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Sánchez-Casanova, Wendy Marilú

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Barter in the Path of a Citizen-Consumer: An Autoethnographic Viewpoint

El trueque en la trayectoria de un ciudadano-consumidor: Una vista autoetnográfica

Wendy Marilú Sánchez-Casanova
wsanchez@enesmorelia.unam.mx

Escuela Nacional de Estudios Superiores, México

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6611-7664>

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Abstract: Barter comes from citizen-costumer, exchanging good or services for others without monetary reference (use value that provides welfare) and its context is the social and solidarity economy. The aim of this study was to describe barter as a supportive practice facilitating the learning process of a citizen-consumer, who puts a critical awareness first when deciding how purchase goods and services. Following a qualitative methodology, through auto-ethnography focused on an individual barter experience in Mexico City (from 2012 to 2014) in three stages: 1) decision to be citizen-consumer, 2) specific barter experience and 3) how that experience ended. Barter was found to promote sustainability, as the crossing of objects with useful life resists planned and perceived obsolescence, constituting an innovative, community and conscious exercise based on trust and organic interactions, inspiring actions for a broad individual and collective presence on the stage sociopolitical. However, barter could be restricted by the lack of coincidence of needs and desires. It is concluded that barter is a learning process that involves tries and error, building and deconstructing individuals, societies, expectations, and practices aimed at addressing poverty and inequality caused by the preeminence of the paradigm of value change.

Keywords: Consumption, social and solidary economy, exchange, use value.

Resumen: El trueque proviene de un ciudadano-consumidor, intercambiando bienes o servicios por otros sin referente monetario (valor de uso que provee bienestar) y su contexto es la economía social y solidaria. El presente estudio tuvo como objetivo describir el trueque como práctica solidaria facilitadora del proceso de aprendizaje de un ciudadano-consumidor, quien antepone una conciencia crítica al decidir cómo adquirir bienes y servicios. Siguiendo una metodología cualitativa, a través de la auto-etnografía centrada en una experiencia individual de trueque en Ciudad de México (de 2012 a 2014) en tres etapas: 1) decisión de ser ciudadano-consumidor, 2) experiencia específica de trueque y 3) cómo concluyó esa experiencia. Se encontró que el trueque impulsa la sustentabilidad, pues el cruce de objetos con vida útil resiste a la obsolescencia planificada y percibida, constituyendo un ejercicio innovador, comunitario y consciente basado en la confianza y las interacciones orgánicas, suscitando acciones para una amplia presencia individual y colectiva en el escenario sociopolítico. Sin embargo, el trueque podría restringirse por la falta de coincidencia de necesidades y deseos. Se concluye que, el trueque es un proceso de aprendizaje que implica ensayo y error, construyendo y deconstruyendo individuos, sociedades, expectativas y prácticas destinadas a enfrentar la pobreza y la desigualdad ocasionada por la preeminencia del paradigma del valor de cambio.

Palabras clave: Consumo, economía social y solidaria, intercambio, valor de uso.

1.-INTRODUCTION

The social and solidarity-based economy proposes various ways of transitioning from a simple consumer to a citizen-consumer who questions the paradigm of exchange value (based on commodification) to give relevance to use value (determined by providing a material, mental or emotional well-being), which implies a continuous analysis to informed decision-making.

In line with the above, one of the proposals for such transition is bartering, whereby goods or services are directly exchanged for other goods or services without any monetary reference, which is often common among citizen-consumers, for whom every decision about how goods or services are acquired must be preceded by a community awareness that considers social and natural environments, contributing to the social and solidarity-based economy.

Bartering is a solidarity practice in which use value prevails. This absence of a monetary reference often leads to misunderstandings. Consequently, reflection on the goods or services being sought, as well as the specify bartering processes, requires a theoretical and methodological framework capable of explaining them in terms of conscious and sustainable consumption.

Within this framework, the context of bartering is discussed considering the difference between use value and exchange value as an essential condition to start a path as a citizen-consumer, in the social and solidarity-based economy, being both learning processes with a community background.

Thus, this work is justified by the contemporary call for sustainability through alternative ways of consumption, which are currently common in Latin America and need to be discussed under the theoretical and methodological framework of the social and solidarity-based economy, which is also a current and useful practice for different social groups. Hence, the broadening of the possibilities of approach, both academic and social, is suggested.

