



International Journal of Community Currency Research

VOLUME 26 (2, 2022) 52-62

ALTERKA – MONEY OR GIFT? THE SOCIAL MONEY PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

Alterka, a complementary currency used by the Wymiennik ('Swapper') community in Warsaw, fulfilled each classical function of money. The main goal of this paper is to describe the structural features of alterka as well as to present the ways in which it was conceptualised by the users. Alterka was actually not seen as money by the participants of the Warsaw-based system, which is quite fitting with the European discourse on alienating money. A different set of moral meanings was attributed to alterka than to conventional money; it was regarded as the antithesis of globalised official money and as a currency that enables the realisation of an alternative paradigm of economic bonds based on shared goods, with the gift culture as a source of inspiration. The research into Wymiennik can in turn inspire to see beyond the gift-commodity dichotomy, so popular in European thinking, and points to the relevance of reflection on local currencies from the perspective of money anthropology.

KEYWORDS

Alternative money, community currency, gift, social movements, money discourse.

1. INTRODUCTION¹

Alterka was an interest-free, nonconvertible, based on the mutual credit system principle, community currency (CC) registered in Community Exchange System platform, used by the Warsaw-based informal group Wymiennik ('Swapper') from 2012 to 2018. A context description follows, and some basics information about the system's scale and organization structure, even though the main purpose of this article is to describe the structural features of alterka due to which it can be considered as money, and to present the ways in which the users of Wymiennik conceptualised their currency. Despite the fact that alterka fulfilled every classical function of money, it was actually not seen as money by the Wymiennik's participants. A different set of moral meanings was attributed to alterka than to conventional money; it was regarded as the antithesis of globalised official money and as a currency that enables the realisation of an alternative paradigm of economic bonds. The exchange model in Wymiennik was to be based on shared goods, local ecology and the idea of participatory economy tailored to human cognitive abilities. The ideas of gift economy were its main source of inspiration.

My main research question is: why do Wymiennik's participants not deem alterka, a community currency, as money? This question derives from the anthropological astonishment I confronted during the fieldwork – all the users I met explicitly did not regard alterka as money, which appeared to me as a sheer paradox. At Wymiennik, I was exchanging goods and services thanks to a tool that sufficiently played the role of a unit of account, medium of exchange and even store of value. I argue that the reason for the interpretation stating that alterka is not money stems from the lingering modernist assumption that money depersonalises, alienates, serves capitalism and is profit-oriented. Wymiennik was a place of sociality celebration, so thus alterka with her conviviality properties seemed to have a different ontological status. The interview data proves the dichotomy of money (commodity) and gift persists astonishingly as a silent supposition and is tacitly employed by Warsaw-based system users. It comes as a surprise that this dichotomy defines the perception of alterka as no money. Still, it also is the very evidence of the social nature of this community currency – alterka is embedded in sociality to such an extent that it seems impossible to call it by the name of money, which is considered to be antisocial. Paradoxically, the empirical research on Warsaw-based CC confirms that money (since I argue that alterka is money) can be constructed in a way that makes it a vehicle for community.

The answer to the first question ("Why do Wymiennik's participants not deem alterka as money?") prompts the supplementary ones: what does the described dichotomy obscure? Why is it essential to topple it? Bloch and Parry (1989) claim that this stark binary is not only arrogantly Eurocentric but also serves as technological determinism – the assumption that every form of money leads to a moral revolution which commodifies social relations. My article aims to provide an empirical example of the falsification of the 'universal' and the modernist dichotomy between gift and money. Challenging this binary allows us to understand how money works and argue that there is no single notion of money – money does not have universal properties that perfectly determine the trajectory of its usage (leading to alienation, for example). Money's impact on society is defined by various factors: the cultural surrounding and values ascribed to money by its users and money's technological and structural qualities. Locally distributed money is more likely to be a bonding tool, connecting people from a neighbourhood.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

I have run the research into Wymiennik in the following ways: (a) individual in-depth interviews conducted between late 2017 and early 2018 with the ten most active system users and its two leaders; (b) analysis of press articles about the system as well as the creators' own publishing; (c) participant observation as a system user (with 136 exchanges registered on my account) and a volunteer for the promotion and media group of the Wymiennik Coordination Team (from January 2014 till September 2015). I was responsible for the acceptance of system registration, media contact, organisation of promotion meetings, content writing on the system's principles and at a later stage also for the recruitment into the Coordination Team.

