

Alternative currencies

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Diverse economies of money

Money, it seems, both everywhere and unexamined – unless we think that we don't have enough, or that someone else has too much. Often this is as we assume that money is something we have to 'earn', a 'thing' out there that we need to get hold of, but that we can't change. But actually, it isn't 'out there' – it's a system of belief. The Latin root of 'credit' is *credere*, to believe something is true or trust it. It is not singular, but multiple. For some, money – coins, banknotes, digital entries in an account – is, or should be, a fungible and portable substitute for a concrete commodity, e.g. gold, that facilitates the exchange of goods between humans with incommensurable wants and needs, but with a natural propensity to barter, truck and trade (Smith, 1776/1981). For others it is 'capitalist credit money', an advance on the delivery of future tangible goods and services in a credit fuelled capitalist society (Lapavistas, 2003). We accept it as we trust that others will also do so in the future. Alternatively it is issued by states as a tool for state building and the control of space by specifying how goods and services should be priced and taxes paid for within that state's domain (Cohen, 1998, Ingham, 2004).

Marxists see money as a tool for enclosure through which formally self-provisioning and moneyless peasants are thrown off the land, proletarianised, and forced to sell their labour in a disadvantageous exchange relationship. In time, Marxists argue, forms of financialisation act as tools for capitalist disciplining that trap wage slaves into deeper and deeper webs of debt. An indebted society in which people have to work to pay off their debts is easier to control. In contrast, Simmel (1978/1908) argues that 'money is freedom'. I don't have to like you to trade with you; you just have to accept my money, and everyone's money is as good as anyone else's. Hayek (1944) argued that having money allows you to flee persecution, protecting you from petty bureaucrats in state-owned economies and genocidal dictators alike. Given its importance for protecting individual liberty from the state he consequently argued that the right to issue money should be protected from the predations of 'profligate' governments, and be issued by the private sector (Hayek, 1990). For Viviana Zelizer (1997, 2005) money is both freedom *and* control. Money, society and emotions are intertwined, not separate domains: should a church accept a mafia don's donation? Why is the acceptability or otherwise of paying for sex contested? Money is not singular, but multiple. Appropriate at times, not at others

Money, then, has always been diverse, evolving from cowries and tally sticks through silver and gold to today's paper and electronic fiat money (Ingham, 2004). Recent years has seen

a mushrooming of alternative, complementary and community currencies in that space between exchange using state and bank-created money on one hand (pounds, dollars, euro), and non-monetised exchange or sharing on the other. How, advocates of alternative currencies ask, might a convivial and democratic economy be facilitated by or lubricated by an alternative form of exchange that does not require the pre-existence of conventional money or the ability to or willingness to share *without* using money? How might people who want to develop alternatives to capitalist ethics that require you to sell your labour, who are against growth, and who might want to help build more localised or community-based economies use alternative forms of money that enable people to exchange goods and services in different ethical ways? Communities have recognised that fiat, or 'make it so' money is just a social construct and have created their own currencies going back to Robert Owen's Labour Notes at the dawn of capitalism, in the 1930s in Europe and North America, and more concretely since the 1990s. In the 21st century new forms of electronic and crypto currencies have emerged.

This chapter will first describe the different alternative currencies that have emerged over the past thirty years before examining how alternative forms of money can be entangled with other forms of labour and non-human resources to generate new economic possibilities, organised around three themes:

1. Valuation and convertibility
2. Regulation, commitment and community-building mechanisms
3. Geographies of circulation

The world of alternative currencies.

