

REUSE MARKETS: EMBEDDED IN CAPITALISM

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Abstract

The paper addresses the growing popularity of markets for reuse and repair (RR) in a developed economy. The reasons behind the growth of these markets remain an open research question, which could be attributed to changing consumer preferences and/or as an effect of multiple exogenous shocks on societies. The paper contributes to the predominantly anthropological research on the topic by employing a market-oriented entrepreneurial perspective. The methodology involves participant observation by actively engaging as a trader in micro activities to exploit arbitrage opportunities. The findings suggest that the traditional economic model of rational actors is well-suited to analyze individual actions in these markets. It is observed that these markets do not necessarily require integration into complex social constructs. Effective trust-building arrangements with low transaction costs facilitate market transactions between strangers. The research implies the importance of markets at the micro level, especially in times when political actors at the macro level favor market interventions.

Research Paper

Keywords: second-hand markets; reuse and repair activities; economic approach to anthropology; informal market; consumption; ebay Kleinanzeigen

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Introduction

In recent years, the popularity of second-hand markets, sharing platforms, repair cafés, and share boxes has surged in developed economies. An increasing number of individuals are actively involved in reuse activities, re- and up-cycling, and participate in cultures of circulation (Isenhour and Berry, 2000; Isenhour et al., 2017; Murphy, 2017). The rise of digitalization over the past few decades has notably contributed to the popularity of electronic platforms for facilitating such exchanges. Alongside traditional open-air flea markets, garage sales (Herrmann 1997, 2011), car boot sales (Gregson and Crewe, 1997; Crewe and Gregson, 1998), and local newspaper pages with private advertisements, electronic platforms have emerged as prominent marketplaces. On these platforms, sellers and buyers can negotiate before meeting in person, and the platforms also enable the exchange of comments and evaluations. Henceforth, the acronym RR is utilized to denote low-stake informally organized exchanges of material goods for the purposes of reuse, resale, repair, and related activities on both digital and physical marketplaces.

In general, RR activities operate beneath the notice of the state and largely evade regulation by authorities. This is typically the case when marketplace organizers establish rules that align with laws, and individuals engage in small-scale activities for personal purposes. The exchange activities predominantly occur informally, meaning they are untaxed and often lack warranty coverage. Moreover, agreements associated with these activities tend to be informal, and cash payments are prevalent in certain contexts. These activities fall within the informal or grey sector, estimated to constitute approximately 20% of the gross domestic product in developed economies (Gërkhani, 2004).

The resurgence of popularity in electronic second-hand markets, sharing, and reuse in developed countries, as noted in Gregson and Crewe (2003), remains an open question. One possible reason for their popularity is that in times of economic crisis, more people tend to engage in such activities. Another reason could be that in parts of Europe, consumer preferences have shifted, and they have become more sensitive towards recycling and reuse activities (e.g. Miao et al., 2023).

This paper contributes to the answer by employing an entrepreneurial approach. The existing literature on the topic is dominated by anthropological research. In economics, and also from the perspective of formal companies, such activities are often grouped under the catch term informal economy without analyzing the individual level of actions comprehensively. An entrepreneurial approach to the topic is articulated in the key assumption that exchange on these markets provides utility (sometimes monetary) for participants, which can partly be expressed in profits gained from RR markets. The paper contributes such an entrepreneurial perspective to the anthropological approaches to RR activities in developed economies.

Informal economic activities often experience growth during times of crisis, as witnessed in Eastern Europe during the first half of the 1990s. The collapse of socialist states and subsequent existential crises for millions of individuals resulted in widespread impoverishment. Many turned to clandestine economics and engaged in informal international trade activities (Egbert, 2006; Konstantinov, 1996; Kressel, 2010; Sik and Wallace, 1999). With the stabilization of institutions in transition countries, these activities lost popularity. Similarly, Ireland faced severe economic hardships during the financial crisis, despite being an affluent society (Murphy, 2017). The recent surge in

RR activities may thus indicate that economic necessity has increased for some individuals and vulnerable groups in developed economies. With respect to the development of poverty in European countries, Mussida and Sciulli (2022) find that despite redistribution policies, poverty persists, and in some countries, a high degree of state dependence is prevalent.

Another plausible explanation for the increase in RR is a growing awareness of the causes and implications of climate change, as well as the challenges associated with global value chains (Oldekop et al., 2020). Specifically, a larger portion of the population in West European countries and North America appears to comprehend that individual preferences and consumption behaviors have contributed to the climate crisis (Loureiro and Alló, 2020; Salamzadeh et al., 2024; Steinitz et al., 2024). This heightened awareness may have prompted the formation of new attitudes and preferences. Consequently, individuals are inclined to alter their behavior as consumers and producers, placing greater emphasis on the efficient utilization of resources (e.g. Moss and Bapna, 2020), including consumer goods (Crocker and Chiverralls, 2018; cf. interviews in Isenhour and Berry, 2020).

In addition to the rise in RR activities, there is growing evidence of changing preferences: the demand for vegan and vegetarian products has increased (ProVeg et al., 2023), more individuals are opting for locally produced goods (Feldmann and Hamm, 2015; Salamzadeh and Markovic, 2018), and there is a heightened willingness to pay of consumers for energy from renewable sources in some countries (Chaikumbung, 2021). In Germany - the focus of this research - the recent COVID crisis (2020 to 2023) and the energy crisis (2022 to 2023), directly linked to the Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022), along with the significant inflation rate hike, have made more people

cognizant of resource limitations and the fragility of supply chains (Pichler and Farmer, 2022). The lessons learned from these crises may expedite a shift in individual behavior toward RR, recycling, waste reduction, and resource conservation.

