# Teatime politics: ethics and identity in the online debate about a tea blend[1]

## Política na hora do chá: ética e identidade no debate online sobre uma bebida

## Política en la hora del té: ética e identidad en la discusión en línea sobre una bebida

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**Abstract** *The paper outlines some aspects of an online debate concerning the changes in the Twinings Tea Company Earl Grey blend. The change was the news in some of the main British newspapers and was debated in digital social networks, where a discussion about flavour became an argument about nation and identity. This research focuses on the 389 online readers´ comments about articles published in* The Times, The Daily Telegraph *and* The Mail *and the Facebook page "Bring back our Twinings Earl Grey", framed in Habermas´ concept of discourse ethics. The goal was to highlight the main arguments and reasons pointed out by the readers. The analysis pointed out three main elements: (a) the discussion framed 'tea' not only as a product, but as the major aspect of British cultural identity; (b) there were several arguments concerning the fact that Twinings moved its factory to Poland, which makes it a 'foreign' company; (c) as a result, there was a public pressure on the company to change back into the former blend.*
**Keywords:** *Politics. Cultural Identity. Discourse Ethics. England.*

DOSSIÊ

**Resumo** *Este trabalho analisa como um debate online sobre a mudança de sabor de chá da fábrica inglesa Twinings tornou-se parte de um discurso político sobre nação e identidade cultural. A alteração foi notícia em alguns dos principais diários britânicos, repercutiu nas redes sociais e ganhou cores políticas. Foram analisados 389 comentários às matérias publicadas no* The Times, The Daily Telegraph *e* The Mail, *além de uma página no Facebook, buscando compreender as principais linhas argumentativas a partir de critérios da ética do discurso de Habermas, em sua aplicação à discussão no ambiente online. A análise apontou três aspectos: (a) o uso do chá para a politização de questões cotidianas que têm relevância moral e coletiva, implicando a reafirmação de uma identidade cultural britânica; (b) a crítica ao caráter "estrangeiro" da marca – a fábrica foi para a Polônia em 2010 por razões comerciais; (c) a influência na decisão da empresa de retomar o antigo sabor.*
**Palavras-chave:** *Política. Identidade Cultural. Ética do Discurso. Inglaterra.*

**Resumen** *El texto analiza como una discusión en línea sobre el cambio del sabor del té de la planta inglesa Twinings se transformó en parte de un discurso político sobre la nación y la identidad cultural. La alteración era noticia en algunos de los principales diarios británicos, repercutió en las redes sociales y adquirió colores políticas. Fueron analizados 389 comentarios de los textos publicados en él* The Times, The Daily Telegraph *y* The Mail, *además de una página en el Facebook, para entender las principales líneas argumentativas a partir de los criterios de la ética del discurso de Habermas, en su aplicación a la discusión en el ambiente virtual. El análisis señaló tres aspectos: (a) el uso del té para la politización de cuestiones cotidianas que tienen importancia moral y colectiva, implicando la reafirmación de una identidad cultural británica; (b) la crítica al carácter extranjero de la marca - la fábrica se mudó a Polonia en 2010 por motivos comerciales; (c) la influencia en la decisión de la empresa para volver al antiguo sabor.*
**Palabras clave:** *Política. Identidad cultural. Ética del discurso. Inglaterra.*

The conditions and possibilities of the occurrence of political discussion online has been submitted, in the last years, to various types of analyses which aim at understanding how the interactions which take place in different spaces of internet constitute themselves as indicators of the degree of participation and involvement of individuals and groups in the discussion about subject matters they are interested in. On the web (and also outside it), people talk about their problems and prosaic needs, thus developing the affective bonds of empathy and proximity, but they constantly resume and reformulate codes of appurtenance and union. The most stimulating fact is to perceive that the informal conversations on the web acquire a political character, less because they have as object a subject matter undeniably associated with the world of formal politics and more because they begin with subject matters of everyday life (hobbies, values, tastes, songs, cultural preferences, habits, etc.), which give rise to opinions, positions, justifications, contestations, offer of reasons which can be understood and accepted. Finally a concrete exchange of arguments, that transforms fluid and dispersed conversations into dense debates which aim at the reciprocal and constant explanation of viewpoints.

Generally the occurrence of debates is linked to the notion of public sphere, proposed by Habermas (1989, 1997), thought in its possible adjustment to digital media. Nevertheless one cannot affirm that the presence of different publics and perspectives in discursive spaces online automatically transform, internet into a public sphere. The prudence used in pointing out these spaces, as potential public spheres derives from the fact that the different types of its discursive architecture have the potential to restrain as well as to facilitate the inclusion, the use of reason, the reciprocity and the clear explanation of the premises which sustain the opinions emitted by the interlocutors (MARQUES, 2011). Thus it is necessary to consider the potential of the web architecture for sociability, for the production of conflict and public contestation of viewpoints and arguments. Recent studies articulate conceptual patterns with the empirical observation of the deliberation online about specific

questions, at the same time in which they discuss to what degree the conversation between actors established in dialogic spaces of internet can reveal the intention or the effective use of a practical communicative reason with a view to understanding (MARQUES, 2010, 2011; MAIA, 2011; MAIA e GOMES, 2009; GOMES, 2011).