LETS or Local Exchange Trading Schemes emerged in the late 1980s as local trading networks that use a virtual local currency called a *Green Dollar* (in Canada, Australia and New Zealand), the *Toronto dollar* in Toronto, *Talente* (in Germany, Hungary), or *Grains of Salt* (France). In the UK LETS networks adopted an amusing or locally significant name such as 'Tales' in Canterbury, 'Brights' in Brighton, or 'Bobbins' in Manchester (North, 2006). Members of these local currency networks advertise their wants and needs in a directory, and then make their own arrangements to trade and pay each other using the local currency which, as we discuss below, had a variable relationship in value with conventional money and

time. LETS or Green Dollars have no physical form, and members of the network do not have to have any currency before they can spend it. They just make a commitment to pay back what they spend at a later date, and write a cheque denominated in the local money units to pay for goods and services. This is then sent to an 'accountant' who keeps scores on a PC. The person buying goods or services has their account debited, while the buyer or person doing the work is credited the same amount. Scaled up to the network, the totality of transactions in and out of all accounts balances. These person-to-person personal credit LETS and Green Dollar networks now have some 25 years' trading experience under their belt (North, 2010). They have a resolutely 'alternative feel', with aromatherapy and counselling services outnumbering plumbers and electricians. People joined these networks to meet new people, build community and obtain things they could not afford, but also to explore new economic values, ways of caring for each other, and living in a sustainable way. Ecological politics was important.

As Gradon Diprose discusses in more detail in this volume, time banks connect people who exchange services rewarded with credits denominated in time, with no relationship to national money (Cahn, 2000, Seyfang, 2003). One time credit is paid for one hour's work. Time banks emerged as people working with vulnerable groups were concerned that the lovely alternative-minded but perhaps a bit chaotic people attracted to LETS might not in practice be the most reliable people to provide services to vulnerable people (Aldridge and Patterson, 2002). Rather than using an unpaid accountant to keep score (and who again might be unreliable or unable to cope with large volumes of trade), time banks are generally run by a paid co-ordinator or broker based at a social services organisation who takes responsibility for making sure vulnerable people's needs are met by making a decision about what needs can be met using the time bank, and where intervention by mainstream health or social services provision is required. The agency also ensures that the value of the credits will be maintained over time, so time banks have the potential to be a better store of value than LETS (North, 2003). Time money is enthusiastically supported by advocates of a mixed economy of welfare through which service users and professionals co-produce services which, they argue, will be more effectively targeted on need and more democratically delivered than would be the case from a perhaps bureaucratic, unresponsive, one-size-fits-all state-delivered welfare system (Cahn 2000). For some, this means time money can appear as

worryingly neoliberal, a form of self-help legitimising the withdrawal of social democratic levels of welfare. For others, the ethos of coproduction is welcome.

As an alternative to virtual LETS or time credits stored on a PC, Ithaca 'Hours' emerged in the late 1980s as the first of a wave of a paper currencies denominated in hours and decorated with local images and slogans extolling the virtues of a place (for example, "In Ithaca we trust") that spread across a number of towns and cities in north America (Maurer, 2003, North, 2014). They shared their originating town's alternative ethos, and use of the currency would often spark discussions about the nature of work, the value of place, and the role of money between likeminded people: they acted as a tool for conviviality. Also in the US, this time in the Berkshires, Massachusetts, the EF Schumacher Society established a local paper currency denominated in BerkShares, with one BerkShare equivalent to one dollar. In time, and as we discuss below, Ithaca Hours and BerkShares inspired the UK's transition currencies, Germany's *regiogeld*, and the community and NGO-created paper *creditos* used by millions after the economic crisis of 2001 that devastated Argentina's economy (Gómez, 2008, North, 2007). The advent of the Eurozone crisis meant alternative exchange networks later emerged in Greece (Sotiropoulou, 2011, Thanou et al., 2013) – where SYRIZA finance minister Varoufakis commissioned early policy work on the feasibility of a state backed alternative to the Euro (North, 2016) - and Spain (Cha, 2012).

