

Tactics and strategies of consumption: new way of creative resistance between global and local

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The aim of our paper is to analyse the emergence of new shapes of creative resistance in the global society through an elaboration of the dichotomic variable pair "tactic/strategy", that was introduced by M. de Certeau in his trail blazing (pioneristic, innovative, advanced) analysis of life everyday practices.

Our reasoning is based on the hypothesis that we are in front of some phenomenas (events, facts) that suggest an overcoming of the contrast between the two categories of analysis proposed by de Certeau. We are in front of a process of mutual contamination that bring us to see a growing and not negligible tactical consistency into the power strategies, and some new and significant strategic qualities (properties) in life everyday tactics.

Therefore we'll start with a brief examination of the dichotomic variable pair "tactic/strategy", as it was originally introduced by de Certeau and with an analysis of the facts (events) that bring us to see some tactical consistencies within the power strategies, also in relation to the economic and social changes. Then we will analyse some emerging ways of creative resistance, that make a contamination in the opposite direction (from strategies to tactics) particularly obvious.

To such purpose we will analyse the emergence of strategic properties within everyday tactics, addressing their de-privatization, their escape from their clandestine nature, the loss of their invisible nature that produces no consequences for the elite who create the languages of power structures. In some cases, these tactics ultimately seek to take on predominantly public and political functions.

An emancipation of the consumer who is described by de Certeau: the astute poacher in the space of the other, to whom the possibility to publicly legitimize the dignity of his practices and to produce creations of himself was not recognized.

Otherwise, if the consumer does not become emancipated, the tactics risk remaining, as it has emphasized by R. Silverstone, the equivalent of some scribble on the back of a school notebook, where they leave a sign but they don't touch the structures.

Building strategies on everyday tactics

In the second half of the seventies with wide advances in the panorama of the studies and the reflections in the field of the cultural and communication processes, de Certeau defined the consumer a silent, symbolic or second level producer, a nomadic traveller who covers the territories of the "other" in a creative way. He defined the consumer a renter who temporarily borrows the goods he needs and seals them with his personal subjectivity¹.

Characterizing the consumer through the status of "dominated" but not "passive or quiet," de Certeau focused his analysis on the consumption practices of everyday life and, more generally, everyday practices: the thousand tricks, deceits and simulations through which the common man manifests his extraordinary creativity.

The consumer described by de Certeau is the ordinary man, the man without quality described by Musil, one who plays with the social order that surpasses him using the products that the dominant economic system imposes on him in unforeseeable ways.

De Certeau described the strategy the game of the powerful, the action model unique to the economic, political and scientific rationality (the elite who create the languages of power structures). He juxtaposes the strategy with a tactic, which he defines as the game of the weak, a process completed in the adversary's territories. He identifies the tactics with the consumption or everyday life practices of the common man (producer of trajectories, of undetermined and unforeseeable tracings)².

A silent majority that, through its own everyday practices, is an unconscious craftsman of a cultural resistance based on an extraordinary and surprising creative ability: the ability to invent the everyday. The consumers, "unrecognized producers, poets of their own affairs, trail blazers in the jungles of functionalist rationality,"³ produce personalized speeches, using a pre-existing vocabulary and a pre-existing syntax.

¹ «affittuario che prende temporaneamente in prestito i beni di cui ha bisogno e vi imprime il personale sigillo della sua soggettività». Cfr. Borrelli D., *Postfazione*, in de Certeau M., *L'invenzione del quotidiano*, op. cit., p. 291.

² «a rationalized, expansionist, centralized, spectacular and clamorous production is confronted by an entirely different kind of production, called "consumption" and characterized by its ruses, its fragmentation (the result of circumstances), its poaching, its clandestine nature, its tireless but quiet activity, in short by its quasi-invisibility, since it shows itself not in its own products, but in art of using those imposed on it", p. 31. "By contrast with a strategy... a tactic is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. No delimitation of an exteriority, than, provides it with the condition necessary for autonomy. The space of the tactic is the space of the other it is a maneuver within enemy territory ... In short, a tactic is an art of the weak" p. 37

³ de Certeau, op. cit., p. 69. *The practice of everyday life*, University of California Press, 1984, p. 34

A productive or creative potential which in many regards is similar to those recognized by English anthropologist D. Miller when he speaks about the propensity of the goods to be personalized through their use and possession, and to grow distant from the industrialized production process and to become a unique commodity [cfr. D. Miller 1994].