For this approach, the prevailing method is autoethnography, which establishes the link between the actors and a specific phenomenon, explaining their own reality through the previously constructed theoretical framework. Along these lines, I presented myself as single research subject to describe and analyze my own bartering experience in Mexico City (2012-2014), from the approach of the social and solidarity-based economy, promoted by citizen-consumers.

It should be noted that this autoethnographic viewpoint could be a limitation itself, so the responsibility for a unique narrative is assumed.

2.-THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The social and solidarity-based economy constitutes a resilient path in the context of growing poverty and inequality, existing in Latin America since the 1980's, when "state participation in strategic sectors was replaced by

the law of supply and demand, emphasizing financial liberation, trade openness, foreign investment, and privatization” (Sánchez & Desilus, 2020, p.139).

According to García (2009, p. 71), the results on the lost decade were “national decapitalization, the underconsumption of the majorities, unemployment and a decline of the cultural offer”, a horizon of concern addressed by critical voices that question the predominant economic paradigm, under the conviction that there is a multiplicity of ways acquiring both goods and services, being bartering or exchange one of them. This is based on the idea that capitalism encourages an unconscious consumption to elevate the solitude, dependance and waste, following up on the strategy that Wallerstein (2012, p. 11) has described in his analysis of historical capitalism:

In the course of seeking to accumulate more and more capital, capitalists have sought to commodify more and more of these social processes in all spheres of economic life. Since capitalism is a self-reading process, it follows that no social transaction has been intrinsically exempt from possible inclusion. That is why we may say that the historical development of capitalism has involved the thrust towards the commodification of everything.

The negative effects of that commercialization have led to consider the social and solidarity-based economy as an urgent and necessary solution that forms citizen-consumers, adopting their consumption decisions based on critical reflection. This is because the tactic that leads to exacerbated consumption is a marked distinction of status in terms of what is acquired or what might be acquired, regardless the mechanism whereby this is achieved (which can include credits, partial payments, mortgage, pledges, among others). Consumers seek a primacy granted by the ability to acquire something that not everyone can have, an aspiration created by marketing, which is that repetitive message of what one can become when gaining access to a certain product or service.

Thus, fashion, the promise of social mobility or the prestige that a good or service can bring, become the driving forces of consumption, contributing to inequality and social division. For this reason, the social and solidarity-based economy, (re)emerges so that, through information, knowledge, criticism, and collective action, the social fabric can be recovered, turning consumers into citizen-consumers.

About that, García (2009, pp. 68-69) distinguishes the requirements for the consolidation of a citizen-consumer:

- a) a. A vast and diversified supply of goods and representative messages of the international variety of markets, of easily and equitable accessible for the majority,
 - b. Multidirectional and reliable information about product quality, with effective consumer control and the ability to refuse the pretensions and seductions of propaganda, and
 - c. Democratic participation of the main sectors of civil society in the decisions of material, symbolic, legal, and political order where consumption is organized.

In this context, bartering emerges as an alternative practice instead of buying and selling, which also activates the circulation of goods and services, while stimulating creativity and sustainability, recovering the self-management and solidarity, and qualitatively enriching the social and natural environments. This is also because “the swapping process does not require monetary exchange which makes it all the more exciting” (Matthews & Hodges, 2016, p. 98).

Bartering can be included in the catalogue of solidarity practices, which are those resulting from the awareness of community and cooperation to contribute to a better development of human relationships, by placing use value over exchange value, under the premise that “consumption is the set of socio-cultural processes in which the appropriation and uses of products take place” (García, 2009, pp.58-59).

From this social, cultural, and political perspective, it can be rightly distinguished between need and desire. On this point, indicates that the first “has a physiological character, and for its satisfaction a determined good by the mind of the person is not required”. While the second “has a psychological character and, to fulfil it, a specific kind of satisfier is considered”.

Goods and services are precisely those satisfiers required for both cases. It is necessary to clarify that a conscious consumption is not one aims to radically suppress desires, leaving their place exclusively to needs, but one that distinguishes perfectly between the two as the catalyst of accurate consumption decisions, planning it outside the expectations of capitalism, responding to the real availability of economic resources and to a prospective of the social-environmental impact that may be generated, contributing to the sustainability understood as a “learning process” (Meppen & Gill, 1998, p. 131), by containing discovery, adaptation, interlocution, as well as a synergy of knowledge and practices.

