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ECONOMICS, PAIN AND MASOCHISM
A Psychoanalytical Approach to the Study of the Current Economic Downturn

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«All roads lead to Rome.» (Mario Monti)¹

«Euro is irreversible.» (Mario Draghi)²

«Just as a cautious business-man avoids tying up all his capital in one concern, so, perhaps, worldly wisdom will advise us not to look for the whole of our satisfaction from a single aspiration. Its success is never certain, for that depends on the convergence of many factors, perhaps on none more than the capacity of the physical constitution to adapt its function to the environment and then to exploit that environment for a yield of pleasure.» (Sigmund Freud)³

«The psychic life is an economic life.» (Giacomo B. Contri)⁴

¹ Idiomatic expression pronounced by Mario Monti like conclusion of very important conference about economic situation in Europe, July 4, 2012. See www.sole24ore.it

² Declaration of Mario Draghi in an interview of *Le Monde* newspaper, July 21, 2012.

³ Freud, 1929, SE XXI p. 84.

⁴ G.B. Contri, 2006, p. 68.



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What do these sentences have in common? And the subjects who have publicly pronounce them?

A statesman, a Governor, the founder of Psychoanalysis and a Psychoanalyst: economic subjects according to a concept of economy which does not define it as a separate sphere of human behavior, relegated to the expertise of specialist, but as an integral part of the individual thinking of all human beings.⁵ These subjects work for and in the economy through words, phrases and discourses: we can say talking economy as we say the talking cure.⁶

We are convinced that in the current historical moment we need Freud to re-examine and, actually, re-establish an *economy*. An economy that does not remain fixated on the crisis but recover the tension to the provision of benefits. Such a drive would be capable of correcting errors and promoting favorable conditions, not only for the individual but also for humanity as a whole.

One of the main objectives of the paper is showing the tight link between speaking about the economy (without distinction between micro- and macro-economy) and the economy of the *libido* or psychic life. For this reason we are going to use several and varied materials from the scientific literature, psychoanalytical practice and the media. We are proposing clinical materials and business stories as case studies of a new economic science.⁷ We claim there are not two economies - the *libido* and the market - but one economy encompassing all the range of human thinking and acts. Anchored on this statement, we can then introduce the distinction that really matters: the distinction between a good (sane, healthy, satisfactory) economy and a bad (pathological, damaging, depressed) economy.

1. FOR A RESTORATION OF THE ECONOMIC PRINCIPLE IN PSYCHOANALYSIS, WITH FREUD

Let's start from a case study.

A man⁸ lies on the couch, he doesn't want to ignore the forgetfulness that today makes him feel uncomfortable with his analyst. He has forgotten the agreements made for his session, even though he had spoken with his wife some days before sharing with her how the day would be organized. Then his recollection of his appointment evaporated. In its place there was a strange emptiness without much sense. Today, however, during his session, he realizes that the blank was *strategic*, he

⁵ G.B. Contri defines the *Economic Rectitude* as the realization of the «man as economic reality, a producer of wealth for himself and for everyone else.» (www.studiumcartello.it)

⁶ About the link between economic and cultural knowledge see also Guido Rossi (2012). About the close relation between thinking and language see Jaques Lacan (1966).

⁷ We restrain from using the word *economics* to characterize this science, since economics is the name of one of the possible way to engage in this science.

⁸ We have deliberately kept to a minimum personal data in order to scramble the case.



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analyses the substitution. He tells he has been spending his time with an unusual friend of his, someone who years ago was in a recovery program for drug abusers. He finds that he cannot help him, but he feels empathy for that man who has been subjected to injustice and has compromised his health. He feels close to him and feels *compassion* for him. In the afternoon he had played with his son. He is surprised to note in the young boy some familiar traits, he has something of his grandfather, when he gets angry he clenches his fists like his father. Will he become irate like the other males in the family? Will this family trait torment him too? He began to relieve the anxiety which took his breath away. He had learnt to recognize it as soon as it began. Now, talking to the analyst, he retraces his thoughts, calm and curious and grateful that the analyst has found time for him. He regains his way, he *re-gains*.

His forgetfulness gave voice to his desire to take time, without duties but immediately he had found himself stranded in compassion and with the obsession of an innate aggression – the two sides of his inconclusiveness. Now he finds himself with strengthened thought – it was a *strategic cut*. Competence in forgetting is competence in re-working – constructions in analysis and constructions in life, both in a psychic and economic time.

Even when we are facing the pain, we are, as always, “facing the thinking”. Anxiety, like pain or the economic downturn, can be used as any other material, relationships, “factor of production” to obtain a gain, to reach a satisfactory conclusion of our own acts and thoughts.

This is what the term *economy* should refer to. As any dictionary would describe it, *economy* refers to «the entirety of resources available (earth, primarily materials, natural energies, systems, money and productive capacity) and to the activities concerning their usage».⁹ This should be the same concern of the psychoanalytic work. At the beginning of each analysis, one goes to another because life’s affairs are going badly. In the end, the analysis’s benefit is quantifiable in terms of recovered relationships and businesses. Thanks to an analysis, we can calculate the costs of psychopathology. Psychopathology is dis-economy, it is against the economy of life’s relationships just as it is against the economy measured in the monetary units.

Referring again to a case study, we will briefly touch on the continuation of a business which succeeded in times of crisis.¹⁰ A young businessman comes from a family which knew how to bring to fruition a craftsman woodworking business. After an initial infatuation with architecture, the young man decided to take on the family business. A contract was made with the Senior Partner, his father, to construct a novel business model, an innovative, advanced business but at the same time a business that did not blindly obeyed the unwritten rules of globalization. He wanted to build «a simple organization, no hierarchy and no bureaucracy (...) we had to connect the head and hands of our employees». The result: unique piece of furniture, each one different from the other. Important

⁹ Our translation of definition of Italian word “economia” from Vocabolario Treccani on-line (www.treccani.it).

