

PSYCHOANALYTIC STIMULUS PACKAGES

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David Bennett, *The Currency of Desire: Libidinal Economy, Psychoanalysis and Sexual Revolution*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 2016, 314pp+vii; £20 paperback

'What happens when we start to decode sex-talk as metaphoric money-talk?' (p2) This is the organising question running through David Bennett's finely-argued, wide-ranging and lively study *The Currency of Desire*, a history of 'libidinal economy', its thinkers and discontents, from the Enlightenment to the present day. Bennett's reading is capacious, taking in everything from Lawrence to Lyotard, Viennese Actionism to Christina Aguilera, and his pursuit of his subject energetic and expansive, travelling from the 'complex marriages' of the Oneida Community in nineteenth-century North America to the new money - crime - psychoanalysis circuit of Yeltsin's Russia from our own recent past. If the vastness and stretch of Bennett's interests give his text a sometimes baggy formlessness, each chapter comes studded with insights and asides enough to reward any reader's patience. Erudite, engaging, and sometimes drily funny, *The Currency of Desire* combines political seriousness with an admirably scrupulous regard for what sometimes seems, to us now, the absurdities and delusions of the past. Bennett's aim 'is to denaturalise [...] the language of libidinal economy and reopen it to critique by historicising, rather than parodying, it' (p38).

Contemporary consumer society, from the relationships column in the *Guardian* to dating apps Tinder and Grindr, is awash with money metaphors floating in the discourses of sexuality and sex talk swimming through the language of money. We 'invest' in relationships, see our erotic or cultural 'capital' rise and fall as we work over our personal 'brand' and online identity, our private lives all the while being commodified, measured and monetised by Facebook as our financial lives are subject to strictures for stimulus or austerity. Economic concepts, in Bennett's account, 'have permeated the vocabularies of both popular and scientific discourses on sexual anatomy, psychology, morality and politics for several centuries' (p7) and *The Currency of Desire* sets itself the task of carrying out 'the resurrection of dead metaphors, or the resuscitation of unconscious ones' (p36) in order that we might estrange and see afresh the libidinal economic terms informing our consumerist lives.

Sex and money have, after all, been talked about together for a very long time. They even share clichés, from money making the world go round to the various insinuations about the 'oldest profession'. All sorts of pimps and pamphleteers have seen the financial appeal of desire, while a century's worth

of Freudian analysis has searched the money-world for evidence of libidinal drives and dynamics. As the cynical author of *The Wandering Whore Continued* (1660) put it, 'Mony and cunny are good commodities'.¹ Eschewing the twin temptations of 'biologising' money (the orthodox Freudian approach) or 'eroticising' capital (the project of both psychoanalytic dissidents such as Wilhelm Reich as well as neoliberal advertising and marketing gurus), Bennett insists instead that 'neither discourse can ultimately claim to "demystify" the other, or explain the other historically' (p80). At a certain historical moment 'the discourses of money and sex became inseparable', and it is this interconnectedness, and its consequences, which *The Currency of Desire* traces. Bennett 'traces the history of the exchange or intercourse between the languages of money and sex, economic and libidinal economy' (pp3-4), not in order for one to 'establish itself as the literal, rather than the metaphoric, voice of history' (p80), but rather so readers can trace how these two mutually-reinforcing discourses have shaped our accounts of selfhood and society together. Bennett's work is thus both psychoanalytic history and a history of psychoanalysis, a work of a discourse analysis and an analysis of discourse mutating and shifting through history. 'Just as the entities traded in the money economy have become progressively rarefied, abstracted and psychologised,' he observes, 'so there has been a progressive dematerialising, rarefying and psychologising of the presumed currency of the animal economy since the seventeenth century' (p11).

1. Anonymous, *The Wandering Whore Continued*, London, John Garfield, 1660, quoted in Matthew Beaumont, *Night Walking: a Nocturnal History of London*, London, Verso 2016, p56.

