

Past, future and change: Contemporary analysis of evolving media scapes



edited by
Ilija Tomanić Trivunđža
Nico Carpentier
Hanni Nieminen



Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt
Richard Kilborn
Ebba Sundin
Tobias Olsson

THE RESEARCHING AND TEACHING COMMUNICATION SERIES

PAST, FUTURE AND CHANGE:
CONTEMPORARY ANALYSIS OF EVOLVING
MEDIA SCAPES

Ljubljana, 2013

PAST, FUTURE AND CHANGE:
CONTEMPORARY ANALYSIS OF EVOLVING MEDIA SCAPES
Edited by: Ilija Tomanić Trivundža, Nico Carpentier, Hannu Nieminen, Pille Pruulmann-Venerfeldt, Richard Kilborn, Ebba Sundin and Tobias Olsson.
Series: The Researching and Teaching Communication Series
Series editors: Nico Carpentier and Pille Pruulmann-Venerfeldt

Published by: Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana Press: Založba FDV
For publisher: Hermina Krajnc
Copyright © Authors 2013
All rights reserved.
Reviewer: Igor Vobič
Book cover: Ilija Tomanić Trivundža
Design and layout: Vasja Lebarič
Language editing: Kyrill Dissanayake
Photographs: Ilija Tomanić Trivundža, François Heinderyckx
Printed by: Tiskarna Radovljica
Print run: 400 copies
Electronic version accessible at: <http://www.researchingcommunication.eu>

The publishing of this book was supported by the Slovene Communication Association and the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA).

The 2012 European Media and Communication Doctoral Summer School (Ljubljana, August 12-25) was supported by the Lifelong Learning Programme Erasmus Intensive Programme project (grant agreement reference number: 2011-7878), the University of Ljubljana – the Department of Media and Communication Studies and the Faculty of Social Sciences, a consortium of 22 universities, and the Slovene Communication Association. Affiliated partners of the programme were the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA), the Finnish National Research School, and COST Action IS0906 Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies.

CIP - Kataložni zapis o publikaciji

Narodna in univerzitetna knjižnica, Ljubljana

316.77(082)(0.034.2)

PAST, future and change [Elektronski vir] : contemporary analysis of evolving media scapes / edited by Ilija Tomanić Trivundža ... [et al.] ; photographs Ilija Tomanić Trivundža, François Heinderyckx. - El. knjiga. - Ljubljana : Faculty of Social Sciences, Založba FDV, 2013. - (The researching and teaching communication series (Online), ISSN 1736-4752)

Način dostopa (URL): <http://www.researchingcommunication.eu>

ISBN 978-961-235-639-2 (pdf)

1. Tomanić Trivundža, Ilija, 1974-

267892480

The Political Dimension of Everyday Life: The Practice of Barter

Giulia Airaghi

1. THE PRACTICE OF BARTER

Consuming is an activity in which we are all involved: whether or not we have access to consumption, whether or not we are consuming in an alternative way or whether or not we are involved in various forms of mass consumption, we must all confront it. In order to engage in this practice of acquiring objects or services that we need or like, we must use money. Nevertheless, monetary exchange is not the only possible exchange system people have at their disposal in order to acquire objects. A very ancient system that has never completely disappeared from our societies is the practice of barter. Barter is the exchange of goods for goods, without the use of a standardised instrument with an economic value. To quote Appadurai (1988: 9), it is the *“exchange of objects for one another without reference to money and with maximum feasible reduction of social, cultural, political or personal transaction costs”*.

