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Talente Tauschring Hannover (TTH): Experiences of a German LETS and the relevance of theoretical reflections

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INTRODUCTION TO THE TTH

Foundation

The TTH was founded in 1995 and has presently (December 2001) about 250 members. It is the largest "exchange-ring" in the Hannover area. There are three more of these LETS-type organizations in the city; in the Hannover region plus the nearby city of Hildesheim about 10 Tauschrings exist. The total number of participants lies between 600 and 700. In the area considered, the total population amounts to just above 1.2 million (the city of Hannover has about 515.000 residents). Unemployment in the Hannover area (10.6% at the end of 2001 - Niederschsisches Landesamt fr Statistik, 2002, p. 177) is above the German average, in the suburbs outside the city this rate is below average. Nevertheless, the area is relatively prosperous, but economic growth has not led to significant price increases; in comparison to a city like Munich prices (in Euro) for services typically being offered in a Tauschring are still moderate.

The foundation meeting of the TTH took place in April 1995. About ten persons participated; they had met at a lecture on the issue "Tauschrings" in March 1995 (Fahl, 1999, p. 25).

At that time the Tauschring movement had taken off following the examples in other countries, notably in Britain. (Earlier attempts to promote the basic idea - cf. for instance the first presentation of the model "Kooperationsring" by Offe and Heinze in 1986 - had remained unheard). LETS became an issue for the media (cf. for example DER SPIEGEL, 1993; for a detailed account of this development with many examples see Baukhage and Wendt, 1998, pp. 13-101; also Pierret, 1999).

The TTH benefited from this wave of popularity. Reports in local newspapers and also a presentation in a regional TV broadcast helped to spread the news, and in late 1998 membership had already risen to a level of 220 (Fahl, 1999, p. 30).

Organizational Features

With regard to most aspects, the TTH is organised as the original model of a LETS (among the various interpretations, these letters usually stand for Local Exchange and Trading System) as designed by Michael Linton and first applied in Comox Valley, Canada in 1983 (Linton et al., 1986, pp. 196-203, in particular pp. 200-201; in German: Linton, 1992, 13f; Petersson, 1990). In order to avoid over-regulation, the written rules of the Tauschring are being kept to a minimum (they comprise less than 200 words - Talente Tauschring Hannover, 2001, p. 62.) An important deviation from the original scheme is that members do not know the balance and the turnover of other members. The most important explanation for this unusual arrangement appears to be that right from the start the character of this experiment was to build a forum for the creation of social contacts (Fahl, 1999, p. 25) in which the status of a member should not be influenced by his or her turnover.

The unit of account is called "Talent". With the introduction of the Euro the "one to one" correspondence to the DM has been given up; 1 Euro now corresponds to 2 Talents. For the day-to-day operation this issue is only of minor importance; for the presentation of the Tauschring mechanism to outsiders, however, it means a loss of transparency. In a way this illustrates the somewhat ambiguous character of the exchange-rings as a means to get away from the reign of DM or Euro on one hand, and, on the other, to acknowledge that there continues to be a relationship between "Green Dollar and Dollar" (Linton et al., 1986, p. 200).

In the early days of these organizations in Germany many tried to adopt aspects of the Time Dollar system and to apply the objective time used for a service as a measure of exchange. A Tauschring in Linden - a quarter of the city of Hannover - performed this experiment. (Another example - that of Tauschwatt Bremen - is described by Sachs, 1999; their statutes are reprinted in Islinger, 1998, pp. 93-97.) The TTH took a more pragmatic approach: with regard to material goods the relationship to price fixing was acknowledged; in respect of services a price of 15 to 20 Talents per hour is recommended; but the actual agreement is left to the exchange partners, i.e. barter is possible. However, the vast majority of participants keep to this recommendation. A strict confrontation of barter versus the objective time measure (Cahn, 2001) does not need to be justified; with regard to exchange principles the Tauschringe are somewhere in the middle between the ideal types LETS and Time Dollar.

The membership fee is 10 Euros per year plus 3 Talents per month. This allows, of course, use of all facilities - the full version of the 'Talent-Zirkel', i.e. the full set of advertisements is being published twice a year, in between small updates are being issued. The account may be overdrawn by 400 Talents; in special cases this limit is extended. The membership fee covers all expenditures. The TTH receives no subsidies. A small exception is the use of an assembly room at very favourable conditions.

