. Since other variables were unknown, these three criteria were used to guide subject selection; Table 3 shows the final composition of the sample, together with other socio-demographic variables that emerged during the interviews. The interview scheme developed to conduct the interviews focused mainly on the experience of the subject with barter practice, the motivations for engagement in it, and the subject's attitude to consumption. The researcher also contacted and interviewed the three webmasters. The interview scheme used for webmasters was focused more on the history of the website and its functioning, and the relations between the website's administration and users.

A total of 22 biographic interviews was conducted using different techniques, in order to cope with the national dimension of the sample. Subjects who were geographically proximate to the researcher were interviewed face-to-face; others – spread over the Italian territory – were interviewed using VoIP devices.

As the literature on VoIP interviews is scarce, an analysis of benefits and limits to the use of this medium can be interesting. Some undeniable advantages of conducting interviews using Skype (the VoIP chosen in this research project) were⁶⁹: lack of travel costs which allowed contact with even the most isolated subjects; reduction in the time needed to arrange a meeting, and increased time available to arrange the interview (subjects were happy to be interviewed in the evening or the daytime), and no necessity to arrange a formal venue for the interview. It allowed subjects with very busy schedules to participate in the interview at a time that suited them. Although interviewer and interviewee can see one another's faces, part of image field is outside the range of the camera. Thus, the researcher was able to take notes without the interviewee noticing this. At the same time, with a good connection, the non-verbal communication absent in online interviews or telephone interviews, was preserved. The subjects were at ease in the environment they chose for the interview. However, VoIP has some limits. The first is related to the digital divide in Italy which is not an irrelevant problem. Large parts of the Italian population do not

⁶⁹ VoIP interviews share many of the strengths and weaknesses of other online interviews as mentioned by Di Fraia (2004).

have an internet connection⁷⁰. However, for the present research this problem did not arise since the research object was an online community, therefore, each subject necessarily had access to an internet connection. VoIP interviews also required a certain level of digital literacy. Although Skype presents a highly user-friendly configuration, it still needs to be downloaded and installed on computer. Also, if from one side the subject can choose the place she prefers to take the interview, on the other the researcher has less possibility of controlling that environment. The subject can be distracted from the interview by looking at emails or surfing the web while responding to questions. Finally, this kind of interview depends strictly on technology; if the quality of the connection is poor, bits of conversation may be lost, or the whole communication seriously compromised if distortion is continuous.

Overall, barterers on Zerorelativo proved to be more available than E-barty users, and much more available than Reoose barterers. In this last case, the low level of experience played an important role. While Zerorealtivo and E-barty have been operating for much longer and there is a solid experience of exchanging (some users bartered on both websites), Reoose's users only experienced bartering in that website.

⁷⁰ The value of this index is about 4% (almost 2,300 citizens). See, <http://goo.gl/TqmQLt>.

Code ⁷¹	Age	City	Gender	Degree	Occupation	Interview modality	Exchange	Website
Re_24m	24	Milan	M	High school	Supermarket employee	Face-to-face	138	reoose
Eb_36f	36	Ascoli Piceno	F	PhD	High school teacher	Skype	252	e-barty
Re_29m	29	Taranto	M	High school	Video editor (irregular)	Skype	226	reoose
Zr_33m	33	Milan	M	High school	Informatics consultant	Face-to-face	-	zr
Zr_35f	35	Rome	F	High school	Shop assistant	Chat	142	zr
Zr_33f	33	Padua	F	M.A.	Consultant for financial training; graphology teacher	Skype	145	zr
Zr_49f	49	Milan	F	PhD	Irregular (biologist)	Face-to-face	553	zr
Eb_33f	33	Rimini	F	High school	Employee	Skype	349	e-barty
Zr_37f	37	Cosenza	F	M.A.	Elementary school teacher	Skype	996	zr
Zr_46m	46	Milan	M	M.A.	Biologist (hospital)	Face-to-face	59	zr
Zr_42f	42	Lucca	F	High school	Cleaning lady	Skype	425	zr
Zr_54f	54	Milan	F	M.A.	High school teacher	Face-to-face	497	zr
Zr_29f	29	Milan	F	M.A.	Communication consultant in ONG sector	Face-to-face	646	zr
Eb_53f	53	Livorno	F	High school	Farm owner; B&B owner	Skype	202	e-barty
Zr_30f	30	Bergamo	F	M.A.	Communication consultant	Face-to-face	82	Zr
Zr_51f	51	Varese	F	Professional	Nurse	Face-to-face	1186	zr
Re_47f	47	Rome	F	High school	Unemployed	Skype	165	reoose
Re_36f	36	Rome	F	M.A.	Journalist	Skype	12	reoose
Eb_35f	35	Como	F	High school	Employee	Face-to-face	216	e-barty
Key informants	43	Milan	M	M.A.	Social researcher	Face-to-face		Research company
Re_wm_40m	40	Milan	M	M.A.	Reoose webmaster; Marketing consultant	Face-to-face		Reoose
Zr_wm_39m	39	Pesaro	M	High school	ZR webmaster; restaurant owner	Skype		zr

Table 3 – Interview sample

⁷¹ Codes have been obtained by indicating the essential information of the subject: the website attended (Zr=Zerorelativo; Eb=e-barty; Re=Reoose), the age, and the gender.

5.2.4 Process of analysis

From the various ways to analyse the content of empirical material, analysis by themes and subthemes was chosen to address the main research question of how far barter can be considered a counter-hegemonic activity. For the purpose of analysis, excerpts were selected from the interviews to demonstrate how the subjects' accounts revealed the presence of specific themes or subthemes, and combined with ethnographic material collected through participation in public debate. Field notes were used to reconstruct the peculiarities of each case and to create a list of descriptive themes describing the barter practice. The list of themes and subthemes was transposed into a list of codes that were fed into the text analysis software programme, Dedoose. All interview transcripts were coded.

The list of codes and sub-codes identified 18 dimensions. The motivations related to the approach to the barter practice, where three sub-codes were identified: economical needs, a desire to get in contact with other people, and the need to reduce the number of possessed objects. The code identifying the typology of objects exchanged was divided in sub-codes identifying the status of the object: new objects, used objects, services, and brand-name objects. Two separate sub-codes were introduced to differentiate between demanded objects and supplied objects. The code related to the value of objects, was articulated in sub-codes specifying the economical value, sentimental value, and use value. A code for gift was introduced, adding sub-codes related to the difference between gift and barter (when user donate and when they exchange), to the gift within the barter exchange, and a sub-code identifying reactions to receiving gift. Another code regarding the purpose of barter, with several sub-codes identifying the different purposes: acquiring useful objects, acquiring object in order to make presents to relatives and friends, having fun. A code identifying the way of exchanging: manual exchange, postal exchange, courier exchange, single exchange, and cumulative exchange. A code concerning the role of money in barter, hence the sub-codes related to the cost of shipment, cost of registration, money within the barter exchange, money as a unit of measure, gold in barter, credits in barter (with a different code for credits established by website or credits established by users). A code for the wish list issue. A code for misbehaviour

which contains specific sub-codes for each action: fraud, partial description of the objects, shipment of different object from what agreed, in spite feedback, making a deal, rude conversation. A code for good actions, instead, included these sub-codes: good communication and good description of the objects, availability. A code to identify those tool used to control the trustworthiness of users: public discussion forum, private communication between barterers, private communication between barterers and staff members, black list, feedback system (then specific sub-sub-codes were created for the feedback system like the giving/receiving a positive feedback, giving/receiving a negative feedback, giving/receiving an in spite feedback). A code for misbehaviours' punishment, sub-divided in punishment by staff members and by barterers. A code for barterer's reputation, with sub-codes for positive feedback percentage and barterer's language analysis. A code indicating the construction of exchanging network, therefore sub-codes identifying the exchange between the same barterers, exchange with new barterers, the creation of friendship networks, and the triangular exchange. A code identifying the time dimension in barter, with sub-codes related to the periodicity of barter the time of the exchange and the periodicity of access to website. A code describing the dimension of critical consumption in barter, with sub-codes related to wastes production, recycle, and consumerism. A code identifying the power in barter, with sub-codes regarding the power of administration, the power of users, the power of feedback. The coding process helped the emergence of those argumentations which are then used in the analytical chapter to answer to the main research question.

5.2.5 Problems and limits

As referred to in the first part of the chapter, digital (or even traditional) ethnography has some ethical implications, which can limit the research. The most problematic ethical concern is related to conducting covert participant observation. With regard to the digital ethnography conducted in this research the position of the researcher was partially covert during the three barter phases of acquaintance, negotiation and exchange. Partially relates to the fact that researcher's real name, age, geographical location, and email address were public data, and only her profession

was hidden. During a normal exchange between two non-researcher users, neither knows what is the other's job, and this is information irrelevant to the purpose of exchange. The scope of the exchange in this normal situation, is the exchange itself; while in the case of a researcher exchanging objects for research purposes, the focus is on collecting data. Nevertheless, it could be argued that the intention of a barterer is always unknown to the other party – it could be aimed at building a relationship, or just exchanging comments. Finally, bartering to collect data does not imply gathering personal data without permission and, ultimately, the intention of the researcher is participating in a process in order to understand it. This, in turn, means that the aim is to exchange.

The ethical aspect emerges if the researcher participates in public debate as a mere observer, and captures excerpts from conversations which she then uses as ethnographic material. Although the ambiguity of the public/private nature of the internet could be used to argue that those texts are public, it is also true that such texts are the intellectual product and property of a person and, as such, their intellectual property rights must be respected. In this case, ethically correct behaviour would require the research to ask permission to use the material, which was the solution pursued by the researcher. She captured some extracts from debates, and asked the participant for permission to use those texts, and opened a public post where she posted questions about barter, specifying that the responses would be used for research purposes.

One major ethical problem encountered in this research regarded the relations with the administration in a specific case. A dialogue began between the researcher and one staff member about the possibility of interviewing barterers on that particular website. The staff member denied the researcher from conducting interviews, claiming exclusivity of the research field and stating that he himself was conducting marketing research on barterers. He eventually denied all access to the website by deleting the researcher's profile. It should be underlined that up to that time the researcher had not engaged in any actions that could be construed as unethical, that is, she had not infringed the website's rules, and had caused no harm to the subjects involved in her research. The users interviewed were aware of the scope of the research, and had been guaranteed absolute anonymity according to

ethical guidelines. Although by deleting the researcher's profile the legality of their action could be questioned⁷², this event shows the level of power commanded by the technical administrator of a website. It demonstrates the vertical nature of the relationship, despite a supposed willingness to act as a collaborative organization.

In order to continue the work already started (the staff member stopped the researcher only after having noticed the barterer requests to exchange objects for interviews), the researcher infringed one rule of the website: she provided false information to register with a new account. Although this infringed the rules of the environment in which the researcher wanted to participate, in the context of ethnographic research it is considered as allowing a covert position. In certain sensitive contexts, researchers cannot provide personal data and are obliged to construct false identities in order to operate in that environment. According to ethical guidelines, this is acceptable as long as in a context where the researcher is collecting personal data (interviews), her role must be made explicit. In this case, the researcher approached the three phases of barter from a covert position (a false identity), but in private communication related to requesting an interview, she revealed her real identity and also made the subject aware of staff member's actions. All interviewees were informed that the researcher had registered with a false identity in order to continue the work already started and they were free to decide whether to be interviewed or not, in the light of the information provided by the researcher⁷³.

In this case, apart from the ethical guidelines guiding researchers' behaviour, the way that the subjects involved judged her actions was the best indication of their appropriateness and acceptability. Ethical guidelines exist to respond to the basic principle of not causing any kind of moral, psychological or physical hazard to the subjects involved in research. If they are provided with full information to allow them to judge whether or not they are exposed to risk, and their evaluation is positive, then the researcher can be confident of ethical correctness.

⁷² As described in the paragraph on this specific case, this website involved a registration fee of 18 euro which implies participation in a cultural association. In theory, excluding a member of a cultural association who had not broken any of the association's rules, should be decided by all the participants.

⁷³ It is important to note that every barterer accepted to take the interview.

5.3 Case study description

Although the three cases analyzed in the present work have specific characteristics resulting from peculiar biographies, that are exposed in the following paragraphs, they show a similar structure which appears to be like an hybrid product collecting features of e-commerce websites and social network sites. With no pretension of reconstructing neither the literature on e-commerce – which is now abundant – nor the literature on social network sites – which although being sensibly inferior to e-commerce literature is still too wide to be analyzed in the present work – what is here important to note, are few general characteristics of both typologies of online environment which can be found also in barter websites.

The interesting aspect of e-commerce, with regard to barter websites, is the way trust dimension is developed within the online environment. Trust is necessary for the success of economic transaction (Hirsch 1978), and in e-commerce websites there are many factors which can prevent trust to arise: the physical and temporal distance created between buyer and seller, the need of sending private data through a global network, and, above all, the purchasing of goods which are not “touchable” before payment, increase the perception of risk, which consequently must be bypassed by a good level of trust and trustworthiness circulating among users. Yet, it is important to distinguish between the two concepts – trust and trustworthiness – since, according to Brenkert (1998) they are referring to substantial different aspect of reality. Indeed, trust is a disposition of the subject to participate in risky situations and is dependent by the goodwill of the other part, while trustworthiness rises when a subject evaluate if the other part is worthy of trust or not.

In the online environment, trust is even a more complicated concept since it may be defined by two criteria: the trust that is established between vendor and consumer, which depends by transaction-specific uncertainty, and the trust that is established toward technology involved in the mediated exchange relation, which depends by a system-dependent uncertainty (Corritore et al. 2003). In order to create trust and trustworthiness within commercial exchange relations, an e-commerce website must adopt some technical systems, which in any case must be considered to be

trustworthy. An example of such system is the feedback systems, the most efficient model being the system developed by E-bay – considered the most trusted online company (Ponemon Institute and TRUSTe, 2009). Nonetheless, feedbacks are needed when transactions occur between non-institutional partners, hence in “business-to-business” or “business-to-consumer” e-commerce websites (like Amazon) the feedback system is not needed. When the transactions are performed among private users a different issue arises: indeed, there is the need to develop systems which can create trust when users must send private information and do not have any forms of control over the system. In this sense, Paypal is an example of a system which does not send private information to the vendor, so that the consumer is not concerned whether his personal (banking) data will be given to a third part. A barter website shares some characteristics with an e-commerce website. Users are involved in transactions and despite the absence of money, both parts involved are renouncing to some kind of value in order to get others. Barterers must trust one another and since they are related through computer-mediated-communication, trust becomes, also in this case, something which has to be produced. Hence, all three websites have a feedback system, like e-commerce websites.

Nevertheless, barter websites share also characteristics with what we would call a social network site. Providing a definition of what exactly a social network site is, may not be an easy task, since its form changed very rapidly over past years, and the debate about its characteristics is large and complex. Boyd and Ellison (boyd 2007; boyd, Ellison 2008, 2013) have in any case spotted some peculiar characteristics that are considered essential for a social network site to be defined as such. The last definition proposed by the two authors is:

A social network site is a networked communication platform in which participants 1) have uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-level data; 2) can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and 3) can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user-generated content provide by their connections on the site (boyd, Ellison 2013: 158)

The two authors underline how far the profile-centric nature of a SNS is what really distinguishes it from other form of online environment. Nonetheless, this

peculiar aspect of SNS has been changing in recent years, moving from a self-presentational space to “a portrait of an individual as an expression of action, a node in a series of groups, and a repository of self –and other – provided data.” (boyd, Ellison 2013: 154). Being a node in a network is a crucial aspect of SNS’s profiles and this has been possible since profiles are no longer the product of an individual construction but they are co-constructed together with other users. Far from being static pages displaying only their owner’s activity, profiles now show content provided also by groups users joined, content provided by other users and system provided contents. For this reason they are “more like news aggregators than they are like profile-based context” (ibidem: 155).

Following this definition, it can be stated that barter websites are profile-based sites in which users provide content and where there are also contents provided by other: each profile is in fact co-constructed by information provided by the user and by the comments given by other users, not only through the feedback system, but also through usual conversations which are often public. Nonetheless, it must be said that if this is true for E-barty and Zr, the same cannot be said for Reoose, which in fact emerges as the least similar to a SNS. Furthermore, E-barty manifests the closest structure to a SNS, since each profile reveals other users’ activity and each barterer has the possibility to join “I love it” pages, which are similar to what is define as “groups” in other SNSs. Another important characteristic of SNSs profiles is the fact of being connected to each other, hence showing a list of “friends”. Although this is not central in barter websites, in E-barty this is more evident since each profile shows the relation established between a user and other members of the online community, while in Zr this is only inferable looking at messages exchanged and in Reoose there is no evidence of relations at all. In any case, users in all three sites can create links either with users or with objects, which are kept private but create submerged relations. Hence, this aspect distinguish the structure of a barter website from the structure of a proper SNS, where interconnections are publicly shown. Another characteristic of SNS is the possibility of consuming, producing, and interacting with user-generated content. If it is true that users in a barter website cannot produce video, it is nonetheless true that they can post user-generated pictures (of objects) and user-generated texts (mainly description of objects, but also discussions). It can

be hence stated that barter websites are news aggregators, or better said, they are information aggregators, strongly resembling the structure of a SNS.

Finally, “SNSs have become a genre of social media that lowers barriers to communication, facilitates the display of identity information, and enables like minded individuals to easily discern their common ground, thus helping users cultivate socially relevant interactions” (boyd, Ellison 2013: 160). In this sense, barter websites share the same nature of SNS. A barter website works as a marketplace where people exchange objects, but objects are cultural carriers which can reveal much about a user identity. The simple fact of showing certain type of objects and asking for others, gives users the possibility of expressing tastes, interests, likes, etc, allowing them to construct relations with others showing similar cultural identity.

The nature of the barter practice is hence revealed also by the structure of the environment where the practice is performed. Being an hybrid between an e-commerce website and a SNS testify to the fact that, if from one side barter is about exchanging object, manifesting a pure commercial dimension, on the other it is also about creating social relations. If this was not to be a crucial characteristic, barter website would have not developed into SNS-like websites. Indeed, from the interviews taken with barter websites’ administrators, it emerged how the development of their sites have been frequently an answer to users’ needs which were mainly focused to improve the communicational and relational dimension of the platforms.

Case A

5.3.1 Zerorelativo: description of the website

The website was the idea of Paolo Severi, a man living in a small Italian town who was introduced to the internet only at the age of 28. His idea was born out of real experience and reflection on the real value of objects. When he was not able to find someone to take away a sofa for free, he uploaded it on the internet priced at 1 euro and was able to sell it. The internet not only allowed him to sell his sofa but also

to acquire a set of information not available in the mainstream media. He realized the huge potential of the internet for diffusing his ideas:

It is not utopian thinking that we can, I mean, we can influence people to have more critical and reasonable consumption habits. I believe internet has been so useful in this, since we were bombarded by ads in television before, internet helped to go deeper in some issues which of course were not made visible by traditional media, thus certainly it is an instrument which raises the awareness of people, as long as it is used correctly” (Zr_wm_39m).

He then considered web 2.0 as an environment able to create a sort of democratization of barter practice that otherwise would be confined to networks of people with the possibility of personal contact. The first version of his website was rudimentary, and did not resemble a social platform, but his idea to diffuse barter practice in order to stimulate people’s consciousness of the social problems related to mass consumption, persisted. His objective was to create an environment where people could construct a different type of relation:

exchanging objects without using money but exchanging them with other objects, exactly as we were doing with stickers when we were kids, creates a different relation between people which goes far behind the exchange itself, often the exchange is just the pretext to get in contact with other people who share similar values” (Zr_wm_39m).

In 2008, the Zerorelativo project received an economic contribution from Pesaro’s administrative district, which allowed Paolo to develop the technical aspects of his site, aided by a programmer friend who had the technical expertise to implement the functioning. This led to the realization of a proper social network where each member had his own profile, and could be recognized and could recognize other people. According to Paolo, the changes were dramatic since they added an important new element to the practice: a form of identity that was able to transform simple exchange of messages (as the site had initially allowed) into a proper form of exchange between individuals. As he stated:

Essentially it is easy to describe a barter between two persons when they are doing it physically, because we meet, you have an object, I have another one, we exchange them, etc., but indeed trying to let users interact between each others, trying to, how can I say it, give confidence through this mechanism, and trying to reach the point where users independently manage their exchanges has been a very hard work” (Zr_wm_39m).

Communication between the administration and users has always been informal and essential: not having the necessary technical knowledge and “marketing” experience, Paolo benefitted from dialogue with his users, who suggested changes that have since been applied to the website. Through interaction with his users, Paolo managed to overcome many technical problems that might have resulted in the website’s failure, thus, sharing responsibility for its good functioning directly with its users who were actively involved in the project through a dedicated discussion space. Participation in debate has always been a collaborative activity, with barter the main activity on the website. As a result, the technical improvements realized in order to make the website more “social”, were never aimed at constructing a proper “social network” in the sense of a place where people could exchange ideas and opinions, and build relations. The aim was always to create a system to exchange objects that allowed people to make contact with the objective only of bartering. Thus, the website has lacked several features since its beginnings, for example, an instant messaging service.

However, Paolo did not underestimate the communication dimension, and realized that having a community of participating subjects meant a lot of support in terms of website development. According to Paolo, this is the real value of the system that he has created, and is what differentiates it from other barter websites; it is a community with a common interest in promoting the practice of barter:

the world enclosed in Zerorelativo is a world made of critical consumption, conscious choices over a certain type of purchases, ethical consumptions and this is fundamental, from my point of view [other sites] are still immature [...] they did not grasp the strong motivations of why people barter, they did not understand this thing, that the action does not end there, there should actually be two things, the action and the world which lies beyond it, and these two things should grow at the same pace.” (Zr_wm_39m).

Consequently, other spaces, related to the website, have been created to enhance members' participation in debates, such as the ZR Blog, and its Facebook page, on which mostly news is posted regarding critical consumption initiatives or public debates on these themes. The relational dimension is considered so important by Paolo that, in his opinion, the lack of technical features able to guarantee a higher level of control over the exchanges is compensated for by the trust created among members: in other words, trust solves technical problems, and vice versa, this implies that there are technical features that could substitute for personal trust.

The website was set up as not for profit; it does not display any banners or commercial ads in order to respect the philosophy of the practice of not dealing in money. The website staff were volunteers, and any costs incurred were partly covered by spontaneous donations from registered users. However, in January 2013, a compulsory entry fee of 18 euro was imposed to cover technical costs (people still work voluntarily), and this decision was not welcomed by everyone. The result was a body of users migrated to another website⁷⁴. This highlights a fundamental characteristic of the website: although users' participation and interaction is encouraged, and users are usually called to express opinions over important changes to the website, the final decision is clearly down to the website's administration.

5.3.2 Technical aspects

a) Registration

In the registration phase the user is asked to give personal information such as a nickname, first name, last name, home address, e-mail address, mobile number. Once

⁷⁴ At the time of the interviews the website was still free of charge, but Paolo mentioned the possible future change. When the change was introduced, violent debate broke out in the spaces dedicated to members' interactions, demonstrating opposing opinions: on the one side, those who were sympathetic to a fee and felt that the service Zerorelativo offered was worth the money (which the majority considered not excessive), on the other side, those who thought that paying for a service based on the ethos of a non monetary system was a contradiction that was unacceptable. Many former members migrated to other websites (such as e-Barty), others kept their profiles open on Zerorelativo (the fee was chargeable only in the case of an exchange) in order to achieve higher visibility and increase the chances of an exchange, although this would be conducted on another website. Judging this debate is beyond the researcher's scope, but I would highlight this event as an example of the participation the website is able to promote through public debate conducted in the spaces made available by the website, and in private spaces such as email correspondence among users, and chats during exchanges. The analysis of the interviews shows that this is an example of how behaviour is socially regulated within this virtual community: before making a decision to stay and pay the fee, or to leave the website most users engaged in the debate attacking others' positions.

they have registered, a personal page is created which allows the user to manage her transactions with other members. It is used to upload the objects the person wants to exchange in a personal window that has public visibility. On the same page are displayed messages exchanged with other barterers (always publicly visible), and publications of items, and personal information (which are not publicly visible). The public profile shows only the nickname, geographical location and feedback percentage. The 18 euro registration fee is payable at the conclusion of the first exchange, or after publication of more than 20 items.

b) Objects upload

Once the profile page has been created, objects can be uploaded. When uploading an item the system requires certain information. It asks the user: to define a category from a given list⁷⁵, to assign the object, to supply a title describing the object (20 characters minimum), to provide an accurate description of the object (100 characters minimum and following specific guidelines), to provide up to four pictures of the object (again respecting some specific criteria, e.g. not images downloaded from the internet). The user must also indicate if she wants to donate or lend the object, or if she is willing to receive an exchange proposal for her object, and if she wants to exchange the object through one the following modalities: only manual exchange, only postal means, only courier means, or any of the three. An expiry date for the announcement must be set and then the object can immediately be published on the profile page, and on a common page (the home page) where all items published are visible. As soon as upload is completed, the system indicates users who have expressed a desire on their wish list to possess the particular object, in order to facilitate exchange.

c) Wish list

The wish list is a page in the personal profile, visible to everyone, on which the user indicates what objects she is searching for, what she needs, etc. There are no

⁷⁵ Music and movies – play – read – phone – computer – furniture – fashion – drive – photography and videotaping – travels and holidays – collection – kindergarten and baby – eat and drink – everything – sport – hygiene and beauty – school and office – leisure time and hobbies.

restrictions apart from no personal email addresses should be indicated, and users cannot ask for phone chargers, gold, or anything that represents a form of payment.

d) Exchanging objects

Once objects are uploaded and the wish list is filled in (these are not compulsory steps, but strongly recommended to initiate bartering) the exchange can proceed in two ways: a) the object uploaded is noted by another user who leaves a comment, requesting a deal. In this case, the offerer checks the other's page to look for something to exchange, and the negotiation begins. The negotiation might conclude with an agreement to exchange objects, or to exchange an object for a service, or may end in no agreement; b) categories can be searched for an object using the search engine and key words. If the desire object is identified, a comment is left and the negotiation begins.

If the result of the negotiation is positive the system supplies respective email addresses to allow the users to arrange the exchange according to their preferences, that is, a manual exchange (where individuals meet each other) or a postal/courier exchange.

e) Feedback system

After each exchange, each party can express her satisfaction, via the feedback system. The exchange can be judged positive, neutral or negative, and the user can add comments explaining the particular judgement. The feedback system, similar to other transaction websites that imply a degree of trust between users, is useful for determining the reliability of individuals: the percentage of positive comments is displayed in the public information on each user. This particular feedback system shows feedback only if both users release it⁷⁶, and on this website, only the last ten comments on a user appear in the user's personal profile. For example, if a user received negative feedback and an explanation of it, eleven or more exchanges ago, this will not be visible although the percentage of positive feedbacks will be modified (it might be 99% instead of 100%).

⁷⁶ This system is discussed later in the analysis; it generated much debate.

Case B

5.3.3 Reoose: description of the website

The website was set up by an Italian married couple, Luca Leoni and Irina Torgovitzkaja, who are both employed in marketing. Luca was always keen to find a different approach to marketing, which he criticizes as responsible for selling useless stuff to people, and creating added value for things which have little or no value. In his view, marketing should “use the money from branding to make useful things for people” (Re_wm_40m); for this reason he works in an alternative marketing company. His idea to transform marketing in something useful, and his concept of usefulness, underpinned the creation of the barter website: “my biggest objective is reoose begin effectively useful, that it would allow a zero costs life, that would avoid wastes, that it would be effective for families who just had a baby, that it would work for students” (Re_wm_40m).

The project of a barter website, as in the case of Zerorelativo, was based on a real experience. The couple wanted to get rid of a mattress, which had been given to them as a present, but was of no use to them. They tried advertising it on an e-commerce website at a low price, but did not find a buyer, they asked among friends and relatives if anyone was interested in it, but nobody was. They even tried to barter it, but with no success. This prompted a reflection on the short time between market and rubbish dump, that is, the short lifecycle of goods, and the ecological consequences, and also the limits of online barter.

They judged the pure barter system to be an anachronistic mechanism which did not apply a win-win strategy since the whole practice was very time consuming. On pure barter websites, according to Luca, the velocity of web 2.0 is lost. They were keen to develop a system that would be an alternative to the rubbish dump, and would also respond to people’s present day needs, a sort of “hybrid between e-bay, a classical barter website and a sale and purchase website” (Re_wm_40m). They were also interested in a service that dealt with objects that seem not to have a second-hand value, that is, find it difficult to re-enter the goods circuit, but which at the same

time are still functioning: “we always say, if you have an object you don’t use but which still has an economic value, try to sell it on e-bay, you are crazy if you put it on reoose!” (Re_wm_40m).

Their solution was to develop the credit system to respond to both needs: the credit system is designed to accelerate the pace of exchange and also to increase the number of exchanges. Objects are assigned a number of credits which supposedly represent the value of the object in the second hand market, weighted by a sort of “ecological footprint”, which Luca described thus:

for us an electric object is more polluting than a textile object, since researches demonstrate that circuits contain titanium, a series of metals which is difficult to dispose of and thus are highly polluting. Also the dimension of the object has an influence, for us an entire kitchen is more polluting than a single cabinet, thus paradoxically that kitchen perhaps has a greater economic value but it has a coefficient which lower the value due to the polluting and cumbersome potential [...] and also because who wants to sell an entire kitchen want to do it as fastest as possible thus lowering the price you speed up the process” (Re_wm_40m).

This system derives from the much criticized idea that the value of a good is determined by the brand and it tries to bypass this mechanism by attributing a standardized value to the object’s category rather than the particular object. In this sense, in this barter website there is no space for negotiation between barterers, or between subject and object since there is no consideration of a personal evaluation of the object. According to Luca, this is a positive characteristic of their website since:

the possibility of letting users decide the value of their objects is constrictive in my opinion [...] when you calculate the economic value, you count memories, affective value, troubles you encountered to buy it, the original value, so that the object become no more desirable for other people” (Re_wm_40m).

Although they claimed that the project was not initiated to make a profit, it earns money by selling credits. According to Luca, there are very few people who buy credits since, on the one hand the system gives users credits for certain actions (registration, connecting the Facebook profile with the website, inviting friends, etc.) and on the other hand it is rarely that someone does not have an abandoned object

that can be used for an exchange⁷⁷. However, he also said that there is a certain group, according to him people aged between 30 and 40, who find the barter system interesting, but do not have enough time to engage in the practice and, therefore, do purchase credits. This group is small in number compared to the important group of young people aged 15 to 25 (a quite wide age range) who seemed to constitute the critical group of active barterers, who are able to exploit their social networks and their digital competence to get free credits and start a flurry of exchanges⁷⁸.

Their marketing experience drove them to construct a friendly image for the website, and informal relations with their users. As marketing experts, they are aware of the power that web 2.0 technologies have brought to the public and have tried to create an environment where people feel comfortable, and can make suggestions. Users are encouraged to participate in some of the decision-making processes:

users wrote asking 'can we create a forum?'. Reouse's users created a forum where there are faq and where they answer to those user who need help [...] this is something a brand would pay for. Instead the community is so bonded to the project that it feels part of it and helps us [...] it is like having a 15.000 team of people giving suggestions, sometimes bullshits but you know, in this way you have a real direct dialogue" (Re_wm_40m).

At the same time, the website is trying to acquire a more institutional image and to involve some NGO's, which have contacted Luca about developing a credit donation project where users could decide whether to take their credits or donate them (or some of them) to an NGO, which could then exchange them for objects they need for their activities. The project has also attracted the interest of a semi-public company operating in the waste disposal sector in the urban area of Milan. Amsa S.p.a. contacted Luca because it believed that his project could help them to resolve their management of bulky waste. The company provides a door step collection of waste, but for very large objects, the user has to make an arrangement for it to be collected. According to Luca, Amsa says it receives 2,000-3,000 calls per day, which is difficult to manage. They see the possibility of alerting city dwellers to the

⁷⁷ I asked for real numbers, wondering what percentage of credits are bought and, thus, generated directly by the system and not the exchange process, but they did not give me numbers.

⁷⁸ It would have been interesting to consult their data and construct some statistics, but they did not provided me with the data.

possibility of this kind of alternative disposal before calling Amsa. Discussions began, but, Luca stated, that since the company was part state-owned, it was difficult to conclude arrangements and the project collapsed.

