

**J. FR. LYOTARD OR ABOUT THE ARGUMENTS
OF *TOUTE ECONOMIE POLITIQUE EST LIBIDINALE***

VIORELLA MANOLACHE*

Abstract. *Conceived as part of the Encyclopedia of Fundamental Works of Contemporary Political Philosophy (1970 – present), the present article offers a review of the attacks that J. Fr. Lyotard imported from Nietzsche which are directed against theories of modernity, rationality and diskurs, which include the desire to obtain both oppressive and at the same time socially desirable objects (family, stable workplace, economy, state). In fact, the article will show, using all the necessary arguments, that libidinal economy “is politically involved” and that toute économie politique est libidinale.*

Keywords: *Jean François Lyotard, Libidinal Economy, Libidinal Surface, Dispositif, Intensity.*

*Introduction-Warning:
Extreme Intensities Occur at the Junctures*

Contextually included, seen from a seventies *correlation* perspective of an *elements/content – form/formulation* angle and with formal similarities to an anti-nihilist manifesto, *The Libidinal Economy* can be considered to be the work of a kind of contrarian, an energetic, non-critical model indebted to meta-nihilism.

At the same time, the book's overall significance can also be interpreted and perceived as a Nietzschean-derived attack against theories of modernity, rationality and *diskurs*, which include the desire to obtain oppressive yet at the same time socially desirable objects (family, stable workplace, economy, state).

The Libidinal Economy represents a synthetic product, along the lines of Marx – Freud (Lyotard had previously published *Discours, figure*, Klincksieck, Paris 1971, *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud*, Union Générale d'Editions, Paris, 1973 and *Des dispositifs pulsionnels*, Union Générale d'Editions, Paris, 1973), and reasserts a reserved, distinct attitude (*what is expressed passes for the truth*) towards a horizon already emphasized by May '68 – an essential landmark for creating a corpus of writings able to illustrate the free associative model

* Scientific researcher III, PhD, at the Institute of Political Sciences and International Relations “Ion I. C. Brătianu”, Romanian Academy; viorella.manolache@ispri.ro; vio_sl3@yahoo.com

(*extreme intensities occur at the junctures*), which later determined a (distanced) review expressing the philosopher's own misgivings towards the project/program of a "libidinal economy".

Referring to the period of '68, Lyotardian comments state that this moment imprinted in an exaggerated way the conceptual dichotomy *power-potency* and notes that the two terms' contrasting senses are unmistakable, and able to independently resist the pressure of force-ideas (fascism), and indiscernible notions prophesied by radical-socialism (communism).

In Lyotard's opinion, libidinal economists (*artists* and not conveyors, *adventurers* and not theoreticians, *hypothesis creators* and not censors) would comprise a social-professional category most threatened by the elaboration of a new morality which states that the *libidinal freeway* is good and the circulation of affections, disinhibited; that anonymity belongs to amazingly free figures, and pain acknowledges a revolutionary origin¹.

It is no coincidence that Alain Badiou pleaded, in the 80's, for a denial of such free associative models (*amazement and impatience*, in the sense in which *a fragment of the book is the book*) adhering to critical concepts which had targeted liberal economy theory since 1975, the hot moment for launching his work.

At the crossroads between free association and the manifesto of writing, Lyotard identifies this type of endeavor with a translational strategy, with representational and supplanting functions, implying a bodily unity upon whose space a *libidinal surface* is superimposed through expansion and unrolling.

The libidinal dispositif is defined as a stabilization/stasis/group of energetically stasis, being formally examined under a structural aspect, and estimated to be a characteristic factor for approaching, in specialized terms, any problems belonging to the economic domain.

In her notes on the Romanian translation, Magdalena Mărculescu-Cojoclea presented timely arguments for maintaining a true, typical marker of Lyotardian thinking and philosophy, stating that its discourse targets, on one hand, the un-decidable, duplicity, overlapping, alternance, by distancing itself from hard ideological-political concepts and formulations, as well as from those of grand theories, and experiments; on the other hand, it is a style of writing with philosophical-political inflexions, thus betraying a tendency to secede from both nihilist and critical thinking, as expressed through a Marxist-speculative refusal to engage in dialectics, or through abandoning the subject's thinking and reaffirming its secondarity.

