On Money and Quarantine
A Self-Ethnography from Italy

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Abstract: During the lockdown, I started perceiving cash as a potentially infected entity, carrying the virus on its surface. This article explores the trajectories and implications of this modified perspective on money by merging different levels of analysis. The attempt to grasp both the social and material significance of this 'object' will resound in personal anecdotes from my house. The self-ethnographic approach accounts also for the intimate feelings and the new gaze on money produced within me; the enthusiasm for imagining an economy driven by different rules; nostalgia for the activities I used to pay for; anxieties caused by this unprecedented health crisis; and my curiosity to observe how relationships with people and things have changed. The need to share experiences as a political statement and the desire to put fears and hopes into words guide my work.

Keywords: Anthropocene, COVID-19, intimacy, material culture, neoliberalism, non-human agents, self-reflexivity

Introduction. The New Materiality of the Pandemic

The lockdown reshaped our most intimate practices relating to time, space and bodies. Human relationships and routinised activities have been reorganised, and we have started to look at everyday objects with new eyes – screens instead of faces and smiles – and to use gloves and facemasks to cover and protect our bodies.[1] The spaces in which we develop our existences have been drastically reduced in size and variety. Stefano Mancuso (2018), a world-leading author in the field of plant neurobiology, pointed out how this experience helps humans enhance their understanding of plants' lives: they move without walking, they masterly consider which resources are available in the immediate proximity, and generally interact rather carefully with everything happening in their surroundings.

One specific aspect of the new materiality imposed on us by the pandemic, however, caught my attention. Perhaps it is a symptom of incipient or dormant hypochondria that I will have to learn how to deal with. I experienced completely new (and negative) feelings towards 'outside objects' on the inside of my home: shopping bags, shoes, jackets, house keys and money. In order to tackle this (shared) concern, my partner and I set up a strict and meticulous regime, which – admittedly – is not common even amongst the shocked and scared Italian middle class that we belong to. The procedure to go out and come back home entails dressing and undressing on the balcony, repeated hand-washing, putting objects on a specific shelf and cleaning all of them with alcohol. The scarcity of this detergent, which can only be secured after visiting all of our local neighbourhood shops, has bestowed it with a special value to us.

Money bills and coins particularly attracted my fears, and I started to see them as potentially infected entities entering my safe space made out of hygienic procedures and obsessive cleaning. As a consequence, cash was removed from my body and exiled to a specific spot next to the entrance door; for some time, it disappeared from my daily life. To some extent, this

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experience reshaped my relationship with money. It is a tiny change; it is a very personal story too. Perhaps it will not even have a substantial impact on my future life. Yet, it stimulated interesting thoughts, which I tried to put together hereafter.

In this article, I aim to explore the trajectories and the implications of a modified perspective on money by merging different levels of analysis. A first level reflects on the materiality of money and its life as an object as well as on its ability to structure social life. A second level touches upon the intimate feelings within me that were produced by the physical absence of money during the lockdown, leading me to make very personal conclusive considerations.

Theoretical Notes and Insights from My House: The Material and Social Life of Money

For the majority of us, exchanging and using money is indeed taken for granted; even when we are economically broke, it is hard to imagine or display alternatives. The anthropologist David Graeber (2011) commits to deconstructing the necessity of this social relation and to prove that money, debt, commerce and the economy have not always existed as a separated sphere of social life. However, dealing with money is a practice so deeply rooted in our behaviours that we perceive it as obvious and, with all due respect to us – the anthropologists – even natural. It is embedded in our lives, carved into our bodies and minds by culture. We hurl insults against it, but utter heartfelt blessings all the same.

If we embrace an inclusive approach towards animals, vegetables and all the non-human agents (Latour 1993; Viveiros de Castro 2012) that populate our living environment, then money acquires agency as well. Nature, manufactured products, and technology are not neutral tools available for our social needs; they have their own consistence and they actively contribute to mould our existences. Due to the pandemic, we have been forced to reflect upon the interdependence between human societies and the 'lifeless' world of nature and things. Unavoidably, the debate has focussed primarily on the conceptualisations of illness and pathogens. César Enrique Giraldo Herrera's (2018) account of shamanic cultures is particularly appealing: these people negotiate space, time and social activities with the pathogenic agents, just as we normally do in our personal relationships. The latter were identified as social and living organisms gifted with perceptions and empowered to take action centuries before Western scientists developed germ theory.

The above-mentioned scholars invite us to reconceptualise materiality (and science) and to conceive of hybrid systems in which humans and non-humans interact, collide and create coalitions. It may be worth studying the relationship between humans and money in these terms. We may write a new history examining the modes and reasons why humans and money have created such a strong coalition, and to observe the many acts of resistance people, nature and money itself have undertaken against each other. It is a utopian research project that goes far beyond the aim of this article, but speaks of the need to recognise money as an active and formative agent in the creation of our social systems.

Intertwining these reflections with my personal sensibility, I would like to invoke a comparison between currencies and invasive and parasitic species like pigeons. This comparison is not a random one: I am currently undertaking a daily fight against these animals, trying to evict them from the semi-abandoned balcony next to my bedroom, which has given birth to many generations of these stubborn and disgusting birds. Incidentally, this effort entails a set of procedures as accurate as the one depicted above and which have seen further formalisation during the quarantine. I have won a few battles, thanks to so much time spent at home, but I know it is only temporary. Just like money, pigeons are also well aware that the lockdown will not last forever. They will patiently wait, ready to counter-attack and to occupy the space they consider their property as much as I do.

