Filth and Lucre: The Dirty Money Complex as a Taxation Regime

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ABSTRACT
This review essay takes a synoptic view of the ethnographic record concerning the long-standing and cross-cultural associations between money and dirt. In questioning why this association crops up as often as it does, I turn to the anthropological literature on the study of metaphor and metonym. By doing so, I offer a reinterpretation of the money form, pointing out that dirt—as a transgressive mediator between discrete realms—is itself a cross-cultural trope that is often intimately tied to ideas and rituals of social reproduction and fertility. I suggest that the widespread denigration of money as dirty may serve as a sort of economic regulatory mechanism, which aims to reinvigorate money’s potential fertility when this latter has become sterile due to alleged acts of anti-social exchange or non-exchange. [Keywords: Money, metonym, metaphor, money laundering, fertility, taxation.]

The flower derives its fragile beauty “from the stench of dung.”
—Bataille as cited in Surya 2002:120-121

I. Introduction
It has become almost a commonplace that anthropology and economics approach money from almost entirely opposed standpoints.
Anthropologists—against the overwhelming tides of punditry—emphasize the qualitative aspects of money, while economists famously focus on its quantitative aspect. Typically, this methodological divide almost necessarily produces a corollary ethical divide—anthropologists are suspicious of money and its power, while economists celebrate it. As a result of this foundational chasm, the two disciplines speak past each other on a regular basis, each finding the other to have little of value to add to its own research program.¹

But recent theoretical insights and empirical studies within the anthropology and sociology of money have made this simple bifurcation increasingly outdated, as these scholars have increasingly worked toward the conclusion that quantity and quality work together, and the age-old Simmelian “battle” between the two is a mere straw man.² And yet, the lack of cross-fertilization between economics and anthropology in this field remains, perhaps in part due to our failure to place the power of quality into an idiom graspable for economics.

To that end, in this article I will work through one of the most consistently documented qualities of money—its supposed “dirtiness”—in order to argue that it stands as a highly typical mode of redistributing the quantity of money across a social body, particularly in the absence of state-organized taxation regimes. In fact, very often it is itself an informal taxation regime—a mode in which the social body attempts to lay claim to a piece of allegedly over-individualized wealth. In other words, the dirty money complex is not simply a florid ornamentation delivered by culture unto an otherwise colorless and frictionless money (as the economists might be wont to dismiss it); it is a regulatory mechanism—one that helps channel and circumscribe the quantity of money. In Roitman’s (2005) terms, then, the dirty money complex is an example of the “pluralization of regulatory authority,” and should be treated as such.

Thinking of the dirty money complex as a mode of non-state taxation helps us recognize something a bit odd about taxation writ large. When not seen as a direct “payment for services,” but more as social redistribution, taxation regimes carry an implicit logic. Namely, that all individually-owned money is socially produced, and the only question that remains is the extent of society’s rightful portion. Any amount that is retained by an individual is always already a function of the taxing regime’s choice to not seize it all.³ Turning to Cronon’s (2003:58-68) well-known distinction between collective sovereignty and individual ownership helps to clarify this.
In discussing some common misperceptions of English colonists in New England, he argued that Native American notions of individual ownership were generally organized around use-values. As soon as any specific use-value was no longer in use by a given individual, it would revert to the collectively-sovereign commons. Crucially, this meant that items such as land were controlled by the collectivity, and were not alienable by individuals as market-goods; the use of the land circulated among given individuals, but attempts by individuals to actually alienate Native American land to colonists were null and void (though colonists failed to grasp this logic).\textsuperscript{4}

In Cronon’s terms, informal and formal taxation shows that money too can tack back and forth between sovereign and ownership states. In the cases discussed below, it often follows a similar logic of use-value and surplus, viz., money seen as not being used by him/her should revert to the collective sovereign. The individual ownership state can only occur with the tacit or explicit agreement of the sovereign, and the latter tends to keep a finely-tuned gaze upon any supposedly “unused surplus”—unused, that is, by the sovereign community, not unused per se.

Thus, despite money’s famed alienability, taxation and the dirty money complex show that it is actually a bit like Native American land—individual ownership of money is subject to sovereign acknowledgment. Znoj (1998) confirms this when he writes that “hot money” emerges “out of a contradiction between commonly held or claimed resources and the private ownership of the proceeds of their sale in the form of liquid money” (1998:207). If a social actor has attempted to retain what is deemed too large a share of collectively sovereign money, the collectivity reminds or reprimands the individual, demanding its return. With non-state dirty money taxation, anthropological studies show with a significant degree of regularity that money becomes labeled dirty whenever the group’s sovereign rights to it are being challenged by what is deemed anti-social retention or acquisition of surplus money. Rituals designed to cleanse the money, or the individual or group associated with it, ensure that a portion of this supposedly unused surplus returns to the collective sovereign.

Significantly, the dirty money complex should not be seen as necessarily insisting upon increased egalitarianism; taxation can enforce traditional hierarchies as well as combat them. Rather, it is far better at revealing the manner in which the very notion of “surplus” is itself defined: How does some wealth manage, in Roitman’s (2003) terminology, to be socially sanctioned, while other wealth remains unsanctioned? The dirty money
complex is but one of many techniques for coping with “wealth that escapes structures of authority...[involving] accumulation that is not authorized by the prevailing socioeconomic hierarchy” (2003:217). It relies upon the qualities of money in order to reassert collective management over it.

It is precisely anthropology’s insistence on ethnographically documenting the qualities of money that allows us to carefully assess the enduring role of the filth metaphor in such management. As has been well-rehearsed in the scholarly literature, despite being famously anonymous and general, money is constantly subjected to qualitative “earmarking” of various sorts in every society that anthropologists have studied. According to the ethnographic record, people refuse to think of money as pure quantity; rather, they battle against this aspect of money constantly, by “naming” individual pieces of it and setting these pieces aside in special categories. Specific money can be labeled good, evil, base, high, fast, slow, future, past, and any number of other predications depending upon its destination and/or origins. And, as Mary Douglas (2003) so famously pointed out, once a society has categories, it has the conditions ripe for transgression of these categories, producing the very notion of “dirt” itself. As her straightforward dictum reminds us, “dirt is matter out of place” (2003:44; see also Maurer 2006).

