



Rethinking Marxism

A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society

ISSN: 0893-5696 (Print) 1475-8059 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rrmx20

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To cite this article: Stephen Healy (2024) Global Libidinal Economy: Toward a Postcapitalist Politics of Enjoyment, Rethinking Marxism, 36:4, 480-486, DOI: [10.1080/08935696.2024.2400028](https://doi.org/10.1080/08935696.2024.2400028)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08935696.2024.2400028>



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Published online: 20 Jan 2025.



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Global Libidinal Economy: Toward a Postcapitalist Politics of Enjoyment

Stephen Healy

The book Global Libidinal Economy addresses the question of what psychoanalysis contributes to political economy and contemporary social theory. The authors engage with Marxian political economy, asserting that the libidinal dimension—encompassing desire, drive, and fantasies—shapes the social world, including the economy. Throughout, the authors provide a provocative answer to this question by identifying the libidinal stakes across a range of issues, including economic development, trade, environmental governance, technological innovation, and the rivalry between the United States and China, a shift of emphasis that opens the economy to political possibilities. This essay explores resonances with other psychoanalytically informed approaches to Marxian theory, exemplified by Anjan Chakrabarti, Anup Dhar, and Stephen Cullenberg. These theorists envision the majority world as a locus of potential, emphasizing a noncapitalist orientation, termed the World of the Third, to extend the possibilities for postcapitalist politics and a politics of solidarity.

Key Words: Disidentification, Fantasy, Postcapitalism, Psychoanalysis, Solidarity

What does psychoanalysis add to political economy or, more broadly, to contemporary social theory? This is the question that implicitly structures the eight chapters that comprise *Global Libidinal Economy*, coauthored by Ilan Kapoor, Gavin Fridell, Maureen Sioh, and Pieter de Vries. Their imagined interlocutor is committed to Marxian political economy, and the answer the authors provide to this query mark a set of coordinates—desire, drive, fantasies of mastery or humiliation, among others—that describe how the libidinal shapes the social world, including the economy. Throughout, the authors provide a provocative answer to this question by identifying the libidinal stakes across a range of issues: economic development, trade, environmental governance, the trajectory of technological innovation, the rivalrous relation between the United States and China. For some readers, the book's focus will be a source of some discomfort, appearing to recenter “essentialist” human concerns at precisely a moment when deepening ecological crisis compels us to move beyond them as other intellectual traditions, from science and technology studies to vital materialism, purport to do. Kapoor et al.

(2023) argue that they are not so much privileging the subject but rather insisting that the libidinal must be attended to since we cannot extract ourselves from its dynamics; further, they argue that sidestepping, minimizing, or avoiding the libidinal comes with a cost, as well. As psychoanalytically informed theorists have argued for some time, far from recentring subjectivity, acknowledging the libidinal's material dimensions imbricates it into the fabric of institutions and organizations abrogating the divide between subject and society (Healy 2010).

But what does it mean to “add” the libidinal dimension (back) into the way that we make sense of political economy or society more broadly? In the spirit of advancing this agenda, I want to briefly highlight what difference it makes to think with psychoanalytic insights. I do this in two ways. First, I review how this dimension of “enjoyment” (*jouissance*/desire/drive) shifts the purpose of critical inquiry by highlighting people's investment in particular patterns of thought while also as a consequence opening up the economy as a space of political possibility. Here, I am thinking along with Kapoor et al., following the threads of their argument to the edge of thought in a world in which we are continuously beguiled by capitalism while there is also a presently indiscernible postcapitalist possibility and an accompanying reorientation of subjectivity (fantasy, desire, drive). Second, I identify an unexplored resonance with other attempts at psychoanalytically inflected approaches to Marxian theory, other efforts to find a way out of what Kapoor et al. call for us to escape, most notably the work of Anjan Chakrabarti, Anup Dhar, and Stephen Cullenberg (2012). For these latter theorists, the majority world is a key site of possibility—a reorientation of language, thought, desire, and logic that is neither capitalist nor precapitalist but noncapitalist, what they refer to as the World of the Third.

In the opening pages of *Global Political Economy*, Kapoor et al., drawing on McGowan (2016), point out that, late in life, Freud concluded that repetition rather than sexual repression was central to subjectivity. This has far-reaching implications. Contrary to the dominant theorization of humans acting according to rational self-interest, the repetition compulsion positions *jouissance*—“taking pleasure in pain and pain in pleasure”—at the very heart of how we understand both agent and structure, subjectivity and society. For those operating in the Lacanian tradition, *jouissance* recapitulates the inevitable loss that comes from entering the symbolic order of language, our induction into a world split between being and semblance (Ruti 2022). McGowan (2016, 29) describes how subjects, and by extension institutions involved in social processes like development, may aim at success, fail, and try again: “Unconsciously, however, the subject depends on failure to satisfy itself. Failure and loss produce the object as absent, and it is only absence of the object that renders it satisfying.” For Kapoor et al., the relationship between repetition and fantasy formation is key to understanding how this works in a global libidinal economy. It's worth reflecting on how psychoanalytic theorists position fantasy as a concept in opposition to other ways of conceptualizing ideology. One example is a reinvestment in the faith that competitive

