

CURRENCY AND COMMUNITY: LABOR, IDENTITY, AND NOTGELD IN INFLATION-ERA THURINGIA

Erin Sullivan Maynes

Money is nearly always absent in utopian imaginings. But in spite of its strong associations with capitalism, money is not inherently ideological. As Georg Simmel recognized in *The Philosophy of Money* (1900), money is a tool, less a material object than a series of functions: it provides a universal measure of value, mediates exchange, and circulates in order to facilitate future exchange. Can money, then, be a means for remaking the economic and social order? Reimagining the functioning of money might encourage one to reimagine how a society distributes resources and determines value, particularly the value of human labor.

Community currencies are one example of this type of reimagining. They are not revolutionary; they typically work beside existing systems of exchange rather than upending them. But their focus on sourcing and buying locally puts emphasis on the commercial activity of the community. Community currencies also stress one's potential connections to the producer or seller, elevating the role of labor in the production of goods and services, and, by extension, emphasizing human capital as the source of value within the community. The stress, again, is on local labor and local goods, suggesting that such currencies offer a way of keeping the virtuous circle of economic exchange and circulation close and tight, preserving its benefits for, and only for, those within the community.

This essay explores how community currencies were used to assert value — and, by extension, values — at a moment in which money and its legitimizing institutions were failing: the inflationary years of the Weimar Republic (1918-1923). During this period, towns and cities were compelled to create their own provisional money out of necessity, as the official currency, the Reichsmark, was in short supply. But as this unofficial money, called *Notgeld* (literally, “emergency money”), became a fixture of local economies, it also became a way of expressing anxieties, asserting alternatives, and carving out the community as a space separate from the political and economic turmoil of the nation. This currency reinforced the boundaries of local communities by creating zones of economic activity confined to contained areas. But the notes were also a visual space for reinforcing

community identity. Their subjects presented local lore, promoted local products, and praised local character, implicitly and sometimes explicitly contrasting the stability of the community with the chaos of the nation.

Other communities also emerged during the inflation — self-selecting groups whose identities were likewise shaped by economic crisis. These communities were built on the utopian aspirations of thinkers with radically different visions for the future, figures like the so-called *Inflationsheiligen*, the “saints” of inflation, who inspired followers with their rejection of bourgeois norms and the mix of radical religious and political beliefs they preached. This essay will also explore an encounter between one such community of choice: a group called the Neue Schar [New Flock], and its leader, Friedrich Muck-Lamberty, and the town of Kahla, a prolific center for the production of *Notgeld*. This encounter played out, in part, through *Notgeld* and was an expression of the different kinds of tribalism encouraged by the inflation.

Community currencies have reemerged in recent years, particularly since the global financial crisis of 2008, as a way of reconnecting consumers with their local economies. The tagline that promotes the Brixton Pound, the community currency that emerged in 2009 to cater to the south London district of Brixton, reads: “Money that sticks to Brixton.”¹ Its purpose is to encourage both the customer and seller to commit to buying and sourcing locally so that the economic benefits of exchange remain within the neighborhood. Brixton is a multi-ethnic community with a history of poverty and a tradition of social activism. Designers of the Brixton Pound, which exists in four denominations and nine separate issues, were mindful of this history and of Brixton’s distinct culture when creating the notes; the pounds include portraits of the district’s famous residents on one side and art with local connections on the other. Some of the currency’s portraits are activist icons, such as the one pound note featuring Len Garrison, co-founder of the Black Cultural Archive. Others feature celebrities with Brixton connections such as David Bowie, whose note celebrates the glam rocker’s aesthetic appeal, reproducing his iconic portrait from the cover of *Aladdin Sane*. The verso of the Bowie note also lifts an element from Brixton’s familiar Nuclear Dawn Mural painted in 1983, associating the currency not only with local faces but also local places. On the mural a dove morphs, Escher-like, into a peace symbol to stress the importance of nuclear disarmament. On the Brixton

1 Tagline featured on a banner promoting the currency on <http://www.brixtonpound.org/what>.

note, the dove is equated with the note's "security bonded" feature, its form appropriated and given a new function.

The Brixton Pound was one of the first community currencies in Britain, but it is far from the only one. Other British examples include Bristol Pounds, Cardiff Pounds, Cornish Pounds, Exeter Pounds, Kingston Pounds, Lewes Pounds, Liverpool Pounds, Plymouth Pounds, Stroud Pounds, Totnes Pounds, and Worcester Pounds.² The Wikipedia page for community currencies based in the United States lists 122 different currencies including Berkshares, Ithaca Hours, and Cascadicas, though at least 48 are inactive.³ The Chiemgauer, the largest regional currency (*Regiogeld*) in Germany, began in Bavaria in 2003 as a student project at an area Waldorf high school. An economics teacher conceived of it as a way to raise funds for school improvements. By 2012, there were more than 550,000 Chiemgauer in circulation with a turnover of around 6 million as of 2011.⁴

