





307

# RENTAL PROPERTY



Narelle Pathways

## PRIMITIVISM v.s. ECSTASY

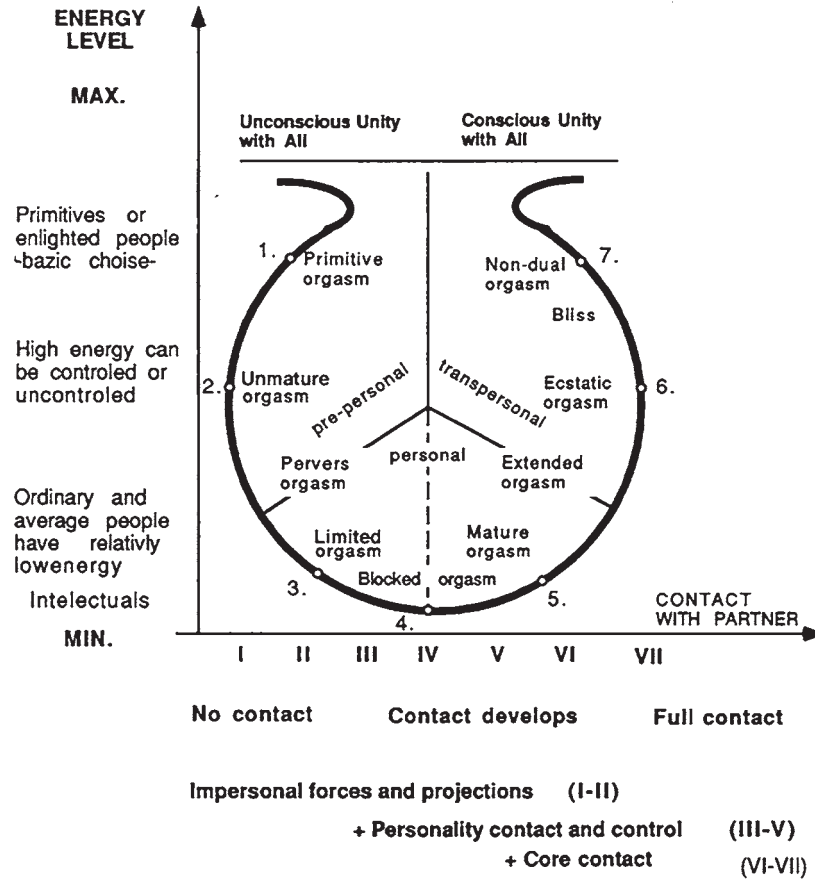


fig. 1

I recently saw a notice in the public hospital ‘inviting’ criminally over-worked staff to attend a seminar on ‘compassion fatigue.’ It is June and walking past the local Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ) office I could see that they had stuffed their browned Christmas tree under the triangular noticeboard structure to the left of the main entrance. There is a security guard standing by the tall, barrier-like reception desk to back up the sadistic receptionist who refuses to assist people who have no form of identification. These are mostly vulnerable and addled people – the mentally ill, the addicted, desperate parents, those too old to understand systems or technology, the unsupported. She seems to enjoy baiting people who approach her without knowledge of the unspecified protocols – drawing out their desperation, confusion and self-doubt – her disgust giving her noticeable pleasure in a feeling of superiority.

The security guard is old and in an ill-fitting dark-navy, pseudo-police uniform with the patches of his employers on it. This is also the company that has the contract for moving prisoners about in armoured vans, the insides of which are divided up into cages to supposedly prevent them hurting each other. Each van is insensitively labeled with CAN followed by a two-digit number. That he is not physically strong is important as it directly expresses how he does not need to dominate visitors – their own fear in this threatening, confusing, obfuscating space will render them compliant. He is there to expediently flush out those who become over-wrought and are making scenes, and goes about his work relatively empathetically (you should really leave now, his eyes say, before they crush you), but is clearly wary of the woman behind the desk. I think he is afraid that someone actually scary is going to intimidate him. I am sure he is only being paid some variation of minimum wage and is just trying to make ends meet in a way that makes him more like the ‘clients’ than the staff, who clearly think they have transcended poverty by their own merit.

