

thoritative refutation that should be consulted for years to come. But the positive reconstruction of Augustine's thought that Lamb offers instead sometimes devolves into an immanentism that Augustine was prepared to rebut. And this is not only a theological criticism, but a political criticism as well. For the way Lamb conjoins hope on the one hand with and worldliness and plurality on the other sometimes makes him sound like the very liberals he is eager to abjure. In *The Law of Peoples* (1999), John Rawls wrote repeatedly of "our hope for the future."¹³ But liberal hope, as Rawls explains, is not so much an expectation of complete fulfilment as a kind of confidence that liberalism's 'method of avoidance', by which it 'bypass[es]' controversies over the transcendent truth, can be projected into the future, and the 'day of reckoning' indefinitely deferred.¹⁴ There is a difference between hope that transcendence will *enter* the world and hope that transcendence can be rendered *unnecessary* for the world. But it is difficult to tell on which side Lamb—or the implicit Christians he hypothesizes—ultimately falls.

There is one minor issue with the Latin that merits correction in subsequent editions. On p. 227, Lamb writes that Augustine has glossed "welfare" as "peace" in his discussion of Jer. 29:7 at *City of God* 19.26. But the word in the Vulgate is *pax*, as it is in extant patristic references to the *Vetus Latina*. Augustine is not glossing, he is quoting.

Connor Grubaugh
Oriel College, University of Oxford

*The Currency of Politics: The Political Theory of Money
from Aristotle to Keynes*

Stefan Eich

Princeton University Press, 2022, 344 pp.

Stefan Eich traces the history of political thought on money, asking why money is so little treated as a topic of political thought on its

¹³ Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1999), 6, 11, 22-23, 29-30, 124.

¹⁴ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 303; *Collected Papers*, ed. S. Freeman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 395, 404n., 434.

own terms. Understanding money has perhaps as much to contribute to social theory as understanding law and civic speech (218-219), and yet it seems to be glossed over by political theorists who have largely accepted that money is a subject for economics and economic historians. There are two well-developed schools within economic history that account for what money is and how it came to be (4-6). The first considers money to have come about naturally out of needs of exchange and because it is superior to the inefficiencies of bartering.¹⁵ The second—perhaps more sophisticated, and less the domain of introductory economics textbooks—argues that money is a political imposition with the specific goal of regulating one's duties to the state.¹⁶ Money is demanded back by the state from its subjects in the form of taxes, and distributed for things like labour or military service. These two schools can be complementary, in that a state's standardization of a currency can work as a guarantee for transactions that lie outside of the state itself, while still ordering citizens' duties to the state. In any case, Eich discusses these accounts only to differentiate his own approach. The two schools are dismissed as 'just so' stories, which may invite criticism from their proponents, and he oversimplifies when stating that barter economies have never been found anywhere in the world.¹⁷ But his identi-

¹⁵ See, e.g., P. Dasgupta, *Economics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 54-55; E. L. Furness, *Money and Credit in Developing Africa* (Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books, 1975), 4.

¹⁶ Generally the view favoured by Modern Monetary Theory (MMT). See S. Kelton, *The Deficit Myth: Modern Monetary Theory and How to Build a Better Economy* (London: John Murray, 2020); J. Feinig, *Moral Economics of Money: Politics and the Monetary Constitution of Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022).

¹⁷ 'Nowhere in the world have anthropologists or historians ever been able to find examples of barter economies. What they found instead were sophisticated social systems of credit. Practices that may have looked like barter in fact presupposed an implicit unit of account and an invisible system of credit' (4). Eich cites David Graeber and then Toby Green for these points, but in fact Graeber *does* identify examples of bartering—just not a 'barter economy' whereby a whole community's economy relies on direct exchange of goods without supportive social norms or social credit systems. Graeber even accepts that societies that are used to money, but then see their monetary system collapse, often descend into a kind of barter economy. The particular question is whether a system of barter evolves into a monetary system, and for that there is no evidence. But even Graeber is at risk of misrepresenting economists here, who usually ask the reader to imagine how *difficult* a barter economy would be, which is not a claim that barter economies temporally *preceded* monetary economies. The economists' question is quite different: how does an economy function efficiently, not what the history of money is. It is therefore in honesty that so many economists ask the reader to 'imagine' a barter economy, and—contra Graeber—I think there is nothing wrong with such use of the imagination when exploring how

fictionation of a new area of inquiry into the nature of money is genuine and thought-provoking.

