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Money: Anthropological Aspects

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Abstract

From its traditional concern with 'primitive' moneys and definitional quandaries over the nature of money in small-scale and nonmarket societies, anthropology more recently has considered money's meanings in multiple, overlapping spatial, cultural, and temporal milieu, as well as the pragmatics of money – what it does and how it signifies, rather than what it is or what it signifies. Early twenty-first century business interests in divesting the state of its monopoly over the legitimate means of exchange open new frontiers for the anthropology of money and value.

Early ethnologists were stunned by the range of things that seemed to be used as currency, from shells to braids of tobacco to giant, nearly immovable stones. Over the course of the twentieth century, several anthropological positions on money crystallized: (1) that 'primitive' is to be distinguished from 'modern' money in that the former is special purpose, employed only for exchanges involving certain things or transactions, or in specific, bounded domains of social life (say, marriages, death, or religious rituals), while the latter is general purpose, able to be employed for all manner of things and transactions, and across domains; (2) that special purpose moneys can be used for each of the Aristotelian 'functions' of money, different objects serving as means of exchange, method of payment, store of value, and measure of value or unit of account; (3) that, therefore, modern money is a universal or general equivalent, after Marx, and that it became the measuring rod against which all things and transactions can be evaluated; and (4) the colonial experience worldwide was one of the supplanting of local, special purpose moneys by modern, general purpose money that thereby; (5) deracinated and flattened objects' and relationships' meanings, purposes, and modes of evaluation by replacing them with one mode of value tied to the market logic of supply, demand, and price. By the 1980s, anthropology in most quarters had explicitly or implicitly essentially adopted an Aristotelian–Marxian–Simmelian perspective on money: as fulfilling the classic functions identified by Aristotle, as commensurating incommensurabilities and serving as a general equivalent as discussed by Marx, and as eroding 'social' or familial connection with the flat wash of anonymous money as argued by Simmel.

In the late twentieth century, however, money itself underwent several important transformations. First, many of the core European countries adopted a single currency, the Euro. The breakup of the Soviet Union and fragmentation of the Eastern Bloc countries into their constituent units led to the creation of new currencies, as well as the extension of the Eurozone eastward to new regions. Several countries adopted the US dollar as their official currency; others are informally dollarized; while the rise of China led commentators and everyday folk alike to question the US dollar's status as the global reserve and standard of value. Aside from their political and economic aspects, these interrelated phenomena spotlighted the relationship between money and sovereignty, money not just as a state project but as a symbol of the nation. Anthropologists explored this symbolism in a unifying Europe (Peebles, 2011) as well as in a former socialist world adapting to a market-based global economic order (Truitt, 2013; Lemon, 1998).

Second, informal flows of money from the global North to the global South reconfigured social and political relationships while creating the material conditions for transnationally distributed extended families. Coming into the twenty-first century, South–South remittance flows have become significant, reconfiguring political, familial, and financial relationships. Anthropological studies of remittances emphasized money's role in creating and sundering relations while serving as a means of communicative action (Hernandez and Coutin, 2006; Pedersen, 2013) and creating new collective identities. This work echoed earlier research suggesting that money mediates different temporal cycles, short-term exchanges in a marketplace vs longer term, durable and transgenerational relationships (Parry and Bloch, 1989).

Third, global financialization – the rise of finance as an industry in its own right rather than in the service of raising capital for productive enterprise – together with the use of market principles for governance, led anthropologists to look at the speculative aspects of money and credit. Marxist stories of abstraction, commensuration, and money as fiction excavated from informants' stories around the world led anthropologists to explore the spectral, fantastic, and magical properties of money. If Bohannan's interlocutors in the early twentieth century were struck by the capacity of modern money to equilibrate values and violate bounded spheres of exchange, the Comaroffs' were more spell struck, according to money magical powers wielded by the undead or witches (Bohannan, 1959; Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999). These themes were familiar to anthropologists whose earlier work had recorded peasants' explanation of the reproduction of money in terms of the intercession of the gods or devils (Taussig, 1980). Yet attention to credit and finance raises a particularly anthropological question: How to demarcate what counts as 'money' in ways anthropologists once did regarding so-called primitive currencies (Maurer, 2012).

Money and sovereignty, money and kinship, money and spheres of exchange, money and abstraction, spirits and speculation – these were the stuff of the anthropology of money at the end of the twentieth century. Anthropologists had come a long way from the old days of simply cataloging

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the great diversity of objects used as media of exchange or stores of value.

Several empirical realizations and theoretical shifts are beginning to make more complex these themes and to suggest others. First, anthropologists, as (for the most part) subjects of capitalist, modern societies, came to the study of money with their own folk theories of economics and value in place. Disabusing ourselves of the idea that practical reason is acultural (Sahlins, 1978) proved easier than culturally situating the idea of money as always a commodity. Anthropologists have been as surprised as their informants to discover that money is a collective illusion, that its representational logics often fail. Is it a stand-in for 'real value,' or is it 'really valuable' in and of itself? (Foster, 1999). Hart usefully reminded the field as early as 1986 that money is always both a token and a commodity, but this lesson, and his equally significant revelation that money is above all a recording device, a kind of externalized memory, are still sometimes forgotten (Hart, 1986, 2001).