The administrative work is distributed among many people. Beside six people who assume major functions various others provide their help, for instance, to write the minute of a meeting, organize an information stand etc. During the first few years, this was done solely on an honorary basis, for some years now, activists receive some payment (the original rule of thumb has been 5 Talents per hour.) Generally, administration is kept on a low profile, in contrast to most exchange-rings of that size the TTH does not have an office. There is no executive committee. All decisions are taken in the monthly assembly which is open to all members (guests may also attend this meeting). Generally, more than 20 members take part in this assembly.

It should be added that social life in the Tauschring is guided also by informal rules that tend to be overlooked by outside observers. Meier (2001, p. 134), for instance, emphasises that there is no personal obligation between exchange partners. This is, of course, a correct description of the "ring" principle: a service is being paid in units of account and that's it! In reality, however, the provider of a service may feel obliged to, say, the newcomer who signs a bill to his credit and help him to pay back the debt incurred by looking at his offers in a more favourable way or recommend him to others. Tauschring is a bit like a village - there are informal reciprocity arrangements within the formal framework. Scholars pursuing empirical research should be advised not to put too much trust into the usual surveys but resort to more elaborate methods (in-depth interviews carried out by Kristof et al., 2001, produce interesting results; cf. also Barry and Proops, 2000 for their application of Q-methodology.)

Membership structure

Members come from all parts of the city, some are residents in the suburbs around Hannover. A special case is the Tauschring Gehrden, situated in a town a few kilometres west of Hannover. The 20 members of this group decided to join the TTH. Here they have their individual accounts. Within the "Talent-Zirkel", however, they have a special section. Basically, this exchange-ring is a kind of a subsystem to the TTH.

Most of the members offer their services on a private basis. Only a handful of shops are participating, and also the number of professionals who use the Tauschring as a parallel outlet is not very large. However, some of the offers provided from members of this group certainly explain the attractiveness of the TTH.

About 62% of the members are women. All generations are present in the TTH including many pensioners; only the participation of those below 30 years of age is very limited. Most of the activists who assume organizational tasks are between 35 and 50 years of age. There is no data available with regard to the background of members. Reference can here be made to an empirical analysis of a Tauschring in Nuremberg. Their finding that a relatively high proportion of the unemployed are participating in this Tauschring (9.5% - Schmidt et al., 2001, p. 22; for other surveys see Meier, 2000, in particular p. 166, Lista, 2000, Kristof et al., 2000) applies also the TTH. All in all, it can be stated that rather many people from low-income groups are participating in the Talente Tauschring Hannover. In general, however, members come from various parts of society's spectrum.

According to Schmidt et al. (2001, p. 23f) a large proportion of the members of the Nuremberg Tauschring belong to the "left-wing / alternative" part of the political spectrum. Formally, the TTH takes a neutral stand towards political and ideological positions, and members with, say, conservative political attitudes should not feel isolated. The observation of Schmidt et al. that "interest in cars, fashion, and sport among exchange-ring members is, in comparison to the general average of the population, pretty low" (2001, p. 24, translated by R.F.H.S.) can, however, also be confirmed for the TTH. All in all, such "snapshots" give the impression that the motivation to participate in local exchange systems in Germany is not very different in comparison to other western countries. (For the UK see Caldwell, 2000; Williams et al., 2001b, 23f; the picture, however, as painted by Purdue et al. of LETS schemes in the Bristol area with "deep green colours" would look different in Hannover¹).

THE FUTURE OF THE TTH

General remarks

Certainly, the future of LETS organizations will also be influenced by exogenous factors like the development of new technologies (smart cards, local intranets etc). For an organization such as the TTH which operates in a rather large area, this might be of importance. But the introduction of new technologies is also a social issue. So far, the possibilities of the Internet are hardly being used for internal communication (instantaneous placing of offers or even transmission of credit/debit notes) mainly because a large number of participants are excluded from this medium of information exchange. With increased public access to the Internet this is likely to change. However, telecommunication will always remain a means; the non-virtual "face to face" communication will remain an essential feature of the Tauschring.

The Talente Tauschring Hannover does not have a strategy, a plan of future development. Fahl expressed in 1999 a commitment to further growth (p. 33); substantial growth, however, would imply changes in the organizational structure. The monthly assembly would probably become somewhat more formal. It might also lead - as the example of the much larger Talente Tauschring Munich (for this Tauschring cf. Hollerbach, 2001) shows - to a kind of devolution with the emergence of smaller "exchange-rings" in different parts of the city within the larger Tauschring. Presently, however, growth is not so much an issue any more. In the last three years membership has hardly increased. It might be asked whether this can be considered as a sign of stagnation? Has the Talente Tauschring Hannover already passed the climax of its life-cycle? In the following parts of this paper the problems but also the potential of the TTH will be discussed.