¹⁰ We summarize a case taken from “Corriere della Sera”, the most widespread Italian national newspaper of July 4, 2012. See www.corriere.it



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orders arrived, first from big Department Stores in Italy, then from abroad, then from the Navy and yachts builders. There is no pain in this story. Nevertheless, a similar restart could only happen thanks to the elaboration of all the different shades of human experience, including the most difficult ones. It is an account that does not call into question our compassion but invites us to help in working out a solution.

Stories of individual economies, a psychoanalytic patient or a young businessman. Cases which allow us to propose an extension of the economic point of view in psychoanalysis, as long as we free it from the limitations of energetic theory (Meissner, 1995).

Freud proposed: «Besides the dynamic and the topographical points of view, we have adopted the *economic* one. This endeavors to follow out the vicissitudes of amounts of excitation and to arrive at least at some *relative* estimate of their magnitude.» (Freud, 1915, SE XIV p. 181)¹¹ For Laplanche-Pontalis «The economic hypothesis is constantly present in Freudian theory and it translates into a series of conceptual instruments (...). In general, all the functioning of the psychic apparatus can be described in economic terms as a game of investments, disinvestments, counter investments, super investments.» (Laplanche-Pontalis, 1967, 128-129)¹²

Starting from Laplace, Meissner (1995) reformulates and defends a true and proper Freudian “economic principle” based on metaphysics. He writes: «The economic principle in psychoanalysis has fallen into disrepute, largely because of the connection with the energetic model adopted by Freud in his development of the libido theory. (...) Psychoanalysis cannot do without an economic principle, that any meaningful theoretical account must embrace economic issues.» (Meissner, 1995, I, p. 199)

As Laplanche makes explicit, «What is called the economic point of view in psychoanalysis is quite precisely that of a “demand for work”: if there is work, a modification in the organism, it is because ultimately there is an exigency, a force; and, as in the physical sciences, force can be dened only through the measure of a quantity of work» (Laplanche, 1976, p. 10). So Meissner: «Not only does the concept of energy as work potential divorce it from the hydrostatic model, but also separating the economic principle from connections with psychic energy removes it from the line of causal efficacy; in other words, economic principles are not principles of efficiency, they are principles of quantitative regulation; efficiency (causality, work) belongs to energetic factors.» (Meissner, 1995, I, p. 206)

¹¹ The terms relating to economy in the Standard Edition are the following ones: 1. *Economic* (adj): (*economic approach to mental processes; economic conditions; economic factors; economic situation*); 2. *Economics* (noun): (*economics of the libido*); 3. *Economy* (noun) is more general and often appears with *expenditure*.

¹² Laplanche-Pontalis (1967) defend Freud. They remark that in classical physics the concept of energy is used to measure differences and results, but it is not well defined in itself. Other Authors refer the notion of energy to a values world, but in this way they open the door to existentialism, leaving out the economic extent of this concept.



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If the economic principle were to be divorced from energetic model, what form it will take? «If we accept that psychoanalytic theory cannot do without a principle of economics, quantity and intensity are required to express and understand matters of quantitative variation, degrees of functioning, and level of motivational intensity. Economic concepts facilitate explanations of how the individual can make choices among conflicting motivations and goals, or gain the resolution of such conflicts, or again to explain the whole range of affective, motivational, and structural concepts that form the backbone of psychoanalytic understanding.» (Meissner, 1995, I, p. 217)

This is the operation of the pleasure principle: the regulation of the need to recreate the contexts of satisfaction and their memory traces at the service of the formation of wishes: «The drive, then, is not synonymous with psychic energy (required for every psychic action), but is rather a capacity or potential that can be called into operation when required under certain motivational conditions.» (Meissner, 1995, III, p. 272)¹³

In our opinion the pleasure principle (*Lustprinzip*) is from the beginning a logical and economic principle in that it links together satisfaction and knowledge by means of judgment. To better illustrate this point, we have chosen to show some remarks conducted by Freud's essay *Negation* (1925). The innovative result of this brief essay has already been highlighted in regard to logic (Laplanche e Pontalis, 1967),¹⁴ but we hold that it extends to the Freudian economic point of view.

Freud states that the negation brings fruitful material to the analytical work. He describes it as an example of intellectual work or judgment in a general sense. With the negation, actually, a plot emerges in the psyche of the subject, a subject who is engaged with his own repressions:

- 1) at the beginning was the judgment; it means a capable subject;
- 2) the repression avoided the access to the sentence that forms the judgment;
- 3) the sentence reaffirms itself by a negation.¹⁵

Freud writes: «The function of judgment is mainly concerned with two sorts of decisions. It affirms or disaffirms the possession of a particular attribute; and it asserts or disputes that a

¹³ In the same text, Meissner continues: «Freud never referred his search for a quantitative viewpoint in psychoanalysis to economic utility theory, although he was quite aware of the theories of Bentham and Mill. Part of Bentham's theory involved a calculus of desire, but again the problems of measurement and quantification are not unlike those with psychic energy - although the economist has the advantage of being able to appeal to measurable quantities (value, cost, price, etc.); nor is it always the case that the goal of maximizing pleasure follows the paths of rational hedonism. Other efforts have been made to articulate an economics of human behavior, based solely on considerations of utility and the allocation of limited resources. Information theory has the undisputed merit of drawing psychoanalytic reflections closer to the current drift in psychological theorizing regarding cognitive processes. All stages of the process of stimulation, information processing, and response activation involve and are governed by economic principles.»

¹⁴ «For Freud the negation in psychoanalysis and the negation in a logical and linguistic meaning (the "symbol of negation") share the same origin. This is the main theory of his article.» (Laplanche-Pontalis, 1967 p. 329 ed. it). See also G.M. Genga (2008).