Anyone who does not want to leave or insists on speaking to a manager is quietly flanked by ‘case workers’ and escorted in quiet, smothering tones to one of the holding rooms that come off the large main area. At the press of a button, a manager emerges from another door, ready to work. All this is done in front of small children waiting with their mothers in the seating that lines the walls of the entrance. I don’t think the office will last long in this location. It used to service the poor areas close to the city, but since these have become

gentrified, the poor are being flushed out, flung by centrifugal force to the outer areas of what has just been rebranded a 'super-city' in the latest round of local-body government restructuring. I have noticed that there seems to be a new group of employees who are dressed like parking meter readers but have been instructed to talk sternly to the homeless, delinquent, or 'anti-social' rule-benders. I wonder what their position is called on their job description? City hosts?

WINZ itself is the victim of the endless corporate rebranding and renaming that has been part of the state's latest disappearing act. The abdication of responsibility for anything but budgets is clear, and the atmosphere is similar to that experienced by an un-parented child: the poet and commune leader James K. Baxter described, in the early 70s, what he saw as the different orders of poverty – the poor, the fatherless, those who are like tree that have been stripped of their leaves. I look at the workstation – big faux-birch desks with bright yellow powder-coated perforated steel with little plus signs cut out at regular intervals. The carpet is an inky deep green like a swirling sea. There is a noticeboard with fliers for training and behaviour-modification courses on it, and is a greyish-blue colour. The WINZ logo looks like a piece of clip-art from Windows 98 – a kind of ecstatic stick-figure holding a loaf of bread, rays of wealth emanating into a white oval frame. The friendliness of the open-plan office belies its dual roles of surveillance and security. There is a Peanuts cartoon placed on the desk, supremely passive-aggressively depicting the emotional shape of Snoopy's working week: increasingly depressing working days leading to two days of non-stop ecstatic dancing, then malaise sets in again on Sunday night, the whole deal somehow contrived to show a touch of humanity.

People move from the reception desk to tables where they fill out forms on clipboards with pens tied to them. Sometimes they are waiting in groups to go into compulsory two-week, clearly punitive seminars to impart work-readiness to clients wanting the unemployment benefit. If beneficiaries don't show willingness to accept work that is offered, they are cut off. Recently, they have decided that there will no longer be sickness benefits for the depressed – it is now a moral issue to be unable to deal with conditions characterised by (thank you Paulo Virno) "the uncertainty of expectations, the unpredictability of assignments, fragile identities, ever-changing values." I want to pin diagrams to the hessian surface of their noticeboard, but it is not a community noticeboard

– that one thing is clear – especially one that a friend sent me, attached to an email, which attempts to map out the functioning and, by implication, location of the libido (see fig. 1). I thought it might help people to understand why it is so hard to get the different parts of ourselves in the right place, and to be present – depicting as it does highly individualised and individualising subjects just trying to feel OK, feel something, anything, but with dysfunctional bursting mechanisms and profound incomprehension of a disquieting absence.

Diagrams make us think that we can understand the actual situation. The diagram only works if it makes a nice pattern, something we can read. If it doesn't really make a nice pattern there is a human tendency to just make one up. So, WINZ is a model for what exactly? I suspect it is a rendering of the forces of social cohesion, of how everything and everybody is to be employed in the service of a deregulated economy according to the agents of a government in the process of being privatized. Beyond its open-plan main space, where the emotional tumbleweeds pass between work stations and client seating facing the backs of monitors, there are interview rooms constructed from walls so temporary it might be possible to run clean through them. There are seminar rooms with white boards from which printouts can be elicited. There are locked rooms containing files and, behind security doors, there is the management. No plants or personal effects are permitted, as in this place they would seem like portals into a sphere that is to have no part in this transaction.

Boris Groys, in his essay “The Loneliness of the Project”, points out that “while it [modernisation] fosters a compulsion for total communication and total contemporaneity on the one hand, on the other hand it constantly generates new projects that foster the repeated reconquest of radical isolation.” Projects loom constantly, and seem responsible and nourishing, personally and collectively, but they take us away from each other. The greater good loses its collectivity above and beyond the havoc wreaked by longer working weeks and additional social networking admin, and ‘staying current.’ They also contain the means for escape and self-abandonment that can let the (see diagram) ‘no contact’ libido soar – disconcertingly to the conscience, projects (always immersive) can help us achieve “deliberate avoidance of social communication and individual responsibility.” I am also thinking here of a Post-it, passed to me once in a staff meeting headed up “The Research Cycle” and showing a circular flow-diagram looping Anger – Recriminations – Avoidance – Fear. I am also mindful of a friend who copied countless diagrams from psychoanalytic texts, dropping out the

words as though the geometries have failed to hang onto the storyline in the face of a terrible voiding force. What are left are the tracings of the physical magical thinking of those who hope they can effect systemic or even superficial change. Or who just keep moving in the way that tired infants do to comfort themselves.

