

Crime and Money: Monetary Hierarchy in Prison

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How do commodities and monies circulate in prison where trade, whether monetary or not, is forbidden? Drawing from a collective ethnographic research, this essay discusses the social mechanisms that lead to the ranking of people and objects that money objectivizes, thus casting light on the social dynamics at play in the carceral system.

This paper results from a collective research led in prison in the surroundings of Buenos Aires, Argentina. The research was conducted by Alexandre ROIG, Acerbi, Jesus CABRAL, Waldemar CUBILLA, Mario CRUZ, Ángel IÑIGUEZ, Oscar LAGOS, Martín MADURI, Ernesto PARET, Pabo ROSAS, Pablo TOLOSA. The other authors chose to remain anonymous.

Although this text mentions crimes and prison sentences, it hardly belongs to criminology. It does not attempt at any sort of collaboration with the justice system either. Names and places were altered for privacy protection purposes.

One of the distinctive features of the carceral system is the paradoxical suspension of inmates' rights, including the right to engage in transactions. In the prison under consideration, trade, whether monetary or not, is forbidden, even though inmates do engage in trading practices. In the high security unit X, the volume of transactions is sizable, both within the unit and between this unit and the 12 pavilions where about four hundred and eighty inmates as well as a hundred prison guards live. Many different goods are used as mediums of exchange and units of account: phonecards for cellphones and landlines, joints containing one gram of marijuana (also known as *finitos*) and some pharmaceutical products. The prison is the locus of a dense and intricate web of exchanges. Dense in virtue of all the interactions that take place in such a confined space. Intricate as a result of the paradoxical and contradictory mechanisms that coexist in a space where walls are boundaries in the full-blown sense of the term. Put otherwise, walls are liminal entities that divide space as much as they let things come and go.

The ban on money and trade fails to prevent the existence of monetary and commercial transactions. Quite the contrary, this ban provides the existence conditions and starting point to

such transactions. I will indeed argue that mediums of exchange owe their existence to a ranking system of people and goods, *i.e.* a Dumontian value system.

The great bulk of goods are introduced in the prison by visitors, or obtained through transactions involving prison guards. For the past four years, while the kinds of goods frequently traded have remained more or less unchanged, the goods used as mediums of exchange and units of account have evolved, especially as far as their hierarchy and their value are concerned.

“Transa” (drug dealing) back in vogue

When this research was first undertaken, trade was not reputable. “It looks too much like drug dealing, and here “transas” are frowned upon. Today, it’s all about trafficking. Back in the day, trade was OK for it was part of gift-giving practices. Nowadays, people sell and it’s frowned upon. Things were different back then.” (Oscar “Mosquito” Lagos, 2009) This statement indicates a change in the moral standards specifying the course of actions that are allowed as opposed to the ones that are not, as highlighted in brawls whose winners can assert their superiority over fellow inmates.

In fact, group discussions show that the carceral system is highly hierarchical. Behaviors that are most valued exhibit certain forms of courage, bravery, and also certain features associated to masculinity. Such values are only materialized when inmates are offered the possibility to pit their strength against each other. On top of the ladder, the “limpieza” exerts his authority. At the other end, the “gil” is sneered at. Knowing how to “pararse de manos”, *i.e.* fight with a “faca” (a hand-crafted blade) bestows kudos. Although fighters put their lives at risk, “pararse de manos” only occasionally results in death, and in fact this institutionalized practice contributes to regulating violence. In pavilions named after their populations (they differ from little brothers’ pavilions (mostly protestant), or pavilions inhabited by students, workers, and so on), this process of social ranking operates in its purest form. Prison officers and inmates widely believe that inhabitants of population pavilions are more dangerous than other inmates. In such pavilions, more so than in others, one becomes a “limpieza” by pitting his strength against others.

Factors that contribute to the ranking of an inmate include the length of the prison sentence that has already been served, the offense that the inmate is believed to have committed, and whether the inmate is a repeat offender or not. For instance, a “chorro” (a thief) is generally held in good repute for his manliness, his loyalty, his dexterity, his bravery and his virility. By contrast, inmates look down on “gils”, *i.e.* prisoners indicted for drug trafficking or homicide unrelated to any further offense or crime. A “transa” is usually associated with guile, treachery, clumsiness, cowardice and weakness (see group discussions, 2012, and also Miguez, 2008).

Four years ago, “chorros” (thieves) were indisputably at the top of the social pyramid in unit X. As a result of their unchallenged domination, “transas” (drug dealers) could not even “pararse de manos” (to fight). Only those who have access to this practice can compete for socially prized positions. Nowadays as much as ever, a rapist cannot pit his strength against anyone, let alone engage in “pararse de manos”. As a consequence, he is denied any access to

positions that are valued in the carceral system. Put otherwise, similarly to untouchables in the caste societies documented by Dumont (1966), a rapist stands “outside of the world”.

