Decolonising money: learning from collective struggles for self-determination

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Abstract
As a reflection of our politically engaged research, this paper addresses the multiple challenges of transforming money for the emergence of the Pluriverse, arguing that practical efforts of emancipation and autonomy need to dismantle the colonial nature of our current monetary system: the flip side of the colonial state. On the one hand, we look into Chiloé, a territory marked by long-term relations of colonialism, dependency and extraction, where the arrival of monetised forms of work in extractive industries has meant the destruction of former ways of inhabiting the territory. On the other, we explore the emergence of the Circles project, in Berlin, that aims at creating a basic income from the bottom-up, whereby people in different communities issue money equally and exchange with each other without the need for state cash. More than assuming that money in itself is ‘bad’, we suggest that a recovery of the social and ecological fabric of life could be done through local money systems, designed and managed by the communities themselves, delivered and redistributed as a basic income. Moving to a plural monetary system based on relations of care would lead to a recovery of history as a project of collective self-determination.

Keywords Money · Colonialism · Basic income · Pluriverse · Minga

Introduction
We are witnessing spectacular failures in addressing the critical conjunctions being faced by humanity, and efforts to escape mainstream responses to our civilisational crisis are raising more attention and interest. From the reluctance to address the underlying mechanisms that led to the 2008 financial crisis and the failure of the ‘Pink Tide’ in Latin America, to the ineffectiveness of the Sustainable Development Goals framework or the general disappointment on the Paris Agreement as the key to address the climate emergency, incrementalist efforts and mainstream policy-led plans and expectations are being increasingly questioned in their inadequacy (Arsel 2020; Hickel and Kallis 2019). In this article, as part of the Pluriverse in Practice special issue, we focus on alternatives to these ways of seeking change, analysing practical engagements with creating a world where many systems of value and ways of inhabiting the world can co-exist and nurture each other in relations of care with the other living beings of the world: the Pluriverse (EZLN 1996; Maldonado-Villalpando et al. 2022; Schöneberg et al. 2022; Akbulut et al. 2022).

By exploring the tensions and contradictions of two very different places in Chile and Germany, we describe the hierarchies of value that underpin and reflect the workings of our globalised colonial state money system. We unpack how these hierarchical relations are lived and what strategies emerge to resist the commodification of life. We aim at finding common clues and horizons on how to undo these colonial relations through ways of organising life outside of the state via forms of play (as opposed to work) and money that relies on non-commodified forms of promises.

First, we describe the historical trajectory of the Chiloé archipelago in Chile, and how ongoing processes of
colonisation have meant the destruction of a rich economic circuit that relied on non-monetised forms of exchange and communal forms of labour celebration (the minga). The memory of the minga inspires current insular attempts at organising autonomy and recovering sovereignty. Second, we take the experience of Circles, a Berlin-based cryptocurrency project, which aims to bring about a universal basic income without the state through a bottom-up democratic organisation. These examples reflect how our hegemonic money system, in its very design, is intertwined in ways that rely on different forms and scales of colonisation as a long-term historical event that still dominates our world today. We choose these cases as in many senses they reflect the ‘two sides of the coin’ of how money works in a rich city at the centre of the global economy and at a marginalised territory in the expanding frontiers of capitalist extraction.

Throughout this paper we ask how to put money at the service of anticolonial struggles for self-determination. While money is repeatedly pointed at as the ‘source of all evils’, can it instead be transformed to enact an ethos of care and mutualism? We think through a historised and localised understanding of colonialism and the production of scarcity, describing how transformations in our global financial architecture are connected with everyday practices of extraction, exploitation and work ethics, all legacies of centuries-long processes of colonisation, enclosure and social–ecological destruction. Rather than focusing on a single category or overarching logic, we approach the structuring relations of contemporary capitalism as part of wider and heterogeneous generative relations such as gender, kinship and race (Bear et al. 2015).

These cases also give us tools to think about how money might work in tandem with a basic income to foster the freer world of the pluriverse. They also suggest how we could transform money from its current universalist commodity form, based in colonialism, to different ones based on autonomy, community and care. We suggest that a significant transformation of money would require a change in the ethic of work and how it underpins our current understanding of value. In addition, overcoming colonial structures requires changing the hierarchy of values that sustains the different effects of money in different (body and land) territories. Overall, our contribution joins wider efforts to recover a sense of the economy as a political economy: a morally— and ecologically—charged task that cannot be safely confined to the domain of technological neutrality and expertise.

### Money and Coloniality: history and possibilities

In this section, we briefly outline why our current arrangement of money is built on and reinforces relations of domination—becoming part of colonial structures—and how the ideas of basic income and mutual credit could subvert this order. We connect this potential with wider and historical anticolonial struggles.