3.-METHODOLOGY, SAMPLE PERIOD AND DATA USED

The citizen-consumer’s learning process of the goes from the individual to the social and vice versa. This constant feedback remits to autoethnography as one of the methodological tools for consigning these transformations, as it is situated “in the epistemological perspective that holds that an individual life can account for the contexts in which that person lives, as well as the historical periods that he or she goes through in the course of his or her existence” (Blanco, 2012, pp. 54-55).

According to Montenegro (2014, p.101), autoethnography is “a rhizome that seeks the path through the ground to make its connections in a free and non-hierarchical way”. In other words, this method allows to explore the selected categories without the rigorousness that other techniques demand, as it is a space for expression in the first person singular and under a free format, without losing the academic pathway (Palomares et al, 2022, pp. 226-246).

Then, the result of autoethnography will be the precision of the link between the actor and a specific phenomenon, explaining the own reality through the theoretical framework that promotes the analysis, so that relevance is given to “contexts” and the fact of “learning by being a part of” (Montenegro, 2014). That is, “when researchers do autoethnography, they write retrospectively and selectively about epiphanies that derive from, or were made possible by, being part of a culture or having a specific cultural identity” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2019, p. 22).

Therefore, after a theoretical review of contexts and proposals of the social and solidarity-based economy encouraged by citizen-consumers, I describe and discuss my bartering experience in Mexico City (from 2012 to 2014), depicting it in three moments: 1) the decision to become a citizen-consumer, 2) the specific practice of bartering, and 3) how this experience ended.

This approach follows the specific objectives of this work to identify the elements to describe bartering as a solidarity practice that facilitates the transition from a mere consumer to a citizen-consumer within a learning process.

In this way, the following aspects are distinguished: a) the context of bartering, b) the difference between use value and exchange value to activate a citizen-consumer path, c) how the commitment to the social and solidarity-based economy and sustainability is, and d) how these events generate a community environment.

It is pertinent to emphasize the ethical aspect of “autoethnography as a method [that] may promote emotionally and intellectually powerful texts that extend beyond the page, affecting audiences and communities. Autoethnographers, therefore, must consider the personal, social, political, and ethical consequences when using their experiences as a source of data for primary research” (Tullis, 2019, p. 157).

In this sense, I present myself as the only participant in this autoethnographic perspective, assuming a substantial responsibility for my own narrative, which contains an experience that contributes to the discussion about the social and solidarity-based economy through an interpretation of specific bartering processes, emphasizing its advantages and disadvantages with respect to the skepticism and incomprehension that this practice implies.

4.-RESULTS

a) Am I a citizen-consumer?

I consider my experience as a citizen-consumer to be triggered by the 1994 crisis, as my family and I had to give up several goods and services to cope with the reduction in the standard of living we had when my father lost his job, although it should be noted that he always raised us in savings and austerity.

At that time, being thrifty and austere was not by choice, but because there was not other way. This made me feel sad, because I did not

understand many as a high school student about to enroll in a bachelor's degree, which I was able to pay for by selling a gold bracelet that one of my grandmothers gave me when I was born: they were very early exercises of valuing things.

I wanted to buy, to have and to do things, often lack of money stopped. The worst thing was to hear constant opinions about consumption from of people who apparently no financial struggles, who emphasized the importance of some brands over others, having a car, being able to go to trendy places and so on.

However, I was appreciated for being a good student. At that moment, my priority was to finish my degree, following the idea instilled in my generation that it would solve my life, which did not happen and was the thing that is what led me to postgraduate studies. The master's degree gave me the tools to understand and analyze sustainability and many things started to make sense to me. The sadness turned into the opposite when I realized that I was collaborating to an optimization of the world, by not consuming in excess, recycling, reusing, thinking before buying, habits that even allowed me to have savings, although I did not that earn much.

Thereafter, austerity and savings were by choice: a citizen-consumer had emerged, even though I did not yet know the term, which I learnt in my PhD, reading García (2009, p. 69), who states that the consumers can ascend to citizens when "consumption is seen not as the mere individual possession of isolated objects, but as the collective appropriation, in relations of solidarity and distinction with others, of goods that give biological and symbolic satisfactions".

I pride myself of being an informed and trained citizen-consumer to be critical and in a position to propose solutions to the problems arising from unconscious and thoughtless consumerism. Over time, this vision has broadened regarding how we can influence and assume responsibility for social and natural environments through creative proposals, changing conventional consumption patterns, for individual and collective benefits.