On the political stage, these topics receive significant attention from green environmentalists and political entities in Europe, including national governments and the EU (e.g., the European Green Deal). Economic policy is largely oriented towards interventionism in markets in order to reduce negative externalities by regulating multinational entities and markets. Related policy agendas on the EU and national levels include paternalistic politics such as intensive regulation of labor markets in favor of employed labor (minimum wages, working hours), price interventions in energy markets by subsidizing specific forms of energy (solar, wind, nuclear) and discriminating against others (coals, gas), as well as regulating private mobility by taxing fossil fuels and prohibiting specific forms of production and consumption. Huan (2010) used the term “Eco-socialism” which may partly describe related political programs.

Catalysts for interventionist policies include a number of exogenous crises, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022), the COVID pandemic (2020 to 2023), the Brexit decision (2016), the Greek government-debt crisis (2009 to 2015), and the financial crisis (2008 to 2009). All of these crises have highlighted particular problems related to the interconnectedness of financial markets, the international division of labor, and dependencies within highly complex value chains. Terms like deglobalization, slowbalization, or deindustrialization and decarbonization resonate well with the political focus on more localized production and exchange patterns (cf. e.g. Gong et al.,

2022). Activist groups, such as *Attac* (finance and trade), *Extinction Rebellion* (environment), or *Fridays for Future* and *Last Generation* (both climate), articulate related political actions on the streets.

The micro level actions of RR activities are in conformity with these political ideologies and policies: if capitalist production and global exchange on globalized markets is seen as a root cause for environmental and social problems, alternative activities of re-cycling, reuse, sharing, and circulating, often with a focus on locality instead of globality, are in line with the above political ideas. RR activities also fit to the concept of sustainable consumption and the slogan of ‘living better by consuming less’ (Jackson, 2005; Soleimani et al., 2023).

The logic of the argumentation and the related political action is on the macro level partly inconsistent and ambiguous. For the macro-level the decision between market or state as the central institutions of production and distribution has been clearly in favor of markets. Nearly all countries at the beginning of the 21st century, independently of the political system, have opted to have market elements in their economic systems. The reason is that most individuals expect from the decentralized market mechanism a higher welfare than from the mechanism of a stately planned economy. Furthermore, with the increase and intensification of international exchange, economic growth has increased, and absolute poverty has decreased particularly in Asia in the recent five decades.

The ambiguity on the political macro-level becomes visible when governments aim to control markets. Interventions in fundamental market principles such as price, trade, exchange, migration, or communication inevitably reduce the material well-being and opportunities of individuals. The

essential inconsistency is that policies of market interventions may not only reduce negative market externalities, but also eliminate or at least hamper the institution that brought welfare and opportunities for many.

On the micro-level a similar inconsistency is present. Before individuals can realize gains from the second and third life of things through RR activities, the ‘things’ must have lived through a first life, i.e. have been produced and have been consumed. Only if sufficiently new goods are manufactured, sold and used by consumers, these goods are available for RR. Consequently, expanding the life span of things does not lead to a reduction or avoidance of production and consumption as such. A boom in RR activities depends not only on the people who engage in it but also on the amount of goods produced and consumed previously.

The ambiguity in the environmental position on the macro- and micro-level stems from the perception of the market system and market exchange as the primary adversary: the institution that causes severe social problems while also generating wealth, economic, and social participation. In this paper this ambiguity is addressed by investigating RR activities, which are considered as market activities. The informal nature of RR activities allows for the direct observation and analysis of actors’ behavior in the markets. Participant observation, i.e., assuming the role of a profit-oriented trader and middleman on informal markets (cf. Belk et al., 1988), is chosen for this purpose. Assuming the role of a person who uses the market to realize profits inevitably involves being confronted with the ambiguity on the micro-level. Furthermore, being in the role of a buyer and seller striving to make a profit through RR activities can offer an additional perspective to the growing literature, which, for de-

veloped countries, relies mostly on interviews and surveys by economic anthropologists (e.g., Albinsson and Yasanthi Perera, 2012; Isenhour and Berry, 2020).

The research is related to a specific market segment where goods are offered for free on an internet platform. The leading question pertains to how RR activities on informal markets operate when sellers prioritize giving items away for free and when buyers (often traders) are primarily profit-oriented and focus on reselling these items.

The remaining paper is structured as follows: In Section Two, theoretical considerations regarding embeddedness and individual behavior are addressed. Section Three outlines the research and describes the market dynamics, decisions from the perspectives of both buyers and sellers. Section Four discusses the findings, while Section Five provides a brief conclusion.

Theoretical Considerations

The globalization process in the last centuries brought an expansion of markets and capitalist modes of production and consumption to territories, people and social spheres which were less related to markets before. Geographically, the integration of the socialist countries since the 1990s and China since 2001 have brought a territorial expansion of market principles. Mass digitalization is another impetus in this direction. The expansion of markets has not only facilitated communication, fostered trade and induced migration but has also contributed to a considerable reduction of world poverty through economic growth (Bubnovskaia et al., 2024). It can be claimed that markets in a variety of capitalist systems have become the dominant mode of exchange worldwide.