¹⁵ See G.B. Contri (1987); inter alia p. 108. See also G.M. Genga (2008).



presentation has an existence in reality. The attribute to be decided about may originally have been good or bad, useful or harmful. Expressed in the language of the oldest –the oral- instinctual impulses, the judgment is: “I should like to eat this”, or “I should like to spit it out”; and, put more generally: “I should like to take this into myself and to keep that out.” That is to say: “It shall be inside me” or “it shall be outside me”. As I have shown elsewhere, the original pleasure-ego wants to introject into itself everything that is good and to eject from itself everything that is bad.» (Freud, 1925, SE XIX pp. 236-7) The child, that is, realizes the most honest *carpe diem* that is known, he wants in fact *«introject into itself everything that is good and to eject from itself everything that is bad.»* There is not a hint of yielding to masochism.

«The other sort of decision made by the function of judgment - as to the real existence of something of which there is a presentation (reality-testing) - is a concern of the definitive reality-ego, which develops out of the initial pleasure-ego.» (Freud, 1925, SE XIX p. 237) The expression reality-ego (*Real-ich*) designs an ego which has learnt, so to speak, to take account of reality. In Freud there is articulation between the pleasure principle and the reality principle. The second one is the fulfillment of the first one. The two principles are never in opposition. But we find dispute between pleasure and reality in the most overt cases of psychopathology.¹⁶

In this section we have approached three kinds of economic subjects:

- 1) The child, endowed with economic competence since the beginning of his life;
- 2) The neurotic, who in analysis draws benefits from denial and lapses;
- 3) The businessman, who in the above example is an economic subject particularly with regard to the force of thought brought about by his innovative choices and played with in the relationship with his father.

2. FACING THE PAIN AMONG CRISIS, DEFENSE AND CIVILIZATION. THE FREUDIAN PATH

It is interesting to summarize the route along which Freud focuses on the experience of pain with the scope of reaching a definition of the concept of *crisis*, so important in economics. The word *crisis* is at the hub of the actual global situation and at the same time emerges in every psychoanalytic treatment.

Freud the doctor, at the beginning of his career, confronted the experience of pain in pathological hysteria. He realized that it was not just a simple organic malfunction, but a complex processing. About the case of Emmy von N. Freud notes: «Another set of pains were in all probability memories of pains – were mnemonic symbols of the time of agitations and sick-nursing

¹⁶ See G. Contri (1977). *Inter alia* pp. 65-66.



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which played such a large part in the patient's life. *These pains, too, may well have been originally justified on organic grounds but had since then been adapted for the purposes of the neurosis.*» (Freud, 1892-95, SE II pp. 90-1. Our emphasis.) Moreover «when a neurasthenic describe his pains, he gives an impression of being engaged on a *difficult intellectual task* to which his strength is quite unequal.» (Freud, 1892-95, SE II p. 136. Our emphasis.)

In other words Freud (1892-95) realized the character of the neurotic subject's working out: it always aim at the construction of psychical representatives.¹⁷

Analyzing anger, pain and anxiety as moments of crisis in a subjective system, Freud demonstrates that in a crisis, the subject looks for a way, associative or motor, which leads however the excitation to the conclusion.¹⁸ As long as it leads to a solution, the way the subject takes can be predefined or substituted.

In some cases however, the pain is not processed with the aim of a resolution, but assumes a value in its own right. «In cases in which a patient wishes to be ill and clings to his ailment, this regularly happens because the ailment is regarded as a protective weapon against his own libido – that is because he mistrusts himself.» (Freud, 1892-97, SE I p. 249) Pain in the patients' statements is not only a happening (*Geschehen*), but it is sought and used as a measure of psychic consistency. In these cases the crisis doesn't aspire to a solution but is used for other ends.

Freud (1895) asked himself which were the characteristics of a painful experience that made so difficult this processing. First of all, pain leaves a mark, a scar like the burn mark left by lighting. The mark remains as an effect of grief and as such it can produce a great pain even in the presence of a much smaller sign. From this moment it will be effect of displeasure which measures pain, and not only the effective stimulation which produced it externally.

On one side, the normal defense from pain comes from psychic representation: the painful perception activates the research of lateral perceptive investments until the displeasure stops. In this process a peculiar role pertains to the linguistic competence in as much as it provides a fundamental prop to perception, inserting it in the construction of relationship.¹⁹ The indications of speech-discharge bring into play intellectual activity because it judges the painful experience and it establishes it as a psychic signal. The economy of judgmental activity permits the ego to master the experience administrating costs (pain and displeasure) and benefits (solutions).

¹⁷ See Laplanche - Pontalis (1967).

¹⁸ See also R. Colombo (1995).

¹⁹ «Speech-innervation is originally a path of discharge for ψ , operating like a safety-valve (...); it is a portion of the path to *internal change*, which represent the only discharge till the *specific action* has been found. This path acquires a secondary function from the fact that it draws the attention of the helpful person (...) to the child longing and distressful state; and thereafter it serves for *communication* and is thus drawn into the specific action.» (Freud, 1895, SE III p. 366) This is at the start of the function of judgment. About Freud's esteem for listening in communication, see also S. L. Gilman (2011).