Barter is, of course, a primordial practice dating back to the very beginning of mankind. Exchanging is considered to be one of the oldest ways for human beings to establish relationships among one another, and, for this reason, as will be explained further in this chapter, it is considered to be one of the activity-shaping social structures in society. Even though I will argue that all exchange practices are political practices, scholars have tended to divide them into two different categories: those that are mainly commercial and those that are mainly social. It sometimes seems that barter is the exchange system which is the most separate from social, political and cultural norms. This perspective derived from the idea that barter was born as an exchange system *between* different communities, allowing them to obtain what one group of individuals could not produce by themselves. As a result, it entails the idea that there is no barter *within* the same community. Those who support this thesis state that primitive communi-

ties were just as big as a large family, had no division of labour and no understanding of the concept of private property, so that the distribution of what was picked or hunted passed through a gift-redistributing system. The chief of a community was responsible for the life of the community itself, and one of the tasks in this role was to ensure that everybody had the right amount of food and protection. In this way people inside the same community did not even have any need to exchange anything, because they actually owned nothing. For these scholars, mainly economists (e.g., Smith, 1976; Jevons, 1910), barter thus arose when family bonds weakened and the tribe enlarged to the point that a division of labour was necessary: at this stage people had to provide for their needs and thus began to seek an exchange for those products they were not able to produce. Consequently, barter has been conceived as a mere economic practice, answering to a basic private interest and not a social one. Not surprisingly, in the economic field, barter has always been considered the beginning of trade and specifically of international trade (Dalton, 1982). This perspective led logically to the formulation of another hypothesis about how humankind passed from bartering to using money as a means of exchange, describing the origin of money as being as natural as was the use of barter. In their view, barter disappeared when its mechanism turned out to be too complicated to deal with an increased volume of exchanged goods, a consequence of the development of markets and labour, and they maintained that this happened at almost the same moment in every part of the world (Einzig, 1966).

Nonetheless, there is a considerable body of empirical and theoretical evidence that allows us to consider that individuals from the same community also bartered between each other, determining the very social structure of a society. This idea was strongly rejected by anthropologists (e.g., Ingham, 1996; Davis, 1994) because exchange inside a community was intended to be of a different nature, namely a gift exchange, different from barter since it did not entail any interest but was effected purely for the sake of reciprocity, gratuity and altruism. For those scholars, the interest implied in gift exchange is simply less evident than in other forms of exchange, but it is still a key dimension of the gift. As Mauss's studies (2002) of primitive communities revealed, the gift mechanism was establishing social contracts and social hierarchies, as the value of a chief's community was ascertained by the amount of gifts he would have received back after a first donation. More generally, in the act of giving a gift, the giver expects that the receiver will, within a certain period of time, give the gift back. As Bourdieu (2003) puts it brilliantly, in the gift mechanism there is simply an

expansion of the time elapsing between the two phases of a normal barter, and the interest lies in the increase in social prestige, which carries with it a powerful social position. Whatever the differences implied, our interest is focused on the fact that bartering, or the gift mechanism, was a practice establishing social norms: for example, one of the main consequences of the practice was to eliminate the use of physical violence, substituting it with a kind of symbolic violence, albeit still based on subordination. The principle embedded in the practice of barter is one human being's respect for the physical integrity of another, and the idea that both of the subjects involved in the practice share this principle. If just one of the participants were to stop recognising this principle, and decide to resort to physical violence, this would no longer be exchange but exploitation. At any rate, the relationship did not become one between equals, because the two sides still exercise different degrees of power over one another: one of the two will own something more "desirable", thus forcing the other to sacrifice more. This is what Bourdieu and Passeron (1970) call "symbolic violence", a violence produced by an indirect mechanism instead of a form of social coercive control which has the objective of pushing classes with little social power to accept as natural the power upper classes wield over them.

Transforming violence into commerce was one of the main reasons why communities decided to barter between each other instead of engaging in disastrous wars: beyond the need for a different range of available goods, their first priority was to create a sort of equilibrium which could guarantee the survival of the group, which meant they had to prevent a hostile relationship forming with their neighbours. Bartering was the perfect occasion to have a cultural exchange as well as an economic exchange.

