

Ordinary Resistance as a Parasitic Form of Action: A Dialogical Analysis of Consumer/Firm Relations

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INTRODUCTION

Holt's (2002) article on dialectical relations between consumers and brands has usefully stressed the centrality of the market as the locus of construction of people's identities. Postmodern as well as critical approaches of resistance tended previously to overemphasize either consumers' freedom through emancipatory projects (Firat and Venkatesh 1995) or the market's domination through imposed codes and seductive practices (Murray and Ozanne 1991). But it seems as inaccurate to idealize consumer power, as it is to overvalue market dominance. In challenging the first perspective, poststructuralist approaches have unveiled the mechanisms by which individuality is originally constructed by social fields that tend to shape and reproduce a system of tastes (Bourdieu 1984). As a consequence, consumers are neither ontologically free to choose, nor ontically free to escape socially constructed mental structures acquired primarily through language (Elliott and Ritson 1995). For that reason, individuals are constrained, most often unwittingly, by a web of power-based relations.

Conversely, the taken-for-granted hegemony of firms needs also to be reconsidered. Firms mainly owe their existence to a sufficiently long-lasting willingness on the part of consumers to buy their offerings. They can be challenged both by dissatisfied consumers who denounce their social or commercial practices (Kozinets and Handelman 1998) and by alternative forms of communities, which create shared solidarity upon adversary actions (Giesler and Pohlmann 2003; Hemetsberger 2006). Both parties—firms and consumers—are in fact indissolubly linked by common interests (Holt 2002). Moreover, since each interpretation seems to be shaped by a particular socio-ideological framework, they tend to conceal the inherent nature of power—which is both dialogical and dialectical and cannot be grasped, except in a simplistic manner, from a single perspective. As Foucault (1982) pointed out, resistance must be regarded as the telltale sign of power relations, just as power relations should be considered as inherent elements of social relations. But resistance is also a contingent reaction: though coextensive with human interplay, it does not necessarily happen everywhere, all the time, among all consumers or in opposition to everything. It represents a specific type of response that occurs at the intersection of individuals and their interpretations of a situation. It acts as a sometimes vehement, but other times silent, denunciation of the discourses and practices of power (Hirschman 1970).

In accordance with this dialogical conceptualization of power and resistance, this paper first puts forward a theoretical framework capable of grasping and classifying a wide range of resistant behaviors that have been identified and depicted in recent consumer research literature. Three levels of resistance are suggested—each of them corresponding to a specific means used by firms to make consumers act in expected ways: against the discourses and codes they mobilize through brands and advertising; against the practices and mechanisms they deploy; and finally against firms themselves, rejected as relationship partners.

The paper then defends the idea that uncovering the dynamic and dialectical process by which consumers interact with markets requires going beyond an analytical and often static standpoint. To this end, a phenomenological research approach was chosen as best suited to the exploratory nature of the study. A two-stage procedure, involving introspective essays followed by three in-depth interview sessions, was adopted over an 18-month period. Eight consumers whose profile was delineated as reflexive and critical-minded were recruited by networking through colleagues. The aim of the investigation was to examine which dynamics resistance followed over time, and how it could be related to biographical information. The results are discussed in the third section, in accordance with this constructed and dialectical perspective of resistance. They reveal the importance of the psychic economy of individuals (Bourdieu's concept of *illusio*) through the way people act and respond to firms' strategies.