Gudeman (2001, 9-12) distinguishes between the community realm of economy and the market realm of economy. The community realm can be understood as a scheme of personal relationships of any form of community (e.g., family, ethnic group) based on common cultural elements (e.g., language or religious beliefs) which an individual can rely on in interaction. The market realm is based on exchange and includes trade, accumulation and the pursuit of self-interest. Gudeman emphasizes the many ways both realms of economy can be interconnected and complement each other and that rarely one exists without the other.

Earlier Polanyi and co-workers (1944; 1957), and Granovetter (1985) coined and shaped the concept of embeddedness. Polanyi implied that (in non-market societies) economic activities cannot be understood or analyzed without considering the institutional (historical, social, cultural) context in which they are embedded. He claims a certain hierarchical order in the sense that first there are other than economic activities and that the latter entirely depend on the former. Granovetter (1985) criticizes this over-socialized perspective and by using the embeddedness concept shows for market societies the importance of personal ties and networks for individual economic activities.

A different position is chosen for this research. Considering the dominance of markets and various capitalist systems worldwide, the presumption is that the market serves as the dominant institution concerning allocation, production, distribution, and consumption in developed economies in the early 21st century. Therefore, RR and related activities are primarily regarded as economic activities embedded in market structures or within capitalism. They constitute an integral part of globalized capitalism and adhere to market

principles. The market realm is deemed essential and encompasses elements of the community realm. In other words, social ties and networks are predominantly embedded in market exchange. Thus, RR activities are also part of the global economy, as they facilitate the final consumption step of products that are produced and distributed globally, particularly in developed economies.

For the analysis of a given context a behavioral assumption is required. For real world situations, an assumption which claims that all individuals are always selfish and permanently maximize material utility is as useless as the behavioral assumption that such a behavior does not exist and that individuals are never selfish. For this research it is assumed that in a *market context most people* consider their (material and immaterial) interests. To provide an example, if a person has the choice to sign one of two labor contract and one contract offers higher earning and more vacations everything else being equal, most people in that position would behave like a homo oeconomicus and decide for a higher salary and more leisure. The same holds for other decisions on other markets and also highly social-minded people will take the bank loan with the lower interest and more favorable conditions if they have a choice. In the everyday decisions on markets many people behave exactly in accordance with these assumptions.¹ Without doubt, behavior according to this model may cause undesirable outcomes for societies, as has been discussed for the causes of the financial crisis (Carrier, 2014; Egbert, 2015). Nevertheless, the assumption implies that the same people do not be-

¹ For the helpfulness and the shortcomings of economic theory for consumer decisions and the advantages of the economic theory of consumption see McNeill (2023).

have as economic theory predicts if they act as a football coach, a kindergarten worker, a mother or act in other social roles. Then other preferences determine their behavior.

In the market context of the research, it is assumed that most sellers and buyers prioritize their own well-being. As demonstrated in previous research on the topic (Isenhour and Berry 2020), well-being encompasses more than just monetary gains for sellers and buyers. It may include factors such as the opportunity to have flexible working hours, the personal satisfaction of diverting items from landfills, or the sense of conserving resources. Furthermore, the assumption that sellers and buyers prioritize their own well-being does not preclude the possibility that their individual decisions to engage in RR activities may, intentionally or unintentionally, generate positive externalities for third parties. This could include enhancing social communication, fostering community-building, or creating other forms of social value (Albinsson and Yasanthi Perera, 2012). Additionally, the assumption does not negate the possibility that selling and buying may impact emotions (Herrmann, 1997, 2015) or that these activities can be enjoyable (Crewe and Gregson, 1998).

Positioning oneself as a profit-maximizing entrepreneur driven by selfish material interests necessitates considering theories of entrepreneurship. Schumpeter's concept of an entrepreneur, whose actions disrupt existing markets by introducing new products and creating tension, is less applicable to trade (Schumpeter, 1912). Instead, Kirzner's entrepreneurial theory can be directly applied to RR activities. Kirzner (1980, 1997) posits that market information is incomplete, leading to perpetual disequilibrium. The entrepre-

neurial role involves identifying opportunities within this context of uncertainty and taking action to capitalize on them. Entrepreneurial actions may involve adjustments to price, quantity, quality, and location (Salamzadeh et al., 2013). The core function of the entrepreneur is to improve market efficiency by reducing discrepancies between prices and quantities, thereby realizing profits through arbitrage and fulfilling a social function.

This theory very much fits to the concept of “distributive labor” by Isenhour and Berry (2020) who describe in a case study a person who exactly fits to the type of go-between entrepreneur of Kirzner. It is Catelyn’s ability

“... to locate goods that were undervalued and redistribute them to those who understood their value and would purchase them, either in the local community or across the nation, and yet Catelyn was all too aware that many people [...] lacked access to needed items.” (Isenhour and Berry 2020, 301).

The three theoretical considerations are applied in the fieldwork: (1) the dominance of the market realm, (2) the rational behavior of individuals in a market context, focusing on both material and immaterial well-being, and (3) entrepreneurial behavior being linked to arbitrage opportunities.