But, as many a social theorist has asserted, it is in money’s nature to be constantly transgressing boundaries of all sorts. Indeed, its central task is to force categories to bleed into one another by mediating among them. Money is, therefore, constantly “out of place,” and thus dirty in its very nature. Not least, money mediates a great deal between the individual or collective body and the material world, and so we find that the dirty money metaphor is often tied to the notion, more particularly, of bodily effluvia, whether blood, semen, feces, or other bodily fluids. In fact, the evidence discussed below suggests that the filth metaphor itself derives from seeing the economy as a body—one that can fall in and out of health depending on treatments, prescriptions, and daily regimens.

But, following Bakhtin (1968), I will be arguing that this transgressive aspect of money—this foundational dirtiness—is precisely what makes its socially sanctioned flow so necessary. In other words, Bakhtin allows us to come to the counterintuitive conclusion that dirt—and especially in its stronger sense as bodily fluid and discharge—is good, natural, and helpful; indeed, it is fertility incarnate. Just as feminist anthropology pointed out long ago that menstrual blood may be encircled with taboos because it
is a powerful symbol affiliated with the generation of life itself and not necessarily because it is “dangerous” and “polluting” (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988:36-38; cf. also Akin 2003), a synoptic look at the dirty money complex is in order, to clarify whether it is always and everywhere built upon an unequivocally negative connotation. Instead, as Bakhtin would insist, perhaps dirt carries a meaning rife with “deep ambivalence” (1968:150, 304).

If money is ambivalent in this dirty way, it would not be surprising to find that it required a nuanced set of rituals and understanding that would allow it to be controlled by society. From this perspective, individuals in the marketplace must “get dirty” in order to make money, but when the social sanction of individual ownership has been lost by an alleged overindulgence in acquisition or retention, the inherent filth of money itself transfers to the person or group. To properly relieve himself or itself of the label of filth, the owner(s) must “cleanse” themselves of the dirt by acknowledging its collective sovereign status, sending a specific portion of the money back into the filthy (and productive) marketplace whence it came. For example, Eiss’s (2002) evocative article concerning the connection of an ordinary coin to the miracle of the Virgin of Tetiz in 18th century Yucatan (Mexico) shows that people can easily recognize this ambivalent aspect of money. He notes that “like capital, [Tetiz money] may well bear the historical stain of origins polluted with human misery and, as in other places, it has long been associated with corruption, dirtiness, and danger. The Virgin, however, acts to redeem money and to purify it—even if only momentarily—of its conception in sin” (2002:323).

The effect in Eiss’ example, as in others, is not to entirely sanitize the world of money, as one might suspect. Rather, it is to sanitize the person or group by removing the dirty money from their body and forcing its return to a specified—and sometimes even dangerously exclusionary—communal flow. Cleansing rituals and the dirt they seek to manage are constantly monitoring the flow back and forth between the collective sovereign and individual ownership statuses of money. In this sense, we are talking about the very common metaphor of the economy as a dietary ingestion-digestion-expulsion system. Waste is acknowledged as a vital and standard aspect of the entire apparatus, but systems must be in place to remove it from individual bodies if it threatens to stay too close to them—if, to stick with the operative metaphor, the intestinal tract stops working.8

Seen within the broader frame of anthropological theory, this preponderance of evidence leads to further confirmation of anthropologists’
long-standing insistence that the regulation of money’s flows is itself part and parcel of the ongoing construction of social groups and their boundaries. By labeling money either dirty or clean, reigning cultural norms help to sustain (for better or for worse) the life of the group and the circulatory flow of its economy, rather than allowing it to descend into rank individualism and the stagnation that might emerge if the anti-social retention or acquisition of money became a widespread and accepted social practice.\textsuperscript{9} Weiss’s (1997) very suggestive article helps us see that the dirty money complex is about the constitution, deconstruction, and reconstitution of such social wholes. He finds that the Haya of Eastern Africa see the economy as a whole, whose integrity constantly needs to be achieved; the parts that make up this whole are forever threatening to decamp from it, causing the whole to fall into anti-social desuetude.

Given the definitively awful and terrorizing history of the dirty money complex, it is vital to note here that I am \textit{not} making a normative argument. I am not invested in ascertaining whether a specific portion of money has been, “in fact,” anti-socially retained or acquired. The dirty money complex does not always show the finer side of mankind, and the dangerous consequences that it has had in the past could even be repeated in the future. Indeed, just as state or colonial taxation systems can be viewed as unjust or abusive, the dirty money complex also has an all too often terrifying relationship to the construction, exclusion, and straightforward eradication of groups. But this fact makes it all the more important to study it and treat its ubiquity critically.

And thus, without endorsing or denying its social value, I am interested in charting the dialectical process of this “informal taxation regime.” Relying on metaphor and metonym, money can be seen to oscillate between states of collective sovereignty and individual ownership, by attaching and detaching itself from individual and corporate bodies. In other words, rather than taking denigrations of “filthy lucre” at face value, I choose to see it instead as part and parcel of a more general argument among social actors about the lineaments of groups. Which collectivities are insisting that it must be shared? Which individuals are being accused of non-sharing? Whenever we see it operating, these definitions are performed and consolidated by the dirty money complex.

To detail this argument about dirty money as a form of informal taxation, I briefly introduce some classic examples that clarify how the metaphor of filth often associates money with death, destruction, and anti-sociality.
I then propose that we can reassess this prototypical meaning of filth by considering Bakhtin’s notion that it productively fertilizes new sod for a new era. In so doing, I detail the ways in which we can learn at least as much by attending to filth’s metonymical, rather than purely metaphorical, predications. Having worked through these arguments, I then attempt to provide a typology of monetary filthiness, in order to show its potential to serve as a regime of non-state taxation, forcing money that is deemed to be overly-individualized to re-attach itself to the collective sovereign (again, regardless of whether we ourselves deem it to be “fair” or not).

Emphasizing this active role of one highly typical quality of money may then, in turn, allow for a renewed dialogue between the hopelessly opposed economists and anthropologists. Since the quantity and the qualities of money work together in order to build an economy, there is no reason that anthropologists and economists need to create disharmony where there is none.

