

FROM ECONOMIC SADISM TO ECONOMIC SACRIFICE

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THE ECONOMIC PSYCHE

It's the psychology, stupid! We see this in the emotions that class and inequality create and in the different models of human nature held by economic theorists. What can psychotherapy say about the phenomenon of the invisibility of money as it is electronically 'transferred'? Financial movements resemble the movements of the soul or the unconscious itself and are proving just as difficult to control.

It's not just a question of feelings you know about, such as anxiety over money. It goes deeper than that. For many years, in workshops on the theme of 'The Economic Psyche', I have been exploring the interfaces of psychology, the economy and money. We consider the implications if people really were to take themselves consciously as the society seems to take them - merely as economic agents, pursuing money and all that goes with that. What I do in the workshops is to prescribe the symptom, in the language of family therapy. 'Look - you live in a society that valorizes money and material things, right? OK, what happens if you go with that, rather than protesting weakly about it? Can you *undo* the bondage to money and status by *overdoing* it?'

At a workshop in the US, I asked the participants to introduce themselves purely as economic agents and then share with the others how that felt. They were being asked by me to

stand up and say 'I'm Andrew, I work as an X, I earn Y, I have Z amount of liabilities. My financial and economic goals are A, B, C.' And other similar pieces of information were asked for. Buzz of anxious excitement in the room. Then a guy gets to his feet - and, I recall later, he is the only one wearing a suit - and says 'I'm an attorney, and I strongly advise none of you here to do this exercise!' For him, this was asking for trouble with the tax man.

Let me begin to go further into this by asking you, the reader, what are your memories of how money was handled in your childhood? Are these good or bad memories? Did it matter what sex a person was when it came to money in your family? Were men, for instance, supposed to know and care more? Women to be grateful? Or vice versa?

How did money move around within your family? Who controlled budgets? Was this control disputed at all? Could money be talked about openly in your home?

Have you done 'better' than your parents? If so, have there been any emotional problems over that? Yours, or theirs, or both? If you have not done 'better', how do you feel about that? This would be the monied version of the intergenerational rivalry of the Oedipus complex symbolising victory or defeat. A lot is stirred up by this question of doing better (or not) than your parents. These days movement is going to be downwards as well as upwards

- last year, *The Guardian* carried a long article entitled 'How Britain's middle class was betrayed' and the title says it all.

How do you think you are doing in terms of handling money issues in your current relationship or family? Rate your self on a scale of 1-10 where 1 is very bad and 10 is very good. In my practice, I sometimes use this workshop technique of getting the client to rate her or himself moneywise. Sometimes, individuals and couples have 'bad money days'. (Where it feels clinically appropriate, and if asked, I would reveal my own score to a client.)

When you fantasize having a lot of money, trillions of pounds, what are you doing with it? If you've never had such fantasies, try it right now! Some answers to this question are benevolent and maybe ten percent of those are true! What interests me is eliciting economic sadism. For many years, I've asked workshop participants to fantasize about the most shameful, sadistic, controlling, horrible thing they would do if they had a very large sum of money. Most people have pretty nasty fantasies in the money zone, fantasies of getting rid of rivals, attaining superiority, eliminating awkward differences whenever they are encountered.

MONEY AND GENDER

My paternal grandfather was fantastic with money and, off the boat from Poland, made a lot. That's how I got the £5,000

for the training analysis. My father was much less good at it. My own financial incapacity is legendary. My elder son wants to be an actor. It is interesting to consider how these differing generational monetary abilities affect (or do not affect) our intrapsychic conceptions of ourselves as men.

There are some special economic features to consider in terms of intrapsychic self-positioning as men. When I write that my financial incapacity is legendary, there is an ironic and assertive cast to it that is still definitely and defiantly 'masculine'. I win by losing, as we used to say in encounter groups. So only holy men and their vows of poverty are exceptions to the rule that men should do well economically. Aside from these kinds of subtleties, who can doubt that the Western (and maybe global) consensus is that the more money the more manhood.