So, barter was conceived as the main practice for exchanging goods, and it seems very difficult, to say the least, to assert that people simply ceased to observe this practice because of the supposed complexity of the double coincidence of need: in fact, to make an exchange viable, not only must one person find an object he likes which is owned by another person, but the latter must like an object belonging to the first one. Many economists (e.g., Jones, 1976; Walsh, 2003) argue that it was exactly for this reason that large and differentiated communities decided to move to the use of money to regulate their commercial trade, without acknowledging that there was a considerable period when some goods were bartered more than others: animal teeth, stones, feathers, shells, beads, rice, woods and pigs, are all examples of what people used to assign a value to their exchange practices, referring to something which had the characteristics needed to

standardise the practice. Paul Einzig (1966) called these goods “primitive money”, and among them we can find one of the most in-demand goods in history: metal. The reason why metals, ranging from bronze and copper to silver and gold, were in such great demand, is connected to their use in primitive societies, first for “*their utility and peculiar beauty as in themselves ornamental, subsequently as the choicest materials for plastic and architectural decoration, and especially for ornaments and vessels of every kind*” (Menger, 1892: 252-253). The demand for metals grew due to these practices as well as their other characteristics: they are well distributed geographically but the overall supply available is inferior to the demand, they are easy to extrapolate and elaborate, and so they can be divided into small quantities which can then circulate easily and without major transportation problems. Since the demand “*emerges as a function of a variety of social practices and classifications, rather than a mysterious emanation of human needs, a mechanical response to social manipulation*” (Appadurai, 1988: 29), it became clear to anthropologists that metals emerged as the best goods to be exchanged, which led to prominence of monetary exchange practice. But how, and why, did it turn out to be the *only* practice involved in commercial activity?

As we said before, barter was an activity which allowed different people, coming from different cultures and traditions, to establish contact with each other. Merchants, more than anybody else in society, have contacts, and thus experience different norms and social practices. They are also the ones who, because of their activity, were, in practical terms, handling those metals which were considered to be very precious. They actually gained power over other individuals in hierarchical, pre-modern societies, and were not constrained by the social regulatory processes imposed by political élites through the means of the gift mechanism, which had the consequence of limiting human activity within precise practices (Ortino, 2010). Thus, a conflict emerged between the regulatory practice of the political élites and the practice observed by merchants of exchanging these precious goods as a type of primitive money. Exchanging metal coins became the practice that was most used, and political authorities had every interest in regulating this practice: the mintage of a legal coin was an activity which political élites used to exert control over economic activity in their realms. By imposing money as the only acceptable, legal way to perform exchanges, this practice became a hegemonic one.

Even so, barter did not completely disappear from society, as the historical crisis cycle (e.g., Marin and Schnitzer, 2002; Humphrey, 1985) shows

us: every time we see a state going through a period of political, economic and social crisis, we can be almost sure that other forms of exchanging objects, building relationships and performing social practices emerge, and, more widely, social norms are questioned. As consumption is a field where social practices are performed, it is also a sphere shaped by the political struggles in which all social actors are involved. This means that when a crisis hits the field of consumption, social norms are also questioned.

In order to better understand and explain why contemporary societies still use a type of exchange system considered to be pre-modern and anachronistic, but, above all, in order to understand how much the struggle for power is an intrinsic dimension of every sphere in human societies, I would like to put forward the idea that, beyond those theories of consumption which define only certain types of consumer behaviour as political, the consumption field *is* a political field where forms of conflict take place not only between the goods exchanged but also between the very ways of exchanging goods themselves. These “ways” of exchanging goods are generating structures of value which eventually determine an individual’s position in a society. To explore this further, I will make use of a specific approach by a Belgian political theorist, Chantal Mouffe.

2. ANTAGONISTIC AND AGONISTIC CONFLICT: CHANTAL MOUFFE’S APPROACH

Chantal Mouffe’s approach to the political, which we find expressed in her work *On the political* (2005), can be used to understand how consumption is political, in keeping with her definition of what political is. According to her, the political, as distinguished from politics, is an antagonistic dimension of all spheres of human life, the place where different discourses, practices or tactics struggle to gain the power to impose themselves on society. When a practice eventually manages to impose itself, it becomes hegemonic. That is where the social order is achieved and the political is taken apart: in this sense the political is about the rise of the social. The social is thus identified by Mouffe as the realm of sedimentary practices which are trying to veil the political act that constituted them, in an effort to conceal the fact that their hegemonic nature depends upon the contingency of their structure. A hegemonic practice is, in fact, the result of a choice between different alternatives, but the practices which have not been chosen, or, to be more precise, which did not emerge, are always there, with the possibility of being reactivated. Thus the social meaning

which is fixed in a precise moment can always be questioned in the next one by some counter-hegemonic practices (Mouffe, 2005).