This study analyses how an apparently banal online debate – the changing of the flavour of a tea blend of the English factory Twinings – became part of the political discourse of the affirmation of cultural identity. Reverberating in the social networks, the debate became denser, argumentative and reflective. The process of the politization of the conversation about everyday life subject matters is the one that allows a move from an interaction level, characterized by a more intuitive communication (guided by identifications and feelings) to a level of discursive interaction in which the citizens start discussing about questions of public interest, constructing preferences, reflecting on their own needs, considering and promoting reasons able to broaden that which is understood as common good. Politization diminishes the degree of dispersion and disorganization of ordinary speeches, permitting the move of level from sociable conversation to political discussion, which requires clear position taking and reciprocal defence of viewpoints.

We analysed the 389 comments the public had given to the news-program and they were published in the newspapers *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Daily Mirror* – in political terms, the first would be of "centre-right-wing", the other of right-wing –, besides a page against the change on Facebook. These data were evaluated on the basis of the normative principles of Habermas´ discourse ethics applied to the online space. It is important to emphasize that it is not a mere transposition, but the attempt to use the normative principles as the horizon for the construction of analytic variables. Thus we sought to identify the main agents´ statements, arguments and contra-arguments in order to observe the logic of rational justification which structured the debate.

The comments were arranged on three axes, which constitute the parts of this text: (1) the relations of discursive construction online of

a cultural identity; (2) the properly political aspects of this construction; (3) a short examination of the main types of the arguments that were used. For reasons of clarity, the comments are distributed as indented paragraphs on the whole length of text and the superscript numbers after each one indicates the journalistic text to which it was originally linked.

Before beginning the actual analyses of the argumentative online exchange, it is appropriate to briefly situate the question concerning the tea flavour which became the focus of the discussion

## The invented tradition of tea

Maybe few elements are associated with a British mythology like the "five o´ clock tea" "the combustible which feeds Great Britain" (WALSH, 2011). Among the elements which Barthes (1996; cf. also HALL, 1997) considers to be the structuring elements of "mythology", it is possible to decipher this semiotic construction, disseminated by mass media, as part of a discourse linked to a whole British ritualistic. The sign "five o´ clock tea" became the index of a Britishness" – the concept would be "Britishness" – imaginary and imagined, close to what Hobsbawn and Ranger (2007) call "invented traditions".

Coming from Asia, tea disembarked in Europe in the 16th century, soon supplanted by coffee as the favourite non-alcoholic beverage – except in England (MOXHAN, 2009), the demarcation factor of a "we" and a "they"", idiosyncrasy of the "Britishness" such as the maintenance of the pound sterling with relation to the Euro and the resistance to the use of the metric system in favour of "pounds" and "pints", for example. In the course of the 18th and 19th centuries, whilst the relations between England and the regions that produce tea become intensified with the establishment of a British colonial regime, offer increases, consumption is disseminated among the bourgeoisie and, later on, with different qualities, among the rising working class that survives in the suburbs of cit-

ies such as London and Manchester (PETTIGREW; RICHARDSON, 2008; MOXHAN, 2009).

The invention of traditions concerning tea consumption, in England, occurs during the building up of the colonial regime in the Victorian Era. Tea becomes popular in England at the same time in which the British Empire constitutes itself as one of the mains actors in the international relations in the 19th century, represented by the Victorian progress and triumphalism (MAIR; HOH, 2009). 'Tea time" is a symbol of that time and tea becomes a representative of a "Britishness" maintained until nowadays.

In the episode we analyse in this study, one of the most traditional tea manufacturer of England, *Twinings & Co.*, founded in 1706 by Thomas Twinings, decided to alter the flavour of "Earl Grey" tea in June 2011, the central point of the analysed discussion. The year before, 2010, due to economic questions, the company closed its factories in Great Britain and transferred the production to Poland.

## The political problem of cultural identity

The process of the building of identities, grounded upon the problem of representation, can be thought on the basis of some premises developed above all in the domain of the reflections on the so-called "post-colonialism" and "post-feminism". In an initial definition, we start from the principle that identities are, among other things, discursive constructions that are arbitrarily and historically defined. Identities and alterities, the concepts of "we" and "they" are inscribed in discourses that define them, stipulating their story and a genealogy which warrants their validity in a process of legitimization.