This brief description of the carceral system leads us to Dumont’s theoretical constructions. Unit X is dominated by one value: bravery, courage. As argued by Dumont (1966, 1977, 1983), hierarchies include antithetic terms. Such terms are defined in relation to two polarizing figures, the “chorro” and the “transa”. “Chorros” take risks; “transas” engage in trade. “Chorros” do not hold private property in high esteem, whereas “transas” do, in virtue of their activities. “Chorros” disapprove of the police, whereas “transas” are ready to make arrangements with policemen. As a result, it is clear that unit X is structured by dichotomous relations, and the materialization of such relations requires Dumontian figures who act as the catalysts of the social ranking process.

In contrast with rapists, “transas” have been given the possibility to compete for socially prized positions at a time when trade was thriving and new monies started to circulate. Even if nothing proves at this point the existence of some causal relation between these two phenomena, the coexistence of a renewed interest in trade and transas’ access to socially prized positions is noteworthy.

The juxtaposition of violent physical fights and the monetization of transactions strikes me as extremely suggestive. I would be tempted to argue that there is a correlation between transas’s access to competitions for prized positions (albeit subaltern) and the increased legitimacy of trade and monetary exchanges. Put otherwise, the evolution of moral standards seems to be echoed by the emergence of new monetary arrangements, and conversely the monetary system objectivizes the transformations of the value system. In order to substantiate these claims, I will now describe the monies that circulate in the unit under consideration.

A plurality of monies

In a nutshell, the evolution of moral standards that allowed “transas” to engage in physical contests went hand in hand with a change in the hierarchy of values which resulted in the emergence of new symbols of wealth. One day, an inmate said to me: “*Today, I don’t have a joint, but tomorrow I’m rich!*” His wealth would pass through his “leather wallet”.¹ This stance with respect to material wealth presupposes that it is possible to purchase goods in exchange for drug. Some of these transactions occur without the mediation of money and are then tantamount to barter. In such cases, no unit of account is used and no good is used as a medium of exchange. Implicit in my account is the view that money is a unit of account which transforms some good into a medium of exchange. Regulationist in spirit (Théret, 2008), this definition picks out, at the very least, three currencies in unit X: joints, phonecards and legal tender money. I will dwell on the highly suggestive practices related to phonecards.

The realm of telephones and phonecards

¹ This expression refers to the practice of temporarily storing drugs and other goods smuggled during visits in one’s vagina or anus.

Unit X is equipped with three phones: the first is located right under the Christ in the dining room; the two other phones are at the end of the hallway, one on each side of the eight cells built there. Like rhizomes, the phone cables go through each cell. At 8pm, when phone fees start decreasing, phone calls are given and received according to a specific pattern: the phone is handed over from cells to cells for a maximum call duration of thirty minutes by cell (*i.e.* fifteen minutes per inmate). As a result, four hours are required to ensure that each inmate has access to the phone. Each day, these series of phone calls start with a different cell. In each cell, the handset is manually connected to unsheathed cables.

Until recently, this system would often give rise to wrangles. But ever since cell phones (although prohibited) were first introduced, such wrangles are less frequent. Today, about 90% of inmates own cell phones. Prepaid phonecards are widely used to make phone calls, either from the land line or cell phones. Such phonecards are given to inmates during visits, and can either come as material plastic cards, or as immaterial series of numbers, communicated orally.

But as they stand, phonecards are not only used to make phone calls. They also play the role of money from time to time, and only for the duration of a transaction. The face value of the phonecard or the amount of unused units in pesos are converted into units of account, and thereby phonecards become a medium of exchange that is required to entertain relationships with the outside of the prison.

Prices

In 2012, I established for some goods a correspondence table between the value of a good as assessed by people on the streets and the value of the same good as assessed by inmates in prison. I used three mediums of exchange: phonecards, joints (*finitos*), and legal tender money.

Table 1: Comparison of prices in and out of prison as expressed in different units of account.

Goods	Street value	Prison value
“finito” (joint)		
Sport gear	500-800 pesos	10 finitos
Sneakers	700-900 pesos	18-25 finitos
Chipless phone	100 pesos	25 finitos
Jeans	100 pesos	3 finitos
“pesos”		
25g of marijuana	90-120 pesos	100 pesos
1 chunk of marijuana	10 pesos	10 pesos

Nokia 1.100	100 pesos	100 pesos + 30 pesos in phonecard units
Sneakers	700-900 pesos	400 pesos
“plastico” (plastic)		
Track jacket	120-160 pesos	2 phonecards worth 10 pesos each
3 joints	12 pesos	1 phonecard worth 10 pesos
T-shirt	40 pesos	10 pesos in phonecard units
1 chunk of marijuana	10 pesos	1 movistar (phonecard) worth 3 pesos

When chunks of marijuana are set aside, it is clear that no systematic correspondence obtains between inside and outside prices: prices in prison are much lower than prices found on the streets. Some take advantage of this price difference, or put differently of the exchange rate between inside and outside monies. Pepe stores in prison pairs of jeans that he subsequently gives to his wife during her visits. They only cost three joints in prison and his wife can then sell them on the streets for 100 to 150 pesos, resulting in a net gain. This profitable exchange rate contributes to the construction of the boundary between the inside and the outside of the prison. The exchange rate parity between the prices of marijuana in and out of prison leads people to use marijuana as a measurement unit in order to compare the inside and outside values of other goods. On the streets, 25 grams of marijuana are more or less worth a hundred pesos, which means that a joint is worth four pesos, sport gear that costs 500 to 800 pesos on the streets is worth ten joints in prison, *i.e.* 40 pesos.