5.3.4 Technical aspects

a) Registration

Reoose involves initial registration which is completed in two steps. First, the user is asked to supply some basic information such as email address, a nickname and a password, but in this case there is the possibility of signing in directly with a Facebook profile. Completion of this first step is rewarded by 5 credits to the user's profile. Next, the user is asked for more detailed information such as first name and last name, data of birth, gender, address, job, and mobile number, which is rewarded by a further 5 credits. The user's personal page shows personal information that can be edited, and objects that have been acquired or are being offered. It is specified that for every user that signs on to the website at the user's recommendation, the reward is 2 credits. Not all the personal data are publicly visible; only nickname, geographical location and feedback percentage.

b) Object upload

When uploading an object the system asks for the category, subcategory and typology (i.e. furniture – office furniture – shelf)⁷⁹ and indication of the geographical area, that is, region, province and city. A title is required to briefly describe the object, no minimum number of characters, and no restrictions on the description that follows. Finally, the state of the object must be described (new or second hand) together with the desired exchange modality and a maximum of four pictures of the object. When the system uploads the object, it automatically calculates the corresponding number of credits. The user can accept the calculation, or decide to announce the object at 20% more or less. The announcement is not published until it

⁷⁹ Textiles and accessories – car, motor and boat accessories – furniture – kids – electronics and households – music, books and movies – non-working objects and collecting – gift and horrible objects – renovation – health and well-being – sport and leisure time – everything 1 credit.

has been approved by staff members, who send an email when the object is approved. When it has been approved the object appears in its category and in the user's personal profile; after publication it is visible on the Reoose main page. Zerorelativo has a homepage showing all published objects, while Reoose has a box showing only the last 20 objects published.

c) Exchanging objects

Once objects have been uploaded, the user has two choices: to search for objects she needs, or respond to requests. In the first case, the search engine and key words can be used, or search can be by category and/or region to find barterers who are nearby. Once an object is identified, the system allows an email to be sent directly to the other party – to ask for more information and shipment arrangements. If the parts both agree, then the user can “buy” the product by passing over the correct number of credits and paying for shipment. The website has a partnership with SDA, so the sender can arrangement shipment directly on the website. When a user receives an offer for her object, she can refuse it or accept it: in this latter case she will receive credits and will be responsible for arranging the shipment, which will be paid for by the receiver.

d) Credits

Each object is assigned a precise number of credits, depending on the category and whether it is new or used. The website provides a long list of existing categories and corresponding credits. For example, a pair of used shoes (no matter the brand, type or colour, etc.) is worth 40 credits, while a pair of new shoes (again regardless of brand etc.) is worth 80 credits. Users cannot decide for themselves the number of credits they want to attribute to their objects, they can only increase or decrease the predetermined number of credits by 20%.

e) Feedback system

Reoose has a feedback system that allows users to express their degree of satisfaction with their most recent exchange. This feedback is displayed as soon as the user releases it regardless of whether the other party has provided feedback. In

this case also, the percentage of positive comments is clearly visible in the user information.

Case C

5.3.5 E-barty: description of the website

The e-barty website is a sort of hybrid of pure barter and asynchronous barter and was chosen for analysis because of this unique characteristic. For this website, it was difficult to collect accounts from the webmaster or a staff member, hence it is impossible to reconstruct the entire history of the case. The system is much more formal than the previous two, working more like a big company than a family-owned business. The website image does not refer to a person, and there is no informal communication related to website functioning. Whoever wants to communicate with the administration must address an email to an anonymous email address.

The researcher emailed this address and received an answer from the product manager responsible for the marketing area of Edizioni Master S.p.a., who would only agree to a phone interview. The information gleaned from this interview allowed the researcher partially to reconstruct the history of the website, which is a second version of an older website called “suesue”, bought by the company in 2008. Edizioni Master is a publishing company which decided to expand its business to the internet, through the acquisition of a number of websites working in a thematic field that it considered to be of current interest. It was interested in acquiring a website dedicated to exchanging objects – *suesue* – which, at that time, was more like a forum for exchanging objects. Edizioni’s idea was to transform the website into a proper social networking site where objects would get major attention. The social dimension underlined by the product manager, was created through a profound reorganization of the website and an upgrade of its functions. It created a proper community of people who could not only exchange but also could share, comments and information, which explains the emphasis in the registration phase on personal information such as hobbies and interests. It also includes “I love it” pages, which are single-interest oriented pages where several users can share their passion for a

specific item/theme, similar to Facebook pages. Finally, the credit system was introduced to create a unit of value to measure things, not to persuade people to understand their exchanges as selling.

This website reveals a much more formal, clearly vertical, organization whose configuration, at the same time, allows for horizontal communication between barterers, who are able to share their opinions as well as their objects, in a horizontal participative environment. Its technical aspects show that the configuration of the website tends towards a proper social networking site.

5.3.6 Technical aspects

a) Registration

The registration phase requires personal information such as first name, last name, email address, username, gender, date of birth, home address, and a personal photograph. It asks for certain not compulsory information which reflects its view of barter practice: it is fact possible to indicate which objects best describe the user's personality, her passions, her hobbies and interests. Users can also indicate their desired objects, which it is hoped can be bartered for. Finally, there are questions asking for the user's Skype address, and how the subject was introduced to the website.

b) Profile

The personal profile is a complex page resembling a social networking page, where the user can check almost everything occurring on the website. It is possible to access a main window from this page, showing where all the activities on the website are recorded, such as item publications, exchanges between users, and ongoing discussions in the forum. The user can manage the publication of objects from the profile page, and also can modify them. This page features a message system, similar to an email address, from where all communications with other barterers are managed. The novelty of this profile page is that it provides plenty of space to show what other people are doing and allow the creation of a network of "friends" that

allows the user to follow what the people she likes are doing. A column on the right hand-side provides a list of those considered to be the top barterers.

c) Object uploads

To upload an object the system requires a title for the announcement (with no restriction on number of characters), the group and category to which the object belongs,⁸⁰ a description of the object and a tag to allow a search on key words to find the object. There is the possibility to upload a maximum of five pictures of the object, and space to declare its state (new, like new, used, incomplete, broken). There is also space to provide geographical coordinates indicating the city and province of origin, and an approximate value of the object in barts (the system specifies that 1 bart equals 1 euro) and the weight of the object. There is space to indicate specific objects that the user is searching for, and a box to indicate any other requests.

d) Exchanging objects

Although the system implies the use of credits or barts, it also works according to straight exchange of objects, according to the barterers' preferences. Unlike Reoose, this website does not provide an initial quantity of barts to start of the exchange; they must be acquired through an exchange or direct purchase using money.

This dual modality of operation allows a phase of negotiation because an exchange can result from agreement over the objects by the two parts, performed via a messaging system similar to email, but managed directly via the website (also, every message sent or received by this messaging system is copied to the email address indicated at registration). This allows the negotiation to be carried on through completely private communication, although public negotiation is not excluded since the website offers the possibility of publishing messages under each announcement.

⁸⁰ There is a long list of possible groups on this site including: clothing and accessories; art and antiques; audio, tv, and electronic objects; car, motorbike and scooter; beauty and health; home and furniture; home holiday; collecting; home made; movie and DVD; photography, video and optics; toys and modelling; real estate; informatics and tablets; book and magazines; music, CD and vinyl; free sample, discount and contests; watches and jewellery; services; sport and navigation; music instruments; phones and mobiles; videogames and consoles; wines and gastronomy.

e) Feedback system

On this website feedback is visible as soon as the user releases it, but unlike the previous website a barterer can provide two different types: one is real feedback including ranking the exchange as positive, negative or neutral, and providing a comment explaining the ranking. The other is feedback concerning the degree of satisfaction with two dimensions of the exchange: the communication that preceded the exchange during negotiation phase, and the textual description of the object. The first type of feedback is expressed as a percentage score, thus, each member has a percentage of positive feedback received, the second is expressed on a scale from 1 to 5 and on what they call the “Bartometer”. The first type of feedback is attributable, but the second is anonymous.

Chapter 6

The mechanisms of online barter

“You buy furniture. You tell yourself, this is the last sofa I will ever need in my life. Buy the sofa, then for a couple of years you’re satisfied that no matter what goes wrong, at least you’ve got your sofa issue handled. Then the right set of dishes. Then the perfect bed. The drapes. The rug. Then you’re trapped in your lovely nest, and the things you used to own, now they own you.”

(C. Palanhiuck, *Fight club*)

6.1 The emergence of key themes

The empirical data, collected through field notes, participant observation and biographic interviews, constitute a conspicuous amount of information to address the thesis research questions, and enable a better understanding of how far barter is a counter-hegemonic practice. It provides information on many facets of the online barter practice. Although their further exploration would be interesting (each of these dimensions could potentially constitute an individual research project) the focus of the present thesis is the counter-hegemonic practice of barter.

The challenge in analysing this material is to capture the information that is relevant to the main research question, and put aside those descriptions of actions or events that do not add to our understanding of the phenomenon. What initially might appear a complex stratification of discourses, meanings, feelings and attitudes, needs to be clarified and its import revealed.

The first step in the analysis of this information is an exploration of the collected texts in order to identify themes and subthemes that will constitute the structure of the analytical scheme that will be applied to produce a coherent answer to the main research question. Some themes will be more related to research objectives, others will refer to the descriptive dimensions of the practice, which nevertheless are necessary to capture the phenomenon in its entirety.

The analytical path towards answering the main research question is the subject of Chapter 7; in the present chapter the focus of attention is the development of those descriptive themes which demonstrate the peculiarities of the practice. Hence, Chapter 6 focuses first on the motives driving individuals to engage in the practice of barter. Next, it considers the ways in which exchanges are performed, explaining the difference between face-to-face or manual exchanges, and mediated (postal or courier) exchanges, and the mechanism of cumulative shipments. The misbehaviours and good behaviours related to both forms of exchange are analysed with a particular focus on the dimensions of objects, followed by an analysis of the mechanisms of control developed to contrast those misbehaviours and stimulate good practices. Among the instruments barter exploits, some allow for evaluation and some tend to promote exclusion: the former include the feedback system, the public forum and the wish list, the latter is the result of neglecting access to barter networks. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the time dimension.

Thick description of the specific dimensions of barter is crucial to understand the performance of the practice of online barter. Thick description is employed to shed light on the peculiar characteristics of a practice performed in a hybrid environment that is a mix between a social networking site and an e-commerce site. It considers those dimensions typical of the online environment, such as trust, online community, time, etc., in order to define and describe the phenomenon, but without pretending to provide an exhaustive analysis of these themes.

6.2 Motivations for engaging in barter

The empirical material gathered reveals important reasons and circumstances for why and how people engage in the online barter practice. First, for many barterers this is their first experience of an alternative modality of consumption. However, most interviewees had already shown an interest in alternative ways of consuming, especially those related to sensitive ecological and social issues such as reducing waste, reducing the costs of transportation, and exploitation of human labour. In

searching for solutions and alternatives, these interviewees had discovered online bartering. However, in a few cases, barter emerged 'out of the blue'.

Among the reasons cited as motives for engaging in online bartering, some subjects mentioned economic problems. Nevertheless, this is not the main motivation for exploring online barter, and even those who began bartering in order to save money – or to acquire what they could not acquire for money exchange – most soon realized that persistent bartering entails different motivations than mere economic ones:

I've been always bartering with my friends, without even calling it barter, I've always bartered. Then I wondered how I could acquire some things I needed without buying them, things my friends did not have. Because I collect stamps hence I needed stamps...so I searched the internet and I found few solutions before eventually discovering a barter website (Zr_51f)

Among the reasons why I started bartering it was because of the economical situation I was in, which was really pitiful, I did not have money, I had just changed job and this was also an idea to gain what I needed without spending money, exploiting the commodities I owned. The economical aspect is one of the aspect, than of course there is the social aspect, I wanted to get in contact with people who owned a vision of the world similar to mine (Zr_33m)

What generally emerged is a consistent difference between the first phases of the practice and later, more mature phases of bartering. Almost every barterer admitted experiencing an initial overwhelming drive to barter, followed by a more critical approach to exchanges: this normally happens when barterers realize how much the number of objects in their homes is increasing rather than decreasing, and begin to notice the shipment costs that inevitably weigh against the general benefits of the practice.

The other reasons referred to as motives for starting to barter online included the desire to get rid of certain objects, generally considered excess to current need, but too valuable from some points of view to just throw them away.

I started bartering since I had too many objects which I was not using anymore and I realized it was impossible to give to someone, indeed I did not have neither time nor chances to sell them, also

because they were not product, how can I say, which were sellable in a market, a street market (Re_24m)

I started in 2008 since I realized I had too much stuff I was not using, hence I searched on an internet searching engines if there was this possibility [to barter] (Eb_33f)

Another reason cited for online bartering was the desire to make contact with other people, to build a social network where opinions, interests and behaviours could be shared:

well, I started since I needed this word, I had many objects but above all I was so curious of knowing new people and understand how this thing worked. In the end I found this is such a friendly world! (Eb_36f)

The media are an important vehicle for spreading information about this practice, and testifying to the important role of the communication strategies employed by these sites, which are usually found by using search engines, such as Google, and searching on the word 'barter': "I approached barter because of curiosity. I red an article on a newspaper where they talked about these websites and I searched on the internet for Zeroreactivo" (Zr_29f). This means that in addition to a certified level of cultural capital (i.e. scholarly achievement) everyone involved in the online practice holds specific cultural capital related to use of the internet and familiarity with the online environment. These individuals are internet literate, are exposed to huge amounts of information of different types, not necessarily available in traditional media.

Although it might be assumed that barterers are sensitive to and interested in topics such as waste, pollution, alternative consumption, etc., interviews and participant observation notes revealed that this is not the case. Many subjects approach the practice with other objectives; however, what is important to note is that, through barter practice, these people soon achieved a level of awareness of money and the value of objects.

I approached barter because I was curious; I red an article on a newspaper, talking about these barter websites and I decide to visit Zerorelativo, and it immediately looked interesting to me. The barter idea was not new to me at all, and I was really surprised to find an article talking about it. I decided to

start bartering because I think our contemporary society has an unsustainable consumption model, hence bartering looked to me as a way to develop an alternative system within the contemporary society, without getting totally out of it (Zr_30f)

6.3 Exchange modalities: mediated exchange or direct exchange

6.3.1 Postal or courier shipments

Although barter practice does not involve money exchange, in the online practice money is involved due to the mediated nature of the exchange. Shipment costs become a burden and strongly influence the practice of online barter. These shipment costs involve two kinds of actors – postal services and courier services – both of which play a decisive role in the phenomenology of the practice.

Practically all barterers complained that postal prices had risen in the previous year from 6 euro to 9 euro, for up to 20 kg boxes. This might not seem a huge price increase, but for people ostensibly exchanging objects without involvement of money, they will be tolerated up to a certain point, in particular because most exchanges involve second hand objects which may not justify that economic cost. Some barterers said that sometimes they refrain from bartering and others were considering giving it up entirely because of the cost of shipment.

the issue of shipments...well, now bartering is always more difficult since at the beginning shipment costs were much lower, but then, I don't know, perhaps the market changed, hence there was a reduction in the number of exchanges since, using the postal services, which was just 7 euro before, now it is 10! (Re_29m)

recently I'm exchanging less, because of the cost of couriers and postal service, they are just unbearable! Postal services costs are crazy, hence I prefer to do cumulative exchanges with a person, I mean to exchange more things so to write off expenses (Eb_33f)

6.3.2 Cumulative shipments

One way to reduce shipment costs is to make cumulative shipments: this involves exchanges of multiple objects and shipping them all together. Such exchanges can sometimes be concluded in a few steps, involving short negotiations before mutual despatch of packages containing numerous objects, but often multiple negotiations take time. As shown by the barterers' accounts, negotiations can extend over weeks or even months. It was described thus: the mechanism starts when two barterers conclude a negotiation (exchanging one object for another) and then both agree to be unwilling to pay shipment costs for just one object. These objects are then put aside (not offered to anyone else), and the two parties continue to scrutinize one another's lists to select other items, until they are satisfied that their number justifies the cost of shipping the accumulated objects. This phase can last for few months, and can involve several objects. The interesting aspect of this type of exchange is that it creates strong bonds between the people who are exchanging, since it implies that each follows the other's page, commenting on objects, and exchanging comments on the respective pages, etc. As time passes and objects continue to be selected, the barterers learn about each other's tastes, and several interviewees admitted choosing objects for exchange based on their perception of the other's tastes, and offering those objects directly to that person instead of putting them into the barter circuit.

it might take one month, two months, three months, in order to reach the end of the negotiation. It goes in this way: a barterer sees an object I have and that she wants and even if in that moment I don't find anything, I say ok, I put the object aside then when she will publish something I like I will take it. So I put the object aside and the negotiation keeps going on. During this period we exchange comments and we learn each others' tastes, it's nice...you can even establish friendship in this way (Eb_36f)

This also implies a high level of trust, since the individual has to be sure that removing the object from the exchange circuit, will result in the object being exchanged with the same barterer, and will not deprive the offerer of other exchange opportunities. Barterers have to trust that the other will ship all the agreed objects; in this context, none of interviewees referred to negative experiences related to

cumulative shipment. It is rather in the negotiation phase that problems emerge: due to poor communication, forgetting about the cumulative shipping agreement, or, due to the passage of time between negotiation and exchange, the parties changing their minds. Barterers condemned such practices since if objects are removed from the exchange cycle, the barterer loses the possibility of exchange for something else. For this reason, cumulative shipments generally are only used by barterers who know one another.

normally we try to barter more than one object because shipment costs, and to ship just a t-shirt does not make sense! Hence, we try to, me together with other girls, I send even 25 objects in the same shipment, eh! So we save money and the box you receive is bigger, and cooler! But, clearly, you can do this only with persons who, who have an open mentality, a certain attitude to barter (Eb_36f)

It has been a so funny barter, with 5 girls, well, 5 ladies from Tuscany who got together, so I shipped just once for 5 and the 5 of them met, collecting all objects, and they shipped me a box with all their objects. When the box arrived it seemed Christmas to me! You know, when kids open Christmas' boxes and go "Hey, I did not remember I also asked for this! (Zr_33f)

It happens frequently that if I'm bartering with a person from Rome, I publish an announcement saying I'm negotiating with that person asking if there is someone who would like to join me. Otherwise, I search for other barterers in Rome to exchange with them. Then I search for 'courier barter', that is, people who have to travel from Milan to Rome and offer themselves to carry objects with them (Zr_54f)

6.3.3 Beyond cost: the crucial problems of time and trust

Post offices offer two shipment services: a more expensive, guaranteed, traceable shipment, and a cheaper service which does not guarantee delivery or offer insurance. If the value of the object(s) being shipped is small and their loss would not be a huge problem, barterers generally choose the cheaper service. In the case of more valuable objects barterers usually prefer to be able to trace their parcel. Postal services can be problematic for many barterers: sending by mail means physically going to the post office, waiting in (an often long) line, and handing over the box to the counter clerk. For the majority of people this is extremely difficult since post office opening time

usually coincide with office hours and lunch breaks often do not allow enough time. In many cases, too, the post office is far from home or office, thereby increasing the time needed to send a shipment.

For this reason, many barterers prefer courier services, whose presence on the web has proliferated in recent years. In 2013, there were 13⁸¹ web companies specialised in online shipments, offering the same services at roughly the same tariffs. A courier service collects and delivers the package directly to home or office address and all packages are traceable. The service can be booked for collection on a particular day; after collection the courier sends a message about shipment status. The main differences between these services (postal or courier) are price – couriers are often cheaper, and mode of despatch – either direct (involving going to a post office) or indirect (waiting for the courier pick up).

There are several more important implications based on the roles of these actors. As already mentioned, probably as a consequence of the rise in the price of postal services, the number of web couriers has increased allowing the internet user a choice among more than a dozen different companies, all of which offer a very similar service and similar conditions of service involving someone collecting the package from your home or workplace, and delivering it to the addressee. Apart from the graphics on their websites, which make them more or less user-friendly, there is little to choose between these companies; they do not compete on price or type of service, but only on customer trust. Shipping a box involves transporting it from one location to another, guaranteeing its delivery undamaged. This might seem obvious, but the interviewees' accounts show that it cannot be taken for granted in the case of postal services. Several interviewees complained that if a box is shipped by mail there is a possibility that it will not arrive or that it will be damaged or having some contents missing. The barterers say that the mail service introduces the possibility that contents might be stolen; in the case only of the traceable service, the post office

⁸¹ Apart from the best known TNT and DHL services, working on the Italian territory there are : spedireoggi.com, ioinvio.it (post office online service), spediamo.it, myship.it, spedirelowcost.it, spediscionline.it, spedire.com, spedireweb.it, spedireexpress.it, spediresubito.com, pakki.it.

will refund a part of the value (unrelated to the contents of the box), otherwise the parcel is classified as lost⁸²:

well, I can't say...see, a barterer sent me a box before Christmas, when it arrived it was open and something was missing, I made a list and the wine was missing, plus something else I do not remember, so I told her that the box was open! (Zr_42f)

exchanging on e-barty I did not receive some objects but I'm pretty sure that the postal service got them, in my area postal services stole a mountain of things, according to me I'm 90% sure that they shipped the objects and the postal service got them, I tell you! (Eb_35f)

Therefore, the fundamental difference between these two actors, post and courier services, is that were the latter to behave like the postal service, then the customer can easily choose a different web service. Thus, they compete on trust which is why barterers have complete trust in web couriers while being dubious about the postal services.

If the problem is about the quality of the service, why do barterers not just always choose the better service (couriers) and, thus, eliminate the problem? Also why is this of interest for the research question of this thesis?

First, for a box containing several small objects or a single object (a barterer may be shipping a tee-shirt or a book) the courier service is not convenient⁸³, since the cost of shipping the object may be higher than the cost of purchasing it new and saving both time and money. In this case, the barterer is forced to use one of the postal services. In addition, some people are not able to relegate a whole day to waiting for the courier's visit: those working from home with no set working hours or housewives, for example, may prefer to go to the post office at the time that suits them rather than waiting in for the courier, so a courier might not be the best option for everyone.

⁸² Postal service in Italy are supplied by a public company whose sole stakeholder is the State, hence it is forced to supply a universal service which resembles by and large a monopolistic service: this means that a private citizen does not have any other possibility of sending a mail which is not by the postal service supplied by PosteItaliane S.p.a. (this is the name of the company). The company has no incentive in improving its services due to a total lack of competition and basically it only partially assumes its responsibilities in case of bad service

⁸³ The raise in price cited before only concerns box but not normal mail: a well folded t-shirt can easily be shipped by normal mail.

well, sometimes I just go out, I mean, I could stay there waiting but since I saw that you have to wait for the courier, since they do not tell you at which hour he comes, and he have many delivers so you have to wait a lot, hence I do not want to have this obligation, if I need to ship I do it through postal service (Zr_49f)

you have to measure the box, call the courier, you need someone who is at home all day long, this is why usually I bring the box to my father's office, since there is always someone, but all that is time demanding (Zr_33f)

Choosing between a traceable shipment and a normal shipment will depend on the value of the object: if it is not worth much, normal shipment will be preferred since loss of the object does not represent huge damage. It is important to understand how barterers decide whether the value of the object is sufficient to justify traceable shipment or not. How barterers establish the value of the objects being exchanged is the subject of Chapter 7; here, we note how this dimension generates a struggle over shipment modalities.

Second, this aspect of online barter is interesting because choosing one service or the other changes the relation established between barterers. One of the most criticized misbehaviours in the experiences of barterers, is fraud and chicanery, that is, making an agreement following a negotiation, but not sending the agreed object/s. there are people who send bad stuff, they do not behave, others that do not even send the agreed object, and there are many cases of people not sending anything [...] you send your stuff and the other don't. There is a rule which states that who has less feedbacks send before the other, the other wait to receive the box and than send her box as well. This was done since during these years there have been many barterers who send first just to receive nothing back and, not surprisingly, the other barterer, often a new barterer, had disappeared (Zr_49f)

Once I exchanged with a very strange barterer, I send my box and she did not tell me anything about her shipment, then during two weeks she did not answer to my messages and I received nothing back from her. She really misbehaved! (Zr_33f)

there are people who stop communicating with you while you are waiting for their boxes, than they do not send the boxes, or there are persons who send really dirty stuff (Eb_36f)

Here the problem is establishing whether this is because of deliberate neglect by the sender (i.e. her bad faith) or the fault of the postal service (i.e. bad service). What all barterers stressed, was that such misbehaviour is related only to postal services not courier services, and that, in practice, there is no way to determine the origins of the problem – whether the individual or the company. This has two important consequences: on the one side, the issues of trustworthiness and trust, already affecting web-based relations, are reinforced by a third part represented by whichever service is responsible for the shipment. This is the external actor in the relation between two barterers. The barter relationship never involves only two users; there is also a “disturbing” element that plays a role in the situation. When barterers state that “you must put a lot of trust in barter” they are referring mainly to this dimension, and the fact that the online barter relation is mediated, not only in the negotiation phase when subjects cannot base their trust on a fully communicative individual, but also in the exchange phase when their trust shifts from the other barterer to the shipping company⁸⁴. So, the second important consequence directly derives from the first, which is that, since the third party (postal service) involved in the relation adopts bad behaviour, this allows one of the other parts (or even both parts) of the exchange relation also to perform bad behaviour. The impossibility of determining responsibility in a shipment failure, generated by poor quality postal services, can be used as an excuse to cheat, without reaping the social cost of reputational damage.

Most people are discouraged from cheating because they know that this will mean the end of their relations, since the person who has been cheated will be unlikely to barter in the future with the cheater. Also, in the context of a space that enables public debate and confrontation, the social cost may be much heavier because, what is threatened is not only the possibility of exchanging again with the cheated person but also exchanging among the whole community, that is, remaining part of a

⁸⁴ This situation looks like the monetary relation. As in use of money, it is assumed that the deal is between two persons, i.e. a baker accepts money and gives back an amount of bread considered fair for that sum of money, but in fact the relation is subject to the fact that baker accepts money only because he knows that the butcher will do the same, and so on. So money circulates and people use it because a third party, the State, guarantees its value, which is established by the State and not by individuals. Thus, I do not trust others when exchanging money with them, I trust the State. In any case, the State usually behaves correctly, while the postal service does not.

community that is extremely sensitive to this kind of information. This refers to reputation construction in virtual communities, a process that has been widely studied (Gambetta 2000; Gili 2005; Volonté 2003: 104). In the specific case of this research, the environment, which is a mix between a social network site and a sale and purchase site, is very particular, hence barterers can exploit different tools for social control. However, before considering how people establish trust mechanisms in online barter, it is important to discuss ways of exchanging that are both cheap and reliable.

6.3.4 Face-to-face (manual) exchange

Another means of reducing barter expenses is manual exchange, which can completely erase barter expenses if the parties are located in close proximity. Manual exchange is generally preferred to mediated exchange, not only because of the economic practicalities but also because it allows direct confrontation between the parties, the final point in a relation constructed through a series of mediated communicative exchanges. For some people, it is consistent also with their ethos: not shipping objects that have been exchanged to protect the environment against superfluous waste. The pollution produced by shipment conflicts with their values, hence they choose to exchange things only with people in the same or a neighbouring city.

I also consider the ecological footprint, I mean it is always a balance, you must balance, you must understand if it is worth the exchange. Shipping has a cost, which is not only economical, but also environmental which is not irrelevant. Finally, manual exchanges are better, since you meet the person, it is more consistent with the barter philosophy (Zr_33m)

Although this seems logical and appears to be the strategy adopted by many barterers, some barterers complained that they cannot adopt this behaviour. There is a difference between being a citizen of a relatively large city such as Milan or Rome, and living in a small town or village where the number of barterers is very small and

it is likely both to be difficult to find someone with whom to exchange, or to find that this person has something that one needs or likes.

I have some contacts with barterers of Milan, I love to exchange with them but coming to Milan has a cost for me...and here in Treviglio there is only one barterer who is much younger than me, we don't have many things to exchange between each other (Zr_49f)

Although proximity will be greater in small towns compared to big cities, and people are more likely to know one another in the former than in big urban areas, it is also true that web communities are generated by an interest while people in small towns are linked by geographical proximity. An individual who had engaged in over 900 exchanges and lives in a very small town in the south of Italy, had exchanged more things through mediated than direct exchange.

unfortunately, I cannot meet them personally because we are too faraway. [...] We are getting left behind, we are a little bit retro from this perspective...and I'm so sorry for this, because I would really like stop paying shipment costs and start bartering with people of my neighbouring. [...] here there is still a kind of prejudice against barter, perhaps a kind of shame in doing such things like exchanging personal objects. I'm always really available, I opened my house to strangers and barterers from all Italy, but it is very difficult to involve people from here. You know, I'm from Calabria, I love it and I really get annoyed when media depict Calabria as a very old fashioned region, but I have to admit that here there is no such opened minded people as I can see in Milan there is. Hence, I can only barter with very faraway persons (Zr_37f)

Some people are forced to conduct mediated exchanges in part because of the website they are using. In small towns there are fewer barterers compared to big urban areas, and bartering in a social network "inhabited" by fewer people allows for fewer exchange possibilities both because the smaller number of people means less variety of tastes and typologies of exchange items, and because a smaller number of barterers results in a smaller number of objects available for barter. Thus, case B (Reoose) has fewer satisfied users since the number of objects and subjects is relatively smaller compared to other websites, and not sufficient to allow a good exchange system.

many barterers do not want to ship from one city to another, but then the problem is that there are really few barterers registered on the website, and many of them still have items published but do not answers email...it is really difficult for me to make face-to-face exchanges! (Re_47f)

Manual exchange does not imply that barterers are able more easily to establish good relations, or that the context is more likely to encourage conversation or meeting up: the majority of manual exchanges take place quickly, lasting no more than few seconds, sometimes not even long enough to check the items being exchanged. For this reason, some barterers prefer manual exchange because it takes less time than mediated exchanges involving finding appropriate packing materials, making up a secure parcel – not least to avoid complaints from the address – then booking the courier or going to the post office, etc. A manual exchange can be straightforward and fast, and may result in very superficial exchange relations:

recently I'm doing lots of manual exchanges like you saw when we did it together, like an exchange "on the fly", on the platform, or perhaps, look, that time in Milan coming back I did 4 more: I did one during lunch since a very sweet lady came where I was working and we did a exchange "on the fly", then coming back to the station I did three more with girls who came close to me, since they were living in Milan and they were free on Saturday afternoon and again we exchanged in a flash. Well, yes, I do lots of manual exchange also because of this reason, since if I had to prepare package, book courier, etc, time flies! (Zr_33f)

6.4 Misbehaviours and good behaviours in both forms of exchange (mediated and direct)

Face to face exchange does not protect the barterers against negative experiences or cheating. In the context of fraud or chicanery, as already mentioned, one of the most dreaded and heavily sanctioned behaviours is not sending the objects agreed for exchange, or sending a different object from that agreed. In all three websites, these problems were classed as the worst experiences related to both synchronous exchange (without credits) and asynchronous exchange (with credits): in the first case there can be a situation of no reciprocal exchange, and in the other, one gave

credits (and presumably paid for shipment since it is charged to the receiver) without receiving anything.

The potential for struggles and quarrels are many, as shown by the E-barty forum, where in addition to mutual accusations of not sending objects, barterers complain about the features of the objects, and the time taken to complete the barter.

6.4.1 Objects' details

Receiving something different from what was agreed is frustrating, but receiving no explanation for the change, or offer to establish a new agreement is particularly annoying. In the majority of barterers' accounts, receiving something that differs from the picture on the website is common. The problem may be related to size, which may have been correctly declared by the first party, but turns out not to be appropriate for the receiver, or perhaps the object's dimensions have not been specified during the negotiation and the object may be too small or too big for the purpose intended. Perhaps there is a misunderstanding over the status of the object, since barterers have different measure to establish the level of degradation of an item.