Selecting the respondents by the criteria of turnover, I talked to the more active users of Wymiennik, who had the greatest experience with the functioning of the system. These were the ones with the highest degree of motivation to participate in exchanges, the most resourceful and at home in the system environment. The respondents included: two professional language tutors, two urban activists, an interior designer, a journalist, a massage therapist-

entrepreneur, an event organiser, an unemployed lawyer, a student of cognitive science, and a corporate sales department employee (also a foreign language student while she was active in the system). Five of the respondents were members of the Wymiennik Coordination Team.

3. THE SCALE OF THE SYSTEM AND THE CONTEXT OF POLISH LETS

Before diving into the main research problems, it is worth presenting the overview of Wymiennik in the context of different economic alternatives and their viability. In Poland, it has been reported that there were only two CCs in consecutive circulation for several years. These were the Wymiennik's alterka and the still active Polish local and complementary currency movement Zielony – 'Greener' (Stępnicka, Wiączek, Brzozowiec 2020). Grzegorz Sobiecki identifies 20 alternative currencies systems in Poland in 2017 and most of them consisted of short-term time banks (Sobiecki 2018). In comparison, Germany had 24 local currencies in operation (Place 2019), while France counted 75 (Blanc and Lakócai 2020). There is no precise data available that would accurately determine how many CCs exist worldwide, but the figure is estimated at four to six thousand (Sobiecki 2014). Before Wymiennik and Zielony, in the '90-s, the LETS systems were unsuccessfully implemented in Poland. In early 2000 the anarchistic and ecological generation of LETS took a lead in some major Polish cities (Kraków, Poznań, Wałbrzych, Łódź), but also appeared to be ephemeral (Żwawa 2008). The result of their existence were the translation of Margrit Kennedy's book 'Interest and Inflation Free Money' (2007) and the appearance of Janusz Reichel's book 'Lokalny recycling pieniądza' – 'Local money recycling' (2007) published by the publishers aimed to spread ecological values. Those two books served as inspiration for Wymiennik's creatorsⁱⁱ. Since 2019 Wymiennik records only sparse occasional transactions, which indicates the demise of the initiative. Its fiasco was primarily due to the burnt out and break-up of the activist team managing the project.

The total value of transactions in Wymiennik between September 2012 and August 2020 amounts to half a million alterkae (1 ALT ~ 1 PLN)ⁱⁱⁱ. The system numbered roughly a thousand users aged 25-40. Over four thousand accounts were registered, however, a minimum of a single registered exchange was recorded on only a quarter of them. The most popular products and services were second-hand items (clothes, books, furniture, household appliances, bicycles), home-made cosmetics and household chemicals, vegan food, massage sessions and foreign language lessons.

4. THE PROPERTIES OF ALTERKA – MUTUAL CREDIT SYSTEM

Alterka took the form of a cashless electronic record registered with the international online Community Exchange System (CES). CES is regarded by Jérôme Blanc as recovery and innovation of LETS system (2011: 8). Alterka, as well as the other CES platform currencies, are not legal tender; they are only issued through the electronic CES platform when users register transactions in the system. Therefore, alterkae was interest-free and created when an exchange is booked (mutual credit system) and cannot be converted to national currency. The sum of all exchanges equals null, and the budget of a new user upon registration is also 0 ALT. The system allowed mainly for small-scale exchange due to the pre-set upper and lower limits on the account balance (a 1000 and -500 ALT respectively). A system constructed in this way implements the ideological background programme of LETS currencies, the main goal of which is to create an alternative in opposition to the centralised issue of money, the accumulation of capital and regarding money as a means of becoming richer. Where interest-free currency serves as a record of a transaction and is only created at the moment of accounting, it is theoretically more feasible to balance the monetary mass with the value of goods in the market^{iv}. Which is quite subversive to the financialisation of economy, where the sum of financial assets exceeds the value of real economy; e.g. in 2009 in the UK, the value of the financial capital of the three largest banks was twice the value of GDP (Dodd 2014, 114).

5. ALTERKA AS MONEY

As a means of exchange, alterka fulfils each and every function listed in the classical functional theory of money, i.e. it is: (a) a medium of exchange allowing for the indirect exchange of one good for another; (b) a means of payment allowing for a delay in the settlement of obligations, thanks to which the flow of goods is not simultaneous with the flow of money (users would often settle transactions wholesale, e.g. once a month); (c) a measure of value facilitating the determination of exchange value; (d) a means of value storage which allows a delay in the decision to spend.