#### In search of the money commons

Mainstream modern literature on the nature of money reflects the colonialism in current understandings of the relationship between money and power. On the one hand, we have commodity theories of money, which claim that money has an intrinsic objective value and posits that money, like gold, is a commodity-like thing which has to be pursued for its own sake (Menger 1892). The commodity imagination is by far the dominant view on our understanding of money. While both Liberals and Marxists correctly recognise that capitalism is organised as a commodity system denominated in prices, both have thus far defined money as only a commodity. Marx’s famous first chapter in Capital starts with an analysis of the commodity form and commodity fetishism: the ability to turn objects into subjects by assigning powers to them, turning them into gods which then gain power over us, transforming our relationships to each other and the world around us, and turning everything else into commodities (Marx 1909). While the notion of commodity fetishism is useful to understand how we ritualistically turn money into a social totality, the majority of those following Marx have naturalised money as only a commodity despite anthropological and archaeological evidence. This has the effect of reifying money as only a commodity, making it seem as if money’s theological fate is its own monoculture reproduction and capitalism our inevitable fate. Liberals, on the other hand, merely conceive of money as a stand-in for utility, the goal being to maximise as much as possible of it.

On the other hand, we have the credit theories of money arguing that money is a set of promises we make to one another, an IOU, a relational process rather than a mere thing (Dodd 2014; Innes 2004). Credit theorists posit that the promises we make to one another are subjective agreements, something that we make, rather than an objective reality—a two-sided balance between debtors and creditors in interdependence with each other. Today’s Modern Monetary Theory (MMT) rests partly on the credit theory of money, but also on Knapp’s state theory of money, which again naturalises money as only a child of the colonial imperialist state. At its core, the whole foundation of MMT is based on the notion of sovereignty, which is ultimately based on the principle of private property, backed up by the violence of nation states (Wray 2015; Knapp 2013).

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1 For our purposes, here we focus only on two of the main schools of thought, which represent the terms of the debate.
The historical records of our current state monetary system confirm that money creation by states follows the colonial genealogy of power that some call the military–coinage–slavery complex (Graeber 2011). In it, a sovereign king would hire an army to enslave a foreign community, enforcing them to pay taxes for having been enslaved, and then using those taxes to pay his (armed) bureaucrats. The English word ‘private’ comes from the Latin privatus, meaning ‘restricted’. The current modern understanding of money being the private property of the state (i.e. its power) derives from the Roman Law tradition, where one only truly knows if they own something if they have the power to destroy it (abusus in Latin). This formed the legal basis of sovereignty and capital accumulation and explains why the only legal actor capable of creating and destroying money is the state (and by extension, private banks) (Graeber 2020; Werner 2003).

Despite this, money is not in itself a creature of law and the state. A closer look at the untold history of what is nowadays termed ‘mutual credit’ shows us that there are countless historical examples of money systems which were and are organised by communities of trust who issue IOUs to one another as an alternative means of payment, without the need of violence or interest-bearing debt: people-powered money. Instead of a debt being issued top-down by a state, in mutual credit, money is created horizontally by peers in a network when they exchange with each other, at zero interest or even with negative interests (Hart 1986; Kennedy and Lietaer 2012; Balaguer Rasillo 2020; Gerber 2020).

From ancient and mediaeval credit clearing houses to Prodhoun’s Bank of Exchange, to the countless demurrage currencies of the 1930s inspired by Silvio Gessell, to today’s community exchange systems (CES) and local exchange trading systems (LETS), mutual credit systems at large are organised by communities of trust who issue IOUs to one another as an alternative means of payment, without the need of violence or interest-bearing debt: people-powered money. Instead of a debt being issued top-down by a state, in mutual credit, money is created horizontally by peers in a network when they exchange with each other, at zero interest or even with negative interests (Hart 1986; Kennedy and Lietaer 2012; Balaguer Rasillo 2020; Gerber 2020).

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So far, mutual credit and other forms of complementary and alternative currencies have remained at the peripheries of political and economic debates, mainly relegated to a small milieu of experts, spiritual approaches to transform the economy and intentional communities (Eisenstein 2011). Despite their potentialities, the lack of a broader political programme of monetary transformation has meant fragmentation and a lack of scalability. However, insofar as money is a social relation, it can be transformed to be at the service of democratic social forms and the expansion of the commons, reflecting the practices and values of those who use it. Mutual credit systems point towards the potential democratisation of money, its creation and institutions—a money commons—a currency for the commons where credit is issued, co-owned and administered by people democratically from the bottom-up, rather than by state bureaucracies and private banks. Taking people powered mutual credit systems as a basis, we build on the understanding of money as a set of promises that we make to one another to ask: what are the questions and obstacles that need to be addressed for a democratic money commons to emerge? In this paper we focus on how the oppression of coloniality is lived in specific territories and bodies, and how challenging its founding anthropological suppositions could offer precious leverage for such a democratic transformation.

### Basic income and anticolonial struggles

When debating basic income, the question of the origins of money (‘where will the money for a basic income come from? How would you finance it?’) is never far away. This is why it is urgent, when debating practical challenges for the materialisation of basic income, to open the black box of money and the structures of power within it.

