

EC275 From Barter to Bitcoin: Philosophy and History of Money

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Course Description

When and how did human societies introduce money as a medium of exchange? What are the most important theories of this phenomenon? What are the challenges to the money economy in contemporary society? Does a return to the gold standard avoid bank runs and financial crises? Is Free Banking the answer and do we need central banks? “From Barter to Bitcoin” explores the evolution of monetary systems from primitive barter economies to present-day currencies like stablecoins or Bitcoin. Studying our banking system from its origins in Renaissance Italy to its modern forms will allow us to critically evaluate status quo and alternatives. Our readings include classic accounts by Georg Simmel and Max Weber, as well as more recent work by George Selgin and Felix Martin. The curriculum extends beyond historical narratives to equip students with an analytical framework that is essential to understanding modern financial markets and the ways in which these are regulated. Drawing on the fundamental textbook by Frederic Mishkin, *Money, Banking, and Financial Markets*, we apply the analytical framework to assess the implications of Modern Monetary Theory and the consequences of digital currencies, whether privately or publicly issued.

Learning Outcomes

- **Historical Understanding:** Demonstrate knowledge of the historical evolution of monetary systems from primitive barter economies to contemporary digital currencies. Analyze and compare major theories on the introduction and function of money in human societies, including classical perspectives by Georg Simmel and Max Weber.
- **Analytical Skills:** Develop an analytical framework to understand the mechanisms of modern financial markets and the role of money within them. Utilize insights from the readings to analyze current financial market trends and regulatory practices.
- **Communication and Presentation Skills:** Develop the ability to articulate complex concepts related to the philosophy and history of money in both written and oral forms. Collaborate with peers to present and discuss assigned chapters, fostering a deeper understanding of the course material.

Requirements

Prerequisites

This is an advanced economics course. Students taking this course should have already successfully completed Macroeconomics.

Textbook

We will closely follow the following textbook:

- Mishkin, Frederic (2021) "The Economics of Money, Banking and Financial Markets". Pearson, 13th edition

The following book is required reading. Each week, two students will present two chapters from the book. With 16 chapters in total, we will complete the book by about week 8.

- Felix Martin (2015) "Money: The Unauthorized Biography--from Coinage to Cryptocurrencies"

Computer and software requirements

The students will be required to bring their laptops to some of the classes. During the course we will use the statistical software Stata. You are required to have your own copy of Stata. The faculty will try to organize complimentary copies of Stata.

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Accommodations

Bard College Berlin is committed to inclusion and providing equal access to all students; we uphold and maintain all aspects of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and Section 3 of the German Disability Equality Act of April 27, 2002 (Federal Law Gazette I p. 1468). If you have a disability, or think you may have a disability, please contact the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, Atticus Kleen, (accommodations@berlin.bard.edu) to request an official accommodation.

Requests for accommodations should be made as early as possible to ensure adequate time for coordination and planning. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and may require advance notice to implement.

If you have already been approved for accommodations with the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, please arrange to meet with me outside of class so that we can develop an implementation plan.

Students may face extenuating circumstances related to various personal or external factors, which impact their academic performance. While these circumstances often do not fall within the legal framework of Disability Accommodations, Bard College Berlin is committed to supporting students experiencing such circumstances. A student needing a short extension or a replacement assignment because of an extenuating circumstance is encouraged to make arrangements directly with instructors if possible. If further support is needed, please visit the [Bard College Berlin Accessibility page](#). Questions about this process can be directed to James Harker (j.harker@berlin.bard.edu) or Maria Anderson-Long (m.andersonlong@berlin.bard.edu).

Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences from twice-per-week courses or the equivalent (e.g. one absence from a once-per-week course) should not affect the participation grade or require documentation.

Bard College Berlin may not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

Assessment

Assessment will be based on attendance, preparation for classes, student presentations, regular and active participation, possibly quizzes and handing problems sets, as well as a mid-term and a final exam.

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where a professor agrees to accept a late assignment, it should be submitted by the new deadline agreed upon by both parties. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students receive end-of-semester grades for their seminar work. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Grade Breakdown

- Handing in problem sets and quizzes 25%
- Student presentations and seminar participation 25%
- Mid-term exam 25%
- Final exam 25%

Problem sets

Problem sets are mandatory and due one week after being given. Problem sets will be given throughout the course where appropriate and constitute an integral part of the final grade. Solutions to problem sets need to be uploaded on Google classroom. Make sure that your solutions are organized and clearly written.

Schedule

The Fall semester runs from Monday, August 31 and runs until Friday, December 18, with the Fall break planned from Monday, October 19, - Sunday, October 25, 2026.

- Normal course sessions end on Friday, December 11.
- Completion week is from Monday, December 14 through Friday, December 18.
- Make-up classes and final exams can take place in completion week.
- Students are required to be on campus during completion week.

Tentative course structure

- **Week 1**
 - Textbook: An Overview of the Financial System
 - Additional reading*:
 - What Is Money?
 - Getting Money's Measure
- **Week 2**
 - Textbook: What Is Money?
 - Additional reading*:
 - The Aegean Invention of Economic Value
 - The Monetary Maquis
- **Week 3**
 - Textbook: The Meaning and the Behavior of Interest Rates
 - Additional reading*:
 - The Birth of the Money Interest
 - The Natural History of the Vampire Squid
- **Week 4: Banking and the Management of Financial Institutions**
 - Additional reading*:
 - The Great Monetary Settlement
 - The Economic Consequences of Mr. Locke
- **Week 5: Economic Analysis of Financial Regulation**
 - Additional reading*:
 - Money Through the Looking-Glass
 - Strategies of the Sceptics
- **Week 6: Financial Crises in Advanced Economies**
 - Additional reading*:
 - Structural Solutions
 - Hamlet Without the Prince: How Economics Forgot Money...
- **Week 7: Financial Crises in Emerging Economies**
 - Additional reading*:
 - .. and Why It Is a Problem
 - How to Turn the Locusts into Bees
- **Week 8: Central Banking and the Conduct of Monetary Policy**
 - Additional reading*:
 - The Boldest Measures Are the Safest
 - Taking Money Seriously
- **Week 9: The Money Supply Process**
 - Additional reading: Geoffrey Ingham (1996)
- **Week 10: Tools of Monetary Policy**
 - Additional reading: George Selgin (1999)
- **Week 11: The Conduct of Monetary Policy: Strategy and Tactics**
 - Additional reading: tba
- **Week 12: The Foreign Exchange Market**

- Additional reading: tba
- **Week 13:** The International Financial System
 - Additional reading: tba
- **Week 14:** Quantity Theory, Inflation, and the Demand for Money
 - Additional reading: tba

*) Additional reading: If no author is specified, the reading is from Martin (2015).

Classes missed due to federal holidays will not be rescheduled.

(this version: July 13, 2026)