Toute économie politique est libidinale

In the acceptance of political philosophy, *The Libidinal Economy* "is involved in politics" (*this* – its problem, our emphasis – *being entirely a political problem*) and projects easy-to-find excursions into the economy of a capital assumed as a

¹ Jean François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trad. Iain Hamilton Grant, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1993, p. 11.

force of absence and/or form of expressing *capitalist religious piety*, while manifesting an undisguised interest for the political, produced by *restored non-complacency*, by a certain way of *procrastinating* peculiar to the process of writing itself, and by resentments serving as spring boards for political – segment *actantes*. If *potency* conditions and makes possible *power*, the triad *sign perception* (dispossession) – *potency* (*Macht*) – *arbitrariness* (*Willkür*) becomes the edifying point of a *fugue politics*².

Under the sign of *duplicity* (and in the counter-direction of *duality*) *libidinal economy* could be mistaken for political economy, which already possesses an ideology with ordering pretensions, unable to pinpoint the duplicity of economical transformations.

Energetic prospection reconfigures a scale of exclusive re-valuations, stabilizing and blocking any intensive model through the assertion and permanent influence it exerts upon power as repetition, through preserving the identical and capturing energies by blocking or connecting intensities, delineating a clear separation between it and the Deleuze – Guattari model, which accepts the “tide of life” just as a revolutionary energy formula, filled with oscillating highlights.

Within displacement, intensities – theatricality and representation – (re)placed beyond a status of libidinal-metaphysic component, expound a result obtained by reworking the labyrinthine Möbiusian band which allows specific folding and unfolding, a situation demanding clear assignments when considering *the epitomizing room as an energetic dispositif*³.

Concerned with the extension of *the libidinal sphere*, Lyotard introduces the concept of *libidinal currency*, seen as signifier for the thing which becomes a substitute, or for the pretextual endeavor of (co)mmuting *the material into term-signs*, a statement accented by the warning “only signs exist now”.

Desire cannot be found anywhere except in that space opened (*as a book*) by its destiny and the necessity of transposing it into signs, an approach confirming that *the sign is a concept and semiotics penetrates into areas previously belonging to nihilism*.

Non-disassociability and non-deductibility are characteristics which re-unite and unite the *tensor sign* and the *intelligent sign*, and represent for Lyotard a decisional/motivational factor which extracts *political particularities* from an intersection between Sade’s and Klossowski’s opinions, by appealing to a demonstrative support offered by the rule of “if – then”: *if* the Sadean theme is a political one because it projects libido upon the circle of the political body while at the same time accepting the obverse of the coin – that immoral people, through continuous insurrectional movements, maintain a republican government in a state of alert, *then* the Klossowskian post-Marxist theme (no city, no government) perfectly describes modern man’s profile, in the real situation in which the only body with integrative pretensions is the body of the capital⁴.

² Jean François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, 1993, p. 20.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 89.

In Lyotard's acception, Freud becomes the victim of confusion generated by identifying *libidinal dispositifs* with formal structures, and Marx should be/ demands to be reassessed (respecting the grid offered by the politics of Marxist practices for the interpretation of any text) through the prism of "its own truth".

Such a presentation of Marx – the symbolist, the religious man or the economist – is the pretext used by Lyotard in order to engage in dialogue with Castoriadis and especially with Baudrillard, as the creator of a movement promoting a certain synchronization and co-polarization, while accenting political economy and defining it as "that something which starts at a certain moment in the history of humanity" while at the same time considering it both a *dispositif social* and a retroactive projection of capitalist involvement into symbolic exchanges⁵.

Contesting the libidinal source of political economy implies a reproduction of regions therefore placed in exteriority, a transposition of desire into production and its fulfillment through work or its instating as a law of value.

