Axioms of Libidinal Economy

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The problem or question of libidinal economy is rarely confronted in its radical form. Libidinal economy refers to the fusion of the libido, in the sense of sexual energy or the drive, with economy, either in the specific sense of a sector of human activity concerned with the production and consumption of goods or in the more metaphoric or general sense of calculation and production across all activities. This chapter explores various modes and conceptions of this fusion between the libido and the economic and the issues that arise from it. My argument is that in the thinking of libidinal economy, there is a tendency to isolate certain elements of libidinal economy, treat them as acceptable or unacceptable, and then praise or reject them. In doing so, while often claiming to be beyond good and evil in a Nietzschean fashion,[1] the discourse of libidinal economy repeats a moralism that judges or proposes we distinguish between a good and bad libidinal economy. It is not that we should not make ethical or moral judgements, or analyse the ethical and moral dimensions of libidinal economy, but that these judgements are left abstract and generate a potentially infinite task of separating good libidinal economy from bad. While claiming to transcend the moral and ethical, or at least reconsider them in terms of libidinal economy, such discourses remain with an unthought moral and ethical dimension. The aim here is to confront the fundamental axioms of libidinal economy as a discourse to gauge how this problem is generated and to seek ways beyond the limits of libidinal economy.[2]

To begin, we can identify the axioms of libidinal economy and, in particular, their connection. These axioms are:

1. Every economy is libidinal.
2. Every libido is economic.

1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1973).

2 See also Benjamin Noys, "'We are All Prostitutes': Crisis and Libidinal Economy," in *Credo Credit Crisis: Speculations on Faith and Money*, ed. Aidan Tynan, Laurent Milesi, and Christopher John Müller (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017).

We can, first, reject one or both of these axioms. In a sense, this is to rule out libidinal economy altogether. For axiom one, we could deny that the economy is a matter of libido, arguing instead that it is a matter of labour, a matter of prices setting values, a human organisation of exchange, and so on. In this way, the question of libidinal economy, as something that concerns us in the world, does not seem to arise. The economy might be many things and cause many problems, but it would not be libidinal. I would imagine this is quite a rare position, but by no means impossible. The denial of axiom two suggests that the libido is not economic. This can go along with an acceptance of axiom one, in which we could say that, while the economic is libidinal, our libido is not exhausted by the notion of the economic. Such a position involves rejecting Freud's argument that the libidinal drive can be analysed in mechanical and quantitative form.[3] While the economic can be infused with desire, this does not mean the reverse, so our desire is protected from the economic. This has been and probably still is a remarkably common position. Such arguments begin with Jung, who believed the libido was not a quantitative sexual force but generalised psychic energy.[4] The libido is desexualised and de-mechanised at the same time. These arguments often take a vitalist form,[5] in which the desire or drive is regarded as a living force beyond calculation, the mechanical, and the economic.

This already compressed sketch might suggest that the acceptance of libidinal economy is less common and more complex than we might usually assume. Part of our position as jaded post-Freudian subjects is the cynical acceptance that libido drives everything as a matter of course. On closer examination, however, this cynicism often breaks into a more romantic celebration of freedom or excess, libidinal or not, against the economic. In a sense, we do not have libidinal economy, but libido versus economy in which our desires exceed the economic constraints, "beneath the cobblestones the beach," as the slogan of May '68 had it. This is despite Foucault's well-known dismantling of the "repressive hypothesis."[6] Foucault would target D. H. Lawrence as the figure of a cosmogenic Eros, in his novel *The Plumed Serpent* (1926), where Lawrence valorised sex against sexuality.[7] While the terms have been updated, we often remain clearly within this posing of sex as a force against

3 Lawrence Birken, "Freud's 'Economic Hypothesis': From *Homo Oeconomicus* to *Homo Sexualis*," *American Imago* 56, no. 4 (1999).

4 Carl Gustav Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*, ed. Gerhard Adler, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977).

5 Ludwig Klages, *Of Cosmogonic Eros*, trans. Mav Kuhn (Munich: Theoin Publishing, 2018). See also Nitzan Lebovic, *The Philosophy of Life and Death: Ludwig Klages and the Rise of a Nazi Biopolitics* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 111–153.