Organizational Problems

With regard to organizational aspects it may be useful to learn from the experience of LETS schemes in countries like Australia, countries with a longer tradition in this respect. Jackson (1997) describes how some schemes experienced first a boost by deficit spending without considering the financing of their activity which later resulted into a loss of credibility into the system as a whole and, ultimately, led to their collapse. Also in the Hannover area there is at least one Tauschring that pursues this strategy with an "imaginary account". By way of contrast, the Talente Tauschring applies double entry bookkeeping - credits and debits (including Tauschring "public" activities) have to be in balance. This principle is also maintained when circumstances dictate pragmatic solutions. Although not officially being acknowledged it might be appropriate to accept payment in Euro currency when someone leaves the TTH.

Also debt default is an issue, although not to a really significant extent so far. An important exception is accounts

with deficits due to accumulated membership fees (in Talents). This was due to a lack of monitoring with regard to people who had practically withdrawn from membership, but omitted to declare their exit. The issue shows how important it is to establish checks and balances.

In respect of computer equipment the TTH does not resort to the comprehensive software solutions specifically designed for German exchange-rings in recent years. The principle of keeping the administration on a low profile also means that new technologies will only be introduced if really necessary.

A problem faced in particular by smaller LETS schemes is that they depend very much on the organizational efforts of one person. Since this burden is distributed on many shoulders, the problem hardly exists in the TTH. Among the members who joined the exchange ring in recent years some took over functions - this, apart from giving new impulses, also allows activists to step back before experiencing a burn out (cf. also Deschle - the author is active in a Tauschring in Rostock - 2001, p. 185). Also in the future, it will be of crucial importance to integrate newcomers into the organizational work; the confrontation of their new ideas with existing practices is a process which sometimes requires patience from all participants. The very informal organizational structure has its merits but for interested newcomers organizational details are somewhat intransparent. Social systems are like egg-timers; they need to be turned around after some time. A rsum of important decisions taken by the membership assembly over the last years (recorded in the minutes of these meetings) would be helpful. A Tauschring constitution which stipulated for example the rights of "managers" should be envisaged. An elected management committee would probably mean more, not less democracy.

The fact that organizers usually receive only a small compensation in Talents, and that all of them do this work beside their normal jobs puts a limit on projects to develop the Tauschring. Beside the advantage of having a non-hierarchical structure, this also means independence from the flow of external (public) funds. A warning example was the experience of a Tauschring in Linden, a quarter of Hannover - this is the only exchange-ring in the area that failed. The administrative work of the exchange ring had been carried out in a local church office. When this service ceased, it proved to be impossible to fill the gap.

Legal issues

The two points to be discussed in this context are a) the legal character of a Tauschring and b) the evaluation of income generated in a Tauschring by various authorities:

- a. The Talente Tauschring Hannover has not assumed the status of a formal legal entity. This is a (small) nuisance; bank accounts, for instance, are on the name of individual activists of the Tauschring.
- b. With regard to income in "Talente", members are responsible to declare it if relevant for fiscal purposes, welfare or unemployment benefits. Although regulation in these fields appears to be rather complicated (see for instance Islinger, 1998, p. 52; PaySys, 1998), it does not cause problems. Usually, exemption rules are applicable due to low turnover. According to fiscal regulation Tauschringring activity is a form of "Nachbarschaftshilfe" - "helping the neighbour" (this corresponds to "social favours" in UK Inland Revenue terminology). "Tausch"-income has not been an issue for the authorities.

There are opinions who plead in favour of a Tauschring legislation (see in particular Lehmann). On the federal level² attempts in this direction faced opposition, basically because it was felt that they were based on a very narrow definition of "Tauschring" which would restrict the potential of this social innovation. The middle-of-the-road between consolidation on one hand and maintaining all options for the future is the demand for introducing a new form of legal entity not just for the Tauschringe, but for many small organizations (presently available is the "eingetragener Verein", a legal option for social clubs introduced in the 19th century which, due to the hierarchical structure required, is unsuitable for the Tauschringe). Moreover, a more transparent regulation with regard to fiscal and other allowances would help to avoid unnecessary questions about moonlighting in the exchange-rings.