Under the sign of the *bis* (of repetition) (taken from the doubled subchapter), *Toute économie politique est libidinale*⁶ deploys the essential idea of an undertaken endeavor and sediments the book's hypotheses, which can be resumed structurally in the following: there exists a primitive society, only with the condition of accepting an external referent, even if this becomes intrinsic and thus can initiate a distancing of capital (the domain of political economy) from subversively (a characteristic of libidinal economy): any readable desire has its own economy, which must not be perturbed (*perturbed* used here in the sense of *precisely determined*): within the capitalist system the same degree of libidinal intensity is registered as in the postulated symbolic exchange: piecemeal allotment cannot be equivocated to alienation: the libidinal economy has no organic body and does not admit any compromise with the libidinal body: any critique of political economy takes the inorganic body as its instance, because the capitalist system is a natural structure: the tautology of economic theories can be retraced by accepting external energy increments, or by fueling external energy reserves: capitalism (doubly anticipated by the "*Lydian*" *dispositif*), received through the prismatic structure of its possible widening accumulative processes, includes a *dispositif* of conquest regulation which ensures characteristic money circulation and an efficient use of time – an experimental practice allowing for a theorization of the libidinal function, while insisting upon the mercantile mechanisms of trade.

In the Lyotardian vision, the libidinal economy's structure resembles that of skin (both on the inside and on the outside), forming a single surface with a single face; and the libidinal body, similar to a *Möbius band*, is the one maintaining/ keeping any instantiations of libidinal impulses inside the *band-body*, by blocking and/or excluding certain regions⁷.

Integrated in the sphere of trade and mercantilism, the political settlement is compared by Lyotard not with a market guided by exchanges and mediated by

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 104.

⁶ Jean François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, 1993, pp. 108-114 and pp. 114-122.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 156.

payment coin, but with a way/figure/*dispositif* of activating pulsions on the surface of bodies; thus, the body of a citizen of Greek extraction is defined as a polymorphous fragment, and the polis – *politeia* – expresses the concept of *useful/usable*, in the note of language (*logos begins by being simultaneous with any manifestations of the politeia and agora concepts*) already deterred from its own significance as a place already invested with the semantic potential conferred upon it by another society. Subordinated to the singular rule of the *tetralogos* (with its maieutic accents) *politeia* represents that *dispositif* responsible for cancelled differences.

Those bodies which belong to that space called *politeia* or, in an Aristotelian line, those goods/needs involved in the *koinonia* are interchangeable, as they transgress libidinal education which allows the placement and sedimentation, *within the agora*, of those *band segments* with acceptable degrees of pleasure.

The doubly-mercantile organizational limit allows one to fall back upon the Greek model which accepts *two edges* – citizenship and the political sphere – *and a center*, offered to the orator in his role as representative of the city.

Seen as the world's first political economist, Aristotle is now revalued using the concept of *chreia*, defining *the need which becomes a pulsional force of pleasure* within the limits of an isonomic body, by equivalent values measured in/by pleasure and by a *connection to the segment of desiring body*.

In the financial domain, *money* cumulates two attributes which are comprised within the note of terminological interpretations: *nomisma* – a means of payment, of repaying debts and a valuable object in its own right, a thesaurus, a Colbertian homogenization resulting from associating *mercantilism* and *metallism*, and illustrated by *quantityism* (hoarding of coins), with the essential observation that any money-related wealth implies a finite quantity. One can thus acknowledge the existence of *two coins* – for payment and for credit – which have three functions [the homeostatic function, the dynamic equilibrium function and the disequilibrium function]⁸.

In the system of libidinal economy, the initial starting point is no longer production or profit, but banks and interests, which demonstrates that the shareholder is able to attract piecemeal structures of energetically areas, while at the same time being allowed to spend before he earns, in the context in which credit implies a before-term structure (under the form of means of wealth creation, expressed in post-manufacture products) and time credit is an expanding adjustment seen as an arbitrary act or a power which absorbs new energies, imposing itself as *a power beyond all powers*⁹.

Textual Economies. Conducive Texts

The Lyotardian construct exposes the fundamental ideas of a project subsumed to an *économie d'écrit* and asserts its status of writing, of *texte conducteur* (doubled in the 1993 edition by a 16 point glossary) which pinpoints the nodal

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 224.

⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 224-225.

areas of acceptation for disjunctive functions with synthetic and oppositional roles, as a way of formatting any consistent discourse.

If the theoretical text is an immobilized organic body (reference point) then its organs belong to statements, and the body in its entirety becomes a text.

