

UCLA

UCLA Previously Published Works

Title

The idea life of money and poststructural realism

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7836n47v>

Journal

Hau Journal of Ethnographic Theory, 5(2)

ISSN

2049-1115

Author

Appel, Hannah

Publication Date

2015-09-01

DOI

10.14318/hau5.2.029

Peer reviewed



BOOK SYMPOSIUM

The idea life of money and poststructural realism

Hannah APPEL, *University of California, Los Angeles*

Comment on Dodd, Nigel. 2014. *The social life of money*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

The social life of money is an extraordinary scholarly feat. Its eight chapters—Origins, Capital, Debt, Guilt, Waste, Territory, Culture, and Utopia—bring us from taxes to numismatics, from primitive accumulation to money as excrement and neurosis, from Bitcoin to the Eurozone. Complementing this breadth is sustained and often revelatory attention to the work of Simmel, Marx, and Nietzsche in particular, and a whole range of other theorists, many well known to anthropologists (Marcel Mauss, Jacques Derrida, Jane Guyer, Keith Hart, Viviana Zelizer) and others whose work we'd rarely associate with money per se—Benjamin, for example. If money's power and effects have been profoundly ambivalent, this book makes it clear that money has been unequivocally productive for the life of ideas. (In fact, I'd sooner call this book *The idea life of money*, but more on that later . . .)

Nigel Dodd makes two central claims. First, if money is anything, it is social, “indeed its very existence rests on social relations between its users” (2014: 8–9). Second, rather than a single form, money is multiple, a “field of variation” (48), a “repertoire” (355), and thus open to experiment and possibility. These arguments come together in Dodd's claim that “money is a *process*” (386; see also 272). In sum: in its sociality and multiplicity, money is better understood as a dynamic and unfolding process, not a static or referential thing. And it is money's qualities of social dynamism and unfolding that give it the “capacity for reinvention” (272) and rupture. Dodd arrays these arguments against various forms of monetary realism, and it is on this question of how we are to understand *the real* of money that I want to dwell in this short piece. To presage, I want to think with Dodd toward a *new real*, a post-monetary-realism real, a poststructural real. Or, somewhat less ambitiously,



how might the social life of money and the idea life of money lead us to understand *the real* differently? To get there, I want to lay a little groundwork, starting with a too-quick review of Dodd's discussion of monetary realism and its responses.

Monetary realism is the idea that money is a thing, an "objective entity whose value is independent of social and political relations" (Dodd 2014: 386). Classic forms of monetary realism argue that money derives its value from an underlying referent, whether gold, state power, or supply and demand. Realism, as Dodd puts it, "seeks to capture value's truth" (198). Monetary realism is constantly with us, not only in the gold bugs who bemoan the post-gold standard era, but also in mainstream rhetoric like "debt ceiling" and "fiscal cliff." These phrases "sustain the illusion that money is a thing: an entity that can be acquired, accumulated, and stored up, ergo, something a country simply runs out of" (386), rather than a wide variety of present possibilities. Money is something that banks, for instance, produce at will, or at the keystroke that confirms a loan. Money is arguably something that is made *present* by public debt, not absent (387). Money, in the form of Bitcoin, is something that can be mined by computers and verified through block chains.

The classical nineteenth century view of money "as a radical leveler that bleaches all color from the world and corrodes every distinction it encounters" (Dodd 2014: 270) is an adjacent kind of monetary realism. Both orthodox approaches from economics (Menger) or heterodox approaches from modernist critics (Marx, Simmel) (271), share a realist doxa—money as ontologically singular, homogenous and homogenizing, for good or for ill.

Dodd's argument about sociality and multiplicity counters these forms of realism, drawing on two related strains of critical theory. The first strain, directed against the thingness and referentiality of monetary realism, includes thinkers like Derrida or Baudrillard, and ideas about counterfeit and simulacra, finance as the endless play of signifiers that have lost their signs, and circulation adrift from underlying value. In the second line of thought, directed against modernist claims that money corrodes everything it touches, we get literature from anthropology and sociology, "which advances the view that money is richly embedded in and shaped by its social and cultural context" (Dodd 2014: 271). Here Dodd draws on the work of Zelizer and Guyer, Hart, Maurer, and Peebles, among others, and this is clearly the line of thinking with which he feels the closest kinship. It is from these texts that we get ideas about money as process, culture as constitutive of money forms rather than merely an external influence, money as a repertoire of scales, asymmetrical exchanges, and as an instrument of collective memory. Insofar as these arguments emphasize money's multiplicity and constitutive sociality, they "are crucial to our broader assessment of money's capacity for reinvention" (272).