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On the other hand, psychopathology complicates that initial constitution, leaving open - a secondary path - the link between strong emotions even of painful nature and excitation. In pathological defense, pain is employed as a theoretical topic, detectable as one of the principle roots of masochism. «The sexually exciting effect of many emotions which are in themselves unpleasurable, such as feeling of apprehension, fright or horror, persists in a great number of people throughout their adult life. There is no doubt that this is the explanation of why so many people seek opportunities for sensations of his kind, subject to the proviso that the seriousness of the unpleasurable feeling is damped down by certain qualifying facts, such as its occurring in an imaginary world, in a book or in a play.» (Freud, 1905, SE VII pp. 203-4) Pain and disadvantage are used also as a justification for narcissistic withdrawal, the ill person abandons all interest in external reality which is not linked to his suffering and «he ceases to love» (Freud, 1914, SE XIV p. 82). He is sure that his every pretentious request for attention will be justified by others similar to himself. Such justifications will be endorsed by civil morale which requires responding to pain with compassion (*Mitleid*) Freud (1915) interpreted it very accurately as a reaction-formation (*Reaktionsbildung*) contrary to a drive. We shall return to this point in the paragraph dedicated to masochism.

In the construction of metapsychology, Freud proceeded to define the concept of pain distinguishing it from other unpleasant affects. Above all, he defined how pain does not meet the repression (*Verdrängung*) because it is not destined towards satisfaction in the same way as driven motions, it is destined only toward elimination (Freud 1915b).

Moreover, although physical pain and psychic pain are considered analogous, they don't coincide (Freud, 1915d). On this analogy however rests the affinity between painful and traumatic experience – in both cases it is about a break or a crisis which the subject learns progressively to confront, but that initially finds him unprepared. The psychic system will work to «mastering the amounts of stimulus which have broken in and binding them, in the psychical sense, so that they can then be disposed of.» (Freud, 1920, SE XVIII, pp. 29-30) In this direction pain plays the essential function for the stimuli which come from outside, anxiety for which comes from inside.²⁰

In particular anxiety does not mark the painful experience neither does it coincide with it but rather refers to the danger that such experience may happen. In all its forms – separation anxiety, castration, moral anxiety, and social anxiety – it represents a system of revelation of threat to the ego. That which more than any other ensnares it, regards the anger of the Super-ego which becomes interpreted as the force of destiny. Under threat of losing the love of the Super-ego, the ego responds with anxiety.

²⁰ The dreams of patients suffering from traumatic neuroses lead them regularly back to the situation in which the trauma occurred. «These dreams are endeavoring to master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety *whose omission* was the cause of the traumatic neuroses.» (Freud, 1920, SE XVIII, p. 32. Our emphasis)



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The capital distinction which Freud points out between pain and anxiety allows him to illuminate social experience and its contribution to civilization, marked as it is by the pathology of the process of elaborating crisis.²¹ On this ground, Freud observes that «it cannot be for nothing that the common usage of speech should have created the notion of internal, mental pain (*innere, seelisch Schmerz*) and have treated the feeling of loss of object as equivalent to physical pain (*körperlich Schmerz*)» (Freud, 1925, SE XX p. 171) The common language calls them both *suffering*.

In *Civilization and its Discontents* (1929), Freud explores the consequences of suffering by analyzing the limited destinies of the desire for happiness. Even the wisdom, one of civilizations greatest ideals can be utilized for a system of endurance or prevention of suffering equal to thought numbing substances, sublimation, religion or illusions love. In any case suffering remains as the principle subject of discontent in civilization – it evokes it and with it pain becomes raised as an icon of the human condition.²² In civilization's discontents the speaking of suffering seems to take the place of work about the solution of the crisis.²³

In this paragraph we wanted to condense fourty five years (1892 – 1938) of Freudian work on the concept of pain. Freud described thinking at work, he wanted to understand how it regulates itself in both advantage and disadvantage, in pleasure and in suffering. Freud never gave up on the emphasis of interior torment and above all did not aspire to eliminate either pain or anxiety.²⁴ Indeed without them, human beings would remain devoid of indispensable means to deal with life events.

3. SUFFERING COUNTERTRANSFERENCE, BEYOND FREUD

There is no doubt psychoanalysis' own field is facing the pain. But at the same time, the psychoanalyst knows he's facing the thinking even when he's facing the pain.

²¹ When the individual «enters into social relationship, it really is necessary for him to be afraid of his super-ego, to have a conscience (...). Instead of the affect of anxiety let us take, for a moment, another affect –that of pain, for instance. It seem quite normal that at four years of age a girl should weep painfully if her doll is broken (...). We should think it strange if the same girl, after she had grown to be a wife and mother, were to cry over some worthless trinket that had been damaged. Yet that is how the neurotic behaves.» (Freud, 1925, SE XX p. 147)

²² See the cultural events signed by masochism describe in next section.

²³ Is interesting in this direction the observations of Turillazzi Manfredi (1983). She writes: «the operation of attaching to physical pain an ethic, even transcendental value (...) - is a very important mental operation towards an *analgesic* way». (Turillazzi Manfredi, 1983, p.575. Our emphasis).

²⁴ Küttemeyer M. and Schultz U. (1989) report the numerous occasions when Freud personally faced the pain experience, but never gave up to the masochism.



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Wishing to retrace very synthetically how the concept of pain was modified after Freud,²⁵ we meet at one point his growing valuation in the theory of the technique, and at another point the loss of the conceptual specificity which it had earned in Freud. After Freud, in fact, pain seems to have been encompassed in the psychology of emotions,²⁶ it becomes an emotion amongst other emotions. The consequences of this being that it becomes difficult to distinguish it from anxiety, from mourning, from displeasure, from a sense of guilt, from the sentiments of loss, from the affect of abandonment, and the experience of frustration. The destiny of pain is united with that of the emotions, half way between working well towards survival and the influence of cultural determinants.

