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Libidinal economy

Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), was plucked out of the first class cabin of an Air France flight by the New York airport police last Saturday afternoon, just minutes before the plane was to take off. The police arrested the 62-year-old “DSK” to answer allegations made by a hotel housekeeper that he sexually assaulted her that same day. In a hurry to leave the plush hotel in which he stayed, he forgot his cell phone in the room. He was going back to Europe, where, among other things, he had a scheduled meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel to discuss the terms of a financial bail-out for crisis-stricken Greece.

The IMF chief now sits in a small jail cell, after being formally charged with committing a criminal sexual act, attempted rape, sexual abuse, and unlawful imprisonment. A judge has denied him bail. If convicted, he could spend 25 years in jail. The hotel maid, a 32-year-old immigrant from West Africa, seemed unaware that her alleged attacker presides over the world’s most powerful financial institution, and is one of the most prominent figures in French politics. Though she did not know his name, she had no problem picking him out from a police line-up.

When I first heard the news of Strauss-Kahn’s arrest on television, I thought what a fascinating allegory it made. Here was the managing director of the IMF, the global institution in charge of rescuing the world economy from financial chaos, completely unable to rein in his own libido. What happened to the capacity for rational calculation of this professor of economics and former minister of economy and finance? The plain and simple answer, if indeed he did it,

had long been the subject of Sigmund Freud, as well as of French post-structuralist writers like Jean Francois Lyotard, from whose book “Libidinal economy” I borrow the title for this column.

Freud, of course, wrote about the “unconscious,” that part of the psyche that notoriously resists our best efforts at moral reasoning, planning, and calculation. Just when we think we are in full control of our lives, here comes libido or Oedipus shattering our most abiding illusions about ourselves. How else would one explain the sexual recklessness of a cool strategic politician like former US president Bill Clinton? Desire indeed boggles the mind.

As he ponders the events of the past few days in the quiet of his detention cell, DSK is probably asking what it was that overcame him. He was in the bathroom of his \$3000 per night hotel suite, having a shower, when the maid came in to clean the room. She thought that the room had been vacated, but took the precaution to knock on the door three times and announce “housekeeping” following hotel policy. She left the door to the suite open, again as required by hotel rules. At that instant, according to her account, the sex-crazed guest emerged from the bathroom naked and dragged her into the bedroom wanting to rape her. When she resisted, he took her to the bathroom and forced her to perform oral sex on him.

DSK’s friends and associates are probably asking the same questions: if you needed instant sex that day and you were in a foreign country, why couldn’t you have arranged to pay for it? If you could afford to stay in a five-star hotel suite in downtown Manhattan and travel first class, why could you not pay for an escort service? Why vent your libido on a powerless immigrant worker who tries to make a decent living cleaning hotel rooms? Are you not supposed to be a socialist? These are questions worth asking, but they are all premised on rational calculation remaining intact as libido rages.

Until this incident, the popular Strauss-Kahn was being eyed by

the French Socialist Party to be the main challenger to President Nicolas Sarkozy in next year's elections. That prospect has suddenly vanished into thin air. Even in permissive France, there is no excuse for using force to obtain sexual favors. He will also most likely lose his position at the IMF, even as the law presumes him to be innocent until he is convicted. He may eventually be set free on bail while standing trial. But this scandal has so stunned the political and economic world on both sides of the Atlantic that it is doubtful if Strauss-Kahn has any future left in French politics or global finance. He has self-destructed.

In the meantime, he is assisted by the best of New York's lawyers, one of them a former counsel of Michael Jackson. They have said that their prominent client will plead not guilty. They will be looking for evidence to support the speculation that Strauss-Kahn may have been the victim of an elaborate set-up. The man has enemies, and he himself had intimated in past interviews that his reputation as a womanizer could be exploited by those who want to tarnish his credentials. They may also argue that what happened was consensual sex. They will surely dig up as much information as they can to destroy the credibility of the woman. If all else fails, they could go for a plea bargain.

Freud once wrote that his concept of the human unconscious was only the last of three discoveries that put into question the privileged position of man in the order of nature. The first was the Copernican thesis that the planet Earth revolved around the sun, and not the other way around. The second was Darwin's theory which showed that man was not created the way he is today but was evolved from monkeys. Freud's theory is perhaps the most radical, for he showed that humans can never fully know themselves.

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