INTRODUCTION

If you ask an economist the trivial question: What does Bill Gates want? she probably has a ready answer. What Bill Gates *really* wants is power—or, perhaps, influence or prestige or social status or fame. Common to all these answers is the way they substitute a vague, intangible, and immeasurable benefit for what appears prima facie as the most obvious and concrete reply: Bill Gates appears to want money. He behaves as if what he wants is money. His business conduct seems to be primarily aimed at increasing the already unimaginable worth of Microsoft. Why, then, should we not see his conduct as a manifestation of desire for wealth? Why not see it as an extreme example of the *way* people want money (a way that may include as justifications those colloquial explanations of the endless race for wealth—power, honor, prestige, etc.)? In addition to the dubious nature of this overconfident naming of vague substitutes for the most obvious answer, each of the possibilities listed by the imaginary economist raises additional and more concrete questions.

What does the will to power mean if Gates seldom appears to use this power? What might this power achieve that his wealth alone cannot? Is there any real sense in which prestige is increased by adding a few more billions to the dozen billions of dollars that Gates already possesses? (Note that this question does not apply to monetary values: fifty billion is exactly one billion more than forty-nine billion.) Can one really draw pleasure from being famous? As Andy Warhol noted, "You can only see an aura [of fame] on people you don't know very well or don't know at all."[1]

I dwell on these absurdities of the economic mind, not usually suspected of inaccuracy, to underline the strange theoretical difficulty that money poses for economics. What in everyday parlance is an obvious truth, namely, that in some sense or another, people want money, is basically unthinkable in economic terms. Herein lies the starting point for the main argument of this book. If desire for money in itself is comprehensively rejected by economic thought, then the idea of money as an object of desire can serve as a starting point for an elaboration of a comprehensive alternative to contemporary economics. Conceiving of a desire for money not as an aberration but as a fundamental economic reality necessitates a radical shift not only in the concept of money, but also in the conceptions of what a commodity is, what economic behavior is, what an economic subject is, and what an economy is. It necessitates, in other words, a radically different economic ontology.

This is the gist of this book: it argues that money should be conceived of primarily as an object of desire, and it elaborates the wide-reaching theoretical shifts entailed by this conception. It can be read as a thought experiment: what would economics look like if it acknowledged desire for money? It anchors this conception in the works of thinkers who were banished from economic discourse throughout the crystallization of orthodox economics during the twentieth century, drawing mainly on the works of Karl Marx, Thorstein Veblen, and Max Weber, with some insights from Georg Simmel. Using the concept of a desire for money as a key to reading these thinkers enables me to formulate the controversy between orthodox and heterodox economics in terms of economic ontology. Marx and Veblen are no longer read by economists—and in the rare occasions they are read, they are misunderstood—because their conceptions of the economy, of economic things, and of economic behavior are radically foreign to those of orthodox economics. What I will show is that this difference can be highlighted by the fact that their theories are compatible with a notion of the desire for money.

Here I briefly outline the dimensions of this alternative ontology. The desire for money is incomprehensible in an individualist, utilitarian framework such as the one that dominates orthodox economics. Money itself is rendered a marginal issue in this framework. This theoretical setting is inverted once we conceive of economy as an impersonal context of action. In that case, money can be thought of as embodying the dimension of impersonal action fundamental to economy. Furthermore, it is when we conceive of money as an object of desire that the economic drive appears in its most alien form.

According to the orthodox economic perspective, people may want things that money can buy—tangible things like food and drink or intangible things like prestige, beauty, or a sense of certainty regarding their future—but they cannot want money itself. That is why economists tend to see money as a "neutral veil" over the "real" economy or a lubricant in its machinery.[2] The distinction between money and *real* things already is rooted in the individualistic view of economics. In a strictly individualist environment, money simply has no meaning. Abandoned like Robinson Crusoe, an individual has no use whatsoever for money. Indeed, Crusoe himself acknowledged this at length when he found a drawer full of money after his shipwreck: "I smiled to myself at the sight of this money: 'O drug!' said I, aloud, 'what art thou good for? Thou art not worth to me—no, not the taking off the ground; one of those knives is worth all this heap; I have no manner of use for thee; even remain where thou art, and go to the bottom as a creature whose life is not worth saving.'" Nevertheless, as a reminder of an advantage that literary imagination sometimes has over economics, Crusoe immediately adds: "However, upon second thoughts I took it away."[3]