Discourses are power relations and, at he same time, they are built in power relations. The inscription of something in a discourse depends on the production conditions and power relations which guide the construction of this discourse. It is in this sense that the affirmation of identi-

ty and the representations of identity become a political problem since it is not enough to want to be "be someone": the right to publicly display a representation and affirm it as identity must be conquered (MARTINO, 2010). The conquest of the political autonomy is linked to the acquisition of an active condition in the formulation of discourses about oneself (and also to the individuals´ involvement in a net of communicative relations with the others), the right to define oneself within one´ s own viewpoint, and not as a category in the discourse of the others (BENINGTON, 1991; WA THIONG'O, 2006).

The discourses define and are defined in the categories of the classification of reality that exist in their origin (LIMA, 1983). Discourses gain concreteness and force from different narratives which circulate in the media and in our daily speech and which act in an individual and collective way connecting and separating the subjects, sharing and denying that which they have in common.. When we "relate" the other, affirms Bhabha (2008), that is to say when the other is presented in my discourse I tend to classify him according to a specific logic. It is not rare that I tend to mould him by means of representations which express judgements, institutionally shared values and which help to insert him in a place defined in the order of the discourse, or outside it. In the following example, the criticism of the transference of the Twinings factory to Poland implies the narration of the fact: Polish taste is "narrated" by the British and made responsible for the change:

> Market research was done in Poland so of course the tea tastes bad, the national dish is beetroot soup! If it looks like dishwater and tastes like it too, you're onto a winber in Warsaw!
> Soothsayer, Avalon.[4]

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[4] WATKINS, A. We're pining for our old Twinings: Furious Earl Grey drinkers dismiss new recipe as 'an affront to tea. *The Daily Mail*, London, August 28th 2011. Available on: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2030922/Earl-Grey-drinkers-dismiss-new-recipe-affront-tea.html. Access on January 6th 2011.

But and when this "other" does not subordinate himself to be narrated in the conditions in which I put him in my discourse? In this case, the power to situate him in representation categories is questioned in his auto-presentation as evident. In the complexity of social life, identity discourses articulate themselves and transform themselves according to an *ethos* which defines representations, practices and actions since they are no singular events, but they are linked to signification and meaning webs (WOODWARD, 1997; HALL, 1996, 1997). The example below extracted from the comments given to reporters of *The Mail*, illustrates this position:

> Nobody makes tea like the English so when they moved to poland I stopped buying it, I've horrible memories of eastern european tea, yeuch! Richard, Worcester, UK.[5]

It deals with the prerogative of formulating its own discourse on oneself and to warrant the validity of this discourse in the public space. The multiplicity of visions of the world, reminds Habermas (2007, p. 140), renders urgent the questions of the conviviality with he other, who can only be understood out of a communication relation. By using Mead´s notion of "generalized other", Habermas affirms that the communicative act aims at reaching the other, allowing that we put ourselves in his place (*ideal role taking*), thus broadening the individual horizons of moral judgement through the "experience of alterity.

Habermas (2004) emphasizes that the development of a discourse ethics invites the individuals to seek to broaden their horizons of the perception of the questions, bearing in mind that which they understand to be the best for everybody. In general, the ethics of discussion aims at elaborating normative and procedural principles which guide collective debates between plural subjects (and autonomous to decide how to

[5] WATKINS, A. We're pining for our old Twinings: Furious Earl Grey drinkers dismiss new recipe as 'an affront to tea. *The Daily Mail*, London, August 28th 2011. Available on: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2030922/Earl-Grey-drinkers-dismiss-new-recipe-affront-tea.html. Access on January 6th 2011.

live their lives in a better way) in an attempt to solve moral conflicts by means of the argumentative exchange (without coercions of violence and power) in which the interlocutors are seen as equally worthy to be considered dialogue partners. The reflective discussion enables us to express our desires, feelings and needs so that we recognize those which belong to the domain of personal judgement and those which should be shared and understood as belonging to the collective space of justice, norms and rights.

It is in this sense that Habermas traces a distinction between ethical questions of a good life and moral questions of justice. The first concern the individual and private decisions about actions to be taken and about the formation of private identities. The moral questions would be linked to the regulation of conflicts between contradictory spheres of interests, considering that which is equally good for everybody. On the one hand, ethical questions embrace the respect we have for ourselves and, eventually, the respect others have for us. On the other hand, the moral questions would deal with "the symmetrical respect which everyone manifests for the integrity of all the other people" (HABERMAS, 1989, p. 9). But this symmetrical respect can only be built up if each individual, out of his own experience, puts himself in the other´s place s and perceives him as worthy of respect. At the same time, Habermas points out that:

> The ethical questions do not absolutely require a complete rupture with the egocentric perspective; they refer to the *telos* of my life. From this viewpoint, other people, other life stories and spheres of interest gain meaning only to the degree that they are united or linked to my identity, to my life story, and to my sphere of interest in the space of our way of life shared inter-subjectively. My formation process completes itself within a context of traditions which I share with other people; my identity is also marked by the collective identities, and my life story is inserted in a context of life stories which intermingle. To this degree, life which is good for me also touches the ways of life we have in common. (HABERMAS, 1989, p. 9).

