

*Primitive Money*¹

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In a subject where there is no agreed procedure for knocking out errors, doctrines have a long life.

Joan Robinson

PRIMITIVE money is a complicated subject for several reasons. There is not in common use a set of analytical categories designed to reveal distinguishing characteristics of markedly different systems: economies without markets and machines still tend to be viewed through the theoretical spectacles designed for Western economy (Arensberg 1957:99). Second, francs, sterling, and dollars are only the most recent of a long series of foreign monies introduced into primitive economies. Earlier, Arabs, Portuguese, Dutch, English, and others introduced cowrie, manillas, beads, etc., with varying permeation and varying disruption of indigenous monetary systems. Only rarely do anthropologists succeed in disentangling the foreign from the indigenous in a way which reveals the nature of the old money and the consequences of the new.

Moreover, if one asks what is “primitive” about a particular money, one may come away with two answers: the money-stuff—woodpecker scalps, sea shells, goats, dog teeth—is primitive (i.e., different from our own); and the uses to which the money-stuff is sometimes put—mortuary payments, blood-wealth, bridewealth—are primitive (i.e., different from our own).

Primitive money performs some of the functions of our own money, but rarely all; the conditions under which supplies are forthcoming are usually different; primitive money is used in some ways ours is not; our money is impersonal and commercial, while primitive money frequently has pedigree and personality, sacred uses, or moral and emotional connotations. Our governmental authorities control the quantity of money, but rarely is this so in primitive economies.

Failure to understand the reasons for such differences leads to disputes about bridewealth versus brideprice, to arguments about whether cows, pig tusks, and potlatch coppers are “really” money, to the assumption that modern coinage merely “replaces” indigenous forms of money, and to disagreement of authorities over minimal definitions of money. In these disputes the characteristics of American or European money are too often used as a model.

Some of the most respected comparisons between primitive and Western money fail to go deeply enough into comparative economic and social structure. Even Malinowski and Firth do not explain that it is nationally-integrated market organization which accounts for those Western monetary traits they use as a model of “real” money: “The tokens of wealth [vaygua: ceremonial axe blades, necklaces of red shell discs, and arm bracelets of shells] have often been
called 'money.' It is at first sight evident that 'money' in our sense cannot exist among the Trobrianders. . . . Any article which can be classed as 'money' or 'currency' must fulfill certain essential conditions; it must function as a medium of exchange and as a common measure of value, it must be the instrument of condensing wealth, the means by which value can be accumulated. Money also, as a rule, serves as the standard of deferred payments. . . . we cannot think of vaygua in terms of 'money'" (Malinowski 1921:13–14).

Firth registers his agreement: "But according to precise terminology, such objects [strings of shell discs] can hardly be correctly described as currency or money. In any economic system, however primitive, an article can only be regarded as true money when it acts as a definite and common medium of exchange, as a convenient stepping stone in obtaining one type of goods for another. Moreover in so doing it serves as a measure of values. . . . Again, it is a standard of value . . . " (Firth 1929:881).

Malinowski and Firth use the bundle of attributes money has in Western market economy to comprise a model of true money. They then judge whether or not money-like stuff in primitive economies is really money by how closely the uses of the primitive stuff resemble our own—a strange procedure for anthropologists who would never use the bundle of attributes of the Western family, religion, or political organization in such a way. Quoting from Lienhardt—". . . most anthropologists have ceased to take their bearings in the study of religion from any religion practiced in their own society" (1956:310). And Gluckman and Cunnison write, concerning political organizations: "One important discovery made in . . . [African Political Systems] was that the institutions through which a society organized politically need not necessarily look like the kinds of political institutions with which we have long been familiar in the Western world, and in the great nations of Asia" (1962:vi).

Dollars have that set of uses called medium of exchange, means of payment, standard of value, etc., precisely because our economy is commercially organized. Where economies are organized differently, non-commercial uses of monetary objects become important, and "money" takes on different characteristics. The question is not—as it is conventionally put—are shells, wood-pecker scalps, cattle, goats, dog teeth, or kula valuables "really" "money?"

It is, rather, how are the similarities and the differences between such items and dollars related to similarities and differences in socio-economic structure?

We shall show below the connections between Western money and economy, then go on to make some points about primitive money and economy, and finally will examine the case of Rossel Island money in detail.

CAPITALISM: MARKET INTEGRATION DETERMINES ALL MONEY USES

In the economies for which the English monetary vocabulary was created, there is one dominant transactional mode, market exchange, to which all money uses relate. By contrast, in many primitive economies before Western incursion, market exchange transactions are either absent (as with Nuer) or peripheral (as in the Trobriands), but non-commercial uses of money do exist.
Seeing non-commercial uses of money through the blinders of commercial money causes difficulty in understanding primitive monies. We must first be made aware of the blinders.

U. S. dollars may be called general purpose money (Polanyi 1957a; 1957b). They are a single monetary instrument to perform all the money uses. Moreover, the same dollars enter modes of transaction to be called redistribution and reciprocity, as enter into market exchange. These features of U. S. money are consequences of economy-wide market integration and require explanation in an anthropological context.

That U. S. economy is integrated by market exchange is explained by the wide range of natural resources, labor, goods, and services transacted by purchase and sale at market-determined prices, and by the extent to which people in our national economy depend for livelihood on wage, profit, interest, and rental income got from market sale. Natural resources and capital goods (land, labor, machines and buildings of all varieties), consumption goods (food, automobiles), personal and impersonal services (dentistry, electricity), are all purchasable "on the market." Goods and services which are ceremonial and religious, or which serve as prestige indicators, are purchasable in the same way and with the same money as subsistence goods. In market-integrated economy very different items and services are directly comparable, because all are available at prices stated in the same money. The subject of price determination of products and resources under varying conditions of supply and demand (price and distribution theory) is an important field of economics because market exchange is our dominant transactional mode.\textsuperscript{2}

\textit{Commercial Uses of Money in a Market-Integrated National Economy}

Except for economic historians, most economists and all economic theory were (until recently) concerned exclusively with European and American types of economy. Economists do not find it necessary to distinguish among the transactional modes of market exchange, reciprocity, and redistribution, because market exchange is so overwhelmingly important. For the same reason economists do not find it necessary to describe at length the different uses of money in our own economy: with only a few exceptions they all express market exchange transactions.