THEORY

The existing literature on consumer resistance covers a wide range of critical or emancipatory positions adopted by consumers. Writers of a primarily Marxian inclination tend to stress the ideological domination of the market and the consequent need for reflexivity and code-conscious distancing (Hetrick and Lozada 1994; Murray and Ozanne 1991). Within this perspective, consumers are perceived as targets, victims of semiotic formatting through advertising discourses, fashion and constructed mythologies (Barthes 1972; Baudrillard 1998). Exaggerated systems of status differentiation are thus exposed as the result of a constant production of signs. Some authors also accused the system of taking control of the desire of individuals (Dichter 1960), transforming them into conformist and other-directed personalities (Riesman 1950). More recently, other commentators have elaborated approaches to emancipation based upon consumer practices and "bricolage" in a fragmented world (de Certeau 1984; Firat and Venkatesh 1995). Such contributions highlight the various ways in which consumers appropriate goods, discourses and codes in a subtle and creative manner through individual or collective actions (Elliott and Ritson 1995; Thompson and Haytko 1997; Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994). Resistance to cultural ideologies is thus manifested by the ability of consumers to decipher and contest meanings embedded in products and services (Duke 2002), sometimes beyond their own conscious awareness (Moisio and Askegaard 2002; Thompson 2004). Communal consumption has also revealed its emancipatory and oppositional power by generating, around a shared outlook, dialectical positions of differentiation and integration/exclusion (Giesler and Pohlmann 2003; Hemetsberger 2006; Kozinets 2002; Muniz and Hamer 2001). Nevertheless, if consumption can be conceptualized as an arena where individuals collect a range of cultural components for constructing their personal or social identities, very little research has given prominence to the interactive construction of resistance (Holt 2002). As made clear by Giesler and Pohlmann (2003), the prevailing static approach to consumer emancipation and the lack of a dynamic perspective calls for new studies able to capture the tensions between consumers and markets.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Of particular relevance to the present research context are Foucault's writings on power (1982), which emphasize the dialogical nature of social relations and the inescapable and structural

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presence of forces and tensions therein. In this work, we extend his interactionist model of power by examining how resistance is produced as a response to the practices, discourses and even existence of firms. Our conceptual framework supports the idea that resistance would benefit from being analyzed as a diachronic process.

Micro-Physics of Power

Beyond Weber's ([1968] 1921) macro-level conception of political and sovereign power, Foucault (1982) has depicted a micro-level theory of power as the very essence of social relations. Power is defined by Foucault as the ability to govern the actions of others and to structure the scope of their activities. Power works on the field of possibilities of active subjects by prompting, inducing, diverting, facilitating or impeding their room for maneuver. It is always a means of acting on other people's actions and controlling their behavior. Yet power is not violence, nor does it imply submission. On the contrary, power exists only in relation to free subjects who face a wide range of potentialities and have various ways to react. When situations are completely determined, as in slavery, there are no power relationships, only force or physical constraint. Hence, power and liberty are not mutually exclusive; rather freedom is the necessary condition for the existence of power. According to Foucault, power relationships and in submission are structural components of social interplay:

'Power relations are rooted deep in the social nexus, not reconstituted 'above' society as a supplementary structure whose radical effacement one could perhaps dream of... A society without power relations can only be an abstraction' (Foucault 1982, p.208)

In social relations, this micro-physics of power can be located anywhere, although some institutions are more likely than others to exert this type of disciplinary control over individuals (Foucault 1975). Prisons, schools, army camps, hospitals and churches in particular combine both discursive and non-discursive practices that aim at breaking in bodies and commanding souls through internalized mechanisms. Constant self-examination, evaluation and confession are examples of how the micro-physics of power contributes, through individualization, to the binding of subjects to themselves and to ensuring their submission to others. In line with Foucault's approach, the disciplinary power of marketing practices has been analyzed by Marsden (2001) in terms of three main instances: market research information technology as a tool of surveillance; segmentation as a means of categorizing and labeling individuals; and advertising as a way of channeling prescriptive and corrective messages. In contrast to Weber's theory in which power is considered predominantly as domination, Foucault's approach gives a less rigid, deterministic and top-down reading of the distribution of forces. Although institutions and organizations may try to exercise power through disciplinary techniques, subjects are likely to free themselves from these constraints. Power and rebelliousness do not confront each other in a simple oppositional relationship, but exist in a permanent state of provocative tension.

Strategies of Legitimization By Firms and Consumer Tactics of Resistance

By considering the position of manufacturers and retailers, Emerson (1962) and Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) showed how the uncertainty of consumer markets threatens the long-term dominance or even survival of firms. By refusing to buy their products, consumers can adversely affect the achievement of company objectives. They have power over firms to the extent that firms depend