Thus, on the one hand, ethics is not ruled by the "egocentric limita-tion to the individual preferences, but it warrants the reference to a life story which is always linked to traditions and ways of life inter-subjec-tively shared" (HABERMAS, 2004, p. 40). On the other hand, the ar-gumentative evaluation of moral questions always remains linked to the personal perspective (which is determined by my auto-comprehension). Thus it depends on the subjects´ capacity to bring their private life-stories near to the life-stories of others who share with them a common and symbolical cultural frame.

An individual´s practices, as well as his discourse, his representa-tions, tastes, and systems of world classification establish a link between him and the social spaces with which he is associated. Identity is build-ing itself and is modernizing itself in the practices , it is woven in the acts of everyday life, in the link to something familiar in its position within a web of meanings in which he recognizes himself and identifies himself as "I" The representations gain materiality in the discourses and practices which permit his identification. In the following comment, we can observe the dimension of these representations in the materiality of products and brands:

> It's one thing the Daily Telegraph replacing it's Old English font for a modern drop shadow interpretation, it's something else again when Rolls Royce who put the Luftwaffe on a back footing as the engine of the leg-endary spitfire are now owned by a german firm, but when Twinings leg-endary Earl Grey Tea is tampered with to a detrimental effect, I think it really is time to consider calling it a day...
> Simon Love.[6]

In this sense, identity could be defined not only as something one has, but as something one practises and builds up in relations. The

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[6] BROWN, A. Earl Grey tea is back: Twinings gives in to outraged tea-drinkers. *The Daily Telegraph*, London, Au-gust 31s 2011. Available on: http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/andrewmcfbrown/100102578/earl-grey-tea-is-back--twinings-gives-in-to-outraged-tea-drinkers. Access on 6th January. 2011.

possession of an identity, in the sense of something which allows the individual to say "I am", translated itself, in fact, into "I do this, I act in this or that way, I believe in this or that idea, I see the others in this or that way, therefore I am". What makes of identity a political problem is less the affirmation of an appurtenance or of an auto-understanding and more the confrontation between this auto-understanding and the judgement formulated in the domain of alterity Nevertheless the point here is not to defend a "politics of identity", or the defence of personal identity or that of a group in response to depreciatory stereotypes, but to reveal to what extent rational defence of a sense of appurtenance to a space is constantly made in opposition to another. This becomes clear in the argumentation concerning the transference of the factory to Poland:

> Twinings moved production to Poland, causing British job losses, so I no longer buy Twinings products. That is people power.
> Colonel Mortimer, Ubique, EUSSR.[7]

> Hmmm. If the British are not good enough to produce Twinings... Why should us British Buy it ???? Get the point Hmmm NO...
> Mike, West Midlands.[8]

Thus the consumption of a tea blend, a banal practice, is being deciphered in the link to an imagined genealogy of the representation of a certain "Britishness" expressed in the minor acts of everyday life. As all this indicates, these elements gain force and are amplified in the virtual space.

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[7] TEA FOR VICTORY: Twinings saves original 300-year-old Earl Grey. *The Mail on Sunday*, London, September 10th 2011. Available on http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2036058/Tea-victory-Twinings-saves-original-300-year-old-Earl-Grey.html. Access on January 6th 2011.

[8] TEA FOR VICTORY: Twinings saves original 300-year-old Earl Grey. *The Mail on Sunday*, London, 10 set. 2011. Available on: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2036058/Tea-victory-Twinings-saves-original-300-year-old-Earl-Grey.html. Access on January 6th 2011.

## Representation and identity in the online debate

The potential of the various dispositives and spaces of internet for the formation of a public discussion space is being the object of intense debate among researchers. The advent of internet as a space of social interactions in the last twenty years has been generating an increasing number of studies which seek to understand how the questions discussed about identity are articulated with and on the online space. It is possible to find ruptures as well as continuities between the identary constitution in the real world and in the virtual world (GARCÊZ, 2011).

We understand that there exist specificities deriving from the very architecture of the online discursive spaces, such as the potential for bringing about an identity only imagined before, or in the relations between invisibility and vigilance, which re-configure the problem of identity with the help of technological dispositives. One can think, with Vilches (2009, p. 39), that "the more the individuals perceive and represent their own identities, the better digital communication works". Identity and community are being formed around "discourses shared by the members who inhabit the trans-national virtual space of computers and of internet" (MARTINO, 2009, p. 145).