II. Destructive Filth

We have our own philosophical treatises, folk traditions, and ugly history, all of which explain why we so readily assume that the filth predicated upon money is a simple denigration and no more. While Marx tells us that “capital comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt” (1990:925-926), Freud also tantalizes us with brief inspections of the “money complex,” wherein he explains that it is a sublimation of the anal complex. He explains that

The connections which exist between the two complexes of interest in money and of defaecation, which seem so dissimilar, appear to be the most far-reaching…. wherever archaic modes of thought predominate or have persisted—in ancient civilizations, in myth, fairy-tale and superstition, in unconscious thoughts and dreams, and in the neuroses—money comes into the closest relation with excrement. (1963:31)

Based on this, Freud argues that people who were previously anal erosics in an earlier stage of their life’s development, tend to share the traits of parsimony, orderliness, and obstinacy. In other words, the way they treated their excrement as children is now the way they treat their money: they refuse to let it go (for it is a part of them, as Freud explains). Supposedly, the
sublimated anal erotic is a possessive individual, one who seeks mastery over objects and dislikes sharing.  

Norman Brown (1959), in his exquisite and lengthy investigation of these matters, spins the metaphor relating money and filth into an entire theory that explains everything that is wrong with the capitalist economy writ large—and thus, by extension, the entire modern world. His book, *Life Against Death* (1959), stands as perhaps the most influential among the elaborations upon Freud’s insight. He wholly relies on the money-dirt interface to reveal the “psychology of the capitalist spirit as a whole” (1959:235). In a series of complicated but logical steps that cannot all be related here, his book asks us to purify ourselves of dirty money by banishing it entirely from our midst (1959:234-304). In so doing, Brown argues that we could free ourselves from money’s inherently dirty and deathly grip, so that our lives could finally blossom without its shoddy and profane materiality.

The most devastating instantiation of the dirty money complex in world history must surely be the Christian assertions of the supposed dirtiness of Jewish money, reaching their genocidal heights under the Nazis. Raffles (2007) catalogues in wincing detail the extent to which Jews have been associated with “parasitism,” and how this is related to the money in which they supposedly specialize: “Parasites drain the lifeblood from the body politic—blood figured as money from a body figured as nation.” He points out that this association between Jews and dirty money had, in fact, become a “commonplace” (2007:528).

But without forgetting even for a moment the singular atrocities associated with this commonplace, it is important to recognize that the association between filth and money stretches well beyond stereotypes unfairly leveled against Judaism. In the anthropological record, it can be found on every continent. Thus, it seems rather a rule than an exception. Maurer (2003) has, for example, helpfully compared and contrasted adherents of the local currency movement with those of Islamic finance and found that both readily associate money with dirt:

For Islamic portfolio managers, any income that is “tainted” by *riba* [a concept close to “interest”] must be “purified.” For local-currency diehards, government-issued currency is quite literally “dirty money.” For both, however, their efforts to make change literally and figuratively hinge on a transmutation of filth into faith. (2003:336)
Other anthropologists, meanwhile, have shown how money easily falls into unclean categories. Hutchinson (1992), in a much-cited article, argues that the Nuer label money earned in denigrating labor as “money-of-shit,” which then cannot be utilized for productive investment. Similarly, in an excellent recent doctoral dissertation, Krige (2011) explains that money gained in underground gambling games is castigated as “dirty” as well. Verdery’s (1995, 1996) well-known study of the Caritas scheme in Romania shows how locals believed that dirty money needed to find a laundry machine. In an important study of the relationship between money and excrement, Harris (1989) provides ethnographic evidence from Latin America that debts and loans are frequently thought of as related to the growth provided by manure. Meanwhile, in Oceania, Rutherford (2001) also has an extensive analysis of the power of money earned in foreign spaces, and how it is attached to images of decaying skin. Considering all these examples, both from academic theory as well as from ethnographic and historic data, it seems safe to say that the dirty money complex is widespread. As a mediator between realms, money is readily labeled dirty; we need to ensure that modernity’s hygienic campaign against dirt has not blinded us from seeing that the coin has two sides.

III. Productive Filth
In this regard, Bakhtin (1968) can help us move beyond the transparently negative connotations of filth, thereby broadening our understanding of the dirty money complex. His assessment of Rabelaisian marketplace language—billingsgate—also focuses heavily on dirt, especially bodily fluids and excreta. Crucially, however, Bakhtin insists that these latter always have a dual meaning, a “deep ambivalence.” They are at once debasing and generating. He claims that the modern reading public has entirely missed this generative side of excrement, and thus have had trouble digesting Rabelais’s “coarseness,” “naiveté,” and “cynicism” (1968:146). Instead of noting only the destructive side of filth, we should also be noting how “these forms of gay Shrovetide cynicism are transferred to a historic spring, to the new era” (1968:146).

Bakhtin insists that people of Rabelais’s era understood this double-meaning of filth intimately. During marketplace carnivals, dung was literally thrown everywhere and upon anyone, in particular upon representatives of the court, the higher ups. This “volley of scatological abuse hurled
at the old, dying, yet generating world” brings the “gloomy, disincarnated medieval truth...‘down to earth' through laughter” (Bakhtin 1968:176). He informs us that

such debasing gestures and expressions are ambivalent, since the lower stratum is not only a bodily grave but also the area of the genital organs, the fertilizing and generating stratum. Therefore, in the images of urine and excrement is preserved the essential link with birth, fertility, renewal, welfare. This positive element was still fully alive and clearly realized in the time of Rabelais. (1968:148)

As an author, Rabelais also knew that excrement was “closely linked with fertility” and he “saw no sacrilege in” using these images astride mentions of God or king (Bakhtin 1968:149). So-called “gay matter [feces]” represents a “world which continually grows and multiplies, becomes ever greater and better, ever more abundant. Gay matter is ambivalent, it is the grave and the generating womb, the receding past and the advancing future, the becoming” (1968:195). It achieves these remarkable paradoxes because, according to Bakhtin, filth is a mediator like money, allowing for translation and interaction between realms: “excrement is conceived as something intermediate between earth and body, as something relating the one to the other” (1968:175).