I received things which were much worse than what I expected them to be, because the other wrote 'perfect conditions', and then the objects were overused hence I throw them away (Eb_35f).

many times there is no bad faith from the other barterer, I mean, perhaps you think the object you own is good while for the other is disgusting, it depends upon the tastes of people. Perhaps you have a used t-shirt, you wash it and according to you that's perfect, but for another person that same t-shirt may be horrible (Zr_49f)

This is not a cause for concern among barterers; it is considered one of the hazards of the game, which may turn out to be positive such as when the object is much superior to what was expected. Barterers are content with this dimension of exchange as long as there is reciprocal comprehension of each other's position with regard to the exchanged objects. Hence, the exchange relation do not end at the moment of shipment, but continue until the barterers declare they are satisfied with the exchange. If this does not happen, then the dissatisfaction must be viewed

sympathetically if participation in the relational exchange is to continue. In the case that one of the parties is satisfied with the exchange and the other is not, there are a few responses/attitudes that are considered appropriate, while some others are classified as signalling “bad barterers”.

In the case of a barterer whose exchanged object is considered unsatisfactory by the other party, it is important for the supplier of that object to maintain the communication open, to respond to emails and messages, and be willing, if necessary, to take the object back and to return the object she obtained in the exchange. This situation is an extreme case that is not frequent; however, it highlights the importance of a response in the case of a complaint. Some barterers may decide to start a public quarrel, not just because of their displeasure with the object received, but mainly because the response received was rude or unhelpful, did not show understanding or willingness to rectify the situation, or because they did not receive a response of any kind.

if a receive an object and I tell the other, look the object you sent me is not as you described me, let's collaborate. It happened once that I sent many objects for just one object, which was not resembling the description the other made of it, hence, before thinking about his bad faith, I usually contact the person and I say “I received the object, unfortunately is not as I expected, I thought it was like this, and this, can we help each other?”. Now, if the other side had a good faith, and it happened also to me, you just say, “ok, it's all right just tell me if there is something I can send you”. And perhaps we do not arrange another shipment because of its costs, but in the next exchange I will had something more...I mean, we can reach an agreement in any case, if we want to do it, isn't it? Instead, if the other part does not answer or give bad answer, pretending to be offended or whatever...I mean, you understand the lack of honesty! (Zr_54f)

This would seem again to be related to trust and trustworthiness. There are no written rules, either on the website or in Italian legislation⁸⁵, obliging a person to take back an object should the other party not be satisfied with it. Theoretically, both parties should have gained sufficient information before concluding the negotiation, which has no time limit and, thus, allows the barterers to communicate for as long as

⁸⁵ I refer to the law concerning “permuta”, article 1552 of the civil code which is regulated by article 1555 in the same code.

necessary to obtain the information they require. Nonetheless, within the barter community, collaboration and reciprocal aid are a social norm that regulates behaviour and distinguishes between good and bad behaviour.

it really depends upon the willingness to mediate. As I told you when we exchanged, I propose things I made, I'm not a tailor, in the sense that I try my best but then you may not like them, you see the object and perhaps it is not what you expected, then I give you the chance of saying "I'm not interested" and there is no problem, friends again! (Zr_54f)

This may be due to two factors: first, objects are carriers of cultural meanings, they form a system of signs constituting a proper language, which is the language that individuals normally adopt to interact with each other. Thus, objects can communicate meanings that idioms cannot, and, despite very precise and detailed descriptions, it is not possible to understand the nature of an object before it comes into one's possession.

first thing to ask are the characteristics of objects, or the seizes because lots of time seizes do not correspond perhaps S is not S but an XS. With time you learn that asking is fundamental, you must ask for everything. On the other side, in my messages I always indicate everything so to avoid people asking me thousand questions. Especially with clothing, I indicate the length, the width, etc., (Zr_51f)

Full comprehension of an object comes from the experience the subject makes of it and, during this experience, the subject inevitably adds something of her own personality to its biography. It should be remembered that the majority of exchanged objects are second-hand items, which means that other persons have used them previously. Clothing is the most emblematic example of this: clothes touch the body, they cover and protect it and even decorate it, and however hard the fashion industry tries to standardize bodies through images and sizes, people's bodies are heterogenic and unique. Hence, each time a subject buys and uses a garment, she shapes it to her form, producing a different object from the one originally purchased. If this garment is exchanged, the subject may (in fact she is obliged to) refer to the standard size as reproduced on the label when describing it. She may also supply other standard measures such as length and width, expressed in centimetres, and give an account of

her experience of wearing the garment (or using the object), but this does not allow the other party fully to understand its nature. On the other side, barterers receive accurate and detailed descriptions, but are aware that it must always be partial. Hence, this is why barterers allow for further collaboration after an exchange is concluded.

last week I sent a little jumper but I did not realize it had few stains, I did not check it carefully before sending. The other barterer said, 'look I found these stains of the jumper...' and I said, ok, there is no problem, forgive me if I did not check carefully, send the thing back to me and I'll send you something else, we found an agreement. In any case, this can happen, you know, perhaps you are on a hurry, these things can happen. The important thing is be polite and keep on talking to each other. (Zr_49f)

The moment of possessing the object is part of the negotiation, postponed because the acquaintance phase of the barter has been conducted over the internet. It is postponed also in the case of manual exchange because the barterers have not had a chance to try out the object or try on the garment.

the website suggests to exchange manually, in order to increase the control over the object, but actually I never check during a face-to-face exchange, I just trust the other. Also because I think that if you don't trust others, in barter, you won't make many exchanges (Re_24m)

This is completed at home, outside the exchange moment. Second, in the absence of the physical presence of the person, communication establishes trust and trustworthiness. Not responding to complaints or providing rude or partial answers, takes the relation back to an unbalanced form where the possibility of agonistically performing the struggle is forbidden. Lack of communication is perceived as an intention not to recognize the very identity of the other part, which negates the relation.

I found really bad when we agree on a shipment, that means we concluded our negotiation, barter is a negotiation after all, hence we find an agreement for the exchange and we formalize the exchange on the website. Then there are people who cannot ship the object immediately, they have some problems etcetera, but they do not inform of the delay, and this is the worst thing! I mean, if you tell me 'look, I have a problem, I won't be able to ship before that day', then I understand, and I know I'll wait a little

bit, but I know that the delay is normal, because the other informed me about her problems. But there are some people who don't ship, and they don't inform you. This is the worst situation because you are just suspended in doubt, not knowing if they cheated you or if it is only a matter of delay. You don't know how to act with them. Not knowing their motivations is really the worst. (Eb_36f)

you know, sometimes it happens to receive bad things, for example if I receive a teapot which is broken, badly packaged, etc., than before giving the negative feedback I contact the other user and I ask for explanation. If she comes back to me saying 'this is none of my businesses', well then I understand there is an uncaring attitude and I disapprove this by giving the negative feedback (Zr_33m)

For the person who received an object that did not satisfy her expectations, it is equally important to keep the relation going and, as barterers said, concede a "second opportunity" to the other part. In practical terms, this means accepting that the other party acted in good faith and asking for a replacement object or agreeing that both sides will take back their objects. A debate on the E-barty's public forum sees two barterers discussing between each other: the first recognises that she send a damage object (a jumper with a stain), but she does not find the negative feedback received correct, since also she manifested her willingness to pay the cost of shipment and give something else to the other barterer. The second barterer involved, argues that the first barterer, beyond lying over the status of her objects, did not manifest the willingness to pay the shipment back, hence she gave the negative feedback. Several barterers intervened in this long discussion. In particular, this barterer condemns the rapidity with which the second barterer gave the negative feedback, without waiting to hear more explanations from the other:

I think you should have given her more time to find a remedy...what's the sense of all this hurry in giving a negative feedback?! I can understand the rage of the moment, but missing a stain can happen to everybody, especially when we are exchanging second-hand clothing. However, if a remedy can be found, why starting a quarrel over it?? (e-barty public forum)

In this case, any sense of negative behaviour from the other (i.e. negative feedback) and no proper communicational exchange, will be considered wrong, since it constitute a denial of the relation.

once it happened that I did not receive some stuff I exchanged, shipped by mail. The real problem was that I neither received any kind of explication from the other side, even if I asked. I perceived her bad faith by the fact that the other person did not give me explanation why I was not receiving my objects. In any case, I did not give the negative feedback because with postal service you cannot ever be sure about whose the responsible for the missing shipment [...] I mean, it also happened to me: I shipped a box which never arrives, but in that case I apologized, even if wasn't my mistake, and I offered to ship another thing (Zr_29f)

Overall, what characterizes social norms is that they may be adhered to or not. Barterers who are strict about procedure, that is, who believe they have supplied all possible information to conclude the exchange and deny a collaborative double exchange, can behave in this way since there is nothing preventing them. However, they know there will be social consequences because the community does not appreciate such attitudes:

Sometimes I received something that is absolutely not as it has been described, mainly clothing. With clothing I always have problems, like things I think they fit me, and then they don't, but once it happened that the stuff I received was really old and I gave back to her [...] I don't know if she did it on purpose or if it was a mistake, in any case, I'm not going to exchange with her anymore so I take the doubt away! (Zr_49f)

bartering you can find wonderful people as well as horrible people but the point is, once you met those bad people, you just avoid to exchange with them and that's it! It is like in life, you avoid those you don't like! (Zr_54f)

6.4.2 Broken or different objects

The case that the object received is broken or has some flaw that was not signalled before the exchange, is particularly egregious.

it happened to me to receive things which were different from what was agreed during negotiation, like for example cosmetics. I only exchange new cosmetics, because of an hygiene issue: once I exchanged a eye pencil which has visibly been sharpened hence it was not new, so I contacted the other barterer to tell her that I thought she misbehaved (Zr_30f)

This is considered, and in most cases is in fact, real fraud from the point of view of the relational pact, fraud that seriously compromises the barterer's reputation. From one perspective, it can be compared to the act of not sending the object and, again, in this situation, the shipment means play a crucial role and cause the trustworthiness problems cited above. It is even more difficult to establish fault if the object received is not working or is broken: that is, whether it was shipped in this condition or the condition is the result of bad shipment.

When a third party is involved the situation acquires a different nature. If the exchange was manual then even if the supplier is guilty, a collaborative attitude will usually promote a willingness to "forgive" by the injured party.

Although I don't receive the object I do not feel like to give the negative feedback, also because you can't be 100% sure it was the other's fault and not the postal service's fault (Zr_49f)

6.5 Mechanisms of control: evaluation and exclusion

Although the exchange relation between two parties may be influenced by the intervention of a third party (shipment service), it is important that each barterer constructs her own reputation in order to "play the game". Reputation is a fundamental dimension in online communities and it plays a crucial role on those e-commerce websites where exchanges are performed. Hence, while a barterer must construct a positive reputation, she must be able also to evaluate the reputation of other barterers, in order to understand the level of risk involved in establishing relations of exchange. Furthermore, for the system to continue to function, it is necessary also that barterers be able to signal misbehaviours and to prevent bad barterers maintaining their bad behaviours. "we should signal a misbehaviour to staff members of the website, because they cannot control every single announcement and we must help them because the website is our place" (Re_47f).

For this reason, the mechanism of control can be distinguished from mechanism for evaluation and the mechanism for exclusion.

The most efficient instrument for reputation construction is the feedback system, which is used in the best known online electronic marketplace – eBay. Nonetheless, the interviews and ethnographic notes show that communication also plays an important role in the evaluation mechanism exemplified by the use of public forum debates, and public conversations between barterers. Even wish lists can be used as a way to evaluate the barterer's personality and, as a consequence of the evaluation, different forms of exclusion are applied.

6.5.1 Feedback system

In economic theory, the problem of reputation is usually described as the problem of asymmetric information, exemplified by the case of the market for lemons (Akerlof 1970). Reputation in real markets is constructed through certain mechanisms that do not operate on the internet, which is why,

internet players have struggled to find a substitute for traditional seller reputations. Important systems have been introduced to enable the systematic elicitation and distribution of reputational information. These systems collect information on the past behaviour of a seller, or for that matter of a buyer, and then make that information available to potential future transaction partners. Because people know that their behaviour now will affect their ability to transact in the future, not only with their current partner but with unknown others as well, they are less likely to engage in opportunistic behaviour. Moreover, less reliable players will be discouraged from joining the marketplace" (Resnik et al. 2006, p. 81).

This happens because trust is a dynamic rather than a static phenomenon, evolving over time and influenced by positive experience (Golembiewski, McConkie 1975). Application of this system to an online barter website presents several peculiarities. First, it should be remembered that, while in normal online trading communities, sellers' ratings play a greater role in transactions than buyers' ratings, in barterers both parts give and take equally, thus both their ratings play a crucial role in the system. At the conclusion of a transaction both are advised to provide feedback. It should be noted also that this research considers three websites, which have feedback systems that are mostly similar, but have some differences. In Zr and E-

barty, users can give positive, negative, or neutral feedback, in Reoose they can choose only between positive and negative. However, for all three websites, barterers can write comments explaining their rating. The rating system is based on percentage data, hence, after each feedback, the barterer's profile indicates the percentage of total positive feedback received, with 100% signalling complete positivity. In the barterer's profile, together with the number showing the percentage of positive feedback, the comments are available for other users to read: in E-barty and Reoose, all feedback is available; in Zr only the last 20 comments are available.

Although it is always possible to create a new account if the current one gets a bad reputation (if the subject cheated and received a lot of negative feedback), the feedback system works as a deterrent since reputation is constructed over time, hence the more the number of feedbacks the higher the reputation. Thus, starting again from zero does not provide a serious advantage for the cheater since newcomers are "sanctioned" in a way. For example, "older" barterers ask for guarantees that cannot be given by reputation, hence there is a tacit rule that the newer barterer ships first, that is, the barterer with the smallest number of feedbacks, ships first. Hence, before cheating again, a barterer must gain a certain number of feedbacks, that is, make a certain number of exchanges. There is no doubt that some might consider this option as affordable, but generally there are very few cases of such barterers.

The fact that the system assigns percentage scores, disadvantages newcomers since the percentage of trustworthiness should be compared with the number of completed exchanges. If a user has engaged in two exchanges and received one positive and one negative feedback, her rating will be 50%, which no one would consider reliable and trustworthy. Although this may drive newcomers to behave well and not to cheat, it is also true that if someone has every intention of cheating from the start, that person will basically ignore the social damage caused by a low reputation, while newcomers, who still need to understand the "rules of the game", may receive negative feedback that is not altogether justified. Moreover, if a dispute arises, the opinion (feedback) of an older barterer is considered to be more relevant

than the newcomer's, leaving no possibility for the latter to respond to unfair feedback⁸⁶.

The higher the number the exchanges, the less the damage caused by negative feedback not only from the obvious social point of view but also from a mathematical perspective. While Reoose and E-barty provide fairly accurate percentages (to two decimal places), Zr does not provide exact figures (its figures are not in decimals). In addition, the Zr system is less fair because of its comment system: the fact that only the last 20 feedbacks are visible, means that those who have engaged in only a few exchanges have their negative feedback (if any) made public while for those who have engaged in numerous exchanges and may have received numerous negative feedbacks, the messages linked to those negative feedbacks are not visible so other barterers do not know why the rating was negative.

it would be nice, and right, for justice, that negative feedback would be exposed more explicitly [...] those negative feedbacks should be always visible because others should be aware why you got it or you gave it. If the instrument is used to protect us, then negative comments should be always visible. (Zr_54f)

The reasons for negative feedback can vary considerably, and knowing the reason for such a rating is very important. In this sense, comments are fundamental if we consider what exactly the feedback is measuring/judging. Many barterers state that feedback should be made available if a just-concluded exchange is satisfactory.

even if the other barterer does not give me the feedback, I don't care. I never wrote to a person reminding her that she had to give the feedback, I mean, if you would like to give it, then do it, otherwise don't, I don't see it as a compulsory thing. It should be an impulsive action, if you are happy, satisfied by the exchange you give it. (Zr_49f)

However, it has been shown that exchange involves different phases and a barterer might be satisfied/dissatisfied with some aspects of the exchange, but not others. The barterer can evaluate the quality of the object received, and how far it

⁸⁶ This mechanism gives space for an uneven distribution of power which will be better analyzed in the next chapter.

corresponds to the description given; she can be satisfied by the packaging protecting the object during shipment, or the shipment time; she can judge how far the communication style of the other barterer helped in the transaction, if the information given was sufficient and reliable; the politeness of the barterer and her helpfulness in resolving any problems during the exchange.

well it is the way barterers communicate, like saying hello in a very polite way, using conditional tense, 'could you give me', 'would you ship', etc., also the tone you use to approach a conversation, even if you are writing and not speaking, I mean, you can get the tone! (Zr_33m)

At the same time, barterers can use feedback to "punish" the other barterer, communicating to the whole community some misbehaviour. The comments accompanying the feedback clarify which of these dimensions the barterer is judging.

I go for a feed judging not only the object but also the barter's effort: if she lets me know about shipment, or if the object was not as she described, how far she is willing to fix it. When I see this willingness I put a big positive feed, at the same time I put a negative feed if I receive no news about shipment, I don't receive the package, she does not answer my messages. (e-barty public forum)

These comments help to show whether the use made of the feedback instrument is correct: there are at least three misbehaviours associated with feedback. The first and least frequent is fake feedback. This is when barterers that know each other post fake announcements, and exchange (fake) objects just to allow feedback.

Girls, is that possible that [barter named] X, publishes 5 announcement, immediately exchanges with [barter named] Y and they received packages, so to put feedbacks, all in few hours??? This is a pretty infamous way to get feedbacks!" (e-barty public forum)

A much more serious misbehaviour associated with feedback is so-called feedback given out of spite. This is an unfair judgment received in response to some (likely deserved) negative feedback.

let's say that if you give a negative feedback, 90% of the time you get a negative feedback back, even if you did everything right, and the object was perfect. It happened to me, and it happened almost to everybody else in this website”(Zr_54f)

there are people who take revenge on you by giving a negative feedback once you gave them a negative feedback, but they do it only to take revenge, not because they were not satisfied of the exchange (Zr_49f)

many times people give in spite feedback, as a reprisal (Re_29m)

if you have a guilty conscience, that is, if you gave an horrible book, with stains, for example, you will give me negative feedback just because you know I'll give you a negative feedback (Zr_33f)

This acts like a compensation mechanism used when a barterer wants to counter-attack the barterer who attacked him. In barter communities this is extremely problematic behaviour since it weakens the feedback system: if negative feedbacks signal bad barterers, feedback based on spite compromises the whole information system. This is such a problematic practice that many barterers said they preferred not to supply negative feedback, even when not satisfied by the transaction, out of fear of retaliation in the form of negative feedback from the other party. “feedback are useful to a certain extend, because there are many people who are afraid of giving negative feedback, because they know they'll receive a negative feedback in return” (Zr_33m).

Hence, the information system is spoiled twice: it indicates the presence of bad barterers who in reality are not bad, and it hides the presence of really bad barterers. For this reason, the Zr website tried to upgrade its feedback system. In order to prevent retaliatory feedback the system makes both feedbacks visible at the same time: the feedback one barterer gives to another barterer is hence made visible on other barterer's profile only when she also gives her feedback. Thus, neither knows the content of the other's feedback and, consequently, cannot retaliate with a spiteful rating. Theoretically, this should provide the optimum solution to the problem, but experienced barterers have discussed its negative aspects in the Zr public forum, and tried to discourage the administration from its introduction, although their pleas were ignored. During interviews, they explained the tricky aspect of it: if just one of the barterers does not provide feedback then none will be visible. Hence, if the barterer

misbehaves she need not worry about negative feedback because she will not provide any feedback herself.

actually you know it...I mean, if I cheat you hardly then I know that you will give me a negative, I don't need the gazing ball to predict this "I wonder if she is so stupid not to give me a negative!", c'mon! It is so evident! Then I just don't put the feedback myself and I'm done! (Zr_54f)

The third category of misbehaviour related to feedback is not strictly unfairness, but is considered unacceptable by many barterers. The fact of not releasing feedback is irritating to many barterers who consider the number of feedbacks achieved as capital to play in the field. If withheld, the feedback is demanded although some barterers think that feedback should be considered a gift rather than an expected standardized judgment.

Overall, the information collected through these accounts and the ethnographic notes, questions the role of feedback systems in the construction of reputation in this particular kind of online community. Most barterers said they did not look at feedback when deciding about trusting another barterer, both because of the limitations of the feedback system (barterers are perfectly aware of those described above) and partly because a 100% positive rating does not provide any information about the barterer's personality:

of course I take a look at feedback, but I also check what other barterers are saying, related to the feedback given. I don't base my judgement only upon feedback. From written words I can understand who is really hiding behind the screen" (Zr_37f).

from a simple question you can understand the other person, how she would be like, I mean, you read the answer and you know if she is nice and whether she is bartering only for dealing, because you know, there are some barterers who are here only for a good deal, and you can understand this by the way they are communicating" (Zr_51f)

Trustworthiness is recognized through communication and what really matters is how the barterer behaved in past situations. In theory, this is what the feedback system should reveal, but the standardization imposed by mathematical calculation does not provide this for these communities. The construction of reputation passes

through another instrument that reveals the relational nature of this community, which, it must be underlined once again, is a kind of hybrid between a social network site and an online trading website.

6.5.2 Public forum

The public forums of the three websites show profound differences, and consequently, show how different are the communities they host. Public forums are the best and quickest way to create what can be called a public opinion generator. Technically, the three websites show the first dissonances: E-barty is the only one showing an online forum, that is, a page containing a number of links to different theme pages where people can open topics of discussion, in which they can invite the whole community to participate. There are no restrictions on content, themes or users, anyone can contribute to creating a discussion and participating in discussions created by others. Many barterers participate in the public forum where very diverse themes are discussed. Apart from general topics, which vary from how the website works to what is barter, from the use of credit to a list of objects barterers are in search of, there is a specific page where barterers can signal other barterers' misbehaviours (black list). Thus, what was a private quarrel involving two barterers becomes public and the offended barterer can collect other barterers' experiences with the supposed cheater. To give an idea of how the public forum mechanism works, here it follows an example of a debate over the supposed bad faith of a barterer:

“Barterer 1

Since I got a negative feedback with no reason (since I was willing to ship contrary to the other) I would like to say to everybody that you should not trust this barterer, she is bad, and I'm sorry for those barterers who already engaged in an exchange with her. [...] When we concluded the exchange and we were about to arrange the shipment, I told her that, since she got only 1 feedback, she must have shipped first, and that I would have shipped right after receiving her package. She was clearly annoyed by my request (this is a rule of the website) and she told that she would have shipped by Friday, then by Monday, inventing a series of incredible excuses. Yesterday, I told her that I would wait just another week and then I would free the objects chosen. In this way, she understood that I would have never shipped things first, hence she said that she would have never shipped her things

first as well, so the exchange was revoked. She justified herself saying that with another barterer she did not ship first, but what do I care about other barterers exchange?! I was not convinced by her, she only had 1 feed and her tone was strange, hence I did not want to ship first, as this is my right. Now, I don't care about the negative feedback she gave, because I have plenty of positive feedback and here every body know about my seriousness, but be careful in exchanging with this barterer, she is untrustworthy!

Barterer 2

I do not even waste my time in discussing with you. I have explained you why I did not send the box, anyway you are free to think what you like.

[...]

Barterer 1

I shipped first to [*a series of barterers' names*] but don't really understand why I should have trust you, with only 1 feedback. You deserve the negative feed I gave you because you refused to ship first and invented a mountain of excuses not to ship, until I forced you to take a decision, otherwise this could have being going on for ages. I would have shipped if you did not tried to cheat on me. I have a certain number of positive feedback because I deserve them, nobody donate positive feedback!

Barterer 2

I did not want to cheat anybody, so please shut up!

Barterer 1

Ahahah, that's funny! Well my objective was to let the other barterers know about your lack of seriousness, now that I know that nobody will trust you anymore, I'm fine. I don't care about the negative feed you gave me, since I'm honest!"

Until this point, the debate is held between the two barterers involved in the exchange. The very short answers given by barterers 2 already suggest a potential misbehaviour, however, it is the intervention of other barterers that sanction barterer 2's reputation:

Barterer 3

I completely agree with barterer 1, dear barterer 2, she has 49 positive feedback, you have just one...when we exchanged together, I was really annoyed by your attitude, when you told you were fed up waiting for me, when I clearly said to you that I had problems and that it would have taken

some day for shipping. There are several ways to say things out, and you really said them badly! I'm happy I did not send you anything and I'll get your negative feedback with no problem. I'll explain to whoever wants to exchange with me what kind of bad person you are! Furthermore, people know I am a good barterer.

Barterer 4

My God, this is foolish! I will defend you [*barterer 3*] for sure! ☺ you've been always kind and correct with me, and plus now we became friends! I've been cheated by [*barterer's name*], I shipped my things and then she disappeared...I still did not give the negative feedback, perhaps she had some problems...I always tend to see the positive side of people but still...she could have told me so...fortunately the majority of people are as honest as you are!

Barterer 3

Thank you barterer 4...as I was defending barterer 1, I got a negative feedback too! I don't mind...

Barterer 5

This is ridiculous! I can prove the super honesty and correctness of barterer 1! What barterer 2 wrote is completely fake! Barterer 1 has always been patient, polite, pleasant, and helpful with me! She even shipped before me, even if I have less positive feed than she has!

Barterer 1

I'm so sorry barterer 3, I warned you as soon as I found out which kind of person the other barterer was. The thing that annoy me the most is the negative feedback that we both got from her, I mean, we do our best to integrate in this community, to gain a little of esteem for others and then here comes this newcomer who did not understand a thing about this website and ruin it all! ☹" (e-barty public forum)

This is more informative than reading the percentage of good or bad comments, and it delves into the relations other people experience and construct. Although each relation is unique, with barterers having good experiences with some and others having bad experiences with the same persons, each barterer has her own attitude towards exchange. In this case, social capital plays a crucial role. In E-barty, the forum is the only place where communication between barterers is made visible since communication during the negotiation phase is kept private. In fact, E-barty provides the possibility of sending a private message to a barterer even if one has never exchanged with him. This two-ways communication allows for what Goffman

(1959) calls a stage and a backstage: on the forum-stage barterers talk to all other barterers in the community, debating and discussing (sometimes violently) many different themes; in the private messages-backstage, they comment, with few selected barterers, about what is going on in the forum. The private communication channel, hence, gives the opportunity to manage alliances and to coordinate public actions in the forum.

Zr has no public forum, although it tried to create a public environment by opening a blog. However, a blog is very different from a forum, since only administrators can publish blogposts, users can only comment, which perhaps is the reason why the blog was almost abandoned two years ago (at least, administrators published posts until two years ago, but users were not participating in the debates). As a demonstration that public spaces are essential for these kinds of communities, what was a normal page for asking information has been transformed by barterers into a kind of forum. The “help!” Zr page is structured as a page where people ask for information and receive answers from staff members, hence messages are visible by scrolling down the page. This is not the best page structure to allow a public discussion, because debates are not split into themes, and it can appear very confusing.

in the ‘help!’ section of the website people are discussing over several issues and if I have something to say I usually intervene in discussion, I like to participate [...] people discuss over the functioning of the website or over the problem they encounter, like frauds. You can access that section and read about different issues, sometimes there are also staff’s answers, but not always. Sometimes there are barterers suggesting potential upgrading, then other barterers answer back giving their opinions [...] the problem is that if you write something and then someone answers you back you are not notified of the answer, you have to track the conversation (Zr_49f)

However, the need for a space for public confrontation was evidently stronger than the limits imposed by the technology: to know what is going on in the website, to complain about something, to propose an upgrade, to signal an event, etc., a user must go on to the “help!” page. Nonetheless, the reputation of a barterer is partially constructed in this quasi forum. No doubt the participation shown in the page gives important information about barterer’s personality, starting from the fact that she is –

or she is not – participating in life’s community. The attitude to the whole community does not predict what the barterer’s behaviour will be in an exchange, and also, not everybody contributes to the discussions. To check on past exchange behaviours, Zr users can check the messages exchanged between the specific barterer and other barterers in two ways: either on the object announcement pages, or those published directly on the barterers’ profile pages. In practice, then, all conversations and communications on Zr are public; there is no facility for exchanging private messages unless the barterers have exchanged email addresses following a previous barter exchange. Private messages may be used for private communication, but negotiations over objects are usually public – private negotiation would be much more complicated. The way a barterer negotiates with another barterer is fundamental for them to understand the kind of person with whom they are dealing.

usually I’m really empathic, I mean, if I read something strange in between the lines of a written conversation I don’t barter. From a very basic answer you can understand, from the writing style, the tone, I understand which is the attitude of the other person (Zr_37f)

you must inevitably talk to the others if you want to organize an exchange, agree on what to exchange, I mean, you have plenty of information if you have to organize, exchange, meet, etc. if you don’t have other elements, than those are very important ones. Then you have feedback, which are very important, too, and you have the wish list, which is revealing lots of information about the subject (Zr_30f)

Several interviewees complained about the use of very short, rather curt phrases such as “check my page”, which, according to the barterers interviewed, suggests a bad attitude toward communication and is deemed disrespectful behaviour. A typical sentence on a barterer’s page if someone is interested in the object she is offering might be: “I saw your object and I like it. It would be nice if you can come and check my page to see if there is something you would like to exchange your object with. Thank you”. Reducing this to just “check my page” might be acceptable in informal spoken exchanges, but in a written message is not appreciated by some barterers:

if you want to barter with me, at least you check my wish list and then you gently ask me to check your page: if the question is kind, the answer will be kind too. The simple and straight “check” is not kind at all, and I don’t even answer to that. (e-barty public forum)

you just write “check my page” and I perceive it as a complete lack of respect and communication! (Zr_54f).

In my wish list it is made explicit: if I publish an object on the website don’t write ‘check my page’, because I don’t. I don’t like this form of expression, it would be better if you write...well actually it would be better if you check my wishes first because if you have nothing I like, it is useless I spend time in checking your page! (Zr_51f)

Hence, on Zr, the barterer’s reputation is constructed within the exchange relation, while on E-barty it is constructed much more in a public environment where alliances and amity relations play a greater role.

Reoose has no space for public communications. There is no public forum, and negotiations are carried on privately between barterers. While E-barty provides the possibility to write a message below the object announcement, or to send a private message (the majority of barterers prefer to negotiate in this private way), on Reoose barterers can only negotiate privately. The website has a blog, linked to the online version of a famous Italian newspaper, but it is not followed by barterers, who prefer to communicate on the Facebook page of the site. Also, communications via the Facebook page are usually direct questions to website administrators not public discussions. This is because although anyone can write on Facebook, users cannot create their own posts on their preferred topic. Similarly, although Zr has a Facebook page, it is used as a communication channel between users and staff members. Reoose interviewees did not complain about lack of a public space, or its use as control instrument, and also seemed to care about reputation much less in general, for example:

on Reoose sometime I even don’t look at feedback, why? Because basically who published that object, above all if it has a certain number of credits, did it because he really wanted to give the object away so that someone else can use it and he doesn’t want to sell it to gain money, got it? (Re_29m)

The reason why Reoose's barterers do not invest time in understanding the level of trustworthiness of other barterers may be related to the fact that they operate using credits rather than objects or money. Credits are perceived as less relevant than money and are not as personal as objects. Losing credits seems less dramatic than losing objects or money and, in addition, Reoose staff members intervene if a transaction goes wrong, and reimburse credits to anyone able to demonstrate that a fraud has been perpetrated. Of course Reoose's barterers worry about whether the other barterer will send the object or not, but by using traceable shipments they can show that the object was never shipped and recoup their credits, which is not possible, even with traceable shipment, when exchanging on Zr or E-barty. Once the object has been shipped, the barterer is reliant on the other barterer's kindness to ship it back if something goes wrong with the exchange, there is no authority (staff member) who will intervene in this case.

It would seem, therefore, that Reoose provides more guarantees and more protection to its users from fraud; barterers' reputation plays a more minor role when there is a standardized method of control. However, this higher level of standardization reduces social control. It will be interesting to see what happens when the number of the Reoose website's members grows, and it becomes impossible for staff members to resolve every conflict: this highly standardized mechanism works only because of human intervention, that is, the work that staff members do to confirm the bad faith of some barterers and reimburse credits to those who have been cheated. What will happen if people do not get reimbursement of credits in this situation? It also implies that all shipments must be traceable for this standardized control system to work, which implies higher expenses for the barterers.