Politics, then, comes to be seen as a realm where the political can be managed and an order achieved through the transformation of the conflicting nature of human society into a democratic coexistence. Unfortunately, Mouffe maintains, politics nowadays is struggling to accomplish this task, due to the tendency which is threatening the very mechanism of democracy.

The political is about the confrontation between different alternatives, which in society are often related to collective identities. The relationships between different identities are antagonistic, since *"every identity is relational and [that] the condition of existence of every identity is the affirmation of a difference, the determination of an 'other' that is going to play the role of a 'constitutive outside'"* (Mouffe, 1993: 2). Collective identities thus emerge from a "we/them" relationship which might turn out to be a friend/enemy relationship if the 'other' is perceived as threatening the existence of the 'we'. This is when the antagonistic dimension of the relation between different identities emerges. It happens when there is the precise will to deny the very existence of one of the parts.

The main aim of a democracy should thus be the control of this antagonistic force through institutions and practices which create the conditions for an agonistic relationship, where confrontation is entered into not by enemies but by adversaries. It is precisely the role of political parties to represent collective identities in a realm where this antagonistic conflict could have been turned into an agonistic one, but where that result is now hard to achieve because the boundaries between different political identities have been blurred in an attempt to eliminate differences. This happened because of the emergence of a political discourse which stated that the only way to solve the perpetual conflict between different factions in society and the global organisation was to overcome the conflict itself. Nonetheless, according to Mouffe, the neo-liberal discourse, a discourse which has the precise intention of overcoming the antagonistic conflict, does not solve the problem of antagonism but actually reinforces it by negating the conflict to arise. Denying the conflict means denying the existence of the very relationship, thus avoiding the formation of collective identities. But since the political dimension constitutes part of the ontology of any human relationship, once it is negated in the realm of institutionalised politics, conflict emerges more vigorously in other forms: that is a possible

explanation for the rise of so many nationalist or religious movements. The starting assumption of neo-liberalism is that the individual is a rational subject, able, with other individuals, to achieve a consensus through a deliberative debate, thus adopting the best option among many different ones. In this kind of democracy, the various instances concerning the public sphere should be discussed by individuals whose objective it is to create a broad collaboration based on reciprocal trust, trying to solve conflicts in a peaceful and harmonious way. Those who maintain that antagonistic conflict is not a sustainable political model anymore enforce this opinion by emphasising that the great push towards an individualistic society has erased the possibility of collective identities.

The whole democratic process threatens to be reduced to a dialogue between parts, searching for a consensus which logically needs the elimination of differences: agreeing upon issues means establishing a universal perspective. But instead of creating a peaceful and harmonious democracy, this process weakened the very legitimisation of political institutions that, as I said before, were conceived to be able to represent citizens. This provided space for an explosion of new antagonisms and, even worse, for the rise of populist parties which, rather than simply being right or left wing, are the collection of concrete necessities which are expressed in the most extreme and dangerous way for democracy. At any rate, when a conflict is suppressed in one sphere, it will emerge in another, because, according to Mouffe, this is the very ontological condition of human behaviour. The political dimension is there every time an identity is formed, Mouffe argues, as does Beck (1992), and the political *"cannot be restricted to a certain type of institution, or envisaged as constituting a specific sphere or level of society. It must be conceived as a dimension that is inherent to every human society and that determines our very ontological condition."* (Mouffe, 1993: 3). One of the aims of this chapter is thus, through the barter case study, to argue for the relevance of this theoretical perspective, approaching the consumption sphere on a macro level of analysis. The assumption is that consumption is *"eminently social, relational and active rather than private, atomic or passive"* (Appadurai, 1988: 31); that is, consumption is a social field and, as all social fields are the result of a political struggle, consumption, too, is a space shaped by conflicts.