Research

Participation occurred both as a buyer and seller on the internet platform *eBay Kleinanzeigen*. In Germany this is the most popular hub for small local private advertisements (in some way similar to *Craigslist* in the US). There are no costs except if the seller wants to promote her item. In general, individuals offer their goods by uploading photos, providing descriptions and giving a tentative price or declaring that the price is negotiable. Potential buyers contact the seller, usually directly via the platform, rarely by phone. The

platform is structured into main categories such as ‘family, child, baby’, ‘electronics’, ‘house, garden’ or ‘jobs’ and respective subcategories. Rather rarely a person advertises that she is looking for something.

The categories mainly focus on material goods, services or jobs offered. There is only one category that relates to the price. This category is named ‘to give away for free’ (*zu verschenken*). It has no subcategories. Consequently, all items are listed according to the upload time. A search function to detect specific types of goods is available for all categories. Different filters are available, e.g. the location of the advertised item. This information provides an initial orientation for a potential buyer in case she personally picks up the purchase.

Active participation occurred in the *to give away for free* category as a buyer. Even though the price is zero, it still constitutes a purchase, hence the use of the term buyer and seller. This category was chosen for two reasons. Firstly, when the primary aim is to realize arbitrage, the purchase price should be as low as possible, making a zero price an advantageous starting point for potential gain. Secondly, goods in this category are never shipped by mail; instead, buyers typically pick them up in person from the seller’s location, often requiring personal interaction. The purchasing range encompassed a radius of 20 km, centered around a North German city with a population of about 500,000. This area included suburbs, urban quarters, and villages in a predominantly rural area. On three occasions, goods were purchased outside this radius.

Between July 2021 and January 2023, a total of 123 purchases were made in the category *to give away for free*. In three instances, non-monetary compensation was requested, resembling barter. Examples include a six-pack

of beer in exchange for a load of wooden trunks, jelly sweets for a bike, and two liters of Coca-Cola for a rolling chair.

Goods were sold across various categories, resulting in a total of 131 sales, as some purchases included multiple items. Additionally, 43 items were sold privately during this period. As a potential buyer, email contact occurred with over 350 sellers, while as a seller, contact was made with more than 400 potential buyers, all through the platform.

The activities were not consistently pursued with the same intensity throughout the entire period. There were times when more effort was dedicated to finding suitable purchases, while in other months, the focus shifted to market observation and sales. Following an initial period of testing and learning through buying and selling various goods, attention was directed towards specific categories.

The primary criteria for selection included price, distance to the seller's location, as well as the bulkiness and weight of items (sometimes a car trailer was used for transporting some goods). Additionally, preference was given to items that were mechanical in nature. For instance, in the "garden equipment" category, defective lawnmowers, garden decorations, and garden tools were purchased. In the "family, child" category, rolling walkers and crutches were acquired, while fitness equipment and bikes were found in the "leisure, hobby, neighborhood" category.

Market transactions

The terminology from Plattner's (1989) depiction of transactions on markets is adopted to offer an overview of the market and transactions organized via the internet platform. Markets are locations of social interaction (cf.

Bohannon and Dalton, 1962). In the case at hand, the interactions as a buyer and as a seller are short and occur only once. Due to the nature of the products, repeated interaction with the same sellers and buyers did not take place. What evolves is – at best – an option of repeated interaction. The exchange of goods and money is simultaneous. Communication occurs via email or in person, however, anonymity (with respect to the participants' names) is mostly kept.

The costs for a buyer are mainly determined through the search and transport. Particularly for a buyer in the category *to give away for free* competition is tremendously high. Valuable items and those which are interesting for resale receive many clicks in the first minute as soon as they are online. Contacting a seller immediately is often a precondition to be able to purchase the item. Email alerts and search functions are ineffective because they transmit information too slowly. The only way to get an interesting item is permanently screening the platform for newly uploaded items and reacting instantaneously if possible. Consequently, the amount of time spent on searching items is high. If a purchase is agreed upon, transport costs occur in the form of driving time and petrol. Selling, in contrary, does not require much time. After advertising an item on the platform for sale, one selects among potential buyers and arranges the transfer. The estimation from time spent for purchases and sales is that the time spent on selling in comparison to the time spent on search and purchase is 1/11.

Since purchases and sales are within a certain regional radius, one may assume a mutual local culture. This is particularly the case because transport costs are relevant so that both trade partners know that they are from the same

region. The estimation (based on communication and car number plates) suggests that about 90% of the buyers also came from within the radius used for purchasing the items.

It is noteworthy that a high degree of anonymity prevails in the transactions. In email correspondence ex-ante purchase, sellers and buyers often use acronyms, pseudonyms or first names. When it comes to the exchange, anonymity with respect to the name was mostly kept, however the address had to be communicated. In about half of the purchases the goods were picked-up at pre-arranged places (a yard, a garden, the front door, a garage, a place in a street,) without having a personal contact with the seller. In the other cases goods were picked up by having personal interaction with the seller, still anonymity (with respect to the name) was mostly kept.

As a seller the same method was used: the items were deposited in front of the entrance door or in the carport within a specific time-span so that a potential buyer could choose in anonymity whether to take the good or leave it. The money for the pre-arranged price had to be put in the letterbox if a buyer decided to take the item. The advantage for the seller of using this *take-pay-go-sale* is that she saves her time and does not have to wait for a buyer to come.²

² In the region of my research it has become common for the last decades that farmers sell agricultural produce such as potatoes, pumpkins, eggs, or honey by the roadside. This happens impersonally in very much the same way as described in my research. Customers can choose and take the goods from a stall by the roadside or from the yard of the farmer and the money is dropped in a paybox. This method was, to my knowledge, first developed for flowers. In the early 1990s farmers started planting flowers which customers could pick from a field and pay accordingly by dropping the money in a paybox. This mechanism of regional impersonal selling and buying by the roadside (see photos in Appendix 1) has become popular for other agricultural products partly in relation to ‘direct marketing’. However, one should note that this form of impersonal selling by the roadside exists only in some regions in Germany.