6.5.3 Wish list

asking yourself what do you desire, it is a very interesting self-analysis [...] plus, it helps understanding with whom you are dealing, which kind of needs she has, which kind of person she is. When I see wish lists full of brand-named objects then I immediately perceive a different approach from mine. ” (Zr_29f)

first thing I do, I check the wish list. If I see something I recognise as a good behaviour, like for example if there is someone who writes in her wish list 'I don't consider objects as important things in life', than it's done, I contact her!" (Zr_37f)

The wish list cannot be considered a proper instrument of control, but the use barterers make of it clearly reveals an interesting dimension of this practice. A wish list provides information that, instead of describing past behaviours of the barterer signals potential future behaviours. During interviews, some barterers stated that they usually check others' wish lists not with the intention of discovering which objects could be used for exchange, but because they want to understand what type of person the barterer is. This could be one of the most important validations of those theories in the anthropological and sociological literatures⁸⁷ that describe goods and commodities as signs constituting a proper language shared by social actors. Depending on the kinds of objects barterers desire, other barterers can deduce things about the person and her likely attitude to exchange. Hence, the barterers interviewed usually shun barterers asking for gold or branded commodities, or people who provide the email address on their wish lists. In Chapter 7 the role of brand commodities is discussed; it demonstrates that they are not appreciated by the barterer community since they exercise a particular role in the process of value creation. With regard to gold, in the barter community, asking for it equates with asking for money another dimension discussed in Chapter 7 to prove how far this is profoundly incorrect behaviour among barterers. Finally, providing an email address in the wish list is an ambiguous case of misbehaviour and it gives a confusing message about the barterer's personality and attitude. According to some barterers, people who provide an email address in the wish list want to conduct a private negotiation, hence not showing publicly how they respond to questions. According to some barterers, however, it is a way of facilitating negotiations. Although the website's guidelines forbid provision of email addresses in wish lists, barterers do not see this as a serious misbehaviour, hence in the majority of cases they do not report barterers infringing the guidelines but rather see this behaviour (publishing email) as a sign of the other's

⁸⁷ See chapter on consumption.

potential negative behaviours (wanting to make a deal or some other kind of chicanery).

Since barterers scrutinize others' wish lists to understand their personalities, they are keen for others to look at their wish lists, since they express their personalities, and they would hope not be contacted by people with different values.

Among those who contact me because they like my objects, the most gentle and nice people are those who read my wish list, and I have so few wishes... (Zr_54f)

6.6 Mechanism of exclusion

All these instruments are aimed precisely at detecting barterers' misbehaviours which, if spotted, can be dealt with to prevent reoccurrence of those behaviours. In this sense, in addition to control, there are some "punishing" mechanisms that are activated if misbehaviours are ascertained.

Both Zr and E-barty, the two more social websites among the three, include some mechanisms which allow for the exclusion of undesirable barterers. Through public communication, barterers have the chance to establish whether the behaviour of a particular barterer is acceptable or not, sometimes even before entering an exchange relation with him. On E-barty this mechanism is performed on a much wider public scene, since the blacklist forum page works as an arena for struggle where everybody (including those not participating in the debate) can assist, and record information. The mechanism at work on that page is simple, and is aimed at a public accusation of someone who then must respond in the forum in order to defend her reputation and not be considered a cheater. The fact that other barterers can participate in a quarrel between two users, allows for a process of social construction of reputation: both the barterers involved in an accusation are supported by the social network created during exchange and, again, depending on past exchanges, will have accumulated a number of relations that can be used to help their defence, so-called social capital.

Public blame is less diffused among Zr users. Instead, it emerged how carefully a barterer's profile is analysed before proceeding with negotiation. This was stressed much more than among E-barty users. They also underlined how, after an exchange

that was not entirely satisfactory, instead of giving negative feedback (perhaps in fear of retaliation), they just assigned the particular barterer to a personal private blacklist, and avoided any further exchanges with her. Among Zr users, the practice of private talking is also more diffused than among E-barty barterers. Zr's barterers interviewed during the course of the research, stated that when something happens they prefer to exchange emails among a selected network of people instead of commenting on the "help!" page. This again may be due to the structure of the help page, which does not distinguish among topics, conversations, etc., and does not represent a proper public arena for debate⁸⁸:

if someone is a cheater, you know that. There is a kind of hidden tam-tam between acquaintances, I mean, there is not a black list since you may be fine with me, but another person may not be fine with you, it depends from barter to barter, thus it is also wrong to signal someone. But it happens once, twice, three times, then someone has the reasonable doubt that you are a cheater, and avoid you (Zr_54f)

Hence, while in E-barty a barterer may be exposed to the public judgment but has the chance to reply through the forum, on Zr this seldom happens.

On the other side, this could be related also to the nature of the two websites: while in Zr there is a very active staff who invigilates frequently and has a good relation with its users, on E-barty the staff is completely absent.

During the ethnographic observation a particular characteristic of the E-barty website emerged. This was that the apparent formality of the person interviewed as a representative staff member of the website, hid the fact that the website had been abandoned by staff and that no one intervenes in debates, and no one responds to

⁸⁸ An example of this private email mechanism was revealed when the researcher revealed her position, explaining her previous exclusion from the website. When she uncovered her with barterers, explaining them the contrast she had with a staff member, their reaction have been emblematic: the first person to discover who she was immediately contacted other barterers in her network. The researcher was already negotiating with some of them and when she contacted them and explained her position, it was clear that they already know about it, and collectively had decided on a strategy. They decided that the staff member behaviour towards the researcher was unacceptable, and they also asked for some description of the research he was conducting. They wrote a letter which was signed by all of them, and sent it to website administration. Although they did not receive a response, their action as a group is interesting. They evidently saw themselves as in a different position compared to less experienced barterers, which had allowed them to accumulate a lot of experience in forms of exchange (the time was immaterial, it was the number of exchanges that mattered), and they used this "capital" to resolve the position.

specific complaints addressed to the private email addresses of staff members. On the public forum, there are often new discussion trends where barterers wonder about the activity of the staff, but this also does not provoke any response: “I had a problem more than a year ago and I contacted the staff to denounce a kind of stalker who was really annoying me but...they have never answered and this was not a common problem, I mean, it could have been considered a dangerous situation” (e-barty public forum).

Zr staff, on the other hand, are very active and there is a consolidated procedure to signal misbehaving barterers to staff members, through private messages, instead of their being publicly denounced on the “help!” page. The “help!” page includes signals of incorrect object descriptions, which, in any case, are considered a good representation of barterers’ attitudes toward exchange. In each object’s announcement/description, there is the possibility to report on the object, and the message goes directly to staff through an anonymous signal.

Although staff members cannot intervene in barterers’ quarrels, they can exercise their authority in the case of proven misbehaviour such as publishing forbidden objects (there is a list of objects in website’s guidelines, which should not be exchanged), rudeness or reputation damage during negotiations (which are publicly visible under the object announcements), and all other behaviours explicitly forbidden in the guidelines. The guidelines are the instrument of staff power, since whoever registers on the website, which, it should be remembered, is a cultural association, accepts their rules, that is, the rules of that group.

On E-barty the only rule that is applied is the rule of social reputation, but on Zr there is an authority that establishes rules and decides whether an actor is allowed to remain in the community or not. On the one side, this structure allows for fewer struggles between barterers and a higher level of security against fraud and chicanery, on the other, it limits social action. In any case, barterers did not complain about the power staff members can exercise, but were not tolerant of the lack of transparency manifested in their actions. What they object to is not that members can be removed from the website, but that if a member is removed the community is not told exactly why. The message that appears when searching for a member who has been removed

indicates four possible reasons⁸⁹, but does not specify the real reason why the user was removed.

On Reoose, staff seems to have absolute control since the website does not have a public forum, hence no social space for discussion. Although, both barterers and staff members stated they had good relations with each other – barterers declared themselves satisfied with staff activities, and staff members underlined how collaborative their users are – their relations remain private. Lacking even the quasi forum Zr proposes, Reoose completely avoids the possibility of social control: everything is controlled by the staff. If this element is added to the fact that it is staff members who establish the value of objects through a table of credits, then the hierarchical nature of this website and the importance of the role of authority in the construction of social relations, become clear.

6.7 Barter time

6.7.1 Negotiation and exchange: two emerging approaches

Time is a particular variable which intervenes in many aspects of the online barter practice. At the beginning of this chapter the fact that barter is not a saving practice was stressed, and even those barterers who initially approach it to save money, quickly realize that barter still has a cost, beyond shipment costs which do play a role; indeed, time can be considered the highest cost: “if it true that you don’t spend money in barter, it is also true that it takes time, both for publishing items and for exchanging” (Zr_30f).

Although many barterers stated that barter do not take up much time in their everyday life organization, they were employed part-time or not employed who hence had more time available compared to those working full-time (some even had two jobs). Time, like value, is a relative concept and, for this reason, in the context of this paragraph, time is understood as specific capital in this field. To check the

⁸⁹ 1. the user registered with false data; 2. we are checking user after signals received from other users; 3. user asked for account removal; 4. misbehaviour. <http://www.zerorelativo.it/giuliafederica>, (last accessed, 6th October 2013)

validity of this assumption, the use of time in online barter practice is analysed in a bid to understand how far it influences exchange practices.

Analysing the descriptions of the exchanges made by interviewees, the barter phase that seem to be the most time consuming is packing the items, rather than negotiating over them – although to an extent this depends on the individual approach to barter. “it takes time because you have to pack it well, perhaps finding some pluriball paper, and then you have to find the right box, I mean with the right seize, because everybody has a box at home, but it must match the seize requested by the courier” (Zr_33f).

Two types of barterers emerged from the interviews: those who regard bartering as a hobby, and those who see it almost like a job, which consequently dramatically changes their perception of time.

For those who consider bartering is a game or a hobby, negotiation can last days or even weeks. In describing bartering as a hobby, they refer to a leisure time activity, which is clearly opposed to a job. Barter belongs to a separate temporal area which does not involve the job and where time is for themselves. Bartering acquires the status of a personal moment, away from normal life duties, which might include family care, domestic responsibilities and/or a full time job.

I really have fun bartering, for me it is relaxing I mean, I do not have so much time to do it hence I take it as an hobby [...] In the end, I tell you, I really have fun, I like it and, I repeat, I take it as a game, as an hobby, it is not a job (Zr_33f)

it must be an hobby, a moment to have a chat with someone, an opportunity to meet new people, according to me bartering should be like this, it should not become a stressful activity (Zr_42f)

for me Zr is the last ring of a long chain of activities which fill my days, it is not the first thing that comes into my mind in the morning and plus, perhaps it is only my perception but I do perceive that the barter philosophy is exactly about engaging in a slower form of consumption [...] hence, bartering should not be taken as a job, you can't dedicate entire days to bartering, and it is normal that you are more relaxed on a barter website (Zr_29f)

These barterers do not connect to the website during the day, and usually prefer evening times, consequently, their negotiations may extend over a long period. For example, the time from when another barterer asks for information about an object

they published, to the moment they answer to the question may involve several hours. They may also keep track of requests and questions received during the day by checking their email, but they prefer to respond to them all at one time, in the precise moments when they focus only on bartering.

For their would-be barterer partners this approach can be very frustrating, not just because they may regard bartering as a “job”, but also because they have a different approach to social media, which alters their view of the time pace at which exchanges should be conducted. Among those who barter throughout the day, include people with part-time or no jobs, and those who are “connected” all day long. Some are connected during the day because their job allows this, some are connected because they want to be. They have no problem with keeping the website page open while they are working, and checking from time to time what has been published, or responding to questions and conducting negotiations.

I don't have too much time but when I'm at work I always keep the Zr page opened below the other internet pages and sometime I keep an eye on new items published or I answer to requests on my email (Eb_35f)

it is very annoying to exchange in this way, I mean, there are some people who do not answer requests because they take their time and then they answer too late, but then I forget what I've been asking! (Re_29m)

Their pace of exchange is much faster than in the first category of barterers, who are seen as rude and annoying by the second category. The second category finds it annoying to be locked into a relation that does not take form and leaves them suspended in a relational void. Thus, when two barterers start negotiations over an object and one of the parts takes too long to respond to questions,⁹⁰ a longer time between question and response reduces the tension necessary to maintain the bargaining: similar to a chess game where the adversary never moves its pawns. The void perceived by the person awaiting a response puts them in an uneasy situation which they cannot control. However, while some barterers become uneasy waiting

⁹⁰ Evaluating how much time is considered “too much” is not straightforward, but my observations indicate that not responding with 12 hours considered a quite considerable delay, and 24 hours is regarded as definitely rude.

for a reply, others are discomfited by continuous requests for a response. Not only do they feel they are not being respected they also think the other is manifesting an unjustified lack of trust.

For time related to shipment, both parties feel that once an exchange is agreed it is important to ship the object as soon as possible, and if there is a delay, then the addressee should be kept informed. Delayed shipment with no explanation is irritating, above all because it signals potential chicanery and sets up an unbalanced relation: if one party has received her object, the one who is still awaiting receipt perceives a greater harm.

I do it as well, I mean, if I am negotiating with a person, or we've just concluded the negotiation, I always inform the other whether if I'm going to ship in a day or more, or even if I have problem I inform the other that there will be a delay. You see, I try to keep the communication opened because I think it's right, I mean, the other person is waiting...as if I am the one who is waiting and the thing does not arrive, and I wait, and the other inform me about the problem she encountered I appreciate this so much. Hence, if a person behave in this way, it is probable that I'm going to exchange with her again (Zr_49f)

Negotiation also involves some sacrifice of time. It can be considered unfair if the sacrifice is unequal: for those barterers who devote a limited time to exchanges, it is unfair to be asked for checking very long pages. Barterers can receive numerous requests for a single object: some of these requests might contain an offer (I like your object – I saw your wish list – I can offer you this) or might be just an invitation to check the other's page, to look for something that they might want to exchange for. The invitation can be provoked by two situations: the first, and most correct, is if the other shows a desire for an object, then checks the offerer's wish list, but appears not to have anything the barterer desires or might like. Then, a request to check her page is acceptable, since she has spent *time* taking care of the other person's needs. She sacrificed her time, but, unfortunately, the result of the sacrifice did not lead to a positive conclusion. The second situation is when someone shows interest in the object being offered without bothering to scrutinize the offerer's wish list, and responds with the generic "check my page". In this case, there are some barterers who simply let the invitation drop, considering this a rude response. Others may try

to look at the other's page, but if it is a very long list will let the invitation drop and feel annoyed. The reasons for their annoyance are the time and sacrifice involved: their sacrifice of time to check the other's page, has not been reciprocated by the other barterer who spent not time at all checking the offerer's wish list. However, it should be noted that, according to all barterers, a wish list does not include all of a barterer's needs and wishes, there is always something that might have been overlooked. Barterers stated that, if the sacrifice is not balanced, it is of no consequence whether they conclude a useful exchange; they will not engage in negotiation. In this case, the sacrifice refers not to money but to time.

The exchange phase, then, requires different amounts of time depending on whether it is mediated or direct. The characteristics of a mediated exchange have been explained and, again, the shipment phase depends partly on the nature of the barterer's lifestyle/job: whether she can be at a particular address to wait for the courier, or if she must instead go to a post office, etc. The majority of the time spent in mediated exchange is actually dedicated to packing the object(s) for shipment; when this is considered overly demanding barterers will prefer to exchange directly.

At the same time, exchanging directly might involve only a few seconds for the actual handover, but involves time spent arranging the meeting. Sometimes, organizing the meet-up can become so complicated that one or both barterers renounce the exchange because their schedules do not coincide.

the most demanding part of manual exchange is organizing the meeting. Milan is a big city and we should find a moment and a place that suit both barterers. This is really difficult for me because first of all, I don't have a car, an using public transportation takes time, secondly I work until 6 pm hence I'm free during the evening or during lunch time, sometimes, but not always during weekends. Hence, I concentrate exchanges in those moments but these are serious limits to the practice. Then, you know, there are more gentle barterers and less gentle barterers, someone who is willing to come a little bit closer to one, someone who's not (Zr_29f)

These two approaches to barter that emerged during the interviews seem to be strongly connected to the value given to time and the work/occupation of each barterer.

I connect to the website late at night or when I take a break from work, because now I'm doing an autonomous work hence I'm more relaxed. I'm working at home hence when I take a rest and have a coffee I check the website. Before, when I was working in an office, I couldn't do this because they did not allow us to access to internet, now I'm bartering much more than before. (Zr_30f)

First, there are two types of full-time workers: those who have a strict 40 hours working week contracts, mainly in the tertiary sector, and those who have more than one job, meaning that they work more than 40 hours per week, or have a job that does not imply downtimes (the two may also coincide). The former are employed in the office eight hours a day, but are also spending a discrete amount of time bartering (or engaging in other sorts of activity, such as chatting on Facebook, shopping online, booking shipments, etc.) which means that they are not actually working for the eight hours and can enjoy what are normally considered "leisure time activities", during working time. They have a stable wage, hence economic capital, but also have time to spend that capital, perhaps not in traditional forms of consumption, but using internet to satisfy their needs and desires. The other group is usually employed in jobs where internet connection is not allowed, and have to work more than eight 8 hours a day, meaning that this can overlap into time many (the first group) would consider to be leisure time. They possess discrete economic capital, at least enough to live with dignity and they may consider themselves as middle class, but they have scarce leisure time; thus, since time is a scarce resource, it has a particular value for them. Unemployed people may appear to have endless time, but a large proportion of their time is spent searching for jobs, something that can be considered a job in itself, hence their real leisure time is reduced. They also lack economic capital.

At the beginning of the research, it was expected that there would be more unemployed barterers on the websites, because they had more time, and because their smaller economic capital would encourage exchanges not involving money. It soon became clear that not only is the monetary cost of barter (represented by shipment costs) relative (some barterer can exchange by hand but others cannot) but also the time cost is. It became evident also that among those people with considerable incomes there is a group who is able to benefit from leisure time *within* working hours: hence, they have both capital, economic and temporal advantages. In their

accounts barter is described as a practice that takes a small amount of time. This leads to an observation that cannot be expanded on here, but might be an interesting topic for future research, that is, the relation between time and work⁹¹.

In general terms, it must be stressed the fact that many barterers maintained that as their experience increased, the practice took less time. In fact, an increase in experience means an increase in knowledge, which accumulates as the practice is performed.

experience comes from many exchanges done, at the beginning the practice can take time but then, when the mechanism is understood and you deal with people who know the mechanism, it becomes easier (Re_24m)

6.7.2 Cumulative negotiation

The time taken for a single negotiation and the time spent on negotiation in general, are different and vary widely. Some negotiations (such as in the case of cumulative exchanges) can extend over weeks or months before the exchange takes place. The real negotiation phase for each pair of objects exchanged does not last weeks, which means that the moment of agonistic struggle characterizing bargaining starts and ends in a short space of time. The moment of exchange, too, is performed almost synchronously, with the two parts receiving their expected packages at the same time. What barterers share over a long time is their relation beyond barter practice; during the period when they are waiting to achieve a certain number of objects to justify the shipment costs, they usually activate friendship relations.

Conducting a cumulative exchange gives barter practice the temporal structure that is typical of gift exchange, with a very long lapse of time between one exchange and the other, meaning that negotiations might never be concluded leaving open the possibility for the relation to continue. Typical of cumulative exchange is that barterers carry on multiple negotiations until they are satisfied, but each negotiation does not imply the general rule of equivalence of values. All barterers stated that, no matter the real (economic) value of the objects exchanged, what is important is that

⁹¹ See Cross (1993).

that the objects have the “same” value. How value is established during barter exchanges is discussed in Chapter 7; here we note that in cumulative exchange none of the negotiations may be balanced, but the exchange reaches a sort of equilibrium with the sum of the objects exchanged. Sometimes, the link generated between the two parts can be such that one of the barterers buys or searches for an object she knows the other will appreciate, based on what has been learned about her tastes through a series of communicational exchanges. In this sense, time is more than a capital, it is an element structuring the relation, a dimension determining the nature of the relation itself.

6.8 Some initial remarks

There is a recurring issue related to value and values. When barterers have to decide whether to ship objects exchanged, using couriers or the postal service, the value of the objects is usually the measure used to decide; we have seen how this can lead to discussions and quarrels. When deciding if the exchange was satisfactory or not, especially from the point of view of the quality of the object received, barterers evaluate how “used” the object is in order to determine its value. Different degrees of deterioration are tolerated and, depending, on the barterer, the object may be considered as in a perfect state or destroyed. Hence, we have already uncovered some important elements related to the research question, the first being that value is a subjective dimension.

Also, most of the disputes arising from barter exchanges (apart from those strictly connected to the act of fraud) derive from lack of communication or cold, impersonal communication. The longest established website among the three, Zr, imposes a minimum amount of characters for object descriptions, and barterers state that misbehaviours are not punished (with negative feedback or exclusion from exchange) in the case of good communication that justifies behaviours. Overall, the impression is that barter is much more to do with the relational dimension of exchange than a form of opportunistic market behaviour.

Chapter 7

How far barter is a counter-hegemonic practice?

“Oh yes, you have the choice of buying or not buying. As a consumer, you can choose a brand instead of another, a company instead of its competitor because it has ethical principles and produce certain type of products, but this is the only possibility you have. According to me, barter goes beyond this. It is parallel.”

(Zr_30f)

“money reveals itself in its true character a mere means that becomes useless and unnecessary, as soon as life is concentrated on it alone it is only the bridge to definitive values, and one cannot live on a bridge”

(Simmel,1997: 249)

The final chapter in this thesis addresses the main research question and demonstrates to what extent online barter practice can be considered a counter-hegemonic activity. It responds to this question using the empirical evidences already employed to draw a picture of the phenomenology of the online practice, alongside its peculiarities. The description thus portrayed reveals a political side of barter that needs to be explored in detail, in order to provide an answer consistent with the theoretical framework proposed in the first part of this dissertation.

Five dimensions are explored, demonstrating how far barter is counter-hegemonic. The counter-hegemony of barter is revealed by its capacity to split the market, reject the use of money, support alternative production models, support alternative consumption models, and create alternative social relations.

Chapter 7 shows that barter is counter-hegemonic because it opposes market logic: it uses ex-commodities, whose value is generated within a unique relation between two parts. However, it can also be argued that without a market production there would be no objects to exchange and, at the same time, it is not always the case that all objects are exchanged – there is a discrete number of things that remain strictly related to individuals who would never barter them.

Online barter practice is considered counter-hegemonic not only because it contrasts market hegemony but also because it rejects the use of money. As shown in paragraph 7.2, it sometime uses the credit system as a short-cut, retrieving the money function of a numeraire, which does not constitute a hegemonic dimension. Evidently, credits contain a remembrance of hegemony, but it really depends on how people use them and, in this case, they are used mainly as a measure. In any case, in barter practice the setting of value is built within the relation, through the negotiation over objects. The negotiation phase, where money is eliminated, gives space to a different location of trust, no longer responding to money, but embedded in the exchange relation. At the same time, money 'sneaks in' via the use of gold – as a medium of exchange, and when two parties negotiate using money as a measure of value, even though both these behaviours, according to interviewees, are considered inadequate for barter practice. Furthermore, money must be used also to access websites and, above all, to pay shipment costs. In one of the case studied, moreover, the establishment of prices – in the form of credits – is determined by the website's rules, shifting the price setting back to outside the relation, although the researcher could suggest some counter-hegemonic actions that contrast with this hegemonic dimension.

Although less evidently, online barter practice also supports an alternative model of production, since it allows for a withdrawal of labour from the labour market, enhancing the development of self-production. It implicitly also represents a critique of overproduction; in some cases the critique is explicit. Obviously, it cannot constitute a proper alternative model of production since bartering is a consumption activity, but in any case, it stimulates consumer to think, and even act, as an alternative producer.

The most evident counter-hegemonic force barter exercises is related in any case to supporting alternative models of consumption. Bartering objects instead of throwing them away when still functioning, undeniably lengthens their life cycles, redefining their biographies. Consequently, it reduces the volume and types of polluting wastes and it contributes to diminishing mass, unethical, production. The role of consumption in everyday life is hence redefined, creating a model of alternative consumerism. Obviously, there are suspensions of this model – people do

not rely only on barter in their everyday lives – and the fact of exchanging between geographically distant parties promotes a certain amount of pollution.

Bartering online also means constructing an alternative model of social relations, contrasting the dehumanizing process operating in market-based relations. The two parts involved in a barter exchange benefit from a balanced relation that is unachievable either in gift exchange or in monetary exchange. This is why, through barter practice, communities of people are created and the relations so established work according to a horizontal, informal model of authority. Again, the presence of a vertical, authoritarian force is revealed, but, at the same time, barterers find ways to resort to their ability to take part into the decision making process through public discussion and participation.

Then picture that emerges from this chapter shows how difficult it still is to define this practice: it contains elements of counter-hegemony which may be developed in the future, but at the same time displays those implied hegemonic elements that develop through a process of institutionalization. At the moment, barter practice seems to conform to the criteria in de Certeau (1990) used to define a tactic, and, as a tactic, it operates in a field where the rules have been decided by a dominant force, the force of the market. Barterers are engaging in this poaching activity, “*braconner*”, which opposes the hegemony by residing within its territory.

7.1 Barter is not market

In the reconstruction of the political dimension of the exchange field, developed in Chapter 3, a market economy was defined as an economy where a precise structure, the market, dominates the process of resource allocation (Polanyi 2001). Hence, the market is the place where the forces of aggregate demand meet the forces of aggregate supply in order to establish the price of commodities. In a capitalistic market system, demand is supposed to be infinite and the supply is supposed to be produced by the owners of the means of production who are interested in maximizing their profits: the more they produce, the lower the costs of production and the greater the profit they can reap from selling their products. It has been said, that the hegemony of the market is exercised in two ways: it extends the idea of economic

interest to any form of social production, and it imposes a certain way of circulating commodities. For its part, barter, to a certain extent, constitutes a way of resisting this hegemonic force. It does so, by using objects taken outside the circuit of commodities, and by working with what could be described as the “visible” hands of the barter exchange, that is, non-abstract subjects who establish the value of objects through their relations. In the next section, these counter-hegemonic dimensions and the limits they impose, are explained. If it is true that barter implies the use of ex-commodities and self-produced objects, it is also true that those ex-commodities were once commodities, hence, they may still hold economic value.

7.1.1 The circulation of ex-commodities and self-produced objects

This section analyses the counter-hegemonic role of ex-commodities, self-produced objects, and services together with the limits they impose through their hegemonic elements.

7.1.1.1 Ex-commodities

you know, the jacket we exchanged, I wore it thinking you wore it and this is the nice think about barter, the fact that a contact is created between me and you. And this is different from second-hand market because you don't know who wore the clothing you buy (Re_47f)

One of the first characteristics of barter is that it works with ex-commodities. Using a biographic approach to the definition of objects, Kopytoff (1986) and Appadurai (1986) reflect on the process of commodification operating in capitalist complex societies referring to the fact that each object is related to every other object by money. Being a non-commodity inevitably implies a value not represented by monetary price. According to Kopytoff (1986), the biography of an object produced in a capitalistic system starts with its birth as a commodity: a good that is acquired at a certain price and which, once bought, stops being a commodity. It quits the commodities circuit, but it can return to it if it is sold again (e.g. in the second-hand market).

One of the counter-hegemonic sides of barter is that it works only with ex-commodities. As the interviews show, the barterer's very objective is to give away objects not longer used – but which are still in working order – in order to acquire objects more useful to her at that same moment. The objects that are circulating have been removed from the market and are exchanged by subjects who are aware of the explicit and specific status of ex-commodities, as the quote below illustrates:

I have a kid and I exchange toys for him. It is normal...I mean, if the toy is purchased in a shop, it is perfect, but if another kid has been playing with that toy I can't pretend that the toy is perfect, as if it was new. [...] I think that if someone wants perfect things, just go in a shop and buy them! (Zr_42f)

To confirm the idea that a commodified object should stay in the market since barter mainly works with ex-commodities, the website administrator of one of the case studied states:

if you have an object which you don't use but it still has an economic value, sell it on e-bay, it is silly to put it on Reoose" (Re_wm_40m)

During ethnographic observation, the researcher noticed that the ex-commodities category is a broad category that includes different sub-categories of objects. Although websites develop categories, analysis of field notes and interview notes, show that objects are usually exchanged between barterers according to particular descriptions. For example:

a) "objects I do not use anymore", which are books that have been already read; old versions of objects (usually technological goods, but also furniture): "I gave that usb key away since I have bought a new one, with a higher quality, and I did not need the old one anymore" (Zr_30f); "Well, for example, if I have three mouse for the computer, what am I going to do with the two of them?! Or, another example, I have three mobiles I don't use..." (Re_24m); Objects such as clothes which no longer fit, baby clothes no longer appropriate, furniture from a previous house that does not fit the new one: "I changed size hence I really had a mountain of things I did not want to throw away!" (Eb_35f);

b) "objects I no longer want to own", usually things acquired as gifts – especially from an ex girlfriend/boyfriend, ex friends, colleagues, or as commercial promotions.

In other words, presents from people with whom the subject no longer has (or does not want to have) a relation, or as the result of advertising. For example: “I broke up with my girlfriend, I have her things there, things that she gave me, I want to separate from them, because they hurt me” (Zr_33m). There are subjects who stated that they often follow commercial promotions to obtain objects that they can use to barter: “you know those promotions like the one in supermarket, ‘win a coffee machine buying from us!’...I usually win some stuff, some of them I give to my family, but other I use to barter, searching for something more useful. Like, I won a toaster, I didn’t use it, I exchanged it for a salad spinner” (Eb_35f);

c) “objects I want to share”, usually books that the party very much enjoyed and hopes others might appreciate: “books I judge to be good, I like the idea that other people read them” (Zr_33m);

d) “self-produced objects”, this category includes clothing and accessories made by the barterer: “I always search for teabags because I make breakfast placemat out of them” (Zr_29f). Different kinds of furniture and ornaments: usually disposed of through a recycling process.

e) “services”, such as massages, language lessons, children’s entertainment.

Although there are differences between these ex-commodities, they all have in common the characteristic that they are irreversible, that is, they cannot return to the status of a commodity because there is no market that would award them monetary value. “those objects which are exposed on my Zr page, are no more useful objects to me, and I cannot give them a market value since, according to me, there is no market for them” (Zr_29f). They have been through a process of singularization (Kopytoff 1986) which works at a personal level and gives to the object an individual value. Their specific status keeps them outside of the logic of commodification, and their role within the exchange relation refers to a completely different universe of meaning, far removed from that of the market exchange, in which their value is homogenized and reduced to a quantity of money, which is the object that represents their *real* value. In the exchange relation, the status of ex-commodity assigns them a sort of uniqueness which was hidden in the market, and gives to subjects the opportunity to use them as instruments of power during the negotiation struggle that determines their situated value – the value determined by a condition of *hic et nunc* typical of non-commodified object. Like the work of art described by Benjamin (1974), these

objects assume the role of a work of art for the common consumers, who are sharing not only the object but also a piece of their identity. In the struggle between singularization and commodification (Kopytoff 1986), the tactic adopted by consumers, described by de Certeau (1990), consists of unconscious personification of the object.

The counter-hegemonic power of barter, in any case, is limited by the fact that the objects circulating through this modality of exchange initially were commodities, and some resist the singularization process. They were produced for the market, that is, their costs of production, together with the aggregate demand for those products, generates their price. Consequently, they have been bought for a quantity of money and for one moment in their lives they were subject to the logic of the market: they had a value that was determined within the relation between the particular commodity and all other commodities. The hegemonic power of the market, represented in object by the status of commodity, does not disappear even during the process of barter: there are some objects that clearly maintain their previous commodity status.

In particular there is a category of objects, which interviewees identified as “brand-name” or “a designer” object, which maintain their status of commodity even in the barter circuit. A barterer that says “she is interested only in luxury brand or designer objects”, “she is exchanging only luxury or designer objects”, etc., is making reference to the high market value of the object. Of course, every object has a “brand” which is the name of the producer that commercialized it, but in the market brand and producer are not synonymous. Brand is understood as indicating both the name of the producer or group of producers and a series of variables that distinguish the object. Brand describes a life style which is constructed through the most sophisticated marketing tools, and is associated with the person who buys the good. Fashion studies focus on the fashion world and associated brands, but their discourse can be extended to any commercial sector in which there is competition among producers on the basis of being the best producer, or promoting the most exclusive image.