This does not mean to think identity *from* a technological point of view, which would be close to a certain determinism, but to observe articulations, inter-relations and disseminations in the flux of the various identities within a space, in which the idea of "individual" gains new outlines without completely dissociating itself from the former. (MITRA, 1997 p. 58). As Castells reminds (2011, p. 49), in the network society the dynamics of domination as well as those of resistance structure themselves out of the formation of networks and one cannot disregard the formulation of attack and defence strategies coming from these networks. At risk of the reification of technology, it is necessary not to leave aside the humane dimension of its practices.

In this sense, and exclusively in this sense, there is no discourse in the virtual space which does not have any latent existence in the space of the

social relations offline. The form of the social interactions on internet respects and uses the possibilities of this communication architecture, but it does not determines the contents which are related to the values, significations and meanings of the cultural context in which technology and users are bunched together. One of the comments belonging to the *corpus* indicates this relation. The person who created the "Bring back our Earl Grey Tea" page on Facebook, mentions the attempt to be listened to by the traditional channels of the company and how, in front of the failure in this relation, she decided to bring the discussion to the space of the social networks:

> I set the page up on Facebook as I was so upset by the taste of the 'new and improved' blend I bought without realising the change. Correspondence with Twinings PR resolved nothing so I thought I might be able to change things via Facebook. If all who hate the changed blend like the page and we get enough we might be able to do something.
> Hilary, Nottingham, England.[9]

In the space of the online debates these questions express themselves in the posture the actors exhibit in front of their peers. They question the extension of the alterations which the possibilities of online social interaction provoke in the individuals´ positions. To what extent the possibility of a questionable anonymity – see Lemos (2010) – opens space to the manifestation of opinions and viewpoints which would not be sustained by the same actors in a face to face interaction? Would the authors of the comments that bear a nationalist tenor about tea express their viewpoints in a visibility situation?

The construction of representations and identities online expresses a political tenor since, in the virtual space, people find the possibility of forging bonds between themselves and other individuals who are linked to this same identity/representation of whom they would otherwise be separated. This applies to movements stimulated by the quest for "ac-

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[9] WATKINS, A. We're pining for our old Twinings: Furious Earl Grey drinkers dismiss new recipe as 'an affront to tea. *The Daily Mail*, London, August 28th 2011. Available on http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2030922/Earl-Grey-drinkers-dismiss-new-recipe-affront-tea.html. Access on: January 6th 2011.

knowledgement" (HONNETH, 2003) and respect for minor positions within society as well as, in a negative value, to groupings that freely preach the hatred for other social groups.

The following example characterizes this definition of frontiers in the contrasting register of the discourses. The auto-entitled "Starfinder" and "The Serf" criticize the fact that the tea is being produced in Poland, using as a rhetorical strategy, a satire-on the Slave phoneme "inski". In the answer, "kkk" defends his position with a rational argumentation:

**Argument:**

- Stopped buying Twinings when they sacked their English workforce. I will NEVER buy Twining's again! Who would buy POLISH TEA? What a JOKESKI!
  The Serf, uk.[10]

  I also stopped buying it when it became Twininski..:)
  Starfinder, galaxy.[11]

**Contra-argument:**

- About Poland, dont blame the polish for UK goverment alowing for companies to take their jobs overseas, if I was british I would be getting together and make the goverment end companies taking jobs away from this country. Its not only twinings problem is bigger, IT industry loses thousands of jobs a month to India and then you also give billions as aid away to same country. Like what?! The country that has space program which u dont have.
  kkk, Tartu.[12]

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[10] WATKINS, A. We're pining for our old Twinings: Furious Earl Grey drinkers dismiss new recipe as 'an affront to tea. *The Daily Mail*, London, August 28th 2011. Available on: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2030922/Earl-Grey-drinkers-dismiss-new-recipe-affront-tea.html. Access on January 6th 2011.

[11] WATKINS, A. We're pining for our old Twinings: Furious Earl Grey drinkers dismiss new recipe as 'an affront to tea. *The Daily Mail*, London, August 28th 2011. Available on: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2030922/Earl-Grey-drinkers-dismiss-new-recipe-affront-tea.html. Access on January 6th 2011.

[12] WATKINS, A. We're pining for our old Twinings: Furious Earl Grey drinkers dismiss new recipe as 'an affront to tea. *The Daily Mail*, London, August 28th 2011. Available on: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2030922/Earl-Grey-drinkers-dismiss-new-recipe-affront-tea.html. Access on: January 6th. 2011.

In both cases the political dimension is similar: it is the link to a representation and to a discourse in which the actor identifies values, proposals, and a shared vision of the world based upon a communication relation. According to Habermas (1984, p. 64), the vision of the world and the ethical horizon of expectations act in the formation and stabilization of identities, providing the individuals with a set of basic concepts and presuppositions which cannot be changed without endangering this representation. On the one hand identity is linked to the dissemination, in the virtual space, of a discursive representation in which the individual is reflected. The search for acknowledgment with regard to other representations and identities makes the question a dispute which invites people to reflect, to formulate arguments and contra-arguments in the attempt to define what the issue is, who can take a position about the subject matter and what kind of situation or public scene is being constituted when such a dispute is enunciated.