Dropping the storyline is part of some meditation practices, as it aids the process of letting feelings pass like clouds overhead – our narratives perpetuating patterns of emotions. But hanging over the whole affair is the confusion about what exactly needs to change (given that it is so hard to understand what is happening) accompanied by a lingering dread that something is going wrong. That the black is going to eat up the red. Wilhelm Reich described in *The Function of the Orgasm* the way in which a dysfunctional organism (subject to capitalism’s very special delirium?) builds energy that must be released by a process of bursting – orgasm, self-harming, self-deletion, self-abandonment, violence – which entails real or figurative explosions.

Reich’s own diagrams in this book fascinate me. In a concerted attempt to combine Marxism with a freeing of the libido, he produced “sex economy” diagrams that had a great variety of forms from, but not limited to, dynamic trees (“Structure of the armor as a result of the inter-play of dynamic forces”), to a cross between stethoscopes and female reproductive organs (“Reactive work / Sex economic work”), bent pipes (“orgasm reflex / Arc de cercle”), single-cell creatures (“plasma currents on the ameba with expansion and contraction”), globes (“The basic function of the vegetative nervous system”) and spherical membranes (“surface tension / internal pressure”). Several tonnes-worth of *The Function of the Orgasm* were burned by the US Food and Drug Administration in 1956 and, soon after, Reich was imprisoned for two years for contempt of an injunction to stop him selling orgone accumulators. These were cupboard-like structures of his own invention within which people could access a primordial cosmic energy that he called orgone, but that, he said, some other people call God. He died in jail of a heart attack one year into his sentence.

So I am back, in my mind, at WINZ, and marvelling at the bind of desiring to avoid work to protect “time of life” (as Antoni Negri put it in *Time for Revolution*) in the interests of establishing some sort of basic sanity, but losing resources and comfort at an alarming rate as soon as one even starts to think about not being socially cohesive. No wonder many practices start to resemble the paranoid survivalist activities – urgent in



production values and intellectual finish – of those avoiding libido-deleting work in the service of something creepy that may have something to do with fluorescent lighting.

The specialty store I now work in part-time-casually is called FantaZZZy-land and caters to a particular subculture of people who have comingled cos-play with their sex lives; that is, they like to dress in costumes (from fiction, science fiction, fantasy, and the natural world) and go about coupling (or grouping) this way, revising archetypes in practice as they go and see fit. I think that people find in these practices relief from the personal, from the repetitive – although many like a certain sameness because of favourite cues – and from themselves and their long-term partners, not just to endure, but to transform (with gestural, yet reproachable, uncertain acts of self-kindness) what could be considered the condition of a trial. This could include, but would not be limited to monogamy, family life, employment, knowledge economies, ugliness, failure, humanity and urban planning in its myriad registers.

There has, since I started here, been a slow economic downturn meaning that there are a lot of empty shops, a depressed housing market, and a strange, in a sense squalid acceptance of mistreatment. Things run down and meanwhile the process of gentrification carries on, unrelenting, unhindered, in streets clustered nervously around decile 10 schools (schools are graded 1-10 depending on the average income of the parents in the feeder-neighbourhoods), where the children are trained to know how much each of the other children's parents earn. Their architecture is stark and minimal, with expensive but eroding lighting systems that encourage forensic investigation of the skin. They keep away from us, repulsed, in tall, bulky vehicles, and we keep away from them.

The spaces I am drawn to are musty, un-aired from disuse and utterly unrenovated, because these are indicators that this space is off the radar. There is dust, leaves have blown in under doors and grime coats both sides of windows. There is dark wood veneer, chipped Formica, broken furniture, bare shelving, redundant lighting, dead insects and dried pools of condensation on windowsills, their paint lifting. Notes may be still affixed to vertical surfaces, birds may have worked out how to get in and vines may have sent in rays from the outside. The system wants to reinforce precariousness, the various recent economic failures increasingly appear to be manufactured in order to complete the transfer of wealth from the working classes and into the managerial elite. The best way to make money from gambling is to own the casino – all the better that risk can be transformed into fear which can be

leveraged to produce more concessions. In my experience things tend to break down or run on bad energy. Money has a gravitational attraction to itself; it will always filter up. Neo-liberalism empties things out. The temptation is to reconstitute real estate as permanent, worn-out junk storage.