Weiss observed «A physical pain, once felt, opens the way for the substitution of a psychic pain with a physical pain.» (Weiss, 1932, p. 394) Pain becomes a facility in identifying different experiences. From one side, painful experience encourages psychic defenses. From the other, his processing through dreams, lapses, mourning and humor produce the representation of pain as psychic suffering. In civilization, «every religious and political rite condenses within the group great quantities of mental pain and it organizes and finalizes it». (Gori, 1987, p. 363)

Funari's reconstruction (1965) surprises the change in psychoanalytic theorization about the pain. The ego, according to Szasz (1957), is forced to construct a relationship between psychic events and physical events starting with phenomena such as pain, pleasure and emotions in general. Anxiety is an extension of pain and both are genetic emotions conditioned by attachment and loss of the maternal figure. «Pain and anxiety as well as signs of danger constitute a reaction of which *finality is to re-establish lost or threatened equilibrium*» (Funari, 1965, p. 285. Our emphasis.)

After and beyond Freud the treatment of the concept of pain occurred above all within the boundaries of technique.²⁷ The scope of the analyst was almost redefined in terms of affronting pain. Here are some examples.

Gaddini (1978) sustains that mental pain should not be confused with anxiety, it is produced rather from a negative therapeutic reaction and the patient lives it as a worsening of the condition.

Cancrini (1988) puts the accent on the being of the analyst, beyond counter transference. What counts is the *pietas* of the analyst at work, saving angel, he is asked for the sympathetic affectionate sharing, to transform the pain into an occasion of maturation and personal growth. «A culminating moment in this complex emotional event which involves the patient and analyst and the final part of

²⁵ It is useful remembering that after Freud many psychoanalytic concepts have developed in directions that Freud himself would have not taken. See Green (1998) and Eagle (2011).

²⁶ One might draw the difference between psychology and psychoanalysis through the distinction among emotion, affect and drive. We only recall that these concepts are mutually irreducible. See Laplanche (1967), J. Lear (2005), G.B. Contri (2008).

²⁷ The new reading of the concept of pain in the theory of emotions opened the door to the new concept of empathy in psychoanalysis (Bolognini, 2002; 2008). See also Bucci (2001).



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analysis (...) It is a moment of growth and autonomy, but also a painful moment of separation» (Cancrini, 2002, p 126).²⁸

The following authors sustain an economy of mental suffering as *proprium* in the analytic process.

«An analyst that ignores his own mental pain does not have a chance of being an effective analyst» (Pontalis, 1999).

«Mental pain is a common concern of psychoanalysts in their professional life. Countertransference is considered to be the major source of the analyst's work-derived mental pain.» (Fleming, 2005)

«The therapeutic process is affected when patient and analyst struggle together with similar feelings and experiences.» (Sherby, 2004)

«The psychoanalytic experience must increase the patient's capacity to tolerate pain» (Fleming, 2008).

The analyst must be capable of accepting and transforming the contents expelled by the patient, and of returning them in a more acceptable form (Kogan, 1990; Prince, 2009).

The analyst should know how to suffer (Borgogno, 2002) offering himself as a container - «without desire, without memory, without understanding» (Bion, 1965) - for psychic suffering. In the analytical relation the acquisition of reparative competence (Di Chiara, 2003) will finally allow the tolerance of pain.

Buechler explains three attitudes toward psychic pain and suffering and their clinical implications: suffering as a symptom, as an inevitable burden, or as a window of opportunity for wisdom. She uses the words *pain*, *suffering*, *emotional pain* and *psychic pain* interchangeably. Showing the analysts as human beings she argues: «although all analysts have had to learn to tolerate being in presence of pain, (...) it is an imperative for each of us to examine our own tendencies to treat human suffering, first and foremost, as an obstacle to living fully, or an inevitable part of human existence, or as vehicle to gaining the fullest understanding of the human condition and our own particular, psychic life». (Buechler, 2010, p. 335)

With Freud we can remember that the *core* of the psychoanalytic route is to conduct the analyzing to the crossroads where the subject can recapture his own freedom (*Freiheit*, *Freud's emphasis*) of thought. Freud writes in a footnote of *The Ego and the Id*: «analysis does not set out to make pathological reactions impossible, but to give the patient's ego *freedom* to decide one way or the other.» (Freud, 1922, SE XIX p. 50)

²⁸ Cancrini refers the works of Melanie Klein (1957) which emphasizes the maturational function of the pain experiences. In the same direction move: (1) Meltzer (1967) when notes the first function of analyst is containing the patient's mental suffering; (2) Bion (1962, 1970) when draws the core of relation between patient and analyst in term of projection of pain from patient towards the analyst and restitution of the same pain to patient, but made livable. Bion derives this clinical model from the infant mental development model, referring to the early relationship with the maternal object and to the most primitive mother-baby interactions.



4. THE CURRENT CHALLENGE OF MASOCHISM

The psychoanalytic study of pain is not complete without a detailed reference to Freud's *The Economic Problem of Masochism* (Freud, 1924).²⁹ In this short and surprising essay, Freud shows that masochism does not preeminently belong to the clinical material but to culture in general by asserting the primacy of *moral* masochism over *erotogenic* or *feminine* masochism.³⁰ It is a discovery at odds with most of Western culture in the 1900s.³¹ Freud understood that while sadism generates a severe judgment, masochism appeals to a subtle justification. It is the issue of compassion as reactive formation. Masochism is an unavoidable challenge for contemporary thought. A challenge to be faced by using cultural phenomena as case studies, as the following few examples on the issue of pain show:

1. A first literary example, *The Good Soldier Svejk* by the Czech writer J. Hašek (Hašek, 1912), where the hero is a subject devoted to pure submission.³²
2. A second literary example, *La Cognizione del Dolore (Cognition of Pain)* by Carlo Emilio Gadda (Gadda, 1893-1973), about which the literary critic Magherini correctly asks: «what is the relation between the peculiar style and structure of the text and the painful core which seems the reason of the author's writing?» (Magherini, 1986).³³
3. An historical example concerning catholic morality in the 1950s. Pope Pio XII was asked to officially take a stand about the use of analgesic medication during childbirth and in surgery. The issue was if the true believer had a general moral obligation to endure physical pain. The firm and resolute answer was no since pain actually prevents the achievement of goods and higher interests. If the Pope had to give an answer that could have been reached by a modest use

²⁹ See also H. Blum, who outlines a concept of masochism which recognizes that «psychoanalysis has been evolving in many different directions.» (Blum, 2011).