The *voluntary* element of the online conversation, the will to make one´s own viewpoint known (and potentially accepted) by the other interlocutors, leads us to the question of deliberation – the ideal process of public discussion, of inclusion and parity in which the participants use language rationally with a view to a reciprocal understanding in order to generate an action (HABERMAS, 2004). The deliberative process does not require that the individuals give up their interests and ethical conceptions of a good life, but that they broaden their interpretative horizons and frames of moral evaluation in order to reach ways to judge objectively the interests of the people who are involved.

This conception permits to think about the concept of "political participation" on the basis of Habermas´ theory (2007, p. 278), in a broader form than the involvement in governmental questions or in those of the State. The concept of politics, in this respect, refers to the possible elements of discussion with a view to the normative regulation of the interests and demands of the members of the community in relation to the dynamic of circulating powers. The discussion, in this context, becomes a fundamental element not only for democracy, but also for the creation

of bonds between the individuals who are part of a community and seek in the discussion and in the establishment of understandings to find the solutions of moral questions which concern the different participants of this community, and if it be the case, to obtain practical results. The following comment indicates this political form, in the broadened sense of the concept, by associating the tea flavour with a question of gender:

> "Earl Grey" tea is a drink for girls and confirmed bachelors. Same for Pimm's.
> Ryeatley.[13]

Said in another way, to like a tea flavour or not is an experience restricted to the realm of the private ethical sphere; to talk about this flavour, giving the discussion a tendency related to the politics of representation and identity, is to bring the problem to the public space of the reformulations of the moral evaluation frame. In this clarifying process, the participants of the deliberation must be able to "exploit and question what they really desire and what is good and just for them as well as for the others, so that it does not suppress the private interests of this reflection" (MANSBRIDGE *et al.*, 2010, p. 73). This way the conflict and the collective reflection on the interests of each of them can produce auto-understanding and political autonomy as well as mutual understanding Without this, it is possible that that which is defined as common good, the objective of every communicative action, be imposed by those who possess greater power of influence.

## Specificities of the used arguments

In this last part, we focus on the short analysis of the general discursive formulations that are present in the 389 comments collected for this

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[13] BROWN, A. Earl Grey tea is back: Twinings gives in to outraged tea-drinkers. *The Daily Telegraph*, London, August 31st 2011. Available on: http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/andrewmcfbrown/100102578/earl-grey-tea-is-back--twinings-gives-in-to-outraged-tea-drinkers. Access on January 6th 2011.

research. We note the presence of four main arguments elaborated by the participants. Actually there was no "discussion" in the sense of taking different positions, but we noted an overvaluation of the meaning of identification among the actors out of their arguments. We sought to observe the guiding principle of each argument, on the basis of the principle that by formulating it the participants of the discussion ground their expositions on a more or less rigid set of ethical presuppositions that guide their vision of the thematic question under discussion, an argumentative basis deriving from an *ethos* of the individual to which the discourse referred. The table below sums up these five types of argument observed in the *corpus*:

| Modality | Foundation | Argument | Contra-Argument |
|---|---|---|---|
| Political | Recourse to the sense of "community": we X they. | The brand is "Polish". | The change is not the Polish´s fault. |
| Emotional | Recourse to the authority of "tradition" and of the past. | Tea consumption is part of British identity. | Tea consumption is a question of class. |
| Cognitive | Analysis of the action of the company. | Change as a marketing action. | Action of failure "one does not repair that which is not broken". |
| Esthetical | Derived from a personal preference. | The new flavour is unpleasant. | The flavour in question was always unpleasant. |
| Meta-argument | Paradoxical loss of legitimacy of the discussion. | The question is futile. . | There is none. |

First of all we must emphasize that the attribution of a determined mark of origin for the argument does not absolutely mean exclusivity: an argument based upon a sense of community with a strong emotional appeal does not exclude a critical-cognitive dimension equally important. We only sought to emphasize the aspect, in each case, more prominently. To avoid the repetition of similar examples, we chose to point out the most representative.

The main argument, in numbers (47 comments, 12.8% of a total of 389), grounds on a political reason with recourse to the sense of a "British" identity in opposition to "Western Europe" or "Polish". The reason not to drink Twinings tea paradoxically is not related to the change of flavour, but to the transference of the production to Poland. None of the participants seems to evidence this route alteration – on the contrary, the argument is preponderant and bears stronger political colours.

