



fig. 1



fig. 2

## Other Issues: Currency Delimiting Sovereignty

Emilio Moreno

The artistic project *Other Issues* (2011) investigates and documents heterogeneous forms of money issued by groups of people during times of extreme political, economical, and social instability.<sup>1</sup> As countless as these cases are throughout history, and as diverse as they are geographically, in what follows I describe two that are especially relevant when investigating the relationship between currency, political organization, and the concept of the border.

The first case dates back to 1574, when the Catholic Spanish Empire put under siege the newly protestant and therefore rebel city of Leiden, which is today located in The Netherlands. After a year of military isolation, money stopped circulating within the starving city; it was both being saved in governmental coffers as a means to maintain political legitimacy, and being hidden by citizens who preferred to exchange goods without using the scarce metal currency. Eventually, the need to pay the soldiers to defend Leiden led the local government to issue the first ever “paper coins” (nearly 100 years before the first paper banknotes circulated in a European country, figs. 1–2).

The moment of scarcity in Leiden created an opportunity for the local government to use the design and meaning of the emergency currency to reinforce social cohesion on two fronts. First, by trying to dignify the sacrifice of every individual while fighting for a shared goal for the community; on the surface of the coins one finds the inscriptions, in Latin, “I fight for my country” and “This is for the sake of freedom.” Second, the currency emphasized the historical differences between Dutch society and the Spanish Empire: the design included the “traditional” Dutch protestant brimmed hat alongside a reference to the ancient Batavians, their ancestors



fig. 3

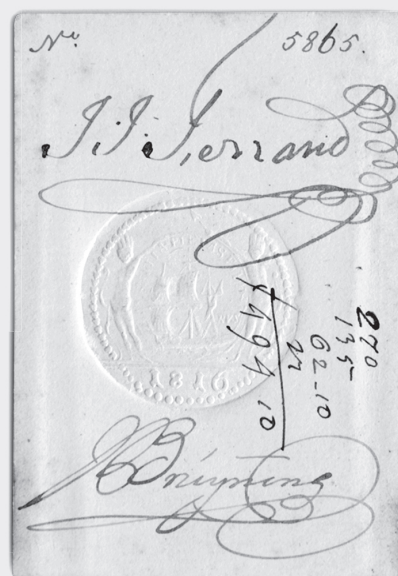
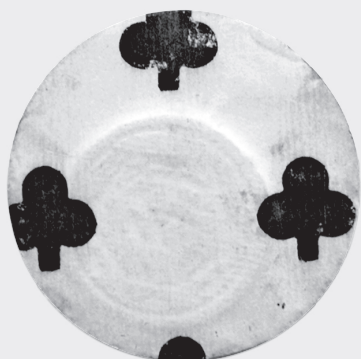


fig. 4



who once resisted the Roman Empire's army nearby Leiden.

More relevant, and in keeping with the intention of such messages, is the fact that this upstart currency was not made from any ordinary, blank paper. Instead, propelled by the religious struggle, the government of Leiden decided to mint the needed coins using pages of Catholic books and works referring to the lives of the fathers of the Catholic Church as the base material. Given the situation, the coins were no doubt useful tools for normalizing monetary exchanges, but they also operated, through their very material fabrication, as blunt moral weapons against not only the Spanish, army but the whole of the Catholic empire.

It is easy to imagine how, as the siege continued, supplies began to run out, and starvation caused fatalities, the city government faced the real possibility of popular defiance. In this regard, I believe that the new currency, by invoking a sense of solid cohesion, activated a crucial process in order to avoid any doubts regarding political authority; as we know, objects can only operate as money when legitimized by a legal framework within a community. The users must agree on the object's subordination to a political structure. Accordingly, that same community, when accepting the use of a specific currency, is also agreeing to its own subordination to the sovereign power of the issuer. In our case, the mentioned paper currency, besides greasing daily transactions and the religious convictions of the city, was the scaffolding supporting the strength of the government by means of a deal that implied, and perpetuated, the roles of subordination and sovereignty.

Contrary to the case of Leiden, where only the government issued a new currency, the numerous cases of alternative money during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) are important because currency was issued by nearly anyone who enjoyed the trust of those living in close proximity (figs 8–18).

In July 1936, a failed *coup d'état* against the legitimate Republic of Spain divided the country into two opposing



fig. 5

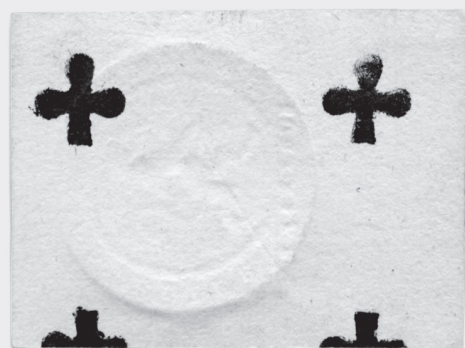


fig. 7



fig. 6

areas. Two months later, General Francisco Franco, leader of the nationalist military insurgency, created his own Central Bank in Burgos, while the government of the Republic continued to be regulated by the Central Bank of Spain in Madrid. As a consequence of the war, many territories were isolated for long periods of time, and communications with Madrid and its monetary institutions were difficult, if not impossible. As the war went on, the shortage of currency in the republican areas prompted regional governments, city councils, small municipalities, factories, cooperatives, associations, trade unions, large companies, small family-run businesses, cafes, hairdressers, and even individuals to issue their own forms of money in an effort to continue daily transactions. Today we know that during the last years of the war, more than 7,000 different forms of heterodox money coexisted with the official higher-value banknotes issued by the two separate central banks.