Debate between the two schools gives the impression that much has already been discussed about the politics of currency, but in fact both are principally organized around the question of *what brought money about*—that is, what caused the development and entrenchment of money as an organizer of economic relations. Eich opens an altogether different and more unsettling set of questions: *why is money no longer the subject of political theory? What should a political philosophy of money look like?* It is for this reason that this most startling and welcome book structures itself as a history of the politics of currency—not so much a history of all those who have deliberated over the ethics of the market economy, but a more refined history of all those who have considered how money might be politically organized to achieve a flourishing and just society, a wider question than the usefulness of money for smoothing transactions or funding state-building projects.

One could have thought that the book's title should be *The Politics of Currency*, which might be an account of the manipulation of currency for political purposes. But putting the terms in reverse as *The Currency of Politics* indicates a conscious effort to demarcate a way politics is done, not a way politics interferes in the economy. As Eich explains his choice of title in the preface, there is a need to establish 'the ways in which discussions of money as an institution of governance and collective value form a constitutive part of the history of political thought' (xvi). This is, in part, a normative project, in the sense that the book is written from within a tradition it

contemporary market economies efficiently connect demand and supply. David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (New York: Melville House, 2011), 23. Furthermore, the evidence-based rejection of historical barter economy may have a different image of a barter economy than exists in the minds of many textbook-writing economists, who usually do not engage in the careful distinction between barter economies, on the one hand, and systems of social credit through debt, trust and reciprocity, on the other. The latter may be what many economists in fact mean. See, for example, Dasgupta's view that money is useful for solving the inefficiencies of barter *and yet* unnecessary if there was complete social trust. He conceives of barter economy as concurrent with the idea of small communities of high trust, involving long-term relationships based on social norms. In this sense, Dasgupta's introduction to economics is in tune with the theory of debt-accruing obligations that Graeber sees able to sustain many forms of economic cooperation before monetisation. Dasgupta, *Economics*, ch. 2, 'Trust'. Or, as Eich himself puts it at one point, 'Currency seems needed least when it functions best and used most when it functions worst' (39).

seeks to advance, a tradition of reconceiving monetary systems to ensure they serve citizens (7). At the same time, the term ‘political currency’ stands on factual grounds, too—it offers a way of describing and charting how money and its constant political reorganization has worked empirically as a mechanism of self-government (6). The book’s theoretical premise is that, if we can get a better handle on the political thought that has framed the nature and purpose of the instrument of money, we can create a new space for dialogue on the form of money that would best suit our social needs.

This explains why Eich’s history of political thought on money jumps quite a bit through different episodes of economic thought. A full history of ethics of exchange and distribution would be impossible for a single manuscript, and Eich carefully chooses those authors that were able to reflect with revealing clarity on the conventionality of money and its political design. Unfortunately, it seems for Eich, this begins a sad tale of the steady neutralization of portrayals of money,¹⁸ whether due to self-interest in preserving wealth gains under the monetary status quo or to the intellectual eclipse of money by class division and factors of production as units of political analysis. ‘[A]ttempts to “depoliticize” money rely on a performative contradiction—a magician’s sleight of hand—insofar as they disavow that such calls are themselves political moves within the politics of money. ... Even where it announces itself in an anti-politics, money is always already political’ (xv). Indeed, the book is remarkably balanced in criticising both the left and the right for avoidance of discussion of the politics of money—a criticism that helps demarcate a future space for the political theory of money that would welcome new thinking from both ends of the spectrum.

On the left, Eich is particularly troubled by Marx’s apparent de-emphasis of money for understanding the intentional structuration¹⁹ of the economy in the interests of the rich over the poor (ch. 4, ‘Money as Capital: Karl Marx and the Limits of Monetary Politics’). The plot thickens when it becomes apparent that a good amount

¹⁸ Indeed, Eich puts his original motivation for writing the book down to his surprise that Marx relegated the history and politics of money to footnotes at the start of *Das Kapital*, believing, by the time Volume One was first published, that money was more a mirage of the economy than a true determinate of economic value and relations between the factors of production (127).

