Your data or your life. On demonetisation, cashlessness and the digital panopticon in India

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1. Demonetisation as shock therapy

Over the past few years, there has been a growing debate over cashlessness. In several countries, economists, policy makers and financial institutions have insisted on the advantages of cashlessness, considering digital transactions as an instrument of governance pivotal to the achievement of a more transparent and inclusive society. Over these same years, cash has become a symbol of tax evasion, corruption, and criminal activities such as terrorism, the drug trade and human trafficking. In India, most consumer transactions have traditionally been carried out in cash, both in terms of volumes and in terms of value, from when the Indian Government ordered that cash be removed from circulation on November 8th, 2016. In contrast to countries such as Norway or Sweden, where the cash-to-GDP ratio has been slowly declining, banking penetration has always been low in India, with merely 53% of households having one bank account, the number of ATMs/1000 people being 0.1, financial literacy insufficient even for basic operational procedures and the cash-to-GDP ratio of India being among the highest in the world, as summarised by the Indian multinational banking company ICICI in November 2016. In this context, Indians relied heavily on cash for most transactions. Daily workers used to rely on cash to pay for daily errands and emergencies, including possible illnesses, but even for transactions in real estate (Gettleman, 2018). Women used to fold away their cash in their saris and often relied on cash as a hedge against the future. For them, demonetisation did not represent a step towards greater financial inclusion. More dramatically, it meant the risk that they would not to be able to convert their credit into money beyond a certain date. If money is but a promise to pay, the Government's refusal to honour the legal tender status of Rs 500 and Rs 1000 notes beyond a certain date left citizens with no other option but to line up at the nearest bank, hoping they would be able to exchange their old bills for new ones.

In general, the decision to not provide legal backing to 500 and RS 1,000 notes produced a cash crunch in the country. The problem, however, was not

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merely the Government’s controversial decision to suspend withdrawals or the insufficiency of new currency notes but was rather the abruptness with which demonetisation was announced. In those days, individuals holding Rs 500 or Rs 1000 notes could still use them on humanitarian grounds, for instance in government hospitals or in consumer cooperatives. Those who did not have a bank account could only deposit these notes in banks or post offices until December 30th. Soon enough, demonetisation generated panic among the population. Jeffrey Gettleman reported in the New York Times (2018) that some died of heart attacks while waiting in bank lines, while stress “pushed several others to suicide” (Gettleman, 2018). Local newspapers reported episodes of children dying in hospitals after they had been denied treatment following a rejection of demonetised banknotes (Bengali, 2017). According to Kumar and Bumra (2017), the cash shortage forced consumers to cut down on their consumption. In agriculture especially, a labor sector that directly or indirectly employs 75% of the population, farmers experienced a fall in farm income, given their difficulties in selling their products on the street or at the Farmers Market (Sumathy and Savitha, 2017). For millions of farmers, it was impossible to get enough cash to buy seeds and fertilisers for their winter crops (Sumathy and Savitha, 2017). Looking at the impact of demonetisation on the welfare of poor households in the Sundarbans region of India, Zhu et al. (2017) concluded that low income households had limited tools at their disposal to deal with shocks, such as lowering their consumption levels (Zhu et al, 2017). By early January, demonetisation had raised concerns that the cash crunch could lead to famine. In West Bengal, chief minister Mamata Banerjee alerted the public to the fact that farmers were not able to earn money from the growing of vegetables and people were cutting consumption (Dinda, 2017). For the most part, the Indian population works in the informal economy, consisting of poor people with precarious incomes that rely on mutual help to overcome their economic difficulties (Patnaik, 2016a). In this context, the shortage of agricultural demand snowballed onto other labor intensive sectors such as textiles, garments, leather and jewellery, where it affected primarily daily workers who either lost their jobs or were temporarily left out of work.

“Agricultural labour, construction workers, employees of micro-enterprises, the urban and rural poor – mostly from these marginalised castes – have been pushed to the brink of starvation or worse due to loss of jobs and income. The other sections, whose lives have been severely disrupted are small and medium-sized farmers, who are overwhelmingly from other backward castes and artisans, mostly from poorer Muslim communities (...). What the Narendra Modi dispensation is doing through
its devious insistence on a digitalised economy – imposing on the already disadvan-
taged a test designed to not just make them fail but also put the blame for their misery
on their own ‘ignorance’» (Sagar, 2017).