6 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume One*, trans. Robert Hurley (NY: Pantheon, 1978), 15–49.

7 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 157.

the constraints of a libidinal economy. This is recast after Foucault in the vitalist dimension of desire as resistance, which was the innovation of Gilles Deleuze.[8] In this case, there is a "good" libido of cosmic excess and a "bad" libido restricted in its flow to the economy's limits, to use Freud's hydraulic metaphor.[9] The slogan of libido versus libidinal economy would be another May '68 slogan, "enjoy without shackles," as Alain Badiou has identified.[10]

Again, these are ethical or moral critiques, which play the two axioms against each other, but mainly rest on repressing or denying axiom two. The difficulty of every libido being economic is that it seems to foreclose the space of critique of the capitalist economy. Libidinal economy would lose its critical edge and, even worse, it would seem as if either the economic has colonised the psyche or, worst of all, the psyche was always "capitalist" or economic. This is the point made in Freud's metaphor from *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in which our unconscious wish is "the capitalist who provides the psychical outlay for the dream."[11] What if this was not a metaphor? What if our desire was a capitalist investing in dreams and symptoms and anything or everything else? What if we were capitalist subjects in a very literal and libidinal sense? At this point, the critical value of libidinal economy would seem to collapse. We might even seem to have returned to a justification of capitalist society as consonant with a fundamentally "selfish" libidinal drive. Capitalist economy would be the fulfilment of libidinal economy.[12]

This is the risk. The threat of Freud's model of the unconscious as sexual through and through, and economic or mechanical through and through, was the ending of the romantic unconscious. Hence the difference between Freud and all the various vitalisms, and the hostility of virtually all other forms of the unconscious to that argued by Freud. I have already suggested the opposition of Jung, Klages, and Lawrence. However, we can trace a general stream, or better an overflowing torrent, of vitalist conceptions of the unconscious that have tried to override Freud's "mechanical" unconscious. The scandal was not so much that the unconscious was sexual, which was beginning to be accepted by various vitalists and is at the heart

8 Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. and ed. Séan Hand (London: Athlone, 1987).

9 Sigmund Freud, *The Three Essays on the History of Sexuality. The 1905 Edition*, trans. Ulrike Kistner, ed. and intro. Philippe Van Haute and Herman Westerink (London: Verso, 2016), 38.

10 Alain Badiou, "The Caesura of Nihilism," in *The Adventure of French Philosophy*, trans., ed., and intro. Bruno Bosteels (London: Verso, 2012).

11 Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1976), 714. For a discussion of this metaphor, see Samo Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious* (London: Verso, 2015), 108–110. See also Samo Tomšič, *The Labour of Enjoyment: Towards a Critique of Libidinal Economy* (Cologne: August Verlag, 2019).

12 For a discussion of forms of socialist libidinal economy, see Keti Chukurov, *Practicing the Good: Desire and Boredom in Soviet Socialism* (Minneapolis: e-flux, 2020).

of Lawrence's vision. We could again turn to Foucault's analysis of sexuality, especially of "the perverse implantation" at the end of the 19th century,[13] to suggest an increasing sexualisation of the notion of life itself. As we have seen with Lawrence, this sexualisation is accepted, but only on the condition of opposing sex to sexuality. If the vitalist does not simply desexualise or pan-sexualise the libido, as in Jung, they oppose sex as a vital force to the limits of sexuality and the economy.

The real scandal is not that the unconscious is sexual but that it might be mechanical (or economic). The problem was not sex per se but sex as economy or mechanism. If sex or sexuality could be analysed scientifically as a quantitative and mechanical phenomenon, then it would lose its sense of romantic opposition. The Romantic unconscious of the "divinities of the night" and the "primordial will," as Lacan noted,[14] would be replaced by Freud's machinic unconscious. In this sense, we could say the true inheritors of Freud were the abstract vision of humans as comedic machines found in Wyndham Lewis,[15] or the bitter vision of sexuality as mechanical performance in T. S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" (1922). In Eliot's poem, the aftermath of a unsatisfactory sexual encounter, amounting to a rape, is recounted:

> Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:
> "Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over."
> When lovely woman stoops to folly and
> Paces about her room again, alone,
> She smooths her hair with automatic hand,
> And puts a record on the gramophone.[16]

In this misogynistic vision, the female body is an automatic machine dispensing sexuality in a detached fashion, even as an unwilling partner. The sexual drive is correlated with the turning gramophone record or the machinic "throbbing" of the taxi engine earlier in the scene.[17] Eliot and Lewis still belong to the romantic reaction, despite themselves, as they can only register this mechanical vision of sexuality as

13 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 36–49.