To make this point clear I will attach to each of the money uses an adjective describing the transactional mode, thereby pointing up how they all serve commercial transactions: medium of (commercial) exchange; means of (commercial) payment; unit of (commercial) account; standard for deferred (commercial) payment.

The medium of (commercial) exchange function of money in our economy is its dominant function, and all other commercial uses of money are dependently linked—derived from—the use of dollars as media of (commercial) exchange. For example, dollars are also used as a means of (commercial) payment of debt \textit{arising from} market transactions. It is purchase and sale of resources, goods, and services which \textit{create} the money functions of means of (commercial) pay-
ment and standard for deferred (commercial) payment. All the commercial uses of money are consequences of market integration, simply reflecting the highly organized credit and accounting arrangements that facilitate market purchases. This is why economists in writing about our economy need not attach the qualifier “commercial” to the money uses. Indeed, we in our market-integrated national economy sometimes regard the terms “money” and “medium of exchange” as interchangeable. But for primitive communities where market transactions are absent or infrequent, it would be distorting to identify money with medium of (commercial) exchange, as Einzig warns us: “Since, however, money has also other functions and since in many instances [of money used in primitive economies] those functions are more important than that of the medium of exchange, it seems to be unjustified to use the term as a mere synonym for ‘medium of exchange’” (1948:321).

Non-Commercial Uses of Money

Dollars are also used as a means of non-commercial payment: traffic fines paid to local government and taxes to all levels of government. A structural characteristic of Western economy is that redistributive transactions—obligatory payments to political authority which uses the receipts to provide community services—are made with the same money used as medium of (commercial) exchange in private transactions. The consequences are important and far-reaching.

In all societies having specialized political authority, there must be some institutionalized arrangement for the governing authorities to acquire goods and services for their own maintenance and to provide social services (defense, justice) to the community. In this sense, we may regard the redistributive function (acquiring and disbursing such goods and services) as an “economic” component of political organization. Exactly how the arrangements vary for political authority to acquire and disburse goods and services is one way of differentiating between the organization of Soviet, American, and (say) Bantu economies.

In U.S. economy the government makes use of the market in the process of redistribution: medium of (commercial) exchange money earned as private income is used by households and firms as means of (redistributive) payment of politically incurred obligation (taxes). The government then buys on the market the services and products it requires—civil servants, guns, roads—to provide community services.

In our system, the same can be said for another mode of transaction, reciprocity, or gift-giving between kin and friends. The same money serves the different transactional modes: in purchasing a gift, the money paid is used as medium of (commercial) exchange; giving the gift is part of a reciprocal transaction (a material or service transfer induced by social obligation between the gift partners). If cash is given as a gift, it is means of (reciprocal) payment of the social obligation discharged by the gift-giving.

Here is yet another reason why economists in dealing with our own econ-
omy need not distinguish among transactional modes: redistribution and reciprocity make use of market exchange and make use of the same money used in market exchange. In Western economy, therefore, tax and gift transactions appear as simple variations from the private market norm—special types of expenditure or outlay—which present no theoretical difficulties.

American reliance upon market sale for livelihood and upon the price mechanism for allocating resources to production lines does the following: it makes the medium of (commercial) exchange use of money its dominant attribute, it makes other money uses serve market transactions, and it confers that peculiar bundle of traits on our general purpose money which mark off dollars from non-monetary objects. It is our market integration which makes it necessary to institutionalize all uses of money in the same money instrument. As with Malinowski and Firth, we thereby come to think of “money-ness” as this set of uses conferred on the single monetary object. And because ours is a market economy, we come to think of medium of (commercial) exchange as the single most important attribute of “money-ness.”

**Limited-Purpose Monies**

In primitive economies—i.e., small-scale economies not integrated by market exchange—different uses of money may be institutionalized separately in different monetary objects to carry out reciprocal and redistributive transactions. These money objects used in non-commercial ways are usually distinct from any that enter market place transactions. And the items which perform non-commercial money uses need not be full-time money, so to speak; they have uses and characteristics apart from their ability to serve as a special kind of money.

In U. S. economy, objects such as jewelry, stocks, and bonds are not thought of as money because (like cattle among the Bantu) these come into existence for reasons other than their “money-ness.” Each is capable of one or two money uses, but not the full range which distinguishes dollars, and particularly not the medium of (commercial) exchange use of dollars. It is worth examining these because, we shall argue, primitive monies used in reciprocal and redistributive transactions are the counterparts of these limited or special purpose monies, and not of dollars as media of (commercial) exchange; they resemble dollars only in non-commercial uses (paying taxes and fines, and gift-giving).

Dollars serve as a store of (commercial and non-commercial) value because dollars can be held idle for future use. But this is true also for jewelry, stocks and bonds, and other marketable assets. However, in U. S. economy jewelry is not a medium of (commercial) exchange because one cannot spend it directly, and it is not a means of (commercial or non-commercial) payment because it is not acceptable in payment of debt or taxes.4

As a measuring device (rather than as tangible objects) dollars are used as unit of account and standard for deferred payment of debts. Now consider the
accounting and payment procedures used by a baby-sitting cooperative in which a number of households club together to draw on each other for hours of baby-sitting time. Family A uses four hours of sitting time supplied by family B. Family A thereby incurs a debt of four hours it owes the co-op; family B acquires a credit of four hours that it may draw upon in future from some member of the co-op. Here, baby-sitting labor time is a unit of (reciprocal) account and a standard for deferred (reciprocal) payments—a limited purpose money in the sense that it performs two of the subsidiary uses of dollars. Other examples (trading stamps, blood banks) could be given. The point is that even where dollars perform all the money uses for all modes of transaction, there are situations in which a limited range of money uses are performed by objects not thought of as money. These limited purpose monies become important in small-scale communities without market integration and, therefore, without a general purpose money.

Control over the Quantity of Money; Absence of Status Requisites

In national market economies, governments deliberately control the quantity of general purpose money because dollars (francs, sterling) carry out market sales which the populace depends on for livelihood. Roughly speaking, if the authorities allow too much money to come into use as medium of (market) purchase, the result is inflation. If the authorities allow too little money to come into use, the result is deflation and unemployment (a contraction in the rate of market purchasing below the full employment capacity rate of production). The need to deliberately vary the quantity of money is a direct result of economy-wide market integration.