These heterogeneous currencies were issued and used mainly to address the needs of small, local territories and social groups in close contact. For instance, every village accepted only its own money, though some included the currencies of the villages in immediate proximity. In the most extreme cases, such as those issued by small businesses, cooperatives, or individuals, it is clear that without state backing, these currencies were supported only by neighbours' reciprocal trust and thus occasioned an inevitable reinforcement of social bonds within the community. As a consequence, this situation gave some localities a level of autonomy from the state that prompted an interesting revaluation of the traditional form of sovereignty operative in Spain at the time.

On the one hand, the official currency issued by the state operated as a measure of value, that is, it established a universal standard of equivalence for commodities. The fact that the state currency kept circulating in Spain only in the form of higher denomination banknotes implies that, even if rarely present in daily life, this form of money would be used to



fig. 8



fig. 9



fig. 10

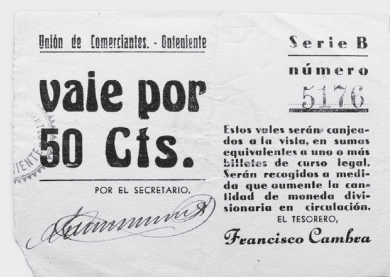


fig. 11



fig. 12



fig. 13

satisfy wholesale transactions that promised further exchanges, which then entailed speculation. The main users would therefore be traders, businessmen, and people operating between different territories of the country, or even internationally. One could say that this currency—even if symbolic of the sovereignty of the state—operated almost exclusively in a long-distance and private market.

On the other hand, the remaining 7,000 forms of currency that were not issued by the state worked mainly as a medium of exchange in short-distance range. By meeting the need for small exchanges, they facilitated daily access to those goods with an immediate use value, thus promoting direct contact between producers and consumers within a local economy.

From my perspective, there existed in Spain a dual currency system in which the state-issued form of money was intended to reflect the objective financial indices that value the economy of a country, while the unorthodox issues of currency were necessary for satisfying the social needs within a community, and also fostered social capital and forms of trust between the members of local groups. As a consequence of this dual currency situation, what I call “other issues” were able to provide a space with a certain degree of self-management where trust was both a value to fight over and a tool for survival. Both systems satisfied different functions, in different contexts, and because of that they could operate complementarily.

Money is a form of agreement. During the Spanish Civil War, more than 7,000 issuers of currency were closer to the users of that currency, operating together in a process of de-bureaucratization that necessarily meant the monetary agreement became more humanized and localized. The recovery of short-distance human relationships as the basis of the contract came as the immediate consequence of people taking control over the symbols that represented their own work. Ultimately, this meant a recovery of sovereignty over themselves. These forms of currency demystified the idea of



fig. 14



fig. 15



fig. 16

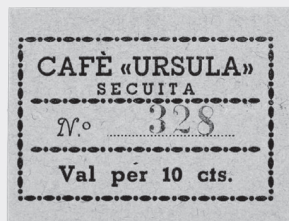


fig. 17



fig. 18

money as something distant and abstract, while also allowing the possibility of a more or less autonomous structure within local economies.

The Spanish case provides ample evidence that during moments of political and economic crisis, there is a tendency for currency to return to a practical differentiation of its functions, underscoring its historical roles as unit of account and medium of exchange. If it is true that, within Western history, commerce has accelerated thanks to the implementation of a revolutionary new function of money—as carrier of value, including the introduction of credit and the application of interest—it is also true that this velocity has imposed a set of values that are implicit to an imperative of limitless expansion and never ending growth.<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, those “other issues” unveil how currency can take on the values of social solidarity and collective trust as principles for a more humanized and autonomous construction of value. ○

Visit [www.transitionculture.org](http://www.transitionculture.org) and [www.complementarycurrency.org](http://www.complementarycurrency.org)

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 In addition to the photographic documents, *Other Issues* (2011) takes different forms depending on the context in which it is shown: photo-installations, lecture-performances, booklets, and articles have also made this project public.
- 2 Eds. note: For a complementary discussion of the history of currency, see “Coinage and Code: A Conversation with David Graeber,” *Scapegoat* 02 (Winter 2011), 23–4.

#### FIGURES

- 1 Paper coin made by using 20 pages of Catholic-related books. The pages were minted and cut out after being glued together. Here we see the original content of one of those pages.  
Leiden Siege (1574). *Other Issues*, Emilio Moreno. Image courtesy of the artist.
- 2 Paper coin made by using pages of Catholic-related books.  
Leiden Siege (1574). *Other Issues*, Emilio Moreno. Image courtesy of the artist.

3 Playing card used as regular currency.  
Suriname (1760–1827). *Other Issues*, Emilio Moreno. Image courtesy of the artist

4–6 Playing card used as regular currency. The colonial government initially shaped the cards as coins, but this was soon found to be unsustainable.  
Suriname (1760–1827). *Other Issues*, Emilio Moreno. Image courtesy of the artist.

7 Playing card used as regular currency. Cards were cut into halves to denominate lower values.

Suriname (1760–1827). *Other Issues*, Emilio Moreno. Image courtesy of the artist.

8–18 Some of the approximately 7000 forms of currency issued during the final years of the Spanish Civil War.

Spain (1936–1939). *Other Issues*, Emilio Moreno. Image courtesy of the artist.

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BIO Emilio Moreno is a Spanish artist whose work investigates different notions of value and the sources from which value emerges. Recent works have been made public in *Abridged*, South African National Gallery, Cape Town, 2012; *A Bewitched System*, Centro de Arte Dos De Mayo, Madrid, 2012; *The Grand Domestic Revolution*, Casco, Utrecht, 2012; and *18/18, If I Can't Dance I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution*, Amsterdam, 2012.