Alterka provided an interesting alternative for the enthusiasts of a variety of neighbourhood exchange groups, since it eliminated the disadvantages of barter. The users of Wymiennik created an original system of measuring value, thus alterka was not pegged to national currency. Wymiennik's participants would individually assign value to their goods and services by taking into account the following three factors: (1) the amount of labour invested; (2) the price of the product or service on the official market; and (3) the value of the good or service on the Wymiennik's own market. It was therefore a necessary part of the valuation process to compare the price of a given good or service to the value of counterparts also offered within the system.

The price of certain goods on Wymiennik differed significantly from their prices in a regular store. For example, a loaf of bread would cost about 5 PLN in a corner shop and about 20 on Wymiennik. On the other hand, the in-system price of a massage session was roughly equal to the market price in PLN. The most important component in measuring the value of goods and services was the amount of time invested, which can be a proof to the ideological affinity with the time banks. Thus, the difference in the price of a loaf of bread in a supermarket and on Wymiennik is primarily due to the difference between the production process in a bakery and the way the product is made at home. In other words, the discrepancy between the valuation of services (with prices similar official market counterparts) and the valuation of hand-made goods (where they were significantly higher than market prices) was an attempt to appreciate unique goods, produced in household self-supply economies, and not en masse, whereby the surplus production is minimal and can well be allocated to the niche market of the Wymiennik^v. Thus, what the peculiarities of valuation within Wymiennik also indicate, is a degree of longing for craftsmanship and self-supply in the system of production.

6. ALTERKA AS A BONDING TOOL. SMALL TALK ABOUT PRICING

It is worth adding that creating an original unit of account, the process of community pricing formation is a social-bonding process. It demands from participants discussions about value systems (since pricing is based on some moral assumptions) and price negotiations. This system's oral aspect also boosts conviviality among participants and makes economic exchanges personal and highly social. Thus, involvement with the Wymiennik required resources, such as free time and the willingness to take appropriate measures such as arranging the real-life exchanges, including, e.g. the choice of a mutually convenient location. It should also be considered that exchange meetings had the inherent component of small talk, often turning into social occasions. Hence, the system attracted mainly freelancers and students^{vi}. User activity was heightened during their initial period of engagement and would decrease significantly in subsequent stages, which suggests that using this system was seen as a specific life episode, whether longer or shorter. In late capitalist life, finding time for such intense exchange relations is a privilege, which explains why the most engaged participant had flexible working hours or still were students.

7. ALTERKA COLLECTIVELY CONTROLLED. DIRECT DEMOCRACY

An important piece of the context for the functioning of Warsaw's community currency system was the participation understood as a means to build of fairer forms of organization. Within Wymiennik were established the institutions of the General Assembly and the Coordination Team, which made consensus-based decisions.

Participation relies on cooperative group work, balance and concordance, and aims to bring equity to the power of individual stakeholders. It is actually the equal distribution of power that constitutes the primary goal of participation. However, such a form of participation requires an intense information flow between the group members, which often results in protracted discussions and lengthy decision-making processes being seen as the distinctive features of this mode of governance (Mendel 2001, 10). In the context of Wymiennik, those long-lasting discussions were an advantage since they served as evidence of collective decision-making and made this system a joint endeavour, creating a solid group where each member's voice is heard.

At Wymiennik the direct exchange of goods was complemented by a direct form of initiative management, while the idea of socialising the money was accompanied by a project of socialising the management. Warsaw's community currency system was therefore an attempt to realise a small, interactive and non-hierarchical community, striving to create equitable socio-economic bonds. The community created around Wymiennik can thus be seen as an attempt to kick-start an economic system characteristic of non-capitalist societies, in which the economic values do

not take over moral control, and where the market and economic exchange are embedded in the social needs and institutions (Polanyi 2001).

Karl Polanyi, inspired by the concept of gift culture described by Bronisław Malinowski, became fascinated by the illiterate non-capitalist societies in which the economic motivations never dictated the essence of their social order. This Hungarian anthropologist conceptualised an opposition between the pre-modern economy, where the lead value were the social relations, and the modern economy based on market values. The antithetical nature of these two economic worlds is a component of the theory of modernisation among authors such as Marx, Simmel, Weber, Durkheim, Elias and Tönnies. Consequently, it would be worth to add Polanyi to the names of renown above (Karalus 2018, 437). The ambition of the Wymiennik leaders was to create a community where the economic needs are subordinated to the goal of building a resilient, supportive, and harmonious collective. In this perspective, the participation with its communicative dogma of lively debate and exchange of viewpoints within an extensive decision-making framework is attributed with a bond-building value, as well as a much sought-after type of social dialogue.

