

THE SILENT UNIVERSITY READER

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THE CURIOUS CASE OF SILENCE

BY AHMET ÖGÜT

According to the dictionary *silence* means: *complete absence of sound; avoiding discussing something; the state of standing still and not speaking as a sign of respect for someone and to prohibit or prevent from speaking.* If we also look at the meaning of *silent*, it means *not making or accompanied by any sound; not expressed aloud; without an accompanying soundtrack; saying or recording nothing on a particular subject and not prone to speak much.*

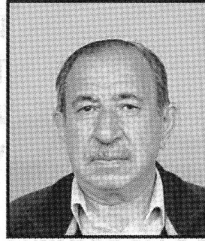
These known meanings of *silence* and *silent* mostly refer to a passive state of understanding. We decided to have a look at these notions from a different position.

Who are we? We are the Silent University.

What is the Silent University?

It is a knowledge exchange platform initiated by myself together with Synthia Griffin and Nora Razian from the Learning and Community Partnerships teams at Tate, working with asylum seekers and refugees who, although having a professional background, are unable to practice their profession due to a variety of reasons including their status. They have become lecturers, academic consultants and research fellows of the Silent University.

For the Silent University, *silent* and *silence* mean a rather active mode of silence.



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The Silent University is an autonomous knowledge platform
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Communities Forum and Migrants Resource Centre





It is a poetic protest.
 It is a functional tool.
 It is about exchanging positions through empathy.
 It is a consciously delayed exchange.
 It is a currency.

The notion of silence has always been a curious case in literature, theory, cinema, music and history, besides its meaning in law. It may sound negative when Wittgenstein notes in his famous argument in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.' However, it becomes definitely clear to us that we shouldn't underestimate the power of silence when we listen to Mladen Dolar saying in his book *A Voice and Nothing More*: 'We must not interrupt the silence unless we have something to say which is better than silence.'

He argues that the voice is the instrument, the vehicle, the medium, and the meaning is the goal.

The Silent University will use silence as a powerful tool and perform it as a poetic protest. As Susan Sontag remarks in her essay *The Aesthetics of Silence*: 'So one must acknowledge a surrounding environment of sound or language in order to recognise silence.'

How will it operate? The first public events of the Silent University are taking place at Tate Modern at the end of November 2012 and a roundtable discussion on alternative education will be held at the beginning of December 2012. In addition, we have prepared this publication, a resource room, a series of silent courses developed by the lecturers of the Silent University with discussions led by the academic consultants of the Silent University that connect with the themes of migration, alternative currencies and the notion of *silence*. Course content can be publicly accessed via the Silent University website. After registering and completing a Time and Skills Loan Form, users will be given a password providing access to Silent University courses.

The Silent University will survive as a University in Time and will mostly be accessible online, appearing temporarily where hosted by collaborating institutions. The Silent University has no limitations; it operates beyond any language, nation, or territory. •

BASIC RIGHTS ON OUR DOORSTEP: THE EXPERIENCE OF REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS IN THE UK

BY SHAMI CHAKRABARTI

The Refugee Convention, like our bedrock international protections for fundamental rights and freedoms, was born in the aftermath of the Second World War. The horrors of persecution, torture and genocide were fresh in the minds of the global community and our celebrated war-time leader, Winston Churchill, joined together with his counterparts overseas to send a message about inherent human dignity. At a time when millions of people had been displaced by war, the plight of refugees and the asylum seekers could no longer be ignored. But more than this, practical reality was the knowledge that we did too little, too late in the face of the worst humanitarian atrocity the world has ever seen. The Refugee Convention was a recognition that our obligations to our fellow human beings cannot end at our national borders.

Our recent global history contains many more horrors – Srebrenica, Rwanda, Burma. Dreadful inhumanity is visited on men, women and children everyday because of who they are, where they come from or what they believe. Our political leaders talk the language of human rights when it comes to Syria, Libya and Iraq – they are quick enough to condemn atrocities and express the outrage of a nation. We, in our turn, watch the graphic images of human suffering on our television screens in horror. But something seems to shift when the persecuted man, woman or child comes from there to here. The plight of a member of a terrorised minority, the persecuted political activist, detained and tortured, rightly attracts our indignation and our sympathy. But when she escapes, leaving everything she knows and making the perilous journey across international borders to ask for our help, she becomes bogus, a scrounger, a pariah. Happy to talk up human rights abroad, our politicians are all too quick to

play fast and loose with our proud tradition as a country that offers succour to those in need of protection. They forget that a humane asylum system involves more than just determining applications for refugee status, but requires treating an individual with dignity and respect while you do so.

The asylum seeker in modern Britain is all too often treated with suspicion. She is detained for administrative convenience, prohibited from working and left to survive on a pittance. She is denied judicial due process, treated with scepticism, and her experiences of trauma, torture, bereavement received with casual contempt. And our Human Rights Act, the one key piece of law in this country which allows the vulnerable to hold the powerful to account, faces political threats to its very existence. When we disown our human rights commitments – when we abandon the values carved out at a time of deep reflection – it is the vulnerable and the voiceless who always suffer the most. Of these disenfranchised few it is the asylum seeker, denied the protection of her state and forced to throw herself upon the mercy of a foreign power, who is perhaps the most at risk. She has no state to uphold her interests – her protector has all too often become her persecutor. She needs our help, not because she will give us something in return, not because she is brave or worthy, but purely and simply because she is human and accordingly entitled to dignity and respect.