14 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1977), 24. On the rejection of the mechanical unconscious by vitalists, see Lebovic, *The Philosophy of Life and Death*, 53; Benjamin Noys, "Vital Texts and Bare Life: The Uses and Abuses of Life in Contemporary Fiction," *CounterText* 1, no. 2 (2015): 172.

15 Wyndham Lewis, *Wild Body* (London: Penguin, 2004). On Lewis's libidinal economy, see Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, The Modernist as Fascist* (London: Verso, 2008).

16 T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 72. See also Charles Ferrall, *Modernist Writing and Reactionary Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 88.

17 Eliot, *Collected Poems*, 71.

an object of aggression and disgust. In that sense, the scandal of Freud's discovery remains hard to accept.

The work of Herbert Marcuse is another sign of the tension over the concept of the libido as economic, this time on the left, as he tried to recover libido against libidinal economy.[18] This involved disputing Freud's vision of mechanical sexuality, especially in the form of the death drive. To save libido, it must be identified with the "binding" of Eros and seen as a constructive drive, a "self-sublimation in lasting and expanding relations."[19] This possibility of the drive, mutilated and violated by capitalist society, can then be reconstructed as a point of dis-adaptation and so of the critique of capitalist society as long as we resist the mechanical vision of unbinding the death drive. The binding of Eros to the death drive threatens this project of a "non-repressive development" as "the brute fact of death denies once and for all the reality of non-repressive existence."[20] Marcuse then reinterprets the death drive to argue that in the form of the Nirvana principle – reducing tension to zero – it can be seen as a state of gratification, while failing the reach that state leaves the death drive as an instinct of destruction.[21] So we have a splitting of the two drives and then a splitting in the death drive itself to save good libido.

Certainly, Marcuse would become more pessimistic in his conclusions, suggesting, in *One-Dimensional Man*,[22] the capacities of capitalism to absorb and profit from libidinal opposition. In this case, harnessing the desire for destruction could lead to "the supreme risk, and even the fact of war would meet, not only with helpless acceptance, but also with instinctual approval on the part of the victims."[23] This pessimism is justified by the death instinct, which is treated as a negative force of destruction against the constructive possibilities of Eros. Again, the death drive threatens to emerge as the "bad" drive of destruction, and Marcuse leaves the utopian hope to resist such a drive to the least integrated in the one-dimensional society.[24] In both cases, the difficulty does not simply lie in the death drive hypothesis but also the intimate identification of the death drive with the life drive. This is why Marcuse's thought proved vulnerable to those reconstructions of Freud that noted the complete identification of Eros and the death drive.[25] The dualism of drives, or the splitting of the drive, is necessary to maintain the distinction between good and bad libido.

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18 Hebert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilisation: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (London: Abacus, 1972).

19 Marcuse, *Eros and Civilisation*, 157.

20 Marcuse, *Eros and Civilisation*, 162.

21 Marcuse, *Eros and Civilisation*, 165.

22 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (1964; reis., London: Routledge, 2002).

23 Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 82.

24 Marcuse, *Eros and Civilisation*, 222–237.

25 Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1985).

If there is only one drive, if it is sexual, and if it is entropic, then we have the mechanical vision of the libido as economic. This is the Freudian vision, which remains the core of Freud's original monist vision, despite his turn to speculative dualism.[26] The death drive, which proves so hard for Freud to distinguish from the life drive, is better thought of not as a separate drive but as a process of unbinding within that singular drive. The result retains negativity and conflict, but within the form of the drive treated still as subject to mechanical and quantitative analysis. It is the difficulty with and resistance to this vision we have been tracing.