Beyond their primary role as a medium of exchange, community currencies draw attention to money's different functions, inviting its bearers to consider the note as a material object and exchange itself as a highly mediated and contingent social act. The Brixton Pound stresses the former, the currency is covetable not (only) as a signifier of wealth and status, but potentially as a desirable, designed object. Distributors offer ways of purchasing the cash as collectible and create eye-catching designs to appeal to consumers. The Bowie Bristol ten pound note, for example, is also offered as a limited edition print, with both recto and verso printed on a single sheet of A3 paper, embossed, and sold framed or unframed. The celebrated British artist Jeremy Deller designed a special edition fifth anniversary Brixton five-pound note in 2015, a colorful and complicated symmetrical knot with a face in its center. The page announcing Deller's note on the Brixton Pound website enthuses that "[Deller's] extraordinary design adds a significant and provocative message that reflects our intention to raise the conversation of how we understand, use, and value money in this time of economic instability and what we could aspire to in the future."⁵ Certainly, offering cash as a commodity does present the community with an opportunity to make money from its money, but it also arrests its circulation. Issuers of the Brixton Pound seem to suggest this will make consumers more mindful of where and what they spend, but it also undercuts the currency's primary function as a viable medium of exchange. After all, if the note has more value as a collectible than as a currency, what is the incentive to spend it?

2 Ibid.

3 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_community_currencies_in_the_United_States.

4 <http://community-currency.info/en/currencies/chiemgauer/#return-note-4921-1>.

5 <http://brixtonpound.org/blog/2015/07/08/deller/>.

Other community currencies have a more overtly ideological function. Their issuers present them as a means of realizing a more equitable community by creating a more equitable economy. These currencies attempt to counter the reifying character of cash by identifying alternative measures of value as the basis of exchange. This is especially true of time-based currencies, which make duration their measure of value, suggesting an awareness of both labor and leisure as “time spent.” It is also a more egalitarian measure, as time is a finite resource but also one that all possess, in theory at least, in equal amounts. “Time Is Money” announces the verso of an Ithaca Hour note, directly equating labor with value. The inscription on the note continues: “Ithaca Hours are backed by real capital: our skills, our tools, forest, fields, and rivers.” In other words, labor guarantees the value of the note but so, too, do the shared resources of the community. These notes force a more holistic vision of what, exactly, comprises an economy at the local level: nothing less, that is, than the whole of the community itself.

As these examples demonstrate, recent community currencies have emerged in places that cast them as progressive projects, in spite of the currencies’ provincial focus and anachronistic ideas about economic growth and exchange. In their form and function, these notes appear designed to counter anxieties on the left about the workings of remote financial markets that threaten to erode economic self-sufficiency. These currencies implicitly counter the abstraction of modern economic activity by insisting upon more rudimentary, concrete forms of value and traceable networks of exchange. As such, they define the community as a physical space through the boundaries created by the currency’s circulation. But they also present a conceptual and idealized version of the community, which conflates culture and economic activity and which puts a progressive spin on what is, arguably, a somewhat reactionary and isolationist attitude.

Community currencies do have a longer history. Indeed, before centralized banks, essentially all paper money was local and functioned as a kind of scrip one could exchange for the equivalent value of gold or other precious metals at private banks. These currencies reappeared in the twentieth century at moments of economic crisis and in places where normal economic exchange ceased to function. The most prolific period for such provisional money is the focus of the remainder of this essay: the inflationary decade in Germany, particularly the period from 1918 to 1923.

Notgeld, was the offspring of necessity and enterprise, a hybrid born of economic chaos. It proliferated throughout the German Reich from the beginning of World War I through the end of 1923, the high-water mark of Germany's hyperinflation. *Notgeld* came into circulation as a way of temporarily addressing the chronic shortage of low denomination notes and coins necessary for the majority of economic transactions throughout the Reich. This shortage was the result of hoarding—due to the military's demand for metal, the material value of most coins surpassed their face value—and the fact that inflation forced one to pay more money for the same basic necessities, requiring more of it to purchase everyday items. Thus, the amount of paper money in circulation, both official paper Reichsmarks, as well as unofficial *Notgeld*, ballooned. But because *Notgeld* was necessarily provisional, with each note valid for only short periods, and because it was an insistently local form of payment, the number of *Notgeld* issues was especially inflated by the economic situation.

As *Notgeld* became a new normal throughout Germany, local economies came to rely on it as an alternative form of payment, and, increasingly, a source of revenue. The latter function resulted in *Sammlerscheine*, collector's notes, bills designed for the audience of *Notgeld* collectors attracted to the ever growing number of unique provisional notes. The audience for this collectible cash was significant enough that specialty publications such as the journal *Das Notgeld* appeared, informing collectors of the availability of new issues and the rising value of sought-after notes.⁶ The most famous *Sammlerscheine* are the *Serienscheine*, or series notes, most of which were created from 1920 through 1922. These were not intended for circulation but were sold directly to the collectors' market by issuers or by numismatic dealers and auction houses such as Robert Ball Nachfolger in Berlin. As such, they were designed to appeal to audiences as consumable objects. Their serial format allowed the notes to narrate stories or present thematic groupings, but their seriality was also meant to appeal to the acquisitive sensibility of collectors. Successful issuers were expert at offering designs in a range of variants, with different text, colors, and sizes, attracting those who might feel compelled to acquire each and every version of the same note. Other issuers focused on making individual sets highly desirable through their designs, hiring known artists to illustrate them or relying on popular or sensational content that would appeal to audiences outside their immediate vicinity. *Serienscheine* demonstrate how money itself had become an object that had the potential to be marketed and sold —