8. OFFICIAL MONEY CONDEMNATION, NOT CONDEMNATION OF MONEY AT ALL

The description of the above properties of Wymiennik (community pricing formation, direct democracy, lengthy discussions) aims to prove the social and personal nature of the community currency system. I argue that this conviviality is why Wymiennik's participants do not regard alterka as money. Before analyzing the excerpts of the interviews in which system's users deem alterka as a social-bonding tool, I propose to briefly looking at the general discourse on official money.

Leaders of CC initiatives criticise standard monetary systems quite frequently, regarding it as a tool of isolation and individualisation, and as an impersonalised mechanism, the alienating impact of which results from its function as an intermediary link in a globalised capitalist economy. Therefore, when official money is mentioned, the creators of community currency systems often resort to a stylistic repertoire reminiscent of Simmel's portrait of Western modern money (2011). The German philosopher saw money as the quintessence of a nascent world of individualism; of ubiquitous calculation and grand institutions supplanting the importance of family and endemic communities. Nevertheless, Simmel would oppose the socialist condemnation of money and should not be associated with sentimentalism or the fascination with communities based on the exchange of gifts that are personal in nature (155, 200). He would emphasise the role of money in creating new forms of socialisation and in the expanding the freedom of the individual, whose fate was no longer dependant on the tyranny of the community (370). As a sociologist, Simmel's attitude towards modernity (along with its essence – the global money) was quite sophisticated and notably different from Marx's commodity fetishism. Thus, the philosophy of money embraced by the leaders of local currencies is closer to Simmel's thought than Marx's. However, the critique of standard money among the creators of community currencies often takes the shape of a devastating and passionate disapproval, but not so radical as to completely reject the institution of money in truly Marxian fashion. The rhetoric of Michael Linton, a creator of modern complementary currencies, can serve as an example. In the 1980s and 1990s he was at the forefront of the global spread of Local Exchange Trading Systems. Linton assumes that the current economy is based on colonial wealth, which is detrimental to local and familial bonds, and exercised the reign of fear and almost unlimited power over the lives of both individuals and larger social groups^{vii}. Nevertheless, Linton believes in the project of social money – money that serves communities, not big powers. He does condemn money, but those used within the capitalist scheme, not community money.

Grassroots and private local money is a form of search for a mythical community, whereby the locality is first and foremost an attempt at a coherent and transparent social network; a vision, born from a longing for a world of not-overcomplicated structures and an autarkic attempt to withdraw from the intricate global economic order. Community currencies are thus means of payment intended to circulate in relatively small social circles. Their creation is spurred by the idea of creating transparent economies and by a revolt against modern money and its typical functions in Western culture; a revolt against the building blocks of an economy which is greatly complicated and blurry at best. The mission of local currencies lies i.a. in breaking the chains of intermediaries.

9. ALTERKA AS A GIFT

In the early days of Wymiennik, the initiative was advertised with the 'gift culture 2.0' tagline. On the expired website wymiennik.org, it was said: 'In early societies, a system of exchange was commonplace, and people would transfer goods or do each other favours without expecting immediate payment. The voluntary and continuous circulation of gifts among the members of a local community created social bonds and informally defined mutual obligations. The gift culture was the first model of exchange, preceding the economy based on the principle of «one thing for the other» (barter) or on commodity money. Today, through the use of information technology, we can easily record every transaction. Wymiennik is there to support the local economy based on mutual favours, allowing us to strike a balance between taking and giving.'

That statement was an example of the optimistic discourse on cybernetic utopias, emerged in the first decade of the 21st century. There, the Internet would be described as the ultimate democratic tool to share knowledge and other goods. Without doubt, online platforms facilitate accounting for local currency transactions by creating databases easily accessible to users. As a result, it has become popular to regard the internet as a possible space where diversity or financial democracy could become real (Lietaer and Dunne 2013, 55). The most recent iteration of this trend can be seen in the context of blockchain-based monetary initiatives (Friis and Glaser 2018; Dodd 2021).