The resistance to Freud's vision can continue even if we maintain the fusion of the drives and identify the death drive as an entropic effect of unbinding. In this case, Marcuse can be inverted and resistance located on the side of death drive as the instance of excess and what is "beyond" not only the pleasure principle but also the economic. It is the unbinding and entropic form of the death drive that promises to undo the economy of the libido and the economy as libidinal. In this case, we would not have a restricted economy, in which the drives were bound together, but the death drive as excess or general economy, to use Bataille's terms.[27] This celebrates the death drive as excess, a point of negativity, and a factor that cannot be economically integrated. Jean Baudrillard's *Symbolic Exchange and Death* would probably be the most definitive version of the position,[28] although traces of it remain in Lacanian approaches.[29] Whether we consider the excess of Eros or the excess of Thanatos, what appears to be at stake is the difficulty of accepting the libidinal melding with the economic. The trauma of accepting axiom two (the libido is economic) is the threat that axiom one (the economic is libidinal) will come to supplant the libido – and the fusion of libidinal economy will be, finally, economic.

So far, we have focused on the difficulty of accepting axiom two – that the libidinal is economic. If this is difficult, so is the scandal disguised in the acceptance of axiom one – the economy is libidinal. While I have suggested this is more readily accepted, the consequences too are often limited. If the economy is libidinal, this does not only mean that the economy expresses our wishes and whims, especially our sexual desires; it does not only mean that "sex sells," it does not only mean that money is "sexy," it means that the economy is, fundamentally, an exchange of bodies. Money, as the general equivalent, is merely a representative for the exchange of bodies, as the economy is libidinal at base. This point is Sade's and is made again by

26 Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, trans. John Reddick, intro. Mark Edmundson (London: Penguin, 2003).

27 Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Volume One*, trans. Robert Hurley (NY: Zone Books, 1988).

28 Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant, intro. Mike Gane (1976; reis., London: Sage, 1993).

29 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke UP, 2004); Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010), 77.

Pierre Klossowski.[30] It would seem to fuse the libidinal and the economic with no reserve, identifying the economy itself as libidinal. In this case, critique dissolves, or it would be limited to pointing out that we disguise this exchange of bodies with an exchange of money and would be "better off" revealing the properly libidinal form of economy.

In practice, however, the critical form can still be retained. This is evident in the work of Pierre Klossowski. Not only can we reveal the true libidinal flows and abandon all the disguises and misdirections of the actual economy, but this economy of desire also exceeds the civilised and discrete forms of the actual economy. In Klossowski, this is achieved by pitting Fourier's playful visions of libido as play against Sade's "serious" vision of libido as court masque. Fourier takes libido as a new principle of flux and flow that exceeds the limits of economy, while Sade, for all his bravado, remains within an economic vision of exchange and trade, if not of the violent subjugation of bare life.[31] Similarly, Klossowski had previously chided Sade for not being able to accept the "innocence of becoming" suggested by Nietzsche.[32] Sade remained too attached to what he transgressed. As an atheist who demanded male and female victims dress as nuns and priests to be violated, Sade proved his disregard for religious norms but also gained enjoyment from the transgression of those norms. Klossowski, as a heterodox Christian, finds the flow of souls in Nietzsche and Fourier – in which identity disintegrates into an exchange of souls or "breaths"[33] – to be the economy beyond libidinal economy. In a typical criticism, Sade's vision of the true economy of the violent exchange of bodies is found to be transgressive and too attached to what it transgresses. To depart the economy via the libidinal, it is not enough to dissolve the economic into the libidinal, but the principle of identity itself, on which the economic depends for calculation, must be dissolved.[34]

Once again, we have a good and bad libidinal economy. The bad libidinal economy of the world around us, in which exchange is really libidinal, and the good libidinal economy, which dissolves economy into pure flux. What is more challenging to concede is that we just have libidinal economy. In this case, the economy and the

30 Marquis De Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom or the School of Libertinage*, trans. and intro. Will McMorran and Thomas Wynn (London: Penguin, 2016); Pierre Klossowski, *Living Currency*, ed. Daniel W. Smith, Nicolae Morar, and Vernon W. Cisney (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

31 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002).

32 Pierre Klossowski, *Sade My Neighbour*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1991), 34.

33 Pierre Klossowski, *The Baphomet*, trans. Sophie Hawkes and Stephen Sartarelli (Hygiene, CO: Eridanos Press, 1988). See also Ian James, "Evaluating Klossowski's *Le Baphomet*," *Diacritics* 35, no. 1 (2005).