In a study released in 2017 by the Committee to Study the Impact of De-
omonetisation on the State Economy of Kerala, a state in which 98% of trans-
actions occurred in cash until 2013, shortages in cash immediately translated
into a reduction in consumption. In Kerala too, the labor force is largely em-
ployed in the informal sector, often with no written contracts or social secu-
риту. In the Southern State, the cash famine has led to a halt in trade not only
in agriculture but in the traditional sectors of fisheries, coir, handlooms and
cashew processing as well as in crop and plantation agriculture, which in turn
has had an impact on tourism and the service sector (Committee, 2017). In
the end, the two and a half million migrants that work as wage labourers were
the hardest hit, together with cash-intensive sectors such as retail trade, ho-
tels and restaurants, and transportation, which account for over 40% of the
Kerala economy (Committee, 2017).

«Thus 56 per cent of the economic activity of Kerala is immediately affected by
the withdrawal of specified bank notes. Agriculture, whose growth has been low and
constrained over the last few years, will be affected directly by the new policy. Any
turnaround in construction, transport and storage, which have been decelerating in
the recent past, will be delayed» (Committee, 2017, p.6).

According to Chandrasekhar and Ghosh (2018), official estimates of
GDP do not adequately capture the consequences of demonetisation to the
expropriation of purchasing power, jobs, livelihoods and employment for a
considerable part of the population (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh, 2017, p.
425). “It was like breaking the spine of every Indian and seeing whether you
can break it”, argued Arundhati Roy in Democracy Now, on May 4th, 2018.
The consequences did not impact all Indians alike. Even though they had
been at the forefront of the banking movement, women were the hardest hit.
In fact, women often relied on cash

«not only to protect themselves against irresponsible, lazy and alcoholic hus-
bands, but more generally to preserve some control over spending-related decisions.
In a context where the very idea of women’s financial autonomy goes against social
norms, transparency—what banking and digitalisation of payments offers—is per-
ceived more as a source of dispossession than empowerment» (Guérin at al., 2017,
p. 7).
Caste was also an issue. Even though reports insist on the existence of intra-caste mutual help and emphasise that “dense networks of supportive relatives, friends and patrons” remained key “for safeguarding daily life and the future”, people who could not activate their networks simply struggled. Dalit women, in particular, “were not trusted and really struggled to access staple food, petrol, etc”. According to Guérin at al., they felt treated like “goats” or “dogs” (Guérin at al., 2017, p. 6). In general, Dalit women “spent considerable time and energy bargaining, persuading, exchanging, and often putting their self-respect aside, in order to assure their households’ survival” (Guérin at al., 2017, p. 11). For several months, they struggled to protect themselves from demonetisation, mitigating its consequences by cutting consumption or activating their social networks.

2. Deceptive narratives

Despite the turmoil, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi presented demonetisation as a price worth paying for Indian society. In his initial address to the nation on November 8th, 2016, Prime Minister Modi described demonetisation as an opportunity to reduce corruption and black money. The idea was that since most informal transactions in India are carried out in cash, removing cash from circulation would encourage transparency and prevent tax evasion and illegal activities. In those weeks, the Finance Minister Arun Jaitley also defended the long term results of demonetisation. Notably, he insisted that demonetisation would have a negative impact in the short run but that everyone would benefit from a «bigger and cleaner GDP» in the long run. In an interesting way, the mainstream narrative insisted that disabling the “black economy” would enable the government to invest more in public spending. In a useful article, entitled “Demonetisation as the Basis for a Fiscal Stimulus” (2016a), Patnaik observed that BJP spokespersons promised that “black money” would be brought into the country from Swiss Banks and distributed among the people, thus benefiting families in distress with the «obvious aim … to divert people’s minds from the extraordinary distress they are currently facing because of this demonetisation» (Patnaik, 2016a). The problem was that such a hypothesis was largely deceptive, as removing a certain amount of black money from circulation did not mean that the government could spend more, especially if it was to respect the neoliberal request to reduce its fiscal deficit (Patnaik, 2016a). Failing to provide any such benefits, it may not be entirely surprising that Prime Minister Modi quickly changed his narrative. Using a data analysis of the speeches that the Prime
Minister delivered across the country between November 13th and November 27th, Praveen Chakravarty (2016a) observed that while the notion of “black money” was central in Modi’s initial public speeches, together with words such as “fake currency” or “counterfeit”, Prime Minister Modi in fact changed his narrative in less than two weeks. In a way, Modi’s narrative resembled the mainstream narrative around cash, emphasising that cash is a rudiment from the past, «redundant, deviant and criminal» (Brett Scott, 2016), and that the achievement of progress necessarily required a transition to digital transactions. Independent scholar Brett Scott has been particularly insightful in his analysis of cash narratives, stressing the continuity of arguments dealing with the war on cash in India and abroad. Reflecting the spirit of those transnational campaigns that describe cash as the very cause of corruption, Modi argued that cash symbolises “a 70-year-old disease I have to eliminate in 17 months”. “Give me 50 days, then punish me if I am wrong”, he argued in his initial address to the nation, promising that this mission was going to make «the farmer … happy, the trader… prosperous, every woman… empowered and the youth gainfully employed» (quoted in Gandhi, 2016).