³⁰ Freud brings to conclusion his study of masochistic trend in “*A Child Is Being Beaten*”: *A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversion* (1920).

³¹ Many Authors showed the close ties between the issue of pain and the development of Western Philosophy (Natoli, 1986). Psychoanalysts are able to recognize the masochistic temptation even in philosophical doctrines. For example Sacerdoti (1987) shows us this issue within Kierkegaard's thought.

³² See M.D. Contri (1991) for an interesting comment on the novel.

³³ Many critics, for example G. Contini (1989), and many psychoanalysts, for example E. Gioanola (1977) and C. Benedetti (1983), have pointed out the psychoanalytical relevance of Gadda's works. Specifically, G.B. Contri in *La tolleranza del dolore* (The Tolerance of Pain) (1977) articulates the exegesis that Gadda thought impossible. Contri's book - whose subtitle is *State, Law, Psychoanalysis* - confronts the theme of masochism with a broad reflection about the relationship between law and psychoanalysis.



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of common sense, it means that a good number of Catholics was at risk of confounding pain with masochism.³⁴

4. Finally, the musical production contains good description of depression, as in the classic *I am a rock* by Paul Simon (1965): «I have no need for friendship / Friendship causes pain (...) I touch no-one and no-one touches me / I am a rock / I am an island. And the rock feels no pain / And an island never cries.». Here is a subject that withdraws all his libidic investments, swaying in melancholia. In this way, does he avoid the masochism or prepare the ground for it?

On the contrary, Freud in *The Economic Problem of Masochism* states: «The existence of a masochistic trend in the instinctual life of human beings may justly be described as mysterious from the economic point of view. For if mental processes are governed by the pleasure principle in such a way that their first aim is the avoidance of unpleasure and obtaining of pleasure, masochism is incomprehensible. *If pain and unpleasure can be not simply warnings but actually aims, the pleasure principle is paralyzed – it is as though the watchman over our mental life were put out of action by a drug.*» (Freud, 1924, SE XIX p. 159. Our emphasis). As it is well known, Freud recognizes in moral masochism the (mostly unconscious) sense of guilt or need of punishment. This is what accounts for the negative therapeutic reaction. In the negative therapeutic reaction «The suffering itself is what matters; whether it is decreed by someone who is loved or by someone who is indifferent is of no importance. It may even be caused by impersonal powers or by circumstances; the true masochist always turns his cheek whenever he has a chance of receiving a blow.» (Freud, 1924 SE XIX p. 165).³⁵

Freud refers to the super-ego to attempt an understanding of the psychological processes responsible for the genesis of moral masochism. The establishment of the super-ego corresponds to a genuine regime change in the life of the child. It is an overcoming of the Oedipus complex more similar to a bypass of the issue than to a genuine resolution. Indeed, it is exactly at this moment that morality becomes pervasive and dominant: «Kant's Categorical Imperative is thus the direct heir of the Oedipus complex.» (Freud, 1924 SE XIX p. 167) Both with subjects affected by hyper morality (where) and with subjects affected by masochism «in both cases what is involved is a need which is satisfied by punishment and suffering» (Freud, 1924 SE XIX p. 169) Freud's conclusion is a firm

³⁴ See Genga (1995) for a more articulated argument.

³⁵ «The satisfaction of this unconscious sense of guilt is perhaps the most powerful bastion in the subject's (usually composite) gain from illness – in the sum of forces which struggle against his recovery and refuse to surrender his state of illness. The suffering entailed by neuroses is precisely the factor that makes them valuable to the masochistic trend.» (Freud, 1924, SE XIX p. 166)



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condemnation of masochism: masochism «is to advantage neither of morality nor of the person concerned» (Freud, 1924 SE XIX p. 169).³⁶

In the clinical experience, it is not uncommon to find subjects that, during a psychiatric treatment, manage to commit suicide skillfully avoiding any form of outpatient care and home care. These are cases of masochism stretched to the extreme consequences. Do they obey the death drive? Or, by making the act unpredictable for the caregiver, do these subjects state their progressive disinvestment in any real relationship, once more reiterating the hate characterizing their previous relationships?

These cases are going beyond the clinical interest. For example, the Sean Penn's film *Into the Wild* (2007) has brought into the collective imagination the story of a young man, Christopher McCandless, who was able to recognize, on the verge of death, that «Happiness is real only when shared». An appeal and repentance that are coming too late, after years spend working *against* any possible relationships and, in general, against the concept itself of partnership and drive to reach the satisfaction. It is a lesson quite different from the myth of extreme challenges or of a return to a nature imagined to be wild and pristine.

A final example is inspired by a debate at the 2009 IPA Congress at the end of Jonathan Lear's session on *Technique and Freedom in Psychoanalysis*.³⁷ One member of the audience supported the thesis that a psychoanalyst could not and should not do anything to stop a patient who is declaring the intention to commit suicide. The reply, from an esteem Australian psychoanalyst, was of a totally different orientation. Reporting the case study of a patient of him who was slowing killing himself though alcoholism, he confronted the patient with a choice. When the patient arrived to the psychoanalytic session reporting that his medical doctor has clearly said that continuing drinking would have caused certain death and faced with the patient's refusal to stop drinking, he replied: "If you do not change course of action, this is your last session with me because I have a better use for the psychoanalytic hour I am devoting to you: I will use it for someone who has requested and is waiting for a psychoanalysis with me." It is an extremely instructive example: the challenge brought by masochism calls into question the relationship between freedom and technique. No analyst can ignore this challenge.

