'The Quiet Market' a Critical Realist Account of C2c Exchange in the West of Ireland

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ABSTRACT
This paper presents a single case example of exchange in a C2C setting. This case is drawn from a longitudinal qualitative and quantitative study of a Local Exchange Trading System (LETS) group in Westport, County Mayo on the West coast of Ireland known as Meitheal Na Mart (MnM). LETS are a system of economic exchange designed primarily to free members from the labour-wage economy. This paper uses critical realism to illustrate the causal relationship between the focal actors behaviour as well as the causal potentialities and the environment in which she operated.

INTRODUCTION
The issue of consumer-to-consumer (henceforth referred to as C2C) exchange has only rarely been considered by researchers in consumer behaviour, or other fields of socio-economic enquiry. As Grayson (1999) points out there have been some exceptions although a great deal of fundamental exploration is required to establish this area as one of value to the mainstream reader of consumer research. This paper reports the findings of a longitudinal, qualitative and quantitative study of a system of C2C exchange. The paper has two purposes. Firstly to illustrate the variety of influences that can affect the progress of an individual acting as both buyer and seller. Secondly to highlight the potential for critical realism to provide a pathway to understanding this and other economic behaviours. The paper progresses through four main stages, an explanation of critical realism, an introduction to the case study location, the presentation of the case study and a discussion of some of the issues arising from this case.

CRITICAL REALISM
As Easton (2000) suggests, realism has broadly won a long battle to take the position as the leading epistemology within marketing. This paper, its theoretical framework and approach to data analysis are built around one particular form of this known as Critical Realism. Historically Critical Realism is traced to the work of Roy Bhaskar (1975) however its origins can be more readily accessed in the work Collier (1994), and Sayer (2000). In this section, the ‘bare bones’ of this understanding will be reviewed and their implications discussed. The emphasis is on the potential for critical realism as an alternative ontology for studies of the kind undertaken here.

The Transitive and Intransitive Dimensions of Knowledge
The basic belief of the critical realist is that a reality exists, can be discovered and exists independently of the researcher (Easton, 1998). This is built from Bhaskar’s (1975) distinction between ‘transitive’ and ‘intransitive’ aspects of knowledge. The objects of study are the intransitive dimensions. Regardless of the theories that explain them, or the changes in those theories, they remain the same. The transitive dimension refers to the explanatory theories that can and do change. As Collier (1994: 51 in Sayer, 2000) puts it, while different branches of science may have different theories (transitive objects) the objects of study (intransitive dimensions) remain the same—otherwise there would not be rival theories.

The Real, the Actual, and the Empirical
As was discussed above, critical realism distinguishes between the real world and the researcher’s experience of that world. However, it also distinguishes between the real, the actual, and the empirical worlds. Sayer (2000: 11-12) outlines the distinctions particularly well. The real is whatever exists, be it natural or social regardless of whether it is of interest to the researcher. The real is also the location of objects, their structures, and powers. Every object has structures and powers, causal liabilities and passive abilities, or the capacities to behave and change in certain ways. The task of the critical realist is to identify relationships and possibilities given these properties. The actual refers to the outcomes when these structures, powers, and capacities are activated. The empirical is the domain of experience. Insofar as it is possible to do so successfully, this may refer to the real or the actual. However, it may not always be possible to observe a phenomenon. Such observability may lead to researcher confidence about existence. For the critical realist, existence does not depend upon observability. They also accept a causal criterion. That is, a reasonable case for the existence for unobservable entities may be made from observation of effects that could only be explained by the products of such entities. The next level of this position is that powers may exist unexercised. That is, what has been observed to happen in a particular situation may not be the sum of all possibilities. Different configurations of real objects at a particular time may lead to a different set of outcomes. Critical realism is thus particularly useful at explaining change and dynamics in social settings.

