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The Unconscious of the Political Economy

El inconsciente de la economía política

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The libidinal tensions described by Freud are not simply internal to the subject but are part of the interpersonal (family) politics, power struggle – this is why Etienne Balibar (2016), points out that, in his description of the formation of a crowd and the genesis of the superego, Freud doesn't provide a "psychoanalysis of politics" (an explanation of the political dynamic of crowds through libidinal processes which are in themselves apolitical) but rather its opposite, the politics of psychoanalysis (the explanation of the rise of the triadic structure of Ego-Id-Superego through the familial "political" power struggles). This is what Marx is doing in his "critique of political economy": he is bringing out its unconscious – which is why he calls the object of his critique "political economy."

The standard Freudo-Marxist idea that the explanation of the subjective features of individuals living in today's capitalism (why do millions act and vote against their obvious interests? why can they be mobilized for nationalist, religious and military struggles which pose a threat to their very lives?) in the terms of the determination by economic base is insufficient – to explain such phenomena, Marxist economic analysis has to be supplemented by a psychoanalytic research into collective libidinal investments. Adrian Johnston¹ convincingly rejects this view: while he agrees that Marxism needs psychoanalysis, he convincingly argues that these unconscious libidinal mechanisms are at work already in the very heart of the "economic base": we just have to read Marx closely to see that the individuals caught in the capitalist reproduction do not really follow their egotist interests – they act as the instruments of the capital's drive to ever-expanding reproduction, ready to renounce to many life pleasures: "Maybe Marx ought to be credited not only with inventing the psychoanalytic concept of the symptom *avant la lettre*, as Lacan proposes, but also with inventing the analytic idea of the drive prior to Freud." Johnston, of course, does not ignore the complexity of the interaction between the reproduction of capital and the subjective life of capital's agents who are also "psychical subjects of enjoyments having to do with socio-symbolic secondary gains exuded from the pure accumulation of capital" – just think about the esteem gained by the charities of today's ultra-wealthy neo-feudal masters.

The very difference between economic base and its political and ideological superstructure is not simply a universal feature of human history: it is actualized as such only in the capitalist society in which economic life does not rely on direct (non-economic) relations of domination (in the same sense in which, for Marx, although all history till now is the history of class struggles, bourgeoisie is the first class "for itself" – before capitalism, class differences were obfuscated by estate hierarchies). However, the obverse of this emergence of the economic base in its autonomy, outside its links with political and ideological superstructure, is that, at the same time, in capitalism economy itself is more than ever "theologized," i.e., that theo-

1. See Adrian Johnston's monumental Infinite Greed (manuscript). All non-accredited quotes are from this source.

logy, the highest and most spiritual form of ideology, directly structures economy – as Walter Benjamin pointed out, capitalism is a mode of secularized religion, the world of commodities is impregnated by “theological niceties,” with capital itself as an obscene self-moving divinity. So, we can further specify our premise: the unconscious of the political economy is theological, which again confirms Lacan’s claim that God is unconscious.

The link between the unconscious and the capitalist economy is indicated already by Freud. To explain the distinction between the (conscious) wish encoded in a dream and the dream’s unconscious desire, Freud (1976) compares the wish to the contractor (manager, entrepreneur) and the unconscious desire to the capital that finances (covers the libidinal expenses of) the translation of this wish into a dream:

To speak figuratively, it is quite possible that a day thought plays the part of the contractor (entrepreneur) in the dream. But it is known that no matter what idea the contractor may have in mind, and how desirous he may be of putting it into operation, he can do nothing without capital; he must depend upon a capitalist to defray the necessary expenses, and this capitalist, who supplies the psychic expenditure for the dream is invariably and indisputably a wish from the unconscious, no matter what the nature of the waking thought may be. (p. 561)