free markets lead to generalized well-being, even as this unrelenting competition leads to its opposite: in many industries, the concentration of economic monopoly power. Another example is our species' self-sabotage in the form of a fantasy that technological fixes will repair the damage produced by deepening environmental crisis. Such fantasies in the efficacy of markets or that technology will allow for mastery and control are for McGowan (as for Kapoor et al.) precisely the problem. As Žižek (1992) asserted long ago, fantasy's conservative function rests upon maintaining the proper distance between the subject and its object of desire via a confounding symptom that forestalls consummation. The fantasy that markets would work perfectly *if only* meddlesome regulation x were eliminated works to conserve things as they are because if x were, in fact, eliminated then barrier y would take its place. In a sense, then, fantasy, and the subjectivity it sustains, refers both to a hoped-for ideal *and* our attachment to a symptomatic social antagonism that forever forestalls its consummation. This has implications for the political project of moving beyond "capitalism." As McGowan (2016, 49; emphasis mine) puts it, "We don't need more desire, but rather the recognition that the barrier is *what* we desire. It is this recognition that provides the key for divesting ourselves from the appeal of capitalism." What follows from this is that a postcapitalist imaginary is secured not only through being able to cultivate postcapitalism but equally by understanding the terms of this disinvestment.

Kapoor et al., working with the psychoanalytic tradition, insist on that tradition's significance not simply as another form of "critique" but more precisely as a form of critical theory that zeroes in on libidinal investments, on how the circuits of jouissance recapitulate our intractable current situation. Consider, for example, Jodi Dean's (2015) short article, written nearly a decade ago, in which she described Donald Trump, then represented as a long-shot presidential candidate, as "America's id." As Dean explained:

Where other candidates appeal to a fictitious unity or pretense of moral integrity, he displays the power of inequality. Money buys access—why deny it? Money creates opportunity—for those who have it. Money lets those with a lot of it express their basest impulses and desires—there is no need to hide the dark drives when there is none before whom one might feel shame (we might call this the Berlusconi principle). It's the rest of us who bow down. (1)

Dean's diagnosis of the politics of Trump's class-based resentment, overt racism, and sexism may seem obvious with hindsight, but, when it was penned, she put into words the truth of what was happening by also clarifying libidinal investment, as Kapoor et al. put it. In another testimony to the power of repetition, it is not an overstatement to say that the United States finds itself in almost exactly the same position a decade later, with Trump as the outraged and, for liberals and progressives, the outrageous candidate that captivates. This outrage is

also enjoyable. The fantasy formation of Trump as obscene father figure is but one permutation in a world replete with authoritarian masculinities promising reassurance in a world that is not forthcoming with it. But at stake here is that we remain trapped in a game that is deadly for migrants, for poor people, for those vulnerable to the unfolding consequences of climate collapse.

The more general point that emerges across Kapoor et al.'s efforts is the way that adding a libidinal dimension to our understanding of political economy underscores how all of us are *inside*, caught up in a part of the dynamics of the very thing we are endeavoring to understand. But even with this dimension, are we not still left in the same spot, perhaps with an enhanced understanding of how our libidinal investments attach all of us to the existing order, but no better off in terms of how to change it? In response to this question, Kapoor et al. offer the possibility of international solidarity among those who are sacrificed for the sake of ongoing enjoyment, those the authors refer to as occupying the part of no-part. One wonders how this appeal to solidarity might connect, or be made to connect, with existing social and solidarity-economy movements that have been trying to organize, for people and the planet alike, economies grounded in practices of cooperation. I think that key to these politics of solidarity is precisely how the libidinal opens the economy up by adding culture, belief, fantasy, desire. This leads not to a privileging of “culture” over economy but rather allows us to “conceive of the dialectic of materiality itself by desubstantializing the economy: the economy is thereby non-all—contingent, incoherent, unstable—forever traumatized by the Real/unconscious. Or to put it another way, the economy as a whole ‘does not exist’; it is forever traversed by lack, division, and unpredictability” (Kapoor et al. 2023, 159).

Restating Lacan's sentiment that the woman does not exist, the economy “does not exist” either, apart from our ongoing libidinal investment in it. In their reflections on China's Belt and Road Initiative, Kapoor et al. (2023) take pains to distinguish this point from what they term a postmodern relativism. Interestingly, drawing on Latour's sociology of the scientific fact, they argue that something coheres as a fact only to the extent that it can enlist allies, a “network of statements and practices” that make it so (146). By extension, the Belt and Road Initiative cements political alliances, and China's investment in strategic technologies are investments—both material and libidinal, or, more precisely, the material as libidinal—that attempt to help a new economic imaginary to cohere.