With those sellers who had personal contact, it was observed that they were rarely younger than about 30 or older than about 65, with gender distribution being equal. From observation, the sellers were predominantly ethnic Germans and comparatively often homeowners. This outcome is likely influenced by the type of items (e.g., garden equipment) that were picked up. Regarding the buyers (who had to come by car to pick up items) and those among them who were spoken to, it was found that about three out of four were men, and at least half of them appeared to have a migrant background, with origins from Albania, Poland, Russia, or other places. Several made it obvious in conversation that they intended to re-sell the items.

Buyers were selected based on previous email conversations and personal judgments of their reliability. The evaluation system and comments from previous exchange partners of the buyers were disregarded due to potential falsified reviews and because the stakes were low. Consequently, there were no instances where a buyer failed to pay the pre-arranged price. Payments left in the letterbox varied, including envelopes, small plastic bags, and short notes, while in other cases, an email notification of dropped-off payment was received. The majority of buyers accepted the offered items, except for three cases. Following purchases organized in this manner, many buyers expressed gratitude via email for the trust extended to them.

The risk related to purchasing and selling activities is comparatively low. The highest risk is spending time and travel costs for purchasing an item but not being able to pick it up, for instance, because the seller is not present at the pre-arranged time. However, this never happened for purchases. Neither was there the experience of the risk that a seller or buyer wanted to renegotiate a price that had been agreed upon by previous email correspondence.

Indeed, there is the risk of not being able to sell a purchased item at a positive price. This causes costs even if the item is purchased for a zero price. It happened only four times. In these cases, the item was first advertised for free, and if there was no interest, it was disposed of at no extra cost at a recycling center (similar to the seller Shannon described in Isenhour and Berry 2020, 300).

The 131 items were acquired for a price of zero and sold within the price range of 5 to 40 euros, with an average price of 12.30 euros. The pricing strategy employed involved undercutting the market price for similar items on the platform to facilitate quick sales and avoid storing goods for extended periods. Some buyers of the items were traders themselves aiming to capitalize on additional arbitrage opportunities, especially for defective lawnmowers. After deducting direct costs, particularly petrol and car-related expenses, a total profit of 930 euros was realized over a period of 18 months, averaging about 50 euros per month.

Exogenous shocks

Within the research period severe exogenous shocks erupted the society and the economy. These shocks influenced the supply and demand side on the markets, including internet platforms. The first shock was the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2022. Consequences of the pandemic were stately administered lockdowns and social distancing, quarantine rules for infected individuals, severe restrictions on private mobility, a shortage of medical help, and other disruptions of daily life, which had not been experienced for decades. Besides the state regulations, a considerable part of the population


decided for social self-distancing and self-isolation. Social and economic interactions and consumption, as well as production patterns were drastically influenced by these new formal and informal rules of interactions. For instance, people spent more time at home and thus had time to search and sell on electronic marketplaces. Furthermore, they also had time to tidy up at home, thus finding items that they could offer as used goods (Süddeutsche Zeitung 2020). In this respect the supply side of goods and the number of offers considerably increased in *ebay Kleinanzeigen*. Since shops in cities were often closed and people avoided previous consumption patterns, purchases via internet boomed during the pandemic in Germany.

The second shock was the invasion of the Russian Federation into Ukraine. Private households were directly affected through quickly soaring prices of energy, particularly gas, electricity, oil and petrol. These price increases were central drivers of the shooting up of the inflation rate. The soaring prices of energy are closely related to politics. The recent German governments (with participation of parties with conservative, social democrat, liberal and, recently, environmental background) have decided to stop the energy production from nuclear power plants in Germany after 2022, and the energy from charcoal and lignite after 2038. Instead, capacities related to renewable forms of energy, particularly wind and solar, are politically preferred, subsidized and developed further. These decisions imply that several decades of structural reforms and structural transition in the energy sector are necessary until renewable forms of energy are fully able to substitute those based on carbon-dioxide emissions.

For the necessary transition period natural gas is highly important for the country. Since natural gas was mainly imported from the Russian Federation until 2022, the EU sanctions of Russia after its invasion in Ukraine and the physical destruction of the *Nord Stream* pipelines in September 2022 led immediately to skyrocketing energy prices (for all forms of energy) for both private households and industry. With respect to private households the shock becomes visible in the form of the general inflation rates of about 9% in the beginning of 2023 and prices for fuel, which nearly doubled. The increase of consumer prices together with moderate wage increases resulted in shrinking real wages of private households by more than 3% in 2022 compared to 2021. Private consumption for certain goods shrank in 2022, e.g. for energy or for organic food.