As internet technology developed over time we have seen the rise of electronic currencies that use a network of computers to store and lock together chains (blockchains) of electronic bookkeeping entries that log and validate a transaction without the need for a bank. For some, cryptocurrencies are an exhilarating, disruptive and potentially liberating decentralised non-state financial innovation that cuts out illegitimately hyper profitable and exploitative financial intermediators like capitalist banks and that capitalist states that exist to support an exploitative system that meets the needs of elites. Libertarians have no confidence in states to maintain the value of fiat currency over time. As such, cryptocurrency advocates argue, they have the potential to offer solutions to poverty, financial crisis, debt and hyperinflation (Dierksmeier and Seele, 2016). Others condemn them as evil tools that facilitate nefarious forms of commerce (weapons, blackmail, drugs, modern slavery) on the dark web (Krugman, 2013). Blockchain mining is based on unsustainable fossil fuel usage and is dependent on the privately-owned technological infrastructure of the internet that anticapitalists rage

against: consequently, these critics do see them as part of the progressive alternative currency movement. Beyond cryptocurrencies, other electronic innovations such as the now widespread use of contactless electronic payment and mobile phones, and a concomitant fall in the use of cash, has led to the development of local electronic currencies such as COLU in London, Haifa, Tel Aviv and Liverpool¹, or Hull Coin in Hull, UK². ICUs, introductory coin issues, are tools for raising credit for new business ventures, perhaps with progressive intent (for example, new local solar power businesses), perhaps not.

For diverse economies advocates, these alternative currencies provide inspiring alternatives to ‘money-as-usual’ that enable their enthusiasts to construct forms of money that facilitate performances of economies that enable people to live differently, in ethical ways for the Anthropocene (North, 2007). That said, the different models of alternative currency value work, people and relationships in diverse ways that have implications for the sort of diverse futures they construct. Taking the necessary risk of oversimplifying what is a very diverse range of global phenomena, the chapter will now examine the implications of different forms of design for the performance of diverse economies.

Money or Time? Valuation and convertibility

Alternative currencies can be denominated in time (time banks, Ithaca Hours); with direct reference to and convertibility with national currency (transition currencies, BerkShares, Toronto Dollars); a hybrid of the two (a LETS credit or green dollar is *like* a pound or dollar) or (in the case of Argentine *creditos*) unconnected to any form of valuation – people are expected to *believe* in and support each other. Time banks are specifically not aligned to national money, while Ithaca and other ‘hours’ suggest a local hourly rate as a grassroots minimum or living wage. Cryptocurrencies are mined, and their value rises and falls in relation to mainstream money. The arguments for and against various rates have implications for how the alternative currency works and who they value, and are as follows.

Time-based money mainly appeals to those who want to value work in ways unconnected to the capitalist nexus whereby, for example, a lawyer is paid more than a cleaner.

¹ See <https://www.colu.com/>

² See <http://www.hull-coin.org/>

A strict hourly rate appeals to those for whom equality and equity in trading relations is of major importance, i.e. as a technique of resistance to capitalist commodification. Local money advocates here are engaging here with Robert Owen's – and Marx's – argument that the basis of all wealth is labour. They reject the economics of austerity, arguing for problems to be solved and needs to be met above the need for money to be in existence in advance to meet these needs, for money to be just the lubrication or energy needed to facilitate work, which is what matters (North 1999). Third, there is an engagement with feminist analyses of labour markets that want to properly recognise, value and reward work often attributed to and carried out by women (Waring, 1990).

Of course, and as Gradon Diprose discusses elsewhere in relation to time banking, valuations of what constitutes fair recompense for labour time can be contested. What if one person works harder or more efficiently than another: should they be paid the same? Elites argue that one person's time *is* worth more than another's: an hour of a lawyer's time is actually twenty years' experience and training concentrated into an hour. Having a time-based currency potentially restricts its appeal to those with whose political views are aligned with those of the exchange network, framing the currency as a radical, countercultural experiment aiming to revalue work and time in favour of those that market capitalism does not remunerate well (North, 1999). That is why diverse economies advocates engage with them.