Why or, more precisely, how does Crusoe take the money after all? He takes it despite his own internal monologue, which conveys a somewhat complacent blend of self-pity and pride. This play, between an articulated contempt for money and the decision to take it after all, reflects the relation between orthodox and heterodox economic thought. If one's actions are seen to be grounded solely on one's subjectivity, then desire for money in itself makes no sense. By contrast, the inexplicable backtracking, "upon second thoughts I took it away," situates the relation to money at the limits of subjectivity. Crusoe takes the money in spite of the perception he has of his own activity. He acts against his own self-perception. This act reflects the reason why heterodox economics can indeed account for the desire for money.

The works of Marx, Veblen, and Weber share the idea of the economy as an impersonal framework, namely, a framework in which one's activity is situated from the outset against one's own self-perception. This idea pervades Marx's economic thought from the beginning in the concept of alienation and, throughout all its theoretical levels, in his conceptions of commodities, exchange, and money. It is epitomized in the concept of capital as embodying a drive or a movement of accumulation that goes beyond any subjective end. In Veblen a similar notion of economy is explicitly stated in his emphasis on man as "an agent seeking in every act the accomplishment of some concrete, objective, impersonal end."[4] His formulation is steeped in an ostensibly different terminology, namely, in Veblen's predilection for an evolutionary approach to the economy. Yet its meaning for economic theory dovetails with Marxist thought.

If *Capital* elaborates the workings of the drive for profit as an impersonal formation, Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* elaborates on waste as an impersonal phenomenon. Conspicuous gestures of expenditure on unproductive efforts enter Veblen's economic theory insofar as they suspend the individualist, utilitarian calculus of gains and losses. In Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* the impersonal dimension is still more evident in the transformation of a divine, austere injunction into an economic drive. In all these conceptions, far from being marginal, money occupies a central place as an object that embodies the impersonal nature of the economy as such. This line of reasoning becomes clearest when desire is brought into account. It is in relation to desire that money most fully assumes its position as embodying the economic in its foreignness to subjectivity.

In the individualistic framework of orthodox economics, the fact that money cannot directly serve subjective ends renders the desire for it a pathological tendency, if not a complete theoretical impossibility. In the impersonal framework of heterodox thought, the same fact allows us to posit the desire for money as an objective reality in the sense that it cannot be fully subjectivized. In joining money and desire, money takes on its most unfamiliar shape when the subject's own desire confronts it as an incomprehensible force. To return to Crusoe—formally speaking, his speech is actually a dialogue because his contemptuous words are actually addressed to the money he found. His additional remark "upon second thoughts I took it away" can be considered as money's mute reply.

A direct representation of this notion of economy as transcending the individual's perspective can be found in the reality-television show *Survivor* in the interesting use the contestants make of the expression *to play the game.* The first thing to note is that here the game does not signify the opposite of reality but rather comprises a hard kernel of reality—a kernel that cannot be revealed except in the guise of a game: the hypocritical, treacherous conduct of the participants in their fight for the one-million-dollar prize. In this usage, the game allows one to suspend in practice one's self-perception, namely, "In my real life I am a conscientious citizen, a good friend, and a loving family man, but in the game I am a jerk." The heterodox view of the economy as an impersonal framework takes this suspended, unreal player as the real economic subject. Furthermore, this view enables us to see the gesture of bracketing as related to the economic object of money—as part of the practices that surround money and sustain it. Money is the embodiment of impersonal economic activity insofar as it enables us to behave as though we are alien to ourselves.

A parallel dimension of the difference between heterodox and orthodox economic ontologies concerns the question of history. The individualistic framework of orthodox economics entails an ahistorical conception of the economy. In this framework, any economic situation can be eventually reduced to individuals and their preferences. These preferences may indeed change over time, with shifts in fashions and tastes; yet, preferences themselves are *not* an object of economic knowledge. Economics only studies the mechanisms of allocating resources according to given preferences. For that reason orthodox economic knowledge lacks, in principle, any meaningful historical dimension.