Although this hegemonic dimension comes into barter, it is limited by the fact that brand-names are recognized as denoting valuable objects, but this value is considered

negatively by some barterers. This counter-hegemonic side becomes evident if we consider both perspectives: on the one side is the person exchanging the branded/designer object who is regarded as a particular type of person with whom others prefer not to exchange because of a supposed lack of shared values:

if there is a barterer who barter only brand-named objects, I even avoid to get in contact with her (Zr_54f).

Personally, when I'm attracted by an object, first thing I do is looking at the other wish list. If I see brand-names like Dior, Armani, or new things, not used, this type of shoes, that type of shoes, I just drop it, I don't even ask. This is not barter! (Zr_37f)

On the other side, there is a well diffused idea that exchanging branded objects is not in line with the philosophy of barter:

according to me, dealing with who is still thinking with a market's logic has been always a problem, since those objects did not clearly have a market for the person who published. If you published them on a barter site it means that you don't find them useful anymore! It has been always a problem, really, it is like if we are speaking two different languages, we don't understand each other, it is a different way to barter, in a way, it is selling without using money (Zr_39f).

This category attracts negative connotations because the objects are still perceived as and, indeed, exchanged as commodities. As is described in the section on relations, subjects assign a pre-determined value to such objects, which is the market value: when these objects are part of the relation, participants are in different positions/have different status, and cannot achieve equality since ownership of a designer item has the power to subjugate any other barterer and their object.

This is not because its quality and value are determined within the relation, but because the power of the brand, deriving from the market, is so strong as to resist personification. In an exchange involving designer objects, the relation involves three parties, the third being the market and its tool, money, which influence the negotiation, as this barterer makes clear:

well, let's say that such an object, it is an object with a strong economic value. If I possessed such an object I would not barter it, but I would sell it on e-bay or subito.it. I also know of website where you exchange valuable objects, but this is not my idea of barter. I prefer to give life back to everyday use objects, or to clothing, but highly valuable objects...no, I can't think of them as exchangeable objects. Perhaps is my idea of luxury which is influencing me [...] when you exchange such an object of course you give it a commercial value (Zr_30f).

7.1.1.2 Self-produced objects

Exchanged objects can also include self-produced objects. The counter-hegemonic nature of barter is fully exhibited by these products, since they have been generated by a mechanism of self-production, they have never been commodified. Their level of uniqueness is higher both because they are unique pieces and because they have never been compared or related to other commodities, and their values have never been expressed through money. The fact of not being "touched" by money, gives them a particular position within the barter circuit. These objects not only embody a part of the person who possesses them, they hold a part of the person who created them, part of her creativity and knowledge. This is the exact reverse of the case of a branded, luxury item: for self-produced objects, the power of personification is too strong for the market to intervene. The value assigned to these objects is determined by a different mechanism: as the following barterer maintains, these objects are not valued by market means, but they acquire a value through the relation they establish with the subject, contrasting the alienation produced by the rupture of the subject/object relation (Marx 1988). A barterer who produces knitted objects said that:

if you exchange an object for money, then of course there is the value of the work you needed to acquire that money, but it is different compared to... I mean, I like to produce an object, if I realize a pot holder I appreciate the fact that I did it, it does satisfy me. When I exchange it, I clearly do not consider the economic value of the work which was needed to produce it, also because it would be really high in terms of working hours. [...] I repeat, it is the very fact that I was able to do it, this gratifies me: I am so delighted to see the thing done, that I don't need to compensate through exchange. The real satisfaction is doing the object. (Zr_49f).

Consequently, these objects can exercise a discrete power over other objects, but their value has no aprioristic references, it is established within the relation. They are the result of the activity of the craft consumer described by Campbell (2005), and they are effectively unique since they have not been produced in a series, which means that no item will be exactly the same as any other item. Although many of these objects are produced precisely to be exchanged, they are not commodities because they are not assigned a price. Appadurai (1986) argues that a commodity is anything produced with the intention of its being exchanged, but Kopytoff (1986) disagrees, stressing the price element as the key factor determining the commodity nature of a good. Also, barterers do not produce objects *mainly* to exchange them: they obtain satisfaction from the activity and only in a second moment do they consider the product of their work as something that is “exchangeable”.

I started knitting again after a long pause, since I wanted to teach it to my daughter, hence I began to create some little things. Then I wonder about the possibility of getting these things exchanged on Zr, perhaps I would have found someone interested. (Zr_49f)

my mother has this beautiful vegetable garden which produces a mountain of herbs and spices, too much for her consumption and what should she do? Throw them away?? She gives me a lot of basil, for example. I make big quantities of pesto sauce that I consume for myself and my family, but I exchange the rest. (Zr_37f)

This counter-hegemonic dimension of barter is conditional to an extent. For example, the raw materials used to create self-produced objects were usually once commodities. Barter requires once-commodified objects but there are two considerations here: first, the ex-commodity material passes through a deep transformation when is used to create something new. It could be said that it is completely removed from the process of commodification. Second, using this raw material represents another form of resistance against useless waste since it activates a process of recycling. Using commodities to produce non-commodities can be regarded as a tactic of craft consumers, who create and diffuse new cultural meaning thorough recycling (de Certeau 1990; Campbell 2005). At the extreme, are barterers who exchange self-produced object realized out of exchanged raw materials.

7.1.1.3 Services

The counter-hegemonic force of barter can be seen also in services. When the object of negotiation is the knowledge of a subject, expressed in the exercise of a specific activity, the level of uniqueness and personification reaches its optimum level for several reasons. Once the service is taken outside the standardizing labour market, whenever the activity is performed, it is not repeated in exactly the same way. Second, the performer of an activity *is* the subject, not a commodity. The hegemonic vision of the market forces individuals to think that labour – as well as land and money – is a commodity and consequently must be exchanged as such in the market. According to Polanyi (2001), this assumption is what made the market hegemonic and subjected people to its power. The market needs to transform labour force, land and money into commodities, otherwise it cannot function. In barter exchange, however, labour force applied in the performance of a service is kept out of the process of commodification: the value of an hour of work – an English lesson, a massage, a babysitting session, etc – is decided within the relation. Now, even if it was true that subjects performing these activities recognize that the value of their performance would be high, if measured by the market, they still exchange their labour for objects of a lower value, because the interest they are pursuing is different from economic interest. This is exemplified by the quote below from a masseur: “ayurvedic massages are expensive massages, their cost range from 50 to 70 euro in the market, this is their real value. Then, I mean, I conceive massage as something I offer to people to give them well-being, and I think this is a practice that should be more diffused in our society” (Zr_46m); and for this girl, who gave several English lessons in exchange for some small objects that she used for Christmas presents: “English lessons are expensive, you know how is the market for them, but in that case I was really interested in the fact that the girl could pass the test” (Zr_33f). And even for this girl who organizes children’s parties: “entertainment has a cost, but when I put my activity in the website I knew I would have never gained those 150, 120 euro that I usually earn in the market [...] in any case, my romantic aim was to organize parties for those kids who could not afford one” (Zr_39f).

The first is an emblematic case for understanding the counter-hegemonic force of barter. Interviewee Zr_46m explained in his life-account that bartering massage for objects was the only way he could offer his skills. Indeed, the other two exchange

modalities (gift and money) produced a distortion in the creation of value and the meaning assigned to his performance. When tried to give massages for free, his service was regarded as non-professional, and his intentions were perceived by potentially interested subjects as sexually oriented.⁹² Being masseur is a secondary activity, something like a hobby, he does not want to make it his main profession (he is a biologist), and was keen to offer it as a pure gift. In order to avoid any suspicion of sexual motives,⁹³ he offered his massages for a certain amount of money, but this also was not considered professional. The hegemony of market was acting in this case: in the market subjects are used to assigning to labour certain characteristics. The market assigns a precise price to a massage, which is not the result of a negotiation between people, but the result of aggregate demand and supply. The price of a massage is relatively high (especially for an ayurvedic massage in the Italian market) and few people can afford it. If the service is offered at a low price, it loses professionalism: “there is a discourse on massage...it is considered to be elitist, only rich people get massaged in Italy, only who can pay” (Zr_46m). It is of no consequence that supplier and receiver might agree to for a lower price: the market price is a sign of the quality of the commodity/service (as in the case of a designer good). In a situation of asymmetric information, price is the only criterion for judging value.

Well, I think that there should be the possibility of getting massaged much more frequently and that everyone should have this possibility, but massage is linked to money, in the sense that I massage you and you pay me, there is no another way to intend the massage in this country. If many more people were able to massage, then people would get massaged at home, among family members (Zr_46m).

People generally are suspicious of a service offered for free or at an unrealistically low price. In both cases, his offers attracted sexual related requests. He began bartering his massage service to protect himself against this distortion of meaning. Through barter exchange, trust was guaranteed by the feedback system, hence his

⁹² This is probably because a massage is an extremely particular type of personal service involving physical contact between people, in a situation of unbalanced power (the receiver must completely trust the giver). If in eastern culture this is more diffused and accepted, in western cultures physical contact tends to be avoided and suspected of being related to sexual behaviours.

⁹³ When he first announced on the internet that he was offering massages for free, he received enquiries only from male subjects interested in a homosexual relation.

seriousness was recognized and the act of giving something in return for the massage did not leave the receiver feeling powerless as a gift relation can do. His interest was not to maximize profits based on costs and revenue (as in economic interest), but instead to perform as many massages as possible.⁹⁴ He acknowledges that what he received in return for a massage was completely inconsistent with its market value, but since he was not pursuing a market interest, he was satisfied by the exchange.

However, it could be argued that those who exchange services for objects, despite the satisfaction reaped from taking their activity outside the labour market, still tend to think about their services in monetary terms: they find an alternative compensation in the satisfaction resulting from creating a relation with people benefitting from the service, but they all claimed that on the market they would have received a higher value. Furthermore, they regard bartering of services as an opportunity to promote themselves, as a marketing strategy, typical of market economy, as this barterer explains:

I must say that if one considers what could have been earned, if I did the same activity on the market, well, entertainment has a cost, hence if you propose it on a barter website you know you are not going to earn those 150 euro that I get on the market. But the logic behind the exchange of service is that in any case I'm promoting my activity on different channels compared to the market one, and more people get to know what I do (Zr_29f).

7.1.2 The visible hand of the barter exchange

Finally, the counter-hegemonic force of barter is exercised against Adam Smith's (1976) invisible hand of the market. Adam Smith's conception, which was developed further by classical economists, was that the aggregation of all demand and the aggregation of all supply, interacted in the market to produce prices. This assumption suggests the idea of the market as an abstract place where, *theoretically*, all demand and supply meet: a place where the single individual has no possibility to determine the value of anything, since it is not individual demand or individual supply that counts, but the aggregation of all demand and supply.

⁹⁴ Having completed an intensive training course, he needed to practise his skills.

In contrast, a barter website is a place where individuals meet, together with their objects, the value of which is defined within the exchange relation. It is the subject who decides whether to conduct a negotiation, whether to create a relational situation with the intention of struggling over the power of one's own objects. The result of each single exchange relation is unique, since objects are not exchanged against a common universal object, but are the result of an exchange of personal, individual sacrifices.

Who decides about the value of an object is not an abstract subject, but involves two physical individuals within a relation: "In other words, the way economists talk about "goods and services" already involves reducing what are really social relations to objects; an economical approach to values extends the same process even further, to just about everything." (Graeber 2001: 9).

there is a lot of participation, because each person walk in the shoes of others. Here we do not have the seller and the buyer, here we have a person who identify herself with another person. Hence you say 'ok, this could have happened to me also' [*in case of problems*] therefore there is more participation and more availability (Re_47f)

7.2 Barter rejects the idea of money

Barter is not an aim, it is a mean to get to know other people, to get what you need...like money, which should be a mean, but it became an aim (Zr_33m)

As was argued in Chapter 3, money is only one pattern of exchange and, oftentimes not the most efficient. Nonetheless, for historical and political reason, money developed to be the only system of exchange applied by social actors in contemporary societies. In this sense, the counter-hegemonic nature of barter is manifested by its enabling exchanges without the use of that instrument.

The history of money, its birth and diffusion, has been shown to be one of a political instrument employed by a political authority (whether the State or the king) to represent and exercise power. Chapter 3 also shows that far from being a mere numeraire, money is the representation of the economic value of an object exchanged in a market: it is the representation of a relation that involves all the commodities

exchanged in the market, in which the relation between the two parties is not taken into consideration. Money is recognized as representing interchangeability with itself, and as an instrument that is interchangeable with any other thing (Simmel 2011: 122), people place their trust in it instead of in the other parts of the exchange. It has been said that money is used by individuals because of a diffused idea that it will be used by everybody else and that its value is guaranteed by a third party, the State or the banking institution.

By eliminating the use of money, and by adopting (in some cases) a credit system to facilitate transactions, barter resists the hegemony of money. The value of the objects exchanged is established within the relation and, where credits are involved, they serve only as short-cut enabling negotiation in the fastest possible way.

7.2.1 Rejection of money

It is by rejecting the use and the very idea of money that barter expresses its counter-hegemonic power. Barter does not need money to function and, as our barterers contend, the less the reference to money the better the barter mechanism works. Some barterers claim that they embarked on the practice to escape money's dominance:

Let's say the first idea was to stop money circulating [...] Now, I mean, everything is made for the sake of money, everything goes around money from small to big things, with no exclusion, now, it is clear that we cannot think about a world without money, it is not acceptable anymore, but if we think about some decades ago, there was less money and more brotherhood, money got a lower value, it was less relevant compared to nowadays. (Eb_53f)

Although there may be no direct reference to money, for comparison, the tendency to revert to numerical calculation (Simmel 1997a) based on money is an irritant to many people who engage in barter activity. "I'm sick of hearing only about money, always money, like 'if I do this how much money do I get?'. Unfortunately in modern society we always have to deal with money" (Zr_33f)

There is an expression of resistance deriving from a consciousness of living in a world where the value of nearly everything is expressed in monetary terms, and even

if this consciousness is less developed, many barterers described money as “dirty”, “useless”, “a-social”.

money is dirty! I mean, not all money is dirty, it can also come from legal things but by saying dirty I mean [...] when we use money, money is an object that would not have a value unless we gave it one, and this fact, that this object does not have a value in itself, but it is only us who gave a value to it, it makes it less human, less friendly (Re_36f)

people are money's slaves, euro's slaves, they are slaves in a negative sense, they have their back folded since they do not have money and cannot buy, but in any case they are not able to conceive the world without money (Re_47f)

According to me money is, let's say, a dirty thing! [...] I do not like to touch it, I do not like to handle it, in fact I prefer to use digital money, like credit cards (Re_29m)

Although not able to define in detail the origin of their repulsion towards money, barterers find it more satisfactory, at a social level, to barter rather than use money to obtain commodities. It emerged clearly that their relation to the idea of money was like relation to the idea of an instrument that destroys social relations, and that they interpret barter as a way to return to a different way of relating to other subjects. The idea that money distorts social relations is clear in this barterer's comment. His opinion confirms Simmel's (1997b) idea of money as an instrument that defines everything, even people.

money changes the relation between people, because who is got lots of money is perceived as a prestigious person, a different person. A prestige which does not derive from the person herself, but from the things she can do with money she has. (Zr_33m)

In this barterer's view one of the major problems of our society is that every action is aimed at the accumulation of money:

everything is quantified, we were born in the society where you must have a profit in everything you do. For example, you are now studying, you are become a researcher because one day you will turn this knowledge into money! I would like to live in a society based instead on the idea that you are

studying because one day you will give back to society a service, and society will support you in some way (Re_29m)

However, the hegemonic power of money plays a role in barter in different ways. The use some barterers make of gold is a substitution for money, for example. These barterers are interested in exchanges only involving gold, either by offering gold in order to obtain as many objects as possible, or offering to exchange objects with a scarcity value, against gold. In the first case, the use of gold distorts the mechanism of negotiation because gold exercises excess power over other objects: the value of gold immediately transforms into money, gold is perceived as the “neutral object” (Simmel 1997a; 1997b) that can be exchanged with everything. In particular, gold can be directly exchanged for money in particular outlets,⁹⁵ thus, people who give away multiple objects in exchange only for gold can then transform the gold in money and make, what interviewees described as “the deal”.

Although this attitude demonstrates the weakness of the counter-hegemonic force of barter in contrasting money, the counter-hegemonic side of barter is protected by those barterers who regard the practice of gold exchange as misbehaviour. Those who offer or those who ask for gold are usually regarded as “cheaters”.

there are barterers who ask gold against objects. For example, if they have some brand-name good, if they do not find anything they like on your page they ask if you have a gold necklace or anything else in gold. But asking gold means asking money! You should not be asking for money in barter, hence if you are asking for gold it means you are selling, not bartering! (Eb_36f)

they are searching for gold because then they go to ‘compro oro’ [*typical Italian shop for exchanging gold for money*]. According to me they should go somewhere else, not in a barter site (Eb_33f)

The second way that hegemony enters barter, is through the measuring and/or describing of objects in monetary terms. Sometimes barterers start negotiation by declaring an amount of money needed to acquire the object; sometimes an amount is

⁹⁵ In Italy “compro oro” shops have proliferated since the onset of the financial crisis, growing exponentially in number. Media and public opinion have focused on them since their growth must be a sign that people are having to renounce their “inalienable goods” to obtain cash liquidity; some compro oro do not offer the relevant exchange rate so people are cheated, and money is actually stolen from them.

specified within the announcement description. Thus, the function of money is maintained unaltered: it establishes a value prior to the exchange relation. Barterers who declare the price of an object are seeking to signal a pre-determined value and to start the negotiation phase based on that value. Hence, although the barter mechanism tries to resist money, the latter became so hegemonic⁹⁶ that is used also within barter exchange as a value reference.

well, there is a problem when people pretend to exchange with the 'same value', while I do not give a value, I mean, if I don't use a thing anymore I don't care if my object has a higher value compared to another, but not everybody think in this way (Eb_33f)

the economic evaluation of objects, is the reason why some exchange are not performed. I cannot judge objects economically. It happens quite frequently that I read objects' descriptions where it was mentioned that the object was 'like new' or 'paid x', as to intend that to answer to that announcement, other barterers should offer something economically equal. I could never do this reasoning!" (Zr_29f)

As for the use of gold, a protection mechanism is activated to preserve the counter-hegemonic dimension of barter: describing objects in monetary terms is considered bad behaviour among barterers, who condemn this practice and categorize its practitioners as "strangers".

describing objects with money is like keeping using the lira instead of euro. I mean, why on earth are you translating prices in lira if it does not exist anymore! You did not get the point of barter if you tell me how much did the object cost when you bought it! (Re_29m).

These subjects do not understand the "barter philosophy", and are unable to assimilate the implicit rules coordinating a barter community, the recipes described by Schutz (1979). Some barterers prefer to have no relations with these "strangers" even when they are offering useful objects.

Beyond the use of a surrogate for money (gold), and beyond the use of money as unit of measure, there is a third way that money contrasts with the counter-

⁹⁶ Recall that the term hegemony refers to the capacity to conquer not only the practical dimension of everyday life but also its abstract, cultural dimension. The fact that people cannot judge the value of an object without referring to money means that money has achieved high hegemonic power.

hegemonic force of barter: that is, that money is required for some of the steps involved in a barter exchange. To access barter practice one website required an entry fee: the researcher was involved in the introduction of this rule, which is a novelty for barter websites. The discussion generated by its imposition was an evident sign of how far money is rejected in barter, and barter is only possible (on that particular website) via payment of an amount of money (18 euro).

The discussion over imposition of a fee provides important evidence for understanding how hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces play in the definition of the field. Those barterers who were against the introduction of a fee, justified their position by claiming that the compulsory introduction of money in the system was detrimental to the whole philosophy of barter, a philosophy, they stressed, that focuses on the elimination of money from social relations. They maintained also, that the good relations between staff members and barterers would be damaged by the introduction of money, which would transform the website into an e-commerce site, and diminish its social networking character. Before the introduction of the fee, those willing to collaborate and enable the website activity to continue could donate whatever sum of money they felt was appropriate, and this would be the only monetary transaction allowed on the website; donation was considered to be outside the logic of market profit.

you must pay a fee to register on that website, and according to me this is foolish! Barter is a form of free exchange. If you think that not even e-bay asks for registration fee, and e-bay is a big multinational which seeks profit, it is not a 'non-profit' organization! And in any case it gives assistance, I mean it has much more costs compared to Zr. I don't think the owner of Zr has the same expenses. Furthermore, he could have accepted advertisement in his website, but he did not want...well, he will pay the consequence of that, many persons closed their profiles on that website, as I did." (Re_29m)

I heard the news [*registration fee*] and I decided that I will not subscribe it. I understand the need for money, but honestly it looks like a nonsense to me: a website which proposes free exchanges then turns to asks for money! (ebarty_forum)

At the same time, some were not against the imposition of a fee and argued that, although they would prefer not to have to pay, they found the service useful and so

no reason not to pay for something that provided them with a benefit. They were of the opinion that 18 euro was not a large sum and the benefits obtained were worth more than that.

Well, the volunteering of Zr is a professional volunteering, that is, who is managing such a complex website as Zr is, cannot be an amateur, she must have professional skills, and these professional skills must be paid, for a service from where lots of users benefit (Zr_29f)

While the first perspective represents the counter-hegemonic dimension of barter (rejection of money, to be tolerated only as the decision of the individual subject to donate it as a gift); the latter represents the hegemonic neoliberal logic that a value or worth in society must be part of the market (must have a price and must be paid for), and should people be unwilling to pay for it, it will die out. The interesting aspect here is that there were barterers who thought that the alternatives offered by the website (staying on the website or being excluded from the website) represented a democratic process, as though democracy was about to divide society into enemies and friends, as this barterer maintains:

it has been a completely non-sense debate, that debate over the introduction of the fee, I would have never started such a quarrel. First of all, we must understand that behind a website such as Zr there are people giving their time, hence it is right that they are given a gratification. If I agree with this, I stay, otherwise I just leave the website, with no complain! [...] We are in a democracy, if you do not agree, you can go away without criticizing the position of whom think something different from what you think! (Zr_37f).

Ultimately, the fee was introduced hence the hegemonic power of money was imposed once again. Those against its introduction migrated with their objects to another barter website (mainly case B in this research) or simply stopped bartering. In this case introduction of a fee worked as a proper hegemony in the sense that those who migrated or stop bartering, had to renounce the social network that they had spent time (sometimes years) constructing, and those who stayed with the website, even if they were not in agreement with the introduction of a fee, had to accept its imposition.

It should be stressed that the fee applies to bartering, not access to the website. Thus, payment is only required after one exchange, or after the uploading of more than 20 objects. A user can register and upload up to 20 objects, comment on other users' objects, participate in public discussions and start negotiations, without attracting any fee. Some of those against introduction of a fee, instead of migrating or stopping bartering, opted for a form of resistance exploiting the rules to their advantage. They remained registered on the website, uploaded their 20 objects, conducted negotiations, but then asked the other party to conclude the transaction on another barter website (or via private emails).

This attitude, which works as a proper form of resistance, reveals a hegemonic dimension since it creates an unbalanced position between the barterers, and a form of competition (typical of a market economy) among barter websites. Not surprisingly, this is regarded as misbehaviour by barterers who have paid the fee.

Beyond any particular website's rules, all barterers on any website have to acknowledge existence of money in barter due to shipment costs. Chapter 6 discussed much shipments influence barter activity. It is claimed that shipment is a typical online barter activity, but is not typical of barter in general; in a street market the counter-hegemonic power of barter would not be questioned by the use of money since face to face exchange negates the need to ship objects. However, it can also be argued that online practice opens the possibility to barter to many more people than in a local street market context.⁹⁷

However, depending on the service chosen for the shipment, the level of trust can change dramatically, even to the extent of influencing the establishment of trust within the actual exchange relation. The most secure shipment service costs more than normal shipment, which is why barterers enact forms of resistance such as cumulative shipments or courier-barterers. Nevertheless, the hegemonic power of money enters the practice of barter through shipment service even in the face of forms of resistance: for instance, there are those who consider it wrong to evaluate objects in monetary terms, but who equally claim that their shipment mode reflects

⁹⁷ Barterers from very small towns in Italy complain about this.

the value of the objects involved (they do not ship objects whose values is lower than shipment costs).

well if I have to send an object which costs 10 euro and I spend 9 euro just for the shipment...it is not convenient (Zr_45f).

you have to see how much you pay for the shipment since if I pay 1 euro for a small cup in a shop and shipping the small cup costs 5 euro, I just go an buy it, don't you think so? (Zr_51f)

Although the credit system has been described as an alternative to money, allowing barter to function easily, its uses vary and it can conceal reminders of hegemony. Indeed, credits work like the primitive money described by Einzig (1966): they are a short-cut to describe a value or, in other words, are a language invented to measure and compare different values.

money is just a unit of measure, nothing more nothing less. Hence, if you consider it as a unit of measure it is not bad, it can be used without causing problems, only if you use it and conceive it as a measure" (Zr_33m)

The four functions of money⁹⁸ are the result of a long history. The primitive money used by ancient farmer to exchange cattle, was necessary in order to establish a ratio of exchange, but it did not constitute a fortune. Among the four functions money fulfils, the first is that it is a measure of account. The first primitive money was in the form of shells, rocks, feathers, etc. which could be found everywhere and could be produced by everybody. They were crucial for faster and more effective negotiations. If credits are considered to work like those primitive short-cuts, they must be intended as a counter-hegemonic alternative to the kinds of money used today. It has been stated that money has an important psychological dimension: an individual uses it because she is convinced that everybody else is using it. However,

⁹⁸ Recall that money is considered a tool encompassing these four functions: a) it is a medium of exchange; b) it is a measure of value or a unit of account; c) it is a store of value, which means that money keeps its value over time; d) it is a standard for deferred payment (an implicit function which derives from the other three) (Ferrari et al., 2012).

credits are not perceived as money: “I think it is a psychological issue, because on that website credits are perceived as something different, they are not considered like money” (Re_24m).

Nonetheless, there are other ways to use credits which can be considered hegemonic instruments, weakening their counter-hegemonic nature. The first important difference is between how barterers use them, and how website’s owners use them. For case study B, the website using only credits, they are profitable. Since the system works with credits, whoever does not have any, can buy them. Part of the website’s revenue comes from selling credits. Once they are transformed into money, they have a monetary value and, consequently, can be seen as intended as money. Furthermore, as one barterer notes, the fact that the website administrator introduced the convertibility option, reduced credits back to money. When the website was launched, the value of an object was expressed only in credits, but as more people asked about the monetary value of items, administrator introduced the possibility of translating credits into euro.

a mistake Reoose administrator made is to have published the equivalent of credits. At the beginning this was not shown, then someone started to ask, ‘but what does credit mean?’, and they turned credits into euro [...] I think it is wrong because now there are barterers who publish an item, they see that it is worth 30 credits, than they turn this value into euro and they see that it corresponds to 7,50 euro and they prefer not to give it away, because they are still thinking in monetary terms! (Re_29m).

However, users cannot resell credits, hence in the hands of barterers they do not store value (one of the functions of money). Since credits do not fulfil this function, they can still be considered counter-hegemonic. Furthermore, there are several ways a user can obtain credits without spending money. The first and most obvious is by exchanging her objects. Also, the website awards a number of credits to users who invite other subjects to register on the website through a direct invitation, or relating the website profile with the Facebook profile, and uploading exchangeable objects on the Facebook profile (all of which advertise the website). This mechanism is ambiguous: on the one hand it represents counter-hegemonic resistance since it dramatically expands the number of people involved in the online barter practice and the number of objects uploaded: “I like this website [reoose] because it is the one that influence people the most...it influences people in the sense that it donate credits, it promotes barter practice”

(Re_24m). On the other hand, it is mere merchandising to increase the volume of profits for the website's owners. Finally, there are some barterers who think that using credits it is a way of assigning a minimum value to the objects exchanged, so they are not just thoughtlessly disposed of: "I try to give a minimum value to objects, so that someone must spend a certain amount of credits. In this way she will then think that she spent credits and won't throw the object away so easily, she will consider the sacrifice she made" (Re_24m). At the same time, there are barterers who are completely convinced that credits resemble money too much to be considered a real alternative: "I know about the existence of barter website where you can use credits, which are a kind of money, but that kind of exchange does not suit my idea of barter, since what I especially appreciate about barter is the fact of transcending the value of money" (Zr_30f).

Overall, even after analysis and ethnography, it is difficult to understand the real nature of credits. Perhaps, in the same way that money has different aspects, some of which can be considered hegemonic, and others that can be considered counter-hegemonic, credits also have a dual nature. What is important to underline is that, on website C where a dual system of exchange exists (credits and pure barter), and where staff intervention is absent, users prefer to exchange through pure barter. It emerged from the interviews and ethnographic observation that nobody on the case C website used credits. "I never, ever, used those credits. They introduced them last year, but I never used them and I do not think there are barterers who use them! They are like a fictitious money but not properly...in the end you can always buy them with real money" (Eb_35f).

In case C's public forum there are frequent requests for explanations of credits and their use, such as the one quoted below, and the forum contains at least 15 threads related to bart (the name given to these credits):

"Barterer 1

Hello everybody, I don't understand if there are lots of people accepting bart or they are only a few. A user was willing to give me bart for my object, but from what I see, nobody is using them. I'm asking this because I do not what to hold some virtual stuff nobody is using, hence which I can't use.

Barterer 2

I never used them, and really think nobody is using them on this site...

Barterer 3

At the beginning of my barter experience I bought 50 bart since I did not understand their function. Now I've got them on my account, I can't use them, because nobody accept them, and I lost my money because they cannot be transformed again back to money. In the website they wrote that you can use them to pay shipment cost but, again, only if the other barterer accepts them...but nobody want the damn bart!" (e-barty public forum)

However, barterers maintained that they do not use credits because nobody else uses them and they have no certainty that they are perfectly interchangeable. This could be seen as evidence that credits are very similar to money since they need a third authoritarian party that imposes their use in order for them to function properly. At the same time, there are barterers using credits, who claim they perform a sort of personalization mechanism that creates a distance from money: "but I give credit to credits, sorry for the words' game! They become something yours, it is like your personal money, you start thinking in credits, as if you were in your own world" (Re_47f).

After all, what is really problematic about credits is to decide whether or not they enable profits, which is the aspect of money that is most strongly contested. Making a profit means gaining monetary capital out of an economic action. Simmel (1997b) argues that what made money problematic in our society was its passage from a mere means to an ultimate aim.

To the extent that many ends require the same means, such a fact is emphasized for our consciousness in such a way that its value appears to grow beyond that of a mere means. And this success will be more likely to occur if the ends to be achieved with it are very multifarious and diverse, because they are then reciprocally neutralized in their variation, and the only thing they have in common the means for acquiring them all stands out in that much brighter a light. (Simmel 1997b: 238)

The aim of capitalistic economic action is ultimately to accumulate capital, i.e. money. Making a profit is perceived by barterers as very negative conduct and to be resisted by those who barter. One of the most frequently cited misbehaviours was trying to "make the deal", to "gain" from barter, which is considered one of the worst sins in the barter philosophy. "well, having an utilitarian approach, I do not know if it is the right term, in any case the fact of gaining, beyond the way to assign value to objects, if you are bartering only to gain something, it is as if you were searching the cheapest thing in order to maximise your profits" (Zr_33m); "there are people minding only to their businesses, in the sense that they are trying to make the deal" (Zr_33f); "for some people barter becomes another way to make profit [...]"

they are only looking for valuable objects” (Eb_33f); “I think that they only want to make profit out of it” (Zr_42f); “there are people only interested in making a deal” (Eb_33f).

Profit oriented actions are perceived as typical of a market system where the value of the individual is omitted since the aim is to acquire as much capital as possible, while in barter the action of a subject is driven by different aims: “when I barter I take in consideration the other person’s need, for example, if a person needs a book to write her thesis I give it to her even if I do not gain anything from the exchange” (Zr_33m)

7.2.2 Inside/outside value setting

In Chapter 3, money was described as a social construction and as a mechanism of distortion that is exercised on value. According to Simmel, value is generated within an exchange, but money establishes an aprioristic value that prevents individuals from engaging in an exchange relation to struggle over value. Thus, monetary transactions are perceived as impersonal, and money is considered a hegemony. What barter allows, instead, is the possibility of determining value within the relation: therefore, the strong counter-hegemonic power of barter is represented by its capacity to restore the power of the subject in an economic transaction, allowing her to determine the value of what is exchanged.

