

Coins and banknotes: vectors of Covid-19 contamination or collateral victims?

In the context of the current pandemic, many rumors are circulating about vectors of contamination. Among these, cash is often designated as a transmission medium. But is cash really more dangerous than other means of payment? Or is he just an easy victim designated by lobbies aiming to replace him with electronic means of payment?

It all started in December 2012, at a time when the Covid-19 was still unknown. But some coronavirus epidemics like SARS or MERS had already taken their toll in Asia and the Middle East. It was then that a study from the University of Oxford appeared, relayed by MasterCard and whose authors identified 26,000 bacteria on banknotes. It complements a study carried out in 2007 by the virology laboratory of the University Hospitals of Geneva (HUG), and relayed by numerous media including *Le Figaro*, which had proved that banknotes could present traces of influenza virus 120 hours after being infected.

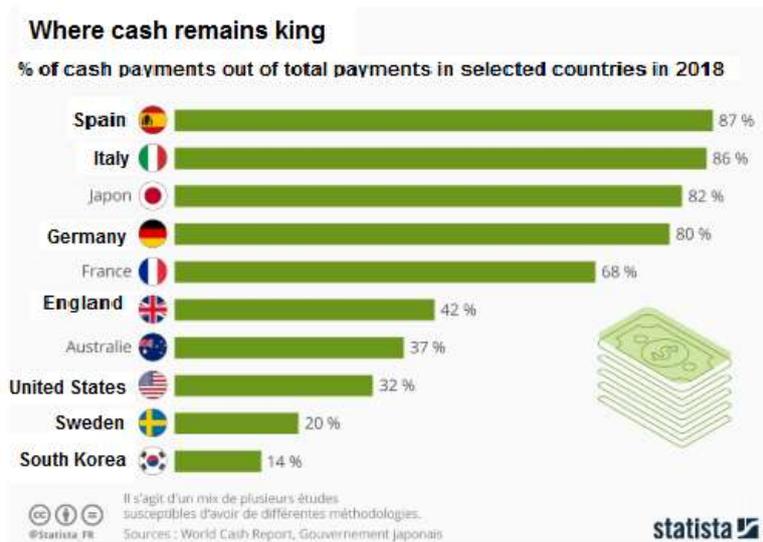
Inevitably, at the start of 2020, with the SARS-Cov-2 type coronavirus pandemic, distrust of cash resurfaces. With the battery of precautionary measures, from social distancing to confinement, including customer limitations in food businesses, or staff who are sick or unable to come to work, automatic cash registers are even more prevalent than traditional cash registers, with a premium for payments by mobile or bank card at the expense of cash.

To facilitate these processes and limit the risk of contamination, payment specialists are increasing their choices. Swisscard AECS (payment company owned by Credit Suisse and American Express) announced on April 8 that it would raise the limit for contactless payments for holders of a card issued by partner establishments, from 40 to 80 francs., without needing to enter the PIN code (and therefore without having to put your fingers on a numeric keypad potentially infected by a previous client carrying the virus). "We are very pleased to be able to support sales staff and consumers in the corona crisis in that higher amounts can also be paid at the checkout completely without contact."[Swiss Payment Association](#)

The resistance of cash

For some, however, the dangers of contamination from coins and notes can be avoided without eliminating their uses. And they point to the will and expediency of certain lobbies wishing to eliminate the use of cash in everyday transactions. This is particularly the case of Thierry Lebeaux, secretary general of [ESTA \(European Security Transport Association\)](#), which brings together professionals in the transport and use of cash at the continental level: "The current pandemic is a very good pretext for advancing the business strategy of payment service providers, by card or by mobile, which are almost all American and who have declared a war on cash for fifteen years. They decided to do everything they could to eliminate the cash. But it did not work well. They launched electronic wallet systems that were supposed to replace cash in the early 2000s, all of which closed. Cash has a number of essential and irreplaceable features that are found in other payment methods, but none except cash brings them all together. "

However, cash resists. In many European countries (especially southern European countries), more than 60% of transactions are still carried out with coins and banknotes and not by electronic means of payment.



In Switzerland, according to a study by PostFinance, cash payments remain the preferred means of payment for purchases by 36% of residents, barely behind the debit card (38.3%) but ahead of the credit card (23, 2%).

A market share that remains significant despite decades of alternative solutions, from the generalization of checks in the early 20th century to cryptocurrencies in the course of the past decade, including traveler's checks, debit cards, credit cards, mobile payment or digital solutions like PayPal...

So many solutions whose official goal was to secure payments and to be able to trace each transaction, with the beneficiary, the payer, the date, the place and often the reason for the transaction... "Until now and until advent of the contactless, the new forms of electronic payment have not taken large market shares in cash. Mobile payments, for example, took more on card payment than cash. The contactless changed all that by replacing cash for small transactions. This substitution could be done exclusively because contactless payment is above all a payment without any security. If we impose the obligation of a signature or a code, the transaction becomes longer. Payment with a PIN code becomes less attractive", analyzes Thierry Lebeaux.

Why be wary of cash?