This idea that filth, in its very nature, multiplies and continually grows sounds like nothing so much as Marx’s notion of capital, a dialectical power of “productive consumption” and “consumptive production” that remakes the world (cf. Marx 1973, 1990). In this sense, both literal and metaphorical filth are just like Marx’s capital—both destructive and creative. Bataille (1991) would happily add that capital (as accumulated “surplus-value”) and filth (as that which the body casts off as seemingly unnecessary) are both forms of unused surplus that must be expended in order to guarantee new growth. Consequently, pace the standard bourgeois fear of it, Bakhtin insists that filth is telling one of the oldest stories of all: “the drama of laughter presenting at the same time the death of the old and the birth of the new world” (1968:149).

To develop this claim, Bakhtin treats filth in its metonymic register, rather than purely in its metaphoric one:
Each image is subject to the meaning of the whole; each reflects a single concept of a contradictory world of becoming, even though the image may be separately presented. Through its participation in the whole, each of these images is deeply ambivalent, being intimately related to life-death-birth...If the positive and negative poles of becoming (death-birth) are torn apart and opposed to each other in various diffuse images, they lose their direct relation to the whole and are deprived of their ambivalence. They then retain the merely negative aspect. (1968:149-50)\(^{14}\)

Bakhtin’s innovative attention here to the power of metonymy can crucially improve our understanding of the dirty money complex. Metonymy opens up the way in which, as a system of non-state taxation, the dirty money complex forces the productive use of supposedly dormant or “dead” surplus (according to the perceived or invoked community).

In this regard, we should follow Durham and Fernandez (1991), who insist that analyzing metonymy can be at least as fruitful as analyzing metaphor. Metaphors seek to bring together dissimilar domains (e.g., money and filth), thus relying on the existence of equality between those two domains. Conversely, “[m]etonymy is, par excellence, the hierarchical trope; to extrapolate a bit, it is obliged to feature and thus exalt some part for a whole or vice versa” (1991:208). Accordingly, metonymy is unusually productive in illuminating and overthrowing conventional hierarchies and thus building the world anew (1991:198). And thus, like Bakhtin, Durham and Fernandez assert that this overthrowing is precisely what allows for the new “creation of a world contained in a metaphor and the liberating manipulation within the hegemonies of that world made possible by metonymy” (1991:209). While metaphor and metonym both rely upon a hegemonic and established semantic order, metonym has the capacity to threaten this order from within. By upending established hierarchies, it can sow the seeds for a new order.

Thus, if we accept that the metaphor equating money with filth is frequently effective, then, as Durham and Fernandez explain, there may well be a set of “highly conventionalized” metonymic relations latently invoked by equating these two distinct but similar domains (1991:195). In this case, there are many instances wherein the economy is seen as a body, and money as the lubricating fluid which flows through it, or that can be cast...
out of it as surplus. Just like bodily fluids, money is then seen as always powerful and life-sustaining, but also as potentially dangerous and dirty.

Monitoring and manipulating the flow, ejection, increase, and reduction of these metonymical fluids and filth is seen as vitally significant to the continued health of the metaphorical body, whether economic or human. For example, Freud insists that infants believe that feces are a part of their body, and they take pleasure in granting the world what it wants, or alternatively, withholding it like a miser (1962:52-53). By way of metonymy, it is now clear why Freud believed that by holding back one’s money, one is holding back a detachable and fertile part of oneself that ordinarily moves into the world and becomes a vital part of it. According to this logic, constipation is a form of cheapness, a pathological desire to retain the part.

Further confirming this part-whole relationship, Comaroff (1985:236) provides a non-constipated inversion of it, when she explains that members of the Zion Church in South Africa do not think of the money they are giving to the church as “alienated,” but rather as a part of themselves that is going to circulate within a larger whole. Weiss (1997) likewise describes how both the corporeal body and the corporate body must be achieved by way of social effort—their unified integrity is not guaranteed in advance. As he clearly shows, “[s]ome of the more effective... modes of achieving effective bodily coherence involve the use of money and, in particular, small coins.” He discovers that specific denomination coins are relied upon in ritual contexts in order “to prevent splitting or bursting” of the individual body (Weiss 1997:347-348). According to all these examples, individual denominations of money are seen as fungible parts of an abstract whole. In a Durkheimian (1984) sense, we are here moving from the whole of the body to the whole of the body politic. By spreading out his or her monetary fertilizer, the individual partakes of the whole economy, and according to economic theory—and according to folk theory, I am arguing here—the entire whole benefits from such sharing.

But this interface between the whole individual body and the whole body politic can also inform us of community boundaries, of the precise borders within which money is supposed to circulate, according to dominant norms. We then encounter a desire for sharp delineations and zones of purity and cleanliness. Thus, for example, in the “world market” seen as a whole, we have a history of nation-state tariff barriers, sumptuary laws, and other obstacles to trade that, whatever their potential merits, also represent a desire for the national body to keep some circulating part to
itself and stop it from relocating to a new or different whole. For example, money that circulates “unfairly” or furtively outside of these boundaries can quickly be labeled “dirty.” As two economists inform us regarding American policy, it is a misunderstanding to see this sort of dirty money as a form of illegal capital flight. Rather, “[i]t has more to do with getting rich secretly outside of the country and not having to share money with others inside the country” (Baker and Nordin 2007). The secret stash forms a part that has sought to distance itself from its supposedly rightful whole.

In Freudian terms, such behavior—whether on the part of the individual or the nation-state—is a manifestation of the desire to “become the father of oneself,” to remove oneself from outside influences and stop partaking in the external world, for one can provide everything for oneself; this is the desire, in short, to make oneself a new and autarkic, fecund whole, separate from the original whole from which it came. For example, the much neglected text by Fichte (1940), *The Closed Commercial State*, demands a hermetically sealed capitalistic state. Remarkably, this state’s autarky is guaranteed, according to Fichte, by nothing other than the creation of a new national currency. Such a currency will quite literally demarcate and index a part of the world economy and then demand that this aliquot portion of global value stop circulating in the worldwide sphere. Quite obviously, Fichte wants to keep both money and goods from being shared beyond what he perceives as a clearly demarcated social body—the nation.¹⁶

Finally, we would be remiss to neglect the countless times that circulating signs of economic wealth also become specifically associated with body parts. Coins around the world have heads on them.¹⁷ Brown (1959:298) claims that cowrie shells are called “the excrement of the sea.”¹¹⁸ Munn (1992:114) argues that kula shell valuables have an “anus” and other human properties, while Coronil (1997) explains in great detail how Colombians treat petrodollars as an alien substance flowing through the national body and even causing indigestion.