on their cooperation. Because power is primarily founded on dependence, Pfeffer (1981) suggests that legitimization is a relevant strategy to alleviate the vulnerability of firms, by trying to persuade consumers that their offerings are of particular importance for them. To this end, they draw on consumer representations and attempt to alter them in favor of their own interests. They mobilize information, expertise, and selective interpretation of rules, language and symbols to present their corporate decisions as coinciding as closely as possible with the presumed outlook and thinking of their targets. Such legitimization tactics are likely to succeed insofar as they suggest consonant decisions, so reducing the gap between consumer objectives and those of the company. In order to persuade consumers to make the hoped-for decisions, firms can act at three levels (Bourgeois and Nizet 1995): through the products and services they offer; through procedures whose enactment and performance must appear fully to respect consumers' freedom of choice; and by presenting themselves as valued partners in the exchange process. These three levels of legitimization are also implicitly the echo chambers in which consumer discontent is amplified. As shown in Table 1, we propose analyzing the motives for consumer resistance as specific responses to different companies' modes of action. First of all, the content of presumed relevant and congruent decisions presented to consumers are swept aside by consumer claims to freely chosen codes and signs. The repudiation or avoidance of products and brands (Fiske 1994), engagement in oppositional practices, and rejection of mass-marketed meanings and discourses exemplify some reactions of this type. Secondly, consumers can also feel saturated and repelled by the manipulative, if ineffective, advances made by companies (Fournier, Dobscha, and Mick 1998). Selling tactics and "capture plans" are resisted in the name of autonomy and ethics. Complaints, negative word-of-mouth, retaliation, boycotts, subversion and "culture jamming" (Handelman 1999) are among the expressions of dissatisfaction, feelings of harassment and moral sanction applied against companies. And finally, consumers get to the point of questioning the very existence of certain companies as acceptable current trading partners and as responsible actors for future generations. Whereas firms urge consumers to trust them, consumers often choose to ignore or avoid them, and instead opt for voluntary simplicity, patronize alternative distribution channels such as second-hand markets or favor gift-giving and consumer-to-consumer exchanges.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Consistently with the exploratory and discovery-oriented nature of the research, the methodology consisted of a survey carried out over an eighteen month period in a major European capital city. Informants were selected via a "snowballing" technique, initiated by asking colleagues to introduce the researcher to acquaintances they felt to be resistant consumers. A brief definition of resistance was given to identify potential informants, following Fournier's (1998) conceptualization of it as a continuum of opposing forces, ranging from avoidance behaviors to active revolt. Eight volunteer participants of varied gender, age, origin and religious affiliation were finally recruited after agreeing to participate in the two-stage research program.

Stage 1 consisted of a diary study in which participants were asked to note down over a 6-month period (1) perceptions, judgments and feelings they could express in relation to their day-to-day life experience as consumers, and (2) example accounts of what was likely to trigger their distrust, dissatisfaction, irritation and other negative emotions and opinions about the discourses, offerings and practices of companies. Through introspective essays, they were also encouraged to recall, as far as they could, how they had come to react in such a way, against what in particular, and why. They

TABLE 1
Company levels of legitimization and consumer expressions of resistance

Levels of legitimization by companies	CONTENT OF DECISIONS Objects, discourses, signs and values	BEHAVIORS in commercial (capture devices, selling tactics), environmental, social and ethical terms	COMPANIES Themselves as qualified partners
Motives for resistance	Freedom of choice (code-conscious)	Autonomy (trap-conscious)	Electivity (self-definition of who to deal with)
Individual expressions of resistance	Distinction “ Bricolage” Oppositional Loyalty	Complaining behaviors Negative word of mouth Retaliation	Alternative channels Second-order marketing systems Voluntary simplicity
Collective expressions of resistance	Boycotts Counter-cultures Subcultures	Boycotts, Buycott Subversion, Attacks, activism, hacktivism	Communal consumption Gift-giving communities

were also asked, in terms of possible reflexive changes in their consumption choices, what had evolved over time.

Stage 2 consisted of three in-depth interview sessions, each lasting from one to three hours. The first interview aimed at bringing out more information about the events and stories recounted in the introspective essays, in order to acquire a clear sense of the informants' perceptions and meanings. In particular, special attention was paid to potential changes they might have noticed over time in their own feelings toward the functioning of the market. The second interview was guided by a set of questions related to their general consumption choices, life styles and values. This phase was helpful for understanding how their stories could be related to the critical attitude to consumption expressed and enacted in their day-to-day lives. The third interview consisted of a conversation about salient autobiographical elements, i.e. the socio-economic, family, cultural and religious environment in which they had grown up. This stage provided further information for a deeper understanding of informant backgrounds, sensitivities and ways of reacting. The profile was also supplemented by additional interviews with informants' acquaintances in order to triangulate across sources. The interviews took place in the homes of the participants and were loosely structured. All interviews were recorded and transcribed before they, as well as the diaries, were analyzed in terms of content.