3. BARTER AS A COUNTER-HEGEMONIC PRACTICE.

As Beck (1992) emphasised with his description of "subpolitical" spheres, no matter how personal the choices and practices of a single consumer, s/

he will always be mobilised inside the public sphere as part of a collective identity: *“Contrary to those who believe that politics can be reduced to individual motivations, [...] politics always consists of the creation of a ‘we’ versus a ‘they’ and [that] it requires the creation of collective identities”* (Mouffe, 2005: 70). We have always witnessed various forms of collective identification in consumption, and scholars from different generations described it as a way for people to declare their affiliation to some groups and consequently in contrast with others. From Simmel’s description of the fashion mechanism to Bourdieu’s studies on distinction and on to the cultural studies analysis of subcultures, we know consumption is a place where different identities emerge.

In this sense, consumption is a political field where competing practices, performed and represented by collective identities, struggle to be legitimised as hegemonic practice. Different ways of exchanging goods struggle to become the only way to exchange: as in pre-modern communities, people who owned goods that were much in demand exercised a kind of power over other people. In our contemporary societies, the larger our economic capital, the more powerful the position we can reach in the field of consumption. This is because the monetary exchange system turns out to be the hegemonic exchange system, although others forms of exchange did not simply die out but turned out to be counter-hegemonic practices.

Once imposed, a hegemony works in contrast to counter-hegemonic practices, all together building the structure of a society, which is a structure based on the inevitable tension generated by this “pull and push” mechanism. Any change, any development or evolution occurring in this structure, will necessarily entail a shift in the distribution of power, and therefore it will generate some kind of conflict. The history of the evolution of the media of exchange has shown us that, in the struggle for power within the world of trade, money, as we know it today, emerged and imposed itself over other media. And the domain it imposes is a good representation of that symbolic violence Bourdieu and Passeron (1970) described, a violence perpetrated in an attempt to legitimize an order hiding the balances of power that are implied in it.

But, as Mouffe suggested, when a hegemony is imposed, a choice is made between different alternatives that do not disappear completely but continue to represent those alternative instances which were neglected, like barter has been. Not surprisingly, we know that barter practices have been used throughout the entire history of humankind, long after money

became the main tool accepted in goods exchanges. On the level of international trades, for example, barter has always been preferred to monetary exchange, both in the commercial relations between the great colonial empires and their colonies, and later in the relationship between major economic powers, imposing itself as a "*response to the growing number of barriers to international trade and finance*" (Appadurai, 1988: 10). In every period of economic crisis, it is the citizenry itself which spontaneously organises itself, recreating alternative forms of commerce which allow goods to flow and people to access them: that is, they find ways of exchanging goods which are not determined by the hegemonic practice. Not by chance are those periods characterised by sharp changes in the structures of all spheres of social life.

The structure of the domain of consumption is, as with any other domain, characterised by a tension between the hegemonic practice, money and the alternative practices, in this case, barter. Barter represents an alternative way not only to exchange goods, but also to give value to them. The reason I argue that barter represents a counter-hegemonic practice is precisely because it is the representation of the fact that, in the domain of consumption, there are different interests and instances carried by groups forming collective identities. These interests generate practices, tactics and discourse which might subvert the main system, becoming themselves hegemonic.

In contemporary societies, alternative ways of understanding consumption struggle to find space for expression: the idea of an unlimited consumption capacity brought about by decades of mass consumption no longer seems to be prevailing as an hegemonic discourse creating a social imaginary of freedom related to choice. Some consumers do not find this kind of ideology appealing, above all in terms of the environmental consequences, some other consumers are simply forced to find an alternative way of obtaining goods, because of a shortage of money, while others are experiencing a different approach to consumption mediated by technology. No matter the reason, or the meanings involved in consumers' actions, the very fact that people engage in the practice of barter testifies to the presence of an alternative, the tension between this and the hegemony results in a conflict capable of generating change. It may be high time for the monetary exchange system to be substituted by another practice, and barter might become the next hegemonic practice, but in terms of what concerns my analysis in this chapter, this struggle shows how much the political dimension constitutes part of the ontology of the domain of consumption.