It has often been noted (e.g., Herskovits 1952: 238) that in primitive societies there is seldom any conscious control by political authority over money objects. Such is not merely a difference between primitive monetary systems and our own, but one that reflects differences between their economic systems and ours. In economies not integrated by market exchange, non-commercial monetary transactions are only occasional events (e.g., bloodwealth, bride-wealth), and non-commercial money is not usually connected with production and daily livelihood. That the non-commercial money-stuff may be fixed in quantity for all time (Yap stones), or increase in quantity only through natural growth (cows, pig tusks) does not affect production and daily livelihood (as would be the case with us if dollars were fixed in quantity).

What is also true of our market economy based on contract rather than status, is that having the money price is a sufficient condition for buying most goods. Not only is Western money anonymous, so to speak, but money users are also anonymous: the market sells to whoever has the purchase price and only rarely imposes status prerequisites on the use of money as medium of (commercial) exchange. In contrast, there usually are status prerequisites in non-commercial uses of primitive money. For example, in the use of cattle as means of (reciprocal) payment of bridewealth, status requisites such as lineage,
age, rank of the persons, must be complied with. The money users are not anonymous, and a special kind of limited purpose money is necessary to the transaction.

**PRIMITIVE MONEY AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC ORGANIZATION**

Einzig (1948:323) points out that: "The overwhelming importance of unilateral non-commercial payments in primitive life as compared with payments arising from [commercial] trade is altogether overlooked by practically all definitions [of primitive money]. It is assumed that money must be essentially commercial in character and that any object which serves the purposes of non-commercial payments may safely be disregarded even if its use is of first-rate importance in the economic, political, and social life of primitive communities."

When anthropologists employ Western monetary terms to describe uses of money-stuff in non-commercial transactions, a crucial misunderstanding may result: when cattle or seashells perform some money uses in ways unrelated to market purchase and sale, they are not media of (commercial) exchange, or means of (commercial) payment.

The uncritical use of our general purpose money as the model of true money obscures the point that special purpose monies used for non-commercial transactions express salient features of underlying socio-economic structure. When we consider money in communities not integrated by market exchange—the Nuer, the Trobriands, the Tiv—it becomes essential to distinguish among the several transactional modes and among the several money uses: *primitive money-stuff does not have that bundle of related uses which in our economy is conferred on dollars by market integration and by the use of dollars in both commercial and non-commercial transactions*. The differences between cattle-money or shell-money and dollars are traceable to the differences in the transactional modes which call forth money uses. When Malinowski says that *kula* valuables are different from Western currency, he is really pointing out that reciprocal gift-giving is different from market purchase and sale (1922). Indeed, anthropologists use Western monetary terms ambiguously whenever they fail to distinguish between the market and the non-commercial modes of transaction. Reining, for example, states: "There seems to have been little exchange among households although iron tools and spears made from locally smelted ore had a limited application as a medium of exchange, being used primarily for marriage payments" (1959:39).

If Western monetary terms are to be used by anthropologists in the meanings they convey for our own economy, the unqualified phrase "medium of exchange" must mean medium of market (or commercial) exchange. Since brides are not acquired through impersonal market transactions by random buyers and sellers, the iron tools are not used as media of (market) exchange, but as media of (reciprocal) exchange: as part of a non-commercial transaction in which a man acquires a bundle of rights in a woman and her children in return for iron tools and other indemnification payments to her kin.
It seems useful to regard the bridewealth items as special purpose "money" because the iron tools and spears—or in other societies, cows or goats—are the required items, and because they carry out money uses which do have counterparts in our own society. Whether one calls them special purpose monies or highly ranked treasure items necessary to the transaction for which one may not substitute other items only matters when the subject of money uses in primitive compared to Western economies is raised. Then we can show that cows and armbands of shells do perform some of the uses of dollars but in non-commercial situations. The goal is always to state the role of bridewealth or kula items, or other limited purpose money, from the viewpoint of the analyst concerned with comparative economy, but without distorting the folk-meaning of the items and the transactions they enter.

Money Uses in Primitive and Peasant Economies

Because money and money uses in market-dominated economies differ sharply from money in other economies it is useful to classify economies in accordance with the importance of market exchange transactions (Bohannan and Dalton 1962).

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Underdeveloped Communities</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Type I</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Primitive (or Subsistence) Economies</strong></td>
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<td>Marketless</td>
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<td>Sonjo</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nuer</td>
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<td>Lele</td>
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<td>Arnhemlanders</td>
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<td>Bemba</td>
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<td>Kwakiutl (1840)</td>
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</table>

**Type I: Marketless**

In marketless communities, land and labor are not transacted by purchase and sale but are allocated as expressions of kinship right or tribal affiliation. There are no formal market-place sites where indigenously produced items are bought and sold. These are "subsistence" economies in the sense that livelihood does not depend on production for sale. The transactional modes to allocate resources and labor as well as produced items and services are reciprocity and redistribution (Polanyi 1944: Chapter 4; 1957 b; Dalton 1962). In marketless economies, then, transactions of labor, resources, material goods, and services are of non-commercial sorts—obligatory gifts to kin and friends, obligatory payments to chiefs and priests, bridewealth, bloodwealth, fees for entering secret societies, corvée labor, mortuary payments, etc.—which imme-
diately marks off as different from our own any money-stuff used. Items such as cattle, goats, spears, Yap stones, and pig tusks, take on roles as special purpose money in non-commercial transactions: they become means of (reciprocal or redistributive) payment, as is the case with bloodwealth and mortuary payments; or media of (reciprocal) exchange, as is the case with bridewealth.

Type II: Peripheral Markets Only

Everything said above about marketless economies holds true for those with only peripheral markets, with one exception: market-place sites exist in which a narrow range of produce is bought and sold, either with some money-stuff used as medium of (commercial) exchange, or via barter in the economist’s sense (moneyless market exchange). We call these market exchanges “peripheral” because land and labor are not bought and sold and because most people do not get the bulk of their income from market sales. In such small-scale subsistence economies market-place prices do not function—as they do in our national economy—as an integrative mechanism to allocate resources to production lines: labor and land use do not respond to changes in the prices of products transacted in peripheral market places. Malinowski’s *gimwali* are peripheral market transactions of an occasional sort without the formal trappings found in African market places.