¹⁹ To use the term in line with Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge: Polity, 1984).

of Marx's analysis prior to *Das Kapital's* publication was devoted to debates on the nature of money (in dialogue with Saint-Simon and Proudhon), and whether a reorganization of the monetary system could achieve fairness and equality by means of a sustainable reorientation of incentive structures away from selfish, unbridled private accumulation among a few. Marx ended up taking an almost exactly contrary position to those earlier socialists, believing that 'one can only exercise true control over money by controlling the productive relations' (133). As Eich explains, '[t]he obsession over the nature of money was a distraction from the actual problem of value, Marx now argued' (126). It seems Marx can take most of the blame on the left, therefore, for quite a radical position that money does not really structure the economy, and that exclusive focus on it acts as a smokescreen for the genuine forces structuring economic relations: the factors of production. As Eich describes it, 'the conceptual shift to capital nonetheless meant that what was intended as a conscious critique of modern money's malleability all too easily resulted in an elision of the history of political debates over money' (108), despite Marx's prior close study and critique of managed money.

Eich plays here with a theme persistent throughout his book, that there is in social theory often a desire to move from the appearance of things (*schien*, for Marx) to what is real, and money sits ambiguously between the two (102, 112). Eich's own position seems to track Marx methodologically on this point.²⁰ On the one hand, noting money's conventionality helps make us aware that its structuration is arbitrary and therefore changeable. On the other, such apparent arbitrariness leads us to believe that money has little to do with the causal forces at play in determining our economic and political condition. Marx's confidence in demonstrating what truly matter as forces for economic history, such as diminishing returns to labour, seems to have secured a dismissal of the politics of money for over a century on the left, a slumber rudely interrupted by the global financial crisis and the controversy surrounding quantitative easing. Marx's approach 'implied that any activist monetary policy

²⁰ '[C]apitalism thrives on a kind of objective illusion that separates the shadow from the body. To grasp capitalism as a historical phenomenon implied for Marx not only placing it into a larger frame of historical development but also reckoning with these objective illusions produced by one's own vantage point within the capitalist hall of mirrors. One had to somehow take appearances seriously and simultaneously glimpse behind them' (133).

to alter the level of investment, let alone the ability of monetary policy to shake off exploitation, was futile and ultimately misguided. Instead, [...] monetary policy was heavily constrained and could at most alter the relative concentration and liquidity of capital in periods of crisis' (109).

The journey within liberal thought is even more tortuous, because the conventionality of money runs against two pillars of liberalism: respect for private property and individual choice unperturbed by state interference. The possible arbitrariness of money raises the question of the possible arbitrariness of private property, and if we think that money as a construct is dependent on state regulation, the whole market seems to look like a state-dependent project. Eich puts flesh on the bone of this conundrum, in what I consider the best chapter of the book, through examination of the thought of John Locke, a founding father to liberalism who was deeply invested in debates over the nature and form of money. In terms of his political thought, Locke was a man fixated on trust as the basis to society, and saw politics as necessarily embroiled in the difficulty of maintaining that trust. As John Dunn puts it, Locke's 'moral and political thinking as a whole (and in my view the central burden of his political thinking in its entirety) was directed towards an understanding of the rationality and moral propriety of human trust.'²¹ For Eich's history of political thought on money, Locke is positioned as concerned with the ruination of social trust when money is manipulated by private actors against the successful functioning of the market economy.

It may be that Locke enjoyed greater discretion than subsequent liberals and conservatives for rethinking the nature and purpose of money without opposition to state regulation, because Locke was not a liberal who had to position himself against socialist doctrines of state-led redistribution. The ultimate contrast on this front is Edmund Burke, who cannot agree with any French revolutionary ideas of monetary reform because of their accompanying confiscation of Church property (81). Locke saw no difficulty in a government that reflects moral laws of what is natural and right according to

²¹ John Dunn, 'The Concept of "Trust" in the Politics of John Locke' in R. Rorty, J. Schneewind, & Q. Skinner, eds., *Philosophy in History: Essays in the Historiography of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 280-1.

quite universal conceptions of conscience and rationality,²² and likewise had little fear of a state acting to restore order in the economy through the reestablishment of the monetary system. Eich's particular focus is on Locke's role in helping settle the monetary crisis of the 1690s, in which coin clipping had become so widespread that it was becoming hard to trust the currency and hard to standardize its value for effective use in trade or as a promise of credit. Locke insisted that the state should take back and then reissue all coins, revaluing them based on their weight. The effect was disinflationary, but heralded as a success because it helped restore trust in the financial system, and especially among those giving loans on credit.