Clear as it is, this metaphor lends itself to a superficial reading which totally misses its point. That is to say, it may appear that the work proper (dream-work) is just a mediator between the conscious wish and the unconscious capital: the contractor (conscious wish) borrows from the unconscious the capital to finance its translation into the dream language. Here, however, we have to take into account Freud’s insistence on how the unconscious desire “infects” the dream only through the dream work: the exclusive source of the unconscious desire is the work of encoding/masking the dream thoughts, it does not have a substantial being outside this work. This primacy of form over content also accounts for the paradox of perversion in the Freudian theoretical edifice: perversion demonstrates the insufficiency of the simple logic of transgression. The standard wisdom tells us that perverts practice (do) what hysterics only dream about (doing), i.e., “everything is allowed” in perversion, a pervert openly actualizes all repressed content – and nonetheless, as Freud emphasizes, nowhere is repression as strong as in perversion, a fact more than confirmed by our late-capitalist reality in which total sexual permissiveness causes anxiety and impotence or frigidity instead of liberation. Lacan’s (2007) reading of this “metaphor” of Freud is instructive here:

These are things that look like they are a metaphor. Isn’t it amusing to see how this takes on a different value after what I have been telling you concerning the relationship between capitalism and the function of the master –concerning the altogether distinct nature of what can be done with the process of accumulation in the presence of surplus jouissance– in the very presence of this surplus jouissance, to the exclusion of the big fat jouissance, plain jouissance, jouissance that is realized in copulation in the raw? Isn’t this precisely where infantile desire gets its force from, its force of accumulation with respect to this object that constitutes the cause of desire, namely that which is accumulated as libido capital by virtue, precisely, of infantile non-maturity, the exclusion of jouissance that others will call normal? There you have what suddenly gives Freud’s metaphor its proper connotation when he refers to the capitalist. (p. 98)

Or, as Johnston puts it in a succinctly brutal way: “Analysis is not about teaching neurotics how to fuck.” It is about making them abandon the fantasy of full normal fuck, about making them identify with their “symptom,” with the fragile arrangement of the figures of enjoyment that enable them to go on living without too much suffering and pain. The point of Lacan’s reading of Freud’s metaphor of capitalism is very precise here, it reaches beyond the mechanism of dreams into sexual life itself: in the same way, the capitalist who wants to start an enterprise has to borrow the capital from a bank or another pre-existing fund, a subject who wants to engage in a “normal” sexual activity has

to mobilize “that which is accumulated as libido capital by virtue, precisely, of infantile non-maturity” –in short, when we are engaged in “normal” mature sex (“jouissance that is realized in copulation in the raw”), we can do this only if our activity is sustained by pre-mature infantile sexual fantasies. The promise that, at some point, we will reach the “big fat” full jouissance at its purest, leaving behind infantile fantasies, is in itself the ultimate fantasy– to quote Johnston (2022), if a subject were to throw itself without restraint into the abyss of impossible full jouissance,

the whole unconscious economy orbiting around the (absent) center of jouissance would grind to a halt and come crashing down. There would be a psychical market collapse causing the libidinal economy to sink into the depression of ‘subjective destitution’. The primal repression concealing from the libidinal investor the truth that the economy he/she participates in is, in a sense, one giant Ponzi scheme erected on nothing more than empty promises of ‘big fat jouissance, plain jouissance, jouissance that is realized in copulation in the raw’ (as per the already-quoted Lacan of Seminar XVII) would be lifted and the jig would be up. A libidinal investor who would go to King Oedipus’s bitter end and try to cash out for good would end up empty handed or, perhaps worse still, with a handful of delivered shit in place of promised gold. (p. 23)

Johnston uses here the term “subjective destitution” in the rather common sense of a fall into depression, of the subject’s psychic collapse which disables its ability to desire. However, I think Lacan’s “subjective destitution” rather refers to a form of self-erasure without any reliance on the survival in posterity through my work, but which in no way incapacitates my full engagement. This subjective stance is perfectly rendered by Vladimir Mayakovsky, THE poet of the October revolution: “Die / die, my verse / like any rank and file / like those of us / who fought and fell anonymous.” What makes this stance unique is that it does not involve any false modesty – Mayakovsky quite often refers to himself in a quite cocky way: “I am not like everyone else - I am Mayakovsky. / I sit and eat my horse steak.” It is precisely this uniqueness that he is ready to sacrifice.²