According to the Basic Income Earth Network, a basic income (also referred to as Universal Basic Income, UBI) is an unconditional cash transfer delivered to all without means test or work requirement (Miller 2017). This definition does not tell us much about the origins of money and much less its orientation (commodity or credit). Most serious proposals focus on the different methods to finance it: sovereign wealth funds, whereby money is invested and the returns are redistributed to people as a dividend, or taxation, where money is to be taken from one place and given in another as a means of financing a UBI. Most recently, an option in debate is giving a basic income through sovereign money, also called ‘Quantitative Easing for the People’, which is basically monetary creation by states (Torry 2019). Except for the last one, these forms of financing a basic income point to a systemic commodity imagination of the monetary system, rather than a credit one. Until now, most proposals and advocacy for a UBI are therefore nation state centered. It is assumed, or rather, naturalised, that the only actor who can issue a basic income is the state. Part of our argument is that basic income offers interesting transformative possibilities as a bridge into new social forms, specifically when articulated to actively transform money away from the control of the state. Hornborg (2017), for instance, has proposed the redesign of our monetary system to move to a dual currency structure, in which a local and ecologically bounded currency would be issued partially as a basic income. Still, for our argument, a limitation of this proposal is that unless monetary institutions are democratised, power distribution will not change. In contrast, another example of a basic income initiative administered through direct democracy is Recivita’s work...
in Quatinga Velho, Brazil. Although promising in its direct democratic organisational approach, they use state money collected through crowdfunding as a means of giving the basic income.

We take an anticolonial way out of this limitation. Different Latin American decoloniality and anticolonial struggles—from the Haitian revolution in 1789 to the “gas wars” in Bolivia in 2003 (Valero Pacheco 2018; Gavaldá Palacín 2013)—offer a rich tradition and useful compass on how to attain self-determination, democracy and freedom from a historical perspective. Thought together with the emancipatory potentials of basic income, these debates help us understand the relevance of feminist anti/decolonial struggles, not only as self-defence strategies, but as a political–economic project for alternative futures, in the present. Envisioning these futures requires refusing the narrative that dates colonality as having finished with indigenisation of nation states and see this as a transition to a period of global colonality (Rivera Cusicanqui 2010). Under this outlook, nation states have inherited the colonial power structures, now under the form of internal colonialism (González-Casanova 2006) that reproduces relations of domination exploitation implanted during foreign colonial rule now in the urban/rural divide of independent states.

An important theoretical input in dialogue with such struggles is the idea of the colonality of power—as a critique to the blindness of traditional Marxist perspective on race and racism—emphasises the construction of racialised structures as key for the control of labour in Latin America and other colonies by imperial powers (Quijano 2011). Expanding the colonality of the power framework, Segato (2015) argues that modern Latin American nation states have perpetuated a more lethal articulation of patriarchy than the one existing previous to the European invasion, with a specially damaging effect on indigenous people.

Applying this gaze to the relations of the contemporary hegemonic money system makes us ask: how are these colonial hierarchies reproduced in its use? While the exploitation of bodies and territories in the name of capital accumulation has been widely studied, here we focus on the role the commodity form of money plays in reproducing unequal power relations.

Another element to consider as part of the anticolonial tradition is the role of communal governments and the reproduction of the commons (De Angelis 2017). These political arrangements have existed all over Latin America and elsewhere for hundreds of years, and continue to exist despite colonial impositions, as a claim from indigenous people to self-determination, keeping the state and its bureaucratic institutions at bay while maintaining and expanding the commons, showing living alternatives to both capitalism and the state (Tzul 2015). We take an approach to such communal political arrangement not as a potential restoration of the past, but rather on the possibility of a democratic modernity, instead of capitalist modernity (Öcalan 2015), historicising the entwinement of modernity and colonialism as a project in undying contestation.

Here we connect the two strands of this section, as we propose to think of basic income as the basis for organising life beyond the nation state and as part of the decolonisation of our political–economic imagination. The insights of communitarian feminists in Guatemala could throw light onto this connection through their understanding of territory. Lorena Cabnal, for instance, argues for an understanding of territory as something to be defended on communal grounds, starting with the body (territorio-cuerpo) as the first line of defence, and land (territorio-tierra) as the second line of defence (Cabnal 2017). Their understanding and practice of territory do not separate between people, their shared labour and their land, between subjects and objects, because ultimately these communal relations are founded on relationships of mutual care, for each other and for the Earth which sustains life, transcending through their actions both Liberal and Marxist understandings of private property as the main form in which society is organised (Tzul 2015), a “commonist project (Gills and Hosseini 2022). In line with this, territorialising money as mutual credit (as the power between people), this paper opens up the exploration of a potential third territory of defence—a money commons (territorio-moneda)—as the basis for the expansion of anti-capitalist, democratic social forms in the form of an unconditional basic income.