Now, this cultural consensus on the surface could not be further from what analysts and therapists learn from the depths in their consulting rooms. The hedge fund wizard with erectile dysfunction is, by now, a well-known clinical phenomenon, almost a cliché. Without going into his cross-dressing or submissive fantasy, there may even be a formula that says 'the more external masculinity, the less internal confidence in it', or something like that. Economic success understood by psychotherapy as a psychic compensation.

If you think it through, economic downturns and 'the betrayal of the middle class man' may unconsciously be huge psychological reliefs for men as well as, more obviously, major stressors for them.

If I were a woman, I am not sure where I'd stand regarding the oft-stated idea that I might be less rigid (and hence maybe less greedy and more 'relational') when it comes to money matters. I have no idea whether it is true or not that such a difference from a generic man exists. When we explore such things, it all becomes extremely complex. Class (or structuration) analyses interweave with gender issues and the resultant melange often comes through in the clinical situation.

ECONOMIC SADISM, WHITENESS AND THE WEST

Is there an unhealable cruelty attached to money? Do humans just love their inequalities and that is that? But maybe with economic sadism brought to consciousness, its opposite - economic benevolence - may flower into overwhelming electoral support for fiscal and other programmes to reduce economic inequality. Adam Smith referred to economic benevolence and, as the polls tell us, it sputters altruistically in Western politics waiting to be translated into action.

The reference to the West opens something up. When Brazil's President Lula stated on March 26th 2009 that the economic crash was the responsibility of white men with blue eyes, and

that black people were the victims, many of us were shocked. Having worked for Lula, I knew exactly what he was getting at in terms of domestic political consumption – but there is more to his remark.

Whiteness it was that developed the mind-body split, global warming, unsustainable economics, nuclear technology, and free market economics. Whiteness got the bonus. Whiteness it is that can contemplate brown and black people dying as if they mattered less than white people – they get killed these days in a kind of video arcade by unpiloted drones steered from underground chambers thousands of miles away back home in the States. For sure, race and ethnicity play out in myriad ways according to history and cultural context. But we have to contend with this constant whiteness, British whiteness, American whiteness, Western whiteness – the box we are in. These whitenesses have been allowed to become essentialised, universalised, removed from history.

Reflecting on our economic sadism. I think many of us are (or feel we are) more complicit in the Great Crash of 2008 than we can bear to admit. A Professor of Philosophy at the workshop I mentioned said, 'Well, if I had unlimited funds, I'd buy thousands of acres of skiing land at Aspen and fence it off so no-one could use it.' I did not think this was very sadistic, to say the least. Then he blurted out: 'And I'd hire the US Marine Corps to machine-gun anyone who came near'. He

burst into tears and told us about his tycoon father and the relationship they had, and other personal information.

SACRIFICE, SHARIA, AND KEYNES

Shameful economic fantasy tells us how even people of progressive views are deeply invested in a system of economic injustice. If we want to change this system, we need to recognise what we are up against. It's about owning our own bit of the system, a piece of shadow from which we can all too glibly detach ourselves. The lesson is that economic sadism is not something you can escape just because you want to leap out of the pit.

I would like to be optimistic about the prospects for economic justice but, without a change in awareness and the backing of many groups – including therapists – for a new approach to economics, it will be hard to achieve change. What therapists can contribute is the idea that economic injustice and economic inequality is bad for your mental health, bad for the soul, bad for the spirit.

The sooner we admit our sadistic and shameful economic fantasies to others, to other peoples, creeds, genders, species, the better and lighter the human future will be. The more even the middle classes deny their economic sadism, the greater will be 'the horrors and the vengeance of time that wait silently in the wings of the bloody dramas of our future' (in Ben Okri's words). It's not just

the bankers. As the Baal Shem Tov put it, 'Sinners are mirrors. When we see faults in them, we must realise they only reflect evil in us'.