It is also worthwhile to note, that the source domain of such figures of speech as the 'culture of the gift 2.0' lies in the customary exchange modes of illiterate communities. The Internet thus presents itself as a medium that can enable people to return to bonding and equitable exchange within local communities.

Marcel Mauss, in his 'Essay on the Gift', based his reflection on communal economy in illiterate cultures upon the oppositions such as: gift culture vs capitalist economy; bonds vs profit; community vs alienation; disinterestedness vs self-interest, etc. His analysis of the gift economy is rather a smokescreen for the expression of disillusionment with the market economy. It is also an expression of a longing for an autarkic economy, well-rooted in social structures; an economy of the gift, that is, a total social fact whereby the logical values of the social and of the economic are equal. The intertwining of 'economy, law and morality' (Mauss 1973, 243) is contrasted with the fragmented capitalism, in which the commercial relations become both dominant and fetishised.

The 'Essay on the Gift' is imbued with the gift-commodity dichotomy, so widespread in European thinking; with the discourse on the alienating modern money as an inseparable component. The source of this notion can be found in Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, and it served as inspiration for the many anthropological visions of the culture of gift as an opposition to the commodified economy, entangled in a network of abstract and universal ways to measure of value. What followed the passionate critique of the nature of money, was Marx's utopian vision of a world without money, the dawn of which would be marked by the proletariat revolution. Within this conceptual framework, money appears solely as an essential tool of the capitalist system. One can ask, however, whether money can only be attributed alienating qualities?

In his work 'The World of Things. An Anthropological Outline', Janusz Barański opposed the anthropological traditions of abusing the gift-commodity dichotomy, and the resulting concealment of an entire spectrum of phenomena that should be considered within it (Barański 2007, 355–356). With regard to the anthropology of things, the author expressed a belief that goods may display a bonding character, and that reducing them down to a solely alienating function is an illegitimate simplification. Further to this, Marek Krajewski wrote:

In a tangled and opaque world, in which we do not even stand a chance to get to know the Other, in a world of constant change and transformation, we are in need of good means of communication, both with the Other and with ourselves. Means that are subordinated to universal and easily assimilable codes. Nowadays, such means are found in material goods, commodities, daily use articles, clothes, cars, houses and their fittings, hairstyles, tattoos, piercings and toys. They are no longer simple status symbols but, on the contrary, a means by which we tell others about ourselves, a mode through which we conduct a dialogue with ourselves. [...] A vision of the world bereft of such material dimensions is thus not so much a form of defence of the humanist vision of human nature, but rather a dehumanised utopia that deprives individuals of the tools and the ability to be human, that is, a being which communicates and is self-aware. (2006, 89)

Research into community currency movements provides evidence that the peculiar characteristics of local money have not so much an alienating effect; conversely, they activate sociability. All participants of my interviews pointed to the personal nature of exchange on Wymiennik and valued this aspect as positive (while in this article I cite four of them). Ten interviewees whose names I changed at their request, said that they had made new friendship(s) and many acquaintances on Wymiennik. It is worth remembering, however, that this system attracted people with similar sets of values; open-minded and with a high degree of social trust (the swappers would often let strangers into their homes, accept food and hand-made cosmetics not inspected by public health authorities and without proper certificates). Nevertheless, the discourse of ‘alienating money’ proved so prevalent, that the users of Wymiennik themselves did not recognise their alterkae as money:

Marlena Rycombel: Who makes up the Wymiennik community?

Marzena [foreign languages tutor]: This is a community that wants to get away from the system, from the overwhelming reality ruled by money. We forget how in the past some things were done with completely no cash involved, that there were other kinds of relationships, closer; you could arrange lots of stuff, help each other out. And now...! Among other things, not enough time makes people busy, preoccupied, running around. So they just buy things, sort stuff out with money, and they can't quite think: 'Maybe my neighbour knows stuff and could help me'. But the community... These people are more aware, they want to feel this closeness in their relations, feel that something is not necessarily done strictly for money, but to find another human being in doing it.

For Marzena, above, to use the alterka was to evade monetary transactions, and her understanding of the relationships made on Wymiennik was one of a ‘cashless exchange’. Barbara, on the other hand, compared the Wymiennik community to a family:

Barbara [event organizer]: When I order a cake from Klementyna, I know that it is baked especially for me [...]. When you go to the shop, you just get your groceries. And when the other swappers come to me, then the feedback I get is like: 'Oh God, your veggie stew is so good!' So if I were selling it in a shop, I'd bring it in, then collect the money when it's sold – end of story. And here it's an exchange. You kind of get hugs and cuddles [...] That's the real value, that everything we do here is so personal. You know, we're like a kind of, I don't know... like a family!