As some claim, basic income is the freedom to say no to relations of domination (Widerquist 2013). The realisation of the pluriverse with regard to money must therefore go beyond the colonality of power and the binaries it reproduces, where capital is controlled by states and banks. To counter both state and capital, the enactment of the three territories of defence above would mean the creation of a democratic money commons, powered by people as an unconditional share, an income derived from the socially produced wealth in the planet, administered by communities locally, sharing their labour and their land. Understanding capital as power, the democratisation of money by people would mean a fundamental break in the cosmology of capitalism, a change in the nature of capital itself, as the power to say no would remain in the hands of people who would no longer need to rely on wage labour to sustain their lives. This would create, we argue, the political and economic basis for the emergence of a democratic economy: a pluriversal basic income beyond nation states and capitalism.

In what follows, we situate these questions by exploring the challenges of reassembling these different territories of defence into the communal labour practice of the minga in

2 For more information, visit https://www.recivitas.org/
Chiloé and Circles UBI, a basic income cryptocurrency project that started in Berlin.

Methodology

For this work we draw from our ethnographic experiences as activist researchers based on two different places: Berlin, the capital of Germany, and Castro, a city in the Chiloé archipelago in southern Chile. This includes mostly participant observation and informal interviews, complemented with historical research of the longer and wider geopolitical trajectories that have shaped both Chiloé and Berlin. We are currently living in the locations of our study and working with the communities engaged in resisting the current situation and organising on rearticulating the economic circuits. We see ourselves as actively engaged in the efforts of bringing new universes into being (Demmer and Hummel 2017). We participate in everyday conversations, actions and designing of strategies to strengthen political and economic autonomy. While our face-to-face interactions have been limited by the COVID-19 pandemic, we are still participating actively in other forms of communication.

Centro de Estudios Sociales de Chiloé³ is a research collective made up of people living and working in the Chiloé archipelago. Circles UBI⁴ is a cooperative made up of people living and working in Berlin, Germany.

Minga as an anticolonial practice

The history of the Chiloé archipelago shows the development of a colonial power that started with the Spanish invasion and the founding of its first and current capital city, Castro, in 1567. Together with the installation of Catholic missions, the most relevant institution that shaped the period of Spanish rule (that lasted until 1826) was the encomienda, widespread in the American continent. Through it, power was given to Spanish noblemen and their descendants that lived in the archipelago to demand labour from adult men from settlements of so-called ‘naturales’ or ‘Indios’ (indigenous people): partly as their way of paying off their tribute to the Crown, and partly in exchange for a salary (Urbina Burgos 2004). The institution played a relevant role especially in places with scarce metallic resources that interested the invaders (who were deeply indebted), like the south of Chile.

The encomienda was both the source of livelihood for the encomenderos noblemen and their families and a way of “civilising” and forcing a work ethic among the Indios through forced labour, so they would understand “the value of work” (Urbina Burgos 2004, p 187, our translation). Unsurprisingly, this regime provoked intense rejection from those subjected to it. The encomenderos enforced their entitlement brutally and without respecting many of the legal safeguards that were supposed to protect indigenous people from abuses. The coloniality of power is present here: the stealing of children for domestic service, physical punishment for any disobedience and work until death or near it were common situations. While the encomienda subjected only a small percentage of the indigenous populations as tributaries to the king (men in working age), it relied on women’s and children’s labour too. This was either by direct domestic labour in the encomendero’s household —doing chores like cooking and cleaning—and by putting the bulk of the work at indigenous orchards on women. But none of this was considered as actual work from the Spanish perspective. Indeed, payment of tribute by men in kind that came from their wife’s labour was considered a breaking of the rules and spirit of the encomienda (Urbina Burgos 2004).

After the annexation by the Chilean state, the central government ignored the region and its need for currency. Local elites coined their own currency, the chunimpas, with the scarce silver that remained in their hands. Its circulation was explicitly cut by the centralist state during the conservative government of Diego Portales (López Hualamán 2017). Only in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Chilean state established a stronger presence in the archipelago, as a continuation and deepening of colonial power and relations, not the end. In many senses it has built a stronger colonial relation, as the acknowledgement of local indigenous sovereignty over the land was overruled by the new independent Chilean state. While over for a century Chiloé remained isolated from the rest of Chilean society (Urbina Burgos 2002), the major driver of change in recent decades has been the exponential increase of the salmon industry that took over the province from the 1980s onwards. This export-oriented productive policy was part of the economic reforms imposed during the military dictatorship (Barton 1998) and installed for the first time wide access to a regular wage in the national currency. After a long period of isolation, social and economic transformations in consumption and working practices went beyond the urban centres into the rural areas and inner islands of the archipelago (Bacchiddu 2017). Other new export-oriented activities like the extraction of pompóm (a moss of the Sphagnum family) (León Valdevenido et al. 2012) and seaweed (Calderón Seguel and Morales Pérez 2016) have increased colonial penetration and reliance on these cash-generating activities: undermining of indigenous ways of human–nature conviviality, such

³ Publications and current research of the group can be found (in Spanish) in www.cesch.org

⁴ You can read more about the Circles system at handbook.joincircles.net.
as asking for permission when cutting something from the forest, an example often given by locals while debating the need to stop deforestation in the largest island of the archipelago.