Stratification and Emergence
The ‘stratified’ distinction between the real, actual, and empirical differentiates critical realism from other ‘flat’ epistemologies offering either the actual or the empirical. In addition, critical realism characterises a world of emergence. That is, two or more features may lead to the emergence of a phenomenon. However, that object is not reducible to its constituent parts. Sayer (2000) suggests the relationship between water and its constituent parts of hydrogen and oxygen as one example of this. Socially, similar relationships apply. For example, a marketing manager’s ability to act is drawn from a complex of powers related to their relationships and the institutions within which they operate. This sensitivity to context makes social phenomena far more susceptible to change than their counterparts in the natural world. The implication for theorising is the need to constantly re-examine concepts for relevance.

Causation
One of the most prominent aspects of critical realism is its approach to causation. As has already been discussed, objects are part of structures. Structures consist of a set of related elements with a set of causal powers that when combined are emergent from those of their constituents. The outcome of the activation of causal powers depends upon the conditions that exist at the time of action. For critical realists, causation is not understood as the regularity of occurrence of particular events, as positivists might suggest. Rather, identifying the causal mechanisms that underlie an event, how they...
work, and how they have been activated provides an understanding of causation. The understanding of a mechanism is dependent on revealing the nature of the structure or object that possesses the mechanism or power. Exploring the nature of causal powers further it can be said that the same causal powers can produce different outcomes, depending on the conditions that prevail at the time. Equally, different causal mechanisms can produce the same result. Thus when an effect or event is observed it should be borne in mind that this may or may not have been the only possible outcome. A different configuration could have led to a different effect. The final point to make regarding causation is that it is a fallible process. It requires some judgement to identify the various elements of the causative relationship. However, such judgement is a characteristic of all scientific effort.

The Interpretative or Hermeneutic Dimensions

Critical realism recognises that social phenomena have an intrinsic meaning that is not simply externally descriptive but also constitutive of them (Sayer, 2000: 17). Such meaning requires interpretation and so there is an inevitable interpretative hermeneutic element to social science. Where critical realism differs from hermeneutics is in its requirement to explain material aspects of life. Secondly, critical realism views reasons as potentially playing a causative role in the sense that they prompt actors to behave differently. The example that Sayer (2000) provides is the link between voting behaviour and the political experience of the individual.

The Critical Dimension

The critical aspect of critical realism gives it a licence to be critical of the practices and subjects that it studies. This is linked in particular to Bhaskar’s belief in the emancipatory potential of social science. This is driven by the recognition that social science is based on ideas, where these ideas are the cause of unjust behaviour it is the duty of the researcher to intervene.

LOCAL EXCHANGE TRADING SYSTEMS (LETS) AND MEITHEAL NA MART

LETS are complex socio-economic systems that have been characterised in a variety of ways. The most succinct description of LETS has been provided by Williams (1996) ‘LETS are local associations whose members list their offers of, and requests for, goods and services in a directory, and then exchange them priced in a local unit of currency (e.g. acorns in Totnes, favours in Calderdale). To maintain a record of the exchanges, cheques written in the local currency are sent to a treasurer who functions in a similar manner to a normal bank, sending out regular statements of account to members. No notes or coins are issued and neither is any interest charged or paid. As such, the local currency functions as a ‘scoring system’, much like matchsticks in babysitting circles. It has no ‘value’ outside of the local system. The local currency accumulated by members can be used to buy other local goods and services offered on the system. LETS, moreover, are a source of interest-free credit since members can spend local currency before earning it’. (Williams, 1996: 231).

The Westport LETS system, known by the Irish name of Meitheal na mart (henceforth referred to as MnM) was officially launched in February 1993. Like all LETS it had its own currency, known as the Reek, so called after Croagh Patrick, the local mountain that dominates the region, and which is referred to as the Reek. MnM had a sophisticated accounting function with a regular circulation to each member of his or her financial position within the system. Other publications included a newsletter and a directory that listed the contact details for every actor and the goods or services they sought to make available. Exchange took place in a number of formats, between actors, at a weekly stall in the town market square, at regular Reek only auctions and through work parties when groups of members would visit the home of another members to carry out some large project, usually over a weekend.