The drafters of our post-war human rights protections made clear that the freedoms they sought to enshrine attached to each and every member of the human family. The world had seen first hand the atrocities which follow when human rights are gradually stripped away. The Human Rights Act ensures there is no ‘other’ – we are all accorded equal value and equal worth, regardless of our race, religion, sexuality or beliefs. In difficult economic times it is all too easy to turn against those who have no voice and nobody to fight their corner. It is dangerously easy to tie our ideas about human worth to ‘people like me’, to talk about those who deserve protection and those who don’t, to label human rights a farce because they apply to everyone with equal force. But how short our memories are if we countenance the replacement of our Human Rights Act with more nationalistic ‘Bill of Rights’ that would scrap universal protection in favour of citizens’ rights. In this shrinking, interconnected world, where we travel by desire or necessity and trade freely in information and ideas as well as commodities, we have to decide whether we want to be foreigners somewhere or human beings everywhere. •

– *Shami Chakrabarti has been Director of Liberty (The National Council for Civil Liberties) since September 2003.*

PERFORMING SILENCE

BY FRANCESCO PONZO

As the Silent University aims to challenge the idea of silence as a passive state and explore its powerful potential, here I will focus on some important performances taking silence as a protagonist. Silence has always been a source of inspiration for creative minds that have explored its wealth of meaning, its mystery and its transcendent nature through various art forms. Poets, writers, dancers and composers have also tried to 'give voice' to silence, nuancing our understanding of it.

Among all forms of expressing silence, performance is the most engaging for its ability to involve diverse media and immediately confront the public. Of these, *The Artist is Present* by Marina Abramovic is an important and recent performance dealing with silence. This took place over three months at MoMA in New York from March 2012 and involved only one simple table and two chairs. Marina sat there seven hours a day for the duration of the exhibition, and members of the public could share in her presence by sitting in the empty chair opposite her and engaging in silent eye contact for as long as they wanted.

Marina has said that after a while participants lose perception of surrounding sounds and focus intently on her, as she becomes nothing more than a mirror, vanishing entirely in their perception. Somewhere else she added: 'All you have is your state of being. That's what performance should be: pure energy flow.' In our daily lives we never look intently, for a long time, into someone else's face, the mysterious primal seat of personality and identity¹. In performance people cannot hide behind the shield of speech and consequently feel vulnerable, in silence they look at their own bare humanity reflected in the eyes of the 'other'.

The art critic Arthur Danto points out that *The Artist is Present* represents a new experience in art history: 'People were in front most of the masterpieces for thirty seconds. Mona Lisa? Thirty seconds. But people come here and sit all day.'² The reason for this prolonged participation could be explained in Susan Sontag's writing on silence and art: 'Traditional art invites a look. Art that's silent engenders a stare. In silent art, there is (at least in principle) no release from attention, because there has never, in principle, been any solicitation of it. A stare is perhaps as far from history, as close to eternity, as contemporary art can get. Traditional art invites a look. Art that's silent engenders a stare...'³

Up to this point, the most well-known example of an artist who tried to perform silence was the composer John Cage in 1952 with *4'33"*. For John Cage silence can never be a total lack of sound, as man is always subject to external sonority. Silence for him is a changing of the mind, an acceptance of the sounds that exist rather than a desire to choose and impose a particular music. *4'33"* is a short, silent score that attempts to show the absence of silence and the necessity of giving the opportunity to hear the sound of daily living. Cage said: 'For me the essential meaning of silence is the waiver of any intentions. Therefore a genuine openness to the world.' When John Cage started to read the first things that appeared in English about Zen, he focused his attention precisely on these: the 'exit of the choice' and the condition of spontaneity. 'Exit of the choice' means to stop producing something of your own, letting Nature be. This extends to the reality of sound, abandoning compositional technique, the decision to put a certain note rather than another and so on. Through researching silence we get the opposite: every sound has an occasion to manifest. This is perfectly in line with the Zen approach, which continuously repeats this adage: 'Let it be.' 'Let it be' means achieving a state of spontaneity. Only in this way can sounds be released in their authentic way.

Many artists and intellectuals from the beginning of the 20th century have experienced language not only as something shared but as something corrupted, weighed down by historical accumulation. Poets like TS Eliot, Eugenio Montale, Paul Celan and Georg Trakl upset the syntax of verses by giving space to pause and to silence, in order to release the most basic and pure meanings of words. In this context, naming and singing silence acquire a revolutionary connotation against a false, weightless, and deteriorated language. To talk about silence could be the ultimate act of language and alludes to a different 'Word', which no longer stiffens the subject and object, the self and world, but enables a new way of living language.

I have quickly illustrated three different approaches to the expression of silence engendering three different meanings: in





A Silent University meeting at Tate Modern. Photo © Ahmet Ögut

The Artist is Present the state of silence creates the condition to look inside yourself, in 4'33" to listen and penetrate surrounding natural sounds, and in poetry to liberate the deep meanings of words.