It was UK LETS, perhaps unsurprisingly given its role as a space for early innovation and problem solving, that the most debate over value occurred. Many UK LETS schemes argued that a LETS unit, e.g. a Bobbin, is 'like' a pound, and that a recommended hourly rate should be charged that reflects a 'fair' rate for the work done and time spent. Others argued for a rate that specifically does **not** align with UK pounds: for example the Bright Exchange's (Brighton, UK) rate of 12 units to the hour was felt to be specifically non-decimal and therefore discouraged valuations aligned to pounds. Belfast experimented with pints³. Ideal LETS, in Bristol, set a rate of 20 Ideals an hour, reflecting the earning expectations of its bohemian middle class and professional members used to charging top dollar for their counselling and aromatherapy sessions. For Manchester LETS, the dilemma was solved with

³ "I'll buy you a pint if you"

a (perhaps very British) fudge. Individual LETS members were allowed to develop a range of diverse values for the currency, the Bobbin, such as:

- A Bobbin is worth *exactly* a pound, and hourly rates would be calculated directly translating members expectations of their worth at mainstream prices. Members were free to bargain in a free market, and those who charged too much would need to adjust their prices according to market signals;
- A Bobbin is '*like*' a pound, and a recommended hourly rate was set. This would be a more moral market (Lee 1996);
- A *gesture*: One Bobbin would be paid, irrespective of the time taken to provide a service. In Manchester, advocates of this called themselves the 'bob-a-jobbers'.
- *Distrusted*: Others distrusted complementary currencies which they saw as commodification of co-operation that would have happened irrespective of the existence of the currency. They used the network to share without using Bobbins. Here they are drawing attention to the use of the vernacular 'that's bobbins' in Manchester to indicate that something has no value.
- *Variable valuation*. All or some of the above, depending on the quality of the relationship between traders, how much or little a trader wished to or enjoyed providing a service, or the relative level of accounts. A complete free market.

The problem with this early diversity was that the bobbin failed to act as money in the conventional sense. It was not an effective measure of value or an accepted means of exchange if traders with different value systems interacted, tried to make come to an agreement, but struggled to resolve their wildly differing expectations of how much to charge or pay (North 2006). For example, cleaners could feel that an accepted rate of ten bobbins an hour compared favourably with the going rates in the pre-minimum wage UK, while a homoeopathist could feel that her hourly rate should include recompense for her hours of training. This differential also meant that bobbins failed to act as an effective store of value if a trader who charged above the odds and could then buy more labour per hour than someone earning a lower rate. On the other hand, others felt that as they had access to unlimited currency, the fact that one person charged more than another seemed irrelevant as all that is traded is points: unlimited currency did not need to function as a store of value if it is valueless 'bobbins'. Money is 'bobbins': what matters is meeting people's needs, not saving.

In a third scenario, market mechanisms worked and the trader charging above the odds began to store up unspendable credits and lowered their prices. The problem was that strong bonds of trust were not developed in the absence of a universally-accepted currency valuation, either imposed by a strong organisational structure through rules, regulations and/or penalties, or through the evolution over time of a shared and accepted ethos. In Polanyian terms, LETS operated more as a free market than one in which societal values trumped exchange values.

Regulating the use of and the circulation of the currency.

Another debate about societal control or free markets emerged over debates about how the supply of the currency and how it circulates should or should not be managed. There are two approaches. LETS and time money are 'personal credit' forms of money as currency issue is governed by the users of the currency themselves in an unmanaged way. They don't have to have enough local money to pay for something in advance; they just write a cheque which they 'back' with their personal 'promise to pay the bearer on demand' by doing some work for someone else in the future that will earn back the money they have emitted and return their balance to zero. This leads to a debate: should this be left to individual buyers and sellers to decide how much of a personal commitment to repay they should take on, and who to take money from? Should this be left to the workings of a free market, or regulated by society or the community – and if the latter, how? Should there be credit or debit limits? Are members expected to earn as much as they spend over time, periodically returning their account to a zero balance as in LETS; or should needs be met irrespective of ability to pay in the future (the case with time banks)? What if your needs are greater than your ability to pay? Can an account with a growing debit be tolerated? Should balances be made public, and what are the cultural mores of the community concerned about what many regard as private, personal information about spending habits, indebtedness, and account balances?