A citizen-consumers embrace the proposal of social and solidarity-based economy for a "simple life and learning to live modestly, as well as the relations of reciprocity, and in consequence, will prioritize the search for meaning and life in harmony with nature" (Collin, 2012, p. 395). If for capitalism an "exemplary consumer is the still man" (Galeano, 2007, p. 260), a citizen-consumer is the opposite; someone with initiative to "take over reality, carry it and deal with it" (Cortina, cit. pos. Tuvilla, 1998, p. 216).

And it was precisely during my PhD studies in Mexico City when I had the opportunity to continue my learning process as a citizen-consumer. I made an in-depth revision of what I had brought with me when I moved, what was I going to do with what I no longer needed? The term bartering gave me the answer.

b) The bartering as a learning process

The barter or exchange is one of the actions that a citizen-consumer can undertake, as it is a solidarity practice in which goods or services are exchanged directly for other goods or services without a monetary reference, being able to replace money in times of economic crisis, at the same time as it constitutes an alternative model that facilitates an awareness that is not only economical, but also ecological and social.

On Facebook, I found active bartering groups in Mexico City. The spirit of these communities of practice was the conscious consumption, restricting the waste that compulsive consumption can generate. We often buy things without thinking, and then they lie there, completely useless. It happened to me many times, especially when my economic situation began to get better, so that I sometimes succumbed to the flashes of certain products, the illusion and thrill of buying. This is something that often happens to people when they suddenly start earning more money, which is an important point to address in the citizen-consumer formation: money is a means not an end.

This unconscious consumption happened to me mostly with clothes. To tell the truth, I do not know what I was thinking when I was trying on a garment that I would not wear even once. Then, I would either give it away or throw it away, although it was more the latter. This made waste easy, which requires unconscious consumption to subsist, because if the clothes are given away, at least it is known that they had a certain destination, but by throwing them away I could not know if they were useful to someone else; I hope that whoever took them have given the fair use.

Giving things away makes more sense, although this cannot be sustained for long, given that world is strengthened by reciprocity and the construction of communities in which each member plays an essential role. A friend told me that “giving and receiving is an energetic balance”, despite the fact that in the Latin-American imagination the idea that “it is better to give than to receive” is deeply rooted, as a religious motto that does not help much in a scheme of work and responsibility. It is not about avoiding donations, but economies and the world cannot be based solely on them: exchanges are needed.

The habit of saving, an enthusiasm for practical sustainability and the approach to the social and solidarity-based economy were the factors that led me to bartering. I learnt that many people do it precisely out of savings or necessity, and by investigating I found out about the Red Global de Trueque en Argentina (Global Barter Network in Argentina), which arose in 1995 in the context of the Efecto Tequila (Tequila Effect), that brought with it a “lack of wage labor and the difficulty of placing autonomously produced goods and services in formal markets as a consequence of the narrowing of the market” (Hintze et al., 2003, p. 19). This national initiative has a solid organization, which is based on credit as a unit of exchange and reciprocity among its members.

The foregoing proves that creativity and resilience are capable of moderating consumption habits and leading them towards sustainability,

because “it is the phenomenon of scarcity, of the finiteness of the human world, which includes his own habitat, from where he satisfies his needs, that is the origin of the modern paradox, consuming while conserving, consuming without destroying, consuming while regulating scarcity” (Cázares, 2013, p. 28).

If the preponderant system of consumption demands a certain lifestyle to have an identity and a presence in time and space, initiatives such as the Red Global de Trueque clarify that the challenge and the starting point would be exactly to go against that vision, for we are not because of what we have or can buy but because self-esteem, self-knowledge, self-management, and resilience. That is, the ability to face every situation and not give up.

In 2012, I did a cleansing and inventory of what I did not need, initiating myself in bartering in two specific groups: Intercambiamos, si no, regalemos (Let’s Exchange, If Not, Let’s Give Away), and Trueque (Bartering), both operating mostly in Mexico City. In these groups, not only bartering was practiced, but also gratiferia which means “giving away”. I have said that donations should be given with moderation, but not completely ruled out. The difference in the specific case of the group is that it could follow up the usefulness of the good, and well as contributing to solidarity and community in a more certain way.