The heterodox view, in contrast, allows us to bridge the conceptual gap that ostensibly separates economics and history. The view of the economy as impersonal, as a foreign context of action confronting the subject, makes room for history in the sense of an aspect of social reality that surpasses the points of view of individuals. It allows a conceptualization of that aspect of social reality that is blindly inherited from the past. In heterodox economic thought we can find reference to this aspect through the question of persistence, of the way economic systems perpetuate themselves.

The answers we find in Marx, Veblen, and Weber are similar in that they all point to the economic object as a medium or carrier of history. In this sense, their theories historicize the economy not in the trivial manner of viewing any specific economy as embedded in its historical context, but by conceiving of economic objects as historical objects. Weber's "iron cage" metaphor points to this. It suggests that the Protestant ascetic religious ethic that gave rise to the spirit of capitalism has become congealed in the ostensibly neutral economic cosmos, embedded in things and in the practices that surround them. Marx's concept of fetishism addresses the same idea in a systematic manner, as it explains how an antagonistic social order persists as it is mediated through objects: social relations appear to agents as "material relations between persons and social relations between things." Finally, Veblen's institutional economic theory refers to practices and things as they are habituated: things that are associated with power or wealth, such as refined manners, but become appreciated for their own sake. For that reason, a thing enters the economy of conspicuousness precisely by the same movement that makes it a historical thing—it is an economic object insofar as it becomes a remnant of the past, combining persistence with effacement of origin.

This book ponders the possibility of weaving desire into this conjunction of economy and history. It explores the possibility that among the other vestiges that the economic object carries from the past, and with which it confronts the subject, is a social structure of desire that sustains money. If this possibility seems farfetched, one should examine it with respect to the era of gold-based money. In such a system, money is quite clearly entangled with both a misconception and a form of desire. Gold appears as if it is the pure embodiment of economic value and that is also how it is desired. Desire attaches to the untraceable quality that allocates to gold the special function of money, despite the apparent fact that it is but an ordinary commodity.

What should be emphasized is that this conjunction of erroneous belief and desire that surrounds gold is not simply an error in the conception of money. Rather, it *is* money. It is precisely the way that gold assumed, in its time, the function of money. Marx notes this in his *Comments on James Mill*, where he suggests that the efforts of political economy to dispel the mercantilist superstition that gold is the essence of wealth are futile despite their cleverness because this superstition is part of the structure of a monetary economy.[5]

Thus, in this sense, the desire for gold may be conceived as part of the historical reality of money. It is historical precisely because it is related to a misconception of economic agents and, therefore, to that which transcends the purely individualistic perspective. History, in this sense, is a horizon that allows us to grant reality to the erroneous beliefs of agents, and money is a historical object in that it carries an incomprehensible remainder through time.

Some may doubt the relevance of this last consideration for our own time. One objection might be that gold-based money may indeed have been sustained by an erroneous belief and an adjoining pathological desire, but these are precisely the superstitions that were overcome when modern money finally was detached from gold to become a purely technical tool in the administration of goods. This position lies at the basis of the notions of real economy of contemporary economics and the clear-cut distinction between money and things, all the more emphasized by the question of desire (things can be desired while money cannot). Naturally, this position runs contrary to the distinct feeling that contemporary, affluent societies are evermore obsessed with money. To paraphrase F. Scott Fitzgerald's Gatsby who says of

Daisy, the object of his unrequited love, that "her voice is full of money," it seems that our public sphere has become thoroughly moneyed. While money itself has become invisible, consumer culture increasingly strives to make wealth visible.

To provide theoretical support for this intuition, the book introduces a third dimension of the alternative economic ontology that heterodox thought entails. The book draws on Marx and Veblen to consider the idea that in some sense of the term, our monetary systems are still a variant of commodity money. Marx and Veblen offer us complementary ways to overcome the distinction between money and things, which can be brought to bear upon contemporary monetary systems. Marx's concept of capital suggests a way to view things as effects of money. In his M-C-M′ formula (**m**oney is exchanged for **c**ommodities and then exchanged back to **m**oney of a greater sum) for the circulation of capital, things are seen as necessary placeholders in the movement of increasing monetary value. This idea concerns the sphere of production, allegedly distant from the everyday presence of money.