LETS members are expected to periodically balance their accounts, or, as it is called 'go through zero'. Some LETS schemes impose credit or debit limits, and actively enforce them either through the proactive publication of balances or through oversight by a management group. These account management systems are, it is argued, necessary to maintain the integrity of the currency and confidence in it by ensuring that all traders are

contributing to the scheme, and that a member who takes more from others than they contribute will find that opportunities to trade reduce when the size of the imbalance – or for some ‘debt’ - becomes publically known. In reality, however, the extent that individual LETS members do check up on the credit balances of others and regulate their trading relations to ensure equitable contributions is questionable and in practice community regulation – which some would see as an inappropriate financial panopticon - does not happen.

In contrast with LETS, for time money the emphasis is on meeting needs and on people making whatever contribution they feel they can, irrespective of whether the volumes of services given and received are in balance in any individual case. The concept of 'debt' does not exist in the same way as in the conventional economy, and participants collectively contribute and withdraw ‘time’ from 'the bank', rather than manage an individual account. The ethos is of 'co-production', of people meeting their needs collectively, of providing as well as receiving help (Cahn 2000). Accounts statements are often not provided, to avoid putting those whose needs outweigh their ability to reciprocate feeling beholden to the community, or holding back from asking for the support they are entitled to if they are culturally resistant to taking on what they see as a 'debt'.

With local scrip such as 'hours', the Argentine trueque, the transition currencies and German regional currencies, a central issuing authority decides how much scrip to issue. If this currency issuance is through new users converting national currency into local currency and then spending it into circulation, the market decides how much currency is in existence. If too many unbacked notes are issued, as we saw in Argentina, they may (perhaps catastrophically) lose value in an inflationary cycle as too many notes are chasing too few trading opportunities (Gómez, 2008). If too few are issued, needs may still be unmet for lack of money, recreating the pathologies of the conventional currency. How many notes to issue is a delicate decision, and it is unclear who has the right, or knowledge, to make a decision that affects the fundamental integrity of the system. Some of the currency networks driven by activists with more radical objectives decide collectively at open meetings how much currency should be issued. Regiogeld and Berkshares, which do involve significant numbers of businesses, are formally organised by NGOs, with the support and participation of local banks.

In the UK, in the early days some of the transition currencies suffered from a perception that they were not professionally organised and managed. Users exchanging

limited volumes of personal services or buying the odd hand-made card or homebaked cake are likely to be more relaxed about the professionalism and accountability of the network when compared with what is necessary to facilitate business-to-business exchange and the tax and (potentially) regulatory liabilities associated with that. With the latter businesses and livelihoods are on the line, and people affected need ways in which they can hold the currency system accountable and change the rules if the currency is affecting their livelihood adversely (North 2014). In time, the transition currencies began to formalise their management structures and develop explicit channels to enable them to get feedback from users of the currency, and to involve them in decisions about how the currency was governed and how future developments. BerkShares used local banks to store the dollars that backed the currency, a luxury places that do not have local banks envy.

The geographical extent of trading

Peer-to-peer personal credit money worked well enough when people exchanged services or things they had or produced at home or in a community garden. But given their alternative feel, LETS credits or Green Dollars were generally not accepted by conventional businesses beyond those whose clientele came from alternative networks and who saw participation as part of their 'social license to trade'. They saw it as worthless monopoly money that they could not use to pay for supplies, wages, or taxes. Secondly, the absence of any national currency referent led to confusion in pricing goods in time-based money. Here, time money could work well as unit of exchange for people with aligned values sharing services, but was a poor measurement of value for goods: how many hours for a slice of pizza? How do you give out change (Maurer, 2003). Thirdly, busy businesses could not be expected to take cheques and send them to the accountant. Paper money goes in and out of tills with ease. Generally, businesses did not accept LETS, and time banks generally did not seek their involvement.