Membership, exchanges and social aspects

Membership of the TTH only rose from 220 (Fahl, 1999, p.32) to just about 250 at the end of the year 2001. In the last three years many new members joined the Tauschring, nearly fifty in 2001, but about the same number of people left the organization in that period. Altogether, after six and a half years of its existence almost 250 people left the Tauschring. Activity, however, has been substantially increased: Whereas in the years up till 1998, i. e. in a period of more than three years, the total turnover amounted to 35.000 Talents (Fahl, 1999, p. 32) this figure represents the

present annual turnover. About 70 exchanges per month result in a turnover which usually varies around 3.000 Talents (1998: 40 exchanges, 1200 Talents - Fahl, 1993, p. 32). There is a very uneven distribution of this exchange activity.

Experience shows that many people who leave the Tauschring are not really disappointed; they consider it to be an interesting experience ... and move on to the next experience. Specific reasons for withdrawal from membership are:

- moving to another city (members of an urban Tauschring tend to be rather mobile);
- social mobility - personal relations change; for instance, the new partner is not fond of this "weird" club;
- the Tauschring is used as a single purpose vehicle; they use it, for example, to renovate their apartment, do perhaps even some trading, but after having balanced their account, they quit.
- no time any more - perhaps because of a new job; (the TTH offers the possibility to freeze the account and remain a passive member);
- disappointment about a service or when searching for a service (people who offer something are not available; they might not even call back to say No;); people affected express - to use the well-known terminology of Hirschman, 1970 - their discontent not by "voice" but by "exit".
- offers are not being taken up; actual trading of an individual is extremely low.

This last point is probably the most serious one. The optimistic "Anybody has a talent" of the early years has been replaced by a realistic picture: a plumber or a good hairdresser would not have any problems to sell whereas the large variety of esoteric trades are, to say the least, less in demand. Also other German exchange-rings experience an imbalance between supply and demand. Sikora and Hoffmann (2001, pp. 118-126) suggest to integrate small businesses to a larger extent. Following this proposal would change the character of the institution completely, this would also not be of any help to those who have little to offer, they would become even more marginalized.

It has to be understood that people hardly ever expect to compensate the renovation of their apartment by casting horoscopes. By placing such offers they rather expect to establish social contacts with like-minded people. If they can earn a few Talents in addition - so much the better. There are a number of purely social activities - like an Italian conversation meeting - where the "exchange" takes place without any Talents being transferred. The problem is that the circle even of a relatively large exchange-ring as the TTH is still too small for these very specific interests which form a second tier of offers in the Tauschring.

There have been various attempts to address this problem - the possibility, for instance, to attach a signal (a "cockchafer") to advertisements, a call for solidarity towards newcomers. Active new members also get the opportunity to earn Talents by doing jobs for the Tauschring. There might be room for improvement with regard to individual counselling, however, apart from the fact that this is rather laborious, it might lead to a kind of customer mentality, something definitely to be avoided. Presently, ideas are being systematically collected. The real challenge will not be to develop good ideas, but to find the resources to implement them. Positive examples show that "Tauschring" should not just be a place to exchange goods and services, but an event centre, events not only organized by activists, but also on a "private" basis against payment in Talente; in particular for those with rather specific interests - i.e. the second tier of offers - a framework should be created to present their hobby in courses.

Campaign work

The presentation of the Tauschring idea has become more difficult over the years. Whereas in the foundation phase - as mentioned above - media interest in this social innovation was quite substantial, the glamour of this piece of news is largely gone. Public relations today means to play a more active role in order to get some coverage at least in smaller magazines. This plus the array of other instruments of advertising a social organization is being applied. Nevertheless, this means hardly more than a reminder to those who are aware of the Tauschringe anyway. It is far more difficult to reach the majority of the population that, due to a conservative attitude towards social innovations in general, is unaware of the exchange-rings. However, some of these people find their way across the threshold to the Tauschring, but only because the practical advantages have been demonstrated to them by "word-of-mouth". Another way to reach these people is by offering presentations to organizations like church communities or initiatives of unemployed people. Besides campaigning for the Talente Tauschring the message in such presentations is also "Found your own Tauschring!" If people do not come to the Tauschring, the Tauschring-mechanism must be exported into existing social structures (cf. in this context Borchardt and Wirtz, 1996). This approach takes account of the problems described above, the time-constraint, also the fact that people might not cross the threshold to the Talente Tauschring because its social atmosphere (for example, being on first name terms with each other at the monthly assembly) does not correspond to their style of life.

A regional network?