A CRITICAL REALIST ACCOUNT OF EXCHANGE IN MEITHEAL NA MART

In this section, the basic model of causation offered by Sayer (2000) is worked through to identify why one actor in MnM behaved as she did. The case study reported here is the result of a three-year case study of the group in question. Data was collected form three main sources, interviews with regular members of the system and with key informants. Like many LETS systems this one operated a computerised central banking function which recorded the date and value of transactions between members for the years of the case study. Finally, MnM produced a number of publications, directory’s and newsletters many of which were made available in the course of the case study. A process of member check was operated through multiple interviews with members such as the one featured below, Maureen. Also, leading members were presented with summary findings and their feedback sought. We shall now proceed with the case analysis.

Event

In this case the event that we wish to consider is the behaviour of one actor, Maureen, within MnM. The event can be specific along two dimensions, firstly why she became a member of MnM and secondly why she behaved as she did in the system. Maureen had been a member of MnM since its inception. Her exchange behaviour is summarised in table one below. Maureen had significant exchange partnerships with actors 13, 40 and 124. With actor 13 Maureen had exchanges in 1995 and 1996. This exchange totalled 12 purchases and 8 sales episodes in 1995 and 5 purchases and one sale in 1996. The value of these purchases was 1033 and 200 Reeks in 1995 and 1996 respectively. The value of sales was 1800 and 73 Reeks in 1995 and 1996 respectively. The total value and volume of sales and purchases are summarised in the final column on the right. What this shows is that Maureen had 17 purchasing and 9 selling exchanges with actor 13. The total value of these being 1233 and 1873 Reeks respectively. The final three rows summarise Maureen’s total exchange behaviour that is purchases and sales, both with the highlighted significant partners and with all other actors in the system. Total personal exchanges summarises the value and volume of activity with other individual actors. Total stall exchange summarises the value and volume of activity that took place through the weekly market stall operated by MnM.

In aggregate Maureen’s exchange behaviour can be described in a number of ways. Firstly, she is a high volume actor who has bought and sold more than average in the system. From table one below it can be seen that the total number of exchanges Maureen undertook during the study period was 164 (81 purchases and 83 sales). As can be seen from the break down by year, there was some fluctuation in this level of activity between years.

Secondly, she has bought and sold roughly the same number of times. What is interesting about this is that, as with the total activity measure this figure fluctuates between years, its fluctuation is broadly consistent across each year. For example, in 1998 Maureen had 9 purchases and five sales, compared to 31 purchases and 23 sales in 1997. It is unclear what this pattern is indicative of, however, strict reciprocity can be ruled out. This actor had only
three significant exchange patterns, actors 13, 40 and 124. Significant exchange partners are those with whom Maureen had four or more exchanges over the four-year period of the case study. As with activity, so with pricing, Maureen charged roughly the same prices for sales as she paid for purchases. The final noteworthy feature of Maureen’s behaviour relates to her partner network. As was noted above she had relatively few relational partners, but she did exchange with a wide range of other actors within the system.

To summarise, Maureen was an active trader with a wider network of partners, although only three of these could be described as significantly relational. In the following section a mechanism to explain this behaviour will be presented.

**Mechanism**

It can be suggested that the mechanism through which this was achieved was recognition by Maureen that the system could meet a significant proportion of her social, political and economic needs.

**Structure**

In explaining Maureen’s behaviour we know that every actor within MnM exists within a set of necessary relations, what is referred to as structure. This structure is comprised of three main elements: a social exchange with the system, an acceptance of the Reek as a measure and store of value and Maureen’s own exchange strategy. Each of these is considered in turn.