Guyer's important revision of Bohannan situated his spheres of exchange as part of a broader colonial and slave economy of an Atlantic Africa with ties to Birmingham and Nantes (where manillas, the brass bracelets serving as a currency of the slave trade, were actually manufactured) and beyond (Guyer, 2004). Bohannan had argued that 'conveyances' within one sphere of exchange are morally neutral but 'conversions' across the spheres are morally fraught, with people wanting to convert up into higher prestige spheres but loathe to convert down (Bohannan, 1959). Putting transactions in a broader historical and geographical context Guyer found that one could make a conveyance in another region, returning with new items from another sphere to convert up closer to home. In other words, Guyer finds conversion, not conveyance, to be a generalized phenomenon, and one inextricably bound with position in a set of sometimes intersecting hierarchies and geographies. For Guyer, this introduces the necessity of placing rank and its associated numerical relationships of ordinality at the center.

Guyer's move, in turn, required a more complex engagement with number itself. Numbers are not just a priori logical givens and do more than count things. There are different metaphors, embodiments, and physical or metaphysical reference to numbers. Rather than seeing number, like (the myth of) modern money, as abstracting and commensurating, tout court (Crump, 1978), recognition of rank requires an expansion of the analytical vocabulary for different kinds of numbers and styles of quantification and enumeration (Verran, 2001). This is becoming a fruitful area for the anthropological study of money (Pickles, 2013) but has to battle the headwinds of analysis of 'neoliberalism' and financialization that still insist on viewing the world in terms of the unfolding of one logic of capitalist abstraction, and one valence of quantification (Appadurai, 2011).

Guyer herself takes up the variety of conversions among different orders of value and geographies in order to query the contemporary world of multiple currencies (Guyer, 2012). Most, she observes, are 'soft,' that is, they do not function as a store of value or a reserve, but as a means of exchange. In economies of soft currencies, it is the money supply and not its ultimate value per se that matters, and that keeps exchanges going. One does not hold money, fetishizing its value, but instead tries to keep it moving and, crucially, to convert up. It is this potential for conversions that preoccupies people. The borders between domains and positions, the temporal dimensions of exchanging 'up,' and a variety of units of account and measurement thus map out a program for empirical investigation.

Guyer's program emphasizes creativity, dynamism, and pragmatic action. Another line of thinking in the anthropology of money focuses on money's materiality. One might assume that this work is therefore more static or less historical. This is not the case. Anthropological linguists developing a material semiotics have found in money a useful demonstration of some of their theoretical stances. Keane and Kockelman, in different ways, emphasize money's materiality as a communicative medium. Keane argued that when money is material, that very materiality underdetermines money's semiotic content (does it signify because of the marks inscribed on it? does it signify because of its qualities of being heavy, smooth, shiny, brittle?) (Keane, 2001). This indeterminacy allows money to remain an open signifier (Foster, 1999; Rutherford, 2001). Kockelman likens money to infrastructure – that which carries value across time, space, and language, a communicative channel subject to being redirected, skimmed from, or destroyed (Kockelman, 2010). Similar work along these lines draws attention to the polysemy of numbers on banknotes (Strassler, 2009), counterfeit notes (Chu, 2010), or redenominated actual (Dzokoto et al., 2010) or spiritual (Kwon, 2007) moneys. These studies shift anthropological attention from what money signifies, to how it does so.

There is much merit in bringing together these new strands of anthropological thinking on money. From the shift away from ethnological obsession with simply cataloging the stuff of money, to the opening-up of the spheres of exchange paradigm, to the reconsideration of money and number, money and commensuration, and money and abstraction, anthropologists can begin to examine the complex monetary ecologies and repertoires in which, even in a postneoliberal world, people make and do money with each other. The task, however, remains difficult: anthropologists are like most other moderns in accepting the separation, for example, of quality from quantity, and the purification of these as distinct and irreconcilable domains (Callon and Law, 2005; Latour, 1993). Anthropologists also take money, along with number, as necessarily capitalist forms of abstraction. Here, the work of economic sociologists (Zelizer, 1994) remains useful in pointing out the zones and practices in which people simply do not use money to equilibrate or deracinate but rather to make distinctions and relations.

