

“Heads and Tails”: Money as a Poison Center

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by Lloyd deMause

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Money is strange.

It seems to be something quite useful – a convenient way to facilitate exchange and acknowledge debt.

Yet a simple experiment will show that money carries within itself more than just wealth. Take a ten-dollar bill and hand it to a friend. No explanation, just give it to him. A strange thing will happen. Your friend will feel uneasy about you, he may avert his eyes when he sees you, he may even avoid meeting you. The money you gave him seems to have transferred as much guilt as wealth.

If you take a careful look at the money you have given him, you’ll see its twin aspects of wealth and guilt quite clearly. One side is called “heads,” and it usually has on it a head—the part of us with which we enjoy pleasures, eat, smell, hear, look. It represents wealth, the goods side of money.

The other side is called “tails,” and it has on it symbols of death, guilt and destruction: tombs of dead people, birds of prey, branches representing sacrificial trees, etc. Even when the back portrays sexual symbols—as, for instance, the German twenty-mark bill does, with its phallic bow and female violin—they are shown next to a death-dealing bird, and thus represent sinful sex. These images represent the guilt, the bads side of money. Whenever you pass along money, you circulate both heads and tails, both goods and bads, both pleasure and guilt, both food and poison, both life and death.

This ambivalent aspect of money can be easily seen in the words with which we describe it. The German word Geld and the English word “guilt” come from the same source – Geld in Old German meant “sacrifice,” and has the same source as vergeltung, “revenge.” Similarly, gift in German means “poison” in English. In most languages, the identity of gift and

poison is found. The gift you gave your friend turned out to carry poisonous guilt with it.

Ever since Freud pointed out the anal origins of money, it has been common knowledge that money unconsciously represents shit and reflects our ambivalent attitude toward our body products. The rich are "filthy with money, "so rich they stink," bank officials are *Dukatenseheisser*, and debtors are "up to their necks in shit." As we used to say in the U.S. Army, "on payday, the eagle shits." This language reaches all the way back to the beginnings of money in early civilizations. The Aztecs called gold "the shit of the gods," while the Babylonians called it "the shit of hell."⁽¹⁾ The valued and the devalued have always been acknowledged to be combined in money.

But what is not common knowledge is that the earliest money only had one side, the guilt side. The very earliest money was probably shells, since they are found in Paleolithic burials. When shells have been used for money in early tribal economies, they in fact have not been used to facilitate the trading of goods at all, they were used solely for the magical circulation of bads-that is, of guilt. Let's see how this worked.

One of the best-known shell-money economies, ever since it was so well described by Malinowski in his *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*,⁽²⁾ is that of the Trobriand Islanders, who spend much of their time making shell arm-bands and necklaces and exchanging them in what is called a "kula ring" trade route. These money-shells are traded, however, quite separately from their barter system, where useful goods are exchanged. The useless shells are said to be traded for "prestige," and the more one gives away the more prestige one has.

But this anthropological explanation of trading for "prestige" begs the real question-why award prestige to someone because he gives away the most shells?

All early money economies – whether the currency used consisted of shells, hides, huge stone wheels, metal objects or woodpecker scalps – were similar gift-giving systems. Ever since Mauss's pioneering study, *The Gift*,⁽³⁾ scholars have tried to figure out why money began as something that you gave away and even destroyed rather than as something you used in trade of good.

One thing is certain about all this scholarship on gift economies-saying that these people are merely "generous" and "friendly" in these give-away rituals is not the answer. When a Kwakiutl man gets very angry at his neighbor, he takes some copper money and gives it to him in a gift-giving "potlatch" ceremony. saying Hap-hap-hap! I've eaten you. You are all in my belly now."⁽⁴⁾ He seems to have put his biting rage, not his friendliness, into his money. When he gives money to his neighbor, he

imagines he eats him up, kills him. Thus, Kwakiutls call giant gift-giving potlatches "fighting with property." When intertribal war was outlawed a century ago by white settlers, gift-giving as a substitute for war increased enormously, and "wars of property" became the central Kwakiutl institution at which tens of thousands of blankets and coppers at a time were given away, burned or thrown into the water.(5)

To understand what's really happening in these early money systems, we have to look at the personalities of those who invented them-which means we have to look at their childhoods. Kwakiutl parents see their children as giant mouths, as inherently greedy and destructive, and their literature is filled with images of babies who devour their parents.(6) Since the Kwakiutl live in a rich environment with plenty of food, it is obvious that these parents are projecting their own devouring need for love into their babies.

Then, in order to control what they see as needy, monstrous, biting babies, they subject them to severe impulse training: they tie them (swad-dle them) into cradle-boxes and keep them there for two or three years; they teach them to rigorously control their desires, to conceal their chewing, to feel guilty about all their needs. They frighten them with carnivorous animals-such as the Cannibal Bird, which cracks open your skull and eats your brains-and even act out cannibalistic rituals in front of them during gift-giving ceremonies.(7) In short, Kwakiutl children learn to be extremely guilty about everything they want, including simple love from their parents.