**Social Exchange**

Although not from the local area, Maureen was historically a rural Irish person, having spent her childhood in a small town on the East coast. She had moved to Westport in search of an alternative way of life that she felt would provide healing for the suffering she had endured although Maureen was generally unspecific about the nature of this suffering. However the principle of relief is significant in two ways. Firstly, when she arrived in Westport she was in search of a place where she felt she could belong. The achievement of this was secured through interaction with other actors living in the Westport region. She explained her experience as follows ‘…when I landed in Westport it was like home, I started connecting with people straight away’. She felt that ‘…Westport… has a striking hold on people and what people are doing here is…looking at their lives, they are looking for more in their lives, they are looking to find happiness’. Together these forces suggest two emergent processes. The first was the creation of a cultural space around the Westport region. This was because the presence of a group of people with similar aspirations for social and personal change gave credence to plans for action within which a LETS such as MnM might reasonably be expected to prosper. Secondly, as Maureen saw her own issues being solved in a group setting it could be suggested that she was prone to identifying with and participating in, group solutions to social issues. This predisposed her not only to membership of, but also enthusiasm for, groups such as MnM.

The idea of Westport as a particular cultural space suited to LETS type exchange can be treated further by considering Maureen’s socio-political ideology. That is her belief about how society, particularly in proximate rural locations, should operate and feed into broader society. Maureen felt that the difficulties of modern life actors arose because ‘…people are getting too materialistic, their sole aim is to be independent of one another…they have to have all of these material things that enables them to be totally independent of one another’. What Maureen possesses that perhaps the majority do not is the memory of a society in which such a system of social governance did not prevail. Although only in her late thirties Maureen can recall the operation of a Meitheal system in the area she lived in as a child. She described how she ‘…grew up exchanging with others…the financial stage was very, very minimal and so…you’re always depending on others…there was a lot of exchanging going on because there wasn’t enough money to be totally independent’. From these two statements we can see that Maureen could not only anticipate a role for a co-operative exchange system such as LETS but could also anticipate both how the system as a

**TABLE ONE**

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<td>5/0</td>
<td>38/23</td>
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<td>2,710/2100</td>
<td>114/0</td>
<td>6,072/6,423</td>
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<td>25/21</td>
<td>4/5</td>
<td>43/60</td>
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<td>200/1,340</td>
<td>2,474/3106</td>
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<tr>
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<td>12/18</td>
<td>31/23</td>
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<td>1250/1813</td>
<td>5184/5206</td>
<td>208/196</td>
<td>10332/12730</td>
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whole might work and also what her role within the system might be. It might be suggested that this structural element left her well disposed to enthusiastic participation in LETS exchange. A final aspect of this was the role Maureen felt that MnM could play in educating her children. Two of her children were old enough to be youth members of MnM, she felt that it could play an important role in allowing them ‘to get a feel of that letting go (of material things)...to share things, pass them round, reuse them’.

To summarise the social relationship between Maureen and MnM could be seen as one in which Maureen identified Westport as a location for personal healing. Such healing could be best achieved in a group setting. Westport provided a significant number of people with a similar aspiration. MnM was one formal institutional structure through which such change, healing or development could be achieved. In addition, Maureen expressed a particularly communitarian socio-political ideology which identified economics as a particular reason for the breakdown of traditional societal structures. This suggests a particular social alignment between Maureen and an alternative system of exchange such as MnM.

The Reek as a Medium of Exchange and a Store of Wealth

The second structural aspect of Maureen’s participation in MnM is her acceptance of the Reek or local currency as a store of wealth and a medium of exchange. This aspect of Maureen’s membership is particularly interesting. For her it appears that the Reek was not a particularly noteworthy store of wealth. She pointed out that ‘...the figures don’t mean that much to me... they would only mean a lot if I became aware if I was in the red hugely...’. What is interesting about this is that her strong positive balance is not too important to her. However, a negative or debit balance would not be acceptable. This issue is discussed further below. The need to maintain this balanced relationship within the system was highlighted when Maureen pointed out that in the future she expected to be charging Reeks for jobs that she had done for free because she wanted to use Reeks to part pay for a new house she planned to build. There does appear to be a contradiction in this understanding on the part of Maureen. However, the explanation is consistent with the earlier discussion of her social relationship with MnM. For this actor the Reek played an unusual role, essentially it was a lubricant for exchange in the sense that it gave her the ability to ask for services to the entrepreneurial actor 13. An emergent consequence of this service was a result of Maureen’s willingness to provide certain services to another, without a loss of face.

