



*Brindisi to the Brindisians*, graffiti in Brindisi, Italy. Photo by A. M. Pusceddu.

---

## **In/formalization**

Edited by

**Alan SMART, Josephine SMART, Filippo M. ZERILLI**

Contributions of

**Stamatis AMARIANAKIS, Lenka BRUNCLÍKOVÁ, Dolores KOENIG, B. Lynne MILGRAM, Sarah MUIR, Antonio Maria PUSCEDDU, Alan SMART, Mechthild VON VACANO, Filippo M. ZERILLI & Julie TRAPPE.**

---

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons © LENKA BRUNCLÍKOVÁ

*Formalizing the informal? A non-monetary zone project in Pilsen, Czech Republic*

2017 | ANUAC. VOL. 6, N° 2, DICEMBRE 2017: 57-62.

ISSN: 2239-625X – DOI: 10.7340/anuac2239-625X-3070



## Formalizing the informal?

A non-monetary zone project in Pilsen, Czech Republic

**Lenka BRUNCLÍKOVÁ**

University of West Bohemia

---

**ABSTRACT:** This paper is based on two years of research taking advantage of participant observation and interviews with the organizers as well as visitors of the non-monetary zone in the Pilsen region, Czech Republic. The research reveals that despite the effort to formalize this informal activity, tension between formal and informal conceptualization seems to be an obstruction.

---

About 2 years ago my friend gave me a scarf and told «It is from a non-monetary zone». I had no idea what a non-monetary zone was and I was surprised that he was not able to explain it to me. All attempts to define the non-monetary zone ended in other questions. Also, the describing of this project was not trivial. The use of conventional terms did not work well. The problem of defining the project of a non-monetary zone lies in the tension between formal and informal spheres. As I started to be more interested in a non-monetary-zone project in Pilsen, where it is organized at least 4 times a year, I tried to find out in what sense do formality and informality intersect within this experiment and how can this fact influence successful running of this project.

In fact, the idea of non-monetary zone is nothing new, there are many similar projects running abroad, such as various free shops and free markets (e.g. Really Really Free Market, Schenke etc.), sometimes labelled as give-away shops, Kost-Nix Laden, free stores etc. The idea of free shop goes back to 1960's to Diggers, a counter-cultural group from San Francisco providing free food, and organizing free music and art performances (*Overview: Who Were (Are) the Diggers?* 2016). Free shops are usually considered as a method of direct action in alternative scene and are mostly placed in squats and/or alternative cultural centres.

Free shops and non-monetary zone share the same basic principle, namely providing things without the necessity to use money. Proclaiming the slogan “Give and Take”, anyone can come and bring something they want to get rid of or take anything without an obligation to reciprocate. Participants of these projects are not usually motivated by financial need but rather by anti-capitalist conviction or/and care for the environment. These projects aim to show that “one man’s trash can be another man’s treasure”. Although there are usually no fixed rules except one (not to use money), it is also expected that participants do not take things so that they can be resold.

However, the non-monetary zone tries to overcome the closeness of free-shops through the absence of permanent space and welcome people outside alternative scene, therefore it is organized entirely in a public space, e.g. in a park, on a street or in cafes, restaurants and gardens. The absence of permanent space influences a different time dimension, the non-monetary zone is organized only for one day and takes place 4-6 times a year. The interval is dependent on free time of organizers as well as on whether they manage to find a suitable place. The one-day non-monetary zone allows people to bring here not only clothes, shoes, books, kitchen utensils, dishes and tools, but also plants and food, herbs from their own gardens or gained by dumpster diving. Furthermore, within the non-monetary zone, the emphasis is put on the interaction with other people. In this aspect, the project differs from free shops, which often work as places where people give away or take things, but there is no emphasis on personal meetings. The non-monetary zone is a place where people meet, discuss, they can learn about the history of things and can make new friendships.

Like many similar projects, the non-monetary zone in the Czech Republic has its roots in anarchistic movement. After the Velvet Revolution in 1989, the Czech environment fostered an anarchist movement in the form of Czechoslovak Anarchist Federation. The activities were focused mostly on organizing demonstrations, squatting and publishing activities. With the advent of so-called alter-globalization movements attention was paid to an idea of “think globally, act locally”. Despite some efforts, this idea was hardly applied in practice until 2012 when Days of Action were organized by Anarchist Federation. During this event, the first non-monetary zone was organized on a street in Prague. One year later, in 2013, the first non-monetary zone took place in Pilsen.