This historical recount situates the relevance of the *minga* as a form of communal labour practice that is at the heart of the anticolonial resistance in Chiloé. The *minga*, *minka* or *mingako* can be found in many regions of Latin America, and it has been mostly studied in Andean regions as an indigenous form of reciprocal communal work, the word in Quechua meaning “collective work” (Poole 2009). In Chiloé, it is also described as a form of labour swapping or labour sharing (Daughters 2014). In some places of the archipelago, it still exists as central to local forms of livelihoods and sociability, while in Chile it has fallen in virtual disuse, with some exceptions. Slater San Román (1987) describes it as a form of reciprocity in which work is asked by the ‘owner’ of the *minga* to other members of the community, with the implicit understanding of being available in return in the future. The one requiring help also gives a party at the end of the task with abundant food, drink and music, and more food is given to the *mingados* (the invited to the *minga*) for them to take home (Slater San Román 1987). In its high days, before the monetisation of the archipelago, the *minga* system used to include agricultural work such as wheat or potato planting and harvest, pig slaughter (*reitimiento*) or moving of a house (*tiradura de casa*). The heavier the task at hand, the more people would be invited to—or rather begged to join, *suplicado*—the *minga*. Recent ethnographic accounts show that some smaller scale of this system of reciprocity among neighbours can be found in practices like *chicha* preparation from apples (*maja*) (Daughters 2019) and in some interior islands of the archipelago (Daughters and Pitchon 2018).

The last 40 years have eroded the *minga*’s centrality to insular life as a form of communitarian and reciprocal exchange that sustained indigenous livelihoods without colonial money. The *minga* pre-existing Spanish occupation as an indigenous institution, and survived the long period of the *encomienda*, coexisting with it. As guitarist Sergio Sauvalle once explained to us, the most important part of the *minga* is the party, the music and the drinking. It was the duty of the ‘owner’ of the *minga* (the one asking for help) to arrange a musician that would animate the party that could often last until the next morning. This festive dimension can give us the key to its incredible endurance as a practice.

In the period in which it was central to the archipelago’s livelihoods, the *minga* was not just a useful way of gathering hands for a task that needed big numbers, as it was in the wheat harvest. The celebration and the music were just as important. Some of this remains today as folkloric ‘customs’ that are presented for tourists in official events, but this removes their broader context. The *minga* worked as a system of communal debt rather than one of barter or reciprocity between individuals. The mix of celebration, enjoyment and playfulness with what we label ‘productive’ work is an explicit effort at allowing people to go in and out of mutual obligations with one another. *Mingas* for building a house, for instance, would start and finish with a party, and the building itself would be a competition between different teams (Cárdenas et al. 1993). This spirit can still be found in contemporary minor forms of *minga*, like drinking while working in the production of apple *chicha* (Daughters 2014). The fact that the first thing to do with what has been collectively produced is to share it with those that had made the task possible—as in the case of food harvest and *chicha* making—stands in stark contrast with the forced nature of production for tribute of the *encomienda*.

Considering the explicit challenge of the work-centric ethic as the key element of the *minga*, we read it as a subversion of oppressive forms of work that were imposed during the *encomienda* in the Spanish colonial period. The *encomienda* was crucially a way not only of exerting control over labour and appropriating their products, but of creating a certain subject that would devote their living hours to the sole object of endless production. Idleness was explicitly policed as a vice, ‘el vicio del ocio’ (Urbina Burgos 2004) giving space for too much freedom: escaping from their *encomenderos*, Chiloé’s *Indios* would meet in *cahuines* (big gatherings) far from the gaze of the Spanish. They would drink, play games, and enjoy time together. Famously, the great rebellion of 1712 was ignited when a large group of indigenous people met for playing *linao* (a game similar to Western rugby) (Urbina Burgos 1990). As the *minga* pre-existing Spanish occupation, we suggest that the insistence in its festive dimension can be seen as a form of schismogenesis: a process in which opposition between two groups that see themselves as radically different continue to consciously deepen their differences in time (Graeber and Wengrow 2021).

The *minga*—now expanded beyond its utilitarian side to its more political and cultural one—is also a way of inhabiting the territory that does not rely on ‘work’ as a self-contained activity. A notion of work as a grievous imposition that comes naturally with the human constant state of necessity was strong among the feudal lords of the *encomienda*. They would argue fiercely against the reduction of the time and work they could extract from the Indians and say that doing so would subject them to painful work, an affront to their noble status.

What can the *minga* teach us in the current scenario of the archipelago? Exiting the social–ecological disaster demands cutting the dependency from colonial extractivist commodity—money and the work ethic it embodies. Ecosystems and the social fabric have been gravely affected and continue to be relentlessly destroyed. People in the countryside have mostly abandoned their fields—together with the *minga*—to dedicate
to salmon processing or other industrial jobs. While wages have increased and consumption practices have been transformed (Bacchiddu 2017) tensions between the desire to be ‘included’ in modernity and keeping one’s identity and traditions are widespread. In 2016, a revolt remembered as mayo Chilote voiced this discontent in a new historical iteration: rejecting the destructive consequences of the salmon industry, an activity fostered by the active protection and intervention of the neoliberal subsidiary state (Torres and Montaña Soto 2018).