There is a widespread conviction that, today, people possess an excessive number of objects and this is the more frequent reason given for taken up bartering, to be free of incredible amounts of stuff.

I started in 2008 because I realized that I had a mountain of stuff I was not using, I searched on Google for a solution, since I really wanted to get rid of all those things. Our homes are really stuffed! (Eb_33f)

at the beginning the website has been really useful for me to empty my house from useless things we are used to accumulate years after years, and we do not even question the reason why we do it. (Zr_35f)

Not all possessions are considered suited to exchange. The reasons why an object may end up in the list of potential objects are various and they are important keys to understand the entire process. It might be thought that all the objects selected are

objects the subject is willing to be separated from and that she assigns less importance or value to these objects compared to others. Following this reasoning, an important part of the value dimension would be lost. Objects selected for exchange are not just objects individuals no longer use, indeed an essential characteristic of an exchange object must be that it could be useful to someone else.

according to me, the value of barter does not lie only in the value of exchanged objects, which is in any case important. Bartering is first of all a way to recycle things that perhaps are not useful for me anymore, but that can be useful for someone else. It is a way to establish a new value to objects. It happened to me to exchange things which I would have thrown in the garbage but which were absolutely essential for the person who asked them. This is one of the aspect I like the most about bartering, giving a value which is not a monetary value. Establishing a personal value (Zr_30f)

Sometimes objects are bartered because they represent particular times in a person's life, which invests them with value. Some want to exchange books they found particularly interesting: so that other people can share the meanings and values transmitted by the cultural product:

books I thought were nice, I had pleasure in passing them on to another person, so that she could feel the emotions I felt reading them, and perhaps she could develop the reflections some books force you to do (Zr_33m)

Whenever a subject selects an object for exchange on a barter website from the many objects she owns, she establishes a relation with all the other members of the community who might potentially be interested in establishing an exchange relation with her. In a monetary exchange system, each object derives its value (price) from its relation with all other objects. This leaves the individual feeling out of place in a market economy and makes the market appear artificial and impersonal, since value is defined within a relation that the market objectifies and the subject-object relation is reduced to mere calculus of the work-hours necessary to acquire the object.

I see market like a cage, limiting my actions. In that place people simply get mad, they push around other persons, they accumulate money just to be arrogant with their counterparts (Re_47f)

Hence, in a market exchange, value is already fixed and the subject can only decide whether the sacrifice is possible or not, she cannot decide the measure of the sacrifice.

The market is impersonal because the value of the purchase is already fixed, I do not have the possibility to go in a supermarket and say, well this good is too expensive, I want to spend less for purchasing it. I cannot do this even with a shop keeper. I step into a shop and I have no other choice if not buying (Zr_30f).

The second relational dimension is the one established between subject and object: deciding to give the object away (receiving something in exchange), already implies a form of sacrifice. Simmel describes the sacrifice involved in exchange as the sacrifice a subject must make to close the distance between the desired object and herself. It could be argued that, in barter, there is a previous step: the two subjects involved do not enter the relation from the same position. On the one side, there is a subject who does not desire an object, but who has the desire to separate from the object she owns. The subject will agree to separate from that object only if the exchange object being offered is commensurate with this sacrifice, this other object representing the other party's sacrifice, on the other side of the relation. "the value of an object depends on your judgement: if an object annoy you, you do not want to see it anymore, perhaps a person you don't like gave it to you, then this object has a lower value for you" (Zr_33f)

From barterers' accounts, it emerged that the barterer may begin an exchange in two ways: she can browse the pages of categories, or look at the home page where all new uploaded items are visible. She might also receives a notification (usually email) to say someone is interested in one of the items she has published. Thus, each exchange situation involves someone who is asking for an object and someone who owns the object. The initial conditions involve an individual asking another individual to indicate the measure of the sacrifice she is making to separate from her object, and an individual asking what level of sacrifice would be acceptable for her to renounce her own object. Described in this way we can see the political nature of the situation: the parts involved in the exchange are involved in an unbalanced relation since one part has the power to determine the sacrifice requested of the other. However, the structure of a barter relation drives the relation to the most balanced

situation possible, probably not a perfect balance but close to it. As the relation develops, the subject who owns the object requested will move into the position of the subject who is required to evaluate her sacrifice: to decide whether there is an object that makes it worth the sacrifice of renouncing her own object. There are two possible outcomes to this situation: either she decides that the other does not have a sufficiently attractive object, or she finds an object which is worth the sacrifice. If the latter situation exists, then it is the turn of the requesting subject to decide if the other's request is acceptable, but her decision will be always subject to her initial position of making a request of the subject. She can accept or refuse leaving the other with the possibility of selecting another object. The other party then chooses another object or declines the exchange. If another object is selected and matches up to the level of sacrifice the requesting subject is willing to make, than the transaction will be completed.

Barterers have space to decide together, the measure of sacrifice both are willing to take on. This is what is meant by an exchange of sacrifices and why barter exchange is described as an exchange of equal values. This refers to the value of the sacrifice, not the value of the objects exchanged: the exchange can be concluded only if the sacrifices of both parties correspond.

I perceive the value of objects depend upon the judgment of the subject. An object that is brought into Zr is an object that does not have a value anymore for me, who I am bartering it. A t-shirt is just a t-shirt, it does not have an economic value. For example, I found myself bartering a pressure cooker against two very old dvd. I was giving the two old dvd and I received the pressure cooker. This exchange was stuck in my mind since I felt uneasy in exchanging only two dvd for a pressure cooker but I remember that the other person told me 'look, I do not need that cooker in any case, I do not give it any value, or at least I do not give it the value I know it would have in the market place. But those two dvd of yours, I was looking for them since a long time, hence they are far more valuable for me, compared to the cooker'. Then, I understood she was looking for those objects with the same urgency I was looking for the cooker, that is what mattered, nothing else (Zr_29f).

This powerful dimension of barter, probably the most effective counter-hegemonic side of barter, is weakened in case B, not only because it works with credits (which, as already explained, are an ambiguous case of counter-hegemony),

but mainly because the number of credits expressing the value of an object is assigned by the website. In other words, objects exchanged on that website have an aprioristic value, resembling monetary exchange. Barterers on this website have no chance to negotiate, which is the most agonistic, hence counter-hegemonic, phase of the entire barter practice. The external intervention is exercised by a predetermined list of values: each category of objects is assigned a corresponding number of credits. In theory, this represents an attempt to eliminate the power of market imposed by the brand system. As described previously, brand-names and luxury objects still hold a market value which they exercise with regard to other objects. Brand-named objects have the power to impose themselves within a negotiation, hence the owners of the website decided to assign a value to the category and not to the individual object (i.e. all women's handbags are worth the same number amount of credits, e.g. 20, whether bought from a street market or from a Gucci boutique. Credits vary according to the status of the object, new or second-hand). Although this might have been an interesting way to resist market hegemony, it actually deprives the barter practice of its power of resistance. The space for manoeuvre given to barterers is still not enough for it to be understood as a proper negotiating space: what the website allows is for the object to be assigned to a different category from the original one. Hence, if barterers are keen to dispose of the object more quickly, they can assign a value of 1 or 10 credits to it. As the need to determine value is a necessity for the website's users, the administration allows barterers to assign 20% more or less credits than the default value.

basically, at the beginning it was the website who assigned a number of credits to the object, for example, a computer was assigned X credits. Now you can choose to give it 20% more or less credits, starting from the value assigned by the website, otherwise you can choose to put it in the 1 credit category (Re_24m)

This reduction in of counter-hegemonic power is balanced by spontaneous individual actions, which seek to create a situation where it is the user who decides the value of her object. When barterers take the decision about the number of credits

their object is worth, they then announce the object in the category corresponding to their chosen number of credits.

you can put the object out of its category, in any case, controls are scarce. I mean, if I want to place a TV in a category which assign 30 credits, I can do it, they do not control every announcement. Hence, if I want to get more credits for an object I put it in a category which I know is giving more credits. [...] This is not really “legal”, but is tolerated (Re_24m).

However, switching categories is not allowed by website and barterers know that if their object is spotted as being in the wrong category, the announcement will be eliminated. “as soon as I signal a wrong announcement, they eliminate it. It is our responsibility also to signal these misbehaviours, they cannot check everything” (Re_47f). However, they take the chance of it being missed, and if they manage to exchange the object for the stated number of credits they benefit; otherwise there are no major consequences. Although this behaviour arose in response to the hegemonic power of the webmaster, it is really no more than market behaviour. Since the website gives the possibility of assigning a very low value to objects, there is no need to put the object in a lower category. Instead, barterers are misbehaving mainly in order to assign a higher value to their objects. They are pursuing a pure economic interest, maximizing their profit out of the selling their objects: from this perspective, the counter-hegemony of their actions is completely negated.

Finally, it should be noted that this aspect of online barter testifies to how far an authoritarian approach can be successful. It seems evident that authority is easily questioned and that even in the case where nobody would misbehave, the very idea of exercising total control over published announcements fails from the outset.

7.2.3 Moving the location of trust

In barter exchange, each individual trusts another individual, shifting the focus of trust from money to a person. In the market economy people trust money – or rather they trust the State or credit institute that guarantees the value of money. They must trust money since market exchanges are not reciprocal, in the sense that they do not

establish relations between parties. It was argued that the explication given by economists to the use of money, is that it simplifies transactions, exactly because it frees the individual from the reciprocity mechanism typical of gift (Anspach 2007) so that parties involved in an exchange must not trust the other will reciprocate. Theoretically, money eliminates the need of trust. nonetheless, this need is not removed from exchanges, it is just shifted to money (ibidem: 58). Indeed, exchanges are performed only because each individual believes the money she is receiving from another individual will be accepted by a third part. At the same time, even the third part will eventually accept money, because she thinks it will be accept by another person, so to infinite. In the end, the third part which guarantees the value of money, the instrument people use to exchange, is the State or the banking institute minting money, hence trust is located on that third part. The counter-hegemonic dimension of barter, in this case, refers to the fact that barterers are involved in reciprocal relation where no third part is involved: they must trust each other. Although this may imply a more complex and a less secure process, the fact of placing trust in another person and not an entity (State or bank) endows the exchange with a human side. Among barterers who can relate negative experiences of exchange, they are still more satisfied with barter exchange compared to monetary exchanges since the “price” they face in barter (the risk of being cheated) is more affordable compared to the anonymity of the market. This is part of the social dimension of barter, analysed later in this chapter.

7.3 Barter supports alternative production models

The typology of barter analysed in this thesis research is clearly a consumption practice. It is not that barter cannot also refer to a production model, but this thesis focuses on the consumption side of barter. Exploring the production side of barter and how producers can benefit from the counter-hegemonic power of barter to generate an alternative model of production would undoubtedly be interesting but would constitute another thesis. Nonetheless, investigating barter from consumer’s side reveals the existence of an alternative production model.

First, there is a discourse among barterers that critiques the production model. They claim the mass production model is not ethical either for the environment or for less (economically) developed populations. The interviewees expressed concern about the mechanism of overproduction, seeing it as responsible for the plethora of objects in their homes. Because the market is sustained by a model of overproduction, they are seduced by advertising to acquire many (useless) objects.

Beyond mere critique, some barterers become involved in the self-production of objects: these can be intended for the exchange or for direct consumption by their producer. In the latter case, this can imply a reorganization of the daily timetable, especially when it involves self-produced food to substitute for industrial prepared food: “I spend an afternoon per week, dedicating myself to self-production. I prepare my daughters’ snacks for the entire scholar week, or I prepare sauces [...] At the supermarket in fact, I buy basic foods, I mean, I don’t buy the package of snack, I buy flour and eggs, and I produce snacks at home” (Zr_37f).

In the case of self-produced objects for exchange, as already mentioned, these objects represent a particular category of objects since they are not ex-commodities, and have never been evaluated in monetary terms. Many barterers claimed that some self-produced objects would not find a collocation in a market economy – because their manufacture is not professional, and because once inserted in the mechanism of aggregate demand and supply, the resulting price would not take account of the personal amount of knowledge and time needed for their creation. Thus, on the one hand they would not satisfy the demand need, and on the other hand they would not meet the supply need. However, in barter exchange they are easily exchanged and also achieve a special status among the multiple other objects. Therefore, barter exchange is able to support and stimulate a different kind of production of objects.

7.4 Barter supports alternative consumption models

I give barter a greater value since according to me bartering means going beyond the idea of money in a society, like our consumerist society, which is based on consumption, on buying. Bartering implies an effort, let’s say a psychological effort, to embrace a perspective which is different from that we are used to adopt. (Zr_30f)

All the dimensions discussed so far are part of a consumption process which does not end at the moment of purchase. The process of exchange represents an important phase in consumption practice, but it is only the beginning of what is meant by “consuming” the good. Drawing on anthropological and sociological theories discussed in Chapter 4, this work seeks to demonstrate how far consumption is a cultural and political activity: it involves the creation and manipulation of shared values and meanings. Therefore, exchange through money and exchange through barter practice generate two different models of consumption. The model generated by market exchange is a consumption model that drives consumers to a constant state of purchase, stimulated by a process of desire activation. In this model, the focus is on acquiring things regardless of need and regardless of their underlying production process. Hence, acquiring objects through the impersonal means of money entails certain cultural meanings, almost all of which are based on satisfaction of desire in a hedonist construction of personal identity. The model generated by barter understands consumption differently, especially with regard to the concept of time. The counter-hegemonic power of barter is exerted by shifting the attention from constant purchasing to understanding one’s needs, which are not regarded as pure desire and depend on specific situations. Hence, the moments of acquisition are less frequent and based on careful perception about “real” needs. In addition, the act of bartering is perceived as an act that is lengthening the life of object being exchanged, by increasing the lapse of time between the moment of production and the moment of disposal. The counter-hegemonic force of barter is generated also by the fact that this consumption model forces the subject to ponder over the utility of an object, and drives the subject to reformulate the measure of value with which she constructs her evaluation. Counter-hegemony is demonstrated also by the fact that money is excluded from this model because objects acquire value only within the relation between the subjects and, at a more abstract level, with all other subjects. The ecological dimension of barter calls upon a sort of civil awareness related to the act of reducing waste production, which benefits present and future generations. Hence, the model of consumption created through barter practice reflects the model of consumption described in the literature on critical or alternative consumption.

7.4.1 Lengthening the object's life-cycle

One aspect of barter is its strong counter-hegemonic scope, related to extending the utility of objects whose lives are shortening continuously due to “fast” consumption models such as “fast fashion” (Caro, Martínez-de-Albéniz 2009). In the market economy commodities are meant to have short lives and the declared aim of barterers is to lengthen their lives. The short lives of commodities in a market economy are the consequence of two factors. First, they are less durable because they are constructed from inferior quality materials⁹⁹. In order to lower the costs of production, many producers buy poor quality materials, especially in the fast fashion industry. Consumers who buy stores such as H&M or Zara know that their teeshirts may last perhaps only for some months, but they accept this compromise because they are paying considerably less for the item compared to expensive branded clothing. Second, commodity lives are shortened by the market continuously producing new versions of the same item. This applies especially to technological objects such as phones, computers and cars, but also appliances and textbooks, for example. However, the best example of this process is the fashion industry and in this context, it is clear that self-produced objects are the most counter-hegemonic objects within barter practice. Compared to market commodities, their life is inevitably longer because they are produced as unique pieces that can never be substituted by a new version.

It could be argued that clothing does not become non-functioning until it shows inescapable signs of use – which happens more frequently in the examples provided above. The reason why consumers, every season, substitute them with new “versions” is not related to their function. Instead, it is part of the mechanism described by Simmel (1996), and analysed in Chapter 4. Although the trickle-down effect once confined mainly to clothing, which was the most visible item possessed by an individual used to show her social position, it can be argued that this very mechanism is now working for almost all kind of commodity. This is the reason why,

⁹⁹ There is a theory related to the planned obsolescence of commodities (Bulow 1986; Waldman 1993) which claims that commodities are intentionally produced with low quality so that they will break more frequently and consumers will be forced to replace them more frequently.

as many barterers stated, people's houses are crammed with objects, half of which are barely used.

The objects bartered on websites usually are perfectly functioning objects, they are neither ruined nor worn out, which is fundamental for the object to be exchanged: degree of usedness or worn-outness is evidently a relative concept which can cause misunderstandings between barterers. It is the reason for debates and confrontations, and social and political decisions about the biography of objects. The experience of barterers is particularly significant for understanding the extent to which the life of an object can be lengthened:

with a shirt which is too consumed to be wore I can realize a bag, with a tee shirt I produce an hair band, then the "rag phase" in the life of a t-shirt is only the ultimate phase (Zr_37f).

bartering is just about the idea of not wasting anything, is realizing that those objects which became useless to me can be used by other persons (Zr_29f)

7.4.1.1 Redefinition of objects (biography)

In a market economy, the normal path of an object taken out of the circuit of commodities, is use for a certain period (progressively becoming shorter) and then disposal. Consequently, in the hegemonic model of consumption, the degree of usefulness represented by an object to the subject who owns it, determines the life of the object. In the counter-hegemonic model generated by barter exchange, the degree of usefulness is judged not only by its owner, but also the numerous other subjects who would find the object useful. The life of an object does not end when the subject who bought it stops using it; it can resume its life by entering a re-signification process activated by another subject/owner. The most frequent descriptions of barter provided by interviewees was "giving new life to objects" or "giving back life to objects". The choice of words is emblematic: barterers refer to the "life" of objects as if the object before exchange is "dead":

just to give you an example: I got this laptop, which was broken, actually the display was broken, and I gave 36 credits...I mean, 36 credits is 8 euro! It sounds like a joke! But the most surprising thing is

that the other person was happier than me. She wrote on my feedback: ‘thank you, you gave a new life to my laptop (Re_29m)

I find really funny and useful to give things I don’t use a new life. I know that instead of lying in a drawer they will be used by someone who enjoys them (Zr_35f)

well, also those not really appreciated presents, those things you would just put in a drawer or in a cellar, in this way [*bartering*], you know they will have a new life (Zr_33f)

this is a website where people who like bartering do it because they need to give things a new life (Eb_53f)

Hence, for some barterers, exchanging these objects assures them of a “new” life, a different life, and for others, it can bring to life objects that for some period were dead. This aspect of barter chimes with Kopytoff’s (1986) theory according to which, a commodity is an object that can be purchased for a specific amount of money, that is, it has a price. However, commodities do not stop being what they are: if they are taken out of the circuit of commodities they become ex-commodities, rather than just objects or artefacts, which means they can be brought back into the circuit by their being assigned a new price.

From this perspective, barter represents a deviation from the normal path of commodities (Appadurai 1986), a process of singularization (Kopytoff 1986) that redefines them. In the circuit of barter, ex-commodities’ biographies are automatically intertwined with the biographies of the subjects who owned them, no matter for how long. They assimilate a part of the subject, which is then exchanged together with the object.

The majority of interviewed barterers (and barterers discussing in public forums) maintains that what they most appreciate in barter is the possibility of “giving back life to objects”: in other words, the possibility of deciding about the life of objects. It is this political side of barter that drives people to persist with the practice, more than the economic saving that bartering (not often) brings with it. It is important also to note how, in the very first phase of involvement, individuals admit to displaying a kind of compulsive exchange attitude. None of the subjects identified this behaviour

as such, but they all described a strong excitement related to the idea of bartering. The social dimension of the practice (discussed later in this chapter) is an important variable: getting to know different people, exchanging comments with and learning about other people's tastes, is evidently satisfying, especially compared to normal consumption in the market where there are scarce possibilities of contact with other subjects. Nevertheless, the idea and concrete experience of being able to decide about the life on an object, gaining the right to decide over its value, may also be very strong drivers of barter.

7.4.2 Ecological dimension

let's say that the more the things you buy, the more the production, the more the used up material, the more the natural resources used, the more the impact on the environment (Zr_33m)

One of the effects of over-production is more pollution because of waste produced during the production process and because the rapid substitution of objects which forces subjects to dispose of perfectly functioning objects, which then must be destroyed at high expensive environmental cost. Lengthening the life of objects is a counter-hegemonic practice because it ultimately results in reductions to the amount of disposal and the levels of pollution because the number of objects which must be destroyed decreases and negating the need to buy a new commodity means production is not stimulated. "I really appreciate the fact that through barter I'm reducing the environmental impact I have on this world" (Zr_30f).

Also, but less frequent, barter allows the circulation of self-produced objects, which often have been made using recycled materials. This allows the circulation of objects that have never been commodities – they were not produced by an industrial system – and also objects produced using ex-commodity materials, activating a double counter-hegemonic process.

As some barterers argued, this ecological dimension of barter is to an extent questioned by the number of postal and courier shipments entailed, which in turn entail use of polluting devices such as cars and trucks, to transport objects from one place to another. "I learnt that it does not make sense to ship any stupid crap I like to exchange! I

mean, the courier, the transportation, the package, the environmental cost gets really high, hence I prefer to avoid such exchanges, even if the other person owns something I really need or like. (Zr_33m).

However, all bartering websites are cognizant of this dimension and explicitly suggest that barterers should exchange with people geographically close to them so as not to involve shipment services. Several barterers said that they usually searched by geographical area not category when looking for something on a website. For this reason, geographical information is required and is made very visible to all barterers. Some barterers offer to provide a personal courier service: if they are travelling from one place to another, perhaps for personal or work reasons, they offer to collect objects from barterers in one area and deliver them to barterers in another¹⁰⁰.

Some barterers having exchanged with someone not geographically close to them, will wait to get the object until both parties have an opportunity to meet up somewhere: “if a person asks me to wait and exchange things face-to-face, I prefer and I wait until we can both meet in the same city, either Milan or Bergamo” (Zr_30f). However, Chapter 6 showed that many barterers cannot manage to exchange face-to-face due to their geographical location.

Finally, the ecological dimension does not refer only to protecting the environment; it refers also to care for future generation as this barterer, the mother of two children, stated: “it is a life-style, I mean we help the environment [...] but I don’t help only the environment I also do it for my daughters, to leave them a better world” (Zr_37f)

7.4.3 The role of consumption in everyday life

According to some barterers interviewed, there needs to be a redefinition of the role played by consumption in people’s everyday lives. In their view, the society in which we live assigns a too important role to consumption and they feel that consumption invades rather than being part of our lives. They feel that people are being forced to consume and, although perfectly conscious that consumption is fundamental, they want to reduce the burden of consumption. They see consumption

¹⁰⁰ This is such common practice that one interviewee living outside of Milan, at the end of the interview asked the researcher to take something back to Milan for another barterer who would meet up with her.

as a highly time demanding activity and prefer to use their time for other forms of social activity.

The counter-hegemonic dimension of barter is expressed by individuals participating in barter who are redefining the role attributed to consumption in their lives. Indeed, bartering makes them feel they are reducing their consumption: although the time spent on a barter is no less than time spent consuming, the means and meaning behind the practice changes. Many barterers see consumption as an obsession, as something that controls people's lives instead of being controlled by the individual consumers, while in barter, having the possibility to build social relations and the power to decide on the value of objects, downsizes the role of consumption. In particular, barterers complained about the excessive numbers of objects they possessed which leaves them feeling oppressed and trapped in a house full of useless stuff. They see barter as helping them to free them from this situation and to understand the "true" value of their objects. In other words, it reduces the rate of shopping.

I'm scared of accumulation. When I step in a house which is full of objects, I just cannot bear it. I cannot breathe! In tiny supposedly cosy houses I feel suffocated (Zr_37f)

At the same time, there are barterers who described an attitude to barter as another way of shopping. Some interviewees said that surfing the barter website is like shopping and that, rather than reducing the number of objects in their home, barter had increased it. This attitude may be because barter represents for individuals liberation from the market: once people discover barter practice, the dimension of utility refers to the practice not the objects. Initially, they need to barter in order to experience their power as individuals who can establish the value of things. Subsequently, they focus on bartering only useful things.

once you start you automatically get involved in...well, let's say that, I was really excited about it, and I let myself go, I gave myself to barter, I also bartered useless things, only for the sake of exchange. Then I slowly turned to be more aware of what I was doing and I started to select a little bit more [...] I selected the item of exchange, I mean 'do I really need this'? I mean, is like going in a big shopping mole, on the website there is this huge page full of objects, full of things with their descriptions and

illustration and you get lost. Hence when you realize that you've exchanged two things and you turn to have four, you realize there is something not working properly! Then you select again and say, ok let's get only things I consume directly, I mean, things that do not stay with me, hence things I can give as presents to friends, or food products, home products, or products of personal hygiene, etc. so to actually free my house from goods (Zr_42f)

Although the barter process leads to the constitution of a balanced relation, experience is needed to understand the process and to manage it. The researcher's field notes show how difficult it is initially to decline an exchange for example, and this was referred to frequently in interviewees' accounts. Avoiding being involved in the exchange relation smacks of rude behaviour, and inexperienced barterers tend to accept a negotiation even if they do not need or like the object. This is a sign of the power of reciprocity which can be activated merely by looking at one another's pages. From this point of view, face-to-face exchange is even more problematic; computer-mediated communication maintains a certain distance between the subjects and helps them to feel free to step out of the relation.

well, face-to-face barter is not mediated. Website allows you to accept only what you are interested in, and you are at home, having all the time and the comfort to decide whether you are interested in another page or not. In face-to-face barter if someone says she is interested in your object then you must face the situation and perhaps there is nothing the other person owns that interests you. It happened to me to accept things I did not like only because I did not know how to refuse the exchange. (Zr_29f)

Thus, on the one side barter allows people to think about the value of objects and develop awareness of the superficiality of some things, on the other side several barterers maintained that they were acquiring objects through barter, that they would never have bought in market because of their cost and because they do not need them. For example the experience of this girl:

in the end through barter you get those things that you would have never bought in the market. For example, I usually own one or two bottles of perfume. Now I have five bottles of five different perfumes, and I have them because I bartered them, and I think it is nice to be able to have them, I would not have bought them otherwise (Zr_33f)

In Chapter 6 a distinction was made between people who spend whole days with the barter websites open – including working hours, checking for new items from time to time, and those who access the website just when they need something. The former are adopting a consumerist attitude to barter, while the latter are trying to escape from that logic.

in this difficult period, a website like Reoose invented a new form of consumerism, which works without money. I mean, is true that I'm looking for useful things, nonetheless sometimes I treat myself, hence it is consumerism, a new form of consumerism together with a practice old like the world, like barter is. (Re_47f)

Nonetheless, there is a paradoxical dimension to barter that is revealed by this difference. Many subjects barter to reduce the number of objects they possess (one said that she was decluttering through barter).¹⁰¹ However, this means that at some moment, there will be nothing left to exchange apart from essential items which would cause damage to the subject's survival, as this barterer notes: "well yes, at a certain point you just don't have anything less to exchange, unless you take the pictures off the wall and barter them!" (Zr_45f). In this case, the subject can stop bartering (or at least can slow the rate of barter) or can start producing objects to be exchanged: "I now produce bags from recycled material and I barter them against things I use, like shampoo" (Zr_45f).

This is the reason for many self-produced objects which are defined as particular objects within barter practice. It is important to note that those barterers who engage in producing objects dedicated to exchange, ask for consumable products such as soap, shampoo, creams, food, etc. These barterers maintain that they produce objects to acquire very common goods. They explained that they continue to barter because they need that world: they enjoy the time spent bargaining with other people, since in those moments they are creating social relations. This confirms that consumption responds to subjects' social needs first and their material needs are secondary. Indeed, critical consumers claim mainly that it is not consumption as a process (Leonini, Sassatelli 2008), but a certain model of consumption that they dislike. The negative aspect of consumerism is the production of standardized, homogenized goods which are massively distributed to people who are strongly recommended to consume

¹⁰¹ Descrivi cosa è decluttering.

through advertising. The problem with this type of consumption is that it imposes such a rapid pace that it can cause consumers to lose the capacity to work with meaning and to passively accept the meaning assigned by the market. Indeed, consumerism is not negative, as Douglas and Isherwood (1997) noted: consumption is essential to keep cultural meanings circulating and is also the first source of instruments to define a subject's identity. Although the political function of consumption is undeniable, in barter practice this political dimension reveals its democratic nature.

The democratic side of barter does not refer to the possibility for people to access goods without using money (as is shown later, access to online barter presents barriers to entry), instead it refers to the possibility for individuals to decide about the value of goods. What is intended here as democratic in nature, pertains to the kind of political struggle (Mouffe 2005) that is fought over the definition of value and meaning: in a barter relation the two parties engage in an agonistic not an antagonistic struggle to define the value of each other's objects. This refers to the relational dimension of barter, which is discussed later.

It is important to note that the counter-hegemonic power of generating an alternative model of consumption is contrasted by moments of suspension. These are moments when the subject must quit the logic of barter and return to the market: this does not apply to goods directly searched for in the market where there is no "suspension" of this logic, since the logic of barter never entered the scenario. Also barterers are aware that they cannot count on barter for every needs and in these situations barterers stop searching for goods on barter websites and come back to the market. This happens if the barter websites are not offering the needed object: "yes, I look for it, I specify it on my wish list, and I wait a consistent period at the end of which, if I do not find the object, I just buy it" (Zr_30f). Barterers, such as the above quote shows, usually accept a certain waiting period, after which they will find it impossible to live without the object they need (in the cited case, the girl had broken her corkscrew and was no longer able to open bottles). In more extreme cases, because they so strongly desire an object another barterer owns, they go and buy one of the object the owner mentioned in her wish list.

I desired two things in particular and, committing a mistake, I went buy the thing the other barter wanted! Of course I could have gone buying directly the thing I wanted but, you know, you just lose yourself in barter! (Zr_42f)

7.4.3.1 The moment and time of consumption

With regard to the role played by consumption in everyday life, the “time” and the “moment” of consumption are modified within the alternative model developed through barter. In classical consumerist culture, the act of consumption can be performed at any time, but in barter that moment is confined to the moment of need and implies an instant of reflection before the actual buying action, as these barterers declared:

in the moment I need something, in my mind, before thinking about the shop, I think ‘let’s see if Zr can help me finding what I need’ [...] then I can think about going into a shop, but during this period I have plenty of time to think if I really need that thing (Zr_29f)

I mean I’m not there, it is not like if I was shopping, I don’t check the page each five minutes. I go and check if there is something I need, then if I don’t find anything I move to the shop (Re_24m)

The constant tension in purchasing according to the market model is at the base of Bauman’s (2000; 2007) critique of the “consumerist society”. In this kind of society the market tries to drive people to a constant state of consumption: 24-hour shops, 7-day opening are the result of this tendency – as is the phenomenon of e-commerce which is expanding consumption activity in both time and space. Bauman’s (2002) critique of consumer society focuses on the fact that the market, especially through advertising, has distorted the ideas of “need” and “desire”, transforming the latter into the former, to the point that consumers are desiring to desire. As a result, the idea of “urgency” has been drastically influenced by this change in perspective, and every need/desire is perceived as a matter of survival, that must be satisfied as quickly as possible.

From this perspective, barter is counter-hegemonic in showing that, for certain kinds of goods, a wait before possessing them is acceptable. It is clear that the

modality of consumption imposed by barter does not allow for objects to be acquired instantly: “well no, I do not look for things urgently also because the barter modality does not allow to find things quickly. Instead I search for things that can be useful in a long run” (Zr_30f). Nonetheless, because of this imposition of delay, barterers change their patterns of consumption and learn to plan certain purchases. This means that when they know they will need something in the future, they start searching on the barter website well in advance, and may activate their barter social network to find the particular good, as in the case of this barterer who needed a dress for her daughter’s confirmation:

I exchanged the dress, the accessories and the party favours; actually a barterer from Turin made them. Of course, I began looking for these things 4-5 months before the event. I put in my wish list the party favours and then the barterer from Turin offered herself to produce them. Another barterer from Naples had the dress and the little crown; shoes have been exchanged, too. And evidently, after the dress has been used for the ceremony, I gave it to a barterer from Florence, with the agreement that she will give it back to me when I need it for the second daughter (Zr_37f)

Or this other barterer planning for seasonal change:

for example, in May I realized I did not have summer trousers. I gave myself a deadline after which I could survive anymore with those that I had. I looked for them on the website and fortunately, a barterer I know published 3 or 4 of them, we find something to exchange and I got my trousers. But I did not rush into a shop, as soon as I realized I needed them! (Zr_29f)

However, not all barterers are willing to wait for a desired object. This represents the different attitude to barter mentioned in the previous chapter, which sees it as another form of shopping or as a different philosophical approach to life. The separation between subject and object, intensified by the time element, is perceived by some barterers as a proper sacrifice. Waiting to achieve the object of our desire, is actually nothing than another form of distance created between subject and object, hence, the act of waiting is perceived even more as a real sacrifice. For those barterers who do not slow their consumption pace it is hard to accept and usually results in debate and complaint about the time taken to exchange. This barterer maintained that her idea of barter resembles a slow consumption model, and in fact:

some people complain about my attitude: ‘she took ages to answer me’, ‘it is very difficult to deal with her with this time’, etc. Well, I know it is my limit, but my life is not dedicated to barter. I have a job, and I’m involved in a series of activities which come before barter. Plus, I like this idea of slowing down the pace of life, and of consumption too, I actually think that this is the philosophy behind the website. (Zr_29f).