Anthropologists also kept alive the intellectual tradition that saw money as a form of credit and as the state's monopoly over finality in payment, as guarantor of the clearance, and settlement of exchanges. Economist Wray, who has been a leading voice for the recovery of state and credit theories of money, writes:

> Theories of money became increasingly simplistic and silly [after the 1970s] with the rise of New Classical, Real Business Cycle and even New Keynesian approaches to macroeconomics. Serious monetary

> research was left to the fringe in economics (Post-Keynesians, Institutionalists, Political Economists, Social Economists), or to other disciplines such as Sociology or Anthropology.
> (Wray and Bell, 2004: 3)

This alternative tradition in monetary theory has become important in the aftermath of the global financial crisis that began in 2008. As with prior large-scale economic crisis, this one fed a reconsideration of money itself. As in the 1970s, activists and others rediscovered time- and community-based moneys of account like Time Banking and alternative currencies (Maurer, 2005; North, 2007). Others, however, drew from metallist traditions, becoming latter-day gold bugs as well as advocates of new currency experiments based on monetarist assumptions and the idea that value derives from scarcity (Maurer et al., 2013). Some academics rediscovered chartalism or state theories of money, as well as credit theories of money (Graeber, 2011) that see money as alternately the product of the state's enforcement of the use of its coupon to pay taxes, or as a chain of debts the ultimate arbiter and enforcer of which is the state. Others, particularly mainstream economists, either held onto monetarism or awakened the Keynes that had been lurking inside them all along (Krugman, 2013).

Governments, too, have been experimenting with new forms of exchange. As already noted, several countries dollarized, yet some of these same countries have been exploring various experiments in 'social economy' and 'solidary economy' (Nelms, 2013), a reaction against the G8 club of powerful countries setting global economic policies and agendas, as well as an assertion of the new power of some countries of the global South like Brazil. This took place as the Euro itself faltered: Greece and Cyprus exemplified the challenges of maintaining a currency union in the absence of unified fiscal policy.

The infrastructures of money are changing. Money in the core capitalist countries is increasingly – for the wealthy, at least – dematerialized. Electronic payments have reduced cash use in some countries. Some governments and nonprofits have an explicitly anticash agenda (Bjorklund Larsen, 2012). Their thinking assumes that cash's anonymity makes it the preferred vehicle for criminal activity and tax evasion. Digitizing transactions simultaneously institutes an electronic record, which can be audited, monitored, and tracked. Often put in terms of efficiency and convenience, electronic money systems at the same time frequently function through publicly traded, corporate infrastructures such as the payment card networks (Visa, MasterCard), which levy fees for transit.

Yet the digitization of cash also poses for anthropology and the study of money more generally the age-old question of what money in fact is, how people use it and what they use it for. In a sense, the digitization of money represents a return to the recognition of money as a memory device, as a means of recording credits and debts. What distance is there, really, between the cuneiform ledgers of ancient Sumer and the electronic transactional databases recording many of the world's payments in the early twenty-first century? There is of course the obvious distinction that the ancient database was a public one. But Hart for one has argued for new political options and vocabularies for a world of transactional data:

> Once we accept that money is a way of keeping track of complex social networks that we each generate, it could take a wide variety of forms compatible with both personal agency and collective forms of association at every level from the local to the global. It is up to us to build them.
> (2007: n.p.)

The early twenty-first century seems to be a new era of experimentation with and on money. Professionals from across the information and communications technology and the payments industry held large conferences to reimagine the future of money. Often there was a slippage in their discussions between the future of the transit of or infrastructures for state-issued money, and the future of money itself – its potential disintermediation from the state, and the introduction of a Hayekian world of privatized, denational currencies. A further slippage ensues when so-called money innovators waver between imagining these currencies as tokens or as commodities valuable in themselves because of some presumption of their scarcity.

Still, the increased circulation of private tokens harks back to the era before the consolidation of national currencies and, in the United States at least, the 'wildcat' banking period before state banks were regulated (Helleiner, 2003). If anything, innovations in money's transit and form are reopening a debate over the role of central banks in creating money and setting monetary policy and in the boundaries of regulatory authority over the means of payment and value transfer. The EU in the early 2000s issued several directives that tried to draw a fine line between infrastructures for value transfer and value storage, the latter seeming to invade the state's role as warranting the token at the top of the 'money pyramid' (see Wray and Bell, 2004: 12).

The historical irony is that as private industry experiments with infrastructures of value transfer and storage, and as populism on the left and right of the political spectrum contributes to the delegitimization of fractional reserve banking and central banks more generally (and this article is being written at the centenary of the US Federal Reserve system), central bankers have been busy rescuing the economies of the core capitalist nations. And a few anthropologists have been conducting fieldwork alongside them (Holmes, 2009).

From curatorial interests in the curiosities of primitive moneys, to debates over spheres of exchange and earmarking, anthropologists have more recently emphasized that money is representationally complex, more complex than a story of deracination and abstraction will allow. Its materiality matters, and it is not just a symbol (of state, of value, of social relations, or of power) but a practice. People's everyday interactions with money, especially outside the areas of the world dominated by reserve currencies whose value is more or less stable (though fragile), tend to emphasize its means of exchange modality, for there is no sense in hording a thing whose value may evaporate tomorrow. The view from this world of 'soft currencies' (Guyer, 2012) and of complex repertoires of money, number, value, and social relations may ultimately have more to say about the involution and privatization of money in the early twenty-first century than that of the economists, monetarist, neoclassical, Keynesian, or otherwise.

See also: Economic Anthropology; Finance, Anthropology of; Infrastructures of Society, Anthropology of; Materiality and Culture; Property: Anthropological Aspects.

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