For Lacan (who uses this term only twice, as far as I know), “subjective destitution” designates the “traversing of fantasy” as the concluding moment of the psychoanalytic process; there is no catastrophic depression that explodes at this moment (although Freud and Lacan also evoke the possibility of a suicidal “negative therapeutic reaction”). Analysts who are expected to pass through subjective destitution certainly do not lose their ability to desire – Lacan regularly talks about the analyst’s desire. The status of objet petit a as the object-cause of desire is not limited to its role in fantasy, which is why our libidinal life is not caught into the debilitating alternative: either we are caught into the fantasy of chasing the forever-eluding full jouissance, or if we rip up the veil of fantasy and confront the void of the Thing, we fall into suicidal depression. The first solution is obvious: subjective destitution brings about the shift from desire to drive, and in drive, enjoyment is not forever postponed but always-already won since what we enjoy is the very repeated failure of our attempt to reach the Thing. And is, as Johnston demonstrated in his reading of Marx, drive also not the basic libidinal component of the capitalist expanded self-reproduction condensed in the formula of M-C-M’, from money to more money (with ‘, surplus-value, added to it)? If then, capitalism involves the infinitization of desire, forever postponing its full gratification, the temptation is here to conceive the exit from capitalism as a return to a new version of the premodern/precapitalist “closed economy” in which we renounce the expansion as a self-goal and enjoy a modest self-satisfied life. The main candidate for this return to a “closed economy” is today’s ecology which tends to perceive Nature itself as the limit to our expansion, and enjoins us,

2. The Mayakovsky quotes are taken from mayakovsky-poems_compress (1).pdf.

humans, to renounce our hubris, our ruthless exploitation of nature. Now that God or Tradition can no longer play the role of the highest Limit, Nature takes over this role.

Marx is opposed to this view – he always emphasizes the liberating aspect of capitalism – as Marx repeatedly claims, capitalism is in itself already liberation since Communism involves the infinite plasticity of needs and the expansion of production as its own goal. Marx sees capitalist infinite greed also a precursor of Communism as the infinite expansion of human productivity. The passage from capitalism to Communism is thus the passage within the horizon of the endlessly-expanding drive. The difficult question to be raised here is: does Marx remain caught in the capitalism productivist paradigm, so that what he imagines as Communism is for him “capitalism without capitalism”? In capitalism, the true goal of production is the expanded self-reproduction of capital while workers work for survival, to satisfy their needs. In a post-capitalist society, workers will not work for the satisfaction of their needs but for the pleasure of expanded production itself.

Let us deal with this topic by way of following the role of a certain rhetorical figure in Marx’s writings. Especially in his youthful texts, Marx regularly resorts to the rhetorical figure of “instead of”: his implicit (and sometimes explicit) line of reasoning begins with “instead of...” (which stands for the alleged “normal” state of things), and then they goes on to describe the alienated inversion of this “normal” state: instead of being the realization of the worker, labor appears as the loss of his realization; instead of appearing as what it is, the appropriation of the object in through labor appears as its estrangement; instead of possessing what he produces, the more the worker produces the less he possesses; instead of civilizing himself through producing civilized objects, the more civilized his object, the more barbarous becomes the worker; etc., etc. The implication of this figure is that the revolution should somehow return things to normal: labour should be the realization of the worker who should civilize himself through work, etc., and we should question precisely this restoration of normality, as does Marx himself in his late work. Even when the mature Marx returns to this figure from time to time, he gives it a specific spin, as in the following passage from *Capital*:

This inversion (*Verkehrung*) by which the sensibly concrete counts only as the form of appearance of the abstractly general and not, on the contrary, the abstractly general as property of the concrete, characterizes the expression of value. At the same time, it makes understanding it difficult. If I say: Roman Law and German Law are both laws, that is obvious. But if I say: Law (*Das Recht*), this abstraction (*Abstraktum*) realizes itself in Roman Law and in German Law, in these concrete laws, the interconnection becoming mystical.³