And Dalton, in an exquisite piece about the “sublime beauty” of mobile objects of shell wealth in Rawa, argues that these objects are intentionally created in order to symbolize both male semen and female blood (1996:396). He goes on to show how this imagery allows them to paradoxically embody “growth and fecundity through expenditure and death” (1996:401). And therefore, he concludes that “[t]he cultural presentation of natural processes and capacities is a reflection upon the irreducible cultural necessity of representing them through the deployment of kunawo
[shell valuables] in exchange” (1996:405). Dalton’s straightforward assessment could just as easily be applied to Hobbes’, Petty’s, and many other classical political economists’ penchant for associating money with so many “humours” that circulate through the human body. Perhaps, in fact, it would be more surprising to find a society that adamantly refused to treat the human body as a metaphorical and metonymical trope for grasping the functioning of the economy.

IV. Returning to the Whole
From a survey of the literature on earmarking, one notices that there are only a few paradigmatic instances wherein money becomes emphatically labeled unclean. It turns out, I am arguing, that all these instances relate to moments when people are being accused (fairly or unfairly is no matter) of refusing the play of metonymy within money; they are being accused of trying to hide or ignore money’s metonymical attachments to the community at large. They are alleged to be trying to detach the money from the social whole and instead attach it to a new, autarkic whole. This new whole is often constituted by the individual body, but could also simply be a different community. The community that previously proclaimed ownership over the money responds by announcing, vociferously, money’s role as a fertilizer that needs to be spread around. Attempting to make money an unalienated part of oneself is alleged to be dirty; it needs to be in the marketplace, properly flowing among individual bodies, rather than unnaturally and dangerously trapped in some smaller part of the digestion system. In other words, “dirty money” is an economic regulatory apparatus, forcing (or at least attempting to force) the remobilization of cash that otherwise was becoming attached to new and different wholes.

For example, money is frequently labeled “dirty” because it is believed to be hiding in a “hoard,” not circulating for the general benefit and instead remaining jealously attached to an individual. An entire school of monetary thought, that which inspires the “local currency” movement today, was spun out of this hatred of the hoard (Gesell 1929). In tune with the arguments laid out here, Gesell’s solution to the problem was to force money to “rot.” By attaching date-stamps to the money, it would lose value over time, just like a bushel of wheat that became old as it awaited a buyer. In this manner, money that refused to return to the whole would be heavily taxed. In other words, Gesell insisted that money
must be structured so as to become the filthy fertilizer that it should be, whereas governments had allowed money to become unnaturally sterile by making it the one good in the economic cycle that did not decay over time. Overly enthusiastic followers of Gesell (e.g., Ezra Pound and Major Douglas) morphed this monetary theory into a racist search for a fascist monetary policy, openly declaring the owners of supposed hoards as “dirty”; if society simply followed their proposals, they averred, money would be dirty, but no longer its owners.

But variations on this theme occur elsewhere. Bähre (2002), Bayart (2009), Comaroff and Comaroff (1999), Ferguson (2006), Geschiere (1997), Sanders (2003), and Smith (2008) all provide us with fascinating examples of how the accusation of witchcraft in Africa is associated with anti-social accumulation and a refusal to share what is deemed common property. Cleansing oneself of the accusation of witchcraft most often involves some sort of costs, wherein over-individualized resources are sent back into the community. Munn (1992) also takes this up in much detail, though the role of the witch is inverted on Gawa. She describes one of the premier threats to the Gawan economy: the desire of an individual to not share his or her accumulated economic value. This unleashes a self-regulatory mechanism in the form of witchcraft, wherein the “greedy” witch—an unnamed female—forces the victim (i.e., the alleged hoarder, who is a victim of the witch) to release more food into the cycle, such as a ritual pig offering. She writes that “[i]n distribution a division or piecemealing of an undivided or collected whole results in a dispersal into many hands of what has been held by one” (1992:226).

For our purposes, it is vital to note two things here. Firstly, the value that was initially retained “unfairly” is associated with blackness and death, both forms of threatening “dirt.” Secondly, the witch serves as an equalizing force of society that ensures the return of this overly-individualized dirt to the whole. As this force, she is herself “deeply ambiguous,” representing both greediness and death (she likes to consume dead bodies), but also quickness, lightness, and upward mobility (she flies)—all the things that Gawans hope to infuse into their canoes in order to guarantee successful kula journeys. The witch, as an embodiment of “destructive hierarchization” has the power to appropriate “the other within her own body” by flying around the earth and transgressing boundaries that constrain other normal Gawans (Munn 1992:265, 230). Like circulating money itself, this commitment to destructive hierarchization paradoxically
restores a degree of equality to the system that had been lost by the victim's initial greed.

Perhaps the most famously unclean money is the money that seems to be magically making more of itself without any apparent labor on the part of its owner. The standard socialist critiques of “rotund and parasitical middlemen” or of so-called “unearned money” (see Verdery 1995) come to mind here. So too the famous examples of “devils pacts,” wherein miners are seen to pray for gold or silver to magically grow “like potatoes” in the mines (Harris 1989:252, Znoj 1998, Taussig 1980, Walsh 2003).

Another related form comes in the indictment of interest. In discussing this sort of lending at interest, Harris further confirms our suspicions about the dirty money complex when she explains that “[t]he concept of debt too has close associations with fertility, not through the metaphor of giving birth, but through that of manure” (1989:252). Money-lenders are frequently seen as outsiders (see Gregory 1997:227-228, Simmel 1971, Weber 1958:39, James 2011), making it more clear why a community might be commensurately more concerned that the monetary part could more easily be removed from the economic whole if the person receiving it is already on the margins of society.

But again, all this is also deeply ambiguous, and Harris goes to great lengths to elucidate the “dual, ambivalent” character of money in the Andes. In many instances, the proceeds from magical money of any sort are “penalized” by the community, in the form of some sort of cost or fee associated with them. Maurer (2005), for example, finds that such money needs to be cycled into charitable donations. As for Harris, she finds that extensive sacrificial offerings need to be made in order to ensure the continued fertility of the mountains’ mines.