I bartered clothes, accessories, books, souvenirs, decorative objects, stationary, and other items. In return, I asked for grocery, cleaning products, board games, other books, bags, earrings, and necklaces. In a friendly and trusting atmosphere, I came to make exchanges more than once with certain people, even one of them told me that I was her troquera favorita (favorite barterer).

The gathering places were the stations of public transport (Metro, Tren Ligero, Metrobús), parks, and other public areas. This was a particularly delicate aspect, because in these groups there were cases of home robbery, armed robbery and even one rape. The risks existed, and although there were certain filters to be admitted, it was not possible to know exactly who was behind each profile. It must be stressed that these unfortunate incidents were not due to bartering per se, but rather to taking advantage of the situation, which meant for many people completely abandoning this solidarity practice, which was entirely understandable.

Monthly, bartering and gratiferia events were also organized in public or alternative venues. I had the opportunity to attend a couple of them, one in Portales and the other in Santa María La Ribera (Portales and Santa María La Ribera are neighborhoods in Mexico City). As for gratiferia, they used to put a box in which you could leave things and take others, or just take things. I remember that at the Portales event, I left stationary, and, in exchange, I had the joy of finding a book of José Martí’s quotes. For me, it was a reward, as I had given away a similar book some time before. At that moment, life was giving me back with abundance, and I thought that this was precisely the energy that should be activated in exchanges that generate closeness and are not mediated by money. Someone thought that they did not need that book, but for me it was the best thing to find

it. The quote “the trifles of some are the treasure of others” took on its fullest meaning: what was no longer useful to me could be of great utility or joy to others and vice versa.

At the Santa María La Ribera event I did not barter, but I was observing how people made deals or tried to arrange them, which was not easy at all. I realized that there were those who tried to take advantage, or there was simply noncoincidence in needs or desires. In addition to this, there was the difficulty to avoid valuation through monetization. This last circumstance encourages the capitalist economy to affirm that bartering is uncertain. In view of this, it is important to highlight that this practice can be a catalyst for a paradigm shift: utility-value (use value) instead of labor-value (exchange value).

The advocates of the utility-value school, among them Condillac and Juan Bautista Say, are based on the logical system of considering that utility is the characteristic that things have for satisfying needs, so that the value will be in accordance with the level of satisfaction that it produces. The more useful a thing is, the more value it will have [...] The supporters of the labor-value school, among others, Adam Smith, Ricardo, Rodbertus and Karl Marx, give preponderance to the labor factor to determine the degree of value of things, and calculate it according to the effort invested in its manufacture (Domínguez, 2007, p. 46).

Bartering should be based exclusively on utility-value-, which for the free market may seem unfair or disproportionate, but if it can grant satisfaction on both sides, conscious consumption will have been accomplished. In this regard, García and Jiménez (2015, p. 113) remark that Condillac “pointed out that a thing is useful when it satisfies a need, and that its value is the estimation attributed by the uses to which can be put, while the price is the relative value compared to other things and depends on its relative abundance and the concurrence of buyers and sellers.

Thus, “the utility or use value of a good is the satisfaction it provides to a person; the exchange value is its price in money or other goods” (García & Jiménez, 2015, p. 113). In use value, the importance of a good is not determined by any inherent property or by the amount of labor required to produce it (which would be exchange value), but by the ability to provide material, mental or emotional well-being.

The dispute between use value and exchange value can be solved by considering the former for bartering in which most of the products are second-hand, and the latter for conventional schemes such as buying and selling, especially new goods (in order to respect the labor-value in the first instance). In other words, the former is applicable to the social and solidarity-based economy, and the latter to an economy based on monetization. Of course, it is not about establishing an unbreakable polarization, but about providing guidelines for organizing the models that make up the social and solidarity-based economy, seeking a greater equity in the deals.

It is important that in the practice of bartering we learn the terms of use value and exchange value to have a broad understanding of this practice

and avoid situations where price differences are sought, or an exchange value is insisted upon as the only possible reference.

That knowledge is what allowed me to have successful trades. Practically, I got everything I was looking for, but it took a long time, about two years, and a lot of patience. Also, attitude is important: to be humble, kind, proper, without absurd demands and without the aim of excessive or disproportionate profit. We must always keep in mind that we are dealing with other people and start with empathy, because in these type of deals misunderstandings and risks are commonplace.