34 Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. L. Scott-Fox and J. M. Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), 183.

libidinal are coterminous. What we buy and sell belongs to bodies, or they are part-bodies or, in Freudian or Kleinian terminology, part-objects.[35] In this case, the exposure simply reveals the situation as it is, in which the libidinal and the economic are fused in all forms of exchange, identitarian or not. The division or dissolution of identity is not a cause for celebration as a principle of resistance or escape but another incitement to further calculability and economic activity. The world of the economic, or the world of capitalism, which is the world subject to the economic as final imperative,[36] is a world of the commodity as a series of part-objects. It is for this reason, among others, that Gilles Deleuze offers such apt descriptions of the psychic landscape of high capitalism.[37] Deleuze plays the part-objects against any totalisation by suggesting they constitute a multiplicity.[38] This will later form the basis of the libidinal description that opens *Anti-Oedipus*, cowritten with Félix Guattari, in which the part-object becomes identified with the economic forms of the capitalist machine.[39] We live in a world of part-object or, if we prefer, what Lacan called *lathouses*,[40] in which the part-object is also a technical object or gadget.

We might be familiar with the joy sparked by the act of purchasing, in which what we purchase is somehow not particularly relevant. This might be seen as the act of the collector. In his discussion of book collecting, Walter Benjamin remarks on the "thrill of acquisition" experienced by the collector and the "non-reading of books" characteristic of collectors.[41] Similar instances abound in contemporary life, of music unplayed or "watch lists" left unwatched. Such unused objects are often experienced as objects of shame. In board gaming, "a shelf of shame" is a shelf of unopened games, especially when they are still wrapped in shrink. The prophylactic of shrink suggests this is the safe sex of purchasing. What "sparks joy," in this case, is the purchase, not the object, hence perhaps why we accumulate so many objects that do not spark joy and yet which we find so hard to throw out. They are past loves, or past lovers. Accumulated objects are accumulated stale libido. This, in part, is the

35 Melanie Klein, *The Selected Melanie Klein*, ed. Juliet Mitchell (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1986), 84–94.

36 Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin, 1971).

37 See Benjamin Noys, "'Love and Napalm: Export USA': Schizoanalysis, Acceleration, and Contemporary American Literature," in *Deleuze and the Schizoanalysis of Literature*, ed. Ian Buchanan, Tim Matts, and Aidan Tynan (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

38 Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, trans. Robert Howard (London: Allen Lane, 1973), 109–110.

39 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

40 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar, Book XVII, The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Russell Grigg (NY: Norton, 2007), 150–163.

41 Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library," in *Illuminations*, ed. and intro. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (NY: Schocken Books, 1968), 60, 62.

libidinal economy of contemporary capitalism as an economy of part-objects, gadgets, and now, of course, digital objects. Digital objects are supposed to solve the problems of physical storage, evident in the multiplication of storage solutions and storage services – but these digital objects rapidly become another storage problem in turn.

We can conclude that we are reluctant to take libidinal economy seriously. It is difficult to think or sustain axiom one (every economy is libidinal) or two (every libido is economic). However, the fusion of these two axioms is perhaps most difficult. This just is libidinal economy. The two-word phrase condenses the fact that the libido is economic and the economic is libidinal. I would say this accounts for the scandal of Jean-François Lyotard's book *Libidinal Economy* (1974), which might be the closest attempt to think this fusion.[42] The scandal can be overstated, and Lyotard's references to the book as evil and bought at the cost of agonies to his soul suggest his religious background and a tendency to self-dramatisation.[43] Perhaps the only way to write a book called "libidinal economy" is through a hyperbole that tries desperately to fuse the two axioms. Lyotard's book is far from the enumerative passions of Sade, what Adorno called "mechanical ballets,"[44] but somewhat closer to the transgressive anguish of Georges Bataille, although with a non-tragic pathos, yet not as light as Klossowski's exchange of souls.