Fascinatingly, we also often find that much magical money cannot itself continue to “grow” once it has been harvested by an individual owner (e.g., Znoj 1998, Taussig 1980); emphatically, it can only be spent on consumption goods, rather than investments. Any given amount of money’s ability to grow is tolerated for a period, but it cannot continue to do so “unnaturally” and endlessly. Via a series of penalties, it is brought back into general circulation and only then is it allowed to regain its fecundity. It is, therefore, not so much that societies are foundationally opposed to magical money. In each instance, we never find a successful and permanent banishment of it; rather, there seems to be an acknowledgment that its role in the cycle of birth/growth/death is so essential that it needs to
be guaranteed by a set of social institutions that insist that excess wealth never become permanently over-individualized. Why, I believe we must ask, is this so different than the moral logic undergirding the capital-gains tax levied in the United States and elsewhere?

Finally, anthropologists’ most typical discovery of “dirty money” relates to the history of its movement, where it has been and where it is going. In other words, the source or destination of the money can demarcate it as dirty money. We have such things as drug money or money earned extra-territorially that then must be “laundered” in various ways; as long as it remains furtive or unacknowledged by broader social authorities, it remains filthy. In fact, such money is so filthy that state authorities literally cannot tax this money—it must be laundered in order to be taxed, and the laundering itself costs money.

On the one hand, due to its nefarious origins, this money has trouble entering into standard and anonymous circulation. In other words, it retains its quality as “filthy” money so long as it fails to re-enter into the general and abstract pool of money. Once the owner parts with it (e.g., by buying a house in an all-cash transaction, by laundering it through a Swiss bank, by obtaining manipulated receipts for the purchase of antiques, or what have you), this particular money is no longer denigrated as dirty. Thus, many societies (including our own) have all sorts of ritual and legal methods for washing the dirt off of this money so that it can re-circulate, and every single one of these operations costs the owner of the filthy money, whether he is paying a state or another local cleansing institution. It would appear that such eminently standardized “laundering” of money is both a taxation regime (of sorts) and a way of allowing money to move back toward a socially-acceptable whole and away from a perceived anti-social part.

One particularly compelling example of this comes from the contribution by Carsten (1989) in Bloch and Parry’s (1989) volume. She describes how money that accrues to an individual outside the confines of the village can threaten the notion of Malay equality that reigns inside the village. Thus, the women receive all the “polluting” money that the men earn while fishing, and “cook” it, by passing it through the household and re-distributing it, whereas the men who had originally earned it would have simply held onto it for themselves (Carsten 1989:136, 127-128; see also Hutchinson 1991, Verdery 1995).

At the level of nation-states, money gained in similarly foreign spaces also has the capacity to become dirty money. For example, many governments
assert that large amounts of cash cannot be transferred across nation-state borders; rather, it must be cleansed by a proper institution and declared to the authorities so that it can become a part of a new whole (e.g., Altshuler 2001). Verdery’s (1995, 1996) study of the Caritas Ponzi scheme is important in this regard, for she finds that some believed that it was morally good for Caritas to produce local magical money, precisely because it kept other forms of equally “uneearned” foreign money from taking over the country. In all of these instances, money seen to emanate from other social wholes is penalized, which thus serves as an inducement to keep one’s fertile powers at home and to not share them with external others. As such, the labeling of foreign money as dirty stands as testimony to an ongoing argument over the bounds of the social whole.

The above typology of monetary filthiness attests to my point that the equation of money with filth is no mere denigration; the predication itself is doing “productive work” (again, though we may by no means approve of the work it is doing). By bringing with it a host of metonymical attachments, the dirty money complex is reminding people of the collective-sovereign status of money, and thus, that it cannot be over-individualized. The money/dirt relation arises most frequently in places where people are perceived by a given community (not necessarily in fact) to be actively—and somehow “unfairly”—accruing a surplus of money. They are accused of doing so 1) by removing it from circulation and thus disallowing its productive use by others (hoarding22), 2) by magically producing and then retaining “too much” of it, often “off the backs” of others, or 3) by surreptitiously circulating outside of the “proper” social whole (foreign money), where its use-value is much needed. In each instance, we find that the dirty money has become—in one way or another—sterile money, incapable of further growth within the community. But by agreeing to meet the demands of the dirty money complex, the money regains its standard fertility and the stain of dirt leaves the owners.23

I have posited that these are all instances of groups arguing that individual pieces of money need to be reattached to the whole, to money in the abstract, so that it may proceed with its primary duty: providing fertility to (a specifically delimited) society and continually making that social world anew. In other words, money is denigrated as dirty whenever someone is affronting its role as a flowing part of the cycle of birth/life/death. It appears to be a reminder, in other words, that all money is filthy—it’s not sanitary or natural to keep it too close to one’s body.
The demand is for the person to be sociable with their money, to partake and contribute to the whole (see Fernandez 1986:188-213). But, as with most social life, there is a constant battle over what constitutes the precise lineaments of the whole, and thus, any movement into or out of perceived wholes can cause tension. As a consequence, we have seen that societies the world over have “reconversion” rituals, wherein money earmarked as dirty is returned to the whole. Here I want to relate a particularly illuminating one, the well-known case presented by Shipton (1989) of “bitter money” amongst the Luo of Kenya. Shipton’s example is fascinating because it “tells it like it is,” that is to say, the return of fertility to the sterile money (the moment it returns to the whole), is effected by making it actually dirty.

Money is denigrated as “bitter money,” he explains, by anti-social accumulation, just as we have found with many other earmarking practices. It occurs, for example, when someone sells a plot of land as an individual owner even though it belongs to an entire kin network, thereby illegitimately accruing social wealth to his own individual person. According to the Luo, such money loses its fertility as a consequence; the owner knows that anything purchased with this money will come to naught, or worse, will die. For example, cattle purchased with it will not breed; using it as a bridewealth payment would be similarly disastrous. As with many other examples, the only thing that can be successfully purchased with bitter money is non-investment quality goods, goods such as clothes that are purely for ephemeral consumption and will not increase in value. Crucially, the money itself can continue on its merry way—the sterility remains with the owner, not with the money (Shipton 1989:28-34, 42). Tarnished with having earned bitter money, the owner—not the specific money itself—is enjoined from earning more from his anti-social gains, at least until he is properly taxed by the social authorities.