Despite such narratives, demonetisation attracted national and international critics. Harvard economist Kenneth Rogoff (2016), a leading advocate of digital transactions, openly criticised Modi’s initiative as counterproductive, arguing that an effective removal of cash needed to be introduced over the course of several years in order to avoid massive collateral damage. Forbes Magazine Editor-in-Chief Steve Forbes maintained that demonetisation was a act «that is not only damaging its economy and threatening destitution to countless millions of its already poor citizens but also breathtaking in its immorality» given the economic damage it did to millions of citizens, thus further impoverishing the least fortunate among the Indian population (Forbes, 2016). Harvard economist Larry Summers, a long time advocate of the abolition of $100 notes in the United States, felt that demonetisation was inadequate to address illegal or corrupt commercial practices that have been prevalent in India for a long time because it led to the expropriation of innocent victims, while most black money is not held in the form of cash but rather converted into «foreign exchange, gold, bitcoin or some other store of value. So it is petty fortunes, not the hugest and most problematic ones, that are being targeted» (Summers and Sarin, 2016). In fact, after demonetisation:

«gold purchases, chit funds, informal loans to others and reciprocal gifts (mostly through ceremonial exchanges) continue to be the most popular ways of saving and guarding against every-day knocks. Gold has the advantage of combining prestige
and liquidity (pawnbrokers are available in every nearby small town) and possibly speculation (Goedecke et al. 2017; Joseph forthcoming). In our sample, 97% of households owned gold, at an average amount that was more than 100 times greater than their bank savings» (Guérin at al., 2017, p. 48).

In a way, buying gold was a common reaction to demonetisation. Even in that case, however, the most vulnerable citizens were the least protected:

«The amount of gold bought varies by caste (on average, middle castes had almost doubled the amount of gold they owned after demonetisation, while Dalits had increased the amount by 30%, and upper castes by 7% only). Only women had bought gold since demonetisation, confirming the above arguments of a gendered response to demonetisation» (Guérin, 2017, p. 49).

3. Your data or your life

Within a few weeks, Prime Minister Modi ceased to focus on the benefits of the war on cash and to emphasise the importance of digital transactions. In fact, a transition towards cashlessness was considered a goal well before demonetisation. In October 2016, US development agency USAID and the Indian Ministry of Finance established a partnership called Catalyst: Inclusive Cashless Payment Partnership, a multi-stakeholder initiative intended to push through the project of a cashless India. As reported in the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) press release:

«Catalyst’s mission is to solve multiple coordination problems that have blocked the penetration of digital payments among merchants and low-income consumers. We look forward to creating a sustainable and replicable model. (…) While there has been (…) a concerted push for digital payments by the government, there is still a last-mile gap when it comes to merchant acceptance and coordination issues. We want to bring a holistic ecosystem approach to these problems».

Ten months earlier, the UN-based Better Than Cash Alliance had supported the project, considering digital India a step towards inclusive growth and poverty reduction. Presented as a symbol of good governance capable of fostering transparency and social inclusion, the transition towards cashlessness found open support in on-line companies that promoted digital transactions.
“Companies that deal in online, cashless transactions, are making the best of this move by the government and are on an advertisement blitzkrieg. Apps and websites like Paytm, Freecharge, Ola Money and Snapdeal ran full page ads in newspapers like the Times of India and The Hindu urging citizens not to worry about the lack of cash and go note-free” (TNM, 2016).