Still, in many ways, Lyotard's book, in itself, does not matter. What matters is the problem it points to: fusing the two axioms to as great an extent as possible. All economics becomes libidinal, not just capitalist economy. The book treats high mercantilism – the economy as a war over silver, as a zero-sum game of maximising exports at the expense of other states – as another instance of libidinal satisfaction.[45] If all instances of the economy are flattened into libidinal instances, then the same is true of the experience of subjectivity and the unconscious. The book's notorious opening presents the libidinal model of the subject as flayed body, which constitutes a libidinal band or Moebius strip.[46] In Lyotard's libidinal economy, there is no room for depth, as all is a surface on which libidinal intensities pass, occasionally cooling to form representations and the world around us as one of relative stability. While developing from the energetics of Freud, this is now radicalised by Nietzsche's critique of depth, in which "there is no 'being' behind doing, acting, becoming; 'the doer'

42 Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (1974; reis., London: Athlone, 1993).

43 Jean-François Lyotard, *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event* (NY: Columbia UP, 1988), 13.

44 Theodor Adorno, *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1992), 173.

45 Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, 188–200.

46 Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, 1–5.

is merely a fiction imposed on the doing."[47] In this case, the "doing" is done by the libidinal intensity, and the idea of depth and subjectivity is mere fiction. The result is a world without psychic interiority and neurosis, as there is no space for anguished negotiation between the inner and outer worlds, as we find in Klein or Winnicott.[48]

This collapsing of space into a monism of libidinal intensity falters, however, on the issue of "cooling" and of how and why these intensities should ever appear as mere "representations." In fact, it might be that the libidinal intensities are more apparently fictions and instantiate a sort of depth that could be displaced by language.[49] The production of libidinal economy as a fusion immediately seems to result in the project's termination. Lyotard would retreat from this monistic model to problems of language and the limit inspired by Kant.[50] In fact, *Libidinal Economy* received relatively little discussion or critique.

One of the few substantial criticisms from the time was that made by Guy Lardreau and Christain Jambet in their book *L'Ange* (1976).[51] Lardreau and Jambet violently rejected Lyotard's libidinal "leftism" and any foundation of radical politics on sexuality. Instead, they celebrated the angelic and chaste experience of early Christian monasticism and the Chinese cultural revolution. These monastic and celibate revolutionaries

> invert every accepted form of value, renounce all inheritance, refuse any loyalty to family and familiarity, deny the body, reject sexual difference and desire, affirm the all-or-nothing simplicity of redemption, pursue a heroic anonymity, adopt a permanent posture of self-criticism, embrace the most severe forms of frugality and discipline.[52]

The implication is that the fusion of libido and economy cannot be sundered by selecting a good libido from bad, only by the absolute and intransigent rejection of sexuality. This puritanical position was not taken up, and it skirted being a fantas-

47 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), 29.

48 Klein, *The Selected Melanie Klein*; D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 2005).

49 Geoffrey Bennington, *Lyotard: Writing the Event* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1988), 46.

50 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. George Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

51 Guy Lardreau and Christian Jambet, *L'Ange. Ontologie de la révolution, tome 1: pour une cynégétique du semblant* (Paris: Grasset, 1976). See also, Peter Hallward, "Reason and Revolt: Guy Lardreau's Early Voluntarism and Its Limits," *Radical Philosophy*, no. 190 (2015).

52 Peter Hallward, "Fallen Angel: Guy Lardreau's Later Voluntarism," *Radical Philosophy*, no. 203 (2018): 45.

matic projection. The necessity to violently reject sexuality to retain the possibility of revolution did, however, indicate the intrinsic difficulties of libidinal economy.[53]

The extremity of this response usefully indicates the extremity of Lyotard's project. It is telling in both cases, for Lyotard and for Lardreau and Jambet, that they would move from these positions to the problem of ethics. Ethics indicates, we could say, the limits of the project of libidinal economy.[54] This is not to dismiss ethics or the ethical as a concern about the libidinal – far from it. Instead, my point is that the extreme moralisms that resulted from the project of libidinal economy prevented the integration and concern with the ethical as central to the problem of libidinal economy. The fusion of libido and economy that seems to leave no point of critique, or the rejection of sexuality as corrupted in favour of absolute revolution, dissolve the space of the ethical as a socio-political space formed out of relations of domination, resistance, and freedom. Instead of this vision of the ethical life associated with Hegel,[55] we find a detached and injunctive ethics that constantly struggles with the impossible limit of complete libidinal identification or absolute revolution. This is, as Hegel recognised, the problem of the ethical misrecognised and instead turned into fiat and injunction. It results in a political moralism that Hegel associated with the political thinking of Kant and Fichte.