Acknowledging the deterioration of the minga, some families and organised communities keep it in their horizon of transformation as a subversive utopia, one that does not idealise the past and subvert the dominant imaginary of scarcity through the abundance of sharing goods, time, and one’s enjoyment (Kallis and March 2015). The idea of recovering the values and practice of the minga is a common trope in horizontal spaces of organisation. Some families are keeping alive the mingas for the production of chicha in the autumn months, even though now it is mostly restricted to the family members and not neighbours. Another example of the relevance of the minga as a political principle was told to us by the Longko (head) of a Williche community in Castro. There, a communal ruka (house) is being constructed through multiple donations, following the minga principle of solidarity. Her expectation is that this will make the place feel as if belonging to all the people that helped build it through small contributions.

What role would money play in these efforts for transformation? Since money has made its way into the archipelago, we suggest it must be transformed so it can complement—and not undermine—the institution of the minga as a core element of insular life. Both the minga and a money commons which reflects its values of play and communal labour must come back together to be successful in defending the body and land territories, otherwise the minga will continue to be displaced by a deterritorialised and extractive money system. The chunimpa stands as a historical precedent of the possibility of articulating smaller circuits of currency that do not depend on the central state, but rather nurture territorial interdependence. The minga can provide us with the imagination for a more self-sufficient, communitarian and autonomous form of inhabiting this territory (Lang 2022). Islands, indeed, offer rich possibilities to think out of mainstream trajectories of development.

Our next case at hand, we suggest, can give light on how the subversive utopia of the minga could materialise in a different monetary system.

A basic income on the blockchain: circles UBI

The practice of the minga shows how mutual forms of cooperation form the basis of reproducing the livelihood of a community beyond mere work. In this section, we turn to understand if and how these practices can be embedded in the context of mutual credit systems, or, in other words, sharing the power to make promises to one another to organise that which we call ‘the economy’ in a democratic basis.

Circles is a community currency project of anarchist inspiration proposing a mesh credit blockchain enabled protocol as a general purpose means of payment in the form of a basic income. The system is both local and global in scope. The current team, composed of about nine people, is based in Berlin, Germany. The idea of the Circles (CRC) currencies emerged around 2013 within the Ethereum community, the second largest blockchain after Bitcoin, at a time when the promise of decentralised ledger technology (DLT) as an alternative ‘peer to peer cash system’ to the banks was still new.

The Circles system works in terms of personal currencies, mediated by trust. Instead of having one Circles currency that everybody uses, there is a plurality of virtual currencies, each representing one person in a web of trust (WoT), where payments can be made wherever there is a trusted pathway between peers in the network. Therefore, in the Circles system, people must first trust others to accept their CRC. Trust in Circles is defined both as the power to issue promises (credit), as well as the belief that people are who they say they are and will fulfil their promises. Trust in the Circles system works similar to self-help and affinity groups (Saha and Kasi 2022) (Fig. 1).

Circles extends the principle of trust by allowing for a rippling of credit within the network, so that people who do not know each other directly can swap their credits with those who they know to extend a payment to those outside of their
direct trust relationships. This Circles rippling credit system allows people and communities to transitorily exchange with each other and go beyond their immediate local circuits, gradually expanding trust as people get to know each other. The Circles protocol is programmed in a way where debt-free money is issued by people equally and at a constant rate, which forms the basic properties of a guaranteed basic income. This blending of a non-state credit system with the idea of Unconditional Basic Income forms the basis of Circles UBI, a bottom-up monetary creation process which happens from the individual peers in a network, rather than by central and private banks.

In theory, the Circles protocol provides a paradigm shift for monetary creation and how we arrange the economy, shifting the perspective on people. However, the practice of building the use of Circles provides some hints of the realities and contradictions of building alternatives outside the state and within the current capitalist economy.

Since February 2020, the team began to build relationships between different parts of the local economic rings in Berlin and Brandenburg, focusing on cooperatives, producers and businesses that can complement each other, to claim the stuff of a basic income: food, care, health, housing, etc. Having started a ‘test phase’ in February 2020, Circles is, as of this writing, being used by a loose small local network of about 500 people in the city state of Berlin who do a wide range of things, from bicycle sales and repairs to cooperative distribution bike fleets; yoga studios and saunas; meditation and massage practices; small farmers and local cooperative supermarkets; local shops and cooks that produce their own drinks, products and clothing; one working ecovillage (Morris 2022) and other service providers. After the official launch in October 2020, the network grew to a worldwide entanglement of over 100,000 people.