Type III: Market-Dominated (Peasant) Economies

Small-scale market-dominated communities share with our own nationally integrated market economy the following features: (i) a large proportion of land and labor as well as goods and services are transacted by market purchase and sale; (ii) most people depend upon market sale of labor or products for livelihood; (iii) market prices integrate production. Labor and land move into and out of different production lines in response to profit (and other income) alternatives, as indicated by market prices. In such economies, the medium of (commercial) exchange function of money is the most important; the other commercial uses of money facilitate market transactions, and the same money is used for non-commercial transactions.

Peasant economies (Firth 1946), differ from primitive (subsistence) economies in that peasant producers depend upon production for sale. However, both peasant and primitive communities differ from large-scale, developed, nationally integrated Western economies on two counts: modern machine technology is largely absent, and traditional social organization and cultural practices are largely retained (Dalton 1964).§

**ROSSEL ISLAND MONEY**

Rossel Island money is famous in anthropological literature because it has for so long been a puzzler. Although it was reported at an early date, and by an economist (Armstrong 1924; 1928) who was in the field for only two months, re-analysis in the light of points made earlier in this paper allows a different interpretation of Rossel Island money and economy.
Armstrong's Theoretical Presentation

Armstrong asserts that Rossel Island money is a rough equivalent of our own (1924:429): that it is a medium of exchange used to purchase a wide range of goods and services, and that it is a standard of value for stating prices. He uses Western monetary and economic terms throughout to describe the Rossel system—medium of exchange, standard of value, buy, sell, price (1928:59).

The Rossel Islanders use two types of shell money, ndap and nko.7 Ndap money consists of individual shells (Armstrong calls them coins), each of which belongs to one of 22 named classes or denominations, which Armstrong ranks from 1–22, a higher numbered class indicating a higher valued shell.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Armstrong's numbering system for classes of ndap shell money (1928:62)</th>
<th>Number of individual ndap shells in each class</th>
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<tr>
<td>22</td>
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<td>21</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>30–40</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Total in classes 13–22=146

Armstrong could not determine the number of ndap shells in each class below 13, but he guesses there are fewer than 1,000 in all (1928:63), which would mean 800 or so in classes 1–12.

Armstrong's theoretical concern is with the value relationships among the ranked shells. He tells us that (as in Western economy) all goods and services on Rossel bear a money price stated as a piece (coin) of a specific class (1–22) of ndap, so that a big house costs a No. 20 ndap shell, and a pig a No. 18 (1928:88). But the shells are not quite like dollar bills numbered 1–22 with a No. 20 (say), bearing twice the value of a No. 10, or an item priced at No. 20 purchasable with two shells of No. 10 variety. In Armstrong's view it is merely an aberration due to custom, and, perhaps, to unsystematic thinking (1924:426) that the Rossel Islanders insist that something priced at No. 20 must be paid for with a No. 20 shell, rather than with lower denomination pieces adding up to 20. He sees this as an inefficiency in their system as compared to ours—in which all bills and coins are directly convertible into each other. He therefore shows that the Rossel system requires elaborate borrowing to allow a person who does not happen to own a piece of No. 20 money to acquire an item "priced" at 20, and argues that it is the borrowing system that reveals the value relationships among the ranked coins (1924:425 and 423). This is a
cumbersome equivalent of our own system—a model T, so to speak—which does the same job as our own media of exchange, but with more work and fuss because one cannot substitute two $10 bills for something priced at $20. Armstrong writes: "... the necessity for continual loans is largely the result of the peculiar nature of the system. The same 'amount' of money, where the values are simply related and 'change' can always be given, could perform the same amount of real service (i.e., effect the same number of purchases) with perhaps a tenth or less of the amount of lending necessitated by the Rossel system" (1928:65).

If one borrows a No. 12 for a short time, he will have to repay a No. 13; but for a longer time he will have to repay a No. 14, 15, etc. Therefore, he says, the value relationships among the denominations 1–22 conform roughly to compound interest, which shows the relationship of an initial sum lent to its repayment equivalent, depending upon the rate of interest and the time the initial sum is outstanding. Theoretically, a No. 1 shell is related to any other number, 2–22, by the length of time a No. 1 loan is outstanding before repayment must be made in any higher number (Armstrong 1928:63, 64).

Armstrong's analytical interpretation may be summarized: ndap shell money functions like dollars in that it is a medium of exchange, standard of value, standard for deferred payments, etc. Debts are calculated and goods and services priced in shells of stated denomination. The peculiar (different from our own) feature of the system is that the shell denominations are not freely convertible into one another, which makes necessary frequent borrowing at interest to acquire the exact denomination shell needed for a given purchase.

**Contradictory Evidence**

There are two faults in Armstrong's analysis from which stem the subsidiary difficulties in his interpretation of the Rossel monetary system.

1. He assumes all ndap shells function as media of (commercial) exchange. He does not distinguish among modes of transaction (reciprocity, redistribution, market exchange), but regards all transactions as commercial purchases (1924:427); brides cost a No. 18 shell, just as baskets costs a No. 4 shell. He writes: "... any commodity or service may be more or less directly priced in terms of them [ndap shells]" [1928:59]. Armstrong never doubts that Rossel Island money is essentially like our own media of (commercial) exchange. One could sum up his ethnocentric theorizing in a syllogism: ndap shells are "money"; money is a commercial instrument; therefore Rossel Island is a market economy.

2. This market preconception leads him to do what the Rossel Islanders do not do: to number the ndap classes 1–22. By so doing he can assume that convertibility via borrowing and repayment is practiced throughout the entire range, so that one could start by lending a No. 1 shell, and by continual loans at interest, wind up eventually with a No. 22 shell. For example, "Any [ndap shell] value can thus be regarded as any lower value plus compound interest for the number of time units equal to the number of values by which the two are
separated, so that No. 22, for example, is No. 1 plus compound interest for 21 units of time” (Armstrong 1928:64).

By ranking them 1–22 Armstrong implies that the differences between ndap shell classes are cardinal differences: that a No. 22 is 22 times more valuable than a No. 1, in the sense that a $20 bill is 20 times more valuable than a $1 bill. There are no such cardinal differences among ndap shells. To number them 1–22 is to give a false impression of similarity between ndap shell classes and Western money denominations and a false impression about the commensurability or the “purchasing power” relationship between lower and higher numbered ndap shells.