In those days, companies that dealt with on-line transactions, e-commerce or e-wallet platforms ran full page advertisements in national newspapers. The Freecharge company's advertisement on The Times of India stated that “cash is not feeling accepted anymore. We are”, while listing a number of corporate actors that accepted Freecharge transactions within the country. Paytm bought a page in The Times of India to congratulate Modi on demonetisation: “Paytm congratulates Honorable Prime Minister Sh. Narendra Modi on taking the boldest decision in the financial history of Independent India!”. The Ola company added its own commercial stating “Do Note Worry: India is going note-free with Ola Money”, while the advertisement showed a smartphone inside a pocket suggesting using Ola Money on a smart phone app.

Brilliantly, Brett Scott commented on these advertisements and observed that this was not only happening in India. In the same months,

«Visa Europe launched its Cashfree and Proud campaign, to inform cardholders that they can make a Visa contactless payment with confidence and feel liberated from the need to carry cash. The company's press release declared the campaign 'the latest step of Visa UK’s long term strategy to make cash 'peculiar' by 2020.' There you have it. An orchestrated strategy to make us feel weird about cash. (...) Visa is joined by other propagandists. In 2014 Penny for London arrived, an apparently altruistic group set up by the Mayor's Fund for London and Barclaycard, using charity as a hook to switch people to contactless cards on the London Underground. PayPal plastered cities with billboards claiming that 'new money doesn't need a wallet', along with a video proclaiming: 'New money isn't paper, it's progress'. Astro-turfing campaigns like No Cash Day are backed by American Express, highlighting such anti-cash themes as the environmental impact of banknotes. Other tactics include pointing out that criminals use cash, that it fuels the shadow economy, that it's unsafe, and that it facilitates tax evasion'» (Brett Scott, 2019).

Despite such an unprecedented propaganda machine, the promotion of digital transactions was not entirely successful.

«At the time of writing, in late 2017, it appears that this combination of measures has met with very limited success; as the currency crunch eased, people reverted to cash spending. Figure 2 shows that the number of cashless transactions rose sharply
in December 2016, but thereafter has been lower, with little increase since March 2017. Meanwhile, values of digital payments peaked in March 2017, and fell thereafter (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh, 2017, p. 428).

One year after demonetisation, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley maintained that demonetisation «has brought the issue of digitisation of the economy to the centre-stage and the consequence of this has been that in the last one year, the number of digital transactions has almost multiplied by 100%, and new kinds of technologies, applications, instruments have been emerging, the banks and government and other financial/fintech companies have all been innovating and creating new payment gateways, and the mode by which India now spends its money substantially has begun to alter» (quoted in Mishra, 2018).

In fact, opinions were not necessarily aligned. In its 2017 annual report, for example, Visa admitted having worked closely with the Indian government to support demonetisation and having drawn substantial benefits from it: «During the year, we have worked closely with the government of India to help support its demonetisation efforts. In fiscal year 2017, Visa merchant acceptance doubled to 2.5 merchant locations, providing Indian consumers with more opportunities to use digital payments rather than cash» (Visa Annual Report, 2017, p. 7). Despite conflicting opinions, demonetisation did ultimately induce the unbanked and under-banked to open a bank account, even though, as Chandrasekhar and Ghosh observe, a quarter of them had zero balance, while a similarly significant proportion had negligible balances (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh, 2017, p. 430). It did contribute to increased digital payments; mobile wallet transactions, payments through credit/debit cards or prepaid payment instruments. In short, it did help India’s transition from a cash-based economy to the creation of a type of financial inclusion led by those IT companies who deliver financial services. However, it did not improve the lives of the poor. While in the under-banked countryside the cash crunch paralysed transactions and exposed informal sellers, grocers and small vendors to economic uncertainty, thus laying the seeds of the economic displacement of migrant workers, the miraculous narrative of financial inclusion surrounding digital India did not benefit the poor; on the contrary, it contributed to exacerbating competition between a sector of young urban, educated digital workers and a sector of unskilled rural workers who are largely lagging behind.
«Urban middle class India, from which most of the economic policy-makers are recruited, finds it easy to get credit cards; indeed members of this class are often chased by credit-card providers so that they obtain a credit card, but the same is not true for the bulk of the country’s population. [...] As long as there remains a large segment of the economy consisting of poor people with uncertain incomes, that is not considered “creditworthy” by financial institutions and that has to rely on high cost non-institutional sources of credit (in our case this segment covers more than half of the working population), all talk of a cashless economy is just empty talk» (Patnaik, 2016b, p. 1).