6 *Das Notgeld: Zeitschrift für Notgeldkunde* first appeared in 1919 and was published in Munich through at least 1922. A number of other publications with titles such as *Die Notgeld-Sammler: Zentral-Organ für den gesamten Notgeld Markt* were also published during this period, some of which were reconstituted versions of earlier publications. In addition, there were *Sammlervereine*, collectors' groups, which were organized under an umbrella association called the *Verband Großdeutscher Notgeld-Sammler-Vereine*.

and suggested that a community's self-sufficiency during inflation might depend on making money that was less currency than commodity.

True *Sammlerscheine* were not designed to circulate; in fact, notes' expiration dates often preceded their issue date, rendering them immediately worthless as currency. But as collectibles, these notes did offer potential rewards for issuers. The town of Naumburg in Saxony-Anhalt, for instance, was able to renovate the town Rathaus with the revenues generated from a set of popular *Notgeld* notes illustrating the siege of the city by the Hussites in the fifteenth century. The set, designed by the artist Walter Hege in a silhouette motif, was so successful that it went through more than three reissues. In 1921, Naumburg generated more than 900,000 Reichsmarks in profit from *Notgeld* sales alone.⁷

Hege's Naumburg notes underscore the characteristics typical of successful collector issues: they are attractively designed, function as a narrative set, and focus on stories drawn from local lore. Often these stories emphasize events in which the community overcame past hardship and gloss over the distinctions between historical veracity and legend. The story relayed by Hege's notes, for instance, includes what is known as the Cherry Legend (*Hussiten Kirschfest Sage*), the basis for the annual Naumburg Cherry Festival. Since the seventeenth century, the Cherry Legend has been linked to the history of the Hussite siege, putting a happy spin on the story. According to the legend, the children of Naumburg saved the town by pleading with the Hussite general for mercy. The general took pity and agreed to pull back his troops. He also gave the children cherries to calm their hunger. Like the story, which has become tied to Naumburg's identity less because of its historical accuracy than because of its repetition and reenactment during the annual festival, Hege's Expressionist-inspired silhouettes were successful enough that they likewise became, through dissemination and reissue, part of that identity as well. In fact, Hege's silhouettes are still used to advertise Naumburg's Cherry Festival today.

A community that found especially effective ways to combine craft and currency was the town of Pößneck in Thuringia. In 1921, Pößneck produced a set of *Serienscheine* known as the Industry Series, a six-note set that advertised the virtues of Pößnecker goods, including leather products, printed journals, chocolate confections, and flannel cloth.⁸ "Jeder kennt das Pößnecker Leder" chirps one of the notes: "Everyone knows Pössneck Leather!" It is a line that evinces

7 Ursula Dittrich-Wagner, "Walter Hege und das Naumburger Notgeld," <https://www.mv-naumburg.de/notgeld>, 8. The first set of Hege's *Notgeld*, issued in six designs all worth fifty Pfennigs, included four misprints, omitting the addition of "Pfg" (Pfennig) from the denomination. The series was first issued in November 1920 in a run of 4,000. Due to immediate demand, Naumburg issued a second run of 20,000 about three weeks later, in which the missing "Pfg" had been corrected. In February 1921, Hege was commissioned to create another six silhouettes for the series, and a set of twelve notes was reissued. Finally, as Dittrich-Wagner documents, the misprinted notes, which were in high demand by collectors, were likewise reissued in a run of 5,000 in May 1921. Pictures of these designs can be found in Hans-Ludwig Grabowski and Manfred Mehl, *Deutsches Notgeld: Deutsche Serienscheine, 1918-1922*, Vol. 2 (Regenstauf, 2009).

8 Grabowski and Mehl, *Deutsches Notgeld*, Vol. 1. The catalogue number for the Industry Series is 1066.6 (1-10).

the enthusiasm of a marketing jingle, celebrating the long-standing excellence of local goods and local manufacturing.

Notgeld produced by the town of Genthin and decorated with woodcuts by the Erfurt-based artist Alfred Hanf suggests how the individual can create value for the community: through faith.⁹ “Is this not a world turned upside down?” it asks, “The littlest town prints its own money! And yet the homeland (*Heimat*) reveals its image. The hometown (*Vaterstadt*), more valuable to you than money, you should value if you do not wish to be a fool on your own”¹⁰ The verse on the twenty-five Pfennig note continues: “Your belief makes this slip of paper here into money. So believe in your homeland and build your world.”¹¹ If one can transform paper into value, in other words, a similar kind of magical thinking directed at the community might likewise lift the local economy. It is as if Hanf’s *Notgeld* is trying to restore economic health by attaching value not to such “slips of paper” but to individual and collective faith in the community.