With most other "Tauschringe" in the area exchange arrangements already exist on a bilateral basis, i.e. it is possible for a member of the Tauschring Hildesheim to trade with a member of the TTH. This is sometimes complemented by other types of exchange-system as for instance

- "managed systems" as part of the social work in particular in problematic neighbourhoods (one Tauschring of this type - "Vahrenheide" already exists in Hannover; this may be seen in the context of inner city development discussions - North, 1996; and in respect of Time Dollar Cahn, 2000)
- revival of the neighbourhood in traditional housing co-operatives (Eichener, 1997, p. 150) or use of appropriate exchange-systems in modern housing projects.
- "Senioren-genossenschaften" - Time Dollar systems for pensioners which so far only exist in other parts of Germany (Baukhage and Wendl, 1998, pp. 86-94) - even if inter-exchange would not be possible with such systems.

Some Tauschringe in the area prefer not to have any inter-exchange at all. For many TTH members issues outside their own "club" are of little interest; but such a network would also be to the benefit of the TTH. The collaboration which already exists with some of the existing exchange-rings could be put on a broader basis and make the organizations more attractive in respect of the second tier of exchanges. In Germany the discussion with regard to regional networks is less advanced than in Britain. It remains to be seen whether elaborate facilities like registries (simultaneous management of accounts of a participant in two or more systems which makes bilateral exchange unnecessary) will provide feasible alternatives. The crucial point is to find a path that extends the exchange options for Tauschring members but does not restrict the autonomy of the organization.

THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS

Alternative Money?

Exchange-rings are often identified as community currency systems, with the emphasis being on currency, on money. When it comes to theoretical discussions among Tauschring activists the adherents of the ideas of Silvio Gesell play a very dominant role. Kennedy (1992) - who teaches Architecture in Hannover - made these ideas popular in the early nineties; she amalgamated a plea for general monetary reform with a presentation of the LETS model. In a way this was already a departure from the ideas of Gesell who did not see any possibility for something "third" between the state and the private economy; his attitude towards co-operative and community approaches was rather negative (Gesell, 1998, p.XX). It is therefore understandable that for many writers in the tradition of Gesell, exchange-systems do not have any potential (see for instance Creutz, 2001, pp. 585-595; for a critical review of Gesellian approaches cf. Niederegger, 1997).

Lietaer breaks with this tradition. "Complementary currencies" (2001; p. 147) are a cornerstone of his proposal for a "wiser world" (part of the subtitle). This kind of approach finds some advocates among Tauschring members (see for instance an article in a Hannover paper by Grndler, 2002). The majority, however, including most Tauschring activists, remains very sceptical. This is in particular due to negative experiences in the foundation phase - some rather dogmatic adherents of the doctrines of Gesell were not able to recognize the limits of their theoretical framework. After endless discussions these dogmatics eventually left the Tauschring, perhaps a necessary condition for the success of the TTH in subsequent years.

Certainly, one has to distinguish between the contribution of authors and the action taken by some of their adherents. However, looking at the far reaching promises these authors make in respect of social and ecological problems to be solved by alternative monetary arrangements the confrontation of these arrangements with the actual reality of "complementary currencies" is quite illuminating:

- One of the few pragmatic proposals is the introduction of the "Umlaufsicherung" (Lietaer, 2001, p. 151, uses the term "demurrage"), an anti-hoarding or circulation fee with which continuous economic activity shall be guaranteed. The TTH, as the vast majority of all other German Tauschringe, does not apply this mechanism (although software which makes its application possible exists in Germany). The major reason is that those who provide attractive offers would tend to pay the bulk of the fees whereas the more passive members who find it easier to keep their balance around zero would pay less than the present fixed membership fee. Sanctioning those who make the Tauschring an attractive institution would be counterproductive. It has to be

added that this line of argument would not apply to currency systems of unequivocal economic character.

- The central theme for the alternative monetarists is their criticism of the interest-rate system (cf. for instance Lietaer, 2001, pp. 50-55). In a way, a network like the Tauschring seems to prove their thesis that economic systems can function without interest. Somebody doing a job in the Tauschring is charging just 15 or 20 Talents per hour for his or her working time, nothing for the use of the, say, personal computer which he or she uses to do the job. The computer is being used for private purposes anyway; since capital costs for this household production are fixed, the cost of capital for additional Tauschring production is assumed to be zero. This, however, does not always apply to professionals; a hairdresser, for instance, would take more than 20 Talents per hour, probably the equivalent to the price in ordinary currency. If one imagines a system where professionals played a more prominent role, i. e. a system where demurrage might be applied, the question of refinancing the capital base would become more important.