Even though it promised to increase digital transactions, the transition to digital payments did not improve salaries or social protections of millions of Indians, it did not increase labor formalisation nor did it change their credit-worthiness or generalised poverty. It only relied on promises of financial rewards and on coercive measures to promote cashless transactions and increase the social control of society (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh, 2017, p. 426).

4. Aadhaar and the digital panopticon

In point of fact, digital transactions did not improve the economic conditions of poor Indians. On the contrary, they forced the under-banked Indians to open bank accounts and linked them in to a system of digital identification that was associated with social redistribution schemes (Chauhan, 2017). This is the case of Aadhaar, a Unique ID project (UIP) based on biometric identification which has has been used in India to transit the main food security program towards digitality in order to facilitate financial inclusion and promote distributive justice, as explained in the webpage dedicated to the Aadhaar program by the Indian Government. For several months, Aadhaar has been considered as both the enabler and the main beneficiary of demonetisation. In fact, Aadhaar uses fingerprints and iris scanning to identify citizens and register them as welfare recipients them using a twelve-digit number. In general, “as the Government pushed for a cashless economy, more people came forward to link their bank accounts with Aadhaar, especially those benefiting from government schemes,” said a senior UIDAI official (Chauhan, 2017). According to The Status of Aadhaar 2016-17, there has been a steep increase in Aadhaar enrolments after demonetisation. Since then, Aadhaar has contributed to the opening of over 300 million bank accounts in India and citizens have also been required to use Aadhaar as an identification system for Indian redistribution schemes. As Silvia Masiero argues in her article "The digitalization of anti-poverty programs: Aadhaar..."
and the Reform of Social Protection in India" (Masiero, 2019), the literature over the past two decades has largely focused on the role of technology in solving problems of effectiveness and accountability. At the same time, technology is not simply a «carrier of policy», Masiero claims. In so far as technology is considered as a carrier of anti-poverty policies, under a central government scheme enabling biometric identification, Aadhaar has reformed the main social safety schemes and affected its beneficiaries.

«At the micro level, the system leads to monitoring a specific part of the PDS supply chain, specifically ration dealers (last-mile retailers), on whom much of the corruption in the program is blamed. At the macro level, Indian states can appropriate the same technology, aimed at reshaping the PDS with a cash transfer program, to protect the program in its existing form and to implement reforms to minimize leakage and corruption. Aadhaar’s infrastructure hence envisages a new policy direction for the poor and marginalised, oriented to direct cash transfers as opposed to food subsidies, which states can partially renegotiate according to local visions and priorities» (Masiero, 2019, p. 155).

If we look at the role of Aadhaar in India, it is clear that requiring citizens to rely on a digital identification system to receive benefits and social protections is a coercive way to push through a digital agenda. The fact is that the requirement to link social redistribution schemes to a system of digital identification, translated into a policy of exclusion, rather than inclusion, that denied economic assistance to those individuals that were entitled to receive it. The problem overarches digital transactions and goes back to the difference between cash and digital money. In his 2019 article “Gentrification of Payments. Spreading the Digital Financial Net”, Brett Scott highlights the distinction between cash tokens and digital tokens. Even though we tend to think of digital tokens as the electronic version of cash, the notion of cash usually refers to the currency in circulation, the total amount of cash and notes backed by central banks and government treasuries that is generally referred to as M0 in the money supply. Digital money, on the contrary, refers to the promises of payment issued by commercial banks and often existing in the form of bank deposits that account for 90% to the 99% of the money supply, depending on the country. In this context, cash transactions require two actors that physically exchange state-backed money. On the contrary, digital transactions require a third actor that has the ability to approve or deny any monetary activity (Scott, 2019). Brett Scott gives the example of credit cards. Anytime we pay by credit card, we ask the credit card company to identify us as the holders of our own account and we demand that the credit
card company mediate our payment request to the bank and lastly communicate the bank's approval or denial to the seller. In other words, our transactions rely on the arbitrary power of a corporate intermediary.

«The process might entail layers of intermediary institutions – from telecommunications companies to tech firms to credit card networks – but in the end the same basic thing is happening: a message ends up at my bank (or at a secondary payment service provider using a bank to clear transactions) requesting that they alter my account. Even in situations where it appears that banks are not involved, they are. Services like PayPal, M-Pesa in Kenya, Paytm in India or WeChat in China are essentially new layers built over the banking digital money system, collaborative ventures with banks, or intermediaries between you and a bank. You can have accounts with them, but they in turn will have accounts with banks» (Brett Scott, 2019).