The result was that the networks stayed small, homogenous alternative milieus and the range of goods and services was limited. For people excluded from the means of subsistence by enclosure, i.e. most people in the global North, this was a problem. They still had to exchange their labour power to gain the money they needed to pay their bills, buy

food, pay their rent or mortgage: people cannot live on aromatherapy alone. Those with skills or goods in high demand struggled to spend as much as they earned as they could not exchange their LETS or time credits back into national currency. They often left.

The solution to this was aligning alternative currencies in value with state-backed money, designing them to look and feel more like conventional understandings of money, and backing the alternative currency with conventional money on deposit for which it could be exchanged. While we cannot assume that all businesspeople think in purely instrumentalist terms (North and Nurse, 2014), the assumption was that businesses would be more likely to accept local paper money that looked and felt more like money, more people use them, and consequently they would be a more effective tool for localisation. These lessons were drawn upon by BerkShares and then the UK's transition currencies.

Concerns about the triple crisis of austerity, climate change and resource crises have led to the emergence of Transition Towns, community-led initiatives aiming to relocalise economies to build in resilience to economic shocks, and to cut down on the emissions and fossil fuel consumption associated with globalisation that is contributing to dangerous climate change (Hopkins, 2011). In 2007, inspired by BerkShares and Ithaca Hours, but wanting to ensure that their currency would be accepted by local businesses, members of Transition Town Totnes launched the Totnes Pound (Longhurst, 2012), a local note denominated in local (in this case Totnes) pounds, at parity with pounds, and backed by pounds held on deposit. Lewes, Brixton, Stroud and later Bristol and Exeter followed (North 2010: 161-172). All of the transition currencies attracted significant numbers of business users, and represented an obvious step up in scale from LETS, hours and time banks if the aim is economic localisation in order to mitigate against dangerous climate change and construct an economic ethics for the Anthropocene.

Bristol apart however, there have been concerns that these small UK towns are still too small to work well as optimal currency areas (Mundell, 1961) in which the geographical spaces that money circulates in maps on to the circulation of physical goods and services in the economy. In Germany, Chiemgauer regional money circulates in an area 100km around a lake, the Chiemsee, which is seen as an area small enough to have some coherence, regional identity and be considered 'local'; but big enough to include a wide enough variety of

businesses that users can spend it for day-to-day purchases in some volume. If enough businesses participated, business-to-business exchange would be catalysed, and in time, local production stimulated (North and Weber, 2013). The currency, linked at parity to the Euro, comes in the form of scrip notes again featuring local images, and in electronic form. Users of the Chiemgauer buy them from issuing offices, spending them with the 539 participating business. Businesses can recirculate them to other businesses or community groups, pay suppliers who accept them, give them out in change, donate them, or redeem them for Euros. Since the introduction of a debit card an average of 35% of Chiemgauer transactions are electronic, with some popular businesses processing 80% of their Chiemgauer transactions electronically. By June 2018 629000 Chiemgauer circulated. Thus Chiemgauer is perhaps the most developed of the alternative exchange networks. In turn, a number of the transition currencies undertook pioneering work on local electronic currencies using mobile phone technology.

BerkShares, transition currencies and regiogeld involved local businesses to a significant level, thus deepening the network: but they then encountered four new problems. First, aligning the local currency directly to national currency was seen by more radical members as replicating the inequalities of the conventional economy (North 2006). Secondly, the local currency can only be obtained in exchange for national currency rather than emitted on the basis of your personal promise to repay in the future (as is the case with LETS and time banks). The question then arises: why would anyone change universal money that is accepted everywhere into a more limited form of money that is not, unless they had a political or affective commitment to the project, or their place, or to supporting their local economy? Third, those who do not have enough spare national currency to convert into the local scrip are still excluded from participation in the network: this is not new money boosting spending power for those without much money (which LETS and time banks both do). People on a budget who live from day-to-day are not likely to convert universal money spendable in budget supermarkets for a local currency that cannot be used for everyday non-discretionary purchases. Finally, what is the benefit of a currency that does not circulate widely through the local economy, but is just banked after one exchange? A wider alternative circuit of capital is not created, and the hoped-for 'structuring' elements of a local currency are missing. Local business- focused currencies are designed to incentivise people to supporting ethical