Despite the small size of the sample, respondents were almost equally distributed by gender and age, and belonged to several occupational categories (see Table 2). No claim of representativeness is made here, since the research objective was to gain deep insight into their individual trajectories using a biographical framework for analysis. However, several criteria were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the research. The first criterion was persistent and prolonged engagement, which is one of the basic techniques for obtaining a rich description in a research field (Geertz 1973; Lincoln and Guba 1985; Wallendorf and Belk 1989). In this qualitative in-depth study, reliance was placed on lengthy acquaintance with the personalities and stories of informants. Secondly, triangulation was made across sources and methods, using different ways of capturing what informants meant. Thirdly, feedback was obtained by submitting the author's conclusions to the informants. Most respondents agreed with these conclusions, and any that were questioned were re-examined. Finally, variety and contrast were

taken into account for recruitment, with respondents chosen sequentially and selectively in a constant comparative method and search for varied ideological beliefs and critical positions in relation to consumption (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

FINDINGS

Conflicts of representations, denunciations and levels of resistance

The accounts of the informants present themselves as acts of enunciation and of denunciation of what places them in opposition to the discourses and practices of firms. From this standpoint, introspective essays and interviews have functioned, as Boltanski, Thévenot and Porter (2006) show, as opportunities for revealing conflicts that individuals maintain with the commercial world and for justifying values they defend. The main claims underlying their critiques chime with the three levels of resistance referred to in the theoretical approach: resistance to the stratagems deployed by firms, that threaten their autonomy; resistance to promises, injunctions and temptations that hamper their freedom; and, ultimately, choosing consumer practices more in keeping with their own system of representations, their values or sometimes their utopias. Secondly, their discourses also reveal how different psychic economies transmit dominant tonalities to their modes of reaction, of which we attempt to sketch the main elements from their personal trajectories.

Resisting Stratagems, Pressures and Manipulation

“Grandmother, what big teeth you have got! “All the better to eat you up with.”

The first salient theme of the testimonies brings to light the sense of pressure and manipulation that the respondents perceive on the part of firms. Following the deconstruction made by Cochoy (2004) on the snares used by the wolf in Little Red Riding Hood, consumers are aware of the “capture devices”, sometimes crude and often visible, which firms use against them. Three types of practice are thus denounced. Echoing the long-established but still relevant findings of Vance Packard (1957), advertising discourses appear first always as the prototypical instrument of their seductive and dishonest intentions, as indicated by the following example:

TABLE 2
Summary of respondent characteristics

Name	Age	Gender	Occupation, marital status, background, income level	Personal profiles and salient values
Barbara	22	Female	International business student single. Hispanic origin. No income	Artist milieu. Fair Trade and anti-brand oriented.
Vath	25	Male	Student– applied modern languages. Single. Asian origin (Cambodian). No income	Buddhist. Detachment and indifference to material culture.
Elisabeth	38	Female	Interpreter. Single. Polish origin. Low/middle income	Motivated by altruism, pacifism and sustainability. Subscriber to consumer magazines. Non-practicing Catholic.
Sandra	42	Female	Secondary school teacher. Divorced. 2 teenage daughters. Greek origin. Low/middle income	Self-defined as an intellectual rebel. Secondhand and savvy shopper.
Daniel	51	Male	Telecom engineer. Married. 2 children aged 13 and 15. French origin. Middle/high income	Involved in charities, union and green activities. Voluntary simplifier and anti-advertising.
Patrick	61	Male	German teacher. Single. German origin. Middle/high income	Independent. Hoarding behavior, reluctance to spend, high discernment when shopping
Marc	68	Male	Retired art school teacher. Married 1 son aged 39. Judaeo-Spanish origin. Middle/high income	Secondhand shopper. Motto: “ No god no master” . Nonconformist and independent. Agnostic.
Maria	72	Female	Retired nurse. Divorced. 1 daughter aged 40. French origin. Low income	Independent and not easily influenced. Wary and strongly attached to personal freedom. Practicing Catholic

“...You know the Taillefine de Lu biscuits from Danone? They chose a name that makes you think it’s diet product, but in fact they’re laughing at us. The more you eat, the fatter you become!” [Sandra]