4. CONCLUSION

The monetary exchange system is a hegemonic system, but to what extent is it preventing the very existence of other practices? In other words, are we facing an antagonistic or an agonistic conflict? Not recognising an identity will force that identity to defend its own existence, thus engaging in an antagonistic conflict as a counter-hegemonic practice. When dealing with money, we cannot actually say that this system is preventing the barter practice from being performed: either I can shop for the goods I need, or I can barter the ones I no longer use in order to obtain others I need at that moment. One practice does not exclude the other: in other words, there is no law preventing me from using barter as an exchange system. At any rate, the sphere of economic exchanges, whether of goods or of services, is regulated by a range of laws. The regulation is intended to allow citizens to pay for what they consume and what they earn through the means of their economic activities: this payment to the state is made by the imposition of the consumption tax, VAT. So, when we buy something, or when we perform a professional activity, we are paying this tax automatically, since all of our transactions are recorded, or at least they should be: when it is not, we classify that as a black market. But when it comes to barter, we obviously do not pay taxes, because the application of the tax exists within a system that barter does not recognise. Consequently, in the barter practice we witness consumption without taxation. From this perspective, should barter be considered illegal? Perhaps it could, but the position occupied by this phenomenon in society is still too irrelevant to threaten the monetary system exchange or to deprive the state of considerable income. At any rate, this does not mean there is no conflict between the two practices, as the type of means involved are completely different but the aims are common. The monetary system is still a hegemonic practice and barter its alternative. In fact, even if there is no law preventing me from bartering, the hegemonic monetary system has created the types of social norms that actually prevent me from obtaining the majority of goods and services in the market through giving the objects I own or by performing an activity.

In conclusion, what I argue is that consumption is a political field, constituted by forces which are struggling for power. It is also the field where the conflict between different practices might be performed through the means of an agonistic plurality instead of an antagonistic one. Consumers share a common symbolic space in which to play out their conflicts, the consumption field, where they relate to each other in a we/them re-

lationship, without ever considering themselves enemies. The reason the conflict does not turn antagonistic is because they are bonded together in a production of meaning in which each of them is directly involved. They can give rise to practices which eventually control the antagonistic forces that are always present.

REFERENCES

- Appadurai, A. (1988) *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Beck, U. (1992) *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage.
- Bourdieu, P., Passeron, J.-C. (1970) *La reproduction : éléments pour une théorie du système d'enseignement*. Paris: Les Editions de minuit.
- Bourdieu P. (2003) *Per una teoria della pratica. Con tre studi di etnologia cabila*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina.
- Dalton, G. (1982) 'Barter', *Journal of Economic Issue*, 16(1): 181-190.
- Davis, G. (1994) *A History of Money. From Ancient Time to the Present Day*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.
- Einzig, P. (1966) *Primitive money in its ethnological, historical and economic aspects*. Oxford, New York: Pergamon Press.
- Humphrey, C. (1985) 'Barter and Economic Disintegration', *Man*, 20(1): 48-72.
- Jevons, W. S. (1910) *Money and the mechanism of exchange*. London : Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co.
- Jones, R. A. (1976) 'The Origin and Development of Media of Exchange', *Journal of Political Economy*, 84(4): 757-776.
- Ingham, G. (2002) 'Money is a Social Relation', *Review of Social Economy*, 54(4): 507-529.
- Marin, D., Schnitzer, M. (2002) 'The Economic Institution of International Barter', *The Economic Journal*, 112(479): 293-316.
- Mauss, M. (2002) *The gift: the form and reason for exchange in archaic societies*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Menger, K. (1892) 'On the Origin of money', *The Economic Journal*, 2(6): 239-255.
- Mouffe, C. (2005) *On the political*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Mouffe, C. (1993) *The Return of the Political*. London, New York: Verso.
- Ortino, S. (2010) *La struttura delle rivoluzioni economiche*. Bari: Cacucci Editore.
- Smith, A. (1976) *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Walsh, C. E. (2003) *Monetary theory and policy*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.**