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The Currency of Crisis

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According to Eich, “the history of political thinking about money” accumulates in “layers of crisis,” since crises provoke “an openness to new ideas” that interrupts the calm reproduction of meaning (xiii–xiv). Couldn’t we apply this insight to the history of critical democratic theory? Running through and beneath its explicit excavation of the political thought attending and provoked by monetary crises of the past, Eich’s book also turns up traces of what we could call a crisis of democracy and a crisis of critique. I attend to these traces to ask what we might learn from Eich’s book about the limits and internal tensions of critical theory.

Central to Eich’s argument is the thesis that money is always political. “Money cannot be removed from politics,” he writes, but only “‘encased’ against democracy” (18). And yet the politics of money can disappear or be disavowed. Hence, “much of what passes for the depoliticization of money is a sleight of hand,” a “mystification” or “naturalization” that does not impair the construction of money by political power, but only diverts attention from or hides from view that construction (18). Eich wants his book to call attention to the reality of this construction, to show the smoke and mirrors of liberal and neoliberal theory, and thereby to recover for the populace the possibility that money might be constructed otherwise, more equitably, and for the advantage of the least well-off. Central banks—especially the Federal Reserve system—are political institutions, answerable to the demands of justice.

Beyond Locke and Hayek, however, Eich also takes aim at a different foe: Marx. “The contemporary invisibility of money in political thought” is the result not only of liberal hocus-pocus but of two genuine difficulties (178). On the one hand, the inflationary crisis of the 1970s continues to cast monetary politics as a dilemma: economic steering is necessary, but the decisions are so salient and controversial that bringing them out in the open would threaten a legitimation crisis. Second, “Marx’s critique of voluntarist money politics” continues to cast a “shadow” over the contemporary Left, in the form of the conviction that “imposing justice on capitalist economic relations” is futile (136, 199). Eich’s book turns around this confrontation with Marx. According

to Marx, “only an act of society” can make money (quoted at 129). According to Eich, money is “a construct of political power” (1). A chasm separates these two, apparently similar, claims and one contribution of Eich’s book is to reveal just how radical is the divide.

The challenge confronting those who, like Eich, affirm the political construction and democratic promise of money, is that both “politics” and “democracy” are prone to a “teeter-totter” problem. The terms may be construed as naming constitutive realities that are always already present. However, they may also be construed as extremely demanding normative standards or regulative ideals, which are not and may never be satisfied. Each construal is unsatisfying, and so theorists are liable to see-saw between them, trading off on the appeals of each to hide the defects of the other. Eich tries to avoid this see-sawing by assigning “political” the thin construction and “democratic” the thick one. However, these assignments break down. So, while the “politics of money” is “inescapable”—money is always caught up in “power”—“political currency” is a “normative aspiration” (191, 7). In this “more fundamental sense of politics,” Eich claims, “political” does not mean merely that monetary policy has “effects on the distribution of wealth and power,” but that money is a “tool” for both “achiev[ing] civic relations” and “for the formulation and pursuit of justice” (7). Money is always already political, but it might also become really political.

In the opposite direction, money ought to be a democratic institution, but it is also always already democratic, in the sense that it must be *de*-democratized by processes of “self-binding.” “The depoliticization of money is a mirage,” Eich writes, because “many of the fetters that keep the state and central bank in check are not so much externally imposed but reflect instead attempts at democratic self-binding” (203). This ambiguity of democracy as “collective self-rule” is fully encapsulated in Eich’s claim that “money as ‘political currency’ is a constitutive element of democratic political communities, yet its continued ability to play this role ... requires ongoing political struggle” (213). This involuted horizon of democratic critical theory—we must fight on the basis of what we want for the chance of enjoying what we already have—unfolds its Escher logic out of the basic self-contradiction of modern thought, that we are born free and autonomous, but are everywhere in chains of our own making—or our own imagining. Free your mind, the rest will follow.

The difference, then, between Eich’s political constructivism regarding money and Marx’s “social act” theory is that the former, like all political voluntarism, must fall back on the thesis that we have “forgotten” or “lost sight of” the power we already have. We might consider, instead, that the power of the state to interfere in and regulate money is not revealed by the crises in which the state acts to inject liquidity or security, but constituted by those crises. Susanne de Brunhoff had a point: state control over the money supply is substantial “only in extraordinary moments of crises,” as Eich summarizes in a note (281n223). Rather than reminding the state of its existing powers, perhaps believers in monetary sovereignty ought to work to bring about the crisis that would give to the state, momentarily, the powers they want it to have.

Eich urges, in closing, that “it is precisely money’s unique reliance on the forces of the imagination that also renders it a malleable political institution” (219). I have the opposite intuition, that nothing is more resistant to our conscious control than our imagination, a hypothesis suggested by the stubborn persistence among critical theorists of the belief that we are the authors of collective fictions that rule us.