On the point of contamination of the virus by coins and banknotes, the researchers are still very cautious at this stage. "The SARS-CoV-2 virus is transmitted by person-to-person contact, not by contact with contaminated objects such as cash. There is currently no evidence of the lifespan of Covid-19 on surfaces, from a few minutes to hours or even potentially several days, depending on temperature, humidity and type of surface. Switching from cash to plastic is not proven to be more effective in terms of protection, except by reducing possible contact between hands," said Marilyn Roberts, microbiologist and professor of health at the school of public health. from the University of Washington.

"Some countries wash or disinfect cash, but so far we have no data to prove that this process works. The best protection remains social distancing: limiting person-to-person contact by closing schools, bars and other crowded places. This is what will slow down infections, prevent congestion in hospital systems, and reduce human loss. This is why everyone must do their part and adopt social distancing rather than wondering about using cash or a credit card," added the American researcher.

Therefore, why should some companies have an interest in reducing the volume of cash transactions, as Thierry Lebeaux suspects? "These companies have motivations other than health because they earn a lot of money on card transactions and nothing on cash. They purposely exacerbate the fear of contamination to advance their commercial interest even when payment by card, even without contact, does nothing to protect consumers. Cash suffers from a great handicap: it is made available to the public mainly by financial institutions which also have competing means of payment, and highly profitable for them, to offer to their customers. Conversely, managing cash volumes costs banks. . Those who use cash do it for two reasons: trust, already, because a note is a debt of the central bank towards the holder

of the note and, except in the event of a major crisis, it is guaranteed; and respect for private life because we do not all want to find ourselves naked by revealing the slightest aspect of our private life as the payment data allow. ” This is the argument of discretion for the followers of cash.

Transparency and delinquency

Is cash the most discreet way to hide transactions? To those who slip that honest citizens have nothing to fear, Sami Coll, researcher at the Institute of Sociological Research of the University of Geneva, retorts: "As soon as I hear that we have nothing to hide, I tick. And even if it's not illegal, we still have things to hide. Buying flowers or chocolate from a friend or colleague is not illegal, but it can break a couple. ” Thierry Lebeaux adds: "We cannot be satisfied with the idea that we should not fear transparency if we have nothing to hide: that was the argument of STASI under the old RDA to justify its surveillance! Today there are still a few islands of privacy in a world where everything is known: let's not destroy them. Imagine, for example, the interest that insurance companies might have in going through the expense lists of their policyholders, and then adjusting the premiums according to their consumption patterns. If you buy too much chocolate, we will increase your premiums, and if you do not pay a fitness subscription with your card we will also increase them. ”

As for the cash associated with banditry and delinquency, the general secretary of ESTA wants to put things back in place: the purpose of criminal organizations is to generate profits not cash. Cash is also a problem for them, especially when the volumes are large, because they become visible. He refers to a report by the Belgian financial intelligence services according to which most of the suspicious transaction reports they have to investigate are on the basis of cash transactions: if we remove the cash, there will be no less illegal transactions, but the authorities will see much less because they do not have the technical means to detect large transactions when they are broken up into a multitude of transfers of small amounts.

In addition, cash still enjoys prestige and generates trust with citizen-consumers. After the earthquakes in New Zealand in 2011, the government of the country had to set up cash distribution systems, up to NZ \$ 350 per capita, because nothing was working in and around Christchurch, more electricity nothing more. Without banknotes and coins, many households would have been completely destitute of everything. A few years later, the director of the New Zealand national reserve, in a conference given with the ESTA, "had argued for a balanced distribution between cash and electronic payments. Cash is what works when nothing else works; too much electronic payments in an economy is a vulnerability, not a force,"notes Thierry Lebeaux.

The necessary cash margins

“The cash ontology is radically different from the digital ontology: we cannot guarantee the same discretion. We will never completely replace cash with digital. This is true at all levels of digitization: when you digitize a service, you strengthen the power of a certain form of digital technocracy. What we are currently witnessing with the rumours of contamination by coins and notes, is that we are seeking to break the bond of trust between the citizen and his central bank, his state, and to further eliminate payment by cash. We like to be scared, it's part of our psychological economy. And there, to serve their own interests, the detractors of cash feed this fear, even more effectively than a good horror film.

Sami Coll also mentions a certain number of marginal cases with profiles who benefit from cash: “Sometimes people benefiting from unemployment insurance who want to start a small activity as self-employed will have to rely on cash. Because by their precariousness they will be afraid of being thrown out of unemployment insurance which tracks any form of independent activity. This is what the sociology of deviance theorizes: innovation must sometimes go through illegality. Not out of taste, but out of necessity, because the laws cannot properly frame everything. They need time to adapt. ”

For all these reasons, a growing number of voices are rising to denounce a form of cabal against cash. With the difficult circumstances of the crisis and the legitimate fears of contamination, the opportunity would be unexpected for those who use electronic means of payment. For Sami Coll, "although the disappearance of cash as we know it today would be irreversible in the medium term, it would very likely end up re-emerging first locally, but with different forms and without state control on production or the necessary bond of trust between the government and the population”.