The characteristics of monetary transactions on Rossel that lead us to doubt Armstrong’s interpretation may be set out with the following provisos kept in mind: Rossel Island economy is not integrated by market exchange; ndap shells (except for the lowest few classes) are not media of (commercial) exchange; and convertibility throughout the entire range could not be practiced.

There are (on the basis of Armstrong’s own data) at least three groups of ndap shells, the shells in each group being necessary for a different range of transactions, and convertibility via borrowing and repayment being possible within the lowest two groups, but not within the highest group, and not between groups.

The shells Armstrong classes 1–8 or 9 are the only ones capable of increase in quantity (1924:424; 1928:60). The individual shells in each of these classes do not bear separate names, and some of them, at least, enter low echelon transactions, casual market exchange between individuals. In one of the rare descriptions of how shells below class No. 18 are actually used, Armstrong tells us that one may buy a basket, a lime stick, or a lime pot with a No. 4 shell (1928:85). However, the question, “what goods and services will each shell class 1, 2, 3, . . . 22 ‘buy,’ or what transactions does each enter?” is not answered except for ndap shells Nos. 4, 18, 20, and 21. What is clear, however, is that shell classes 18–22 are used for a very special range of important transactions which mark them off sharply from lower echelon shells, and that shells below No. 18 are not convertible into shells 18–22 by borrowing and repayment. One cannot start with a No. 1 or 17, and by lending, work it up to a No. 18–22.

Armstrong writes: “Nos. 18–22 seem to be in a somewhat different position from the lower values and one would imagine that they are not related to each other and the lower values in the precise manner set out in generalized form above [i.e., according to the compound interest formula linking the entire series, 1–22]” (1928:68). Convertibility via borrowing and repaying a higher class shell most certainly breaks down between Nos. 17 and 18. I suspect but cannot so readily document from the data that it does so, between Nos. 10 and 11 as well. If such is the case, convertibility is possible among Nos. 1–10, and among Nos. 11–17, but not between the two sets, and not among Nos. 18–22. It is very clear that the entire series is not linked because the uses to which
shells 18–22 are put are of an entirely different order from the uses of lower shells. "As a matter of fact, a peculiarity enters as soon as we reach No. 18, which is not, as a rule [when borrowed] repaid by a coin of higher value" (Armstrong 1928:66).

Nos. 18–22 (of which there are fewer than 60 shells in all), are obviously treasure items like especially venerated kula bracelets and potlatch coppers, items with individual names and histories, which must be used to validate important social events and transactions in the same sense that bridewealth items validate a marriage. The folk-view toward these shells helps to explain their role as limited purpose money in reciprocal and redistributive transactions. "Nos. 18–22 are peculiar in one other respect. They have a certain sacred character. No. 18, as it passes from person to person, is handled with great apparent reverence, and a crouching attitude is maintained. Nos. 19 to 22 are proportionately more sacred, are almost always kept enclosed, and are not supposed to see the light of day, and particularly the sun . . . I am inclined to think that there may be a real gap [in sacredness and prestige] . . . between Nos. 17 and 18 . . . [No. 22 shells] are said to be inherited in the male line and to be owned by the most powerful chiefs on the island" (Armstrong 1928:68).

To have regarded Nos. 18–22 as especially valuable media of (commercial) exchange—high denomination bills—with which to buy especially high-priced merchandise, is the most telling error Armstrong makes. Nos. 18–22 cannot be acquired by any amount of lower class shells, and there is no way of gauging how many times more valuable a No. 18 is compared to a No. 6 because they enter entirely different transactions.

Without exception, Nos. 18–22 enter non-commercial transactions exclusively: they are used as means of (reciprocal or redistributive) payment or exchange in transactions induced by social obligation. Payments of a No. 18 are a necessary part of ordinary bridewealth, as well as necessary payment for shared wives, and for sponsoring a pig or dog feast, or a feast initiating the use of a special kind of canoe. No. 20 is a necessary indemnity payment to the relatives of a man ritually murdered and eaten, a transaction which is part of mortuary rites for the death of a chief (Armstrong 1928:67, 1924:428). Moreover, there is a connection between shells 18–22 and lineage affiliation which Armstrong notes but makes nothing of. ". . . Nos. 18 to 22 are regarded as property peculiar to chiefs, though continually lent by the latter to their subjects" (1928:66).

The implication throughout is that there exists (as with us) an impersonal money market in which anyone may borrow from anyone else at the going interest rate (1924:426). This is doubtful. Unfortunately, Armstrong is silent on the question, "who may borrow from whom, and with what penalties for failure to repay?"

As with special purpose money for non-commercial transactions elsewhere, there are status requisites involved in the acquisition and use of the high eche-lon shells on Rossel. Just as marriage is not a market purchase of a wife by anyone who acquires a No. 18 ndap, but rather a reciprocal transaction between
two lineage groups (the ndap payment being one of the several necessary conditions within the social situation), so too with pig feasts on Rossel. Only persons of correct status may sponsor the feast and pay the ndap shell. In this case Armstrong notes that social requisites determine who may use upper ndap shells; but he does not see this as a symptomatic difference between Rossel and Western money, i.e., between non-commercial means of (redistributive) payment, and our Western media of impersonal (commercial) exchange. What Armstrong says of pig feasts is equally true of marriage, and all the other social events which require payment of high echelon ndap shells:

There are...complex social factors determining who shall have a pig to sell, [sic] and who shall be in a position to buy, [sic] and the buying and selling is not a simple economic occurrence, but a much more significant and complex social occurrence. We must suppose a complexity of social facts, which I am not in a position to define, that determine most of the general relations of a particular pig feast. ... A particular individual provides a particular ndap. ... A certain readjustment of social relations thus results from the holding of the feast... though we abandon the view that the monetary operations at a feast of this nature are to be regarded merely as a collective buying from a collective seller, it still remains that this is a useful way of describing these operations (1928: 82, 83).