Jola, who refused to specify her profession, cannot be even bothered to see the alterka as money:

M.R.: What does the alterka mean to you? [...]

Jola: Value.

M.R.: Has Wymiennik augmented your budget? If yes, to what extent?

Jola: No, no, because it is all cashless.

Marzena, who also believed that the Wymiennik community shared a common idea of the rebellion against money, never referred to alterka as currency either:

M.R.: What do you think of the alterka? How would you describe it?

Marzena: Certainly not money. It's a kind of value that gets us over the trouble of barter, which is really convenient, because we don't always want to exchange stuff with this or that particular person. I absolutely don't treat alterka as money, as in money that gets you rich.

Most respondents imagined the alterkae similarly to points scored in a game:

Małgosia [student of cognitive science]: Alterka? I tell people that these are like points that you exchange for stuff, like in a game. That you have like a game, only it's real: you do something, you have points. And you can use the points to get other things.

Having quoted all the above, alterka is money, irrefutably. It does fulfil every classical function of money. The majority of users, however, would never place it in such a category, due to the bonding potential of alterka. This apparent paradox was the starting point for the reflection on the inherent limitations of the European discourse on money and, furthermore, on the eurocentrism of both anthropology and sociology of money rooted in a single, specific moral philosophy. Traditional European thinking has been extremely critical of the phenomenon of monetary exchange since Aristotle, who would praise the independent households with no need to trade (the 'autarky' model), through Thomas Aquinas, who would despise usury, straight to Karl Marx and Georg Simmel. Contemporarily, David Graeber made himself an heir to this tradition, by writing in 'Debt' that: 'What happens to such economy when people do begin to use the same money used to measure dignity to buy eggs and haircuts? As the history of ancient Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean world reveals, the result was a profound – and enduring – moral crisis' (2011, 176). One should not forget Nigel Dodd's classic book 'The Social Life of Money' (2015), where the author discussed various critical theories of money, that would invariably show them through the lens of concepts such as guilt, violence, or debt in the worst sense. This London-based researcher also referenced to psychoanalytic theories on money, that associate the very concept with carnalities and the anal phase (152). Viviana Zelizer was just as brilliant in debunking the beliefs around money, pointing out that precise calculation does not belong to the sphere of close relations in the tradition of European thinking – moreover it is a direct opposite of closeness. Thus, the researcher distinguished two conceptually 'hostile worlds' – the world of rational economic activities and the world of close relations (Zelizer 2005).

10. ALTERKA AS SOCIAL MONEY

Is it then possible to imagine a social money and reach beyond dismissing such an expression as an oxymoron? The leaders of community currency movements are attempting to accomplish exactly this feat; reject as they may the classical European ideas of money, they do not disregard money as such, considering it to be an ingenious, helpful, and above all adjustable tools. Their perspective has departed from Marx's ubiquitous framework in the direction of a struggle to re-invent money, as a means that would circulate within small communities only. Complementary money systems become a part of the users' identity, an element of alternative lifestyle, and create around themselves a community of people who take interest in non-standard ways of payment and believe in a similar set of values. Local currencies re-interpret the category of neighbourhood, a great example of which is the Brixton Pound used in one of the boroughs of London. Wymiennik in turn, based on the CES platform, can be compared to a social networking site, where the exchanges mediated by the alterka were facilitating the meetings of people who shared similar beliefs and consumer practices. The main motivation among many users was the desire to increase eco-consumption (handmade and second-hand products, vegan food, 'natural' household chemicals and cosmetics), which led at the same time to the consolidation of a certain social group, invested in the ecological and vegan lifestyle.