This suggests the presence of an emergent property of the system. In its fundamental form, LETS proposes a market within which actors exchange goods and services for a local rather than a national currency. As discussed earlier actors can borrow against the LETS currency, interest free, in order to improve their standard of living. Maureen has taken an alternative route in which she has actively avoided taking on debt, and views deficit as a negative within the system. It has been suggested that the location of MnM in Westport provided the system with a supportive cultural environment and was an important reason for its success. This approach to the currency may be one of the costs of that location. Many rural people have an informal system of exchange within which reciprocity is not measured but is carefully noted (Salazar, 1996). This exchange culture has overlapped with that of MnM to create a hybrid within which people were willing to exchange, felt liberated to exchange but were unwilling to rely on the system as a source of finance for that trade. The significance of this emergent property lies in the effect it had and looks likely to continue to have on Maureen’s trade in the future. If she had valued the Reek or local currency more highly perhaps she would have traded more actively and recorded her exchanges more accurately. She notes that for future exchanges she will record her credits more accurately as she wishes to use Reeks to support a building project. She could have relied on readily available Reek credit to complete this work but instead she seeks to build a surplus in advance.

To summarise, for Maureen the Reek was a useful medium of exchange in that it removed the notion of reciprocal obligation. This will have contributed to her perception of the system as one within which trade was possible. However, it could not be significantly observed as a store of wealth. Finally, the system of exchange that appears to prevail in MnM is an emergent property of its structure rather than a feature of its intended design.

Actor Exchange Strategy

The final structural element to be considered is Maureen’s exchange strategy within MnM. Maureen was clear as to what the role of exchange in MnM was in her overall portfolio of economic activities. She saw LETS as ‘running alongside’ the main economic activities of her household, providing ‘bits and pieces’ in addition to the necessities provided for by national economy employment. This was a common feature of exchange in MnM as actors felt that they could easily secure luxuries through the system. These luxuries often arose through hobby services such as massage or alternative therapies of various kinds. Alternatively they arose through goods purchased at the weekly stall. The latter was the one most commonly employed by Maureen at the time of interview. Although she had offered her labour for Reeks in the early stages of the system.

To summarise, Maureen was apparently a convenience actor, who improved the margins of her material life through LETS exchanges. What this review of structure has revealed is an actor with a strong historical disposition to co-operative ventures such as LETS. In addition, she had a clear understanding of how the system might work for her and the contribution that she might make to it. In the following section, the impact of contingent relations on this structure will be used to explain the dynamic aspects of Maureen’s exchange profile.

IDENTIFYING THE IMPACT OF CONTINGENT RELATIONS

To explain the outcome of Maureen’s exchange behaviour it is necessary to examine the contingent relations that arose during the course of her membership of MnM. In this case the particular product/service offering, the overlap between the national and local economy and the interaction of social and economic forces appear to have been most significant. Each is discussed below.

Product/Service Offering

Maureen offered both a service and goods for sale in MnM. The service was her own labour that was offered for Reeks only to actor 13 who was setting up a cheese business and required assistance. This established a significant base of high activity for Maureen within the system. This valuable service was offered not simply because it was what Maureen was capable of, if that were the case all actors in the system would offer similar resources. This was certainly not the case. Rather the high volume of activity associated with this service was a result of Maureen’s willingness to provide it for Reeks only and the valuable and high demand nature of the service to the entrepreneurial actor 13. An emergent consequence of this exchange was that Maureen accumulated large amount of Reeks for her services, through the operation of the enthusiasm mechanism she also set out to spend these Reeks. Table one demonstrates the almost balanced nature of Maureen’s activity with the value of buying and selling almost equal. The goods that Maureen offered for sale can be treated together. In the early days
of the system Maureen and other actors baked bread for sale through the stall. The purpose being to convince others that they system could provide for daily needs and so was a worthwhile activity. Maureen’s other offering was household goods sold through the weekly stall. In each case Maureen was offering generally desirable goods, at substantial discount to normal prices through the central distribution mechanism for the system. The products and services that Maureen offered through the system were highly valuable. She offered these as a result of her own enthusiasm for the match between the ideals MnM and her own social, economic and political outlook. In addition, we also know that her purchasing ambition within the system during the period of the case study at least were limited to marginal enhancements of her utility through buying ‘bits and pieces’ as they became available. Thus the product/service offering contingency offers one particularly persuasive explanation for the high activity profile of Maureen’s account.