No doubt, one of my best barter was a shoe rack for a beautiful painting, which I still have. I must admit that, although I did not want to base it on a price, it was a very unequal exchange, as it was an artwork compared to one plastic frame. I let the girl who was offering this exchange know, and all she said was “I just need the shoe rack”. Based on the exchange value, this deal would have never been closed.

Finally, I was aware of a controversial issue: the so-called *chachareros*, i.e. people who bought and sold second-hand items. In bartering groups, they found the opportunity to modify their inventory, which for many was a way to break the practice that was trying to be rooted in the group, on the understanding that exchanged things should not go into a conventional consumption scheme such as buying and selling. In this respect, I never had a problem: I defended the right of people to do what they wanted with what they had obtained; it was a fully individual decision.

c) Peak season and exhaustion

My participation in bartering groups was so determined and enthusiastic that I was proposed to be the administrator of the group “Let’s Exchange, If Not, Let’s Give Away”, which I accepted with full conviction.

We were only four people monitoring the activity of a group that reached more than 10,000 members. We had to accept or reject membership requests by reviewing the profile of each candidate, as well as sending a welcoming message to those accepted, which also explained the guidelines of the group.

Posting also had to be moderated to avoid misunderstandings, especially, if somebody offered or asked for money, or wanted to rely on it to close deals. If there was a conflict between members, the main administrator and founder of the group took charge.

At that time, the founder of the group was involved in alternative therapies, and had a very categorical speech on the social and solidarity-based economy, which to a large extent remained in words, as he eventually started to sell the objects he could not exchange, organized concerts whose tickets could not be obtained through bartering, and embarked upon a bio-construction project in which he tried to make a profit by inviting people to sell raffle numbers for the house to be built, as well as looking for free labor.

Shortly before this, disagreements began. The founder started to get fussy about the terms used in posts, and he did not intervene adequately in the case of a member of the group who had the habit of standing others up, including me. That was the last straw; I left the administration and the group.

Almost at the same time, the “Bartering” group began to shift its objectives. From being a group exclusively for exchange or donations, it became a laxer space, in which buying, and selling was subtly suggested if it was better for both parties, albeit it was with “symbolic” amounts. For example, in that group I had the experience of exchanging a relaxing massage for groceries, and we were both happy to do so. The second time that I asked this type of exchange, the girl told me that she preferred that “symbolic” amount, which led to a discussion about the different perspectives in establishing valuations and how that could lead to a disagreement that was neither necessary nor desired. I also left that group.

In 2014, there was an attrition, which was compounded by the fact that I was about to finish my studies, and the search for a job became a priority. I no longer bartered in Mexico City.

On the disappointment linked to practices of the social and solidarity-based economy, Collin (2012, p. 346) expresses that:

The perspective that appeals to complementarity seems not interested in building a new society, but in softening capitalism, through strategies of social care, which would represent the continuation of the efforts of previous experiences, such as cooperatives and mutual societies, and the return of the redistributive schemes of the State of Wellbeing. They place the solidarity-based economy in a subsidiary scheme, in the double sense of being subordinate and requiring subsidies, as well as transfers from the market sector to the social economy. This perspective is criticized for its inability to reproduce itself autonomously, in other words, it is not an alternative, but an aspirin.

Therefore, it would not be viable to propose a consumption scheme based exclusively on bartering, but this fact does not take away the character of a practice that has emerged with force, abruptly changing the meaning assigned to money, which is no longer the only source of satisfaction of needs and desires. The social and solidarity-based economy is a paradigm under construction, which must face its own complexity.

Discussion

In this experience, bartering is discussed as a mechanism that allows for the optimization and appreciation of resources, thus it constitutes a learning option for the citizen-consumer, and for the social and solidarity-based economy itself, by facilitating two key aspects for sustainable consumption: reusing products and establishment relationships of solidarity.

In terms of the reuse of products, Galeano (2007, p. 271) wrote that “the culture of consumption, a culture of the ephemeral, condemns everything to immediate disuse. Everything changes at the vertiginous pace of fashion, placed at the service of the need to sell. Things age in a blink of an eye to be replaced for other things with a fleeting life”.

Waste underpins the idea of the transitory and disposable, that is, planned and perceived obsolescence. It is the strategy for rooting continuous consumption, which has generated a strong ecological footprint for the massive exploitation of natural sources, in addition to the fact that the physical environment itself is the recipient of all kinds of waste.