local and community businesses (that are likely to accept the currency as it aligns with their values and those of their customers), penalising exploitative businesses who do not contribute to their community or remit all their profits to a head office elsewhere. It is hoped that the currency would help local businesses to support each other, find ways to trade with each other or pass it down their supply chains thereby deepening the local exchange network. In time, local money would catalyse the development of new forms of local production to fill the holes through which money flows out of the community (North, 2005). While many ethical businesses do buy into the ethos, the question then arises, why should a busy business who does not share this commitment proactively try to spend the local currency if they can just bank it? What if, with the best of intentions, they can't spend it as they are reliant on long standing supply chains out of place? One problem is solved, four new ones emerge. The result is that businesses find it easier to just convert their local money back into national money, as was found to the case in Bristol (Marshall and O'Neill, 2018).

An attempted solution to these problems developed by the EF Schumacher Society was to incentivise new users by offering a favourable exchange rate between local and national currencies and simultaneously to dis-incentivise banking rather than recirculating the currency. Nine US dollars bought you ten BerkShares, while businesses that converted BerkShares back into US dollars would only receive nine dollars for ten BerkShares, while businesses that spent their local currency or gave it out in change were not so penalised. This was not a problem for many businesses: they regularly offer a discount to customers. Further, as the local currency featured prominently in the media and provided good publicity for the town, some felt the price was worth paying. But popular high volume, low profitability businesses who could not spend the currency in the volumes they accepted, struggled. They began to describe the cost of banking BerkShares as a taking a ten per cent 'hit' which they saw as a cost of doing business in that community (North, 2014). In time, the discount was reduced to five per cent, which seemed more sustainable and was replicated elsewhere. The other solution was to experiment more and more with electronic forms of payment, and promote it as a cheaper alternative to the charges made by credit card companies. Thus over time, these currencies became more business-friendly, offered more goods and services to members, and became better tools for strengthening the local economy, if their political challenges inherent in LETS and Ithaca hours was deemphasised.

Conclusion

Alternative forms of currency are now a well-established part of the community economy armoury, enabling those who use them to experiment with alternative visions of convivial localized economies, and, within the limits of their productive capacity, experiment with alternative visions of work, livelihood and economy (North 2007). There were hopes that alternative currencies might be fecund sources of less commodified and regulated forms of work and of livelihoods that operate by alternative rhythms than that of capitalist disciplining. However, the reality of what these alternative networks could concretely achieve without access to means of production beyond those held up ordinary people was limited and few alternative currencies networks have facilitated a move out of alternative circuit of consumptions to production (North, 2014). As yet no local currencies have significantly contributed to the localisation of an economy to the extent that emissions and resource throughputs have been significantly reduced at levels necessary to avoid dangerous climate change (Dittmer, 2013). In the Chiemgau and the more mature transition towns we are now starting to see the emergence of something about which we can perhaps be more hopeful – ‘not yet’ does not mean ‘never’.

The extent that in gaining business acceptability alternative currencies like the transition currencies help construct more diverse local economies in which alternative economic possibilities become deeper and more widespread, or have been ‘tamed’ of their radical intent will need to be uncovered through future research. This would go beyond a focus on alternative visions to an examination of the concreteness of alternative practices, including alternative circuits of exchange and production facilitated by alternative currencies. The secular move away from cash into electronic forms of payment might suggest that innovation in electronic alternative currencies might be the most promising. Then we will understand more about the extent that social change comes from innovations in substantive economic practices, with money as just a means of numeration, of exchange, and a store of value (in which case the economy is what really matters, with money as a side show) or if, as their advocates argue, new forms of money can generate new forms of economic practice.

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