In Berlin, monthly assemblies to organise the Circles economy have been running since November 2020, forming different working groups to connect with different actors around the city and beyond. Applying direct democratic practices to a currency like Circles has allowed for people to join and learn about money and the importance of taking the economy into their own hands. People find joy in the idea of giving basic income to each other, rather than waiting for the state to do so. Building this constant reciprocal practice of giving and receiving within peers in a community is slightly different from the unconditionality idea of traditional basic income proposals, where the money of the state comes with ‘no-strings attached’ and can be spent everywhere. Embedding an economy from the bottom-up means that, at first, Circles works more like basic pocket money, as there is still not enough stuff to fulfil people’s needs. Building economic democratic power from below is a slow process and it goes as far as the relationships within it and the mutual trust that members have with each other. Building a democratic solidarity economy is about nurturing and taking care of people and other beings. Solidarity is a form of practice (Loh and Shear 2022; Naylor 2022).

People and those who run their own businesses and cooperatives are not used to issuing their own credits, which are redeemable for stuff later. The process of starting an alternative to the hegemonic money system quickly becomes an untangling of a thread which necessarily opens up the current realities of today’s German and EU political economy and their internal colonialism. One example of this untangling thread are small and medium farmers, who are currently facing a crisis on its agro-food system. Since the 1990s, when neoliberal capitalism came to shape the economy of East Germany (DDR), Farmers have been consistently told to produce for global markets and to increase productivity. These understandings of productivity were achieved via the use of pesticides sold by international corporations like Bayer-Monsanto. Through several policies, the EU has subsidised the mass production of meat, soy and vegetables for the past two decades in European member states, favouring big farm production over small and medium ones, making farmers precarious (Gorton et al. 2009). During this time, there has been a double movement of enclosures and land-grabbing internally in Germany, with an expansionary increase in subsidised cheap food imports from exploited farmers in the Global South. For exports, the argument went that German products like beef and other staple products have a special quality and aesthetic that makes them expensive abroad, the colonial so-called ‘Deutsche Qualität’ (German quality), which is used to justify their high prices abroad. This transformation in the orientation of production happened in parallel to wide land privatisation, breaking up previous cooperatives that existed from the GDR times.

Uptake of the Circles’ currency is slow with small farmers in Brandenburg. Farmers need places to spend Circles to benefit from it, such as access to alternative distribution channels that accept CRC, which in itself requires its own alternative social organisation. As a member of SuperCoop told us, the emerging democratically organised cooperative supermarket in Berlin, logistics is the main problem which prevents producers from selling their products at a fair price in the city, today controlled by supermarket stores such as Edeka, Aldi and Lidl, who set the prices and lock farmers in their distribution system. ‘No distribution system exists for cooperative supermarkets like ours’, she told us. One small farmer from Brandenburg once told us that a cucumber grown by migrants without papers in the south of Spain is sold in the same Berlin supermarket for 30 cents

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5 Or previously E.d.K., short for Einkaufsgenossenschaft der Kolonialwarenhändler im Halleschen Torbezirk zu Berlin, literally the Purchasing Cooperative of Colonial Goods Retailers in the Hallesches Tor district of Berlin.
less than the one he grows. As the thread untangles, the complex interdependence of each sector in the local regional economy becomes more clear. Small farms are already very busy, simply trying to make sure they cover their costs of production and have enough money for the winter. While progressive farmers are actively organising for autonomy and independence through building collective spaces that operate outside the logic of dominant institutions (Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010; Franzen 2022), the problems they face are structurally caused by the EU and German state regulations, which are themselves interlinked to exploitative global supply chain capitalism (Tsing 2009). As our food circle example shows, the process of embedding a currency like CRC to a territory in more democratic ways becomes an active attempt at reshaping the way our colonial political economy is structured.

The importance of trust and its multidimensional situated meanings cannot be underestimated. When Circles had its official “launch” in October 2020, it was picked up by ‘cryptotwitter’ and other social media, which then triggered a global race to enter the system as people heard somebody was giving away “free crypto”, invoking the commodity imagination of Bitcoin. Thousands of people all over the planet were waiting to join, from China, Vietnam, to Nigeria, UK, USA and all the way to Chile, asking “will you trust me?” on Twitter and the Telegram chats the team had set up, which overnight had become a waterfall of deterritorialised information.

To enter the system and claim the power to issue money, people need three trust connections, meaning three people who are already in the system and can vouch for you as a real person. In other words, people share the power to create money by trusting each other. Yet if there are no territorially bounded communities close by to trust someone, it becomes an issue to trust strangers online as they can basically swap your personal credit without your consent. What can be learned from these criticisms is that the precondition for money to work is having trusted people around willing to go in and out of debt with each other, and this needs to be a consensual agreement. It became clear that merely clicking on a button is not the same as trusting a human being, whatever its situated meanings may be. Since this initial start, the team has set up periodic international assemblies to include groups all over the world who want to join, get to know them, build trust and support them with tools and methodologies to organise at the local level.

What started as a local attempt at building up an economy had the unintended consequence of anybody, anywhere attempting to join via the Internet. Some joined with the hope of creating a different economy while others had the implicit expectation of making profit. “Is Circles on an exchange?”, “How can I exchange Circles for USD?” speculators and others who were used to commodity tokens started to ask, looking for quick ways of making profit.