Thus, owners of bitter money are compelled to immediately hire ritual specialists who can return the fertility to the money, thereby allowing the owner’s money to again re-enter the marketplace from its sterilized zone of banishment. A proper ceremony involves the sacrifice of a male bull or ram. A feast occurs as well, with singing and drinking. Then, the ritual specialist “openly prepares a mixture of water and herbal medicine... together with chyme from the animal’s stomach, in a small calabash. The possessor of the bitter money sips it, and the [ritual specialist] sprinkles it onto the money...” (Shipton 1989:41, emphasis added). Shipton tells us
that the “ostensible aim of a purification ceremony is to thank the spirit or spirits that provided the bitter money” (1989:40). But in a footnote (Shipton 1989:47, note 41), he mentions that he never managed to witness the ceremony, and thus, I feel justified in speculating that the additional purpose of it is to return the productive organic filth to the money so that the sanitized sterility emanating from its over-individualization is successfully banished. And besides, these two aims are not at odds: Gods are frequently asked to bestow fertility, so it would not be surprising that a ceremony thanking them would also undertake the pragmatic task of dirtying the money with sacramental fragments from the fertile lower body stratum. Thusly sullied, the money can return to the marketplace and behave like proper money should.

It is as if dirt is itself a circulating metaphysical substance, traversing the ether in an isomorphic band with money, but not identical to it. In everyday life, the dirt remains happily bonded to the money and helps define money as a paradoxical unity of creative destruction. But when the social rules of accumulation and retention are threatened, the dirt suddenly flits off of the money and onto the person or group seen to be breaking the rules. In these instances, the money loses its beneficial dirt and becomes sterile. If the owner then agrees to follow a set of rituals or accept a series of penalties (or both), this dirt then moves back onto the money, revivifies its fertility, and leaves the body of the person or group clean again.24

V. Conclusion
In light of all this, it would seem that a Bakhtinian approach to the deeply ambiguous nature of money as both filthy and fertile is far better at explaining the endless critiques of money that run throughout the ethnographic record. Because of our own modernist preconceptions about the meaning and nature of filth, we often take the claim of “filthy money” at face value. But if we acknowledge the fertility inherent in filth and its vital role in making the world anew, then many typical stances toward money no longer appear as “hypocritical” divides between theory and action on the part of social actors. From a Bakhtinian standpoint, someone can readily curse money at the very same moment that they beg its owners to come to their shores.

A modernist, bourgeois approach to filth seeks to eliminate it entirely, finding it merely appalling and of little value. Authors such as Elias (2000),
Frykman and Löfgren (1987), and Linde-Laursen (1993) have detailed the long bourgeois campaigns against it. We should therefore be careful when Brown (1959) transfers this deep bourgeois suspicion of filth to the analysis of money. He disdainfully announces that psychoanalysis has scientifically recognized “what common sense and the poets have long known—that the essence of money is its absolute worthlessness [i.e., constructed out of things that we would otherwise dispose of as waste, as excrement]” (Brown 1959:254). Following the logic of the argument made here, he is exactly wrong: money is worth something precisely because of its foundational dirtiness, not in spite of it.

In light of this, arguments about money should be about which complex wholes we hope to build, to belong to, and to cycle within as parts, rather than about eliminating this “root of all evil” from our environs altogether. In other words, when we spot the pronounced claim that money is “dirty,” we should see it as a moment in an ongoing process of social boundary construction by interested parties, rather than as a legitimate critique of money per se. Like the filth to which it is so frequently compared, social actors can simultaneously be wary of money and embrace its tremendous power.

In this regard, why should our discipline always be the one that takes a stand “against money” and celebrates social niches that are somehow “outside the market” or which “reject the valuations of the marketplace,” while economics focuses on the beneficial powers of money? Working in tandem, the two disciplines appear to have unknowingly worked against Bakhtin’s counsel that we not artificially bifurcate the paradoxical unity of the cycle of life and death that is embodied in filth: economics studies the productivity of money, while we typically focus on its destructiveness.

Instead, our discipline could celebrate its many decades of solid effort in documenting the qualities of money, not as an interminable “battle” against money’s quantity, but as part of the way in which quality affects quantity and vice versa. The dirty money complex transparently reveals that many societies rely upon the qualities of money in order to redistribute its quantity. As Hart (1986) famously argued long ago, the two sides of money work together, not apart.

As recently as 2007, two influential economists wrote that “The dirty-money problem is largely unseen [and] unrecorded” (Baker and Nordin 2007:3). In light of the preceding review of our own extensive literature on the dirty money complex, anthropologists reading such a statement could
bitterly trumpet, “*au contraire!*” But perhaps more helpfully, we could ask ourselves just how the economists made such an easy and egregious oversight of our consistent and copious research findings.

**Acknowledgments:**
This paper has benefited immensely from the comments of three anonymous reviewers. Alex Dent also gave it a very thorough analysis and assessment, which helped me to imagine transforming it almost entirely. Smoki Musaraj has lent tireless and essential research aid. I also thank the participants and organizers, Erik Baehre and Daivi Rodima, of the 2010 American Anthropological Association panel entitled, “Flows of Money and Freedom,” where it received much cogent critique. I recently became aware of an illuminating paper by David Akin (2005), which aims to synoptically tackle “bitter money,” just as this paper tries to tackle dirty money. Akin’s paper and this one share certain ideas about dirty/bitter money and anti-social accumulation that bolstered both of our confidence about our arguments, but there are also productive differences in our two analyses. I want to thank David for his comments and generous engagement with this piece. Finally, the paper originally emanated out of some inspiration granted by James Fernandez. I thank them all for these insights and contributions, but, of course, all remaining errors are my own.

