KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

Money as Struggle, Nationhood, Domination

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At the 2002 Meeting of the Society for Economic Anthropology (SEA), at which a keynote address by Maurice Godelier (l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales) was an exciting focus of attention, money emerged from the shadowy world of economics and accountancy to be revealed as an important element of imperial hegemony and as a central feature of class struggle. Beth E Notar (Trinity C) revealed the efforts of colonial powers, the Kuomintang and Communist guerrillas to establish currencies to elevate their particular political and economic rank among many competing forces. Mahir Saul (U of Illinois) discussed efforts of the French to establish the franc as the dominant currency in West Africa and deny continued use of cowries. Parading as a "civilizing mission," the campaign for the franc was an effort by the elites of Paris to destroy the position of traditional African elders and more fully control the destiny of a colonized domain.

Similar struggles arose with the framing of the US Constitution. The separate states had championed the privilege of coining their own currencies and were refused. Rather, the nation-state as a whole required a single agency of coinage. Yet, the struggle to establish more tertiary loci of power and independence has continued. Notar pointed out that during the past decade, a plethora of local currency systems have sprung up in the US. Drawing inspiration from Depression-era scripts, promoters of these systems cite as reasons for their circulation: attempts to keep money within the local community, support local production and ensure a fair minimum wage. While promoters of local currencies may not perceive themselves as social revolutionaries, they nevertheless are taking direct action against the hegemonic forces of national capital.

Monetary Developments in China

Notar's principal focus was on monetary developments in China during the 20th century, where a revolutionary currency—"People's Money" (*renminbi*)—ultimately became the official currency. When the Sixth Congress of the Chinese Com-

An American eagle dominates the world: A 1909 note of the International Banking Corporation for use in Canton, China, illustrated symbolic US hegemony. Courtesy of the American Numismatic Society, NY. Photo by B Notar

munist Party met in Moscow in the summer of 1928, a Comintern-prepared resolution for revolutionary economic development included establishing banks and a "unified monetary system." The pragmatics of funding a revolution overcame any ideological concern with money itself. The Chinese Communists justified the issue of guerrilla currency by describing it as a patriotic act, a form of "currency struggle" that was essential to the overall political and economic struggle. Because the Communist base areas were surrounded and blockaded by Nationalist troops, like "red" islands within a "white" sea, currency necessarily took on a territorial and political character. Currencies circulated within politically bounded places and defined the political character of the inhabitants.

Cowry and Francs in Africa

Mahir Saul presented a parallel discussion of the cowry in the West Volta region of West Africa, where he examined reasons for the successful rejection of the French franc by the local population for about five decades. European merchants had brought cowry shells (mollusks of the species *Cypraea moneta* and *annulus*) to West Africa from the Indian Ocean. In precolonial centuries, they were one of the international commodities traded at the Amsterdam and London exchanges and destined primarily for the West African trade.

Matrilineages or patrifilially formed house groups accumulated huge sums of cowries. In the hands of elders, these cowries were a means of controlling junior members of village communities. Cowries also were needed to pay for medicines, divination, burials (as payments and in ritual) and memorial funerals. For these and other purposes, young men and women were dependent on their male and female elders who controlled the funds.

In establishing colonial domination, the French administration became intolerant of the cowry economy, and by forcing its own money upon the population, created a situation of multiple currencies. West African elders resisted this intrusion for their own reasons, and other sectors of the society considered the French coins and bills a nuisance.

Colonial officials put most of the blame on women traders for resistance to French money and for the perpetuation of the cowry economy. Colonial coins did not lend themselves to the conventions of counting and storage that market women had developed for the shells; and the centime piece was too light and was easily dropped or misplaced. The paper bills shared these defects in an exaggerated form. Traders had to resort to the services of money-changers more frequently, with all the risks and costs that this involved. These are common problems in periods of monetary transition, even in the relatively much less-drastic moves in Europe from old francs to new francs, or most recently from national moneys in Europe to the Euro.

There also was a direct political awareness in the stance of African populations that opposed the replacement of cowries with colonial money. Cowries had become uniquely associated with African civilization (as they still are today), so that attachment to the cowry and a refusal to adopt colonial money was a way of defending the independence and sovereignty that they had possessed before the colonial conquest. The attack on the cowry was a symbolic attack on African history and culture; equivalently, it was an unacceptable assertion of European hegemony.

At the SEA Meeting, there also were two papers that demonstrated the symbolic and socially consequential use of money in the form of credit: a paper by B Lynne Milgram (York U/OCAD) focusing on financial advances to traders in the Philippines; and another by Kathleen Pickering and David Mushinski (Colorado State U) on local banking in the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. Issues of social inclusion, exclusion and domination were powerfully expressed in those papers as well.

Most of the papers presented at the SEA Meeting dealt with issues provoked by the most recent work of Maurice Godelier—the sacred, "keeping-for-giving" (when the "keeping" of a thing with great symbolic value facilitates the "giving" of other things) and related issues. All of these papers will be available next fall in the volume *Money and the Sacred: Essays in Economic Anthropology*, edited by Cynthia Werner (Texas A&M U) and myself.

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