In India, the process was similar. Linking social redistribution schemes to a system of digital identification such as Aadhaar implies that anytime the working poor need to access their benefits, they ask Aadhaar to identify them as the beneficiaries entitled to receive assistance and demand that the system mediates their request and lastly that it communicates the state's approval or denial of such request to them. It is not surprising that several thousand people have been excluded from social programs despite their legal entitlement, to the extent of causing death and starvation to individuals who were excluded by public distribution systems (PDS). According to Sircar (2018),

«In several well-documented instances of exclusion that petitioners have submitted before the court, citizens with Aadhaar have been denied ration because their thumb impression could not be read or matched with the fingerprint in UIDAI’s biometric records».

According to Dey and Roy (2015), over 25 percent of card holders have been unable to receive their food rations, which amounts to 250,000 families while 10,000 social security pensioners could not receive their pensions (Dey and Roy, 2015). For thousands of people, Aadhaar became a system of exclusion that denied subsidies to those who were entitled to receive them. In this sense, poverty and the need for economic assistance become opportunities for digital accumulation. Each customer's data are collected by corporate data centres that can exercise strict control over their lives. Drawing on the experience of the Social Credit System in China, where corporate data-centres, in collaboration with the central state, evaluate each person’s economic conduct and decide whether their transactions should be approved or denied,
cashlessness potentially creates a digital panopticon that conditions agency to the corporate approval of each person's economic behaviour.

5. Hacking Cashlessness

In this context, there are at least three sets of problems. The first problem is that the war on cash exposes citizens to financial exclusion, rather than inclusion, increasing inequality and exposing individuals to corporate control and economic despotism. The second is that, in the case of Aadhaar, inadequate security practices have revealed the data of up to 135 million Aadhaar sensitive numbers, in what has been described as a social calamity. The third problem is that demonetisation does not merely entail a transformation of cash into digital money. Digital money disrupts the cash-based economy and its informal, unaccountable relationships to create a digital panopticon that condemns humanity to live at the mercy of a network of interest groups that comprise banks, credit card companies and the entire IT sector.

According to Brett Scott:

«There are three commercial interest groups who stand to benefit from such a society. The first is the banking sector itself, which controls the underlying bank account infrastructure that people will have to use in a cashless society. The second is big payments companies like Visa and Mastercard, who facilitate the transfer — or, more accurately, editing — of money between those bank accounts. The third is the broader financial technology — or fintech — industry that builds services on top of this, like phone apps and payments gadgets that are plugged into this infrastructure» (Scott, 2017, p.149).

Banks, fintech and credit card companies have a direct interest in cashlessness, as digital transactions allow them to reduce the number of ATMs, cut branches and costs, while credit card companies such as Visa and Mastercard extract rent from every transaction. In this perspective, demonetisation could be considered as a levy towards digitalisation: a coercive, controversial and contradictory political decision intended to transform digital transactions into an instrument for data accumulation and social control. Just like Hurricane Katrina relied upon a history of neglect of public infrastructure in order to “wage war on the very idea of the public sphere and the public good”, as Noemi Klein argued (2017), the war on cash undermines trust in the cash-based economy to coerce the poor into a digital ecosystem that uses
their needs as a levy for corporate accumulation. As argued in the USAID report *Beyond cash* (2016), cash entraps both merchants and consumers in its own ecosystem.

«Since few traders accept digital payments, few consumers have an interest in it, and since few consumers use digital payments, few traders have an interest in it. Given that banks and payment providers charge fees for equipment to use or even just try out digital payment, a strong external impulse is needed to achieve a level of card penetration that would create mutual interest of both sides in digital payment options» (Norbert Häring, 2017).

On the contrary, the ability to shift customers to digital payments benefits traders and merchants alike. In this sense, it is not only customers who are leading the digital revolution, for reasons of efficiency or simply to reduce “the pain of payment”, the process that Duke Professor Dan Ariely describes as the agony of partying with our money. In the context of demonetisation, customers are coerced into using digital money in order to undermine a social ecosystem based on cash and partake of a digital economy based on the grand expansion of the IT sector, credit card companies and fintech. The point here is not only how digital money will not reduce inequality, but how pervasive it will be in its control of every form of unaccountable life. Brett Scott once said «a fintech developer once told me that cash is a bug standing in the way of full automation» (Scott, 2019). Instead of sleepwalking into a digital panopticon, maybe we should consider that cash can be a strategic ally in the struggle against digital and financial despotism.

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