Organizers of the non-monetary zone in Pilsen were theoretically inspired by this Prague experiment, where it was held only once, however, they had no direct experience. This is probably the reason why the non-monetary zone in Pilsen tends to be disassociated from anarchistic origin since this is not im-

portant for them and it works as a stigma which makes it very difficult to attract people outside the alternative scene. However, the successful expansion of this project also means to cross the imaginary line between the informal sphere and the formal one.

Although correct definition is essential for successful running of this project, even after five years it is not clear how to talk about this experiment and the activities that are practiced here. Some participants tried to define the non-monetary zone during interviews, however, they changed their mind later as it did not fit to practices within non-monetary zone. Most of them mentioned terms like “absence of money”, “space for unwanted things”, “absence of hierarchy”, “exchange system”, “gift giving”, “autonomous space for meeting”, and “sharing”. But it turned out that the vast majority of actors when asking, «How would you describe this project to someone else?» were surprised and did not know how to deal with it.

Free shops and similar projects are sometimes called as a part of gift economy. Although anthropology has proven that the gift can take various forms, this term as well as similar concepts describing the activities within these projects can be incorrect. Whereas within the family gift giving can be seen as a duty that arises from the nature of filiation, gift giving among friends and neighbours is voluntary (de L'Estoile 2014: S70). Therefore, gift giving is perceived as moral and valuable and tends to be reciprocated. A thing is not a gift itself, it can be identified as a gift only in connection to its obligations (Mauss 1990). In other words, gift is a gift through relations between giver and recipient of such a gift. The act of gift giving therefore reflects not only the value of the gift, but also the value of the action itself supporting relations among members of the social group (Servet 2009: 88). This relationship, however, always refers to hierarchy (Graeber 2001: 29). I heard two women at the non-monetary zone chatting about feeling bad when they should take something without giving something else in return, they would feel like thieves or debtors. This refers to what Gregory (1982: 19) pointed out

Gift economy, then, is a debt economy. The aim of a transactor in such an economy is to acquire as many gift-debtors as he possibly can and not to maximize profit, as it is in a commodity economy. What a gift transactor desires is the personal relationships that the exchange of gifts creates, and not the things themselves.

The principle of the hierarchy was also one of the main reasons why most participants of my research refused to compare this project to charity. They referred to the paternalistic relationships that charity projects establish and mentioned that charity does not allow people to participate fully in the activities and to become an equal partner.

One can claim that the non-monetary zone is a kind of free giving which is not reciprocal. «Once given, the free gift entails no further claims from the recipient» (Douglas 2002 [1990]: ix). However, despite of receiving nothing in return, donors are supposed to benefit from a good feeling as the giver of the gift (Laidlaw 2000: 624). Moreover, for Baudrillard (1993 [1976]: 48-49) the idea of free gift is a myth since this gift cannot be recognized as a gift so as not to be reciprocated. The lack of reciprocity then leads to the fact that the free gift creates no social ties. In other words, free gift makes no social relationships which are very important in the non-monetary zone.

Also, other terms, such as “exchange”, “swap” and “barter”, used by participants do not fit since they are based on the right to demand something in return. Though, things provided at non-monetary zone are free of any kind of demand and obligation. Humphrey and Hugh Jones (1992: 7) stress barter is determined by the mutual desire of its participants to gain some objects. However, at non-monetary zone one can bring something without taking something in return. Also, nobody knows in advance what things will be available here. The non-monetary zone is not based on a principle “tit for tat”.

For the same reason, other kinds of “trade” are also excluded. In connection with the monetary economy respondents often expressed some degree of resistance. Especially the organizers of non-monetary zone accounted themselves actors distancing from consumerism and ideas of neoliberal capitalism although most of them do not label themselves as anarchists. Regarding the impersonal and anonymous character of money, it creates completely different kind of relationship among persons and supports the anonymity of transactions which is not welcomed in the non-monetary zone. In addition, formal trade where money plays a major role is incompatible with the idea of no-monetary zone.