Notgeld notes, designed to attract attention, are, in their emphasis on the visual, an anti-currency. When the primary function of currency is exchange, conspicuous currencies are counterproductive. Cash that requires careful scrutiny and study is cash that lacks institutional authority and impedes easy circulation. *Notgeld*, however, was always meant to be looked at, and regarded, carefully. Initially, this had a practical purpose. *Notgeld* was unsanctioned; the federal government reluctantly tolerated its use out of necessity, but issuers took pains to distinguish their currency from official Reichsmarks by avoiding the designation *Geld* and creating issues that were distinctive. Notes with temporary and ever-changing designs, denominations, and dates of expiration required more attention of bearers and receivers. But, for collectors’ issues, the value of notes was determined by their ability to attract attention, to invite viewers to focus on series’ designs and narratives. Because of the insistently visual nature of collector’s *Notgeld*, its function as a collectible object that could also be a cash-generating commodity superseded its function as a medium of exchange. It became a space for spreading self-referential messages and meditations—on the community itself, as noted, but also on the nature of money and value. In other words, *Notgeld* is very often money about money that made money as non-circulating money.

The town of Kahla in Thuringia was especially notable for the number of *Notgeld* series it issued, and for the way its *Serienscheine* modeled

9 Ibid., numbers 419.1 (1-5). It is likely that Hanf did not write the verses that appear on the Genthin notes but rather contributed the woodcuts. The *Notgeld* notes themselves are offset prints with reproductions (likely reduced) of Hanf’s woodcut prints.

10 The text reads as follows: “Ist’s nicht recht eine verkehrte Welt? Die kleinste Stadt druckt eignes Geld! Und doch die Heimat zeigt sein Bild. Die Vaterstadt die mehr als Geld Dir gilt, Dir gelten sollte, wenn Du nicht allein auf eigne Faust ein Narr willst sein.”

11 “Dein Glaube macht den Zettel hier zum Geld, so glaub ans Vaterland und bau’ Dir Deine Welt.”

these varied approaches to attracting collectors. Kahla, named by one scholar “the secret capital of Germany’s *Ersatz* currency,” produced fourteen series in twelve themes, of which up to six were produced in variants that were repeatedly reissued.¹² A number of these sets reference the larger economic and political situation in Germany to appeal to a broader collecting audience, but many others focus on local landmarks, local products, and local stories. An example of the latter includes the souvenir set celebrating the castle of Leuchtenburg, one of the city’s most notable sights. The set is composed of three notes, in denominations of twenty-five, fifty, and seventy-five Pfennigs, of different aerial views of the castle. The set reaches for a broader, more nationalistic tone on the note’s recto, a quote attributed to General Field Marshall and future German president Paul von Hindenburg transcribed in handwritten *Sütterlinschrift*: “The blood of all those who gave their lives in the belief of the greatness of the Fatherland must not have flowed in vain.”

On the other end of the spectrum of Kahla’s *Notgeld* is the popular satirical set designed by the nationally recognized Norwegian artist Olaf Gulbransson, best known in Germany as an illustrator for the magazine *Simplicissimus*.¹³ The messages of Gulbransson’s series are not specific to Kahla but are focused on issues of national importance. The series is comprised of three sets of pairs; in one set of notes, titled “Deutsche Merkur,” a man with iconographic attributes referencing the German Michael (cap), the god Mercury (winged sandals), and St. Sebastian (shot with arrows and tied to a post) faces off against a large woman in a breastplate marked “RF” for *Republique française*, who aims a charged bow at his chest. In the second note, the German Mercury is on the phone, writing out reparations payments in his own blood with one of the arrows he has pulled from his body. The notes reference Germany’s payments to France, a hated condition of the Treaty of Versailles that exacerbated the financial crisis. Another set mocks pretensions of national unity: the first note’s inscription ironically proclaims “Einigkeit macht stark” or “Unity makes us strong,” while the illustration below depicts a group of figures falling on each other in a violent brawl. In the next note, these men seem to have resolved their differences: they clink glasses together beneath an inscription that reads “Starkbier (strong beer) makes us unified.”

Perhaps the most unusual of Kahla’s *Serienscheine* is the twelve-part Statistical Series from 1921, another set that looks beyond Kahla to the national situation.¹⁴ The recto of each note displays the same im-

12 Wolfgang Kemp, *Wir haben ja alle Deutschland nicht gekannt: das Deutschlandbild der Deutschen in der Zeit der Weimarer Republik* (Heidelberg, 2016), 302.

13 See Grabowski and Mehl, *Deutsches Notgeld: Deutsche Serienscheine*, Vol. 1. The catalogue number of the Leuchtenburg series, also called the Hindenburg II series, is 668.6a, b (1-3). Gulbransson’s series is numbered 668.10 and 668.11 (1-6).

14 *Ibid.* The Statistical Series is numbered 668.7 (1-12).