It is not yet clear whether the war in Ukraine led to a general increase in the demand of used and repaired goods, however, the Russian invasion had direct effects on some markets on the internet platform *ebay Kleinanzeigen*. Two effects can be distinguished: The first effect is caused by an increase in demand of Ukrainian war refugees living in Germany, the second is an increase in demand for people living in Ukraine. In 2022 roughly one million refugees from Ukraine choose Germany as a residence location. By the beginning of 2023 about 1.1 million Ukrainian citizens lived in Germany (which is about 1.2% of the population living in the country). Private organizations and individuals in Germany used the platform to acquire urgently needed goods for refugees, mostly clothing, furniture, kitchenware, toys, or, as in the example below, children's bikes (see Figure 1). The platform is also used by Ukrainians and their friends to advertise for finding private accommodation and to offer jobs.


Figure 1. Search and offer advertisements to help Ukrainians in Germany

<p>3 children’s bikes wanted for Ukraine help Saar Hello, we are urgently looking for 3 children’s bikes for ages 8, 10, 12. Maybe someone still has bicycles which are no longer needed. Otherwise, we always accept all sizes of bicycles for the Ukraine-Hilfe Saar (even defective ones, we then repair them). Likewise tricycles or scooters for children. Booster seats for the car are also needed. Many thanks for your help [German original in App. 2: Text A]</p> <p>Give away children’s clothes for Ukrainian refugees I would like to help families from Ukraine. That is why, I give away children’s clothes in very good shape (for boys and girls) to Ukrainian refugees. Please let me know what size is needed, so that I can see to everything. Possibly, depending on the shoe size, I also have children’s shoes to give away. [German original in App. 2: Text B]</p> <p>Source: <i>ebay Kleinanzeigen</i>, February 2023</p>	
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Additionally, the platform is also used to acquire goods for people living in Ukraine. Here again individuals and organizations collect goods, if possible for free, in order to transport them to Ukraine and to support people there. These advertisements address directly the charity and help aspect, i.e. setting the tentative price for items to zero (see Figure 2). Since sellers are directly addressed by such advertisements, the goods given for this type of charity do not occur on the market. If previously similar items were ‘given for free’, now these goods could be given directly to charity with the consequence, that the price of similar items increase on the market. This effect

could be observed on the market for rolling chairs, which were rarely offered ‘for free’ after mid2022.³

Figure 2. Search advertisements to help people in Ukraine

<p>Donate used laptops, tablets, smartphones to Ukraine</p> <p>We collect technology for people in Ukraine for the “Laptops for Ukraine” initiative. Above all, laptops, tablets and smartphones with intact batteries are required, but also many other devices such as computers, monitors, chargers, power banks and power cables. The donations will be brought to Ukraine via the EU Civil Protection Mechanism and will be distributed there by the Ukrainian Ministry of Digitalization to medical staff, teachers, students and others in need. If you still have an old device in the drawer, your donation can help people who have fled within Ukraine.. Tell your relatives and friends about the initiative! Maybe your employer has unused technology that he/she would donate for a good cause. You are welcome to bring your donation to us or send it by post. Within Munich we can pick up donations by arrangement. [German original in App. 2: Text C]</p> <p>Source: <i>ebay Kleinanzeigen</i>, February 2023</p>	
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To sum up, both recent shocks: the COVID pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, had a direct influence on the market places (increased supply and demand) and also indirect effects through the price mechanism.

³ It is worth mentioning that also other equipment for Ukraine is searched for. An advertisement read: “Hello, I’m looking for an off-road vehicle or minibus for the Ukrainian front. Simply offer everything. Price up to about 5,000 Euro.” (*ebay Kleinanzeigen*, February 2023).

Results

In nearly all arbitrage-oriented transactions, costs could be covered, but the average profit per item was low. Assuming only moderate opportunity costs, such as an income related to the minimum wage that could be earned through other activities, RR activities are not an attractive income opportunity – at least not for the highly competitive market segments chosen. In this regard, earlier findings that highlight the costs of such market activities can be confirmed (e.g., Isenhour and Berry 2020, 296). A trader can reduce search costs by selecting less competitive markets. Nevertheless, the to ‘give away for free’ markets can be attractive for individuals who do not have alternative earning opportunities and for those who consider RR as an additional small income opportunity realized in their spare time. The advantage lies in the flexible working time, which allows for a combination with other activities.

When considering why people give items away for free instead of realizing monetary market gains through positive prices, insights from conversations with sellers can shed light on the matter. It can be clearly stated that most sellers are aware that the goods have a market price above zero. Therefore, information asymmetries, where sellers are unaware of possible positive market prices, can be excluded as an explanation. For many sellers, giving items away for free remains the best decision from a rational choice perspective. By doing so, they save time because it is almost certain that more than one buyer will show up in a short period of time. Furthermore, the seller avoids the need to negotiate a price, as the price is zero. Giving items away for free can also be rational if the costs of transporting the items to a recycling center or a dump outweigh potential earnings. This is particularly true for bulky, voluminous, heavy, and difficult-to-transport goods, such as wooden

logs, lawnmowers, or furniture. Conversations with sellers confirm that those who give items away for free typically act in accordance with traditional economic theory predictions, choosing the best option for themselves. In some cases, sellers faced time constraints, such as needing to clear a house or flat by a specific day. However, some sellers also expressed a desire for their items provided for free to be further used rather than thrown away.

A key result is that if a seller keeps anonymity and relies on impersonal transactions, buyers consider this as an expression of trusting behavior on the side of the seller. By putting (mostly low-priced) items at a pre-arranged place to be picked up by a buyer and leaving the payment to her is considered as an expression of trusting others. Paying the pre-arranged price is reciprocating trust by showing trustworthiness. This institutional arrangement allows trade partners a high degree of anonymity, since they never need to meet physically, but communicate before the transaction via email. For the seller this arrangement is time-saving.