As a result, every time a Kwakiutl gets what he really wants-a wife, a big catch of fish, a new house he feels guilty. He solves this problem by holding a gift-giving potlatch ritual, where he dumps his guilt and his bad feelings into some blanket-money or copper-money and gives this guilt-money away with his bad feelings inside it. By sharing the guilt-money with his neighbor or by destroying it-throwing it into the fire or into the river-he feels much better. He can then enjoy his wife, fish or home without fear of his extremely punitive superego, without fear of upsetting his parents' severe strictures against pleasure.

It may be hard to believe that people can manipulate their bad feelings by putting them into objects. But we do it all the time. Psychoanalysts call it "projective identification," ever since Melanie Klein gave it this unwieldy name,(8) I like to use the term "injection" instead, both because it is shorter and because it conveys the feeling of "injecting" a poisonous substance with a hypodermic needle - since people who inject their bad feelings into objects invariably see them as poisonous.(9)

The psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion gives an example from his practice.(10) His patient comes into his office and is reluctant to lie on the couch. He looks intently at the analyst, shudders, glances briefly at the far corner,

and only then can lie down on the couch. He finally speaks: "I feel quite empty.. it's no use; I shan't be able to do any more today."

After analyzing the patient's unconscious fantasies of the incident, Bion reconstructs what went on unconsciously as follows. The patient came in feeling very needy and angry at Bion. When the patient first looked at Bion, he thought Bion's teeth looked threatening-that is, he had injected his own biting rage into Bion's mouth. He then imagined that Bion would bite him, so he was afraid to lie down on the couch, with his back to him. He then imagined he sucked up the biting teeth from Bion's mouth and placed them in an object in the far corner of the room, where he could keep an eye on them. Only then could he feel safe to lie down on the couch. Even so, having injected his emotions into another object, he felt empty inside, unable to feel his real feeling.

All sorts of bad feelings can be injected into what I have termed "poison containers." Biting rage, guilt, despair, needs for love, all kinds of feelings which are too dangerous to experience consciously are injected into money. Early money is nothing but a poison container. The Kwakiutl called their money objects yaklelwas, which means "bad things," a word that has the same root as "dead bodies" and "intestines." When they had their potlatch money-destruction ceremonies they said they were "wiping off the shame" from their body, like one wipes off shit, by giving money away or destroying it.(11)

All tribal groups invented systems to distribute their bad feelings. Hunting groups usually felt guilty about the game they killed and had kinship distribution systems to give most of it away to others lest they be poisoned by it.(12) Early farming groups had more complex guilt-sharing systems, gift-distribution economies similar to the Trobrianders and the Kwakiutls which circulated money as poison containers, systems which existed separate from their barter systems. The money poison containers themselves were, of course, both sacred and tabu - in New Britain, their shell-money was even called tambu(13) since that which is sacred always contains that which is dangerous and tabu.

The circulation of these poison containers was the central purpose of all early political systems. The group- fantasy involved was that the chief was so strong he could "digest" the poison and "rebirth" it into less dangerous form. The Tikopia, a Polynesian tribe, bring gifts to the chief, and he sings, "You shit here for me to eat/You have brought in a mighty feat/You have brought together/Your death-causing feast.(14) The chief accepts the gifts ("eats" them), cleanses their poisons with magic sacrificial rituals, and then distributes them as small gifts back to the people, reborn, purified of all bad feelings.

Poison-cleansing is, I believe, the main purpose of all social organization, whether economic (gift economies), religious (sacrifices) or political

(war).(15) When too much pleasure stirs up our punitive superego, we feel polluted with sinfulness, and turn to leaders who can reduce our pleasures through the destruction of goods. In modern societies, we accomplish this through bringing about a recession or through war. Those who most cleanse us of our bad feelings earn the most prestige. Those who, like Bismarck and Roosevelt, give us both a war and a major depression are naturally considered our greatest leaders of all.

Poison Money Polluting the World

A typical example of an early gift-giving system and its cleansing functions can be seen in a North Indian village area, the Saharanpu District, where the lower castes give food and other objects to Brahmans in order to "remove the evil" from themselves and transfer it to the elite caste.(16) The sinfulness-the pollution to be transferred – was considered so dangerous that it is said that the receiver was "he who, having accepted many gifts, feels as if he had swallowed poison." The Brahman is expected to "digest" this poison, both through ritual means and through redistribution of some of it in further transfers. For this he earns the most prestige, the most thanks of the other castes, because he cleanses them of their pollutions.

Archeologists have found that the earliest money systems of antiquity were also gift-circulating economies, with the elite classes earning prestige through the giving and destruction of wealth.(17) What Hesiod called "gift-eating chiefs"(18) were expected to exchange expensive gifts and even to destroy them in agonistic and sacrificial rituals, particularly those connected with wealth destruction and burial at funerals.(19) [his helps explain why Bernhard Laum, in his brilliant book *Heiliges Geld*, (20) felt the origin of money was intimately connected with sacrifice.(21) It also explains why the earliest metallic money was either the metal spits which were used in roasting sacrificial animals or the double axes used to kill them.(22)

Those who dared to first trade this sacred money for consumer commodities in the early Greek agora around 400 BC were – like the Jews who lent money in the Middle Ages felt to be full of poison, made dangerous by the poison containers they handled. (23) Medieval money-lenders who died unrepentant were sometimes said to have been so full of poison they were observed to be "black and swollen" (24) and were "thrown out of the church like a dog" to die unsaved. As childhood improved and more and more people used money for trade and lent it out for interest, the scope of illegal money-lending narrowed, but the onus on handling money never left entirely. Money remains dangerous, and those who manage it even today must be strong if they are to avoid being contaminated by the emotional poisons we inject into it.