Money does not stand alone! The theory reflecting monetary arrangements must therefore be integrated into a wider socio-economic context. Contributions that fulfil this requirement are for instance:

- J. Blanc (2000) analyses "parallel currencies" from various viewpoints; the development of "local" currencies as distinct from "national" money is seen in the context of the process of globalization - Blanc, as many of his colleagues from the Centre Walras in Lyon, draw inspiration from the writings of K. Polanyi.
- Schraven (mainly 2001b, see also 2000a) looks at the stability of currency systems by applying the framework of the "commons problem" (as developed in particular by Ostrom): the problem that the mutual credit of such a system tends to be exploited by "free-riders". This is certainly a relevant point whether in respect of the outstanding debt problem of the TTH or the structural deficits in other Tauschringe in the region.

Unemployment

Apart from the more general contributions which consider the development of exchange systems to be very important in tackling the problem of unemployment (as for instance Lietaer, 1999) there are a few analyses which deal with the issue in a more specific way. "Bridges into work?" - is the title of a project where Williams et al. (2001b, see also 2001a) evaluate (UK) LETS schemes in respect of their capacity to provide solutions to the problem of unemployment. From the frame of reference of those who just count the number of unemployed the result is - not surprising from the viewpoint of the German Tauschring experience - rather meagre. The actual number of jobs being created is close to zero (Williams et al., 2001b, p. 26; for Germany see a newspaper article by Meier, 1998). The authors emphasize indirect advantages - people trying to make their way into self-employment might use the semi-professional environment of a LETS as a testing ground. Certainly, cases like this can also be found in the TTH, but they are exceptions. In their concept of "mutual aid" Williams et al. develop an understanding of "work" which has hardly anything to do with the orthodox discussion about the unemployment issue (Williams et al., 2001b, p. 31; for a similar approach see also Peacock, 2000). It has to be added that exchange-ring income by an unemployed is of marginal significance, but marginal does not mean unimportant: Apart from the social advantages the increment of an income of, say, 100 Talents in a month is of significance for a person who has to make a living out of, say, 600 Euros unemployment benefit.

Economy and Ecology

Someone being interested in this issue would certainly find some evidence, could refer for instance to Fahl (1999, p. 33) - repairing instead of throwing away becomes a feasible alternative within a framework as that of the TTH. Also, the offers in this organization comprise health food products (Talente Tauschring Hannover, 2001, pp. 30-33), somebody provides a link to a food-cooperative. But, and this is a difference for instance to food-co-operatives which strive to develop a new relationship between ecological production and consumption, the relation to the material environment is of marginal importance in the exchange-rings. Kristof et al. analyse the Tauschringe in respect of their "sustainability": with regard to ecological aspects they did not find very much (2001, pp. 23ff). Whether the all and everything criteria "sustainability" will ever be of operational use may be doubted (for sustainability see, beside Kristof et al., 2001, also Diefenbacher and Leipner, 1997, p.44f, and the empirical research by Barry and Proops, 2000).

The local dimension

Promoting local economic development was a major point for inventing LETS (Linton, 1986, p. 202) and ever since

this cross-sectional approach continued to play an important role in the literature on exchange systems (Dobson, 1993; in the tradition of E.F. Schumacher - Morehouse, 1997; Douthwaite and Diefenbacher, 1998; Shuman, 2000, pp. 133-138, 191f; Purdue et al., 1997; in particular Tibbett, 1997 as well as Pacione, 1999, see this kind of local development as a response to the process of globalization; Pacione, pp. 68, 70 takes up the "classic" concept of "import substitution" as developed by Jacobs, 1985, p. 162f; see also the various publications of the Interdisziplinäre Forschungsgruppe "Lokale Konomie"). Obviously, with an annual turnover of about 35.000 Talents, the TTH does not contribute even to a moderate economic development of the community. Therefore, the distinction between existing LETS schemes - the equivalent to the Tauschringe - and LETSsystems (Williams et al., 2001b, pp. 11f), i. e. the attempt of Linton and others to keep the ambitious idea of local economic exchange arrangements alive, is certainly an important step forward. Attempts to extend the primarily private exchange rings and integrate local businesses (for the description of a failed experiment in Freiburg see Sikora and Hoffmann, 2001, pp. 118-121) are bound to fail.