Unknown designer, *Porcelain Series*, verso of 25-, 50-, and 75-Pfennig *Notgeld* notes issued by the City of Kahla. Each note measures ca. 7x11 cm. August 1921. Collection of the author. Photo by author.

age of a man's head before a brick wall, with the inscription: "Was das Schicksal uns zerbrach, neu erstehe nach und nach — traget Steine zu dem Bau, deutscher Mann und deutsche Frau" [What fate destroyed for me and you, let us rebuild anew; carry stones to the structure, German man and German woman.] The verso of each note includes a different diagram, which tracks statistical measures tracing the effects of inflation, the war, and its aftermath on the German economy. This includes the growth in the child mortality rate between 1913 and 1918, the reduction in the size of the German Empire due to the Treaty of Versailles, a pie chart illustrating reparations spending as a portion of the total budget, and the inflated price of eggs, butter, and milk in different German cities on a single day in April 1921. The most self-referential note tracks the "Inflation of Notes in Circulation from 1913-1920," comparing circulation rates in different countries, including England, France, and Spain, to those in Germany. Unsurprisingly, the number of notes in Germany dwarfs that of the currency circulating in all other countries, consuming nearly half the note's vertical space. The Statistical Series attempts to visualize, literally and figuratively, the abstract nation-wide economic effects of inflation by tying them to familiar reference points and illustrating these changes in easy-to-follow charts. The assertive but optimistic message on front of the notes, which suggests that German fortitude and resolve will enable the nation to rebuild, is thus challenged by the information presented on the back of the notes, in which the sober presentation of facts and figures details only the magnitude of the crisis rather than offering a reassuring solution.

Kahla's Porcelain *Notgeld* series gets closest to the town's contemporary identity—an identity tied to a product manufactured locally since the nineteenth century and a pillar of the local economy.¹⁵ The financial insecurity caused by inflation, however, threatened to undermine Kahla's status as a center for the production of fine china. This three-note *Notgeld* series, therefore, serves to advertise and celebrate, but also affirm, Kahla's porcelain as an enduring source of value, particularly when compared against the devalued Reichsmark. Visually, the notes equate two elements as essential to the city's identity: the iconic castle of Leuchtenburg and porcelain itself, both of which feature in all three notes. The red-roofed castle migrates from left to right over the course of the three notes while plates, teapots, cups and saucers float above it, among the stars in one note, blending with the clouds in another, and finally creeping over the globe in the final note, suggesting the international market

15 Ibid. The Porcelain Series is numbered 668.5 (1-3).

for this locally made good. “Kahla versorgt für billig [sic] Geld / mit Porzellan die ganze Welt,” reads the first note, [Kahla supplies the whole world with porcelain for ‘cheap’ money.] The verse separates Kahla’s porcelain from devalued currency, which suggests less that its tableware is a bargain than that its currency’s value is depressed. The next two notes refer to the popular expression, “Scherben bringen Glück” [broken pottery brings luck], with the last proclaiming, “Behaltet Kahlas Scherben fein / Das Glück soll drin verborgen sein” [Keep Kahla’s beautiful [porcelain] shards / for luck may be hidden within.] Even in a damaged and functionless state, in other words, porcelain may still have value if it grants good luck. Kahla’s porcelain thus retains material value that the “cheap” paper currency does not. Although the *Notgeld* acknowledges this fact, the town was unquestionably good at promoting both its money and its manufacturing through its many issues of *Notgeld*, using one to reinforce the other.

As an important center for the sale and production of *Notgeld*, Kahla staged a *Notgeld* exhibition from September 3 to September 11, 1921, featuring over one hundred exhibitors, with more than 50,000 *Notgeld* issues.¹⁶ Collectors from throughout Germany attended, and certificates and a cash prize were issued for the best designs. Kahla notes featured prominently in advertising for the event; one series in particular was newly released in time for the exhibition itself, the set known as the “*Muckserie*,” which promised to find broad success as it related the story of a local scandal that had earned national attention: the rise and fall of the *Wanderprophet* Friedrich Muck-Lamberty.¹⁷ Muck-Lamberty and the money made about him stage the encounter between two forms of community—one given, the other chosen.

Friedrich Muck-Lamberty was a charismatic representative of the Youth Reform and Life Reform Movements and one of the so-called *Inflationsheiligen* [inflation saints] of the early 1920s, a group of quasi-religious messianic figures who could be viewed, on the one hand, as an offshoot of the “colorful spectrum of Weimar ‘sect’ culture (*Sektenwesen*),” and the millenarian mood that accompanied postwar crises and economic troubles from 1918 to 1923.¹⁸ According to Ulrich Linse, the *Inflationsheiligen* and their followers exhibited troubling characteristics that foreshadowed behaviors associated with Adolf Hitler and the National Socialists, not the least of which involved the apotheosis of a charismatic leader advocating radical and reactionary solutions to modern life in order to achieve national salvation.¹⁹

16 See Ingrid Bubeck, *Geldnot und Notgeld in Thüringen* (Erfurt, 2007).

17 Grabowski and Mehl, *Deutsches Notgeld: Deutsche Serienscheine*, Vol. 1. The Muck Series is numbered 668.2 (1-3).

18 Ulrich Linse, *Barfüßige Propheten: Erlöser der zwanziger Jahre* (Berlin, 1983), 23.

19 See *ibid.*



Unknown designer, *Muck Series*, verso of 25-, 50-, and 75-Pfennig *Notgeld* notes issued by the City of Kahla, August 1921. Each note measures ca. 7x11 cm. Collection of the author. Photo by author.