Moreover, this paradigm of the transitory and disposable is reproduced in human relationships, which have gradually lost the sense of durability and tolerance because permeates “the tendency, inspired by the dominant consumerism model of life, to treat other human beings as objects of consumption according to the amount of pleasure they can offer, and in terms of cost-benefit” (Bauman, 2009, p. 104)

However, in bartering there is a mutual exchange of objects that still have a useful life, preventing waste, which offers a broad vision of the influence and responsibility that each one has on the natural environment, besides that it is possible to save money. This leads to the statement that “the trifles of some are the treasure of others”. The unconscious accumulation makes room for the revision of needs and desires, making available to others what is no longer useful to us, giving it the opportunity for a new story.

Searching in wardrobes, warehouses, garages, and other storage places for apparently useless objects, the citizen consumer asks himself: What is this? When did I buy it? Why did I buy it? Why is it no longer useful for me? Who could it be useful for? What do I need or want for the exchange? Why? This exercise also implies a review of the consumption habits, proposing creative solutions that gradually complete the requirements of the profile of a citizen-consumer.

In this sense, the wide range of goods and services on offer is examined through “multidirectional and reliable information” (see García, 2009, p. 68) on their origin and characteristics. Thus, access to information is essential in the citizen-consumer’s search for alternative ways of consumption.

For this, bartering is a sort of active citizenship that implies an intervention after a critical evaluation on impacts of consumption in different areas: economic, ecological, and social, considering that the sustainability of things is also the sustainability of people.

To refer to the establishment of relations of solidarity, we also start, who expressed that “the culture of consumption has made of solitude the most lucrative of markets”, while Bauman (2009, p. 104) points out that “human solidarity is the first casualty of which the consumption market can boast”, which leads us to think of a consumerism that tends towards solitude, without which the prevailing paradigm could not be deployed in a satisfactory way.

In solitude, the individuals seek to cover their shortcomings. In many cases, the encounter with oneself causes such anxiety that the fear to interacting can become ingrained. Also, the solitude is made more bearable by the merit of urgent consumption; objects replace people by providing satisfaction or distraction.

In this way, solitude drives consumption without reflection, obstructing any solidarity and alternative practices that may result from human interlocation. Bartering is inevitably based on trust and involves organic interactions, which can lead to other solidarity practices and actions, which would lay the foundations for a broader presence of individuals and groups in the socio-political scene. This is because consumption means the deployment of socio-cultural events (see García, 2009).

Since bartering requires a coincidence of needs and desires, it is necessary to have an openness to glimpse “the intrinsic value of others as unique and unrepeatable human beings, as well as the concern for the care of the one’s own and others’ specificity and originality” (Bauman, 2009, p. 104). This means that it must be emphasized that bartering takes time, patience, empathy and respect, attitudes that come from a thorough educational and reflexive process for which unfortunately people believe there is not time for, as Bauman (2009, p. 95) underlines:

Non-monetary ways of living must be destroyed so that those who relied on it are faced with the decision of buying or starving to death (though no one can guarantee that once converted to consumerism it will not happen anyway). Aspects of life not yet commodified will be shown to entail dangers that can only be averted by buying tools or contracting services, or exposed as inferior, repulsive, and ultimately degrading.

Bartering is now reinvented as part of a citizen-consumer consciousness, to enhance “sharing is caring”, and the idea of transcendence of the Earth and people, rather than orienting interests to money and objects, as this is a (conscious or unconscious) disposable propaganda. Thus, “the context of exchange provided the opportunity to meet new people and perhaps form relationships that could extend beyond the exchange itself” (Matthews & Hodges, 2016, p. 99).

This reinvention is part of a learning required move from simple consumer to citizen-consumer, which begins as an individual initiative that must be positioned on a social scale to impact to have an effective impact. It is a matter of unlearning and relearning under a peculiar style of social relations, being tolerance an unavoidable component. Derived from the above, it is important to mention the nuances of an experience that is still under construction, reiterating that it provides the elements to learn more and more about conscious consumption.

Among other positive aspects, it is worth noting that each trade means the satisfaction of needs and/or desires without spending money, so that money can be saved in a context in which people constantly complain about not being able to do so. Further, bartering can be the beginning of friendships, or the impetus for other recreational, educational, or civic activities, which can also be associated with the promotion of

local producers, artists, and service providers. Hence, it is undeniable that bartering favors the development of an awareness of responsible consumption, while promoting the protection and conservation of the environment, and the establishment of fair and respectful human relations, with patience and cooperation prevailing.