The consumer's process of symbolic appropriation, is that in which he can translate the object from an alienable condition to inalienable one. Since they are the result of the industrial production, alienable goods can be transformed through the action of consumption into inalienable commodities: something that can neither be bought nor be yielded.

Culture is perceived by de Certeau as a battlefield in which the powerful are never invulnerable and the weak are never hopeless.

A potentially productive or creative role of the consumer is juxtaposed to the power of the elite who create the languages of power structures. The consumer's role is expressed precisely in his ability to produce alternative uses of the objects as regards the interpretations prefigured from "the economic" production. His everyday actions become a creative and composite activity, a variety of practices through which he re-appropriates the space organized by the techniques of production.

As we said in the introduction, what we want to emphasize is the overcoming of the opposition inherent in the pair tactic/strategy introduced by de Certeau. Overcoming this opposition becomes fully evident when we use this pair to understand some emerging shapes of creative resistance, as we will observe later.

In short, we propose a review or modernization of social theory, founded on the dicotomic distinction between tactics and strategies, in light of the important social, economic and political changes following one another since the seventies. Borrowing the words and the definitions coined from the most illustrious observatories of the contemporary society, the following are a few of these changes:

- an unknown acceleration of the processes of economic, communicative and cultural globalization;
- the liquefaction or erosion of the points of reference;
- the fall of the principle of not contradiction and the loss of objective criteria of social categorization;
- the passage from the supremacy of the property to the supremacy of the access and the de-materialization of the economy that we can synthesize in the centrality of the cognitive capital within the process of the economic value creation;

- the spread of new technologies of communication that are extremely ductile, capillary and pervasive, that are available to the interactivity and the multi-directionality of communicative flows.

From an economic perspective, the main characteristic of the age of access (as Rifkin defines the present society) is the centrality of the exchange of immaterial goods such as concepts or ideas to promote the culture as a foundation of wealth or economic value production. Many authors speak about the economy of the experience. This is an economy based on the cultural production and cultural merchandising and the commercialization of the experience.

In this scene, how are the strategies of the economic power defined by de Certeau developed? How are the actions invoked by the producers of the languages of power structures developed?

In a more and more de-materialized society the heart of the economic value production has become the brand which is by now independent from the good itself and shifted towards symbolic aspects. The brand is proposed just as a real way of thinking, because it represents a virtual symbolic world. In this regard one speaks about a movement of the brand from the commerce universe to the communication universe, a movement that sanctions the brand centrality in the social construction of the truth.

If, on one hand, it is undeniable that the brand assumes today a central role amongst the variety of sources that feed the possible worlds (the social imaginary), on the other hand it is more and more obvious that the speeches about branding feed off of the speeches or narrations produced and circulated in the inter-subjective places of everyday life.

This is confirmed by the marketing developments in an anthropological or ethnographical direction: the marketers mix themselves amongst people, they smell, they observe, they dive into everyday stories.

We can consider the tip of the iceberg of this phenomena the spread of cool hunters, who mix themselves amongst teenagers, establishing a relationship with them. They care for them, are interested in them, chat with them and shop with them. Another example of this phenomena is offered by the company trendspotters: cool teenagers who assume the role of company advisers and are unpaid.

Almost paradoxically, the symbolic production that de Certeau gives to the consumer is put to the service of economic power. In this case, it is possible to speak about contamination that goes from the strategies to the tactics. The strategies of the economic power have learned to use the everyday life tactics of the consumers, subjecting them to the logic of the market.

This direction of the contamination between tactics and strategies can be read as a further sharpening of the power techniques for the penetration of the market logic in world of everyday life. Meanwhile, this process suggests a penetration of the logic of everyday life in the heart of instrumental acting. In some way the first one conditions the objects and processes of the second.

The strategic potential of the tactics

There is, then, the other direction of the contamination: that which from the tactics returns to the strategies. If, on the one hand, it is possible to focus the tendency of the economic power to use consumer tactics in order to subject these same tactics to the market logic; on the other hand, it is necessary to deepen precisely:

- 1) the advancement of this market logic;
- 2) the effects of this process on the social system;
- 3) the role of the new conflicts that are now arising from consumption.

The aim of this second part is to develop the issue we have introduced before: we want to underline the strategic potential of the tactics.

In our opinion, the new immaterial society impels us to redefine the concept of wealth: wealth no longer concerns anymore the classical production of commodities, rather the production of the social symbolic construction (hereafter we refer to this as the "social imaginary").