It is notable how all these three meanings of silence are explored by religious men and ascetics around the world, with the most significant example being the vow of silence. In the Rule of St Benedict the first word is 'Listen' and a proper listening comes from a silent hearing. That's one of the great ethical elements of silence: checking our words and listening to another point of view. Artists and ascetics also, if in completely different ways, turn to silence when moved by the insensibility of man to his inner voice and to the voice of the natural world. Never is man master of himself as when he is silent: when he speaks, outpouring and dissolving into speech, he belongs less to himself than to others.⁴

I have touched on the artist's relationship with silence, but what of the public? In front of silence, the audience find themselves displaced, as the artist is not performing her traditional role; in fact the artist is creating a gap between herself and the public, a space of action for the audience. Reactions range from intrigue, to mostly discomfort. Silence is perceived as an interruption of the production activity, and as man is permanently enveloped in the logic of activism, he feels this silence as boring, as empty and unproductive. *The Artist is Present* is an exception to this norm, as an extraordinary number of people attended and participated emotionally.

Needless to say, the first audience to experience 4'33" was confused and unhappy. They were used to being shocked by Cage in an aggressive fashion; many people took the new work as an insult to their expectations. 'Good people of Woodstock,' an artist in the audience stood and exclaimed, 'Let's drive these people out of town.'

John Cage reacted to this by saying: 'They missed the point. There's no such thing as silence. What they thought was silence, because they didn't know how to listen, was full of accidental sounds. You could hear the wind stirring outside during the first movement. During the second, raindrops began pattering the roof, and during the third the people themselves made all kinds of interesting sounds as they talked or walked out.'⁵

A common thread unites all the artistic works that I have mentioned and this is their attitude to openness. Silence keeps things 'open'.⁶ As John Cage says, Silence is the waiver of any intentions, a genuine openness. And as this condition enables the reception of not only what comes from nature but also of human relationships, 'Without this kind of openness to one another there is no genuine human

relationship. Belonging together always also means being able to listen to one another.⁷

Silent listening and proper hearing come first, as the origin of anything that follows. The next step (saying, doing) may or may not arrive, but the initial hearing as sheltering has to be the source, the root, of whatever comes next.⁸ The Silent University aims to challenge the idea of silence as a passive state placing its participants in a condition of openness towards the others and the World.

– Francesco Ponzi is an academic consultant to the Silent University.



Marina Abramovic *The Artist is Present* Photo: Archive of the Galleria Lia Ruma from © 2012 Indie eye Stranellusioni

Footnotes

Marina Abramovic *The Artist is Present* – Review, Peter Bredshaw, guardian.co.uk Thursday 5 July 2012

Marina Abramovic *The Artist is Present* DVD release and screening at Tate Tanks <http://www.hungertv.com> 10/09/2012

Susan Sontag *The Aesthetics of Silence* 1967

Abate Dinouart *L'Arte Di Tacere* 1771

Happy 100th Birthday to John Cage, who Made a Lot of People Angry <http://blogs.smithsonianmag.com> 10/09/2012

Susan Sontag *The Aesthetics of Silence* 1967

Hans-Georg Gadamer *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev edn. Trans J Weinsheimer and DG Marshall. New York: Crossroad 2004

Gordana P Crnkovic *Milcho Manchevsky's Before the Rain and the Ethics of Listening*, *Slavic Review*, Vol 70, No 1 (Spring 2011) pp116–136. Published by Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies

IT'S AN EVIL WORLD AND WE NEED STRICT RULES!

BY UVINDU KURUKULASURIYA

Have you ever been subjected to 'stop and search' by the British police? Here is a conversation which took place in a 'police stop and search' exercise.

How are you sir?

I'm fine, thanks and how are you?

We are good, where are you from Sir?

I'm from Wood Green.

What are you doing here, sir?

I'm just visiting.

Any identification Sir?

(Checking the identification)

Don't lie Sir, you are from Sri Lanka.

I'm not lying. Yes, I was born in Sri Lanka, but I live in Wood Green.

I'm visiting Hammersmith.

How did you come to this country? By plane? Lorry? Ship?

Train? By boat or swimming?

This is the conversation two police officers had with me in front of Hammersmith Broadway underground. I was waiting for a friend in front of the Broadway underground. Two white police officers approached me and checked my identity with the above conversation. After the conversation or the so-called search was completed, they gave me a receipt with all my biological details. Interestingly, there is reason for checking. It says, 'Gentleman was standing outside Broadway underground; welfare-check conducted.' Is it a reason for a police check? Is standing in front of a railway station a crime?

Section 60 of the 1994 Public Order Act was originally brought in to tackle people going to illegal raves. It gave police the power, if they feared violence or disorder, to stop and search suspects at a specific time and place. Stops carried out under Section 44 of the Terrorism Act 2000 have already been dropped after the European court of human rights struck them down.

On and off, I have been living in London for nearly six years, though that was the only time I was subjected to a police stop and search operation. I'm still angry over this incident. Look at the questions they asked. In my opinion, this is clearly racism. The police treated me in a humiliating and degrading way when I was searched. The police verbally insulted me. I wonder what it'd be like if it happened every day? This story is an example of the xenophobic attitude of elements of the British police towards immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers. It is racial profiling. It's as fundamental as that. It is based on sight, suspicion and fear. It's a systematic pattern. I have seen this in Sri Lanka against ethnic minorities.

A couple of months after I was harassed by the police, in March 2010, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) released its report on the police stop and search operation with shocking data. It starts with: 'If you are a black person, you are at least six times as likely to be stopped and searched by the police in England and Wales as a white person. If you are Asian, you are around twice as likely to be stopped and searched as a white person.'