Alberto Toscano wrote in “In Praise of Negativism” about “the idea of creation as a resistance against communication.” So we find instances of attempts to represent the reality of the situation, but at the same time resisting work, making virtue of refusing to participate fully and in good faith. The resistance here could be seen to be on the level of language, against articulate or coherent communication, as one of the spaces colonised by power. Toscano characterises language as yet another human capacity that has been “put to work” and that creating “opacities and blockages” is a valid and differently-productive response. In “Resisting Language: the Silenced Voice,” an essay in part about Napalm Death, Nicholas Bullen wrote that “The voice (the mechanism of conveying language in aural terms) becomes almost unrecognizable in this music, moving beyond the status of a site of communication and meaning to that of an object attempting to erase subject. This voice seeks a mode of communication that operates precisely through its own loss of expressive capability: it simultaneously alienates itself from expressions and expresses alienation, becoming an expression of language that is against language in the manner of glossolalia (the practice of speaking in tongues). In this process, the garbling of the larynx becomes an aural blast denuded of meaning, reducing the function of vocal chain to that of pure sounds, or pure utterance.”

I am thinking of broken signs now, both the naked fluorescent-tube tanglings inside abandoned signage and, less literally, where language is unformed or deformed. I am drawn to behaviour that is neotenuous or aphasic (regressive, pre-linguistic or unable or willing to speak directly, simply, clearly, intelligently, politely or at all), that seems to resist the enormous neo-liberal knowledge-economy pressure to, as Negri put it in *Time for Revolution*, reduce complexity to articulation. Even Charlie Sheen seems to feel obliged to offer an explanation for his behaviour. He can't just be blazed in the face of his event, mutely wearing his dick down to a nub. He has to go and say (measuring and accounting for himself) he has “tiger blood.” He can't just *be* manic as it is unmasculine to support complexity, apparently, or to exhibit incomprehension or self-un-awareness or insufficient ‘insight.’ Rewards are quickly withdrawn and the spectre of destitution rears its head.

Rejected and impoverished materials are rooted out by a society collectively trained to do so, as if being near them might cause one to be struck by lightning. These things scare people – there seems to be a general gag reflex associated with encounters with the inchoate or worn, betraying a fear of ostracisation. How on earth are we to extract ourselves, or pure intensity from the amateur (unskilled and uninformed) alloys we put together daily as spells against dis-ease, and that capital jams together for immediate profit, not caring about common welfare? Amalgamous alterations to materials, however, take away their fixity and remind us of an infinity, not just of materials, but of existence and of language. Yet this poetical infinity seems almost as illegal as convalescence – conventionally unproductive and immeasurable.

I notice and register vacant spaces even though I know that New Zealand law does not support their occupation. Its good to explore, to be somewhere you are not supposed to be. The complex of prefabs that once made up the Four Avenues school for teenagers that did not fit into mainstream state schools looks like a palace to me, or a ring of wagons. It sits empty year after year. A guy I know spent some time living in a darkroom cupboard at his art school. Like escaping prison by digging with a teaspoon. Make a tunnel. Become a mole. A trap. A puzzle. Any attempt is undermined by the pressure of the situation, the exhaustion arising from the trial which at times renders effort psychotic. Gilles Deleuze did write once that “psychosis is inseparable from a variable linguistic procedure.” And I take this to mean that the poetic impulse is rooted in a desire to free language and its operations from rigidity, or redundancy, by being liquid and to be communicative in complex and subtle ways. Gaston Bachelard wrote in *The Poetics of Space* that “When we really live a poetic image, we learn to know, in one of its tiny fibres, a becoming of being that is an awareness of the *being’s inner disturbance*. ... If, through poetry, we restore to the activity of language its free field of expressions, we are obliged to supervise the use of fossilized metaphors.”

I am not lazy, it’s just that my talents are not remunerated very well. It is like a friend of mine who has this amazing ability to be able to recall with uncanny accuracy everything that is in the weekly clearance auction in boxes and on tables and furthermore to be able to distinguish one person’s possessions from another’s. There is no job for him in this, he laments, but it is still a gift and something he is compelled to continue practicing. He has found that this painful fact has proved a useful focus with which to accept his basic

groundlessness, and has found a deep contentment, fixing up bicycles (and I don't mean fashionable ones). We think we live in a flat place, so this makes perfect sense really. And our peregrinations around the rectilinear blocks describe patterns of habitual behaviour. Problems contain their solutions; awareness means a problem is 90% solved, etc.