It is about as useful to describe a pig feast on Rossel as buying a pig with a No. 18 ndap as it is to describe marriage in America as buying a wife with a wedding ring. To describe the pig feast as a market purchase one must ignore the social requirements of the transaction and the folk-view of the event, both of which differentiate this redistributive transaction from market exchange. Armstrong is forced to use market terms, purchase and sale, to describe pig feasts and bridewealth, because he regards ndap shells as media of (commercial) exchange in a market system.

One bizarre feature of the Rossel system, that a transaction requires a single shell of a specifically named class, and neither a shell from a higher class nor several from lower classes would do, may be examined in the light of what has been said above. "A man may have to borrow, even though he has money of a higher value in his possession than he requires at the moment. He may have Nos. 11 and 13, but not No. 12 which he requires at the moment. He cannot get change as a rule, for No. 13 is not a simple product of any lower value" (Armstrong 1928: 64–65).

The higher values have nothing to do with commercial purchase and sale. One could not use five petty shells, like No. 4 (which buys a pot), to perform a transaction such as bloodwealth (which requires that special treasure Armstrong numbers 20), for much the same reasons that in the Trobriands, one cannot "buy" a renowned kula valuable with the pots bought from hawkers in a gimwali.

One final point. In comparing primitive money with our own, it is important that the writer describe the frequency of different kinds of monetary transactions. Only so can one gauge what role, if any, the money item(s) play in the production system. Armstrong concerns himself with social and ritual events—marriage, death, redistributive feasts, fines—and says almost nothing about production, subsistence goods, natural resource and labor transactions,
and all the other ordinary concerns of money and pricing in our own economy. That he nevertheless asserts that Rossel money is much like our own, should make one wary. Einzig is properly suspicious: “It is a pity that there is not enough evidence to show to what extent, if at all, ndap and nko are used as a medium of exchange in everyday transactions, apart from the purchase [sic] of pigs” (Einzig 1948:75).

If all the ndap shell transactions which Armstrong describes were abolished, subsistence livelihood of Rossel Islanders would remain unimpaired. It is a pity he did not hit upon that distinction which is useful to analyze economies not integrated by market exchange. DuBois (1936:50) writes concerning this: “... I should like to make a distinction between subsistence and prestige economy. By subsistence economy is meant the exploitation of the . . . natural resources available to any industrious individual. By prestige economy on the other hand, is meant a series of social prerogatives and status values. They include a large range of phenomena from wives to formulae for supernatural compulsion.”

The upper values of ndap shells (and probably the middle values as well—Armstrong is silent here) enter prestige spheres in non-commercial uses. From the Westerner’s viewpoint these transactions are outside the production system and subsistence livelihood. Despite Armstrong’s assertion to the contrary, there is no evidence that one could opt out of the social and ritual games (through which upper ndap shells are paid and received) by converting upper shells into land, labor, or products, except perhaps as occasional events in emergency situations (Bohannan and Dalton 1962).

Rossel Island Money: A Case of Red Herrings

“The study of economics in simple communities should properly speaking be a job for economists. But so far few economists have tackled it, and most of the investigation has perforce been done by anthropologists” (Royal Anthropological Institute 1949:158).

All social scientists are either Sherlock or Mycroft Holmes. Anthropologists are Sherlock: they go to the scene, observe minutely, gather their threads of evidence from what they observe, and—like Sherlock—sometimes reach Paddington before reaching conclusions. Economic theorists are Mycroft: they do not go to the scene to observe minutely. They have no equivalent to field work because economists are not concerned with social organization or human behavior, but rather with the behavior of prices, income determinants, capital-output ratios, and other impersonal matters relating to the performance of nationally-integrated, industrialized, market economies (for which fieldwork is unnecessary). Institutional matters, personal roles, and the social implications of economic organization have long since been consigned to the limbo of sociology. Neither the problems of interest nor the methods of analysis are the same in economics and economic anthropology.

Armstrong is an economist who played at anthropology. His mistake was to bring Mycroft’s tools to Sherlock’s subject (and without realizing he was doing
so). The result—to mix my metaphors—was to create a sort of Piltdown Economic Man, Melanesians with monetary denominations which fit the formula for compound interest. Armstrong's pioneer work is not a hoax, but a red herring; and the lesson to be learned is not analytical—what primitive money is all about—but methodological: how not to do anthropology.

CONCLUSIONS

The distinctions spelled out in this paper may be used to answer questions of interest to economic anthropology, comparative economy, and economic development.

(1) Anthropologists do not hesitate to contrive special terms for special actions and institutions when to use terms from their own society would be misleading. They do not talk about the family, but about nuclear, extended, and matrilineal families. The same should be done with economic matters.

Those aspects of primitive economy which are unrelated to market exchange can only be understood by employing socio-economic terms: ceremonial prestige and subsistence goods; reciprocity and redistribution; spheres and conversions; limited purpose money. Such terms contain a social dimension and so allow us to relate economic matters to social organization, and to express the folk-view toward the items, services, persons, and situations involved. The economist dealing with monetary transactions in Western economy need not concern himself with personal roles and social situations because of the peculiarly impersonal nature of market exchange. The anthropologist dealing with marketless transactions cannot ignore personal roles and social situations and still make sense of what transpires.

Kula armbands, potlatch coppers, cows, pig tusks, Yap stones, etc., are variously described as money of renown, treasure items, wealth, valuables, and heirlooms. Malinowski says kula valuables are regarded like crown jewels or sports trophies in Western societies. Writers on East Africa say that cows are regarded like revered pets. Such treasures can take on special roles as non-commercial money: their acquisition and disposition are carefully structured and regarded as extremely important events; they change hands in specified ways, in transactions which have strong moral implications. Often they are used to create social relationships (marriage; entrance into secret societies), prevent a break in social relationships (bloodwealth, mortuary payments), or to keep or elevate one's social position (potlatch). Their "money-ness" consists in their being required means of (reciprocal or redistributive) payment.

(2) Subsidiary characteristics of Western money-stuff, such as portability and divisibility, are actually requirements for media of (commercial) exchange. In peasant and national economies integrated by market exchange, purchases of goods and services are a daily occurrence, and so money must be portable; market purchases are carried out at widely varying price, so the medium of (commercial) exchange must be finely divisible.