Money only becomes valuable inside of a trusted network of real people in a defined territory, coming together to give and receive stuff for their personal credits, to give it a social life, symbolic and material meaning underpinning peoples’ promises. We see from the experience of designing rippling credit systems like Circles how commodity imaginations of money have colonised our minds. The idea of making money out of money, of reifying its worth through financial rituals, of turning promises into commodities, is what naturalises and hides the violence which reproduces the racist, sexist, classist and patriarchal cosmology of capitalism.

Trying to democratically organise a local or regional economy is like untangling a complex knot, where one thread will lead you to the next, reflecting the real interconnectedness between and within different ‘industries’ and ‘economic sectors’. Circles shows that the hard part of escaping capitalist money is creating (social and technical) infrastructure where other values can circulate and concrete social relations can thrive and flourish. Consequently, what is important is to create the social and technical organisation which can connect the different actors in the region and can provide people with the stuff of a basic income: food, housing, health, care, etc., therefore claiming real autonomy and self-determination outside the cosmology of capitalism and the state. Without communal practices like the minga or via other forms of democratic organisation, credit systems such as Circles risk being deterritorialised, detached from real social relations and their ecosystemic grounding, which is the basis for the emergence of alternatives. Decolonising money thus means creating a foundation where a democratic solidarity economy can truly flourish, where people actively decide over the types of promises they consent to, nurture and care for. It means taking responsibility over the collective future of the territories we inhabit, defending them in the present.

Re-embedding economies: towards a pluriversal basic income

When putting these two cases side by side, it is possible to see not only the long-distance relations of globalised capitalism as the unequal circulation of things. The triumph of our current monetary model has required the long-term and persisting imposition of a principle of scarcity via infinite extractivism. The emergence of the pluriverse could be nourished by questioning the notion of labour itself and recovering more playful ways of living together and inhabit our territories (like the minga), blurring oppositional categories that vilify recreation and idleness and sacrilise work. We see this key objective as an important element to consider in the broader tradition of Latin American anticolonial struggles.
Our experiences show that the hierarchy of values that is at the heart of money today is a reflection of our racist, sexist, classist and patriarchal social hierarchies and systems of domination: be it the invisibilisation of non-monetised forms of labour like women’s work under the Spanish colony—that calls for emancipatory new forms of knowledge for “de patriarchalization” (Piccardi & Barca 2022)—or the ‘German quality’ of products, which acts as a front to invisibilise the exploitation and precarisation of farmers by EU and German state regulation. This form of internal colonialism which pierces through our (bodies and land) territories is a necessary step of capitalist accumulation, not as something done in a discrete period in the past, but as a feature ingrafted in our everyday interactions.

As some note, the issuance of forms of interest-bearing and collateral-based debt has shaped the evolution of capitalism itself, as it acts as a reward—punishment disciplining tool, undermining community bonds and environmental sustainability at the expense of economic growth and short termism (Gerber 2014). Money internalises in our bodies sensations of guilt over our own sense of self and value, turning us into atomised individuals. Money, as it currently exists, separates subjects from objects, reifying private property over merely everything, including money itself. This is why prefigurative efforts of communal life outside capitalism have built money-free methods of sharing (Clarence-Smith and Monticelli 2022). The dissolution of this debt driven, globalised colonial money into debt-free communitarian ones would allow the reterritorialisation and politicisation of money in the spaces where it circulates, as a means for creating and recreating sustainable and democratic economies.

Those exploring the pluriverse have argued that design is a site of political struggle (Escober 2018). Our research shows that money must not be excluded from an understanding of the types of promises and technologies that shape our worlds, as money is indeed designed in ways which reproduce and maintain colonialism. Indigenous forms of organising—like the minga—also challenge the reference frameworks that support state-led actions like policy (Poole 2009) that, like money, rely on the same imagination that puts the capacity for action and change in the hands of the state.

Going back to our initial question: what would it take to transform money from its current colonial form to a more democratic one, a form that fosters freedom and care? At a very fundamental level, any economy is ultimately about the production of people and the values which we want to see in society (Graeber 2006). Our current monetary system has narrowed this down to the colonial binary of production and consumption, of subjects separated from objects, stripping collectives from their creative powers. It is time to recover such powers. We are too used to holding promises we did not consent to. When a person cannot hold their promise, there is little room to solve the impasse in a democratic and caring way.

How can we imagine the practice of making money differently? The idea of money creation as an unconditional, pluriversal basic income can give people the imagination that it is possible to overcome the alienation in the relations that reproduce their lives by actually taking part in the organisation of the local economy around them, either in production or consumption, or going beyond these categories to more playful activities like the minga. It might be a way to recover the possibility to participate in the process of recreating something as abstract as ‘the economy’ and ground it in simply talking, dancing or drinking with others, connecting with the people living on your territory—be it a city or the hills of an archipelago—that otherwise would not meet, showing that organising economic democracy can be a fun, joyful process.

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