Malinowski, elaborating on the gift culture, pointed out that the kula rituals, which involved the exchanges of ceremonial necklaces and bracelets, rituals, festivals, women, children, dances and military services etc., were accompanied by the gimwali exchange of utility items. Time and again, the British-Polish anthropologist would emphasise that the social function was cardinal within the gift culture, and that gimwali was nowhere close to the essence of the meetings of the Trobriand Island communities, in other words, that gimwali was of secondary importance. According to Malinowski, the gift culture is where a system of social bonds, and not economic exchange, is built (2014). Mauss, on the other hand, in line with his theory of the total social fact, considers kula and gimwali as two equally important aspects of the exchanges among the communities in Polynesia, Melanesia and North America. For the French anthropologist, the gift economy pursued economic needs and social values equally (2001). Further to these concepts, it can be argued that the sphere of kula on Wymiennik (in the form of exchanging vegan rituals and recipes for handmade cosmetics, creating friendships and casual relationships between people sharing similar values) was as important as the gimwali – the sphere of ecological consumption, the amount of which could have even been measured with great accuracy – in units of alternative currency.

Considerations on the alterka phenomenon enable a much wider critical reflection on the gift-commodity dichotomy and trigger another way of thinking about money as a social good that can be shaped in a democratic, grass-roots manner. The systemic research into Wymiennik can also broaden the economic imagination and make one aware that money is a flexible, adjustable construct, which can be put to a variety of shapes in various ways. Money

as such does not possess universal properties, and its functions can be adapted to meet a range of social needs. There is no such thing as single, all-encompassing idea of money, nor its true nature; economic exchange can be configured in many ways as well. The question that remains, however, is as follows: to what extent the money users and the qualities of society where money is used, define the nature of money, and to what extent the money and its various constructions define the users?

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ENDNOTES

i This article combines the themes of four other articles on Wymiennik published by the author in Polish (Rycombel M., 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022). However, the following text reaches beyond a synthetic compilation of the earlier papers, elaborating on certain issues further and presenting the research problems from a new perspective enabled by the comparative research on several local currency systems, currently carried out by the author.

ii Ecological values often are driving forces to establish alternative economy systems (Schroeder 2020). Initially, Wymiennik played a significant role in consolidating the emergent vegan community in Warsaw. Year 2012 was a time when vegan products were a rare sight on the shop shelves. Once the vegan lifestyle became increasingly popular and the official market caught up with the supply, Wymiennik shifted to filling another niche, that of people interested in ecology and zero-waste living. Alternative lifestyles turned out to be an important category for the vast majority of the survey participants. Their involvement with the activities on the Wymiennik platform resulted from the dissatisfaction with certain aspects of reality. The following values were of importance to the participants of the study: ecological lifestyle, alternative medicine, the good of the planet and animals, alternative and fairer forms of goods and services valuation, anti-consumerism and anti-capitalism. However, not all respondents identified wholly with the entire set of values above.

iii The latest official statistics of the Wymiennik, freely available to any user of the system, indicate a turnover of almost 1.000.000 ALT. However, this figure is actually manipulated: a certain user, taking advantage of the collapse of the system and the lack of control over its functioning, performed a single, unauthorised and statistically irrelevant operation worth half a million alterkae.

iv I refer to the leaders' ideas on the functioning of a system where the total value of transactions comes to a zero. However, the assumed balance between the number of goods and the monetary mass can be argued against with relative ease. In this type of systems the inflation can still affect the nominal value of goods and services; which is exactly what happened on the Wymiennik and is discussed further in this paper.

v Since 2017, I have been observing the in-system inflation of the nominal value of the goods offered, which may have occurred, among other reasons, due to the fact that the prices on Wymiennik were not regulated, set, or suggested by the leaders in any way. At a certain point, a certain system user realised that there were many users with surplus alterkae on their accounts (active users unable to find interesting offers for themselves) and took advantage of the gradual collapse of the system by offering much desired goods and services at exceptionally high, even doubled prices. In response to his activities, other users began to increase the prices of their products accordingly. This eventually led to a situation where in 2014 a used book (relatively fresh on the publishing market) costed 10–20 alterkae, and in 2019 a similar item would cost 40–60.

vi Another noteworthy point is the definite feminisation of the system – according to Justyna Szambelan, it amounted to 81,1% of the sample: ‘The chi-square test for independence showed that the predominance of women is statistically significant and can be assumed as a characteristic of the whole system’ (Szambelan 2014).

vii Data gathered by the author in 2021 during a series of conversations with Michael Linton and over archive queries in LETS, Comox Valley. The latter were made possible by the Counter Currency Laboratory at the University of Victoria, supervised by Daromir Rudnyckyj.

FUNDING

This article is one of the outputs in a research project funded by the National Science Centre, titled ‘Rethinking Economy? Ethnographic Research on Grassroots Community Currency Initiatives’ [UMO-2019/35/N/HS2/01599].