Yap stones, cows, kula armbands, and Rossel Island shells are not divisible, and some are not conveniently portable. But neither are they media of (com-
mmercial) exchange; they are not used for daily purchases of varying amount. Their use as non-commercial money makes their lack of divisibility and portability unimportant. Here we see one way primitive money-stuff is related to primitive money usage. As means of (reciprocal or redistributive) payment used infrequently to discharge social obligations, it does not matter that the money-stuff lacks those characteristics required of a medium of (commercial) exchange.

(3) Economics textbooks (e.g., Samuelson 1961:54; Reynolds 1963:475) err in citing primitive monies indiscriminately as equivalents of Western media of (commercial) exchange, for the same reason that Armstrong errs in treating Rossel Island monies as a single type and as a crude equivalent of our own. By giving the impression that all primitive monies perform the same primary function as dollars, they quite wrongly imply that all primitive economies may be regarded as crude market systems.

Economists are correct in saying that some unusual money-stuffs have functioned as media of (commercial) exchange. They have in mind situations such as Colonial America (Quiggin 1949:316ff.) where "primitive money-stuffs" (commodity money such as tobacco and cotton) functioned just as dollars do today, or Prisoner of War camps where cigarettes (primitive money-stuff) became used as media of (market) exchange.

But to conclude that because some primitive money-stuffs do perform the primary function of dollars, all primitive monies may be regarded as crude media of (commercial) exchange, is an important error. As we have seen in the case of Rossel Island, this market preconception impedes our understanding of marketless economies and those with peripheral markets only. It implies that market exchange is the only transactional mode ever to exist, and so—as economists do in our own economy—one may ignore the social situations in which monetary transactions occur and the folk-view toward the persons, events, and items involved. It is precisely this sort of ethnocentrism that regards all "exchanges" as commercial transactions, and equates all money payments with market purchases, with the result that brides and murder are said to have a price, just as pots and yams in the market place have a price.

(4) A situation of special interest is one where cowrie (in times past), or sterling or francs (in recent times), acquired initially in external market exchange, became used internally for commercial and non-commercial transactions. Such cases of monetary incursion deserve examination for reasons which are of interest to students of community economic development as well as economic anthropology.

Cowrie inflation, wampum inflation, and bridewealth inflation are related cases. Cowrie and wampum became used as media of (commercial) exchange through external trade with Europeans in situations where the quantity of money-stuff was uncontrolled and increased rapidly in supply. Similarly, where bridewealth comes to be paid in sterling or francs, the sum increases when earnings of Western money through market sale of labor or produce increase faster than the number of marriageable females (Bohannan 1959; Mayer
1951:22). What might be called “potlatch copper inflation” is a similar case: when the Kwakiutl became increasingly enmeshed in Canadian market economy, they used their market earnings to increase the stakes in the potlatch. The limited number of coppers (like the limited number of brides, elsewhere) fetched a larger bundle of market-purchased goods. All such cases may be described as “upward conversions”: newly expanded market earnings are used to acquire treasure items and brides which indigenously were not transacted through market exchange.11

Western money does much more than merely displace primitive monies where the latter were not media of (commercial) exchange indigenously. It allows non-commercial payments and obligations of traditional sorts (such as bridewealth) to be discharged with general purpose money earned in market transactions—instead of with traditional items of special-purpose money. In economies which formerly were marketless or had peripheral markets only, a structural link—Western cash—now exists between spheres of exchange which formerly were separate. Western money therefore has inevitable repercussions on traditional social organization and cultural practices (Schapera 1928; Bohannan 1959; Gulliver 1962; Dalton 1964). In brief, market earnings can now be used for reciprocal and redistributive payments (just as in Western economy goods purchased on the market enter gift-giving, and money earnings are used to pay taxes and tithes).

(5) One source of ambiguity in the literature is the quest for a single, all-purpose definition of money that would include our own kind (and presumably Soviet money), as well as the welter of types in use in primitive and peasant economies widely differing in organization. Einzig writes: “It must be the ultimate goal of the study of primitive money to try to find the common denominator—in so far as it exists—in terms of which both the well-established rules of modern money and the apparently conflicting conclusions on primitive money can be explained” (1948:19).

To concentrate attention on what all monies have in common is to discard those clues—how monies differ—which are surface expressions of different social and economic organization. Money is not an isolated case. Much the same can be said for external trade and market places, which (like money) also are made use of in economies differing markedly in organization (say, the U. S., the Soviet, and the Tiv economies). Money traits differ where socio-economic organization differs. To concentrate attention on money traits independently of underlying organization leads writers to use the traits of Western money as a model of the real thing (while ignoring the structure of Western economy which accounts for the money traits). Then any primitive money which does not have all the traits of the Western model money is simply ruled out by definition—it is not money. This does not get us very far towards understanding primitive and peasant economies.

Two distinctions which allow us to contrast primitive and Western money are the distinctions between commercial and non-commercial uses of money, and between marketless economies, those with peripheral markets only, and
market-integrated economies. In sum, money has no definable essence apart from the uses money objects serve, and these depend upon the transactional modes that characterize each economy: as tangible item as well as abstract measure, “money is what money does” (Reynolds 1963:474).

NOTES

1 M. L. Burstein, Robert Clower, Ronald Cohen, George Delehanty, Mitchell Harwitz, Sidney Mintz, and A. A. Walters made critical comments on an earlier draft. I am grateful to these anthropologists and economists, and to Heyward Ehrlich who suggested changes in style and presentation. I must acknowledge separately the kindness of Paul Bohannan and Karl Polanyi, both of whom read several drafts and insisted on improvement. Much of the paper is an elaboration of ideas contained in Polanyi's lectures and writings.

2 For purposes of this paper we simply characterize the dominant transactional mode of Western economy as “market exchange.” Price and distribution theory distinguish among many kinds of market exchange, pure competition, monopolistic competition, pure and differentiated oligopoly, etc. These distinctions do not concern us. Similarly, for our purposes we regard U. S. dollars as a single kind of money. For monetary problems in our own economy it is necessary to distinguish among currency, check deposits, and savings deposits, and sometimes between legal tender and money which is not legal tender; but for the matters of contrast that concern us, it is not necessary to make these distinctions. For a discussion of the fine points of money variations within Western economy, see Burstein (1963: Chapter 1).