The history we have reconstructed out of the axioms of libidinal economy has been a history of this kind of moralism of the injunction. The turn to Kant as a refuge after libidinal extremism only serves to disguise the continuity of modes of Kantian thinking and moralism. In this case, ethics becomes fractured and separated from its social forms, partially as libido's distinctiveness becomes dissolved – as we saw with Lyotard it may be that everything is libidinal or equally nothing if the libidinal is treated simply as a mode of speaking. This does not mean dismissing the problematic of libidinal economy or simply replacing it with some new form of Kantian ethics. Instead, the impasse we have traced in libidinal economy offers an opportunity to rethink these questions. We have often seen the project abandoned altogether or its softening into an acceptance of the libidinal that struggles to produce libidinal economy as a conceptual or theoretical form.

We see the fragmentation and tensions in Michel Foucault. The aim of Foucault's project was, in many ways, to end talking in terms of sex, yet his project licensed and

53 See Benjamin Noys, "'The End of the Monarchy of Sex': Sexuality and Contemporary Nihilism," *Theory, Culture & Society* 25, no. 5 (September 2008).

54 We could note the turn in Foucault away from the project concerned with sexuality and power and towards a concern with sexuality and ethics. See Benjamin Noys, "Crisis and Transition: The Late Foucault and the Vocation of Philosophy," ed. Gavin Walker, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 121, no. 4 (2022),

55 G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991).

proliferated the categories he claimed to have surpassed.[56] Notably, Foucault also turned to ethics and subjectivity in his late work – parallel to, if not in advance of, those made by Lyotard and Lardreau and Jambet. Again, the difficulty I am pointing to is not the turn to ethics and subjectivity but the fracture in Foucault's project between his histories of institutions and powers and his new history of ethics and subjectivity. It appears that what we cannot think is precisely what Hegel meant by ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*): the problem in modernity of thinking freedom through the relation of subjectivity to institutional forms of power.[57] The fracture of Foucault's history of sexuality suggests the difficulty of an ethical relation to libidinal economy formed through the relationship between subjectivity and institutional forms, not the least of which is the capitalist economy itself. In fact, the tendency of Foucault to treat capitalism as a plural moment, one institutional form among others, or as another mode of governmentality, is one sign of the difficulty his project has in grasping the contemporary form of capitalist totality.[58]

These various endpoints do not, I think, indicate the end of the problematic of libidinal economy but from where we must start thinking. This is not to say that the problem of libidinal economy should be accepted as it was. However, a confrontation with its scandal can remind us that, while we might pride ourselves on our acceptance of sexuality as diverse and plural, we often remain constrained in our thinking and prone to repeat political moralisms. The ethical difficulties of sexuality, signalled in Hegel's text but not fully developed,[59] remain for us, especially in the tension between modes of liberation and new forms of repression. The gains of the sexual revolution, as it was called, must be defended and deepened, especially in the face of reactionary calls to new modes of repression and normativity. At the same time, the political and institutional questions of sexuality and libido, particularly concerning the state and capital, remain pressing problems to be thought and analysed. In the end, the extremism of libidinal economy might be regarded as a block to thinking these problems. However, abandoning libidinal economy has too often led to assumed consonances between libido and liberation or between libido and repression that do not hold up to examination. The fact that libidinal economy remains a battleground is evident, from the misogyny of the "incel movement" to the transphobia of the public sphere, to select only two examples of reactionary currents.[60] In response, we should not abandon libidinal economy but insist on engaging with the

56 See Noys, "The End of the Monarchy of Sex."

57 Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (London: Verso, 2009).

58 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79*, ed. Michael Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

59 Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. David Wills and Geoffrey Bennington (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021).

60 On incels, see Benjamin Noys, "He's just Not that into You: Negging and the Manipulation of Negativity," *Manipulations/Platform* (2015), https://web.archive.org/web/20151108100033/

ethical as the socio-political problem of living together, with libido as the formation of relations, and with the possibilities of necessary and further liberation.

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