That is why until recently we always built our banks to resemble sacrificial temples, since bankers-our modern sacrificial priests-are the people who must handle the poison money in ways that will destroy goods when prosperity becomes too threatening and our guilt becomes too great. The reason we have business cycles is because we continue to have a narrow tolerance for pleasure. When prosperity becomes too much (and, as happened to the Kwakiutl, if peace prevents us from destroying our surplus goods in combat), we begin to feel extremely sinful, polluted, and money seems more than ever to be "all tails," full of our guilt. Instead of investing it in productive enterprises, we begin to engage in speculations, we throw it into inflated stock markets, we send the poison money to Third World elites who can be counted on to waste it, we change our tax codes to favor the rich in order to divert more of our money to them, since only they can "digest" its pollution.(23) Like the Kwakiutl, who increased their money a thousand fold after they became more prosperous, we, too, multiply our money supply as we feel more polluted, since we need more and more poison containers to hold our growing guilt.

Since Europe and Japan haven't had a real surplus-destroying war for over four decades, the only way they were able to get rid of their guilt and limit their prosperity was to pump money into the U.S. and depend upon them to destroy it. So far during the 1980s, Europe and Japan have lent (given as a poison-gift) America a half trillion dollars, which the U.S. has promptly destroyed by burying it in the ground (nuclear missiles) and throwing it into the sea (nuclear aircraft carriers), just like the Kwakiutl did in their potlatches. Yet there is a limit to how much of the world's guilt-money America can absorb and destroy.

This is especially true at this present moment, when a terrible thing has happened to the world: peace has "broken out all over," as Newsweek magazine recently put it.(26) The danger to our psyches of simultaneously having a disarmament treaty between Russia and the U.S., peace in Afghanistan, peace in Cambodia, peace in Angola, peace in Iran and peace in Central America is that if there is no place for external sacrifice (war), the pressures for a major internal sacrifice (depression) become much greater. Here is where our money priests-our central bankers and our treasury officials-are called upon to perform their most serious tasks.

"The Federal Reserve's job," said William McChesney Martin, an earlier chairman of the central bank, "is to take away the punch bowl just when the party gets going."(27) Paul Volcker, the Federal Reserve chairman who presided over the recession of the early 1980s, agrees. While joking once, he gave away the unconscious secret of his social role: "We [central bankers] have a haunting fear that someone, someplace may be happy."(28) To prevent the dreaded pleasure from continuing unabated, it may become necessary to cause a world-wide slump of major

proportions. That is the real reason why at the present moment (August 1988) so many of the leaders of America's financial community are urging policies that could throw the world into a severe economic downturn.

As one financial expert describes the sacrificial scenario now being discussed, "After the election, the leadership of this country will say to the Fed, 'Go ahead and tighten [the money supply] boys.' The Federal Reserve tightens, interest rates rise, the economy slows. Then they will tell the next president and Congress to raise taxes.. we're supposed to impose real austerity on the country. It scares me."(29)

Preparations for the internal sacrifice have already begun in America. Articles outlining "the slump we need" proliferate,(30) huge new taxes on consumption are proposed,(31) central banks world-wide have begun to move up interest rates,(32) the International Monetary Fund continues to keep Third World economies depressed so they cannot buy Western goods.(33) Debt and money supplies continue to soar, threatening an eventual sharp reduction-as with the Kwakiutl, the prelude to the destruction of money in a potlatch is the proliferation of debt.

The problem with the suggestion that the President should cause "a small recession" like the one at the beginning of Reagan's term so as "to be in a recovery mode in time for your own reelection campaign" (34) is that the American economy is in much worse shape in 1988 than in 1980. Debt is far higher, trade is unbalanced, banks are far shakier, corporations less sound. Telling America to undergo "a small recession" now is like telling a man at the edge of a cliff to take "a small jump."(35)

But of course that's the purpose, in the end, of all these austerity proposals. Have a giant potlatch, throw our money and our goods into the fire, cleanse the evil world of its sins in one sacrificial orgy, make our lives-and our money-pure once again. As Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon said in 1929 as the Federal Reserve pushed the world into the Great Depression, "It will purge the rottenness out of the system."(36)

For behind homo economics lurks homo necans, sacrificial man, filled with guilt at the audacity of carrying out his wishes, this is the legacy of our childhood – and the goal of our institutions. Only a considerable amount of emotional maturity can prevent us from repeating the patterns of the past.

It all depends on which side of the coin we choose; the pleasure or the guilt. Heads, you win. Tails, you lose.

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