³⁶ «Thus moral masochism becomes a classical piece of evidence for the existence of fusion of instinct. Its danger lies in the fact that it originates from the death instinct (...). But since, on the other hand, it has the significance of an erotic component, even the subject's destruction of himself cannot take place without libidinal satisfaction.» (Freud, 1924, SE XIX p. 170)

³⁷ 2009 IPA Congress: «Psychoanalytic Practice. Convergences and Divergences», Chicago, 29 July – 1 August 2009.



5. PAIN AND THE CURRENT ECONOMIC DOWNTURN

We are interested in the relation between the current economic downturn and pain not because an economic recession may cause pain and suffering (even if we are fully aware that it does) but because we think pain and economic recession share a similar function. This is true both when pain is correctly used as useful signal in a sane individual and when pain is pathologically pursued by a masochist. We also think that the clear, logical, unencumbered by preconceived theories approach used by Freud in looking at pain should be the same approach to be used in looking at the economic recession. In this respect, we think that the work of John Maynard Keynes motivated by the Great Depression of the 1930s share a similar approach with that of Freud: both Keynes's *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (1936) and Freud's *The Economic Problem of Masochism* give center stage to logical, individual thinking in facing unprecedented circumstances and recognize that economic life is not a separate sphere of our individual lives, that thinking, when it is not inhibited by our pathologies, *is* economic thinking.³⁸

An economy can use a recession (i.e. a marked slowdown in the growth rate of the GDP) just as an individual can use a crisis (i.e. a marked slowdown in the acts and initiatives that reach satisfaction): as material for progress and growth or as a weight leading to depression. The reason is simple. First, economic thinking is part of the healthy, sane, logical thinking characterizing healthy, sane human beings. Second, the economy is not a separate entity from the agents participating in it.

By the same reasoning, just as psychoanalysis is the science of recovering the individual imputability in the emerging and visible pain suffered by an individual,³⁹ the science concerning the economy⁴⁰ should be the science concerned with recovering the individual imputability of economic agents in influencing the economic cycle.

The recent great recession is a good example of this. Just as with individual pains and suffering, we could ask: what errors of individual thinking have created favorable conditions for the economic downturn to start? Which acts and decisions, imputable to specific economic agents, have led to a persistent economic downturn that transformed a housing and lending crisis in a "Great Recession"?

We are aware that this approach to understanding the current economic downturn is at odds with most current interpretations. The main interpretation provided by the economic profession uses the concept of *bubble*: a housing bubble exploded, creating a financial crisis magnified by the aggressive use of derivatives in the mortgage and financial markets. The concept of bubble is a good metaphor to describe a certain course of events but it does not help, it does actually obfuscate, the

³⁸ This is also one of the central argument put forward by G.B. Contri in *Il Pensiero di Natura*.

³⁹ As we mention at the beginning of the paragraph, when Freud was faced with an apparent logical contradiction between the pleasure principle and the painful objectives of a masochist, he did not hide or ignored the problem but trusted logical individual thinking to work through the apparent contradiction.

⁴⁰ We restrain from using the word *economics* to characterize this science, since economics is the name of one of the possible way to engage in this science. Namely the way authoritatively defined by Lionel Robbins (1932) after the marginalist revolutions became the mainstream of the economic science.



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individual imputability at the source of the crisis. A bubble bursting is something mechanical and something that eventually will happen: the individual agents seem impotent in front of it. It seems they have nothing to do with it. No individual imputability.

Rooted in our reading of Freud, we claim that individual agents have all to do with it and that individual imputability should take center stage in the science concerning the economy. In this respect, our reading of the current economic downturn is just one possible example of the application of the science pioneered by Freud.

First step: what errors of individual thinking have created favorable conditions for the economic downturn to start? These are very similar to pathological theories that create favorable conditions for an individual neurosis to arise. The first candidates for this imputation are surely the agents of the US financial sectors conceiving, proposing and leveraging on subprime mortgages. By designing these financial instruments, they increased the systemic risk instead of reducing it and they badly serviced their consumers by proposing a product not appropriate for them. In a sense, they did the opposite of what an economic exchange should be: the meeting of supply and demand to satisfy the needs of the two sides of the market. The receiving side of this product deciding to enter this contract is very similar to a partner of an abusive relationship: he knows damage and pain will result down the road but despite (or better, because of) that he compulsively decides to engage once again in the relationship. The current economic downturn was not the result of a bubble bursting but the result of specific theories (i.e. preconceived *weltanschauung*) and defined courses of actions in which individuals decided to engage in. Some individuals have directly created the theory, by conceiving financial derivatives or by marketing the indefinite growth of housing prices, others have simply decided to comply with the theory. It is a case of group psychology and it is exactly the same mechanism leading to the creation of a neurosis. Keynes was describing a very similar process when he introduced the concept of *animal spirits*.

Second step: Which acts and decisions have led to a persistent economic downturn that transformed a housing and lending crisis in the "Great Recession"? Again, it is not mechanically obvious that a housing crisis, albeit huge, should lead to more than four years of recessions (and counting). Additional agents should have acted to make the crisis persistent, additional errors of individual thinking should have taken place to transform the crisis in depression. As with any crisis, we are still living a lost opportunity: instead of using the crisis to identify and correct sources of excessive systematic risk in the financial sector, policy makers - particularly in Europe - have engaged in punishing austerity policies. Frequently, the receiving side of these policies has nothing to do with creating the favorable conditions for the recession, breaking the link with individual imputability. This is another shared characteristic with masochism where the link between pain and punishment and imputability is not only blurred but also frequently completely reversed.