In a close sense are the arguments which relate tea consumption to a "way of being" British and imply that the alteration of the "Earl Grey" flavour provoked an undesirable rupture with this tradition. With respects to this, these arguments suggest its substitution by brands which preserve the original recipes and the sense of continuity – the device is "Don´t mess with peoples´ tea. ":

> Don't mess with peoples' tea.
> R.D.McDowell, Pungoteague, VA, USA.[14]

> Thank goodness tradition is being preserved and common sense has won out.
> Heather, Bristol, UK.[15]

In this particular case, there is an emotional component – a dimension, as Castells reminds (2011, p. 147), parallel to rationality in politics – in the sense in which Habermas (2007, p. 15) mentions the role of moral feelings in the discussion as being responsible for the creation of empathy and solidarity: in two of the analysed comments, the participants relate the negative reaction of their elderly mothers – 81 and 91 years old respectively - to the change. In this aspect, it is important

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[14] WATKINS, A. We're pining for our old Twinings: Furious Earl Grey drinkers dismiss new recipe as 'an affront to tea. *The Daily Mail*, London, August 28th 2011. Available on: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2030922/Earl-Grey-drinkers-dismiss-new-recipe-affront-tea.html. Access on January 6th 2011.

[15] TEA FOR VICTORY: Twinings saves original 300-year-old Earl Grey. *The Mail on Sunday*, London, September 10th 2011. Available on: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2036058/Tea-victory-Twinings-saves-original-300-year-old-Earl-Grey.html. Access on January 6th 2011.

to point out a present contra-argument: one of the participants affirms that "only peasants drink tea anyway", evidencing a discrepancy of social class, inedited in the other comments. There are two answers, but, in fact, none of them resumes the main argument. There is not either a continuation of the exposition of any evidences that reinforce any side of the argument:

> Only peasants drink tea anyway.
> Liam, UK, 28/8/2011, 14:01.[16]

> Actually tea is historically an upper class drink, coffee is a vulgar americanism and common as muck across the world
> Matt Munro, Bristol, UK, 28/8/2011, 14:55.[17]

> I wouldn't know, as i don't drink coffee either. Peasant.
> Liam, UK, 28/8/2011, 18:22.[18]

Subsequently we also observe-the presence of a critical and cognitive basis in the argument, according to which it is a marketing strategy, but it is bound to fail:

> I suspect this is driven by some marketeer upstart trying to make a name -
> but one that will remembered for the wrong reason. Vote with your pound
> and do not buy this awful travesty of Earl Grey !!
> Henry Woodcock.[19]

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[16] WATKINS, A. We're pining for our old Twinings: Furious Earl Grey drinkers dismiss new recipe as 'an affront to tea. *The Daily Mail*, London, August 28th 2011. Available on : http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2030922/Earl-Grey-drinkers-dismiss-new-recipe-affront-tea.html. Access on January 6tj 2011.

[17] WATKINS, A. We're pining for our old Twinings: Furious Earl Grey drinkers dismiss new recipe as 'an affront to tea. *The Daily Mail*, London, August 28th 2011. Available on: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2030922/Earl-Grey-drinkers-dismiss-new-recipe-affront-tea.html. Access on January 6tj 2011.

[18] WATKINS, A. We're pining for our old Twinings: Furious Earl Grey drinkers dismiss new recipe as 'an affront to tea. *The Daily Mail*, London, August 28th 2011. Available on: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2030922/Earl-Grey-drinkers-dismiss-new-recipe-affront-tea.html. Access on January 6th. 2011.

[19] WHITWORTH, D. Shades of Grey: a storm in a teacup. *The Times*, London, August 30th 2011. Available on: http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/life/food/article3148593.ece. Access on January 6th. 2011.

Perhaps it is just another excuse of increasing the price so that consumers think-ing they are getting something more for their money – idiot neuromarketing psychologists who deludedly think it is the public that are the gullible idiots! Milkie.[20]

It's a storm in a teacup and a brilliant advertising campaign to get atten-tion to there product. (…) This was their plan all along, obviously. It will boost sales and they have gotten lots of free publicity.
Guest.[21]

New and improved, cheaper to make, tastes worse and costs more? That is called progress.
/g, Belgium.[22]

There is just one argument actually destined to discuss the flavour of the tea. The word "to discuss" would not be the most appropriate since there was no discussion actually, but the reiteration of a consensus – like, by the way, in the other arguments – with few dissonant voices. In this case, it is important to point out that these divergences did not occur in defence of the new flavour, but as a criticism of the blend "Earl Grey" in general and not only in the sense of the altered version.

As for Earl Grey tea, if the improved version tastes like dishwater, it can't be an improvement, because it ALWAYS tasted like dishwater, it is the most insipid tea you would never wish to pass your lips.
Euxton Stroller, Euxton, England.[23]

[20] LUSHER, A. Customers revolt as Twinings changes the flavour of its Earl Grey tea. *The Daily Telegraph*, Lon-don August 28th 2011. Available on: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/foodanddrink/foodanddrinknews/8727175/Cus-tomers-revolt-as-Twinings-changes-the-flavour-of-its-Earl-Grey-tea.html. Access on January 6th. 2011.