This arrangement of buying and selling works even if transactions among trade partners occur only once and long-term reciprocity is not expected. The experiences of the COVID pandemic with contact restrictions in person may have influenced perceptions of buyers and sellers. The only visible control mechanism which may affect behavior is the ex-post online evaluation mechanism that provides the option to build a reputation for sellers and buyers.

These observations allow reflecting on markets and networks from a more general perspective. The interpretation is that in the described context trust among strangers is sufficiently high to organize exchange in an impersonal mode. In other words, market exchange between strangers is possible,

and costly contract enforcement, e.g. through networks (Greif, 1993) or by tradition (Egbert, 2007), is unnecessary. In contrast to situations in which trust is built by repeated interactions (Fafchamps and Minten, 2001), here the institutional arrangement of selling to strangers is already sufficient to create the necessary trust.

Consequently, personal networks are rather unnecessary and may even cause ineffectiveness. If they exist, they are *embedded in markets* of unknown and anonymous individuals. Network partners are always only a subset of the larger group of market partners. Therefore, if transactions costs are low (as on an electronic platform), the market system allows individuals to realize more effective exchange than a network system because more individuals are potential exchange partners. To restrict the number of potential buyers and sellers by relying on networks would be harmful to effective exchange and thus harmful to rational actors who want to sell and buy. This observation is very much in line with the economic theory of markets with low transaction costs. Nevertheless, the described system incorporates cultural elements, such as a common language, regional connectedness, regional sense of belonging, but does not require these elements as a precondition for impersonal exchange (see also Egbert, 2010 for exchange on open-air markets).

The initial assumption that RR and related activities adhere to market principles, representing the low-end part of international value chains within globalized capitalism, can be confirmed. In this type of exchange, the market realm plays a fundamental role, with actors on the micro-level effectively utilizing the market for low-cost and swift transfer of used goods. The ambiguity

on the micro level is largely resolved, as individuals find the market system most suitable for arranging exchanges.

However, for political actors, primarily those with leftist orientations, ambiguity persists on the macro level. The institution of market exchange in a capitalist-organized economy facilitates the provision of various items, such as lawnmowers, rolling chairs, bicycles, or fitness equipment, both for purchase and for giving items a second life through RR activities. Despite being viewed as a root cause of environmental and social problems like climate change, unemployment, and wealth distribution disparities, the market institution also enables extending the lifespan of goods, offering access to items at low or zero prices, conserving resources, and providing informal income opportunities.

Acknowledging these positive effects of market exchange in the realm of RR activities may imply fostering the market system by the state or, at the very least, maintaining it without stringent controls. However, market interventions and control mechanisms remain favored instruments of political macro actors.

Conclusions

Recently, in developed economies in Western Europe RR activities have gained in popularity. This could be partly due to a more enhanced awareness of individuals about the origins of climate change. As a consequence, individual preferences about production and consumption patterns have started changing in recent decades. Reuse, repair, recycling and related activities reflect these changes rather prominently. In the last years the COVID pandemic and the war in Ukraine had another impact on markets related to

RR activities. So far politics has not been much focused on RR activities or on related online platforms which facilitate exchange. RR as part of the informal sector operates along market principles often in a local or regional context.

Political parties and social movements instead, have actively started to restructure societies by addressing problems of climate change. The European Green Deal is a case in point. In this context market interventions are highly popular on the political arena (in Germany). They stretch from reducing the energy production by nuclear power stations, coal, or lignite, and the reduction of fossil fuels for transport, to multiple interventions on all markets, including the markets for labor, housing, industrial, and consumer goods.

In this paper, participant observation on RR markets, which offer the "give away for free" option, shows that RR activities are conducted within a market-based economy with rational actors. Individuals aim to maximize utility, which is not necessarily material well-being, by giving away goods for free. Buyers then use these goods for themselves or, often, resell items for profit. RR activities function effectively within the capitalist system of market exchange, despite their role in prolonging the life cycle of products and thereby reducing, postponing, or slowing down the consumption of new products.

Except for tax regulations and the application of civic law for these informal markets, macro-level politics has not yet interfered with these markets and RR activities. In the specific context of this research, the market mechanism works and fulfills an important task, i.e., to redistribute used goods quickly, thus contributing to higher sustainability in consumption. It is not unlikely that informal RR activities will be hijacked by political actors

either to use the term and actions for political communication or to control the related markets through state interventions. Institutionalizations by political actors in a related context have also been addressed by Isenhour and Reno (2019, 2) or Berry and Isenhour (2019). Other terms such as ‘recycling’, ‘sustainability’, and ‘circular economy’ have also been transformed into (all-embracing) concepts that can be used for all aims and political interventions.⁴

The empirical research is limited to a very specific market segment in a local environment and results cannot be generalized. Nevertheless, by using an entrepreneurial approach and to participate actively in buying and selling patterns, an additional perspective is added to recent anthropological research in other countries.

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⁴ As Corvellec et al. (2022) argue for the term of the circular economy. The topic of state control and state interventions in informal trade has a long research tradition and the anthropological literature including Clark (1988), de Soto (1989) and many others can be related to the present case.