The report found a rise in the percentage of ethnic minorities among those stopped under Section 60 between 2008 and 2011, from 51% to 64%. The EHRC said that through Section 60 alone, ethnic minorities underwent more than 100,000 excessive searches over the 2008–11 period. Simon Woolley, a Commissioner at the EHRC, said: 'Our research shows black youths are still being disproportionately targeted, and without a clear explanation as to why, many in the community will see this as racial profiling.' In June 2010, in another report, the justice ministry's publication *Race and the Criminal Justice* says: 'The number of black and Asian

people stopped and searched by the police has increased by more than 70% over the past five years’.

Various explanations have been put forward as to why the police use the stop and search powers so disproportionately against certain groups. Even taken together, however, they provide no justification for the extent and persistence of the problem, the report said. The Commission questioned one common explanation – that is, black people are generally more often involved in crime – is not supported by robust evidence. In any case, stops and searches should be carried out on the basis of ‘reasonable suspicion’. It is unlawful for the police to base their suspicions on generalised beliefs about particular groups.

In its recommendation the EHRC says: ‘For those forces who have demonstrated the most significant and persistent disproportionalities and excesses, we intend to take more immediate action. Following publication, we will be contacting several forces who have demonstrated the most significant and persistent disproportionalities and excesses, with a view to taking enforcement action under the Race Equality Duty, if necessary.’

The EHRC report concludes: ‘The evidence points to racial discrimination being a significant reason why black and Asian people are more likely to be stopped and searched than white people. It implies that stop and search powers are being used in a discriminatory and unlawful way.’ It finds little merit in arguments advanced to justify excessive use of stop and search operations against ethnic minority Britons and questions how frequently some forces use the power.

Despite years of debate and several initiatives aimed at tackling the problem, these ratios have stayed stubbornly high. Why is that?

The role of the media is crucial to the further strengthening of an anti-racist society in UK, where cultural diversity is valued and respected. As a journalist I would like to examine briefly the role of the media and its contributions towards establishing the stereotype – immigrants/refugees/asylum seekers/blacks/Asians/non-whites are criminals.

The wars around the world have created a wave of refugees. Some have crossed the borders and live in terrible conditions in other countries, others are internally displaced persons who simply no longer have homes and no independent lives of their own. In many places, long-time residents who are themselves struggling to adjust to life under often harsh conditions have not welcomed their presence. Politicians often seek to bolster their popularity by

promoting resentment against them among the local population (Media Diversity Institute 2002). Politicians' remarks on asylum seekers and immigrants are both selective and power-serving. While the actual demographic and economic effects of immigration on the UK are rarely discussed, the causes of immigration – global inequality, conflict and human rights abuses – are ignored. Irrespective of party, leading politicians repeatedly highlight issues of exclusion – fears of 'invasion', alleged 'threats' and actual prejudices – ensuring a very negative image of immigrants. Concerns over crime, disease, terrorism, detention and surveillance are consistently pushed well to the fore. This lack of balance can be attributed to a number of factors, including the existence of a covert racist ideology and the political expediency of 'the race card' – factors that repeatedly compromise the welfare of refugees and immigrants. Honest consideration of asylum and immigration issues should involve a far more diverse range of topics, reflecting the complexity of contemporary national and global relations. These include issues of nationalism, sovereignty, racism, demography, human rights, arms sales, war, refugee health, economic policy and moral responsibility. But does this happen?

We all know the case of the Rochdale sex crime gang. The gang was a group of men who preyed on underage teenage girls in Rochdale, Greater Manchester, England. They were convicted of sex trafficking on 8 May 2012; other offences included rape, trafficking girls for sex and conspiracy to engage in sexual activity with a child. Forty-seven girls were identified as victims of child sexual exploitation during the police investigation. The men were all British Pakistanis (except for one from Afghanistan, an asylum seeker) and the girls were white; this has led to national discussion of whether the crimes were racially motivated, or, conversely, whether the early failure to investigate them was linked to the authorities' fear of being accused of racism (Wikipedia). Almost all mainstream media covered the story and debated on white victims – non-white criminals issue. Now even the Rochdale sex crime gang has a Wikipedia page!

Two months later in Derby, England on 13 July 2012, eight men were convicted of plying 'vulnerable' teenage girls with alcohol, drugs and gifts before paying them for sex. Fifteen girls aged 13 to 15, many of them in care, were preyed on by the men. And though they were not working as a gang, their methods were similar to those of the Rochdale sex crime gang – often targeting children in care and luring them with, among other things, cuddly toys. In this case, of the eight predators, seven were white, not Asian. And the story made barely a ripple in the national media. Of the daily papers, only *The Guardian* and *The Times* reported it. There was no commentary anywhere on how these crimes throw a light on British culture, or

how middle-aged white men have to confront the deep flaws in their religious and ethnic identity. (Guardian July 23, 2012) Yet that's exactly what was played out following the conviction in May of the 'Asian sex gang' in Rochdale, which made the front page of every national newspaper. Though analysis of the case focused on how big a factor was race, religion and culture, the unreported story is of how politicians and the media have created a new racial scapegoat. In fact, if anyone wants to study how racism begins, and creeps into the consciousness of an entire nation, they need look no further.