During the interviews, some participants also referred to “sharing”. But can we talk about sharing in case of non-monetary zone? Sharing was mentioned by participant without being explained or even understood. They just talked about it because they saw it on the leaflets promoting the non-monetary zone. If sharing is a term usually tied to a social group, a community which is interested in sharing, and can be defined as a common use and consumption of resources, what is shared in non-monetary zone? What is the object of sharing? Following Widlock (2013: 12) «people do share what they value, they share without receiving or even expecting returns». However, attendees to the non-monetary zone provide things which they want to get rid of, it means they do not value them. In fact, only a place is shared in the non-

monetary zone which, however, is also shared by non-visitors as it is organized in public space. Last but not least, the term sharing does not seem to be suitable because of for-profit sharing (e.g. sharing of cars and accommodation) which has increased recently.

It is evident that an ambivalent conceptualization causes problems for spreading the idea of this project. Non-monetary zone means different things to different participants, such as the organizers, the attendants, public officials and to me as the ethnographer as well. The lack of this consensus is further enhanced by the fact that these participants come from different political or apolitical backgrounds and can understand different terms differently. At the same time, the formal and informal division itself may be very problematic as it is a necessary simplification of reality. In the real world, these two spheres intersect and affect each other so much that they cannot be separated from one another. It also turns out that we are very limited by the language we speak and the economic environment we live in. These limitations reflect the way we think about the world and the inability to conceptualize otherness, something unusual, informal and/or new. Our language is determined by terms connected to and proper for neoliberal economy, or «the mentality of the market place» (Sahlins 1974: 200). At the same time, we are often unable to conceptualize exchange without Maussian obligations or the right to demand a counterpart. Moreover, perhaps the contemporary Czech environment (with constant reminding of the Communist past and the effort to suppress any form of resistance against neoliberal capitalism which in practice means to pursue any bottom-up projects running without the need for money and bureaucracy for their realization) is not yet ready for experiments like the non-monetary zone.

All these factors make it difficult to perceive this experiment as a full-fledged alternative to the monetary economy and problematize its spreading among general public. It seems that organizers and regular visitors of the non-monetary zone can either put up with the closeness and operate as similar projects (free shops), or, they can keep resisting against formal rules of today's political economic settings. This journey is, however, risky and uncertain. Anyway, probably only correct conceptualization and/or the mutual willingness to overcome the imaginary line between formal and informal can fix the problem of mediation of the non-monetary zone and support its successful expansion.



**REFERENCES**

- Baudrillard, Jean, 1993 [1976], *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, London: Sage.
- Douglas, Mary, 2002 [1990], Foreword. No Free Gifts, in Marcel Mauss, *The Gift. The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, London and New York, Routledge: ix–xxiii.
- Graeber, David, 2001, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value. The False Coin of Our Own Dreams*, New York, Palgrave.
- Gregory, Chris A., 1982, *Gifts and Commodities*, London, Academic Press.
- Humphrey, Caroline, Stephen Hugh-Jones, 1992, Introduction: Barter, Exchange and Value, in *Barter, Exchange and Value. An Anthropological Approach*, Caroline Humphrey, Stephen Hugh-Jones, eds, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 1-20.
- L'Estoile, Benoit de, 2014, "Money Is Good, but a Friend Is Better": Uncertainty, Orientation to the Future, and "the Economy", *Current Anthropology*, 55, S9: S62–73.
- Laidlaw, James, 2000, A Free Gift Makes No Friends, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, (n. s.), 6: 617-634.
- Mauss, Marcel, 1990 [1925], *The Gift. The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, London and New York, Routledge.
- Overview: Who Were (Are) the Diggers?, 2016, The Digger Archives, [www.diggers.org/overview.htm](http://www.diggers.org/overview.htm) (accessed on 16/07/2017).
- Sahlins, Marshall, 1974, *Stone Age Economics*, London, Tavistock Publications Limited.
- Servet, Jean-Michel, 2009, Toward an alternative economy: Reconsidering the market, money, and value, in *Market and Society. The Great Transformation Today*, Chris Hann, Keith Hart, eds, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 72–90.
- Widlock, Thomas, 2013, Sharing Allowing Others to Take What Is Valued, *HAU. Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 3, 2: 11–31.