The chapter on consumption offers some insight on how new economic realities might cohere. Here, Kapoor et al. (2023) identify a kind of fair trade as “ethical” consumption that works by adding a clean conscience to what is being purchased with one's coffee and distinguish it from other possibilities beyond virtue signaling. Engaging with Lindsay Naylor's work, they point out that, for coffee growers, participation in fair trade constitutes as one part of an overall livelihood strategy. Here, the motivations of consumers, ethical or otherwise, are not at the center of the story; rather, the efforts of farmers and their communities are foregrounded as

they use fair trade as part of a larger effort toward living “in resistance” (Naylor 2019). From a psychoanalytic perspective, this calls to mind the ethical and political possibilities that come with disidentifying from a dominant social imaginary along with the possibility of entering into a new and different relationship with one’s own desire, in keeping with the Lacanian injunction to not cede one’s desire (Giraldo 2012).

Pursuing this point a bit further, there is an opportunity to connect the thinking in *Global Libidinal Economy* with others who have been exploring the connection between Marxian theory and psychoanalysis in a similar way, most notably Anup Dhar and Anjan Chakrabarti. What these theorists share with Kapoor et al. is an understanding of the capitalist economy as a hegemonic imaginary that is performatively sustained by a geography that continues to divide the world between an integrated camp of the global (developed) countries and a pathologized and victimized Third World. As with Kapoor et al.’s analysis, this familiar narrative is one where precapitalist and premodern societies are presumed to desire integration into the camp of the global. But what might it mean to disidentify with this shared imaginary? What other desires might find expression?

For Chakrabarti, Dhar, and Cullenberg (2012), this narrative excludes or, in psychoanalytic terms, forecloses the possibility of a world that is neither capitalist nor precapitalist but noncapitalist. For them, noncapitalism is an already present reality that could be accorded its own logic, practice, and way of life—a way that works—but that presently does not cohere as an imaginary. Writing in ways that resonate with diverse-economies scholars like Naylor, their political project is thus one of identifying the practices, relationships, and institutions that might allow for this greater coherence.

There are at least two reasons for doing so. We might begin by observing that noncapitalist economic spaces, practices, relationships, and activities are places where the majority of human needs are being met: subsistence and small-scale producers still account for the vast majority of the agricultural outputs that feed human communities. Nor should noncapitalist spaces be thought of as existing only in an agrarian or rural settings. As Fred Block (2018) argues in *Capitalism: the Future of an Illusion*, we might see that, in cities around the world, the major preoccupation is what he calls a “habitation economy”—consisting of a whole range of professions, from health care and education to construction—that is concerned with the production, maintenance, and care of urban environments that contribute to well-being. While some of these efforts are involved in market activity, to be sure, they’re not occurring in ways that necessarily conform to an expansionist capitalist logic.

What comes into coherence here is a present postcapitalist world already in our midst, one that could become the object both of our desire and our passionate investment (drive). Kapoor et al. (2023) end their book with a call for solidarity among people who find themselves a part of no-part. This is important, but one wonders how solidarity of that kind might exist in sympathetic resonance with

global solidarity-economy movements that exist throughout the world and that are already trying to reorganize the world on a cooperative basis. These movements are already in dialogue with one another globally through organizations like RIPESS (Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of Social Solidarity Economy).

The present debate in this context is between those who would see their movement as making up for the failings of a (capitalist) market economy and those who hold fidelity to a desire where (capitalist) market economies are no longer an organizing principal. Here, we might note the parallel between these efforts and the process of autonomous cultural design that Arturo Escobar (2018) has been developing in recent years, not as a romantic localism but as an exercise in iterative design that is a search for an outside to capitalism. Organizations like RIPESS underscore that there is nothing localist or romantic about such endeavors: these efforts are self-organized in their own places at various scales, but they are also *already* in cooperation with one another at a global scale.

Perhaps what we are then in a position to identify at this point is both a politics and an economics that, to use McGowan's (2016) term, has "disinvested" from the circuits of capital. Establishing a parallel with the end of analysis and the traversal of fantasy, for McGowan this disinvestment might be as simple as a movement from "more" to "enough," a shift in the nature of desire that would also work to end capitalism as we've known it. In this we can discern versions of solidarity, degrowth, and convivial economies that are already working to reorient—with their desire, with economics, with life—around the idea of enough, by decommodifying land and housing and meeting other needs through cooperation, with Cooperation Jackson providing one exemplar (Akuno and Nangwaya 2017).

The example in Jackson is a compelling one, as this type of politics involves other types of solidarity, most notably militant self-defense against ongoing forms of white-supremacist violence while working to walk away from capitalist economies altogether.

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