In this case, however, one should be very careful: Marx is not simply criticizing the “inversion” that characterizes Hegelian idealism (in the style of his youthful writings, especially *German Ideology*) – his point is not that, while “effectively” Roman Law and German Law are two kinds of law, in the idealist dialectics, the Law itself is the active agent – the subject of the entire process – which “realizes itself” in Roman Law and German Law; Marx’s thesis is not only that this “inversion” characterizes capitalist social reality itself but above all that both positions – the alienated inversion as well as the presupposed “normal” state of things – belong to the space of ideological mystification. That is to say, the “normal” character of the state of things in which Roman Law and German Law are both laws (i.e., in which a worker possesses what he produces, in which the more powerful labor becomes, the more powerful becomes the worker, in which the more civilized his object, the more civilized becomes the worker, etc.) is effectively the everyday form of appearance of the alienated society, the “normal” form of appearance of its speculative

3. Quoted from <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch04.htm>.

truth. The desire to fully actualize this “normal” state is therefore ideology at its purest and cannot but end in a catastrophe.

This, however, is not the end of the story. What makes this figure of “instead of” really interesting is that it should be put into a series with two other similar figures. When the mature Marx (1970), analyzes the figure of hoarder, he resorts to a similar rhetorical reversal, but with an added castrative dimension:

Our hoarder is a martyr to exchange-value, a holy ascetic seated at the top of a metal column. He cares for wealth only in its social form, and accordingly he hides it away from society. He wants commodities in a form in which they can always circulate, and he therefore withdraws them from circulation. He adores exchange-value and he consequently refrains from exchange. The liquid form of wealth and its petrification, the elixir of life and the philosophers’ stone are wildly mixed together like an alchemist’s apparitions. His imaginary boundless thirst for enjoyment causes him to renounce all enjoyment. Because he desires to satisfy all social requirements, he scarcely satisfies the most urgent physical wants. (p. 134)

Or, as Marx (1863) puts it in *Theories of Surplus-Value*, “the industrial capitalist becomes more or less unable to fulfill his function as soon as he personifies the enjoyment of wealth, as soon as he wants the accumulation of pleasures instead of the pleasure of accumulation” (pp. 282-283). Here a Hegelian reversal occurs: when, instead of accumulation of pleasures, we get the pleasure of accumulation, this second pleasure becomes *jouissance* on behalf of its castrative dimension described by Marx (the capitalist’s “imaginary boundless thirst for enjoyment causes him to renounce all enjoyment”) – it is not just a symmetrical reversal since Marx brings out the castrative dimension of this reversal. (Freud similarly talks about repression of desire turns into a desire of repression, talking about pleasure turning into pleasure of talking...) So, if the first “instead of” reversal is imaginary (the second “abnormal” version the symmetrical reversal, the mirror-image, of the first “normal” one), the second reversal is symbolic due to the castration implied by universalization. Recall also Marx’s analysis of the Party of Order which took power when the 1848 revolutionary élan in France dwindled: the secret of its existence was

The coalition of Orléanists and Legitimists into one party, disclosed. The bourgeois class fell apart into two big factions which alternately — the big, landed proprietors under the restored monarchy and the finance aristocracy and the industrial bourgeoisie under the July Monarchy — had maintained a monopoly of power. Bourbon was the royal name for the predominant influence of the interests of the one faction, Orléans the royal name for the predominant influence of the interests of the other faction — the nameless realm of the republic was the only one in which both factions could maintain with equal power the common class interest without giving up their mutual rivalry. (Marx & Engels, 1969, p. 83)

The parliamentary deputies of the Party of Order perceived their republicanism as a mockery: in parliamentary debates, they all the time generated royalist slips of tongue and ridiculed the Republic to let it be known that their true aim was to restore the kingdom. What they were not aware of is that they themselves were duped as to the true social impact of their rule. What they were effectively doing was to establish the conditions of bourgeois republican order that they despised so much (by for instance guaranteeing the safety of private property). So it is not that they were royalists who were just wearing a republican mask: although they experienced themselves as such, it was their very “inner” royalist conviction which was the deceptive front masking their true social role. In short, far from being the hidden truth of their public republicanism, their sincere royalism was the fantasmatic support of their actual republicanism – it was what provided the passion to their activity. Is it not the case, then, that the deputies of the Party of Order were also feigning to feign to be republicans, to be what they really were? Such double feigning is for Lacan what characterizes the symbolic dimension.

