

Community Currencies, Exchange and Gift Economies in Latin America

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My [opening essay](#) for the series that I contribute to *Anthropology News* portrayed the overall characteristics *Otra Economía & Otra Sociedad* and the way anthropologists are making visible how it diverges from common sense, taken for granted capitalist relationships. [Gibson and Graham](#) have stressed this idea by emphasizing the existence of *diverse economies*, and have made a call to documenting and analyzing what is it that people are actually doing, in order to study economic practices as complex sets of orientations, values and semantic webs, that is, as *cultural* practices. [De Souza Santos \(2012\)](#) has studied what do human practices look like when *producing for living*, and thus, he has argued for restituting the adjective “social” when speaking about economy: to not forget that any economic system of relations is, first and foremost, a co-constructed and human created web of meaning and practices. There is no such thing as “the economy” as an autonomous, context-free, non-ideological imposed phenomenon that conforms a separate realm of the human endeavor (Altvater pp. 17-32 in [Giarracca 2008](#)).

One issue that emerges from these types of analyses is that even though capitalism tends to be thought of as *the norm*, very many different systems co-exist. This is the premise by which many groups of people around the world organize themselves in what they call *alternative ways*: they mean *alternative to exploitation* (of others and nature), to accumulative profit and to alienation. Thus, anthropology helps uncover the fact that any economic system entails *cultural patterns, decision making-processes and room for choice*. It is important to bring these issues at the forefront in light of recently published

research that shows how unequal is unequal distribution being nowadays (see [Piketty 2014](#)).

In this column I address the question of what does emerge when we think in this line about money and currency or about practices of exchange which are not “the market as we know it”? I specifically relate it to the contributions of anthropology-oriented research to *otra economía & sociedad*.



“Sin un mango” (with no money) – Forum for cultural products exchange, Moreno, Argentina, 2013. Photo courtesy David Burin

Community and complementary currencies & the logic of gift and exchange

[Nishibe](#) (2011 in ICCRC pages 36-48) points that money—as well as language—is a social convention created by human cultures over time. When money is seen as serving a function, and not as being *in use*, we lose perspective about that—as any social convention—its use (and meaning) can of course be re-defined ([Orzi 2012](#), pages 131-133).

Nishibe also states that while money can reduce complexity to a one-dimensional value, language keeps its complexity and its capacity to generate a variety of exchanges. He also reinforces that [community and complementary currencies](#) integrate at least these two aspects: they become a medium of exchange, while keeping the communicative capacities that language possesses because individuals or groups must delve into face-to-face interactions to decide how and why to participate, with whom, in which ways, and whether or not there would be a currency. Community and complementary currencies express values as they are locally perceived and/or negotiated, and more important, they make very visible that economic systems are decisions made upon a complex set

of practices (as highlighted earlier by [Seyfang, 2000](#); to deepen into the current research issues on this field see also [IJCCR](#)).



People explain where products come from. Argentina 2013. Photo courtesy Rosana Miraglino

Other processes, such as multi-reciprocal exchange, also have this potential, since what counts as exchangeable becomes such because it has local meaning and is defined in a social relationship: what is considered a resource is locally defined and may help restore the power of making decisions more directly. These approaches may also have the power of establishing relationships such that all involved may access what is sufficient to secure the right of every human being to their life (an approach also referred to as *buen vivir*).

For these reasons many community and complementary currencies, and exchange systems, develop forms of participation closer to gift economy: not exactly “exchange” or “using currency to buy/sell” but giving without expecting anything in return (see [Vaughan](#)).

In Latin America several different scenarios related to these practices, and conceptual discussions on the frames from where to understand these processes, have been documented (for an inter-disciplinary set of papers see the book coordinated by Orzi 2012). One such scenario relates these practices to the crisis of mainstream economy, for which complementary and community currencies and multi-reciprocal exchange provide a solution (in Argentina up to 6 million people participated of these forms of exchange during the 2001-2003 crisis). A body of anthropology oriented research is also showing that the [moneda social](#) and the *economía del dar* (*gratiferias*) also takes place as a political choice and as an action of activism against what is perceived as

alienated forms of life. Additionally, other practices currently found in Latin America are related to forms held in the past that have been kept across centuries. In this respect, anthropologists have become key at making visible how, why and with whom do these different forms arise, also highlighting the connections between current and past ways of organizing the economy in different regions of Latin America.

In closing I would like to point that:

- In the community and complementary currency approach, what counts as “money” is purposefully decided upon: its uses and range, for example, or its ephemeral nature for which it cannot be accumulated or speculated about, a characteristic called *oxidation*, following [Silvio Gessell](#) (so much so that in many *ferias* held in Argentina community currency was destroyed once the event closed).
- Exchange is seen as a social and cultural practice, one in which specific values are agreed upon, for example, mutuality, cooperation, recycling when appropriate.
- Most importantly, these practices bring about dialogue (e.g., to explain where and how was the product fabricated, or why are people choosing to participate in such systems) and explicitly count on making collective decisions.

For many, community and complementary currency, multi-reciprocal exchange and gift economy are seen as coherent ways to sustain daily practices for *otra economía and sociedad* because they seem to have a pedagogical and emancipatory potential ([Plasencia & Orzi 2007](#)), practices that may be creating new subjectivities for making different choices.

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Arte y cultura en Moreno, Provincia de Buenos Aires. Photo courtesy Rosana Miraglino