Thus far the explanation of Maureen’s exchange behaviour has focussed on explaining the enthusiastic nature of her participation in MnM. However, it should be noted that in the final year of the case study her activity had subsided. The following two contingencies will consider reasons for this reduction.

Overlap between the National and Local Economy

When MnM was initiated in 1993, Ireland was an economic backwater notable only for high unemployment and emigration, particularly from the West coast where Westport is located. However, the so-called Celtic Tiger of the 1990’s would see the country enjoy double digit growth. By the mid 1990’s this growth had seeped from the industrialised east coast to the rural West and was particularly felt in Westport. From an exchange perspective within MnM this meant that the material need of many actors to participate in MnM was reduced or eliminated. The effect of this on Maureen was to reduce the number of opportunities she had for trading with other actors. The implications of this will be considered in conjunction with the next contingency.

Interaction of Economic and Social Exchange

The interaction of economic and social exchange is an interesting and significant explanation both for fluctuation and reduction of Maureen’s economic commitment within the system. Essentially this contingency suggest that relationships that begin with an economic orientation, that is actors trading Reeks for goods or services, move beyond the MnM framework as the social relationship between actors develops. Maureen offers one particular example of this. She highlights one particular exchange partner within which this occurred. She noted that ‘…we had a lot of transactions, it was just more handy than saying this amount for Reeks, you owe me this amount… because there was definite things that he was doing for us and definite things he wanted one for him’. This outcome can be considered in two ways. The first is as an inevitable result of the type of local and social interaction that occurs in rural areas. If, as Maureen points out there was ongoing direct exchange between two actors it is perhaps not surprising that such exchange would move beyond the system. However, if the earlier consideration of Maureen’s commitment to the MnM project is revisited this behaviour is actually very surprising. Why would this actor wish to undermine a system to which she had such a large commitment?

There was considerable evidence in the case as a whole that, over time, intra-system feuds reduced the willingness of actors to trade with each other. It also retarded the type of enthusiastic idealism for the system that many such as Maureen showed at the outset. One emergent consequence of this from an individual actors perspective was to lead to a reliance on reciprocation rather than the open market for exchange opportunities. This explanation interestingly does not undermine the confidence that Maureen showed in the Reek and its ability to repay efforts as discussed earlier. Her understanding of the system was primarily a personal one ‘…I just know there are enough people in that system to do something for me for Reeks if I wanted’.

To summarise, it has been seen that Maureen, as a result of the dynamics of the system explains her reduction in trading through the emergence of reciprocal, non-system exchange with key exchange partners. It is suggested that such behaviour is a widespread pattern within the system.

DISCUSSION: CRITICAL REALISM AND C2C BEHAVIOUR

This paper presented an outline of an emerging epistemology that is having a significant impact on a variety of social sciences. In this instance it has been employed to explore a single case of an actor involved in a system of C2C exchange.

Much of consuming behaviour is rightly seen as taking place within a dominant socio-economic framework with a particular set of values, aspirations and pre-ordained behaviours. This case has provided an insight onto how individuals behave economically when such a control structure is removed. Most significantly in the context of current debates within consumer research relating to resistance of the market economy, this paper demonstrates the difficulty of such resistance beyond existing social, cultural, economic and political structures. In order to explore this effect in greater detail further cases and a different event focus will be required. This will be the subject of further papers arising form this research project. Such contributions will go some way towards resolving the challenge to consumer researchers set by DiMaggio and Louch (1998) who pointed out that the deficiency of knowledge regarding the social organisation of exchange in C2C markets. Finally, we can suggest that the ability of critical realism to offer an alternative to linear additive approaches to explanation of social phenomenon is worthy of some further attention amongst consumer researchers.

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