Within the musical score of libidinal economy, the figuratively-narrative structuring accepts an immobilizing pole in which intensities are seen as electrical currents penetrating both the representational body and the client's body at the same time.

Capital is mimetic; knowledge, following Marx, can become a production force, a conglomerate of identities and systems; capitalist production subsumes the conditions of repetitive power; any profit thus obtained represents, in an economic-political vision, a type of discourse often found in texts with theoretical substrate, a model admitting the series and, inherently, the properties of a consumer economy: *capital is as old as theory*¹⁰.

Any founding resources of democratic power (a concept applicable only when its generating conditions are generally accessible) within a theoretical discourse bring into relief the competence by which power converts intensive forces into repetitive potentialities and asserts equality as a figure of theoretical parity, with exigencies projected upon any discourse and any production forms.

Seen as an attack on structuralism in general and Marx in particular, a perturbing influence upon any critical theories of the moment (the 70's) *The Libidinal Economy* was going to be appreciated by its own author, in a Bataillean way, as *its own share of evil*, a creation imprinted by the period in which it appeared, a shameless, indecent or provocative endeavor; or, in Geoffrey Bennington's opinion¹¹, labeled as a form of parody – dandy(esque) writing.

From the same perspective, Michel Sicard¹² notes the deeply sarcastic notes of such a study, involved in diminishing and minimizing the selectively idiosyncratic representation of semiotics; thus, Lyotard accused semiotics of including a nihilistic cookbook for actualizing conceptual hermetic formulas by imbuing them with a form of informational hyper-realism.

In his introduction to the English language edition, Iain Hamilton Grant warns that *The Libidinal Economy* deliberately approves and transmits the author's obvious intention of "exploiting and accelerating, of *leading* one towards/through new and unheard-of intensities"; thus, a fitting end for an endeavor which only confirms semiotics' status of overdevelopment and invites one to retrace pre-established paths for traversing its own domain.

Lyotard considered semiotics to be a useless, static and dehydrated activity (in the formulations he practiced at the beginning of the 70's); this is why he advocated a widening of the domain's particular research field, by initiating studies about *semiosis*, or re-launching (with partly-practical aims) an *alternate semiotics*. In fact, Lyotard advocates a model taken after another model, offering an endeavor based upon intensity and perennially, with the possibility of converting it into *an emotional event*.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 249.

¹¹ Geoffrey Bennington, Lyotard, *Writing the Event*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1988.

¹² Michel Sicard, "L'Economie libidinale", in *Les Cahiers du Chemin*, Avril 1975, pp. 213-221.

*In Place of Conclusions:
Theoretical Excesses of the Libidinal Economy*

As tempting as it is to keep in contact with the *tracks of libidinal economy*, Geoffrey Bennington and Marc Eli Blanchard retained their own judgment even when resonating with Lyotardian paradigms and amending the theoretical basis of the 70's, which they labeled as inadequate and outmoded, a clear deviation from the principles of theoretical-rational research (Bennington, in 1988, comments upon the label of anti-theoretical work applied to *The Libidinal Economy*, which he sees as an *excessively theoretical endeavor*, by its own correlation of elements referencing theatre, representation and critique).

On the same lines, Seyla Benhabib¹³ identifies the method of epistemic representational destruction as the one allowing, in Lyotardian manner, an affirmation of recognition as a specific marker of incompatibility and incommensurability.

Lyotard sensed that *the theoretician-the man of science will deplore the discourse of his Libidinal Economy – which he will see as unusable and unsubstituted* – an unavoidable trap for his exegetes: if Alphonso Lingis maintains that “the libidinal effect is without purpose and devoid of causes/effects”¹⁴, Hubert Damisch¹⁵ signals the impossibility of *libidinal economy* to articulate any direction or even trace any directive, this representing nothing more than “a plot without a project, involved against the program itself” and reconstructed by obscuring through interposing itself in front of its own sign.

Final Lyotardian commentaries anticipate such reactions and conclude that “it would be interesting for us to remain exactly where we are now”, while at the same time suggesting certain recommendations particularized by the reflex of “not inventing anything”.

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¹⁴ Alphonso Lingis, “A New Philosophical Interpretation of the Libido”, in *Sub-Stance* 25, 1980, pp. 87-97.

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