One story is reported and the other is not. Is it the media's job to take sides? Or to take on a tone of outrage and offence then encourage its readers, listeners and viewers to join in an orchestrated campaign of hate against non-white people? The media is one of the many agencies for policing organisational life, although with a much wider mandate and field than most other agencies. When such an agency works unprofessionally and establishes stereotypes such as 'Asian criminals', there's a moral message for the nation to take on board: 'It's an evil world and we need strict rules.'

When the law requires reasonable suspicion of involvement in crime, black and Asian people are more likely to be stopped and searched than white people. So, the police are checking the 'evils'! •

– Uvindu Kurukulasuriya is a Sri Lankan journalist living in exile. He is also a visiting fellow at the London School of Economics and Political Science and an academic consultant to the Silent University.

MIGRATION & NEOLIBERALISM

BY CARLOS CRUZ GARCIA

The phenomenon of migration is as old as humankind. Since the beginning of time there has been a natural proclivity in humans to move frequently from one place to another, within their own land or beyond geographical borders. There were, amongst others, two main motivations to explain such behaviour: better lands with good climate and abundant food, and the pursuit of the unknown.

The nomadic condition of the majority of primitive peoples could be a plausible base from which to build up the fact of on-going migration. Nomadism was a way of living, migration therefore, was a way of life; something natural, constitutive of a vital and full existence.

Of course there is a huge chasm between then and now, given the rise of the nation state, and with it borders – both state borders and increasingly state-supported ethnic and linguistic borders.

While migration has exponentially increased over the last 200 years, firstly due to the dissolution of empires and ensuing world wars, the last 40 years has seen an increase in migration driven not only by wars and famine, but increasingly by economic need, coupled with nation states' increasingly strategic approaches to controlling migration for economic benefit. This significant shift in numbers and trends, where human capital flows from struggling economies to more stable ones, can be paralleled with the rise in neoliberal economies around the world and the resulting globalisation of trade, of economies, and the outsourcing of labour.

The shifting economic terrain over the last half a century, and its immediate impact on the flow of human migration has unfortunately bred the circumstances where men and women are used as cheap, expendable labour; another form of merchandise in our globalised world.

There are superfluous theories put forward justifying the massive waves of migrants struggling to get to rich countries for purely personal economic betterment. This is a distractive dogma that denies the real causes of massive migration from poorer, debt-ridden countries to richer ones, and the indescribable injustice suffered as a result.

In opposition to this dogmatic interpretation of the present human disaster, I would posit that what is responsible for the increasing global diaspora is the proliferation of the neoliberal economic model, an unstable model that has contributed to the present social and economic global crisis. We now find the global economy in a chaotic state – chaotic for most of the population, while for the privileged minority, the 1% of bankers, and big business executives, this is but a bump on the way to another profit bubble.

Migration on the scale and magnitude that is happening now is also the consequence of controversial economic policies put in place by the wealthiest countries of the world, the G8, who use the World Bank, the IMF, the UN Security Council, NATO and other international global bodies, to enforce and apply neoliberal Free Trade Agreements (FTA).

It is in this economic context where the debate of migration needs to be examined.

During the later half of the 20th century, Neoliberalism, inspired by the School of Chicago (The Chicago Boys) with Milton Friedman as its main proponent, was adopted as the doctrine to bring economic development, progress and better living conditions to the people. It was, according to its supporters, the panacea to build up a real democracy and the base for a new social order.

The initial testing ground for this was Chile, and it would not have success without violence. The infamous dictator Augusto Pinochet was the chosen man to apply the free market policies through blood and fire, with a mix of privatisation, tax exemptions for foreign investments, and a reduction in public expenditure. The same man was responsible for thousands of assassinated, disappeared, tortured and exiled Chileans.

The neoliberal model has now been established worldwide with tangible consequences on the flow of labour, goods and capital. Rising inequality in wealth and a de facto inequality in access to

health, education and public services in increasingly privatised economies have also aggravated the issue of migration.

Now, here is the million pound question: Why don't the policies and legislations in industrialised countries, dealing with alarming numbers of immigrants, see solutions beyond the current superficial analysis of immigration, which leads to a criminalising attitude towards migrants?

To be effective, these legislations need to include three parties in the debate: the migrants, the destination country, and the country of origin – I will call them migrant-exporting countries. There is a permanent, on-going debate on migrant issues and possible solutions, but the politicians, academics, sociologists, specialists and government authorities are not considering the fundamental question: why are people forced to leave their homes in the first place? If we could understand the real essence and meaning of the neoliberal economic model we will find the answer. •

– Carlos Cruz Garcia is Union Learning Organizer at the United Migrants Education Project and an academic consultant to the Silent University.

THE EMPOWERING POTENTIAL OF COMPLEMENTARY CURRENCIES AND ALTERNATIVE PAYMENT SYSTEMS

BY MARCO SACHY

Someone has to borrow every dollar we have in circulation... If the banks create ample ... money we are prosperous; if not, we starve. When one gets complete grasp of the picture, the tragic absurdity of our hopeless position is... incredible... It is the most important subject intelligent persons can investigate and reflect upon.

– 1934, Robert H. Hemphill, Credit Manager of the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta as quoted in *100% Money* by I Fisher (1935), reprinted by Pickering and Chatto Ltd (1966).