From the perspective of trading opportunities, the different processes by which goods are valued create exchanges rates of which Pepe and his wife know how to take advantage. Except for drugs, such processes also indicate the mechanisms that account for the assessment of value. The goods that are exchanged do not have an a priori value prior to being introduced into the prison economy. In most cases, these goods have been stolen, or are but gifts offered by visitors. As a result, their value is not rigidly determined by some predefined value standards, but by an ad hoc system of transactions. This is the reason why, for example, the value of goods vary according to the social positions of the parties to the exchanges. The prices faced by “limpiezas” differ from those paid for by “gils”. The time of the exchange also gives rise to variations in prices. For instance, phonecard loans are most costly during evenings towards the end of the week than at the beginning of the week. This shows that transactions do not occur in impersonal commercial environments (Weber and Duffy, 2008). Quite the contrary, these transactions are informed by power relations as well as by processes by which goods that do not have an a priori value are assessed in a somewhat ad hoc way. For most objects that are introduced on the market do not have a price, inmates must construct assessment procedures which take into account the time of the exchange, the hierarchical position held by the parties to the exchange, and the kind of money that is used for the transaction.

Phonecard money, as well as joints, are used as corrosive monies, *i.e.* as goods which can both play the role of money and that of consumable merchandises (Blanc, 1998; Gresell,

1948). This system results in low levels of money hoarding and accumulation. Put otherwise, money is not used as a store of value, but exclusively as a unit of account and a medium of exchange. Other goods (e.g. sneakers) play the role of store of value.

Conclusion

The use of joints as money is part of a transformation of the system of assessment of value in the carceral system. A new money, namely the joint, emerged while simultaneously a social figure, namely the “transa”, was given access to physical fights involving blades and thereby to practices resulting in the social ranking of people. This evolution of the transa’s rank goes hand in hand with a transformation in the perception of crimes and offenses.

The diversity of monies in circulation in the carceral system indicates the complexity of coexisting social mechanisms and patterns of sociability, especially the ones involving “chorros” and “transas”. It also illustrates how the ways in which a social group assesses the value of goods are informed by the origins and uses of money, as predicted by Zelizer’s theory of money earmarking, as well as by the social rank of the parties to the transactions.

Seemingly contradictory moral universes (namely the universe of the “chorros” and that of the “transas”) can in fact become compatible when a new money (namely the joint) starts circulating. This finding may offer a response to the question often addressed by theorists of money: “if money is a symbol, what is it a symbol of?” (Orléan, 2011) This empirical work suggests that money not only represents the value of the goods traded on some market, but also reflects existing power relations. If so, monies cannot operate as equivalents in mechanisms leading to the setting of prices because the monies that circulate in prison are not unified by an all-encompassing principle.

Such observations seem to indicate that the same words can refer to the same entity, even if the uses of these words exhibit a fair amount of variability. If I followed this train of thoughts, I would be led to the impossibility of language and communication. In any event, theories that consider money to be some general equivalent will not cast any light on the empirical findings that I have presented. As argued by Marie Cuillerai (2014), theories of substitution and simulacra, especially the ones sketched by Foucault and Klossowsky, open more promising avenues. “In defining money as a simulacrum, I am keeping at bay any substantial conception of value and I open up the possibility to fully grasp the ways in which transactions could interrogate the relation between values and signs. The reason why transactions could do so lies in the fact that they disconnect monetary exchanges from the circulation of goods. As a result, monetary exchanges belong to the sphere of social relations. The simulacrum can then be grasped as an entity constituted by immanent social relations, and foreign to any substantial notion of value (...).” (Cuillerai, 2014: 15).

This theoretical background seems well-suited to transactions occurring in prison insofar as the assessment of the value of goods does not rest on the intrinsic value of the goods. Given their source, the goods entering the prison economy do not have a price, and as a result the value of these goods cannot be solely assessed based on considerations regarding the productive sphere. Instead, the value of these goods rely on power relations and the moral economy of the carceral system. The simulacrum does not give a representation of equivalences, but instead highlights “power relations that are at play under such and such circumstances” (ibid: 22). In this respect, it helps explain why different monies refer to the same goods in distinct ways – regardless of the existence or not of a general equivalent. It also accounts for the rise

and fall of monies according to the identity of the agents operating on such and such market as well as their evolving moral valence.

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