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In this second step, we are more in line with many contemporary economic scholars that identify austerity policies as a major factor in making the crisis worse and persistent.⁴¹ The main economic argument is still rooted in Keynes (1936). Keynes is a good example of an individual thinker that faced with a crisis (the Great depression of the 1930's) decided to exploit the opportunity without letting preconceived theories suffocating his original thinking. Keynes managed to correct a common error of the economic thinking of his time: markets always work (the so-called *laissez faire* model). Faced with plenty of evidence of the contrary, many policy makers and central bankers of the time engaged in contractionary monetary policies transforming the 1929 financial crisis in a global persistent economic depression. Keynes has identified that this was a pathological theory: there was not an automatic mechanism that could stop the downward spiral of the world economy at the beginning of the 1930s. Only a deliberate intervention of some economic agents (in his recommendations: national governments) could stop the downturn and Keynes build not only a theoretical economic model to support it but he also tried to create a political consensus for intervention. After the crisis, we were left with the creation of the modern macroeconomics and the enrichment of the policy tools available to manage the economy.⁴² It is an example of how a crisis could be exploited for progress. And it is the result of the personal thinking of a man that, like Freud, was putting thinking at the source of human life, as he elegantly put it at the end of his most important book:

«the ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. *Practical men*, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the *slaves of some defunct economist*.»

«Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back. I am sure that the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas.» [...]

«But, soon or late, it is ideas, not vested interests, which are *dangerous* for good or evil.» (Keynes, 1936, VI, Chapt. 24, last paragraph. Our emphasis)

Keynes and Freud recognized the primacy of thinking. But they also recognized that thinking might be perverted into theories that make "men slaves". "Madmen in authority" are "slaves of some defunct economist" just as masochists are slaves of their moral theories. The comparison with vested interests makes it clear: there are not powerful vested interests unless we choose to give them that power just as there is not a moral imperative forcing us to pursue pain unless we choose to obey the super-ego. Keynes is correct in stating: "ideas are dangerous". He states they are *dangerous* instead

⁴¹ See for example the two recent books of two vocal and Nobel-Prize winning economists: Krugman (2012) and Stieglitz (2012).

⁴² As Skidelsky (1992) appropriately put it: "Keynes was inventing Roosevelt's programme for him".



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of a more neutral *powerful*: dangerous means we have a choice, we are imputable of the direction we choose to take, or - as Freud put it - we have «the freedom to decide one way or the other.» (Freud, 1922, SE XIX p. 50)

6. CONCLUSIONS

We are convinced that in this historical moment we need Freud to be able re-examine and re-establish a novel concept of economy. One of the main objectives of the paper has been to show the tight link between speaking about the economy and the economy of the *libido* or psychic life. We claim that there are not two economies - the *libido* and the market - but one economy encompassing all the range of human thinking and acts. From this position, we can then introduce the distinction that really matters: between a good (sane, healthy, satisfactory) economy and a bad (pathological, damaging, depressed) economy.

We have organized our argument in five steps.

First, we sustain the urgency of a restoration of the economic principle in psychoanalysis. We are with Meissner (1995) in defending a true and proper Freudian “economic principle” based on metaphysics, a principle which should not be relegated to the energetic model adopted by Freud in his development of the libido theory. Actually, it is by moving away from this limited view that we can claim that the pleasure principle (*Lustprinzip*) is from the beginning a logical and economic principle linking together satisfaction and knowledge by means of judgment.

Second, we focus on the experience of pain. Our objective here is reaching a definition of the concept of *crisis*, a crucial concept in understanding the current economic downturn and one of the fundamental concepts of contemporary economic science (or Economics). Freud the doctor, at the beginning of his career, confronted the experience of pain in pathological hysteria. He realized that pain was not just a simple organic malfunction, but complex processing. Thanks to the definition of neurosis, Freud (1892-95) realized the character of this processing/working out: it aims at the construction of psychic representation. Analyzing anger, pain and anxiety as moments of crisis in a subjective system, Freud demonstrates that, in a crisis, the subject looks for a way, associative or motor, to reach a conclusion. As long as it leads to a solution, the way the subject takes can be predefined or substituted. In some cases however, the pain is not processed with the aim of a resolution, but assumes a value in its own right or becomes the aim itself, as with the masochist.

Third, we look at the concept of pain after Freud (Green (1998); Eagle (2011)). Pain seems to have been encompassed in the psychology of emotions, becoming an emotion amongst other emotions. As a result, it becomes difficult to distinguish pain from anxiety, from mourning, from displeasure, from the sense of guilt, from the sentiments of loss, or the experience of frustration. After and beyond Freud the treatment of the concept of pain occurred above all within the confines



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of technique. The scope of the analyst has almost been redefined in terms of facing the pain [Bolognini (2002) and (2008)]. There is no doubt psychoanalysis' own field is facing the pain. But at the same time, the psychoanalyst knows he's facing the thinking even when he's facing the pain.

Fourth, we look at the still actual challenge posed by masochism (first of all the moral masochism) for contemporary thought. Freud understood that while sadism generates a severe judgment, masochism appeals to a subtle justification. It is the issue of compassion as reactive formation.

Fifth, we look at the relation between pain and the economic downturn and we claim they share a similar function. This is true both when pain is correctly used as useful signal in a sane individual and when pain is pathologically pursued by a masochist. We also think that the clear, logical, unencumbered by preconceived theories approach used by Freud in looking at pain should be the same approach to be used in looking at the economic recession. In this respect, we think that the work of J. M. Keynes share a similar approach with the work of Freud: both of them Keynes give center stage to logical, individual thinking in facing unprecedented circumstances and recognize that economic life is not a separate sphere of our individual lives, that thinking, when it is not inhibited by our pathologies, *is* economic thinking.

We conclude by supporting the primacy of thinking also when facing the pain or the economic downturn. We always have a choice, we are imputable of the direction we choose to take, or - as Freud put it - we have «the freedom to decide one way or the other.» (Freud, 1922, SE XIX p. 50)

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