This slow consumption model enacted by barter is a precise counter-hegemonic characteristic of barter practice, since it assigns a different value to time and, also, to the object. On the one side, time represents the measure of sacrifice required to achieve the object. This refers to the “urgency” implied in the need for a specific object. As the urgency increases, the sacrifice of being separated from the object increases, hence the subject is more willing to make the sacrifice. On the other side, the time spent conducting a negotiation (implying all the stages described in Chapter 6 including time spent studying each other’s pages) contributes to balancing the relation. Both the sacrifice of separating from the objects and also the time spent on the negotiation must equate.

I like that both parties involved in the exchange share the same level of urgency in acquiring those things, things which are not definable by their monetary values (Zr_29f)

I was exchanging with a barterer from Venice who put in the box two bookmarks she created, for my daughters. And this fact, the fact that she spent time in creating something for my daughters, I mean, it has no value, because it has too much! (Zr_37f)

I always wonder how people can check my page in two seconds. Like when you ask them something and they answer back few seconds after ‘no thanks, I did not see anything interesting’. How could do?? I have more than 200 items exposed, and when I check other people’s pages it takes me ages to check much shorter pages than mine. (e-barty public forum)

This demonstrates how far the practice of barter contributes to creating a counter-hegemonic value for objects through a different temporality. Barterers have the possibility to establish value not only within the relation with another subject, but also by temporally separating from the objects of their desire. Indeed, barter should

be experienced as a practice where the time dedicated to the activity is taken outside the market logic and is de-commodified, as this barterer suggests:

perhaps is a very pretentious reflection, even too hasty, but I think that Zr and the philosophy it wanted to create, they wanted to create a kind of slow consumption, let's say, not really a degrowth, since degrowth is another philosophy yet, but it approaches consumption in a particular way, in a more relaxed way (Zr_29f).

The counter-hegemonic dimension of barter is nevertheless limited by the temporality imposed by the market. The ecological dimension of barter implies the habit of recycling unwanted presents. As already noted, this is strongly counter-hegemonic, since in our culture presents were traditionally conceived as inalienable objects. This inevitably means establishing «moments of consumption» in the barter practice: barterers stated that the pace of exchange increases substantially immediately after Christmas and after each barterer's birthday:

for example, the moments I most frequently upgrade my page are Christmas, when I get presents I do not need and my birthday, again when I receive lots of presents I do not use. Otherwise, during season change, when I found cloths that have not been used since years (Zr_30f)

you know, in those Christmas baskets there are foods you don't eat, and thus you exchange them (Zr_51f)

after Christmas a mountain of recycled presents invade the website! As well as after birthday! Well you know sometimes it happens that you receive a double present hence either you give the copy to someone else, or you put it on the website (Eb_35f)

7.5 Barter creates alternative social relations

the idea of bartering is not natural, not everybody can engage in this practice, in fact, there is still someone who looks at this suspiciously. There is a kind of scepticism related to people and their objects, therefore, according to me, a person who accepts this kind of alternative usually shows a different attitude toward people and objects, because there is a surplus value. The purchase of a good is a very impersonal action: I buy a good only because I have a monetary availability, while in barter I must give something of my own, my time but also something very personal. I must meet another

person, and even though I don't meet her, there must be a minimum exchange. I must necessarily get involved into a different dynamic with regard to that I'm used to (Zr_30f)

In the theoretical chapter on exchange, barter was described as a research object that does not occupy much space in either the economic or the anthropological literature: the former tends to reduce it to the forerunner of trade, and the latter depicts it as the most asocial type of exchange. A few anthropological works (Chapman 1980; Humphrey, Hugh-Jones 1992) recognize the strong political and social nature of barter and confirm its capacity to generate relations. The types of relations generated show another counter-hegemonic side to the practice.

Before analysing the counter-hegemonic nature of barter in relation to market, it should be stressed that its resistance does not work against the asocial nature of market, because the market is not asocial. In the theoretical chapter dedicated to money, the work by Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, is considered. This work was based on two previous papers where the author laid the foundations for his reflections. 'Money in Modern Culture' (1997a), in particular, focuses on the changes in society that the introduction of money wrought. According to Simmel, money does relate individuals with one another, since it allows a perfect division of labour, and these kinds of relations drive the subject to an extreme individuality generated by the anonymous nature of relations.

Through the necessity of exchanging it and receiving definitive concrete values for it, money creates an extremely strong bond among the members of an economic circle. [...]In that way, the modern person is dependent on infinitely more suppliers and supply sources than was the ancient Germanic freeman or the later serf; his existence depends at any moment on a hundred connections fostered by monetary interests [...] by making the division of production possible, money inevitably ties people together, for now everyone is working for the other, and only the work of all creates the comprehensive economic unity which supplements the one-sided production of the individual. Thus it is ultimately money which establishes incomparably more connections among people than ever existed in the days of feudal associations [...]The person in those earlier economic epochs was mutually dependent on far fewer people, but those few were and remained individually determined, while today we are much more dependent on suppliers in general, but frequently and arbitrarily change the individuals with whom we interact; we are much more independent of any *particular* supplier. It is precisely these types of relationship which must produce a strong individualism, for

what alienates people from one another and forces each one to rely only on himself is not isolation from others. Rather, it is the anonymity of others and the indifference to their individuality, a relationship to them without regard to who it is in any particular instance. (Simmel 1997a: 246-247)

Therefore, if Durkheim underlines the anomie typical of complex societies characterized by the organic solidarity, Simmel goes further in describing the paradoxical nature of these societies. They form huge numbers of relations, and networks of strongly related individuals that are dependent on each other in which the “other” is an abstract individual with whom the subject relates by means of money. Although highly interconnected, these modern individuals described by Simmel, experience a mediated relation. Hence, it would be a mistake to describe the market as an asocial and apolitical place: the market, similar to any other entity, is the result of a social construction of reality, which, as discussed in Chapter 2, is a political construction. The market is a social structure – and money is the representation of social relations –determined by political struggle. The functioning of this particular social structure is characterized by a high level of anonymity and anomie because those interdependent relations are between *abstract* subjects. The barterer quoted below describes the main reason that drove him towards barter was the need to establish a kind of empathy with people, including through exchange: “it’s the suffering related to the lack of comprehension between people, what I found unbearable in contemporary society, the infinite inequalities. All these led me to increase a kind of empathy with people which I can exercise in barter. Bartering goes beyond the economical or commercial exchange, it is about sharing knowledge and values, it is about dialogue” (Zr_33m).

This thesis research shows that barter is also a social construction, but the relations constructed through this form of exchange are between subjects, instead of representations of subjects, which assigns to barter a counter-hegemonic nature. The difference between market and barter is reminiscent of the analysis in Tönnies (1955) which distinguishes between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. According to Tönnies, a community is a group of people characterized by personal and direct relations, constituting a stable structure ruled by norms and habits, which creates a high sense of belonging among individuals. The community is normally limited in number, and closed with regard to external reality. In contrast, society is a wider aggregation of

individuals where relations are open and impersonal, regulated by laws enacted by complex institutions, and mediated by the use of money.

Hence, the fundamental difference refers to the relational dimension of the two fields, revealing the strong barter capacity to give back to subjects the possibility to create personal relations, as this barterer underlines:

simply by looking at the object of another person, contact her, talk with her, only by saying 'I saw that', 'I'm interested in that, what do you think about my objects', it creates a minimum of interaction which gives a surplus compared to monetary exchange. Just by saying 'I saw this from your page, you saw this from my page', you exchange emails taking agreement on how you would like to ship...I know it is common, I won't know the person that much, but believe me, it is different; we create a little moment of contact which is fundamental (Zr_30f)

Furthermore, the social norms regulating barter relations differentiate them from gift relations (typical of pre-monetary societies) because of the equivalence and the synchrony of the sacrifices that characterize balanced relations, while in gift exchanges the sacrifice of the one part is used as an instrument to dominate the other.

Relations in barter, on the whole, are constructed directly between the two parties involved in the exchange, without any third party intervening in the relation. This means that the two parties have the opportunity to construct social meaning together, by determining the value of objects exchanged, and by responding to shared social norms, which can be confirmed or developed within the exchange. Furthermore, barter exchanges require very well balanced relations in order to be successfully concluded, and may give birth to communities of individuals with common values and who participate in a collective decisional process.

7.5.1 Balanced relations

The equilibrium in barter relations is achieved via the phase of negotiation where both parties must struggle agonistically to reach consensus over the value of their sacrifices. The agonistic nature of the struggle, compared to the antagonistic relations established in market and gift exchanges, constitute the counter-hegemonic nature of barter. In contrast to gift exchange, there is no imposition of dominance on either

part and, contrary to market exchanges, the aim of both parts is to collaborate rather than compete. For this reason, the relation can be considered to be balanced since it does not establish any kind of dominance although it creates a direct relation between the parties involved. As argued in Chapter 3, barter, like gift exchange, works with reciprocity, which in this case refers to objects rather than subjects. The objects struggle with each other, and can represent different sacrifices for different subjects who, for their part, are not engaged in any form of conflict. Their relation is based only on confrontation to determine the values of their sacrifices, which eventually must be equal. Consequently, barter is about balancing sacrifice. Indeed, in trying to protect the barter culture and its counter-hegemonic dimension, barterers complain about those who do not demonstrate consideration of the other's sacrifice, and who ask for too much compared to what is being given:

in the end, establishing the value of objects is difficult, I know, but when you see that big difference in sacrifices, I mean, for example, if you ask me the "Recherche" by Proust and you offer me a Wilbur Smith's book, well...perhaps the difference is too wide! Well, maybe then I'll give the book in any case but what annoy me so much is the fact that the other person did not wonder at all about, well the opposite problem: 'Am I asking too much?', 'Perhaps I could pounder my request a little bit more..'. I think it is beautiful when you find a person who understand you, like when you offer two books against a couscous package, I mean it is just an example, and the other came back to you saying, no couscous is not enough, I give you also another things for your books. It must not happen, but the thing that you appreciate is dialogue (Zr_33m)

I found really annoying those people who consider their object as so precious you cannot understand their value and pretend to exchange them for many of your objects (Zr_51f)

The agonistic struggle characterizing barter exchange is influenced in online barter, by the level of trust each party places in the other. Within the online barter practice, trusting one another is a demanding part of the exchange; it can in fact be considered a proper sacrifice. Whoever engages in online barter knows this, and knows also that if the level of trust in the other is low, there will be few exchanges. Also if the barterer is not trusted, she will not manage to exchange with anyone. "it is a trust relation which is established between barterers. It is not easy, but unless you trust other people, you can hardly exchange. [...] I try to trust other barterers. I think that only with trust you can keep

going on doing this kind of experience” (Re_24m). Therefore, trustworthiness becomes a special form of capital in this field and can be considered the symbolic capital characterizing the field (Bourdieu, Wacquant 1992).

The peculiarity of the barter field consists of creating a space for potentially balanced relations. Since the struggle is fought between the objects while the subjects collaborate agonistically with each other, their capitals (economical, cultural, and social capital) do not matter for the exchange relation.

Nevertheless, in the online environment, the counter-hegemonic dimension of barter is distorted by the fact that a particular form of symbolic capital does influence the barterers’ relations. Although social actors in this online field may not compete for economic or cultural capital, they must compete for social capital, which is at the base of trust capital. The competition so generated reintroduces a hegemonic element into a practice that otherwise is profoundly counter-hegemonic.

Inevitably, this produces an unbalanced relation, and the potential counter-hegemonic force of barter, which resists the typical liberal idea of diffused competition between social actors, is brought back in. The symbolic power of barterers in the barter field, derives not really from economic capital nor from cultural capital. To acquire a powerful position in this field, what matters is social and trust capital, which can be defined as the symbolic capitals in this field. Trustworthiness and trust capital are measured by the percentage of positive comments a user has on her profile. To achieve positive comments the user must respect the social norms of the field and enact balanced exchanges. Social capital cannot be calculated mathematically, but it is represented by the number of “friendship” relations a barterer accumulates. The two forms of capital are strongly related¹⁰², which means that a high social capital can increase trust capital. A large number of barterers exchanging with a subject – and providing positive feedback – increases the level of trustworthiness of that subject.

¹⁰² Similar to economic capital and social capital: they are not characterized by a direct proportionality, but there is little doubt that having substantial economic capital allows the subject to engage in a many social activities that would not be accessible without economic capital and, hence, increases the level of social capital. At the same time, although economic capital and cultural capital are not directly proportional, it is evident that with only a certain amount of economic capital a subject can acquire considerable cultural capital.

Entering into a barter relation with higher trust capital immediately produces an unbalanced relation, threatening the counter-hegemonic nature of barter. Also, if placing trust in another barterer is considered a sacrifice, those with a lower level of trust capital will be making a smaller sacrifice. At the same time, she will be subjected to the strong power of the person owning higher trust capital: indeed, there exists the social norm stating that who shows a lower number of exchanges must ship first.

Social capital can unbalance the relation at the moment that the party with high social and trust capital uses this to hide misbehaviours. In public debate, the opinion of a user with high levels of both sorts of capital is considered to be worth more than the opinion of a person with low levels of social and trust capital.

well yes, because the other person is more famous than me on the website, everyone follow her while me, that I am unknown, I did not exchange with too many people, they do not believe me [...] then they tease you, hence if someone fraud you, the only chance you have is to keep the good, even if it is broken or too much used, and hope the next time it will be better. You cannot complain, cause nobody believe in you! (Zr_42f)

This is because the level of the two capitals assigns a value to the person, which is exactly what barter tries to avoid by assigning value to the objects exchanged.

The counter-hegemonic power of barter is further weakened by the introduction of the practice of increasing trustworthiness capital through gift. Gift exchange is no longer a hegemonic practice, but it has been argued that in primitive communities it was (Mauss 1990). It has also been argued that when the social structure of a community was shaped by gift exchange rather than monetary exchange, barter was already being performed and, compared to gift, was a resisting practice (Humphrey 1985; Humphrey, Hugh-Jones 1992). Many anthropologists misinterpret the profoundly fair nature of barter exchange confusing it with an asocial nature, claiming that, contrary to gift – the representation of altruism and human generosity – barter is characterized by opportunistic behaviour. However, evidence from a diverse anthropological literature shows that this is not so. The emergence of gift in barter is the sign of the limits to this counter-hegemony. Gift reduces the balanced nature of barter relations since it potentially introduces the element of dominance,

thereby unbalancing the relation. It is usual practice for very experienced barterers to accompany the object exchanged with a gift object. The field notes show that at the beginning of the ethnography this was frequent practice, and despite the positive feeling associated with receiving an unexpected present, the subject receiving the gift had an uneasy feeling of inferiority based on the mechanism gift activates. Anspach's (2007) work on reciprocity shows that a gift potentially starts a reciprocity mechanism, which calls for a counter-gift. In order to escape from the dominated position imposed by a gift, the other barterer can respond only with a counter-gift, which, in most cases, is a degree of trust represented by positive feedback. However, the barterer is not sure to exchange again with the gift sender, and trust is the most immediate counter-gift. This is because trust and trustworthiness are relational concepts and being relational they present a transitive property, meaning that they can be transferred, that is, exchanged from one social agent to the other (Gili 2005: 61). The acquisition of trust through such practice, however, contrasts with the idea of barter since it is too strong an act. In extreme cases, gift exchange can be used to perform highly opportunistic behaviour, as in the case of this barterer who, in fact, was particularly disappointed with her barter experience:

they acted in this way with me: I exchanged with [barterer's name], I gave her a gift package with some stuff she was looking for, common things, I gave to her as a present. From that moment we started exchange. Then I put in my wish list a bicycle and she come back to me saying, 'look, there's a surprise for you on the website'. Basically, she gave a bicycle to me, through the barterer [barterer's name]. But I wondered how we could have managed that, since we did not exchange, and she told me it was ok like this, and if one day I would publish something interesting she would have asked me. Unfortunately, she started asking me a lot of things! I had a kid toy, a Barbie's caravan, and she asked for it. Then I had a perfectly new rocking chair, and she asked for it, without giving back anything to me, just for the bicycle she donated me. Finally she asked me for a tablet, she send the e-bay link to the tablet she desired but then I made her clear that I was not going to buy her a tablet! Also because the bicycle she gave me had used tires, which must have been changed, the handlebar was rusted and the seat was cut open! (Zr_42f)

In general, although barter creates space for potentially balanced relations, it should be remembered that there is always the possibility of insurgence of free rider problems. Even if the relation is kept balanced by equilibrated amounts of social and

trustworthiness capital, users can still engage in opportunistic behaviours. These kinds of behaviours are enabled by the presence of asymmetric information more characteristic of the online than the offline environment.

All interviewed barterers said they had negative experiences, ranging from a barterer who did not send the agreed object, to a barterer who sent a different object from the one agreed upon, to one who sent an extremely well-used object, to problems related to communication, which, as highlighted in Chapter 6 seem to be the most annoying types of misbehaviour.

This opportunistic attitude, typical of market economies, is however opposed by a strong social sanctioning. The cost of engaging in opportunistic behaviour equates to the cost of losing the capital specific to the field, trustworthiness. Although for barterers with high levels of social capital this cost is reduced, their misbehaviours are not free. If the barterer continues to misbehave then the number of negative feedbacks will result in her capital being reduced.

The mechanism of social sanctioning is effective only if there is a public space where it can be performed: in case study C, where there is a formal public forum available for barterers' discussions, the mechanism is clear and works smoothly. The forum has a section entitled "black list" dedicated specifically to the mechanism of social sanction. This works at three levels: it informs the whole community of a barterer's accusation of misbehaviour, thus providing those indirectly involved in the relation with information which reduces asymmetry¹⁰³. It gives the accused person the possibility to offer her version of events. Finally, it allows other barterers to contribute and relate their past experiences with both or either of the barterers. It represents an arena where barterers can struggle and exploit their social network. If it is true that, as already discussed, the wider the social network, the higher the possibility of being defended and, hence, of being trusted, the public forum on website C is a more democratic instrument compared to the social sanctioning mechanisms available on the other two websites.

Case B has very scant social control mechanisms: it allows no possibility to intervene in any kind of public space apart from the Facebook page, which, however,

¹⁰³ A typical situation is where a barterer accuses another barterer of fraud or chicanery, causing a third party, negotiating at that moment with the accused person, to withdraw from the relation.

is not a very democratic instrument. There is no reason why a registered member of the website should also be registered on Facebook, which is necessary to access the website's Facebook page. Case A presents a public space that is not configured as a public forum and, hence, is not widely used for public discussions. Barterers using this website claimed they preferred to discuss misbehaving barterers through a system of private communication among small groups created through barter practice. Thus, they exercise a silent social sanctioning which does not give the accused barterer the opportunity to defend herself.

there is a kind of underground tam-tam among people knowing each others, I mean, there is not a black list where you can signal bad barterers. In any case, if you cheated a barterer I know, you can be sure I'm going to know it straight, as well as all other friends of our group, and I won't ever barter with you! (Zr_54f)

The research shows generally that barter is about relational equality. In barter, the positions of the two barterers are balanced because their sacrifices are balanced: the balance does not refer to equivalence of economical values, but the equality of personal values. Nevertheless, this equilibrium is precarious and can be endangered and ruined, such that the relation is transformed into something else. The relational equality can become relational inequality through the provision of a gift. In this case, the sacrifices are not equivalent since there is a person who gives, but does not receive anything, and a person who receives something and gives nothing back. On the other hand, the relational equality can be transformed into non-relational equality in the market exchange. The market works only with abstract subjects who are not really related to one another, because they need the instrument of money to perform an exchange. Thus, it would be more accurate to say that, markets involve mediated rather than non-relations; nevertheless, the relational equality of barter disappears in the market. Since relational equality is so fragile and so difficult to achieve even within an environment dedicated to barter, it becomes evident why, as anthropologists stress, throughout history there has never been a society that has been completely dominated by barter relations. Barter needs diffused social equality to work, a condition which, effectively, has never been achieved in human societies.

7.5.2 Create community

With regard to the above, it should be emphasized as an important counter-hegemonic dimension of barter. Although barter practice is acknowledged to be transversally present in many distinctive types of societies (primitive and contemporary), there are no examples of a pure barter economy (Humphrey 1985). This fact gave rise to two barter's interpretations, neither of which recognizes its profound political and social nature. In the introduction to this thesis, it was stated that the anthropological literature on barter describes it as the practice farthest from social relations given that, once objects are exchanged, barterers are free never to meet again (Humphrey, Hugh-Jones 1992). At the same time, the economics literature (apart from rare exceptions such as Anderlini, Sabourian 1992) depicts barter as the first phase of commercial trade.

Humphrey and Hugh-Jones (1992) offer a different anthropological interpretation, questioning the mainstream approach, and reinterpreting the nature of barter practice as an exchange modality able not only to establish social relations but also to give rise to balanced exchange characterized by an equal distribution of power among the parties involved.

In the course of this research, this counter-hegemonic characteristic was demonstrated by the emergence of the above mentioned "small groups", in which social relations are supported by an even distribution of power among the members involved.

Indeed, negotiations always imply the establishment of a relation, albeit superficial and short-lived, which sees each subject bringing a part of her personality into the exchange: the construction of trust, in fact, is established also through communication. When there are few elements on which to decide whether or not to trust the other, how the subject communicates reveals her attitude. Therefore, during the negotiation phase each barterer tries to be extra friendly and as transparent as possible (unless she is intending to misbehave). Furthermore, these written communications reveal not only the subjects' attitudes but also their tastes, preferences, passion and ideas.

In the negotiation phase, both subjects are gradually revealing what sacrifices they are willing to make in order to possess the other's object: in revealing their sacrifice they are expressing the social values guiding their actions. Simmel (2011) underlines that the distance interposed between subject and object generates desire: hence, if the object is too close to or too far away from the subject it will not generate desire. However, this does not mean that different objects, placed at the same "right" distance, stimulate the same degree of desire in the subject. The desirability of an object also depends on the social values assimilated by the subject: "this barterer lives in Venice, but she is from Calabria hence she always asks for my hot pepper homemade cream and once she said to me 'a desire I like to satisfy is the hot pepper cream, not the Vuitton bag!'" (Zr_37f). Therefore, as subjects are negotiating, their social values emerge and, eventually, this can lead to the establishment of friendships.

well you uncover yourself, you present yourself, you states 'I don't care about the 60 euro the pressure cooker is worth, according to me your dvd are worth 100 euro, because it has been one year I am searching from them (Zr_29f)

I do not barter to gain a profit hence even if I get less from the exchange I'm ok with it...what I don't like is to see that there are people who are searching for the deal, it annoys me. I prefer to find someone with whom I can share my values, someone who has an approach similar to mine (Zr_33m)

it is a cultural thing, it is a different way of approaching social relations and it is really important because, yes bartering is important, exchanging objects, but it does not stop there, it goes beyond that, and you understand that a bartered object acquires a completely different value to you [...] in the end bartering is about creating relations with others, is exchanging comments and opinions (Zr_51f)

All interviewed barterers claimed that, among the relations created through the barter practice, those emanating from more satisfactory exchanges were the strongest relations. They were both the most trusted people, and also those with whom they share "perspectives".

Well, with some barterers I established a confidential relations, a friendship. Or at least let's say that these are those people I trust the most, because I already exchanged with them and I know I can trust them, they are correct, or punctual, I already know their attitudes, thus I know what should I expect from them (Zr_30f)

it slowly turned to be a very friendly environment. It is not only a place where I exchange objects, I exchange ideas, I feel so close to other people and it is great because when you have a problem you can share it with other (Eb_36f)

Barter relations can be developed to extend beyond barter; they can become relations where the relationship is not just about the exchange of objects:

we started to meet each other, with this small group, to exchange. I mean, we had lunch together, and then we exchanged. But then, it turned out to be something more: each one of us was taking part in the activities of others, like participating in the ethical purchasing group one of us was attending [...] also because, you know, at a certain point we just ran out of exchangeable objects, but we kept meeting each other (Zr_29f)

we organize meeting, we meet each other, there are many barterers from Milan who come here and we exchange, but also we chat, we have a coffee and we spend time together (Zr_51f)

The creation of friendships may be considered as resolving the trust problem: when exchanging with someone one knows well there is no need to expend time and energy understanding the character of the other since previous experience has confirmed a level of trustworthiness.

talking with people and exchanging with them, we learn about their preferences and tastes, therefore if I have something I know a certain barterer is looking for I keep for her. With two or three of these persons I really established a friendship relation (Zr_33f)

In addition, since both are involved in revealing their values, the relational communication may shift to personal information which does not affect the barter. What was born as a friendship relation between two people, is easily transformed to become a group of people who exchange not only objects but also ideas and comments.

she was searching for a bicycle and I found another person from Rome who got one; hence I gave her the contact of the first person and they exchanged between each other. I think there is a high level of complicity (Re_47f)

it happens frequently that I don't find anything interesting in a barterer's page but I ask to my barterers friends to take a look at it. If they find something then we arrange a triangular exchange. Of course you can't do this with everybody, but just with whom you have a certain kind of relations (Zr_54f)

This viewpoint confirms Rheingold's (1994) idea of the nature of the online community as composed of people who share the same views.

well, lots of time barter is just an excuse, is not barter anymore, is a construction of relations. I established wonderful relations with some barterers and I don't access the website only for exchanging but mainly for leaving a comment, or to say hello to somebody (Zr_54f)

A demonstration of the role played by value in barter is that some barterers declare disinterest in exchanging with users who manifest a clear distance from their values. For example, this barterer renounced an exchange when she found out that the other party in the exchange held quite different political views compared to hers, declaring that: "we had to exchange in Milan but then I found out she was coming to Milan for the Lega Nord's [*right wing political party*] meeting, hence I renounced to the exchange!" (Zr_49f).

Here, the wish list can be seen as a reliable indicator of the other's personality: depending on the objects on the wish list, barterers can judge whether the other shares her values and, consequently, agree to the exchange or renounce it. In the example below, a barterer stated that, in her opinion, brand-names and designer objects were not important to her, and she found it unacceptable to spend huge amounts of money to pay for a name. Barterers who explicitly ask for particular brands in their wish list are considered people with whom she cannot exchange:

when I see wish lists full of Dior, or...I don't even know the name of all that expensive brands! Well, if I see a page full of those desires, you see, I don't exchange. I don't feel at my ease with these people, and I think we have nothing to share between each other. Even if they have something I'm interested in, than I think that we will never conclude an exchange [...] it is difficult because there is no affinity between my desires and theirs (Zr_49f)

At the same time, the objects exchanged are perceived as identity indicators, confirming the fact that consumption is crucial to identity construction. One barterer

even described objects as “speaking”: “objects are often ‘speaking’ objects, they are telling something about the personality of who is exchanging them” (Zr_33m).

In general, however, there is a widespread perception that all barterers have a sensible attitude towards social relations, manifested by their respect, and willingness not to engage in opportunistic behaviour: this is a sign that the perception of the counter-hegemonic nature of barter is strong among its practitioners.

the fact that they are participating to barter demonstrate they are serious persons [...] because who is bartering must approach it with a certain kind of availability (Zr_46m)

according to me bartering is something behind the exchange of objects, it is a way to approach life in general, in fact, I usually expect to find a certain kind of person (Zr_30f).

bartering is a real life-style, it is a choice from which you do not come back. It is like Buddhism, if you become Buddhist you do not eat meat anymore, that's it. I try to use money the less the possible, because by choice was to live with less money. We are continuously asked for money, from the State who asks a lot of taxes and everything we need to buy...hence I tried to find alternative economies and barter is one of those. As a consequence I also have an alternative life-style, in fact, I asked to verticalized my job, to have more time. [...] In the end my wallet is not full of money, but I live happily also like this (Zr_37f)

Finally, it should be highlighted that, although online barter empowers the counter-hegemonic nature of barter by extending the possibility to become involved in the practice with a greater number of people compared to street market barter, it is also true that computer-mediated communication has distinct limits. This is demonstrated by the fact that, as barterers construct friendships, they feel the need for more direct communication, and a physical meeting. This dissertation does not try to analyse the difference between the two types of communication, nor the effect of computer-mediated communication on social relations. It is important only to note that the consolidation of social relations requires direct communication.

then we meet outside website with some of these barterers. For example, with a girl from Pescara we met each other several times to barter. Once we organized an exchange with four persons: it was me, and three girls from Pescara. We made a face-to-face exchange which is much better because in this

way you directly know others, you can have a coffee with them, you can chat with them, it is much more funny! (Eb_36f)

Nonetheless, if the counter-hegemonic power of barter consists of generating social relations, the existence of these sub-communities within a larger barter community represents a limit to the counter-hegemonic nature of barter. These sub-groups are forms of alliances that define the status of subjects as friends or enemies: the members of a friends' network benefit from belonging to the network since they can rely on several people to endorse her social and trustworthiness capital. At the same time, all persons not in to the network are considered as enemies, resulting in struggle and competition for trust. If a member of a friends' network engages in opportunistic behaviour – an attitude recalling the hegemonic dimension of market exchanges where the focus is on the maximization of profit at the expense of ethically correct behaviour – towards another user, the members of the victim's network will compete against the member of the opportunist's network of friends to prove the reputation of their "friend". Thus, reputation and trust are transferred among the members of a group, and they compete against other group to ensure for themselves the highest degree of credibility (Gili 2005).

look, for example: there is a barterer whose name is [barterer's name], and I believe her to be the most honest person in the world. She got a negative feedback on spite, I mean, I will always barter with her, but will never barter with the person who gave her that negative feedback (Zr_54f)

Just as there are barterers with more or less social and trustworthiness capital, there are communities with more or less of such capitals.

Here we have a public forum where this kind of "sects" are created, well I said sect which is an harsh term, but you know, these groups of people who know each other's and support each others, if one of them publish a comment on the forum, all others belonging to the group support her. (Eb_53f)

alliances are created, alliances between people who know each other and defend each other against external attacks (Eb_36f)

my experience with barter is not 100% good, I found person who blackmailed me, person who send broken objects, and if you try to complain about this, the war starts, but the point is that in this war I just had to succumb since I did not have the support on public forum, and this is not right, according to me. Then everybody judge you (Zr_42f)

The e-barty public forum is where public discussions take place, and where the mechanism of alliances acquires public visibility. The development of quarrels has a common structure: there is a barterer who accuses another barterer of misbehaving; the accused retaliates with a counter-accusation of misbehaviour; other barterers defend the first victim, and those defending the second subject intervene. In the example that follows, the alliances mechanism determined by friendship relations is particularly evident. In this case there is a barterer with less feedback, who acknowledges her mistake (delivery of a damaged jumper) while also accusing the other barterer with more feedback (i.e. more experienced barterer) of not giving her the chance to resolve the mistake. In Chapter 6, it was shown that this is considered misbehaviour. Hence, barterer 1 complains about the lack of collaboration shown by barterer 2, who did not wait before releasing negative feedback:

Barterer 1

Dear barterer 2, yesterday you gave a negative feedback without telling it to me even if I suggested I could give your stuff back to you, and you refused it! You could have waited at least until this morning, since at 11pm I'm not connected, because I have a young kid. This morning I just found the negative feedback, and I could do anything about it. I apologized because I really did not see the internal stain and I ask you to remedy by sending your things back to you, what could I do? [...] You could have given a neutral feedback after all (e-barty public forum)

Barterer 2 retaliates, questioning the veracity of barterer 1's comments and, after a series of exchanges, barterer 2 tries to stop the debate by establishing the rightness of her position, and drawing on her position within the field:

Barterer 2

I gave you a negative feedback because you deserve it, because you tried to kidding me [...] this feedback I gave you should be a lesson for you so next time you barter, you'll act fair. And I won't let you ruin the reputation I built in 60 positive exchanges. I won't let a newcomer ruin the reputation I built in 2 years of barter activity!" (e-barty public forum)

This last sentence was heavily criticized by another barter who was offended by the comments, and thought that barterer 1 was right:

Barterer 3

Well, barterer 2, you could not have said that comments on newcomers...I know of barterers with a mountain of feedbacks cheating on newcomers...Plus, I do think that you could have given her more time to fix the problem, why have you been so rapid in given her the negative? I can understand the disappointment but everyone can commit a mistake, and since she was willing to give your things back to you, why did you start all this quarrel?" (e-barty public forum)

Evidently barterer 1 and barterer 3 do not know each other, and both are newcomers to the community. In contrast, barterer 2 is an "expert" and can count on substantial trustworthiness capital. Indeed, as soon as another barterer of her social network sees the debate, she enters the discussion.