It should be noted that the "L" in LETS has not become part of the term "Tauschring". Sure, they are community systems. But apart from the fact that there are bilateral exchange arrangements with other Tauschringe in the region, the TTH also participates in the "Ressourcen-Tauschring", a nation-wide clearing system (cf. Das Tauschring-Archiv / Sozialagentur E. Kleffmann, 2001, chapter 6, pp. 136-153). So far, the Ressourcen-Tauschring has not become very important: only a rather small number of exchange-rings participate and for a participant like the TTH, the turnover via this "Super-Tauschring" is rather limited. The idea of a network that stands behind this concept is not unproblematic. Lietaer (1999, p. 211; see also Shuman, 2000, p. 200) suggests a clearing house to facilitate inter-exchanges via Internet between different systems. This illustrates a complete misunderstanding of the basic character of "complementary currency systems". These should be understood as "finite systems". The specific feature of a LETS-type organization would be destroyed if large surpluses could be transferred to a Time Dollar system and saved there for a rainy day. Exchange systems are limited in various respects, and their character as "finite systems" also has a spatial dimension - whether this is a local one or extended to a regional level may be debated. However the limits are defined, in contrast to the global market with its "unlimited" possibilities the Tauschringe offer possibilities within certain limits. Limits do not mean hermetic isolation; exchange systems are not (as stated quite correctly by Perrot, 1999, p. 389) related to the "isolated state" as conceived by von Thünen in the nineteenth century. The perspective presented in chapter 2.4 of making the Tauschring idea popular among parts of the society which are so far underrepresented, runs, in a way, contrary to what is intended with the Ressourcen-Tauschring. This clearing-arrangement is used, for instance, to arrange overnight accommodation in another city - an interesting offer because Tauschring people are still on a similar wave-length; this aspect would be lost if Tauschring members would come from a larger variety of society's spectrum.

Tauschringe - a political movement?

Most definitely, Tauschring members are not interested in abolishing money and market laws (cf. Gorz, 2000, p. 157, see in this context also North, 1998). On the contrary, it is a principle of the TTH to be politically neutral. Sometimes, for instance when a lecture is given on exchange systems in Ecuador, one can observe a certain political interest, but, certainly, there is no ambition to develop the Tauschring into an organization with substantial economic weight.

"Third-sector" approaches

"Third sector" approaches provide the philosophical framework for policies in various countries (in respect of the UK see Williams et al. 2001a who refer - among others - to authors like Giddens and Beck).

In Williams et al. (2001a) the somewhat ambiguous character of this concept becomes evident. On the one hand, they propose pragmatic measures to establish LETS as facilitators of community self-help, on the other they discuss "the role of the third sector in paving a third way". Third way, it should be noted, is a term which is, at least in Germany, definitely not en vogue any more; today, most readers would associate it with the old attempts to discover a path between capitalism and socialism possibly by taking up co-operative principles. Another line of thinking refers to the literature contributed by local economists (for instance Interdisziplinäre Forschungsgruppe "Lokale Konomie" an der Technischen Universität Berlin, 1992; see also chapter 3.4). In this context it has to be remembered that one of the roots of the community currencies was the alternative economics discussion of the eighties. In this tradition the author of this paper (Schroeder, 1992) suggested the development of local markets not as a third sector between market and state but as a complementary dimension beyond market and state - a radical perspective of a dual economy. (For a survey of the literature on dual economy concepts cf. Huber, 1993; an early example of a rather concrete vision of local

economic structures beside the world market can be found in Rosanvallon, 1979; Heinze and Olk, on the other hand, 1982, in particular p. 26, argued in favour of moderate rather political reforms).

Certainly, the Tauschringe are not considered by their members as a first step towards fundamental structural change. Certainly, an improvement of the legal framework would be appreciated; some Tauschringe in Germany decided to co-operate closely with the local administrations (examples are described in Sikora and Hoffmann, 2001, pp. 126-131.) Also, the perspective of a variety of different exchange systems would imply co-operation with the local administration. But within such a "landscape" of exchange-systems the Talente Tauschring Hannover would certainly maintain its position of keeping a certain distance to public institutions in order to maintain its autonomy. The perspective of authors like Saiger (1998), Hoffmann (1998), Kleffmann (1998), Sikora and Hoffmann (2001) who see community currencies as an element in a network with other publicly financed (and thus controlled) local initiatives is not generally acceptable for the Tauschring movement. Specific reasons against too close cooperation are:

- the public sector will not be able to guarantee funding over a long-term period; this - as illustrated above - implies the risk of failure, i.e. the collapse of an institution also build up by voluntary efforts;
- in particular when being faced with a complex administration as in a large city like Hannover volunteer activists would lose control and - this is a concrete experience - find themselves being engaged in filling out one form after the other in order to fulfil the reporting requirements of a bureaucracy.