Muck-Lamberty wanted to lead his followers to a simpler life; he rejected the modern world in favor of the simplicity of premodern lifestyles and ways of being. Muck, as his followers called him, at one point stated, “I am no Rote-Fahne revolutionary, but believe in the victory of the spirit over matter, over material.”²⁰ His followers were motivated by a similar belief that the time was ripe for a spiritual turn, evidence of which was all around them in the near constant social, political, and economic upheavals of postwar Germany. As Linse argues, the rituals of the Neue Schar, especially their ecstatic dances “developed as an alternative to class struggle and prefigured the ‘community’ as a form of apolitical (*nichtpolitischen*) socialism.”²¹

Muck-Lamberty had contact with the Wandervogel movement when he was just nineteen years old. During the war, he joined the navy as part of a unit that was willing to accommodate his strict vegetarian diet. Although he did not experience the November Revolution firsthand, he did view it as an opportunity for the *völkisch* rebirth of Germany, which he would later call a “revolution of the soul.” By early 1920 he had founded the Neue Schar, a community of individuals composed mostly of young men, women, and children who were inspired by his teaching.

Like all *Inflationsheiligen*, the social disruption caused by the chaos of the revolution and inflation allowed Muck-Lamberty to redefine community in his own terms. The Neue Schar was self-selecting and composed primarily of young people committed to the strict lifestyle their charismatic leader demanded. As Muck-Lamberty and his flock made their now famous tour through Thuringia throughout 1920, they attracted attention and followers wherever they went, the Neue Schar dancing and singing while Muck-Lamberty preached. He was compared to the Pied Piper of Hamelin by observers based on the way he entranced the young; he was reported to have as many as one thousand followers, a number that grew with every stop he made. The leader of “the League” in Hermann Hesse’s 1932 novel *Morgenlandfahrt* is based, in part, on Muck-Lamberty.

Muck-Lamberty’s so-called *Sündenfall*, or fall from grace, transpired in early 1921 in Kahla bei Leuchtenburg. The castle of Leuchtenburg functioned at this time as a youth hostel and, due to the group’s large size, Muck-Lamberty and the Neue Schar wintered there. At this time, Käthe Köhl, a female friend of Muck-Lamberty’s and member of the Neue Schar, wrote to the local authorities in Altenburg and accused the leader of keeping a “harem” and of “defiling the sacredness of

20 “Ich bin kein Rote-Fahnen-Revolutionär, sondern glaube an den Sieg des Geistes über die Materie.” <http://www.naumburg-geschichte.de/geschichte/mucklamberty.htm#16a>.

21 “Das tänzerische Ritual war die von der Neuen Schar entwickelte Alternative zum Klassenkampf und sollte die ‘Gemeinde’ als Form eines nichtpolitischen Sozialismus präfigurieren.” Linse, *Barfüßige Propheten*, 106.



Unknown designer, *Notgeld Ausstellung* note, recto of 75-Pfennig note issued by the Stadtverkehrsamt (City Tourist Office) of Kahla, September 1921. Note measures ca. 7.5x11 cm. Collection of the author. Photo by author.

seductive appeal among his followers. After Muck-Lamberty's questioning, the director of the Leuchtenburg hostel requested that Muck-Lamberty and his group vacate the hostel by February 1921. Some of his followers left, and supporters distanced themselves in the aftermath of the scandal.

Kahla saw an opportunity in this crisis, however. Because of Muck-Lamberty's relative fame, the scandal had brought national attention to the area. In August of 1921, Kahla released its "*Muckserie*" *Notgeld*, a three-note set of twenty-five, fifty, and seventy-five Pfennig *Serienscheine*, which detailed the rise and fall of Muck-Lamberty and the Neue Schar in color and verse. The first note depicts members of the Neue Schar dancing freely as Muck-Lamberty imagines his destination: a city on a hill. In the second note, Muck plays guitar and sings to his flock, his head emitting divine rays, his body towering over the city of his imagination. On either side of his head, in hexagonal cartouches, stand two storks bowing their heads in Muck's direction. Then in the final note, these storks—symbols of birth in both German and English—take flight. Muck hangs his head in shame as he is cast out of the city on the hill and his followers turn away from him. The final lines underscore the meaning of the storks, noting that it is Muck himself adding to the Neue Schar's numbers.