The example is illuminating for Eich's analysis of liberal thought on money, because it deftly points out a common manoeuvre in which economic crises are resolved through appeal to apolitical economic theory on the nature of money, even though the solution has major ramifications for justice and wellbeing that could have been decided upon differently. Eich identifies the same trend in much of the debate about the gold standard, and sees it also at play in the neoclassical approach taken by Friedrich Hayek and others. Eich takes it as the prevailing norm now, with the whole Bretton Woods system and the development of independent central banks both offered as examples of begging the question on economic justice and monetary structuration by making banking itself, as well as almost all government monetary policy, appear apolitical, and necessarily so.²³ Eich provides stimulating and detailed reflection on John Maynard Keynes' deviation from this trend, but admits that his more radical propositions were never really tried, and that within economic theory his defeat at the hands of Hayek was almost complete, pushing governments around the world to neutralize the idea of money and monetary policy, despite the serious effects it has on the lives of ordinary people, and the danger it poses to democratic principle.

For the academy, Eich's intervention forces an uncomfortable question about the role of political philosophy for economics. He effectively ignores economic historians' concern with the chronological origins of money, and thereby exposes the assumption that

²² Dominic Burbidge, 'The Uncomfortable Question of Urgency for Liberal Thought: A Dialogue Between John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* and Contemporary Liberal Theory', *Politics & Poetics* 2 (2017): 1-27.

²³ See also P. Tucker, *Unelected Power: The Quest for Legitimacy in Central Banking and the Regulatory State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

settling that question would authoritatively settle the role of money in society. Money can be made differently, and our thinking about money dictates different conceptualizations of politics, so there is nothing about money's structuration that should be taken for granted. But here is where I muster my main criticism of this excellent book. Is there *nothing* natural that money is ordered by?²⁴ If not, as most would now agree, any political philosophy is, potentially, as relevant as any other in advancing an account of what money *might* be, democratic or otherwise. Humanity has constructed what money is, and debates what it should be. In this endeavour, awareness of the history of money, and even the history of political thought on money, is part of a wider evaluation that assesses our current money—its design and use—in ethical terms. One might then simply agree with the narrative of a depoliticized monetary system, not because it is true, but because its ethical consequences are better than those of any other monetary theories on offer. If we can choose to repoliticize money, as Eich proposes we do, can we not equally well choose a depoliticization of money? In keeping with the noumena/phenomena distinction underlying much of the book's framing of political thought on money, there is nothing to stop us walking back into the cave and endorsing, intellectually and practically, a mission of rendering currency as apolitical as possible in its phenomenon, in order to offset the dangers and difficult consequences of distrust in the monetary system.

In other words, while Eich's narrative of the depoliticization of money on both left and right is refined and penetrating, it gives no necessary grounds to opt for alternatives, including the more democratic monetary ideas hinted at in the book's conclusions. Those have to be argued for, not historicized. To those readers who fear I am "selling-out" a true understanding of money for primitive consequentialism, let me counter that all ethics involves some evalua-

²⁴ For an extreme testing of what a natural philosophy of money would look like, see R. Sebag, *The Natural Order of Money* (St Austell: Goldmoney Publishing, 2022). Note also Eich's explanation of Locke's justification of recoinage along similar lines: 'Locke [...] removed money from the realm of politics and rooted it instead in nature. From this perspective, Locke asserted the existence of certain natural laws of the market and thus foreshadowed economic liberalism' (50). At the same time, Eich disagrees that this common understanding properly captures Locke's overall project, which was rooted in a deeper awareness of money's conventionality, and identified a need to restore money's connection to nature only insofar as a naturalistic understanding was a popular view and therefore one that could help foster social trust (63).