I think the valuing of equality, what I've called democratic spirituality in my book *Politics on the Couch*, is not dead in societies like Britain. But time is running out. Now, in the ongoing depths of the financial crisis, is the time for us to call for an economic sacrifice on the part of developed countries and even on the part of the middle classes in such countries where there are millions below the poverty line. Hitting the rich is hard to do (though easy to justify), as we know. But I am talking about the economic sacrifices that could be made by millions of ordinary middle-class people. And if this idea of economic sacrifice fits with what other people are saying about sustainability, climate change and global warming, so much the better.

I'll conclude this piece with a few ideas about sacrifice, with climate change and sustainable economics in mind. Sacrifice is a widespread psychological and historical theme. Sacrifice lies at the heart of the Abrahamic religions (the aborted sacrifice of Isaac) but is much, much older as a propitiation of the Gods. Asceticism has a long, long cultural history as does martyrdom, including that of suicide bombers. In Jungian psychology, we talk of the sacrifice of the ego for the flowering of the wider personality in individuation. In art and religion, we

contemplate the sacrifice of autonomy and control to something experienced as 'other', whether inside or outside the self.

There is increased discussion these days of what is involved in Sharia-compliant banking in which the earning of interest is forbidden. Central to Islamic finance is the fact that money itself has no intrinsic value. As a matter of faith, a Muslim cannot lend money to, or receive money from someone and expect to benefit – interest (known as *riba*) is not allowed. To make money from money is forbidden – wealth can only be generated through legitimate trade and investment in assets. Money must be used in a productive way. The principal means of Islamic finance are based on trading – it is essential that risk be involved in any trading activity. Any gains relating to the trading are shared between the person providing the capital and the person providing the expertise.

Now, I am not sure that we need to share totally in this moral repudiation of money by Islam, suggestive and fascinating though it is. But we can learn from Islam here, I suggest. For there is a challenge to Westerners to recuperate something in Western conceptions of money. The etymology of the English word 'money' is that it stems from the Latin *moneta* which was also the name (Moneta) the Romans used for Menemosyne, memory and the mother of the Muses. The deeper root is *mens* which means conscience, reason and rationality. Money as suggesting

conscience, reason, rationality? How amazing. Something certainly has got lost concerning money in the West, and not only in translation!

And now something from my own tradition. I expect some of you are familiar with the Jewish idea of *Pe-ah*. The passage in Leviticus (19:9-10) reads 'And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very corners of your field [*pe'ot* means corners], nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest.

Sure, there is much to question when it comes to economic charity and philanthropy, and who wants to live on gleanings and grain from the corners? Generosity often masks misanthropy, as we see in Shakespeare's Timon of Athens, who takes a terrible revenge, somehow already there, when the friends he has helped financially let him down in his hour of need.

It's supercilious and disengaged for the therapist to sit in judgement on humanity, balancing the positive and the negative notions of human nature that arise when we consider economic matters. I remain optimistic and hopeful. Whether it is via Sharia, or via a recuperation of deeper and more wholesome associations to money, or via Leviticus, or by a passionate psychotherapeutic

engagement, there is something in the economic psyche that offers us the chance to travel hopefully on the road to utopia, pick up what we need, then trudge back again.

What if, on this trudging journey, we do manage a change or transformation in the economic psyche, do make the economic sacrifices we know are needed? Listen to what the great economist John Maynard Keynes, whose name is on everyone's lips these days, had to say about that possibility in a little known text 'Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren':

'We shall use the new-found bounty of nature quite differently from the way the rich use it today, and will map out a plan of life quite otherwise than theirs. What work there still remains to be done will be as widely shared as possible. There will also be great changes in our morals. I see us free to return to some of the most sure and certain principles of religion and traditional virtue – that avarice is a vice, that the extraction of usury is a misdemeanor, and the love of money is detestable. We shall honour those who can teach us how to pluck the hour and the day virtuously and well, the delightful people who are capable of taking direct enjoyment in things.'

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