Kahla generated a total net profit of 170,000 Marks from the sale of the Muck Series, constituting the first major series it issued as

womanhood."²² He had, it turned out, impregnated two women in the group and was engaged in sexual relationships with others. Muck-Lamberty was unapologetic, and many observers were unsurprised by the erotically charged nature of the Neue Schar's activities and Muck-Lamberty's

22 The reason cited for Kühl's action is jealousy, though little evidence is given to support this. The exact term she used was "Haremwirtschaft." The other quote reads "entheilige das Heiligtum der Weiblichkeit." Ibid.

well as its first *Notgeld* success.²³ The timing of the notes' release was calculated for maximum impact. It roughly coincided with the opening of Kahla's *Notgeld* exhibition in September of that year. There was even a commemorative note produced for the exhibition itself, which was

valid only for the exhibition's nine-day run.²⁴ The note's recto features a trompe l'oeil with an elegantly dressed man and a woman standing below a sign announcing the exhibition, ready to enter the exhibition space between parted curtains. On the verso, the note announces itself as "*Notgeld of Notgeld*," and depicts a large dragon crouched above the castle of Leuchtenburg, blowing notes from its mouth at the people gathered below, who rush to grab at the notes in a frenzy. The short verses on the bottom left announce: "From the hall, to the shore, *Notgeld* flies — a legion of *Notgeld*! But if its price were to decline, the collector would feel just fine."²⁵ The popularity of the Muck Series is underscored here by the fact that one of the notes fluttering above the crowd has the word "Muck" written on it.

In the aftermath of the Leuchtenburg incident, Muck-Lamberty stopped his itinerant wandering and came to settle with the remainder of his flock not far away, in Naumburg, just over the border of Thuringia in the state of Saxony-Anhalt. Between 1922 and 1923, he established a *Handwerksgemeinschaft*, or community of skilled labor, which he named the *Werkschar Naumburg*, transforming the Neue



Unknown designer, *Notgeld Ausstellung* note, verso of 75-Pfennig note issued by the Stadtverkehrsamt (City Tourist Office) of Kahla, September 1921. Note measures ca. 7.5x11 cm. Collection of the author. Photo by author.

» ponderousness, but its financial worth is also anchored in substances, such as gold and silver, that maintain a more consistent value due to their limited supply. Similar metaphors of flying and fluttering are also attached to the broadsheet (*Flugblatt*, literally "flying sheet" in German) and the single-sheet print and print portfolio during the November Revolution, as Gustav Hartlaub wrote in *Die neue deutsche Graphik* in 1920. See Jennifer Roberts, *Transporting Visions: The Movement of Images in Early America* (Berkeley, 2014), 115; and Gustav Hartlaub, *Die neue deutsche Graphik* (Berlin, 1920).

23 <http://www.naumburg-geschichte.de/ge-schichte/mucklamberty.htm#16a>, accessed April 2018.

24 Grabowski and Mehl, *Deutsches Notgeld: Deutsche Serienscheine*, Vol.

1. The catalogue number is 669.1.

25 Jennifer Roberts has noted in connection with nineteenth-century American paper currency that the movement of paper notes or credit is

often described as aerial, employing metaphors of "flight or flotation." "Specie, in contrast," she notes, "had a 'ponderous gravity.'" Because of its association with metal, specie's movement may be inhibited by its »

Schar into a communal “*Werk*” *Schar*. This community, in other words, was now defined by skilled labor as much as its communal character.²⁶ With this settling down, Muck-Lamberty’s chosen community came closer, superficially at least, to the values championed by the established communities that had rejected him. The Werkschar was stationary and engaged in productive work rather than disruptive itinerant activities.

It was not a radical departure for Muck-Lamberty, however. Distinct from the other *Inflationsheiligen* of this moment, Muck-Lamberty had long believed that a *Handwerksgemeinschaft* was the appropriate communal form for his band of followers. In 1912 and 1913, before the war, he had planned for the founding of a settlement, based on communistic principles, and had the idea to develop a skilled workers’ land commune with what he called *Umwertungsstellen*, roughly translated as places of revaluation, an echo of Nietzsche’s call for the “Umwertung aller Werte,” the transvaluation of values.²⁷ The plans for this commune, however, were interrupted by the war. They were revived in Naumburg, where Muck-Lamberty decided the community would focus on high-quality woodworking, specifically turning and joinery, skills Muck himself had acquired. The products manufactured by the Werkschar also offered the means for the community to become self-sufficient. The skilled labor of the community would, in other words, improve the Werkschar in both a spiritual and material sense.

The art historian and critic, Wilhelm Uhde, recalled encountering Muck-Lamberty and his followers when they were still the *Neue Schar* in his memoirs in 1920, at the height of the *Wanderprophet*’s popularity. He noted that the two impulses Muck-Lamberty represented—the spiritual rejection of materialism with the simultaneous affirmation of handiwork—were not necessarily in conflict. In other words, for Muck-Lamberty, spiritual transcendence was connected to the material object through physical labor. Uhde argued that the *Schar* “helped the youth to ‘dematerialise,’ to be modest and happy, to free them from the ties of the mechanical. To newly connect their powers with the blessing of skilled trades [*Handwerk*], to integrate them as an essential factor of a German ‘*Volksgemeinschaft*.’”²⁸

A 1925 catalogue of the Werkschar’s output is suggestive of this fusion of the premodern communal sensibilities of Muck-Lamberty’s Werkschar with the possibilities of modern marketing. The cover is an abstraction of one of the Werkschar’s candlesticks, depicted as a

26 The skilled labor settlement that Muck-Lamberty established in Naumburg was first tested during the winter in Leuchtenburg, where the group traded skilled work such as joinery for food with those in the community. One visitor commented on the division of labor among the women and men, the simple meals they kept, and noted that “Der Wirtschaftsbetrieb war kommunistisch” [The economic enterprise was communist]; Linse, *Barfüßige Propheten*, 119.