What is important at present is the immaterial capital: the production of a shared imaginary. As mentioned by André Gorz: "Brand is already a capital, insofar as its prestige and its celebrity gives a monetizable symbolic value to commodities". If we analysed this concept, through marxist terms, it means that at present the symbolic value is more important than use-value and exchange-value.

On the other hand, this immaterial capital is a common capital because is widespread among the social practices of everyday life. This immaterial capital is created by producers by consumers, by cool hunters, by designers and marketers as it is by common people who contribute to increase the symbolic value of goods with a specific brand/logo. Consumers produce this immaterial capital through an invisible production.

Precisely within the collective production of this symbolic value we single out the origin of new conflicts that are presently arising from consumption.

Amongst the different tendencies that emerge from the central role of this symbolic capital, two are worth noting:

- the exploitation of this collective capital by private companies and marketing strategies;
- the progressive monopolization of this symbolic capital through the copyright, logo or brand.

Wealth, as a matter of fact, comes from income which one obtains by this monopoly.

Many authors underline that, at present, the enterprises interpose obstacles through the control and privatization of this “public place”, rather than giving value to the knowledge sharing.

Habermas calls this tendency, “process of monetization.” He underlines the colonization of everyday life by purchasing power. Codeluppi defines the same process as “power of consumption”, which is the extension of market logic in traditional spaces of the “vital world,” understood as the space of the social interaction.

Rather than develop a shared ideology, many consumer groups are presently developing a reactive culture against the commercialization of social interaction in everyday life, ,

According to this reasoning, we observe emblematic phenomena such as Adbusters and the popularity that the various Arabic colas (Mecca Cola, Muslim Cola, ZamZam Cola) are experiencing, we understand that these are often attempts to stop the logic of commercialisation. We are convinced that it is the intolerance of mind colonization and the commercialisation of public places to breed the new protests. Adbusters' “subvertising”, for example, suggests people fight the “pollution of the mind” caused by mass media .

Along with this reaction to the market we must add an intolerance toward the strong process of marketing or a brand strategy, that embodies the commodities with deep cultural meanings.

Many consumers often refuse the cultural meanings or symbolic values of popular brands, because they are not comfortable with a brand driven symbolic world. For example, many people uncomfortable with the cultural messages put forth by Coca Cola have decided to drink Mecca Cola thus joining an alternative symbolic world.

An other kind of boycott emerges with consumers who claim that corporations engaged in brand marketing should respect human dignity by ensuring consistency between the image put forth by the brand and the reality of worker conditions or the implications of the product's production on the environment.

Returning to de Certeau and to his variable dichotomy (tactics and strategy) he notes: “I call a strategy the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a

subject with will and power can be isolated. It postulates a place that can be delimited as its own..." Stressing the importance of this place, he goes on to say, "The proper is a triumph of place over time. It allows one to capitalize acquired advantages... It is a mastery of time through the foundation of an autonomous place".

What is the autonomous place stressed by the French author?

In our opinion, this is neither the enterprise nor the shopping mall. At present, with the advent of an immaterial economy, the solidity of this place is liquefying as symbols are replaced with immaterial goods. The walls of the shopping centers include all society. In other words, this autonomous place dissolves itself.

In the age of cultural capitalism, this autonomous place coincides with the "social imaginary", with popular culture, with knowledge and with everyday life.

As noted by de Certeau "to capitalize acquired advantages", or to produce profits, one must control this social imaginary. Insofar as the brand or logo (including a patent or copyright) represents a victory of space (of the symbolic world) over time (such as the life span of a patent). It represents a mastery of time through the foundation of an independent place, which today has become the logo or brand.

What is actually at stake is precisely the definition and share of this autonomous place. The examples of Adbusters and the various Arabic colas or Fair Trade underscore that at present language is more important than commodities, because the production and transformation of human value takes place in advertisement and in market relations.

Since the place stressed by de Certeau, the "social imaginary" or the battle field, involves the whole culture we can't define the above examples as tactics. We must change our point of view and define these tactics as strategies, because culture is created by people and by everyday practices, not only by the system structure.

According to this point of view, consumption contributes to create new knowledge. Consumption and production coincide in knowledge creation. More specifically, this shared imaginary develops the ethical ground of modern society.

Or better still, with the extension of market logic, consumption becomes an important vehicle producing new symbols and a different culture which leads to new meanings and ethical rules.

As underscored by Melucci, society based on consumption has moved social conflicts into the symbolic dimension, which becomes important because the symbolic dimension actually has an economic and political role.