I want to pause here to express a general anxiety about the work we imagine theory to be doing in the world. My anxiety does not take the form of a critique of Dodd, who I think might agree with me, but rather, "wary of critique, weary of it," I seek to escape critique and retreat "into the external world" (Harney and Moten 2013: 38). Here's my worry: In our deconstructive mood, anthropology and critical theory more broadly can *seem to* suggest that, in showing money to be multiple, flexible, and capacious, we have then somehow undone its power; that this mere theoretical assertion has actually undone the "real" power of money in the world. And yet, despite all that deconstructive work, we are all, differentially, still stuck



with both humdrum and deeply compromised decisions about, and capitulations to, money's hegemonic forms—minimum wage, no wage, 401ks, payday lenders, student debt, criminal justice debt. At issue here is a simultaneity. On the one hand we have an empirical insight: money is a protean process. (For the record, I agree.) On the other hand, we have the fact that money can and often does act as a brutal singularity. Analogies with deconstructive work on race or the state or gender come immediately to mind. To call race a social construction is, on the one hand true, and on the other hand, a tragically inadequate account of often-violently *real* experiences of racialization. Money, like race or the state, can still seem to act as an unassailable singularity. A thing.

For the great majority of people and certainly for my fledgling family, money does not feel playful or even like a repertoire. Laboring under \$70K of student debt, a mere principal amount subject to the “miracle” of compound interest (Dodd 2014: 147), money is too real and too scarce, even with my (too rare) tenure-track job. Dodd acknowledges the particular form of postcrisis realism to which this gestures, noting that “it will be increasingly difficult for individuals to sever their links with mainstream finance, particularly when they are drawn into financial obligations as debtors from an increasingly early age, for example, as students” (393). With Ferguson, Missouri making twenty-one percent of its municipal budget off of criminal justice fines (and incarcerating those who cannot pay, Shapiro [2015]; ArchCity Defenders [2014]) one could add criminal justice debtors, or medical debtors (the primary contributing factor of bankruptcy in the United States) to Dodd's insight.

Here, I am not only gesturing to a postcrisis “reversion” to realism (Dodd 2014: 198; Roitman 2013), but toward the ambivalence, the two-ness of money as a lived practice—its obduracy *and* its contingency, its inescapable thingness *and* its processual slipperiness. The real of money's social life, indeed of social life at all, is made of both. Holding these analytic poles in tension, as equally empirically true in the world, asks us to account for their copresence. How is it that both can be true? It is in this sense that I gesture toward a poststructural realism in which structure, underlying referents (foreclosed home to mortgage backed security), morality—all associated with monetary-realism—are not mere theoretical choices (am I a monetary realist or not?) but lived experiences and political projects that constitute the social life of money.

Despite my own experience with money as singularly powerful, I also know it to be subject to experiment and rupture, both theoretically and practically. I have been involved with various forms of radical experiment in the space those convictions open up (Appel 2014), and Dodd cites one of these projects—The Rolling Jubilee (2014: 201–2). A too-simple reading of his argument (and one he explicitly anticipates, 272) might allow us to imagine the experiments enabled by money's multiplicity as idyllic spaces of creativity, self-realization, solidarity, and potential. Of course there's some of that, but the work of experiment and reimagining, especially when it takes place around something so central to the exercise of power as money, is beset with compromise, conflict, risk, uneven vulnerability, and even violence. Experiment and rupture often sound romantic in intellectual endeavor, but the projects with which I'm involved most often feel burdensome (so much work!) when they don't feel downright frightening, coming as they do with serious, unequally distributed consequences. A quick ethnographic glimpse at the Rolling

Jubilee, the Strike Debt project from which it came, and the Debt Collective/debtors union project toward which it is moving, gives a sense of the simultaneity at issue here—a new real in which money’s realist forms (indexed to state power, for instance) endure as political *projects* (not theoretical truths) alongside money’s capacious potential.