27 <http://www.naumburg-geschichte.de/geschichte/mucklamberty.htm#15a>.

28 “Die Neue Schar half die Jugend zu entmaterialisieren, sie anspruchslos und froh zu machen, aus den Banden des mechanischen zu befreien. Ihre Kräfte mit dem Segen des Handwerks neu zu verknüpfen, sie als wesentliche Faktor einer deutschen Volksgemeinschaft einzuordnen.” Quoted in *ibid*.

series of downward-facing arrows balanced against the tips of up-turned triangles. This delicate balancing act is not, however, realized by the rustic products inside, which are meant to evoke traditional sensibilities in their shape and assertive use of wood as material.

Yet, one wonders what the Werkschar, a community dedicated to self-perfection through labor, has in common with another communal group dedicated to design and founded during the same period of chiliastic enthusiasm as the Neue Schar: the Bauhaus. The Bauhaus, the design and architecture school founded in 1919 under the leadership of Walter Gropius and located only fifty kilometers away in Weimar, would seem to have few shared features with Muck-Lamberty's Werkschar based on the material output of both groups in spite of their contemporaneous activities and geographic proximity. Indeed, the sharp silhouettes of the Werkschar's candlesticks and lamps that appear in their catalogue are far from the smooth steel and sans-serif designs that we identify as Bauhaus modernist style. Wilhelm Wagenfeld's famous WA 24 lamp, for instance, designed in 1923 and 1924 just as the Werkschar was getting established, is emblematic of this difference; it seems purpose-built from modern materials for modern use. The Werkschar's lamps, in contrast, appear to accommodate electricity only reluctantly, hiding their wiring deep within their dark wood bases.

And yet, there are curious hints of overlap. We do know that Muck-Lamberty spent at least a week in Weimar with the Neue Schar during his tour through Thuringia in 1920, and that Bauhaus students were attracted to the communal events staged by the Neue Schar when the group was traveling through Weimar. Walter Gropius was likewise intrigued by the teaching of another of the *Inflationsheiligen*, Ludwig Christian Hauesser, whom he invited to hold an event at the Bauhaus in 1921. Much has been written about the Bauhaus, of course, including its early years in Weimar when the students and their teachers were influenced by the November Revolution as well as the spiritualism of figures like Johannes Itten.²⁹ But what of its similarities to communities like the Werkschar?

It is worth considering how inflation influenced conceptions of labor and community at both the Bauhaus and the Werkschar Naumburg, two communities of choice built around utopian ideas about labor and craft. Both were led by charismatic individuals that, initially at least, conceived of their community and the importance of labor—specifically *Handwerk*, or handicraft—in spiritual terms and

²⁹ See, for example, Oliver Gabet and Anne Monier, eds., *The Spirit of the Bauhaus* (London, 2018); Christoph Wagner, ed., *Das Bauhaus und die Esoterik: Johannes Itten, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee* (Leipzig, 2005); Rolf Bothe, et al., *Das frühe Bauhaus und Johannes Itten* (Ostfildern-Ruit, 1994); and Éva Forgács, *The Bauhaus Idea and Bauhaus Politics*, trans. John Bártki (Oxford, 1995).

30 Muck-Lamberty and many of the other *Inflationsheligen* experienced renewed popularity with the onset of the worldwide Depression in 1930. Although Muck-Lamberty himself did not embrace National Socialism, scholars such as Ulrike Linse have argued that Muck-Lamberty and the other *Wanderpropheten* exhibited proto-fascist tendencies that the National Socialists would also embrace and use to their advantage. See Linse, *Barfüßige Propheten*.

looked to premodern sources for inspiration as a way to create, and construct, the community of the future. The opportunity for such utopian thinking was encouraged by the inflation. With the stabilization of the economy in 1924 and the introduction of a new currency, *Notgeld* disappeared and communities of place returned, if reluctantly, to the nation. The Bauhaus and the Werkschar proceeded along very different paths. The Bauhaus directed its focus toward a future aligned with modern materials and manufacturing. The Werkschar kept its vision on reviving an idealized past in the present. Their products offered a romanticized, and distinctly *völkisch*, version of that past, which would find new audiences in Germany after 1933³⁰

Erin Sullivan Maynes is Assistant Curator in the Rifkind Center for German Expressionist Studies at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). From 2014 to 2017, she was the Hoehn Curatorial Fellow for Prints at the University of San Diego. She received her PhD in art history from the University of Southern California in 2014 with her dissertation, "Speculating on Paper: Print Culture and the German Inflation, 1918-1924." Her essay, "Making Money: *Notgeld* and the Material Experience of Inflation in Weimar Germany," will be published in the journal *Art History* in September 2019.