The same idea is mirrored in Veblen's work, where money emerges as a hidden principle behind the objects of conspicuous consumption. Veblen's frequent use of the adjective *pecuniary*, defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as "consisting of or measured in money" or "of or relating to money," is symptomatic in this respect. Veblen uses this adjective to qualify a vast array of things and practices, from "pecuniary reputability" and "pecuniary culture" to "pecuniary beauty." This latter expression is a poignant example of the way money can be seen as a hidden principle commanding visual effects. It has to do with the beauty of expensive things; to things that appear to us, wholeheartedly, as beautiful, yet the hidden logic of their beauty is expensiveness. If we take Veblen's and Marx's positions to be complementary, we can come up with a unified theory of the consumer economy in which things are effects of money: from the perspective of capital, things are necessary placeholders in the drive to increase capital; but in the spaces of consumption, they are necessary placeholders in the similarly strange drive to spend money.

A Note on Desire

This book grounds money in desire without committing itself to a precise conception of desire. It does include some references to Lacan and Freud but only where these seem to be required by the economic subject matter. In a way, applying a ready-made concept of desire to economic phenomena would simply be too easy. For example, the Lacanian idea that the aim of a drive is not to reach a goal—but to indefinitely reproduce the movement toward the goal—seems like the perfect conceptual tool for describing the desire for money not simply as an end, but as a means that indefinitely defers realizing its end.[6] Yet because economic discourse has little commitment to psychoanalytic insights, working with such notions might be an exercise in futility. Instead, this book aims to infer a concept of desire for money from economic subject matter. It attempts to extract this concept from a wide range of economic texts and phenomena. It reconstructs a concept of the desire for money mainly from heterodox thought and confronts it with both classical and contemporary economics.

The book outlines the theoretical reasons for the rejection of the desire for money by orthodox economics. It traces the points where orthodox economics seems to approach this concept, as well as the strategies it employs to evade it, and it shows how this concept highlights some peculiar failures of economic thought, especially with reference to the modern consumer economy. With this, my aim is not only to elaborate a critical discourse about economics and the economy, but to tackle a much more difficult task: the initiation of a critical discourse *in* economics.

Moreover, rather than bringing some random concept of desire to bear on economics, the book suggests that a study of money can teach us lessons about desire. As an object of desire, money underscores the extent to which our own desire is foreign to us. It shows how desire can confront the subject as a foreign body. Further, it shows how this desire can be conceived of as social in nature, and how it can be entangled with history. That is to say, a study of money shows how an object can historically carry a social formation of desire that confronts the subject as an alien drive.

The Organization of the Book

Chapter 1 lays the theoretical foundations for grounding money in desire. It suggests replacing the well-known formula that *money is an object believed to be money* with the less obvious one that *money is an object desired as money*. The chapter explores the reasons for the economic rejection of any notion of desire for money and, in parallel, constructs such a notion from Marx's *Capital*. It finds in Marx a theoretical formulation for something already hinted at in the myth of Midas, according to which the desire for money entails a transferal to the object. Marx's capitalist is someone who submits to the object, who acts *as if* money itself wants to grow. The chapter shows that this gesture is necessary for capital to have an objective reality.

A complementary discussion compares Marx's concept of the social object and John Searle's concept of institutional fact. Both concepts refer to the way things, such as money, can partake in social relations. However, Searle's *naturalist* ontology does not afford him a real historical view and leads him to ground the social function of things in agreement (a piece of paper functions as money because people agree to use it as such). By contrast, in Marx, the social object culminates in the idea of commodity fetishism, where the object stands for disavowal, for what cannot be agreed upon, and for social antagonism. The background for this reversal is Marx's historical ontology, in which the object congeals social relations to the extent that they are antagonistic and opposed to subjectivity. In this approach, the object stands for the social insofar as it cannot be subjectivised. This idea is relevant to the question of the desire for money as a drive located at the limit of subjectivity.