Barterer 4

Barterer 2 is pure correctness, I know her very well and I can say it...I don't know what happened and I don't judge, but if something went wrong, this is not barterer 2's fault for sure." (e-barty public forum)

The difference between barterer 3's and barterer 4's attitudes is that 3 is not defending the position of barterer 1, but is complaining about the attitude of another barterer, while 4 is taking for granted the fairness of barterer 2 without knowing, as she says, what has happened between the two.

Hence, in barter field not only are there users with more or less power, but there is also a hierarchy of communities.

Finally, the communities so constructed are highly dependent on the technological features of the website where they were generated. It is the website and its spaces that shape the kind of communication the members of the friends' network build and, as case A shows, there are instances where developments to the website can seriously compromise the existence of a community. When a registration fee was introduced, there were some barterers who agreed with it and some who did not. Even though barterers in the same group have some values in common, in this case, groups were

split by this debate. As a consequence, some of these informal communities broke up. Undoubtedly, groups can demonstrate forms of resistance by moving to another website or organizing their barter meetings offline, but this occurs rarely for the precise reason that the websites play a hegemonic role in barter practice: their rules are accepted as the best option. Website administrations do not have to impose them, most of the time they are assimilated and respected by barterers.

7.5.3 Horizontal distribution of power

The establishment of balanced relations generated by barter exchange, gives rise to a consequent counter-hegemonic organization of the community. Chapter 3 showed that the distribution of resources through the gift mechanism in primitive communities, resulted in a centralized distribution of power. Social relations were usually structured according to rigid hierarchies in which each subject had a precise role in configuring everyday life activities, which ultimately depended on a central authority based on a traditional or charismatic character (Weber 1978). The hegemony exercised by a charismatic leader or a traditional authority rests on the fact that it is accepted as legitimate by the population over which its authority is exercised. A legal authority similarly establishes its dominance on the basis of the legitimacy given to enacted rules. Hence, although modernity brought strong liberating power, represented by social mobility and the diffusion of a democratic process allowing every individual to participate in a collective decision mechanism, the distribution of power has remained uneven. The majority of contemporary societies where legal power is legitimized, are market-based societies, dominated by the hegemony of market exchanges and money.

In contrast, communities organized along a barter system of exchange show few signs of authority, and show high levels of democratic participation in collective decisions. The possibility of establishing the value of objects exchanged allows individuals to truly participate in the decision making process, demonstrating a strong counter-hegemonic dimension. Counter-hegemonic power is reinforced by the possibility of collectively establishing the rules of the game, or *doxa* to use Bourdieu's (1992) word.

Nonetheless, the performance of an activity in an online space introduces an element of hegemony by structuring the community within a space where the dominance of legal authority is legitimized. The website administration imposes its rules and takes the final decision over collectively discussed matters. Ultimately, the administration regulates access to the field, deciding whether or not a user can participate in the activity and fixing some of the rules regulating barter exchange. As the researcher's experience demonstrates, the reasons why a user is excluded from the field are various, but, above all, are not public. The proscription of a user is not the result of a collective decision and is possible because, after all, online barter communities do not function only according to social norms. Sanctions such as social exclusion of misbehaving barterers, do not emanate only from collective decisions, but are distributed by a central authority. The authority even decides about the instrument for trust building by imposing the feedback system (in case A, a system that the majority of users consider is inefficient and unfair); a value on the objects exchanged (in case B); and a cost for participating in the activity.

Hence, the hegemonic dimension of barter is revealed by the fact that individuals agree to enter a space that imposes specific modalities of barter exchange (see Chapter 6) and is ruled by a central authority. As underlined in Chapter 2, the hegemony is established when a dominating class (in this case a group of subjects) is legitimated by the classes it rules, allowing the imposition of rules to the benefit of the dominating class's interests. It should be noted that the three websites differ in the degree of hegemony exercised, and represent a kind of continuum with case B (most hegemonic) and case C (least hegemonic) at the extremes and case A in the middle.

Case B has the highest level of authoritarian power. First, because it is the website administration that decides the value of objects, and, as this chapter has tried to demonstrate, determination of objects' values is a fundamental counter-hegemonic dimension of barter. Indeed, the practice of determining the value of objects in barter, closely resembles the practice of determining a price in market. Establishing an aprioristic value to objects is a denial of the space for collective value creation. Second, on this website there is no space for public discussion, hence the authority cannot be resisted through the creation of collectively shared social moments. The

struggle between barterers is neglected on two levels: first, in the relational exchange, where a subject can only accept the value imposed by the website – exactly as in the market. Second, in the communicational sphere, where there is no possibility for barterers to engage in communicational struggles.

At the other extreme, Case C exhibits the highest level of horizontal distribution of power. This condition is a direct consequence of the absence of any administration. There are different discussion threads related to this issue, where barterers explicitly ask the administration to show itself by answering, or by performing certain actions (usually connected to the proscription of a “bad” barterer); however, they attract no responses and no intervention. As a result, every decision is generated by a collective process: the exclusion of a misbehaving barterer, for example, is the consequence of social sanctioning. It is highly probable that the existence of a proper space for discussion leads to empowerment of the horizontal distribution of power. Yet social sanctioning and communicational struggles may become very aggressive actions leading back to a hierarchical configuration generated by a different distribution of symbolic capital. As already demonstrated, participation in public forum discussions and level of trustworthiness are two crucial elements of power. During public discussion, the collective decisional mechanism is at work, but the legitimacy granted to each participant depends on two factors, the first being the amount of time dedicated to discussion. The more the barterer intervenes in these conversations, the more her opinion will be considered relevant. The second factor is the reputation constructed on the website – which in turn is highly dependent on the time dedicated to barter. The symbolic capital in this field, that is, trustworthiness capital, is increased through correct behaviour in exchanges: consequently, the higher the number of positive exchanges, the higher the symbolic capital. Evidently, concluding a considerable number of exchanges, implies a considerable amount of time dedicated to barter practice. This confirms that time could be another form of symbolic capital in this field.

In general, although participation in public discussions where decision are taken potentially is open to everyone, possession of a discrete amount of the two forms of symbolic capital (temporal and trustworthiness) can give rise to a form of authority.

Nevertheless, case B is configured as a space where a horizontal distribution of power is more easily achieved, and at least provides a proper space for struggle.

Case A is a mix of the other two: it has a central authority although barterers can participate, in a proper space for public discussion. Decisions taken by the central authority cannot be questioned and must be accepted by the social actors in this specific field in order to participate further. Bourdieu (1992) explains it as rules that are not imposed, but are accepted by those players *in ludo*. An example is the introduction of a registration fee: although some barterers did not oppose it in theory, there is no doubt they would have preferred participation to be free of charge. The chorus of complaints was loud, and provoked major public debate on the website. Apart from the different positions taken for and against the fee, the decisional mechanism activated by the discussion are interesting. Some barterers not only protested they also proposed alternatives. This is an important aspect of a democratic environment, which should include both interaction and participation. Participating cannot be defined by mere presence on a website (although the website is about barter and barter implies participation in determining the value of objects) or involvement in a public debate. Participating, in this field, means discussing together what actions might be taken in order to find a solution acceptable to both the website administration and the users who consider imposition of a monetary fee unacceptable. One barterer argued that in private exchanges among barterers the possibility of introducing some sort of “acceptable advertisement” was discussed and some barterers proposed this to the website administration which, however, never considered it, which went against the discussion terms:

they've always chosen not to have advertisement but, having expenses to cover, they could have at least though about it. I do not consider advertisement as a negative thing, you can always choose what to advertise. I would have liked to have a discussion about it, choosing an advertisement which was consistent with the identity of the website. I know this is a diffused opinion, but this was not the opinion of the website administration (Zr_29f)

Also, the absence of a proper public forum, is perceived as a sign of the website's anonymity according to this barterer, who registered on website B, but also tried to exchange on website A: “there is another website, whose name is Zerorelativo, but it does not

have a forum and I felt uncomfortable there because there is no possibility of, I mean, it's pretty cold and anonymous there, while here, well I like so much this fact that I can chat beyond bartering" (Eb_36f).

As in Case B, barterers try to escape the central authority by breaking the website's rules – they upload objects in different categories depending on the number of credits they want to obtain; in case A barterers resist the central authority by establishing friendship relations. The system hegemonically imposes a space for barter, and a mechanism for trust building. However, each time an exchange occurs, private data are exchanged. In theory, barterers could just leave the website and proceed with private exchange, using their personal emails, and sometimes they do this. However, this is infrequent because, in the majority of cases, the barterers need a communicational (verbal and material) space, and a trust building mechanism: they do not establish friendship relations with every barterer with whom they exchange. When barterers engage in friendship relations which, due to their high level of trust, can produce exchanges that do not need the support of a feedback system, they are creating a strong counter-hegemonic space of action.

if someone like [barterer's name] asks me for an object when she does not have anything interesting to me, I gave her the object because I know that in time she will have something I'm interested in and she will come back to me with that object. I mean, when there is a friendship, the website disappears, that is, we don't have the need to manage the exchange through website's rules (Zr_29f).

Friendship relations, although they have hegemonic aspect because they create competition between groups as described above, must be considered counter-hegemonic in this sense. They in fact oppose the hegemony of the authority exercised by the barter website's administration.

Again, this is infrequent because the reciprocity mechanism is reactivated. One barterer maintained that subjects perceive a relation between them and the website (personified in the website administration). The fact that access was free for a period is perceived as a gift and, therefore, an act that requires reciprocation. So when the website introduced a registration fee, the fee was paid to demonstrate a counter-gift - to the website: "because I think the website gave me something by allowing me to exploit that

space without even paying, that now I think it is correct to give something back, now that is the website who needs my support” (Zr_29f).

It is interesting that counter-hegemonic practice always imply a personification of social relations, and as opposed to the market, more personal social relations are created through barter. To oppose the hegemony of an authoritarian website, friendship relations - an even more personal form of relations – are created. It would be interesting to investigate the distribution of power in such small social networks, analysis that could be conducted using methods such as social network analysis. It would be interesting to know whether in these small groups, there is a form of authoritarian power which generates resistance, or if they are effectively horizontal.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

“What is a cynic?”

“A man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing”

(O. Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*)

The objective of this work was answering two basic research questions. At the end of the work it can be stated that, from one side, the thesis described the phenomenology of the online barter practice, detailing the various aspects of the mechanism, from the other, it provided an exhaustive answer to the question of how far barter could be defined a counter-hegemonic activity. From the development of this latter answer some important considerations can be drawn, concerning both the barter practice and the changes occurring in today's society. Basically, the answer to the main research question allows the researcher to maintaining that barter is political and that it represents a symbolic space where the antagonistic struggle performed through the process of evaluation, is transformed into an agonistic one, allowing a good level of participation. Furthermore, the work confirms the idea that counter-hegemonic forms of resistance, always generate within a hegemonic field. In particular it emerges how barter contrasts the market hegemony, at the same time being profoundly influenced by it. Finally, this thesis puts forward that bartering is not only about the creation of economic values but, primarily, about the sharing of social ones, which is why its political and social nature is confirmed.

8.1 Barter is the site of an agonistic democratic process

The first important conclusion of this work is that barter is political. Not only it represents an activity that resists to hegemonic models of consumption and exchange, but it also constitutes a space for the struggle. Following de Certeau's (1990) definition, barter is a tactic. It represents one of those tiny procedures through which consumers can exercise a form of resistance against a fixed order. The heuristic validity of de Certeau's model is here confirmed and it serves efficiently to describe the role barter plays in today's society. Barter represents a subtle resistance, exercised through an alternative use of objects and an alternative process of objects' signification/evaluation. Furthermore, its political nature is revealed by the struggle generated within the practice itself.

Individuals involved in a barter relation must in fact struggle to balance their sacrifices: besides, their conflict produces value and, eventually, a social form. As Simmel (1983) suggested, society does not exist outside relations: it is generated after each "association" and barter is, undoubtedly, a form of association. Indeed, barter shows efficiently how far the political is the emerging of the social. In the first part of this work it has been argued, following Mouffe's (2005) reasoning, that the political should be distinguished from politics, the former being the ontological dimension characterising the emergence of social forms, the latter the place where this struggle is institutionalized. In the work of Mouffe, this distinction is important for two reasons: first, it underlines that the struggle occurring in the institutionalized field of politics, usually identified as the site of the democratic process, should not be limited to that field at all. Indeed, if the struggle is an ontological dimension of reality, then it is performed in all spheres of life, not only in the political one. Second, it suggests that the unavoidable conflicting antagonistic nature of reality can actually be transformed in a conflicting agonistic nature, hence recognising the inevitability of struggle but allowing it to be performed through a different dialectical relation. Furthermore, the broadening of the political domain intensifies the democratic process leading to a society based on more balanced power relations (Laclau, Mouffe 2001), even though such relations will not be completely balanced since the struggle

must be reiterated, as the construction of reality is a never ending process (Simmel 1983, 2009). The idea of extending the democratic process outside the field of politics is supported also by Pateman (1970) who maintains that to guarantee a full and balanced democratic process, the possibility to participate in that political struggle, hence to take part in political decision-making processes, should be extended to “alternative areas”. Through the study of media, Carpentier (2011: 22) noted that “the frontiers of institutionalized politics have also become permeable” and that “not only do we witness a broadening of the set of actors involved in political activities, but also an expansion of the sphere that are considered political”. In the light of this perspective, it can be argued that not only barter is political but it can be considered also as the site of a democratic process, due to the fact that barterers are participating in decisional-making processes, through the mean of an agonistic struggle.

As it was shown in previous chapter, one of the counter-hegemonic dimensions of barter is expressed by its capacity of creating a space where individuals have the power to establish, together with other individuals, the value of the objects exchanged. In other words, they participate in a decision-making process. The process leading to the establishment of values is the result of an agonistic struggle, where participants are not willing to eliminate the counter-part, as if they were *enemies* (Mouffe 2005), but their aim is to collaborate in order to balance the sacrifices they both have to do, to possess the object they want (Simmel 2011), as if they were *adversaries*. The struggle consists in balancing the sacrifices and it results in an exchange realized within an almost perfectly balanced relation¹⁰⁴. Following Mouffe, “this means that, while in conflict, they see themselves as belonging to the same political association, as sharing a common symbolic space within which the conflict takes place” (2005: 20). The symbolic space they share, is the counter-hegemonic space of resistance.

¹⁰⁴ In a theoretical model barter is perfectly balance, while in practice it has been argued that there are some hegemonic elements (symbolic capital) which intervene in unbalancing the relation. In any case, it is the theoretical perfect balancing of barter relations which made anthropologists describe barter as neutral, without considering the idea that neutrality comes from a struggle. As Chapman (1980) noted, barter is neutral only in theory.

Although there are reasons to believe barter never really died out, this research testifies to a present phase of institutionalization of the practice. The creation of barter websites, the increase in number of such environments and the increase in the number of people participating in the practice¹⁰⁵ are all signs of its development and, perhaps, this is the sign of an increasing social claim for participation. In the course of the work, it has been repeatedly noted how far money neglects to the subject the possibility of determining the value of consumption objects, leaving the individual in the illusion of exercising the power of choice, or better said, leaving to the subject the illusion of holding a form of power in the market. During interviews, there has been a barterer who even mentioned this illusion by saying that choosing between a producer and another one, it is not a real power and, above all, it is not like deciding the values of objects. Being involved in this agonistic struggle to decide over the value of objects, eventually means being involved in a process of participation where power is restored in the hands of individuals. Participation, as indicated in the work of Carpentier (2011)¹⁰⁶, is a decision-making process which is kept distinguished from interaction because of the focus on the power dimension. If interaction is that act constituting social forms (Simmel 1983), than participation is the interaction focused on deciding the shape of those forms. Hence, participating does not only mean to establish socio-communicative relations, but to make decisions within the relations. According to this distinction, it can be noted that the liberal rhetoric which refers to a democratization of consumption, as the possibility of a large part of a

¹⁰⁵ The number of users in the three analyzed websites shows a constant increase from their opening till the moment the digital ethnography took place, that is, in the spring of 2013.

¹⁰⁶ According to Carpentier (2011: 24-28) participation holds six key characteristics: 1) participation is defined by power; 2) participation is situated in particular process and localities, involving specific actors; 3) participation is contingent and itself part of the power struggle in society; 4) participation is not part of a democratic-populist fantasy; 5) participation is invitational; 6) participation is not the same as access and interaction. This last point is of a crucial importance for this thesis because it stresses the difference between the conflicting and a-conflicting perspective on the construction of reality. In the theory of the author, access is defined as the presence which can be articulated in a variety of ways (ibidem: 28). The difference between interaction and participation is however of the utmost importance for this work: interaction is in fact defined as the establishment of socio-communicative relationships (ibidem: 29) as the phenomenological approach to sociology exposed in chapter 2 explains. Although in these relations the power dimension is not excluded, the power element is not fundamental in the definition of relations which are not focused on decision-making processes. On the contrary, the participation defines those relations focused on power, hence “the difference between participation on the one hand, and access and interaction on the other is located within the key role that is attributed to power, and to equal(ized) power relations in decision-making processes” (ibidem: 29).

society to consume, it is a wrong assumption. The fact that more people are consuming refers to the fact that more people can access consumption, but the process of democratization should instead refer to the possibility of always more people to participate in consumption, hence to take part in decision-making processes, like the one occurring in online barter, where interactions between users are translated into this kind of processes.

Furthermore, it can be said that barter is the site of participation because the decision-making processes in which barterers are involved are the result of equalized power relations. Individuals are in fact involved in a struggle but the way they perform it, can be defined as “agonism” instead of “antagonism”, because their aim is not to dominate the other and, basically, they cannot since otherwise the exchange would not take place. In barter exchange, the social position of an individual matters as little as her cultural and economic capital. Indeed, individuals have the same power when deciding over the values of their objects.

However, in the particular form of barter analyzed in this work, the participation mechanism activated in barter is often distorted by the competition over the symbolic capital of the field. Hence, also in the barter field there is the possibility of elite’s formation, as the presence of sub-communities shows. These aggregations generate out of the competition for symbolic capital and they constitute alliances which replicate the friend/enemy relation of antagonistic struggle. Nonetheless, also a theoretical model which implies a higher degree of participation (hence a high degree of equalization of relations) does not conceive a complete elimination of elites in a totally balanced social structure. In such a structure there would not be the space for struggle, leading to a post-political situation (Mouffe 2005) which does not benefit the democratic process.

What is worth noting is that, as it was noted in the previous chapter, the construction of those sub-communities is not based on pure barter: it implies another mechanism of exchange, that is, the gift exchange. This could stand as an explication of why anthropologists never found a society completely based on barter, since pure barter tends to perfect balance. As Simmel (1983: 41) noted, society comes out of reciprocal relations which can be stable and long lasting, but which normally are part of the eternal and vibrant flux of life, not always structured in stable organizations.

This dynamic nature of social life is what allows its reiteration and development, in other words, its survival. Were exchange relations established only by the mean of pure barter, the risk would be of reducing the conflicting dimension so to endanger that dynamic flux. Nevertheless, this work tried to demonstrate that barter is not an a-social and a-political form of exchange: it does create relations and it implies the participation into an agonistic struggling mechanism of value creation, altogether it develops a model of maximalist participation which “has proven to be very difficult to translate into social practice” (Carpentier 2011: 32), but which should not be for this reason underestimated.

8.2 The ontological dimension of struggle

The political nature of barter testifies to the fact that struggle is an ontological dimension of reality (Mouffe 2005; Simmel 2009) and, above all, that each activity of resistance moves together with its hegemonic order, in the same space the latter defines. In de Certeau’s (1990) model, the complex mechanism through which the social emerges, the political conflict, is not represented by the opposition of sides moving on their own territories, armed with their own weapons. In the struggle described by de Certeau, the subtle forces of resistance do not shout against a dominant order, but they silently insinuate in the meshes of the pre-constituted net, filling the spaces hegemonies left empty. Counter-hegemony represents a rupture in the symbolic space of hegemony, modifying meanings which apparently remain untouched but which depict different conceptual lines. “Bien qu’elles soient composée avec les vocabulaires de langues reçues et qu’elles restent soumises à des syntaxes prescrites, elles tracent les ruses d’intérêts autres et des désirés qui ne sont ni déterminés ni captés par les systèmes où elles se développent” (de Certeau 1990: XLV)¹⁰⁷.

Hence, barter can be considered a counter-hegemonic activity, as far as it encounters the power of hegemony: like a fluid it takes the shape of the boundaries

¹⁰⁷ “even though they are composed through the vocabularies of imposed languages and even if they are kept subject of assigned syntaxes, they trace different tricks and desires which are neither determined nor catch by the systems where they develop” (de Certeau 1990: XLV, my translation).

fixed by the hegemonic model of exchange and consumption, at the same time sneaking in the interstices of power. What is important to note, is the fact that the resistance barter exercises, does not generate from an outer symbolical space, but it is produced within the same field defined by the hegemony. Indeed, barter represents a good example of a “tactic”, a moment destabilizing the strategy of hegemonic powers. Barter represents the attempt of consumers to suspend a setting, a wide and organized space where they cannot create a new order but where they can confront with it and re-signify it, so to create a moment of rupture which emerges from a confrontation, leading to the participation in decision-making processes. This thesis hence confirms that resistance does not come from outside the field of hegemony, instead counter-hegemony develops and emerges within the same field and keep on carrying with it hegemonic elements, exactly because it can express its force only by exploiting the same instrument adopted by the hegemony. For example, if it can be argued that barter is not market because it works with ex-commodities instead of with commodities, it is also true that barter would not exist if the market did not produce those objects, which once were commodities. Yet, objects of exchange in a barter field are singularized objects which hold a part of the subject, differently from the impersonal commodities exchanged in the market place by alienated subjects¹⁰⁸. Nonetheless, it has been noted how much an object can hold its commodity nature and how strong the market can still influence the signification process of an object taken outside the logic of that field (as the example of brand-name objects shows).

The thesis also argued that barter reveals a counter-hegemonic force by rejecting the use and the idea of money, but the hegemonic power of money frequently comes back in, especially with regard to its use as a unit of account to measure the value of things. In general, the value of objects exchanged is not the result of a rational calculus, instead, it is established within the relation, by the confrontation between sacrifices. This dimension of barter contrasts the power of the market, which assigns a predetermined value to objects, expressed in prices that are the result of aggregate demand and aggregate supply, intersecting one another. In the barter practice hence, things are not hollowed, flattened, and their qualities are not quantified, but they are

¹⁰⁸ I mean alienated referring to Marx's idea of a subject separated from the object.

measured by the sacrifices which are needed to reach them. This means that the subject actively participate in the definition of her values, contrasting the action of money which “expresses all qualitative differences of things in terms of ‘how much?’. Money, with all its colourlessness and indifference, becomes the common denominator of all values; irreparably it hollows out the core of things, their individuality, their specific value, and their incomparability” (Simmel 1997c: 178). Furthermore, by rejecting the use of money, in the barter practice trust is located outside the instrument and relocated on the “other”, who is participating in the redefinition of value, even tough, as it was explained in Chapter 6, the construction of trust encounters limits in the online form of the practice, since the online environment imposes a predetermined structure on relations. The counter-hegemonic power which contrasts the power of money, is in any case weakened by a certain use of credits and by the reference to money subjects use to define their objects. Again, this shows how a counter-hegemonic force must use hegemonic instruments which can in any case be used in alternative way (when credits are used as short-cuts reducing the complexity of barter exchange). Barter also allows taking labour outside the market, creating the space for the circulation of self-produced objects and the exchange of services.

Moreover, and more importantly, barter determines the emergence of a counter-hegemonic consumption model. If the market model of consumption is focused on the satisfaction of personal desires and implies the rapid turnover of commodities, in the barter practice the life cycle of an object is subject to a process of re-signification and its life is lengthen. As it was noted in Chapter 3, the biography of objects are determined by class interests but, Appadurai (1986) argues, the consumption side has the power to determine, within certain limits, changes and deviations to that predetermined trajectories. Barter represents a deviation from normal path of objects, which should usually get to the end of their life much more quickly if not exchanged once or more times before dump. This also refers to an important ecological dimension, since subjects show awareness of the negative consequences of a mass production model and try to contrast them by decreasing the production of disposal. Above all, the consumption model supported by barter reassigns a different role to consumption in the lives of individuals. It is a model that gives a different priority to

the acquisition and possession of objects, modifying the idea of urgency behind individuals' needs. For this reason, the time and moment of consumption drastically change. Nevertheless, it can be argued that, again, barter moves in the pre-determined field of consumption since is the market model of consumption which determines the pace of barter. Indeed, market still imposes a certain temporality to the consumption model developed through the barter practice, and individuals still follow certain pattern of consumption dictated by the moment of purchase typical of the market. A good example is Christmas time, when people increase their exchanges both before and after the festivity: they need to exchange before in order to acquire presents, and they exchange after to free themselves from unappreciated gifts. In any case, the strong counter-hegemonic power of barter is revealed by its capacity of supporting the construction of alternative social relations, which differ both from gift exchange relations and to market exchange relations. On one side, in fact, barter constructs a space for balanced relations where there is not the possibility of establishing dominance typical of the gift exchange; on the other, barter allows individuals to relate between each other on a very personal, and non-abstract level, contrary to the market place. Individuals can participate in a decision-making process establishing the value of what they desire, and this gives space to equalized relations. This counter-hegemonic force is limited by the competition triggered by the acquisition and possession of the symbolic capital of the field, that is, trustworthiness. The existence of this symbolic capital shows how far the counter-hegemonic resistance of barter is limited by typical mechanism of the market, and again in the formation of communities it plays a considerable role. If from one side this thesis rejects the idea that barter does not creates relations, from the other, it underlines how the creation of these aggregations menaces the equalization of power distribution, since a member of such communities can always count on the power derived by belonging to them, and can exercise it against less powerful barterer. The existence of these communities drives the struggle back to an antagonistic form, where the relation is constructed between enemies who recognise themselves belonging to a "we" which is constructed against a "them" (Mouffe 2005). Above all, the distribution of power is distorted by the fact that the relations between barterers

are constructed in a predefined space, the online environment, where websites' administrators constitute an authority whose power cannot be overthrown.

Although this work suggested that barterers can contrast such power, it clearly emerged from the analysis that these authorities eventually decide on the rules of the game; in other words, they develop strategies which can, to a certain extent, being contrasted by the tactics adopted by barterers. In any case, the inferior power of tactics is revealed by the limits they encounter and by the fact that strategies of administrators often leave barterers only with the possibility of accepting them – being *in ludo* (Bourdieu 1992) – or rejecting them, getting outside the field.

Nonetheless, the limitations imposed by hegemony to counter-hegemony, and the consequential answer produced by counter-hegemonic forces, produces a tension, a struggle, which is exactly about that reiteration of social life described by Simmel (2009). The dualistic relation, in which hegemony and counter-hegemony are involved, generates that unity that is not, indeed, the product of purely positive relation (*ibidem*), but which emerges also, and primarily, out of conflict.

8.3 The creation of social values

In the concluding part of this work, it is argued that barter is a political activity, precisely, barter is about building socio-communicative relations between two individuals, who struggle to establishing objects' values. Indeed, it is argued that this is one among the counter-hegemonic dimensions of barter, since it gives back to the subject a power which was subtracted by the market. The work underlines also the fact that barter is a social activity, since the political struggle is nothing but the emergence of social forms. After all, Simmel's (1983) perspective was to define each human reciprocal interaction as that associative event we call "society", looking at each act of exchange as a moment of socialization. Hence, interactions taking place in barter, which bring individuals in a situation of reciprocal relation struggling to define the value of their sacrifices, are social forms. For this reason, it can be argued that barter exchanges do not only generate economic values, but they are the site of social values' formation. The act of exchange, where value is created, is hence one of

the determining acts of society (Mora 1994): evidently each interaction is an association, but exchange represents a particular category of association. This explains why Simmel (1997a,b,c) analyses the negative consequences of a society generated by exchange relations which are not reciprocal anymore. Monetary exchanges, in fact, cannot be defined as reciprocal because the relation is always mediated. In Chapter 3, it was argued that the problem with money is its role as intermediary between subjects, so that the reciprocal mechanism stops functioning in the light of a kind of triangular relation: two subjects exchanging money for objects are actually related to a third subject (institution) who guarantees that that object (the piece of paper, the coin, the credit card which contains virtual money, etc.) actually has a value. Value is predetermined, is not generated within the exchange. Individuals are not related to each another, that is, their interaction is not reciprocal. The introduction of money led to the separation between the production of economic values and social values. As it was argued in the course of this work, the establishment of the market hegemony actually led to the autonomization of the economic field, which is now separated from, and it is dominating, the social field. Consequently, in society based on market economy, social values and economic values are kept separated, the former imposing on the latter. With this regard, Simmel's description of the blasé individual is emblematic:

If money thus becomes the common denominator for all values of life, if the question is no longer what they are worth but how much they are worth, then their individuality is diminished. Through the possibility of being compared against an indifferent standard, and one accessible to all, they lose the interest tied to the specific and the unique. To the blasé person, there exists nothing which seems to him or her to be priceless, and conversely, anyone who believes that they are able to buy everything with money must necessarily become blasé. (Simmel 1997b: 238)

On the contrary, in the barter practice individuals are forced to evaluating their objects qualitatively, through the relation they establish with objects themselves. The analysis of empirical material collected in this work revealed this aspect of barter showing how barterers perform different types of interactions, depending on social values: a barterer does not exchange with all other barterers and the process of selection mainly depends on the typology of available objects. Precisely, this work

demonstrates how far objects are carriers of meanings (Douglas, Isherwood 1996) and the fact that through consumption we claim our position in the social world, attributing to consumption a precise political role. It has in fact clearly emerged how actors in this field use communication to reconstruct the identity of others and recognise their social values. This process of identification leads to the formation of cluster of users who prefer to exchange objects between each other, on the basis of the values they share, and prefer to avoid exchanging with those subjects explicitly manifesting opposing values. These identities are created and related to other identities through the use of objects.

This is the phase where collective identities are formed and it is the moment where antagonistic struggle may emerge. But this remains a possibility, not a certainty. In the barter practice there is hence a certain possibility of transforming a potentially antagonistic struggle, into an agonistic one. This finally shows how far barter can be considered a social and political practice.

All in all, online barter is not only about the establishment of “the degree to which objects are desired” which is value in the economic sense, but it is also about revealing “what is ultimately good, proper, or desirable in human life” (Graeber 2001: 1), that is value in sociological sense. Barter implies the two forms of values at the same time, because it is a form of exchange which does not lead to the autonomization of the economic dimension from social life.

Finally, this thesis does not want to argue that barter will develop to be the next hegemonic form of economic exchange. Indeed, barter has always emerged to compensate a form of hegemony, as in the case of gift. Barter is the space where people can aggregate without regards to social position, participating together in a mechanism of social value creation which is performed through an agonistic struggle. The emergence of barter is nonetheless an important sign which is demonstrating how far individuals are demanding for space of participation, and how far they are actually creating those spaces outside the realm of the institutionalized politics. Consequently, barter is the sign that social actors want to participate in a democratic process neglected by institutionalized politics and obtained in other sphere of social life, like the consumption sphere.

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