tion of consequences, even when grounded in accounts of virtue (via prudence²⁵) or the deontology of rules about how we should all act when faced with similar situations (which involves consideration of the consequences of such rules). Awareness that certain things around us are arbitrary constructs does not render obsolete the question of which system, which construct, is right or wrong, good or bad, based on an assessment of what it will lead to.²⁶

Eich starts his historical overview with stimulating reflection on Aristotle in the context of a particular political awareness of money in Ancient Greece. He shows that Aristotle's understanding of money links with his notions of reciprocity, friendship, and justice, because 'currency can ground civic relations by equalizing citizens, maintain the polity by serving as a measure of political justice, and cultivate practical wisdom and deliberation' (26). In this sense, Aristotle is used to deftly open questions on the moral, ethical, and political dimensions to any monetary system. But Aristotle's ideas of reciprocity and justice are inextricable from his overall account of virtue and *endaemonia*, which is about understanding the habits that pertain to our flourishing human nature. Justice is, on this account, not something realized through agency over structure, but about giving each his or her due, in harmony with what is truly natural to one's flourishing. Sometimes there is no difference between agency, awareness, and flourishing, but occasionally there is, for example when justice does not demand that agency throw off structure because the structure itself is just.

For political thought subsequent to the French revolution, it is hard to think of justice subservient to fixed truths of human nature, and the conventionality of things like money seems part of a wider conventionality of all human institutions and cultures, languages

²⁵ The virtue of prudence, often central in virtue ethics, involves both experience and *nous* about what actions have what kinds of consequences.

²⁶ As Timothy A. O. Endicott puts it masterfully, 'Deconstruction inverts whatever anything seems to mean, by reversing the "privileging" of one interpretation over another. ... It suggests new possibilities of change, but allows no claim that the reasons in favour of a change are better than the reasons against it. It points out the privileging of ideas, but it cannot say what ideas *should be* privileged. In favour of this approach, it can be said that it gives underprivileged ideas (and therefore, presumably, the people whose ideas they are) a kind of equality with the privileged. But the way in which it makes ideas equal is indiscriminate: its inversions lead only to further inversions.' Timothy A. O. Endicott, *Vagueness in Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 15, 17 (emphasis in original).

and law included. But for others there remains a more fundamental question of the type of institutions that pertain to the truth of the human condition, with some institutionalization seeking out harmony with who we are and who we want to be, regardless of whether we are aware of it or not. Eich's study of those who have most sharply debated the structuration of money within the domain of political thought is in this sense not a complete history of the politics of money, because views about justice in the *use* of money are also essential to the political theory of money, even if they do not endorse the view that the monetary system is arbitrary and can be reorganized. For this reason, it is problematic that the book omits discussion of the medieval debates on usury,²⁷ which evaluated in a refined way how inequalities in the possession of money should not be exploited, and argued that it would be wrong for those giving out loans to create conditions of dependence that cannot be overcome. All these considerations follow naturally from Aristotelian insights on the conventionality of money and the need to embed economic relations in civic friendship and harmony, but Eich's approach seems to exclude them because they do not amount to debate on the ontology of money, its structuration, or the democratic agency of peoples. Methodologically, this puts the cart before the horse in presuming that existential questions (and corresponding epistemic debates over what is real and knowable) are more fundamental than ethical questions for social theory. Indeed, a methodology grounded in dialectic between noumena and phenomena leads necessarily to a prioritization of the existential over the ethical. But the truth of money is also in its use, not just its structuration, as Ludwig Wittgenstein said of language. And so a history of political thought on money should not bracket out debate over the ethical and virtuous use of the money that is already in place if it is to fully account for the justness of monetary systems.

Eich's contribution demarcates a new space for political thought on money, and brings together key theorists on the structuration of money both to show that political thought often has a direct effect on the type of monetary system that is maintained, and to show that democratic agency vis-a-vis money is often wilfully ignored. Notwithstanding my suggestion of reincorporating money's ethics-in-

²⁷ There is passing mention of debates on just price and usury in listing Aristotle's influence on pp. 43-44.

use for a more complete account, it is clear that a great intellectual debt is accrued in the reading of Eich's penetrating demarcation of a history of political thought on money.

Dominic Burbidge
Canterbury Institute; University of Oxford