Secondly, some respondents denounce “tricks designed to justify higher prices for non-recognized benefits” in brands [Patrick]. The status and effects of fashion in particular are arguments that they dismiss in favor of reasoning based on the use value of a product and its value for money. Finally, some respondents particularly blame sales techniques, which they denounce for their heavy-handed approach and which reveal, not uncynically, paradoxical realities. For example, they draw a parallel between the “humanized robots” that companies use for their vocal servers and the “robotized humans” working in call centers “who articulate stereotyped discourses” [Sandra]. Among some respondents this dehumanization creates a sense of general discomfort, which sometimes gives rise to intense aggressiveness towards remote sales services departments accused of “transforming people into selling machines for other people who have become buying machines.” [Barbara]

Resisting Discourses, Promises and Temptation

“The serpent deceived me, and I ate” -Genesis 3:13

The second resonant theme concerns the content of decisions that firms suggest to consumers. Numerous illustrations insistently

evoke the lack of congruence between the images and representations conveyed by advertising, brands and companies, and the values of the respondents. They feel themselves interpellated in registers that do not correspond to them and which seem to negate their feelings, personality and individuality. Echoing the criticisms of the Frankfurt School on mass culture (Horkheimer and Adorno [1944] 1972), the various comments often call into question the multinationals and the uniformization they produce. To this largely cultural resistance to advertising and the media are added other criticisms in different registers: economic and political (the effects of globalization), environmental (pollution and destruction of resources) and spiritual (anti-materialism and a refusal of excessive commoditization). As a result, resistance is experienced in accordance with three registers, of which the ethical underpinnings are clearly perceptible:

- first, not to give in and to fight against a loss of autonomy that is perceived as a weakness. Recalling the biblical story of the serpent, the temptation is primarily experienced as a loss of self-control,
- next, to draw satisfaction, pride and spiritual elevation from the strength of character that enables these attempts at seduction to be repulsed,
- finally, to accede to a sense of justice that covers various forms of condemnation of firms—their perceived power, the ideological representations they are accused of conveying,

or what they do to vulnerable sections of the population such as children or socially disadvantaged layers. Or, as one of the respondents expressed it:

“While visiting the Greenpeace website or those of other ethical vigilance associations, I see also those which sell GMOs without saying so, or which break the labor laws, or employ children, or make junk products, none of which they mention in their advertising. And I sanction them by not buying their products.” [Daniel]

Selective Consumption: Modulating the Choice of Products and Channels

Since the practices and discourses of firms are central to consumers’ themes of resistance, their choice of consumption is built or is modified over time according to their changing relation to the market. The procession of representations and lived experience lead them to avoid the products, brands and firms which become distant from their value system, in accordance with a distinguishing process (Bourdieu 1984). This reasoned identification of a non-self, marked out and kept at a distance, leads them tailor their repertory of consumption through rejection and avoidance or by selecting alternative partners, whether they be competing companies that are more respectful at the economic, social or environmental level, or other market or non-market exchange networks. Thus some respondents say that they turn towards sustainable commercial products [Barbara, Elisabeth], some prefer to supply their needs from secondhand markets [Daniel, Marc, Sandra] or through barter [Daniel], and others tend to reduce their consumption [Marc, Vath, Patrick]. The practices chosen are in any case not mutually exclusive and reflect rather an idiosyncratic blending of micro-practices consistent with their preoccupations. While Holt (2002) has shown how individuals on the margins of society construct themselves in and through the market, we attempt here to show how ordinary consumers, professionally and socially well integrated, question the meaning of their actions, try to find acceptable compromises and reorganize their mode of consumption by mobilizing devised selective repertories within, but also outside of, conventional distribution channels. In contrast to militants attached to alternative associations, who engage in serious, costly efforts highly oriented toward the type of resistance they support (Ferrando Y Puig 2005), these “ordinary” consumers try to cobble together sufficiently satisfying solutions and make use, in an opportunistic and irregular fashion, of the various means that best meet their material and symbolic needs.