Creativity and communication both seem to have been expropriated by what Toscano called a cycle of “compulsory creativity” in order to feed “the production of the new in cognitive capitalism.” And it is this ‘seem’ that I find so terribly sad – I wish I really knew more exactly what was happening. I see the national obsession with running ratings statistics – “fifth least egalitarian society in OECD” / “second longest working week behind Japan” – as symptomatic of a sort of survivalism that has set in, exhibiting the self-obsession of the depressed, and the hypervigilance of the traumatized. A friend, who is trying to compile a dictionary of the combined language/s of business and social pathologization, has written about how supposedly simple functions, such as motivation, passion and expectation, have been co-opted, compromised and drained of agency and sovereignty – here, for example, aspiration has become “pre-emptive obedience” in order that employees comply with a predetermined programme of primitive accumulation.

I was ground to a halt by this particular entry: “Confusion of substance and number: As in: *a plan to cut 1,000 jobs*, when the jobs are actually to be eliminated altogether – i.e. their *number* ‘cut’ – rather than each job reduced in magnitude. Also: the plural ‘s’ applied to nouns indivisible in the singular: *technologies, un/certainties, rigidities, inefficiencies, revenues, synergies, behaviours*. And conversely: elision of multiple, distinct and contradictory processes in abstract, indivisible singular nouns: *development, innovation, prosperity, aspiration, crime*. Indifference to the difference between substance and number is hardly surprising as a by-product of an economy dependent on the abstraction of labour-time. But moral anathemas against the ‘measure of the measureless’ no more account for this economy than an example like ‘high-frequency trading’ of slowly accumulated capital explains ‘the whole barbaric shebang’. In practice what is most often occluded is *quantity*, lest a claim to it be staked.”

That there is no outside to capitalism, and that it subsumes all in its path, seems to be obvious, and this tends to leave one in the position of a reactive tenant having to try out one thing after another. Of each such tactic, wrote Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of*

*Everyday Life*, “Our opportunities must be seized ‘on the wing.’ Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into ‘opportunities.’” But my thoughts, my emotions, the very drivers of my technology of the self, have been taken over, inflected by the knowledge economy and its requirements. I remember a friend years ago threatening to build a huge pair of those striped boxer shorts that you get in joke/party sections of \$2 shops that have a fake ass on the back of them, and using them to house a structure that people could climb inside and inhabit. I think it would make a truly workable living monument to the intense neo-liberalisation of New Zealand, but one that I doubt will receive public-sector funding.

I think this as I sit in my shop. I feel a kinship with people who work in costume-hire basements, but I don’t have to deal with returns. I am thinking of the day I came across a huge gay pride parade in Berlin and how it was jubilant and be-costumed and determined. On the subway afterwards I sat down opposite a large, un-pretty shorthaired woman in her thirties dressed as a superperson, perched on the edge of a narrow bench seat made of shiny, plump vinyl. Her face-paint was smeared because she had been crying, I guessed, because she looked utterly desolate, her hopes evidently dashed like an avatar whose reality had grown around her cruelly.

Sometimes I pretend I am six and, when someone approaches the counter, I say, “Would you like to buy something from my shop?” I pass the quiet hours putting out new stock, arranging props and costumes, packing up orders, answering the odd question if I can, but I am mostly alone. I can listen to whatever music I like but tend to go for things that are buzzed-out sludge or tolling commune doom enough to flow with costume drama and the sort of small risks people are taking to come in here and lay their cards down. Disintegrated folk, maybe, on a sunny day or when the heat pump has made clouds of warm air that have come down from the ceiling enough to brush the bare skin on faces.

Some days people try to engage me, and seem to be drawn to me, but on other days I am unattractive, even slightly repellant. I wonder why this is as my manner and basic appearance remains the same. There is a mirror along the back wall of the shop and because I can see myself a lot I am aware that on some days my left eye is bigger than my right. On other days my right eye is bigger than my left, and sometimes they are ore or less the same, and it is on these days that I am more attractive. It seems that humans are symmetry-

loving creatures, and I am not consistently so, in fact quite predisposed to, or productive of asymmetry. I think I fall into habit of looking out my right eye more when I am in certain feeling states or viewing situations, and my psyche then finds itself wandering about in an enclosed, closed-circuit right brain cortex area. Then, at a mysterious delay, an auto-correct will take place, and I am shown a door that opens to left-labyrinth space through which brain activity bleeds, and people feel me again, which is not what I consistently want. Poasting /b/, grossed out, laughing, then bored of pissy anons, triforce bulshit, repetition. So anyway I sit there and nothing much happens and then some freak who wants to go into the dungeon turns up and I take his fifty cents and he goes in...