Strike Debt, Rolling Jubilee, and the Debt Collective have clear theoretical genealogies in the vast literature Dodd analyzes—somewhere between Norman Brown and Benjamin’s conviction that the debtor “eventually gathers the presence of mind, and sufficient courage, to default” (Dodd 2014: 158) and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s argument that, “in the age of global capital it is through finance . . . that the multitude could assume its economically most radical forms. . . . Finance is a vast realm in which we can track down the specters of the commons” (248–49). The Rolling Jubilee buys distressed medical debt and private student debt for pennies on the dollar on secondary markets (as debt collectors do) but rather than collecting on that portfolio, abolishes it. As of this writing (March 2015) Rolling Jubilee has abolished \$31,982,455.76 (USD) of distressed debt, thanks to the shocking leverage ratios of secondary debt markets, and more recently, a small ethical earthquake in the for-profit college debt market.

So what does the Rolling Jubilee *do*? Certainly it provides relief to a handful of those struggling with medical debt and private student loan debt. But our end game is not to crowd-source away illegitimate debt, which would be both politically undesirable and impossible. Rather, the Rolling Jubilee is a spectacular tactic—literally a spectacle that begins to draw attention to the ways debt circulates in widening gyres of accumulation by dispossession. The project shows people that the market value of their debt fluctuates radically, and can plummet to two percent of its value on the assumption that debtors are unaware of distressed debt markets, and always imagine that they must pay the debt collector one hundred percent *or more*. Debtors often understand debts as a dyadic and indeed personal relationship between debtor and creditor: the creditor lent to me, and I am contractually and *morally* obligated to repay (Dodd 2014: 90–94). But this dyadic image is misleading. These forms of debt are not intimate relationships between debtor and creditor. As Dick Bryan and Michael Rafferty (2010), among others, remind us, debt is not only a liability but also a tradable asset, a potential piece of a larger security, even fodder for lobbying power, as failing US banks made all too clear. Thus the Rolling Jubilee also encourages debtors to question the sanctity of the contract. Following debt’s rhizomic paths, the project begins to pry open the creditor/debtor dyad, showing debts’ proliferative form that to date, only creditors have been able to exploit. Again, as a tactic for building collective power this project is limited, but insofar as it begins to destabilize the sedimented moralities around consumer debt—that contracts are sacred, that everyone is equally obligated to pay their debts—it begins to erode some of the enduring realisms of the money form.

I intentionally “come out” about my family’s debt in this piece because the effort to reframe debt into a platform for collective action is as much an *affective* and *intersubjective* process as it is a process of political economic analysis. Indeed, countless debtors contact Rolling Jubilee and the Debt Collective, and each narrates a story of seemingly exceptional exploitation and pathos: chemotherapy treatment made mortgage payments impossible and the house was foreclosed as I lay sick in

bed; my student loan debt ballooned as I worked an unpaid internship and a part-time minimum wage job and I'm unable to pay off even the compounding interest. But of course these stories are not exceptional but ordinary. As Robert Meister argues (2013), today *credit* is as important a source of revenue for workers as wages and debt repayment is just as important to capital accumulation as taxation. "Just as the expansion of commodity production once required the global growth of labor force participation, so the expansion of financial asset production now requires the global growth of forms of indebtedness that are the social conditions of capital accumulation as we know it." With this shift, Meister points out, the financial sector has come to intermediate access to our means of subsistence—food, shelter, medical care, education—through debt. We fail to realize the radical potential of this collective shift in part because debt remains private and shameful. Debt is *afraid to pick up the phone or open the mail*; debt is *groceries on the credit card or the payday loan rolling over*. Debt is not, *Hi, I'm Hannah and my debt is potentially radical*.

The political endgame then is in collectivizing and mobilizing the leverage debtors currently have over the financial system. As the old banking adage has it, if you owe the bank one thousand dollars, the bank owns you, but if you owe the bank one million dollars, you own the bank. Student debt *alone* now tops \$1.3 trillion. We launched our first debt collective—the Corinthian 15—in February 2015. A group of deeply indebted former students of Corinthian Colleges Inc. (a fraudulent and predatory for-profit college that targeted veterans, single mothers, and the poor) made public their collective decision not to pay back federal student loans. "To the Department of Education and to the lenders, servicers, and guarantee agencies who have stolen our futures, we say: enough! Erase these loans" (<https://www.debtcollective.org/studentstrike>).