No Escape but the Choice of Arms

While Kozinets (2002) and Holt (2002) have good reasons for doubting that consumers can escape the market, it is nonetheless interesting to observe, in day-to-day life and apart from extraordinary situations such as *Burning Man*, how they accommodate themselves to their dissatisfaction with market society. At a psychological level, the testimonies mainly reflect three types of coping strategy in response to the tensions which their relations with the market give rise to—confrontation, avoidance, and reasoned adaptation—which, depending on the circumstances, sometimes coexist. These adaptive strategies reflect some of the major dimensions of coping (Lazarus and Folkman 1984), with the first two tending to be based on emotion (aggressive emotional release or avoidance/disengagement), the third arising more from a positive adaptation based on information, evaluation and judgment.

Save Our Souls: Resistance as a Path to Salvation

Some interviewees mainly manifested an attitude of defiance in relation to the market, which was expressed in aggressive forms of practices and discourses [Sandra, Barbara, Daniel]. Their comments reveal the moral discomfort produced by their immersion in a society, which they felt they had not chosen. Conscious of being unable to escape it, but nevertheless constrained to participate in it, they tend to make their choices on the basis of combative postures, as if the blacklisting of certain firms and products or boycotting the market as a whole helped, through an intense emotional release, to relieve their conscience. Strong moral or religious sensibility in fact betrays a powerful sense of guilt either in relation to the feelings that the market cynically conflicts with, or in relation to the weakest social groups, which they feel they have robbed of a degree of happiness. This guilt then seems able to be considerably attenuated through a critical and distanced attitude towards consumption, as was expressed by one of the respondents:

“When one buys a product, one should ask oneself whether it’s toxic, whether or not it contributes to polluting the planet over and beyond the immediate advantages it brings, who it was made by, how much the workers from the Third World were paid, and how many local jobs it’s going to destroy.” [Elisabeth]

As Kozinets and Handelman (1998) have shown on the subject of individual boycott practices, resistance can represent a form of moral hygiene and be a means of self-transformation as a corollary to the hope of transforming the world.

The Three Wise Consumers: “See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil”

In contrast to the preceding correspondents, others develop a form of voluntary ignorance and mental deafness in relation to situations that disturb them [Maria, Vath]. This tactic serves to save the psychological effort which would consist of taking the risk of exposing themselves to messages in order then to be obliged to protect themselves from the emotional consequences of the content (tempting psychological stimuli and the conflicts that stem from them). As expressed by one of these two respondents:

“I don’t look at ads. I see them, of course—on TV, in the street, in newspapers, but I’m not interested in them. Unconsciously, I don’t want to be aware of trends or novelties. This enables me to think, in a way, that I resist the various techniques used by advertising to manipulate us and tempt us.” [Vath]

Forewarned is Forearmed: Positive and Reasoned Modes of Adaptation

Some consumers, on the other hand, stress the importance of adopting an informed, vigilant and adaptive attitude toward consumption [Elisabeth, Marc, Patrick]. Their reactions reveal fewer negative emotions—anger or avoidance—in favor of considered observation of the mechanisms of marketing functioning and a rational analysis of their scope of action. For them, consuming is a game in the sense of *illusio* (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992): an investment in the field of consumption which is not clearly codified, but the implicit recognition of which matches up to the energy it involves. These aware consumers, mobilizing their intellectual or cultural capital in decoding the practices and discourses of firms, try correctly to anticipate the tactics deployed—no longer being influenced by the latest advertising claims and constantly deconstructing

the stratagems used. Having the appropriate outlook and attitude for understanding the world of marketing, they enjoy participating in the game—not the game of believing the claims of the “adversaries” and of submitting to them, but of remaining actively present in the competition to which they feel themselves invited and whose scope they perceive. Resisting is experienced as an adventure, which calls for a vigilant attitude: against the ease suggested by the prevailing discourse, they thus set up a necessary reflexivity of which the stakes are precisely those of deciphering the day-to-day workings of the market.