This is another aspect in understanding a Tauschring as a "finite system" - a contrast to the vision of integrating all and everything into a network.

Microeconomic and -social interpretations

Offe and Heinze developed their model "Kooperationsring" in the late eighties (first presentation in 1986; their major work "Organisierte Eigenarbeit" followed in 1990; see also Heinze, 1998 as well as Heinze and Olk, 1982). In order to utilize idle time contingencies it would be necessary to bridge the gap between private household production and the market economy - with the "Kooperationsringe" they suggested associations of 100 to 500 households.

In contrast to the sociologists Offe and Heinze, the economist Meier proceeds from an understanding of time which is not abundant but scarce. (She refers to the theory of the allocation of time by Becker, 2001; see also Schröder, 1992, in particular pp. 54-56, and Schroeder 2000.) Time is one, but not the only aspect in analysing Tauschring participation by applying the transaction-cost framework as developed in New Institutional Economics (Meier, 2001, in particular pp. 93-103).

On a first glance these approaches may appear to be a bit abstract, but they provide a great help to understand the scope as well as the limits of the exchange-rings. On a small scale, systems like the TTH offer a new dimension in the division of labour that helps to organize private activities in a more efficient manner and improves the quality of life. Scarcity of time provides an explanation of the stagnating number of members and the constraints with regard to the organization work that can be performed.

Also Schmidt et al. emphasize that Tauschring members need to have "time" at their disposal. They interpret this as a typical feature of a modern "Bastelbiographie" - people tinker about with their biographies (2001, pp. 19f; see also Beck, 1999 - for a critical view on this concept see Hartmann, 2001). Getting unemployed or divorced could be a motive to join a Tauschring, when the situation changes they might opt out and move to another social field.

Tauschringe - a modern "social club"

In order to understand the social character of a Tauschring it is suggested to interpret it as a very modern social club. Clubs, called "Vereine" nowadays face the problem of dwindling membership, but are deeply entrenched in German social life (for a survey see Agricola, 1997). The difference to traditional clubs is not only the non-hierarchical nature of the Tauschringe, but the fact that social life crystallizes not around just one purpose (like playing soccer or performing lieder recitals), Tauschringe are multi-purpose vehicles; any member brings in his or her own needs (cf. Deschle, 2001, p. 184). Their character as a social forum explains their attractiveness: a member has the option to develop (deeper) social contacts but can also keep its distance.

CONCLUSIONS

A Tauschring like the TTH is a small-scale attempt to overcome major trends like impoverishment, social segmentation, and commercialization. This experiment to organize social life beyond market and state is, however, exposed to the magnetic forces of the present socio-economic system. Nevertheless, its chances to secure a stable development also in the future are quite good. It will be essential to find the right balance between being innovative and conservative. It is not a well-established "club", but exposed to very dynamic forces with risks and possibilities.

Theoretical reflection, in particular in Germany, has problems to keep abreast of this development. This in particular is because the rise of the Tauschring movement had been associated with great expectations. Today, it should be clear that, and this is the optimistic presumption, the Tauschringe will receive another impetus and resume to grow - they are definitely not a substantial response to the profound social and ecological problems of our time. Theorists should acknowledge this and respect the practical groundwork performed by Tauschring activists. Research should make a distinction between - to use the British distinction - LETS schemes and LETSsystems (cf. Williams et al., 2001b, pp. 11f), between the existing Tauschringe and the vision of complementary currencies, a third sector, a dual economy or whatever. The latter refers to a completely different dimension; with regard to sizeable local economic systems one can learn from certain aspects of the exchange-ring experience but this means entering unknown territory. Anyway, theoretical variety has a value on its own, and many examples presented in this paper are encouraging - theory does not need to be detached from the world of the Tauschringe but can contribute also to its development.

ENDNOTES

1. The comparison between Bristol and Hannover is quite interesting; for the documentation of a conference with LETS schemes from the two cities which are twinned cf. Landeshauptstadt Hannover, 1998. [return to text](#)
2. A representative of the TTH has participated in almost all Annual Meetings of the German exchange-rings ("Bundetauschringtreffen"). The number of the German Tauschringe, including those which are not registered in any list, lies probably below 300; including the "Seniorenengenossenschaften" the total number adds up to well above 300. [return to text](#)

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