

Fortnightly research seminars series presented by David Bennett

Dates: Thursday 30 Oct., 13 Nov., 27 Nov. and 11 Dec., 2008.

Time: 12 – 2pm

Location: Tillotson Room, 30 Russell Square

Libidinal Economy: Sex and Spending in Consumer Culture

What is ‘libidinal economy’ and how has it informed ideas about subjectivity, desire, commerce and subversion since the rise of consumer culture in the eighteenth century? These four research seminars will investigate a tradition of thinking sexuality through the trope of economy which figures desire or libido as something quantifiable that may be spent, saved, squandered or profitably invested. Since ‘to spend’ became the standard vernacular term for orgasm in the late seventeenth century, the metaphoric commerce/intercourse between the languages of money and sex has been richly promiscuous, producing such influential bodies of theory as Freudianism’s economic model of the psyche. These seminars will examine how libidinal economy has operated in discourses as disparate as Victorian pornography and self-help manuals, psychoanalysis, radical political philosophy, market research and advertising. They will consider how the ‘homo oeconomicus’ model of the citizen-subject—on which both classical political economy and neo-classical economics are predicated—has shaped explanations of sexual desire, deviancy and pleasure, and how changing accounts of the costs and benefits of expending libido have interacted with the producer and consumer ethics in the transition from liberal capitalism to late consumer culture.

Each seminar (talk + discussion) will focus on a different aspect of the sex-money nexus that libidinal economists have undertaken to interpret, regulate or exploit.

1. Introduction to libidinal economy: *homo oeconomicus*, onanism and pornography (30 Oct)

This seminar will introduce libidinal economy via the liminal figure of the ‘sovereign spender’, positioned on the border between civil society and the criminal underworld, and it will consider how three influential modernist thinkers shaped their theories of sexual psychology around the *homo oeconomicus* model of the citizen: (i) Sigmund Freud, in expounding his economic theory of the psyche and the cost-effectiveness of psychoanalysis for businessmen interested in liberating criminalised/repressed desire for profitable use; (ii) D. H. Lawrence, in condemning pornography as a stimulus to masturbation and masturbation as a criminal wastage of libido; and (iii) Georges Bataille, in celebrating libertinism as a self-wasting squandering of energy without return. Tracing the early history of libidinal economy in the medico-moral literature on masturbation, we shall also review Laqueur’s arguments (re-stated in his influential *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation*) for explaining Enlightenment masturbation-phobia as linked to fears of credit bubble bursts via anxieties about the imagination and fiction.

Suggested reading:

- (a) Freud, ‘On Beginning the Treatment’, *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, vol. 12 (London: Hogarth, 1953-1975).
- (b) D. H. Lawrence, ‘Pornography and Obscenity’ (1929) – an essay reissued in several collections, including D. H. Lawrence, *Late essays and articles*, ed. James T. Boulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

- (c) Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sexuality*, tr. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights, 1986), pp. 164-76 (ch. 11: 'De Sade's Sovereign Man')
- (d) Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, tr. and ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 1985), pp. 116-29 ('The Notion of Expenditure')
- (e) Thomas W. Laqueur, 'Credit, Novels, Masturbation', in Susan Leigh Foster (ed.), *Choreographing History* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1995), pp. 119—28.

2. Libidinal economy, market research and advertising (13 Nov)

Why did Chrysler model its car wings, headlamps and grilles on breasts and vulvas in the 1950s? Who convinced American business that 'sex sells' and what did Freud have to do with it? This seminar will consider how psychoanalysis's metaphoric model of the psyche as an economy of spending-power was translated into a theory of consumer-spending that revolutionised market research and advertising in the mid-twentieth century and led to a pervasive eroticisation of commodity culture. It will trace the thinking and influence of the Viennese analyst Ernest Dichter, who became the USA's most successful and controversial market researcher, overhauling the notion of rational, self-interested *homo oeconomicus* and selling the idea of a sexualised unconscious to American business and the American public. We shall also consider subliminal marketing's role in constructing sex as what Foucault called 'the secret' of modern subjectivity, and Baudrillard's critique of Dichter via his deconstruction of the classical economic distinction between needs and desires.

Suggested reading:

- (a) Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), pp. 11-37, (chaps. 1-3) and 75-85 (ch. 8)
- (b) Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (London: Sage, 1998), pp. 69-86 (ch. 5: 'Towards a Theory of Consumption')

3. Libidinal economy and the prostitute as proto-revolutionary (27 Nov.)

This seminar will consider how early Victorian anthropological constructions of the prostitute as a compulsive spender of both money and libido have been redeployed by a tradition of radical political theory as images of libidinal subversion of capitalism—and how the arguments of such radicals have at times uncannily paralleled those of mainstream capitalist economists. We will trace the figure or trope of the prostitute through the discourses of early Victorian medical anthropology and pornography, Karl Abraham's psychoanalytic theory, Wilhelm Reich's 'sex-economic revolution', and Georges Bataille's 'general theory of expenditure', to Jean-François Lyotard's 'libidinal-economic' re-reading of Marx—concluding with a look at how contemporary popular culture symbolically rehabilitates the figure of the prostitute-as-spender via 'prostitute-chic' fashion and 'raunch culture'.

Suggested reading:

- (a) Karl Abraham, 'The Spending of Money in Anxiety States' (1917), *Selected Papers of*

Karl Abraham, M.D., trans. Douglas Bryan and Alix Strachey, introd. by Ernest Jones. (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho--Analysis, 1927), pp. 299-302.

(b) Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1986), pp. 129-39 (ch. 12: 'The Object of Desire: Prostitution')

(c) Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*. Trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 94-155 (ch. 3: 'The Desire Named Marx').

4. 'Free love' radicals: libidinal communism and the bio-politics of counter-culture (11 Dec.)

A tradition of 'free-love' utopian socialism, interlinking economic with sexual communism, stretches from Fourierist movements in nineteenth-century America to contemporary European communes such as the Aktions-Analytische Kommune (Austria), Project Meiga and the Sexpeace group (Germany and Portugal). While these countercultural movements predicate freedom from the repressions and reifications of capitalist accumulation on 'free' libidinal spending and the abolition of private property, some have proven uncannily successful in competing in the mainstream business economy. Thus the utopian Oneida Community (founded in 1848 in New York State to practice 'communalism' in property and 'complex marriage' in sexuality) proved exceptionally productive in its manufacturing projects and eventually became the giant silverware company Oneida Limited, while the San Francisco Kerista Commune (1971-91) combined strict principles of sexual 'polyfidelity' and communal property-ownership with running a Macintosh computer dealership that famously achieved a \$35 million p.a. turnover. This class will explore such questions as: what countercultural discourses of libidinal economy have challenged productivist and consumerist models of sexual psychology and self-worth? how have their doctrines of free love related to economists' theories of spending, rather than investment, as the source of economic health? and how should we interpret their ideological relationship with the hedonistic sexual consumerism and credit-driven expenditure promoted in advanced consumer culture?

Suggested reading: t.b.a.