It is well that the people of the nation do not understand our banking and monetary system, for if they did, I believe there would be a revolution before tomorrow morning. Henry Ford.

When it gets down to having to use violence, then you are playing the system's game. John Lennon

Global capital oppresses the individual in an all-encompassing manner, which leaves little space for meaningful and active resistance. In every country of the world, the level of access to national currencies is nevertheless the parameter that most remarkably influences the condition that one experiences in modern society, ie the freedom of economic interaction that one can enjoy. Borders to such freedom have been purposely designed by a handful of international financial institutions in conjunction with banking and non-banking corporations, which form a de facto

'network of global corporate control' operating at a transnational level with conniving states' apparatus for law enforcement. Indeed, a team of researchers at the Department of Systems Design at the University of Zurich published in late 2011 a paper in which they showed that each of the core 147 most powerful corporations worldwide owns shares of the remaining 146, composing a nucleus of financial power, with most important international and national financial institutions legally owning the system itself (Vitali, Glattfelder and Battiston, 2011). This, at the very outset, is the framework of the current institutionalized monetary system, whose features permeate the lives of each individual on the planet.

After an historical analysis, systemic structural problems are highlighted by the present global economic crisis, which is the latest and biggest of a recurring series dating back to the dawn of the modern monetary system in the 17th century (Kindleberger, 2005). Since 1970, the IMF identified 145 banking crises, 204 monetary collapses and 72 sovereign debt crises (Lietaer and Belgin, 2011). More at large, for the past 300, society has been dealing with a centralised and privately owned monetary system explicitly designed to issue with full discretion and manage with unaccountability a very particular type of money, ie bank money (Hutchinson et al, 2002). Although the latter is usually identified as the 'national currency' of a country, the private issuance of 95% to 97% of a nation's money supply by the commercial banking sector, ie the only currency for the payment of taxes, shows the migration of power towards private banking at the expenses of the public sector and society at large: 'Governments have the right to exert power over their citizens and over the businesses active in their territory. Therefore, whoever can control governments can project power over the world.' (Lietaer, Arnsperger et al, 2012)

Modern bank money presents in turn a series of theoretical shortcomings, which define the socio-economic contract that every citizen of a state is entitled to in order to 'freely' live in such a nation state: it is debt-based money, which has no intrinsic value in the current fiat money system. It is loaned out at interest to governments, businesses and private individuals, but the money necessary for the total repayment of the interest on the loan is not brought into existence as the loan is granted with the signature of the borrower. Although it is a considerably widespread means of exchange, modern bank money is not a reliable unit of account nor a safe and robust saving instrument (Douthwite, 1999). Accordingly, conventional money is a type of money legally enforced on the vast majority by a tiny minority.

These shortcomings are the blueprint for all conventional money, ie national currencies. Traditional monetary economic textbooks describe money in instrumental terms (unit of account, means of exchange, store of value), either intentionally or unwittingly or still unconsciously, and such a widespread functional definition contributes in hiding the nature of money from the majority of academics, users and providers. As John K. Galbraith stated: 'The study of money, above all fields in economics, is the one in which complexity is used to disguise truth, or evade truth, or not to reveal it.' (Galbraith, 1975) So although it enjoys a complete monopoly in the form of a banking cartel, modern bank money is only one type of money among many possibilities, a peculiar kind of software for social behaviour which establishes the specific kind of social contract sketched above. But what is money then? At the ontological level, money is simply an agreement within a community to use something as a means of payment (Lietaer, 2001).

Contrary to modern bank money, complementary currencies (CCs) and alternative payment systems (APS) may be designed not to carry the burdens affecting commercial bank money and to potentially eradicate them. In fact, CCs and APSs can be designed to improve and perfect the monetary system, and are the first step toward a multi-currency system where a diversity of monies will possess legal tender power. In turn the empowering effect of monetary knowledge should become widespread in society to relegate the state of recurrent crises as an outdated practice of past ancestors. In other words, an alternative naturalisation of money will be as arbitrary as previous ones, but it will also perform potentially better in that it will derive from a more conscious cognisance of cause. This is reflected in the thousands of CCs and APSs that operated worldwide in the past decades. Indeed, by matching unused resources with unmet needs, CCs substantiate APSs, which graft on the currently collapsing system by counteracting the shortcomings of conventional money. They are used in parallel with national currencies thanks to design strategies such as zero interest or negative interest rates, real-asset backing (intrinsic value), decentralized issuance (eg mutual credit systems), transparent management and public auditing, etc.

At these first stages of social monetary emancipation in the 21st century, those within the system who are aware of the nature of the agreement framed by conventional money and those who are financially and juridically excluded can together organise spaces of effective monetary resistance. Rather than riots in the streets, by paraphrasing Marazzi (Marazzi, 2010), the most effective way to counteract the violent socio-psycho-pathological dynamics of financial capital is by developing a sort of weaponisation of money

as the most effective non-violent strategy to presently adopt. Indeed, solutions are emerging from within the system itself in terms of campaigns for endogenous monetary reform (eg in the UK, 'Move Your Money' and 'Positive Money' campaigns), new theoretical developments such as those by the representatives of Modern Monetary Theory (Brown 2008) and the Neo-Chartalist School (Wray, 1998), new forms of pooling (eg the JAK Bank in Sweden) and direct credit clearing (Greco 2009). However, there are also valuable alternatives that are exogenous in character and so suffer less from the inherent flaws affecting conventional money. These are:

- LETS (Local Exchange Trading Schemes mostly in the US and UK) and LOVE (Local Value Exchange in Japan)
- Transition currencies, eg Transition Pounds in the UK, mainly as local loyalty currencies for shielding and insulating the local economy from external financial perturbations (North, 2010)
- Business-to-business currencies, eg C3 or Commercial Credit Circuit in Uruguay, whereby businesses use invoices as a currency to sustain the SMEs sector (www.c3uruguay.com.uy)
- Developmental currencies, eg the Palma, a currency designed in Fortaleza (Brazil) that by endorsing the principles of Solidarity Economics (Miller, 2004)
- Social Purpose currencies, eg the Fureai Kippu a currency for the elderly care widespread in Japan or the Chiemgauer, a regional currency issued in Bavaria (Germany) to sustain local businesses and local charities in the same scheme

The above list provides an example of the diversity of applications that currency design can offer.

In addition, cyberspace is producing technological innovations that will enable further detachment from the yoke of conventional systems. The shift is now steadily underway in prototypical forms of digital currencies such as Bitcoin (Nakamoto, 2009). It is not hard to imagine a future where monetary transfers among actors in the economy will proceed horizontally and in real time, similarly to the switch from paper mail and email. Banks – as post offices before them – will not close, but will experience a reduction in their market dominance over monetary exchange. A technology such as Bitcoin possesses extremely interesting applications: for instance, the possibility to link at the monetary level individuals living far from their homeland such as legal or illegal immigrants sending money, for example remittances, back home. The widespread use

of the Bitcoin can endanger the oligopoly of wire transfer companies currently demanding high commissions for settling accounts (eg Western Union or MoneyGram). Another interesting feature of Bitcoin technology is the possibility to transfer money under pseudonymity and, in extreme cases, anonymity. This could make a crucial difference in protecting the lives of political refugees and asylum seekers worldwide who can now transact with a safety never before experienced.

However, alternative currencies are not enough to engender a more just economic system. The potential success of the alternative currency movement is only the first step towards reverse engineering the conventional monetary system into a process whereby the monetary system is driven by democratically controlled priorities (Negri, 2002; Mellor, 2010). •

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Footnotes

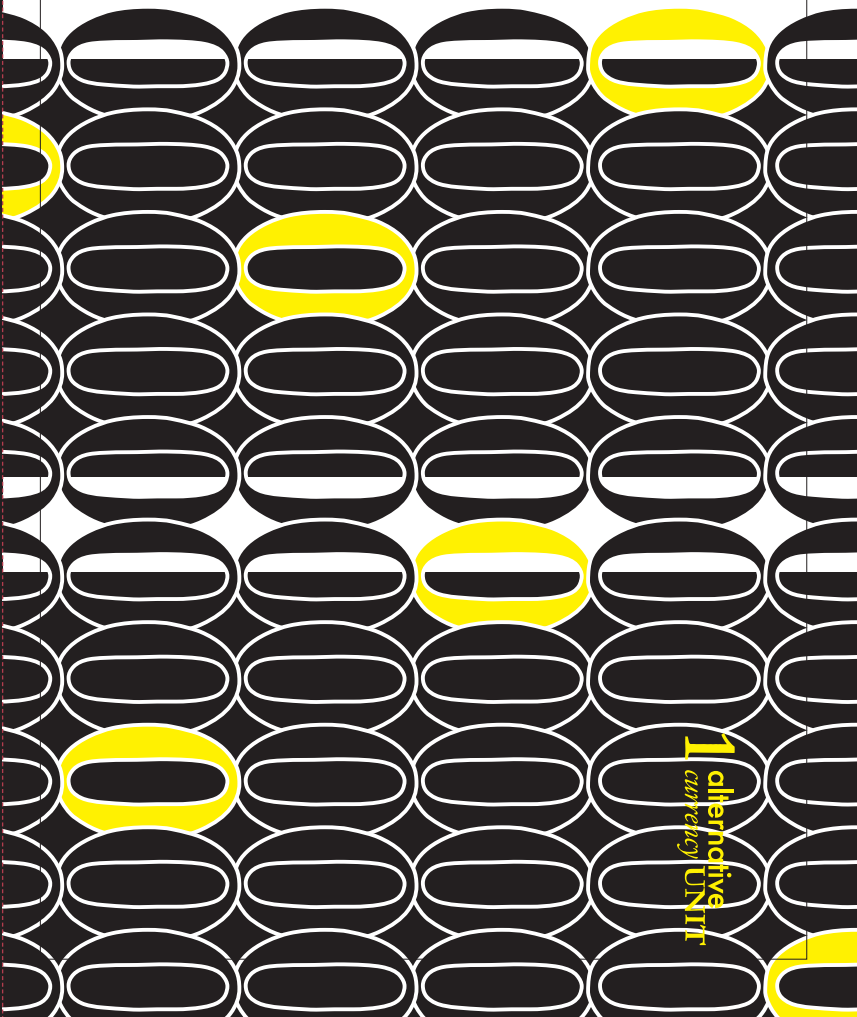
Cf. www.complementarycurrency.org

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ONE
ALTERNATIVE
CURRENCY
UNIT

1



1 alternative
currency UNIT

This is one Alternative Currency Unit.