DISCUSSION

The biographical backgrounds of the respondents make clear the strong links between the socio-psychological details that have shaped them and their modes of reaction as consumers. The field of consumption is therefore but one specific site of expression of their learned predispositions or habitus (Bourdieu 1984). Some respondents recognize themselves to have been instinctive rebels since childhood and their relation to the world of marketing is one situation among others where their propensity to resist is manifested. This tendency to revolt can be acquired in reaction to a parent, a milieu or an imposed education. For example, Sandra implicitly recognizes that her manner of purchasing is strongly colored by an almost structural vindictiveness in regard to firms—which she views as incompetent, unsatisfactory, and ultimately persecuting—as if the animosity that she says she feels toward her mother was displaced onto other more abstract and substitutive entities. Conversely, resistance can derive for some correspondents from their identification with parents who are themselves anti-authority, committed, militant or simply attached to certain ideas or values. Thus Daniel’s parental home, where the outside world is seen as threatening and full of traps, was able to train him to acquire the intellectual and cultural resources needed for an effective decoding of reality. Barbara reveals that the artistic milieu in which she grew up helped her discover her own clothing codes without having felt the need to conform to fashion, nor to have suffered the consequences of doing so in her relations with her peers. Similarly, among those respondents who favor avoidance over confrontation, philosophical, religious or spiritual trajectories can be found at the root of their tendency toward detachment and psychological distance. Vath, for example, feels himself to be strongly influenced by Buddhism, which both in regard to the world of marketing and in his life in general encourages him to distrust desires and the potential suffering that accompanies them. Maria makes numerous references to the Catholic education she received during childhood in support of her wish to distance herself from advertising discourses viewed as enticing.

While social class and income criteria do little to cast light on the results, the same cannot be said of age and the cohort effect it results in. Thus the oldest respondents are influenced by the very duration of their consumption experience. Born in less economically advanced times, they testify to a degree of disorientation in relation to the acceleration of technology and the overabundance of products, but also acknowledge an acute sense of wastage linked to the increasingly ephemeral nature of commodities [Maria, Patrick, Marc]. Conversely, the youngest, immersed in today’s shifting and evolving system are more aware of the spatial dimension of the world they inhabit. The abolition of distance by the media in general and the Internet in particular gives them a consciousness of universal belonging, which often makes them more sensitive to geographically distant peoples [Vath, Barbara, Elisabeth]. Between these two groups, young adults refer to their educational aspirations for their children, in whom they wish to instill an awareness of consumption that is as reflective and rational as possible, and for

whom they already weigh up the harmful consequences of uncontrolled development [Daniel, Sandra].

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was to give another perspective on the exploration of consumer resistance strategies, of which many recent works have described the practices and modes of operation. In line with interactionist and contingent approaches to power (Foucault 1982), this paper proposed examining more closely the finely woven fabric of relations between consumers and the market, and going to the source of their resistant postures, using an in-depth approach drawing on their life histories.

As summarized in Figure 1, the main results of the research could make a contribution in terms of three points. First, resistance works like a reverse discursive mirror on the legitimation processes of firms, and does so at three levels: it dismantles the procedures used by companies to make consumers act in accordance with corporate interests; it deconstructs the meaning of decisions offered to them—discourses, products, codes—which they feel fail to correspond to their own value systems; and ultimately they question the legitimacy of companies as valid exchange partners.