At the heart of the second chapter is a literary excursus, based on the assumption that literature can hold real knowledge of money that systematically escapes the reach of orthodox economics. Literature can approach the elaborate social relations and intense fantasies surrounding money that cannot be incorporated into the neutral economic view of it. The chapter uses Dickens's *Hard Times* to confront Marx with classical economics. It finds in the novel a phenomenological account of money's social ontology, in which the money-object involves real and imagined relations with others. The formation of desire in Dickens evokes Adam Smith's account of the emergence of money, in which the money-object involves the imaginings of other people who desire it. The chapter goes on to argue that the structure of desire embedded in money is its historical substance: it is what sustains it in its function and what gets carried along with it through time.

Chapter 3 addresses the contemporary consumer economy. It maintains that we should apply Marx's concept of commodity money to modern fiat money. This goes against the widely accepted view that with the dissolution of the gold standard, money has detached itself from the circle of commodities to become a pure means in their administration. Viewed on its own, the emergence of purely symbolic money may indeed support this accepted narrative. However, if we consider the parallel shift, from material to primarily symbolic objects, which occurred in the field of commodities with the emergence of brand names, an alternative narrative emerges, in which the *relation* between money and commodities persists throughout the shift in their forms. Furthermore, the chapter argues that in contrast to the apparent distancing between money and commodities, the consumer economy is characterized by an ever more intimate entanglement of money and commodities.

The brand name can actually be seen as made of money in a double sense: on a macro-economic level, the price of the branded item is what prevents its endless reproduction; in a local context, the price has become a *quality* of the item because a low price suffices to render the item fake or inauthentic. In both these senses, money can be seen as the substance of the brand name if we conceive of substance as what vouches for identity and irreproducibility. The intriguing point is that this possibility is already foretold in *Capital*, where Marx comments that the fact that one commodity assumes the place of direct exchangeability with all other commodities is "intimately connected," like the two poles of a magnet, to the fact that all other commodities are non-directly exchangeable. The price becoming a quality of a thing marks precisely the extent to which a thing is directly unexchangeable. It marks the loss of an exchange value that results from the mere purchase of the thing.

From this perspective, the emergence of brand names and symbolic money does not represent a break with the system of commodity money but rather a folding of it into itself. In their use value, brand names assume more directly the place allocated to commodities in the system of commodity money. This argument is highly relevant to the question of the desire for money because it becomes most evident when brand names are considered from the point of view of desire. Brands are desired *as* unique and irreplaceable. The excess of desire that differentiates them from mere products is precisely the extent to which they are non-money or the extent to which they partake in the structure of commodity money.

Chapter 4 offers a reading of Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* that posits the notion of desire for money as fundamental to this seminal work. Weber famously argued that the Calvinist ethic gave rise to the capitalist spirit of an endless, calculated pursuit of profit, detached from any notion of direct enjoyment of one's wealth. But beyond this strictly causal explanation, we discern a reverse perspective that Weber actually suppresses.

There, the main question is not how a religious ethic caused a shift in the allegedly remote realm of economic behavior. Rather, it is quite the opposite, namely, why was the religious ethic the appropriate medium for the articulation of the capitalist mindset of the quest for profit for its own sake? The key to answering this inverse question lies in the view of the desire for money as a traumatic drive, analogous to the divine voice of the Protestant god. The inverse narrative thus blurs the causal view's distinction between economy and religion. It enables us to see the Calvinist ethic as having always been an economic phenomenon and the spirit of capitalism as still being a religious one.

The fifth and final chapter revisits some of the book's central themes from a Veblenian perspective based on a reading of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* and other early works. It argues against a longstanding misreading of Veblen. This standard reading sterilizes Veblen's thought in order to incorporate it into a utilitarian economic framework. In this reading, the acts of conspicuous waste that Veblen studied are motivated by an aspiration for a higher social status. But in truth, Veblen analyzes gestures of waste that are completely gratuitous. Status, in his conceptual apparatus, is not a benefit derived from conspicuous waste but, rather, it is the code that enforces waste without benefit in the name of some sublime quality, from decorum to religious taboo. Setting aside the utilitarian framework forced upon it enables us to read Veblen's thought, focused on the category of *what money cannot buy*, which ties waste to the sublime. And through this category, we can read Veblen's thesis as a monetary theory that explores the presence of money in the field of consumption.