In this way, citizen-consumers drives reciprocity and are oriented towards sustainability as the prevailing paradigm, where social skills such as empathy and tolerance are needed to bring up the community and recover lost human solidarity (see Bauman, 2009).

Therefore, bartering can be described as a learning process based on the understanding of the difference between use value and exchange value, which is also the main challenge when there is mismatch of needs and wants between people.

In this sense, the fact that needs and wants do not always coincide tests the patience of the citizen-consumer, as it is likely that one has to wait before finding what is seeking, and that the one who offers what one needs or wants, at the same time needs or wants what is offered in exchange.

Moreover, a negative as well as a serious aspect is that the absence of money is not fully understood, because everyday life is immersed in exchange value as a unit of reference in and it is hard, but not impossible, to open to another approach. Precisely the differences of opinion regarding the value of the goods or services to be exchanged can generate disrespect or lack of consideration between people who try to participate in bartering, which undoubtedly obstructs the possibility to make a deal.

To this end, a relevant element in the learning process of becoming a citizen-consumer is the awareness and belief in the difference between use value and exchange value, as well as the ways in which they are achieved.

Other pessimistic circumstances could be the case of people who do not know how to refuse a proposal and accept it in conditions of injustice or discomfort; non-compliance with the terms on which bartering was agreed; recidivism in missing appointments to close the trade; objects in poor conditions; discriminatory or offensive speeches, and the uncertainty derived from the lack of confirmation of the agreement, due to the fact that there are people who do not practice seriously, which hinders adequate communication. At this point, the requirement of collectivity (see García, 2009) for conscious consumption is emphasized as a complex task to enhance bartering.

Certainly, bad experiences exalt general mistrust. In fact, just one of them is enough to deny that bartering can be a valid consumption proposal, which makes it clear that people involved in the practice of bartering are in a learning process, as it “provides a new way of assessing exchange, and it allows for a broadening of the concept of consumption” (Matthews & Hodges, 2016, p. 100), which also allows for a paradigm shift, gradually and consciously, because “we cannot build a social and solidarity-based economy without sustainability” (González, 2020).

5.-CONCLUSIONS

In this autoethnographic viewpoint it becomes evident that bartering is a formative option within the social and solidarity-based economy approach, an inevitable premise when assuming responsibility for a change in the predominant consumption model, in this case, through the action of the citizen-consumer, for whom every decision regarding what and how goods or services are acquired must be preceded by an awareness of solidarity with the social and natural environments.

In this way, it is a contribution to sustainability, expressed in the conservation and protection of natural and social environments by exchanging objects that are valued and used again, extending their useful life, thus fading the planned and perceived obsolescence, aroused by capitalism. Likewise, bartering could not be completed without social interaction. People's social skills are activated, as it is necessary to discuss, deal and establish agreements that could activate other recreational, formative, or civic actions. After all, there are various possibilities for a proper exercise of citizenship.

As in all social interaction, bartering brings with it advantages and disadvantages. The main benefit is the establishment of human relationships that defy the solitude caused by the prevailing consumerist system. On the opposite, the main disadvantage is that there is not always coincidence of needs and desires, which delays an adequate culmination of deals, which can end up inhibiting this consumption alternative.

Therefore, bartering is a learning process, trial, and error, building and deconstructing individuals, societies, expectations, and practices aimed to face the poverty and inequality generated by the predominant economic paradigm. Even though it cannot be assured that it can replace it, it is possible to optimize it, so that it can be a good complement, while the awareness of the citizen-consumer permeates the conventional dynamics of exchange, reducing the socio-environmental costs of planned and perceived obsolescence to contribute to sustainability.

In this context, a comparative analysis of bartering with other solidarity practices, such as cooperatives or second-hand sales is recommended as a next step. Furthermore, to broaden the discussion, this practice could be explored under perspectives as Epistemologies of the South, or ecofeminism, due to its community and environmental sides.

Finally, methods such as ethnography and netnography could be incorporated, considering that bartering takes place both in cyberspace and in physical space, being possible to go back and forth between the two.

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Notes

- [1] This article is the product of the “Barter in the Path of a Citizen-Consumer: An Autoethnographic Viewpoint” project