[21] BROWN, A. Earl Grey tea is back: Twinings gives in to outraged tea-drinkers. *The Daily Telegraph*, London, Au-gust 31st 2011. Available on: http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/andrewmcfbrown/100102578/earl-grey-tea-is-back--twinings-gives-in-to-outraged-tea-drinkers. Access on January 6th. 2011.

[22] WATKINS, A. We're pining for our old Twinings: Furious Earl Grey drinkers dismiss new recipe as 'an affront to tea. *The Daily Mail*, London August 28th 2011.Available on: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2030922/Earl-Grey-drinkers-dismiss-new-recipe-affront-tea.html. Access on January 6th 2011.

[23] WATKINS, A. We're pining for our old Twinings: Furious Earl Grey drinkers dismiss new recipe as 'an affront to tea. *The Daily Mail*, London, August 28th 2011. Available on: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2030922/Earl-Grey-drinkers-dismiss-new-recipe-affront-tea.html. Access on January 6th 2011.

Finally, comments that point out the futility of this discussion and put into perspective that the issue is the mobilization of almost four hundred people to speak about a tea flavour:

> Just to make you all realise, this is a cup of tea. Not everyone drinks it and not everyone cares, but the original has now been made available on-line. So stop moaning. What have you really got to moan about now?! Holly18.[24]

Considering the presented data, it is possible to point out that the fact of existing a politization of the online conversation does not necessarily lead to a rational, focused and dense deliberation, according to Habermas´ patterns of discourse ethics. But the exchange of arguments and the reciprocal justification occur in punctual moments, revealing a process which offers the people instants of reflection in which they bring into question their bonds, appurtenances, values, believes and habits. This movement of reflection is the political and expressive basis of the identities and it indicates that political subjectivation depends on the slow and prudent intermingling of conceptions of a good life that characterizes people´s existences.

## Final considerations

The logic of the argumentation and of the use of reason in the public space, in the analysed case, is more oriented towards the politization of daily conversation and towards the formation of a theoretical block, derived from the harmonizing of positions and used as an element of pressure on the company, than a properly free debate on the way in which

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[24] BROWN, A. Earl Grey tea is back: Twinings gives in to outraged tea-drinkers. *The Daily Telegraph*, London, August 31st 2011. Available on: http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/andrewmcfbrown/100102578/earl-grey-tea-is-back--twinings-gives-in-to-outraged-tea-drinkers. Access on January 6th. 2011.

the beverage reflects aspects of the British cultural identity. Nevertheless we note that the argumentation in the public space continues existing, aggregating political, representational and identary elements to the central problem, the change of the flavour of the tea, which in several moments remains on the second place. It is possible to suggest, more than a discussion, the reaffirmation of an interpretative frame which congregates in its discourses various arguments alien to the specific debate about the tea, although they belong to the semantic and rhetorical field of the reaffirmation of an identity.

Thus the involvement in the question seems to have represented, for the participants, the opportunity of reaffirming the links promoted by a national identity strongly affirmed in a relation of opposition we/they out of the identification of a double relation of "treachery" to Britishness up to then associated with the company. Such treachery is so much stronger because the owner of the "Royal Assessment" – in the participants´ opinion –, Twinings, in a double rupture with its status of representation of a British "way of being", altered a traditional flavour and moved his factory to Poland

The discussion of the subject matter was articulated on the basis of two main argumentation axes. On the one hand, the exclusive reference to the flavour of the product, criticizing the alterations that had been done, which in certain moments, implied the suggestion of returning to the anterior formula. On the other hand, the second aspect, perhaps more important since it can reveal a deliberative nature of the public sphere online, is an intense politization of the subject matter, observed above all on the basis of three argumentation factors.

We noted an intense politization of the subject matter, perceived above all in three main aspects: (a) the use of the subject matter as a criticism of the English policy, since the transference of the Twining factory from England to Poland in 2010, was used as an argument not only to criticize the new flavour, but also to suggest a boycott on the brand; (b) the association of tea consumption with a specific identity, a constitutive element of the auto-representation of a British "way of being "

("Britishness") and in this aspect, of political character; and (c) the public demand for influence in the decision making of the company: as a practical result of the online involvement of the people interested in the business policy of the company, the company decided to give up the new formula and use again the former flavour of the tea in question.

Thus the point is not the involvement only in a discussion about the alteration of the quantity of the ingredients of a tea blend, but it is the political debate on the various links of cultural identity related to the consumption of this beverage. It is an identity mythology which, when it is being challenged, leads to its immediate reaffirmation, in the reiteration of a representation of the identity as an element of affirmation of social spaces which the fight for the right of imposition of a representation transforms, in various respects, into a public space.

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