For two months, money, as a material object, has disappeared from my life. This has been a loss, for it came together with the impossibility of enjoying the social activities that I used to pay for. This nostalgia, however, was combined with a transient feeling of freedom and liberation. Money is much more than an ordinary object, regardless of whether it does – or does not – have agency. It is part of a system of socio-economic relations (Harvey 2018), it is an ideological and governmental tool (Wacquant 2012), and it is a symbol of failure and success. In an undersophisticated analysis, money can be defined as the (neoliberal) market's most powerful manifestation and belief. So, all things considered, I would personally refer to it as an enemy rather than an ally.

I am fully aware that money has changed its material substance many times in history, and that

it will not keep its current shape forever. Cash has already become obsolete due to the spread of credit cards, online shopping and instalments. During the pandemic, we have become even more faithful customers of delivery services and online platforms, which most often – and to the hypochondriac's great relief – do not require the client to touch any cash. This has been depicted as a worldwide economic and social experiment, which entailed the implementation of a 'delivery world' ruled by Zoom, Amazon, Netflix and other entities. These were the only infrastructures available for us to escape the monotony and loneliness of the quarantine (Peterlongo 2020). Frankly, I was neither able nor willing to evade this condition, but a coincidence happened. I lost my wallet just two days before the lockdown was enforced in Italy. A nice lady returned it to me one day later, but I had already frozen my credit cards, and I have not been able to reactivate the one I use for online payments yet. Initially, this meant the impossibility of accessing online shops to get a book, a sports bra, or the textile I needed to make my own facemasks. Later, I found a way out by asking friends and family to use their cards after sending money to them. Eventually, I decided against it and to refrain from some of the new forms of consumerism that have been enhanced during the quarantine. It was both an act of solidarity with the delivery workers and a way of testing my independence from unnecessary goods.

I set my personal challenge and reached the goal. Unfortunately, I do not believe that individual behaviours and consumer choices make a difference, at least when it comes to macro-social and developmental issues. Money is more vital than ever, and its ecosystem is the market. Friedrich August von Hayek (1982), an economist who greatly contributed to the formalisation of the neoliberal doctrine, said that the market is an avoidable condition for complex societies to develop. In his opinion, every human action or interaction can be traced back to the economic system of monetary exchange. This belief allowed contemporary societies to pursue monetisation not only of productive and public services, but also of social relations themselves (Moini 2016). In conclusion, money and prices symbolically function as ordering and epistemic principles, and they are intentionally committed to keep ruling humans' lives. Yet, due to the unprecedented living conditions I experienced during the quarantine, I enthusiastically found myself imagining a world without money and an economy driven by radically new rules.

Conclusion: The Fire of Change

COVID-19 has been an unprecedented health, social and economic crisis on a global scale. It is the most traumatic experience Western societies have faced since the Second World War. This may sound partial and ethnocentric, but I feel it. It definitely sounds reasonable for someone who lives in Italy, the borderline from which the outbreak spread across Europe. I come from a suburb in the Metropolitan Region of Milan, which is on the route to Bergamo. This small city has been one of the most deadly affected areas in the world. On 18 March, military tracks went there to collect and remove the bodies that the local facilities were not able to bury and the families were not allowed to mourn. Many controversies arose about the management of the crisis – especially in northern Italy, but this is a topic for another time.

Around the world, some people argued that COVID-19 was the new 9/11; others said it marked a critical stage in the struggle against a model for development based on neoliberalism and anthropocentrism. Personally, I did not celebrate the lockdown as a chance for personal growth and achievements; I have been sceptical of our capacity to become better people and societies. To me, the pandemic looks more like an abyss than a portal (Roy 2020). As much as concerns and anxieties linked to the contagion decrease, severe worries arise about the social and economic consequences of it. Not last is the fact that we as humans, as a species, keep destroying our living environments and dismantling the conditions we need to survive on this planet.

Leaving aside pessimism as a whole, I ask myself how we could benefit from the imaginary potential of destruction, the countless unusual situations and perceptions, the habits turned upside down, the renegotiation of relationships with people and things. It is my impression that these experiences constitute a skein of new knowledge, a raw material with which to craft our relationships and practices. These feelings and stories are extremely personal, but they are also deeply meaningful, and worth reporting on a large scale. They could represent a powerful tool for mutual recognition and reciprocal understanding amongst very different individuals and groups. The quarantine was (amongst many horrible things) a time for self-reflection which led many of us to feel a renewed urgency to be part of a collective organism that is culturally inclusive and politically incisive. Coming together is a necessary condition to stimulate a – very-much-needed – process of transformation

and freedom. Perhaps, it may be helpful to share experiences, needs, fears, emotions, angers and reflections originating within such a circumstance, as if they were dry logs to be thrown into the fire of change.

P.S. The 'pigeons balcony' is not the one where my clothes hang!

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Note

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1. This article is loosely based upon a contribution previously published in Italy by the online magazine *Qcode Mag* and the blog *Osservatorio La Giusta Distanza*.

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