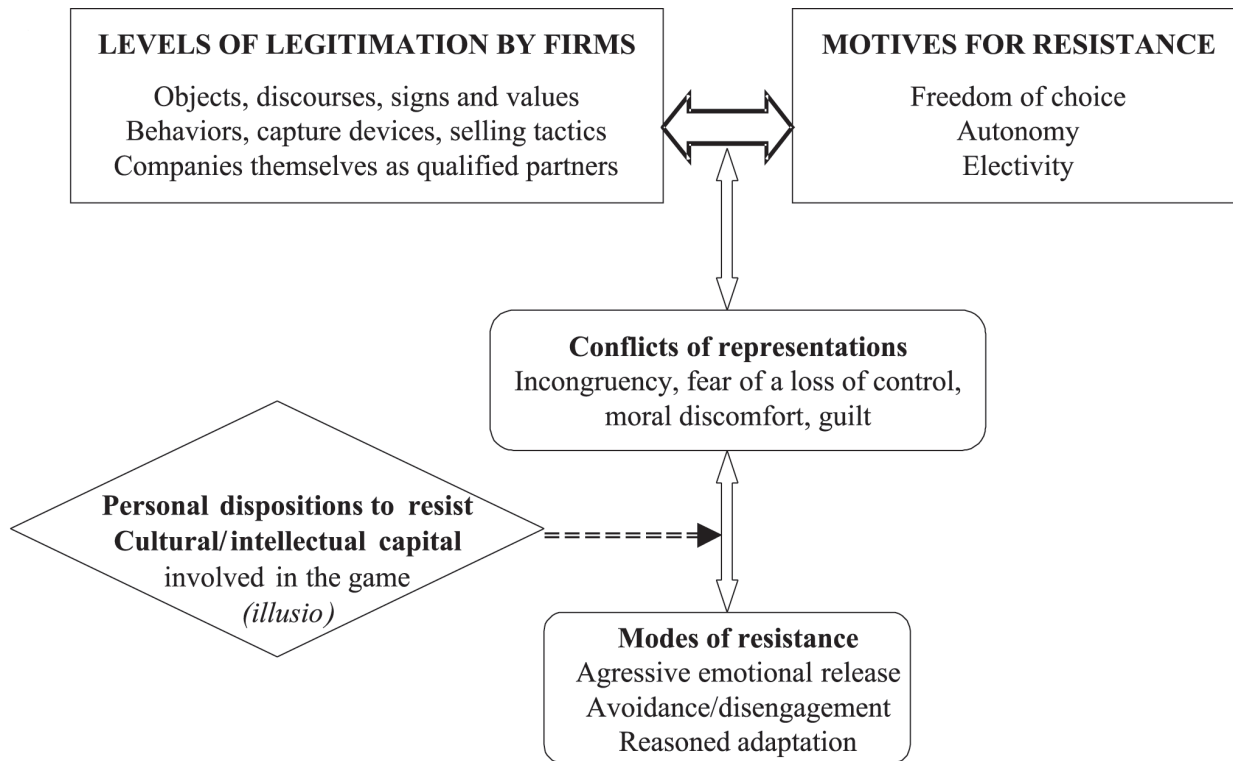
Secondly, in view of this reflexive capacity for decoding practices and discourses, the tactics of resistance vary, depending on the respondents, between confrontation, avoidance and reasoned adaptation. Their psychological profiles predispose them either to engage in the game with offensive or even aggressive energy; or to adopt defensive attitudes based on inertia, evasion or calculated ignorance; or to compose and assemble selective consumption/non-consumption within and outside of the conventional channels by mixing different supply systems.

Thirdly, individual commitments to the game depend on the intellectual and cultural capital that they are in a position to mobilize and which their own dispositions shaped by the environment predisposes them to use. In all cases, confrontation, avoidance and positive adjustment participate in a struggle against certain market realities and in using this to construct an identity-project (Castells 1997). From this angle, the conclusions drawn by Holt (2002) deserve to be re-examined. Although the market does not seem to be threatened overall by the resistance which it lives on and recycles, it does however seem to be parasitized by the critique that it helps feed.

The discourses and devices of firms participate in an exacerbation of decoding reflexes, deconstruction and critical distancing by consumers. Permanently playing with signs can both produce experts and give rise to habituation, saturation and disenchantment. The standard forms of frustration, retreat or guerilla warfare noted in this research are certainly not constructive or politically effective in the way emphasized by some observers or defenders of political consumption (Micheletti 2003). Nevertheless it would be a mistake to underestimate their interest or impact on the pretext that these acts are expressed only in the private sphere and develop in a sporadic and unstable fashion. Work on defection (Hirschman’s ‘exit’ 1970) and retaliation (Huefner and Hunt 2000) has already invited us to pay attention to opposing or reactive behaviors that crystallize an often silent and invisible rejection of the dominant ideology of consumption.

Though apparently inconspicuous and harmless, these behaviors do represent resistance as we defined it. Moreover, their covert nature makes them particularly dangerous for companies, which could easily underestimate their offensive potential. Indeed, many research avenues remain unexplored concerning the analysis and assessment of what de-consumption, alternative ways of acquisition, boycotts, negative word-of-mouth or disloyalty all together represent in terms of monetary losses and for firms and the overall

FIGURE 1
A Model of Possible Consumer's Resistant Responses to Firms



marketing system. Where the market's capacity for recuperation and regeneration has been emphasized as dependent on the very existence of resistance (Holt 2002), it can be said also that these forms of resistance live, in the manner of a parasite, at the expense of the actions and resources of firms whose everyday existence it nourishes. As in biological eco-systems, parasites, though having detrimental effect on their hosts, play however an important part in the regulation of populations. One suggestion, deriving from this metaphor and paralleling Holts' (2002) conclusion, would be that only those companies operating with respect and authenticity are in a position to resist consumers' deeper critical vigilance.

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