3 We can generalize the point by showing how all the commercial uses of money are brought into play as the result of a single purchase: I buy a house for $20,000 paying $5,000 down and borrowing $15,000 from a bank to be repaid in future installments:

(1) I acquire rights to a house; the former owner acquires $20,000. The money is used as a medium of (commercial) exchange.

(2) Dollars here are used also as a measure or standard of (commercial) value, i.e., as a measuring device to compare the house with any other commodity priced in dollars.

(3) The bank uses dollars as a unit of (commercial) account in recording my indebtedness to it.

(4) My debt to the bank also means that dollars are used as a standard for deferred (commercial) payments, i.e., as a device to measure commercial debt.

(5) If I save money currently in anticipation of repaying debt, dollars are used as a store of (commercial) value or wealth.

(6) When I begin to repay the bank, dollars are then used as a means of (commercial) payment of indebtedness incurred by the past market purchase.

4 Common stocks may be used as a medium of (commercial) exchange or payment, as when a company is purchased for stock, but it is nevertheless dollars that are used as the (commercial) standard of value.

5 The qualifications necessary are not due to the structure of market economy, but to cultural practices which differ among market societies: in U. S. society (but not, say, in French) Negroes cannot buy housing at will (but they can buy automobiles); people under 18 cannot legally buy liquor; sale of some firearms is controlled by license. But for most people and for most goods and services, there are no status requisites imposed.

6 Marketless economies and those with peripheral markets only, refer to descriptions in the literature of situations before serious European incursion. The term “primitive economy” is downright misleading when it is used to include all three types. I prefer to use it to mean only types I and II (Dalton 1964). In type III, where market exchange dominates, economic structure differs markedly, and so too do the uses of money. Firth (1946) is right to call the market-dominated Malayan economies “peasant” rather than “primitive” to indicate that a distinction should be made. A useful distinction between peasant and primitive economies is the following: by a peasant economy we mean one in which, (i) most people depend upon market sale of resources or products for livelihood; (ii) modern machine technology is largely absent; (iii) traditional social organiza-
tion and cultural practices are retained in significant degree. A primitive economy differs primarily on the first point: most people to not depend on market sale of resources or products for livelihood. One might also say that the organizational component of community economic development consists in transforming economies of types I and II into type III.

Failure to distinguish among the three types is responsible for needless dispute in the literature, as when writers generalize from what is true in market-integrated economy, to all economies. Jones (1960) and Miracle (1962) argue the case for “economic man” in Africa: that Africans respond to material incentives and choose among economic alternatives just as we do. But note that all their examples come from type III economies, where Africans—like us—have come to depend for livelihood on market sale (of labor or cash crops). What is true for a Rhodesian copper miner is one thing; what is true for a Nuer or a Lele, is another.

7 Following Armstrong, our treatment will concern ndap shells only. He said too little about strings of nko shells to allow anything more than guesses about how they functioned.

8 Armstrong says that No. 4 ndap is the commonest on the island, there being at least 200 of them (1928:63). Note also that each ndap shell in classes 12–22, some 150 shells in all, had individual names, as did some at least, in classes 8–11 (1928:62).

9 Armstrong’s short stay on Rossel, his inability to speak the language, his dependence upon informants rather than direct observation, together with his preconception that Rossel money must be essentially like our own media of (commercial) exchange, prevented him from relating those aspects of Rossel money which differed from our own to their different socio-economic structure. Armstrong does not give enough information to make complete sense of the system.

The unresolved problems are many. To understand the system fully we should have to know about the following: what transactions does each kind of ndap shell enter? What is the nko system all about: Why do certain transactions require a sorting of both ndap and nko? Armstrong tells us that there are really more than 22 classes of ndap shells because some of them are subdivided and given separate names, making about 40 distinctions in all; what are the shells in these subdivided classes used for? Who may borrow from whom, and with what penalties for failure to repay? How do rank and lineage affect borrowing and repayment? Are the high echelon ndap shells related to kinship or political organization, in some such fashion as potlatch coppers are? Who are the “brokers” who act as intermediaries between borrowers and lenders, and for what kinds of transactions and between whom do they intermediate? Specific ndap values are identified with specific parts of pigs and men (Armstrong 1928:79), a matter the people regard as important, but which remains unexplained. So too with the number ten, which appears repeatedly: several transactions require payment of a linked series of ten shells, e.g., one each of the ten ndap classes 20–11 is paid as compensation for ritual murder.

10 In Africa, at least, the impact of cowrie on indigenous economies and indigenous money, varied widely. In some instances, as with sterling and francs, cowrie came to be general purpose money which linked spheres of goods and services formerly kept separate, and which serviced several transactional modes within one society (see Vansina 1962:198); such was the case where cowrie came to be used in market-place exchanges as well as bridewealth. In other cases cowrie were incorporated as just another special purpose money with limited usage within the indigenous system (see Quiggin 1949: Chapter IV).

11 The very early date at which Canadian market exchange permeated Kwakiutl life is important to understand how and why potlatches changed over time: before serious Canadian market incursion, potlatches were given infrequently, were the prerogative of nobles, and were necessary to affirm one’s rank (Codere 1951). Having the traditional potlatch goods was not a sufficient condition for giving a potlatch because one had to have the rank as well. (As in many primitive societies, only those of high rank could accumulate the necessary goods.)

The nature of the potlatch changed radically with (i) the population decimation around 1840—the population fell from an estimated 23,000 in 1840 to fewer than 3,000 in 1880, and under 2,000 in 1890 (Codere 1951:52). Note that the 600 rank positions remained fixed. (ii) The second important change was the increasing use in the potlatch of items purchased on the Canadian market. Now the opportunity for upward conversions—the use of Canadian goods bought with cash to acquire internal rank and prestige positions—became unlimited. With a shrunken popula-
tion, practically everyone had one of the 600 rank positions, which was not the case earlier, and everyone had access to Canadian goods (by simply earning cash), which certainly was not the case earlier. Potlatches then came to be given frequently, by anyone (even women and children), and for all kinds of reasons; and, no doubt, even a commercial element entered.

The trouble with the literature is that even the early anthropologists (Boas first wrote in 1887) were describing Western market incursion well underway, without fully appreciating the radical difference it made to the potlatch when everyone had rank positions and access to purchased goods. Any generalization made about the nature of the potlatch should bear a date. See Drucker (1939:56, footnote 3, 63 footnote 22).

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