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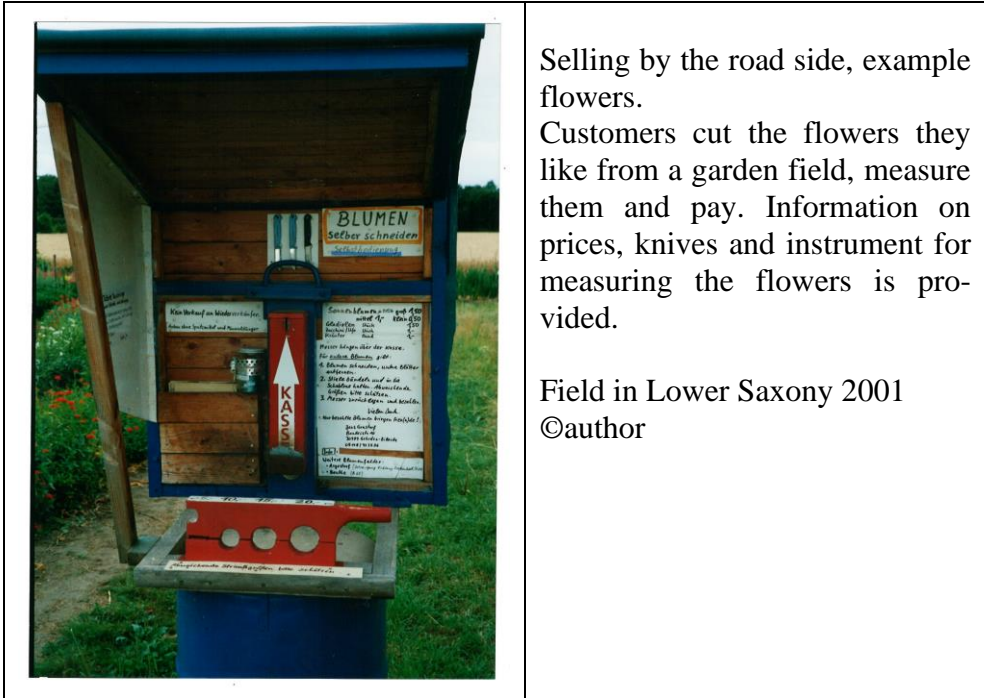
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Appendix 1. Selling by the road side



Selling by the road side, example flowers.

Customers cut the flowers they like from a garden field, measure them and pay. Information on prices, knives and instrument for measuring the flowers is provided.

Field in Lower Saxony 2001
©author

Appendix 2. Advertisement for charity to help Ukrainian in Germany and Ukraine (German Original)

Text A: Jeder weiß, was jetzt in der Ukraine passiert! Wir appellieren an alle, denen das Schicksal unserer Soldaten, unserer wahren Helden, am Herzen liegt! Derzeit gibt es einen großen Bedarf, diesen Jungs zu helfen, ebenso wie den Menschen, die gezwungen sind, aus den besetzten Gebieten zu evakuieren! Diese Menschen sind für JEDE Hilfe dankbar: Kleidung, Unterwäsche, Medikamente, Lebensmittel, Hygieneartikel. Und es gibt auch einen RIESIGEN Bedarf an Rollstühlen, Krücken, Betten für verwundete Soldaten, etc... Also, Freunde mit großen Herzen, wenn es unter Ihnen gibt, die Ukrainern helfen wollen, die Ihnen aufrichtig dankbar sein werden, kontaktieren Sie uns bitte! Zusammen mit dem Ukrainischen Wohltätigkeitsfonds liefern wir Ihre Hilfe an die richtige Adresse. Seien Sie sich dessen sicher! Berichte sind garantiert! Für weitere Informationen: (Source: ebay Kleinanzeigen: October 2022)

Text B: Verschenke Kinderkleidung für ukrainische Flüchtlinge

Möchte gerne Familien aus der Ukraine helfen. Daher verschenke ich sehr gut erhaltene Kinderkleidung (für Junge und Mädchen) an ukrainische Flüchtlinge. Bitte teilen Sie mir mit, welche Größe benötigt wird. Damit ich alles fertig machen kann. Eventuell je nach Schuhgröße hätte ich auch Kinderschuhe abzugeben. (Source: ebay Kleinanzeigen: February 2023)

Text C: Gebrauchte Laptops, Tablets, Smartphones in die Ukraine spenden

Wir sammeln für die Initiative „Laptops for Ukraine“ Technik für Menschen in der Ukraine. Vor allem Laptops, Tablets und Smartphones mit intaktem Akku werden benötigt, aber auch viele andere Geräte wie Computer, Monitore, Ladegeräte, Powerbanks und Stromkabel. Die Spenden werden über das EU-Katastrophenschutzverfahren in die Ukraine gebracht und dort vom ukrainischen Ministerium für Digitales an medizinisches Personal, Lehrkräften, Schülern und andere Bedürftige verteilt. Falls du noch ein altes Gerät in der Schublade liegen hast, kannst du mit der Spende innerhalb der Ukraine geflüchteten Menschen helfen. Berichte gerne deinen Verwandten und Freunden von der Initiative! Vielleicht hat dein/e Arbeitgeber/in ungenutzte Technik, die sie/er für einen guten Zweck spenden würde. Du kannst deine Spende gerne bei uns vorbeibringen oder mit der Post zuschicken. Innerhalb von München können wir Spenden nach Absprache abholen. (Source: ebay Kleinanzeigen: February 2023).