Its value is determined by what you can exchange it for.

If you are the first to use this currency, its value will be determined by the first exchange.

The person who next uses the currency can decide to raise its value in the next exchange, or not.

The value of the currency will increase or decrease depending on each exchange.

Please write your initials on the currency.

To help follow up the progress of the note or organise the final exchange to return it, visit the Silent University website at thesilentuniversity.org



1

The following text is based on my experience as an asylum seeker in the UK.

In my experience, immigration laws criminalise asylum seekers; you are believed to be looking for this country to support you on using public funds. This is an important factor in refusing those claimants who have concrete evidence supporting their case. The asylum process leaves claimants in limbo, with no place to live, no money to eat, and all because of not wanting people to claim public funds. The flip side of this however, is that the current immigration law does not allow you to work and support yourself; as if you are allowed to work and pay taxes, you will not be their burden.

People seek sanctuary in this country after running traumatic experiences of persecution, abuse, or arranged marriages. During the initial asylum interview, the questions asked confuse you, as you are not expecting to be interrogated when you are in such a traumatic state. The same questions are asked three or four times, setting you up for a mistake, or for officials to find a loophole to refuse you. One is asked the same question in three or more different ways, the basis

for this being that you are immediately thought of as a liar and a cheat.

At the time of your arrival, you may not be used to the English accent, and this can lead to misunderstandings and mistakes, which can be used against you.

While asylum cases are pending, claimants are put into very difficult situations: they are placed in National Asylum Support Service housing and they are given a card to buy essentials. In using the card system, claimants are not allowed to access cash, and can only use the card in certain stores. When shopping, cashiers know who you are as soon as you produce that card. Claimants are also expected to report to immigration officials once a week, as if we are on parole. Refused asylum seekers are also expected to do this.

The stress and strain caused by the asylum processes has grave mental and physical effects. You become sick and depressed. There are many cases of people getting ill or developing mental health problems, and without receiving adequate care these can have devastating and life-threatening consequences.

If you are refused, and do not submit a new asylum claim or appeal the refusal, you are put in detention. There are several detention centres around the country, where paradoxically you are allowed to work for the meagre wage of one pound per hour.

In my opinion and based on my and others' experiences of the asylum process, I suggest that the immigration laws should be adapted to allow people to work, earn a living and support themselves, as well as be allowed to study and gain skills to be able to contribute to society. Even if asylum seekers are refused and sent back home, the skills and knowledge they have gained while in the UK will enable them to contribute to their respective societies. Foreign aid to countries is something that the UK government spends billions on every year, yet they have a ready pool of people in the UK fleeing persecution because they are willing to stand up and make a difference. They should invest in these people if they really want to see a change in the world.

The UK should have a fair and effective decision-making body that takes pride in giving sanctuary to those who need it and denies it to those who do not. People seeking sanctuary should be treated fairly and humanely, have access to essential support and public services, and should make a contribution to the UK if they are able. Many asylum seekers are professionals and can contribute with their skills and knowledge, but these are rotting away as the current system denies their use. •

– Loveness Sibanda is an academic consultant to the Silent University.

ACCESS TO EDUCATION FOR ALL

BY EMILY OKITO

Education, and specifically, access to education, should be made available to asylum seekers who may spend up to ten years waiting for their case to be decided. These years, where one cannot work, and one feels as if their skills are wasting away, can feel like a waste of life. It is very hard for those who are in the asylum process to study, as they cannot afford tuition, are not earning a salary as they are not permitted to work, and many institutions will not give them financial aid as their status in the UK is uncertain. Of course this is not always the case, and one example of this was a fund created a few years back, to enable asylum seekers from Zimbabwe to study in the UK while their case was in process. The thinking behind this was to support people's development, to enable them to gain skills and knowledge, that would either be used once they were granted refugee status, or, if they were refused and sent home, they would be in a better position to contribute to a change in their home country. This was visionary thinking. Unfortunately along with many other funds, this particular one lost its income source, but it serves as a good example of how to enable a positive outcome from a difficult situation. The thousands of asylum seekers waiting for their cases to be decided are a resource that is wasted, both for the UK and for their home countries. The Silent University makes this obvious, and is a step towards a positive change. We need more visionary thinking to enable access to education and the hope of a better life for all. •

– Emily Okito is an academic consultant to the Silent University.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

The Silent University is a knowledge exchange platform aimed at asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants who have a professional background and who are unable to practice that profession in the UK due to a variety of reasons. The Silent University was initiated by Ahmet Ögüt, Tate's adult programmes curator Nora Razian and community curator Synthia Griffin. Set up in 2012 it is still establishing itself as a way of exchanging and valuing knowledge that is generated by its students and inspired by their own professions. To date this has been explored through performance, a publication and the collation of material that is connected to the themes of the Silent University eg migration, silence and alternative economies. Those interested will be assigned a position within the university as either a Lecturer, Consultant or Research Fellow and play a role in the University as it develops. It is an opportunity to be able to be able to share professional experience and exchange knowledge with your fellow learners. •

If you are interested in exchanging your knowledge and experience and being part of the Silent University:

Visit: www.thesilentuniversity.org

Email: silentuniversity@gmail.com

THANK YOU FROM THE SILENT UNIVERSITY

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The Silent University Identity Design

Vahit Tuna

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Ali Kaviani and Karoliina Hujanen

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