**Endnotes:**
1 Gudeman (2008, 2009) seems to me to be the scholar who has focused most intently on this important matter, and worked hard to change it. See also Cosgel 2009 for an interesting take on the matter.
3 Typically, this logic is made explicit by activists on the left and denied by activists on the right. To be sure, this “choice” is negotiated between society and the individuals that make it up, and thus, sovereign regimes can take more or less, depending on the reigning norms of a given society. For an especially interesting investigation of the ways in which this matter can be negotiated, see Roitman 2007.
4 I have also found Deborah James’ (2009) and Katherine Verdery’s (2003) recent work on contested property claims to be enormously helpful in this regard.
5 Zelizer (1997) is responsible for putting this term into circulation, but anthropologists recorded acts of earmarking prior to her seminal book, and frequently afterwards.
6 For inspirational work on the notion of productive transgression more generally, see Stalleybrass and White (1986). Also, Taussig’s (1999) book *Defacement*, clarifies how the “labor of the negative” works as a productive force in a similar manner. Dalton (1996), Eiss (2002), Strathern and Stewart (1999), and Weiss (1997) stand as four especially helpful studies of the way in which the deeply ambiguous imagery of money and other valuable objects (good/bad, clean/dirty, life/death, male/female) is related to their status as embodiments of the power of fertility.
7 See also Douglas, who wrote that “ethnography supports the idea that primitive cultures treat dirt as a creative power” (2003:121).
8 Marx’s (1990) opening chapters of *Capital Volume I* dwell much upon this, insisting that money itself has an inherent dialectical drive that alternately causes it to flow and to stagnate in hoards. Social processes move it into and out of these temporary states. I thank Alex Dent for this observation. See also Turner (2008).
9 Bloch and Parry’s (1989) seminal book said something very similar, when they argued that money ebbed back and forth between “long-term” and “short-term” cycles—the latter was focused on the individual, and the former on the group. They argued that societies the world over have systems in place which recognize the value of both types of money, but then always manage to subsume the individualistic money into the more enduring needs of the collectivity. Shipton (1989) provides a similar, but not identical, theory, as do Znoj (1998), Dalton (1996), and Weiss (1997).
10 Sir Thomas More (1993:63) informs us that the money-less Utopians craft their chamber pots out of pure gold, casting aspersions on money in a quite literal manner that must have pleased Freud.
A recent paper from a psychology journal shows that psychologists still hold to this basic Freudian insight:

Money can represent love, power, security, and freedom. Psycho-analytic theory connects money with anality and feces. Feces are both a gift of the self and a potential gift retained or withheld. Interest in feces later becomes interest in money, which symbolizes orderliness, parsimony, and obstinacy. Neurotic money conflicts develop in a person stuck in the anal stage who wants to accumulate money, but also sees it as filthy.” (Motherwell 2002:51)

Bataille (1991) also stands as an important corrective to the standard belief that filth is purely destructive. Mbembe (1992) works with Bakhtinian notions of the productivity of filth.

Similarly, Freud (1962) speaks of the erotogenic zones as being a conduit between the inside life of the body and the outside life of the world.

This plea for the dual meaning of feces as both polluting and life-giving is, of course, also of a piece with the old Frazerian (1922) notion that the taboo-ed object is simultaneously polluting and holy. It is a notion most recently revived by Agamben (1998).

According to any given belief system. I.e., I am not here positing that this is the scientifically correct opinion, but rather that arguments about where money should circulate illuminate group boundaries, and thus even forms of bigotry and bias.

See Helleiner 2003 and Peebles 2008 for more on Fichte’s text.

It is worth recalling, in this regard, that the very word “capital” derives from the Latin word “head,” as in “capital city.” See Graeber 2001 for an interpretation of why the state places its likeness on money.

Though he fails to give a citation for this claim.

While Hobbes (1981) spoke of money as the “sanguification of the Commonwealth,” Petty preferred to think of it as the fat that “doth as often hinder its Agility, as too little makes it sick” (Petty as cited in Valenze 2007:65). More recently, the national economy of Sweden was endlessly compared to a body by experts and the press during the 1992 currency crisis, and money was seen as its vital circulating fluid that was in danger of hemorrhaging into the hands of foreign speculators (see Peebles 2004).

Marx and Shakespeare are not the only people to critique interest; it occurs all over the world. Gregory (1997:212) informs us that, according to the ancient Indian Law of Manu, usury carried with it the extreme punishment of “loss of caste”; a more current example he provides claims that money-lenders limbs have been chopped off (Gregory 1997:230).

In support of this point that foreign money and hoards can be treated with the same level and type of ire, it is interesting to note that the respected Cameralist Justi literally treated money transported abroad and hoards buried at home as identical in his analysis. In both instances, the money was “dead” to the nation (Small 2001:286). Further, the Mercantilists perceived any money sent abroad as always already a sign of individual surplus, for by definition, it was being sent there instead of being used at home to buy necessities. They therefore often counseled against the transfer of money abroad and imposed countless sumptuary taxes, insisting that money should stay at home and help less fortunate citizens purchase necessities rather than allow rich people to purchase superfluities (Hecksher 1953).

Lest I be misunderstood, it is vital to notice that hoarding is different than savings. In a savings bank, private individuals can have money that is personally attached to themselves, but it is simultaneously being productively used by others while the saver is choosing to not use it. This is not the case with the hoard, which is completely removed from use by any and all, including the hoarder.

It would be interesting to probe whether a similar “non-state taxation” regime is at work with the legendary “evil eye.” Exciting research on this common phenomenon suggests that it is a related regulatory technique, for it often gets leveled upon people when people see them as “miserly” or as hoarding. See Ansell 2008, Elyachar 2005, Herzfeld 1981.

I thank Daivi Rodima for clarifying this interpretation to me.

See Callon and Law (2005) on an attempt to bridge this age-old gap. Following Cachoy, they rely on the neologism, “qualculation.”

References:


Routledge.


**Foreign language translations:**

Filth and Lucre: The Dirty Money Complex as a Taxation Regime

Keywords: Money, metonym, metaphor, money laundering, fertility, taxation.

[关键词: 金钱, 换喻, 隐喻, 洗钱, 繁殖力, 征税]

Sujo Lucro: O Complexo de Dinheiro Sujo como Regime de Impostos

[Palavras chaves: Dinheiro, metáfora, lavagem de dinheiro, fertilidade, impostos]

التقاضي والصحت: عقود المال القذر كنظام ضرائب

الكليات الجامعة: المال، الكاتبة، الاستعارة، سبيل الأموال، الخصومة، فرض الضرائب

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