There is yet another, third, figure of “instead of” which is found in Marx’s *Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), his critical analysis of Proudhon’s “philosophy of poverty” (so a reversal is already in the title itself): “Instead of the ordinary individual with his ordinary manner of speaking and thinking we have nothing but this ordinary manner in itself – without the individual.”⁴ Although this passage is a rather cheap stab at (Proudhon and) Hegel, it fits Robert Pippin’s description of what Hegel is doing in his logic: Hegel deploys the basic forms of argumentative thinking in its independence of who is thinking – whenever and wherever there is thinking, these forms are operative:

If someone simply persists in asking what we were asking above: ‘But where is all this thinking and explaining happening?’ all one can reply is ‘wherever there is thinking.’ This is not to say that there is not always a thinker or subject of thought; it is to say that thought that can be truth-bearing is constituted by what is necessary for truth-bearing, by any being of whatever sort capable of objective (possible true or false) judgment.⁵

In this sense, Hegel’s logic is the logic of the Real: precisely where it appears to be at its most idealist (analyzing pure thinking in its independence of any positive bearer of thinking, i.e., ignoring the material and psychic conditions of thinking, ignoring what Marx always adds: “But thinking is actually always an activity performed by individuals who live, interact and produce in a material social reality, it is as aspect of human social practice!”), Hegel’s logic touches the Real. And, as Johnston amply demonstrates, does Marx not do the same in his analysis of the capital’s drive? Capitalism’s

fundamental driving force, the unshakable thirst for surplus-value (i.e., $M-C-M'$ as the core logic of capital), is a strange selfless greed. This motivating structural dynamic is an acephalous and anonymous prosthetic drive, an impersonal template implanted into those subjected to capitalism. /.../ This Wiederholungszwang of capital’s self-valorization through the boundless accumulation of quantified surplus-value is an acephalous kinetic configuration disregarding and overriding any and every other interest. The latter include even the (self-)interests of those human beings who, as capitalists, are this drive’s personifications/bearers.

So, if “the only subject who truly enjoys capitalism is anonymous Capital itself as the idiotic, acephalous repetition of $M-C-M'$, as a drive without a driver,” does this description not directly echo Lacan’s description of drive as idiotic acephalous push? Lacan is, of course, well aware that drive is always related to individual human and social bodies – the same as Hegel who is well aware that thinking appears, comes to exist “for itself,” only in bodily human beings (he develops how this happens in his “Anthropology” at the beginning of the philosophy of Spirit, the third part of *Encyclopaedia*). But what Marx also knows is that, to grasp how capitalism functions, one must describe it “counterfactually” as the Real of an acephalous mechanism. This Real is, of course, purely virtual, with no actual existence in itself – but it must be presupposed by individuals as an In-itself if capitalism is to function.

There are thus three forms of the “instead of” reversal: imaginary, symbolic, and real. And we can add even some further complications here – is it not that Freudian “infantile sexuality” can also be described as a specific form of “instead of”? Its imaginary formula would be something like: “Instead of fully satisfying adult sex (what Lacan describes as “big fat jouissance, plain jouissance, jouissance that is realized in copulation in the raw”), we just get stupid infantile fantasies.” Its symbolic formula would be instead of just a “copulation in the raw,” we need fantasies to supplant it – without them, real sex gets desexualized. And its real formula would point out that the actual sexual encounter is not just lacking with regard to what we expected: lack is also always supplemented by

4. Quoted from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Poverty-Philosophy.pdf>.

5. https://iai.tv/articles/the-return-of-metaphysics-hegel-vs-kant-auid-2032?_auid=2020.

excess. Instead of conceiving real sex as always, a disappointment with regard to what we fantasized that we will get out of it, truly intense sex can also function as the traumatic real of an unbearable enjoyment that shatters our complacency, something so powerful that we are not able to translate it into the (symbolic) coordinates of our reality so that we experience in it what Freud called *Realitätsverlust*, a momentary loss of reality.

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