The Corinthian 15 strike took off like wildfire. Everyone from the *New Yorker* to *Black Agenda Report* to *Newsweek* covered it; within a week nearly one thousand additional current and former Corinthian students contacted us to join the strike, while thousands more debtors got in touch with the Debt Collective to see how they too might organize around their debts. Creativity! Self-realization! Solidarity! Sure, there is some of that. But there are also the specters of wage garnishment, tax return garnishment, social security garnishment for cosigners, trashed credit scores, and with them, difficulty accessing public housing, utilities, let alone further loans down the road. All of the Debt Collective strikers go through an in-depth intake process to assess their specific situation and to talk through the potential ramifications of their decisions. We also offer a suite of tactics that don't run the same risks of financial disobedience. But the risks of financial disobedience, the risks of experimentation, are *real*. (As are the countless and mostly tedious hours spent in meetings, on email, on phone calls, and in Google Docs hashing out details, reading inscrutable loan documentation, writing web or media copy.)

What is the relationship of the idea life of money to this particular account of the social life of money? Ideally of course, the former infuses, emboldens, destabilizes the latter, and vice versa, but in my own straddling of these worlds that relationship has felt more tenuous. In response to the endless letters and emails from debtors, more than anything, those of us who are "experimenting" are faced with our *profound inability* to address their problems. Having read (and intensely

enjoyed) Dodd's excellent book, having a PhD in economic anthropology, having sat in and organized countless seminars where people talk rigorously but somehow also idly about the perils of capitalism, I can't help but fantasize about a different real, in which our intellectual work could both recognize monetary realism as an often-successful political project *and* incite lived senses of rupture and possibility for those who pour their lives (and debts) into our inboxes:

Dear [Deleuze],

After years of stress and anguish under the strain of outstanding student debt (171K, most of which is interest on 25K original debt), I have come to the realization that the only way my debt will ever be \$0 is if I am dead. I am 55 years old and will never be able to repay it myself. I need to die to have the debt cancelled. Only then will my family be free of the unbearable and crushing debt we live with. I have two disabled adult children who depend heavily on me and I can't support them and make the student loan payments both. Thank you for your efforts in helping people with student and medical debt, though it is too late for me. God Bless you greatly!

I am not asking theory to be practical, or to be applied. I am not asking Deleuze to return the letter. Rather, I am asking us to harbor no illusions about the work theory does in the world; the work it does and does not do when confronted with the world. The social life of money knows no distinction between political projects of money's realness, and the empirical validity of arguments for multiplicity and potential. I am asking for theory that accounts for that.

References

- Appel, Hannah. 2014. "Occupy Wall Street and the economic imagination." *Cultural Anthropology* 29 (4). <http://dx.doi.org/10.14506/ca29.4.02>.
- ArchCity Defenders. 2014. "Municipal Courts White Paper." <http://www.archcitydefenders.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/ArchCity-Defenders-Municipal-Courts-White-paper.pdf>. Accessed March 26, 2015.
- Bryan, Richard and Michael Rafferty. 2010. "Deriving capital's (and labour's) future." In *The crisis this time: Socialist register 2011*, edited by Leo Panitch, Greg Albo, and Vivek Chibber, 196–223. London: Merlin Press.
- Dodd, Nigel. 2014. *Social life of money*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Harney, Stefano, and Fred Moten. 2013. *The Undercommons: Fugitive planning and black study*. New York: Minor Compositions.
- Meister, Robert, and Randy Martin. 2013. "Liquidity." Paper presented at Workshop on Theory and Contemporary Politics, cosponsored by Rethinking Debt, a Townsend Center Working Group and Forms of Survival and the Politics of Vulnerability, University of California–Berkeley, September.
- Roitman, Janet. 2013. *Anti-crisis*. Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press.



Shapiro, Joseph. 2015. "Civil rights attorneys sue Ferguson over 'debtors prisons.'" <http://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2015/02/08/384332798/civil-rights-attorneys-sue-ferguson-over-debtors-prisons>. Accessed March 26, 2015.

*Hannah Appel
Department of Anthropology
University of California, Los Angeles
375 Portola Plaza
341 Haines Hall
Box 951553
Los Angeles, CA 90095
happel@ucla.edu*