The Currency of Desire pursues this history by way of two linked approaches. The first, and most successful, is an exercise in intellectual history, tracing the birth of 'economic man' as a 'fully 'psychologised' and 'sexualised' subject' (p3) and following his construction through the paired histories of economics and sexology. Sexology and neoclassical economics were both, Bennett suggests, 'complementary "scientific" moments in a broader redefinition of the citizen-individual during the eighteenth century as primarily a subject of desire rather than of labour' (p74) and, as desire - the impulse to spend - replaces thrift or the desire to produce as the central feature of the citizen subject, modern economics and sexuality can be formed. Human energies, whether sexual 'spending' or labour power, were, from Aristotle to Galen, seen as finite and hard to replenish, forces carefully to be tended and conserved. Our contemporary views - of personal libido as much as, or, Bennett might suggest, in partnership with, social and economic 'stimulus packages' - were born in the break from this thought-world. Bennett follows the 'quantitative character of libido' (p22) and its role as a medium of universal exchange through nineteenth-century economics and sexology. There are plenty of stimulating asides along the way (my favourite being the connections between Orson Squire Fowler's 'sexual science' of 'animal electricity' and Whitman's poetics), as well as some drily amusing encounters with Lawrence at his kookiest, but Bennett's journey takes us through concepts of subjectivity still ordering political and personal life today. His insistence on a kind of

'surface reading', produced via some scholarly skirmishes, mainly confined to the footnotes, with Thomas Laqueur, makes for some startlingly intellectual *Verfremdungseffekte*. *The Currency of Desire* does not tell the 'hidden' story of sexuality and money but, rather, reveals what has been hiding in plain sight. Psychoanalytic hydraulic accounts of sexuality and the mind's drives would, for instance, be unthinkable without the Industrial Revolution and the development of the steam engine: links 'between energetics and economics are more literal than analogical' (p33).

Bennett then follows this history across the Atlantic, into the post-war world of pop Freudianism, advertising, and counter-cultural sexual dissidence. Freud's 'politically conservative libidinal economy [...] produced a petit-bourgeois psyche, managing its economy of energy as a self-employed businessman must,' Bennett claims, 'spending frugally, wherever possible reinvesting in increased productivity, eschewing conspicuous consumption and credit'. In contrast, the contribution of psychoanalysis's anti-bourgeois exponents, such as the one-time Communist Reich, served, in an irony *The Currency of Desire* serves up with melancholic relish, not to overthrow the petit-bourgeois patriarch of Freudianism or the repressive capitalist world but, rather, in their celebration of 'free' sexual spending, 'to develop libidinal economy in the direction of a fully-fledged consumerist culture that celebrated spending for spending's sake' (p139). Bennett has fascinating insights on the 'Freudianism-consumerism nexus' (p90) of the post-war years, as advertising, Keynesian economics, consumer society and sexual revolution all draw on shared sexual-economic metaphors of spending. The cunning of reason, in this exciting account, sees sexual revolution not so much undoing capitalist society as updating its order and stimulating it to further growth.

Sexual revolution's practice, and its tawdry aftermaths, is Bennett's second focus. Here the results are more uneven. Using case studies from nineteenth-century American Christianity, post-war European avant-garde communes and Yeltsin-era 'feral' (p252) analysis through post-Communism, Bennett follows in the tracks of heterodox libidinal economy. The histories internal to these communities reveal that 'the biopolitics of 'free love' movements are invariably no less regulated than the putatively free market, which is sustained by innumerable tariffs, imposts, quotas, taxes and barriers' (p222) while their history as it interacted with the wider world shows how 'utopian experiments in sexual and economic revolution ultimately functioned, despite themselves, as dress-rehearsals for the full-blown consumerist culture of administered enjoyment and disinhibited spending' (p229). The Oneida Community's 'complex marriages' may be gone, but their capital remains in the tableware manufacturer Oneida Ltd; one of the largest Mac consultancy and dealerships in the United States had its origins in the administration of a Californian free-love commune. These case studies are fascinating on their own, and provide plenty for the Utopian reader to ponder, but seem, as part of a unified book-length study, oddly under-rehearsed. Why these accounts

and not others? Bennett's erudition is obvious, and rewarding, but the analytic thread he sews through these sections is not always clear. Questionable also is the book's periodising scheme. If the birth of 'economic man' can be traced to the 'European Enlightenment' (p3), why not push further back? What are the links between Enlightenment and bourgeois revolution? Shakespeare's fourth sonnet seems to me now, after Bennett, to be worrying at precisely the distinction between sexual 'spending' in a vagina and unproductive storing of money in a bank or fluids in a male body:

Unthrifty loveliness, why dost thou spend
Upon thyself thy beauty's legacy?
Nature's bequest gives nothing but doth lend,
And being frank she lends to those are free.
Then beauteous niggard, why dost thou abuse
The bounteous largess given thee to give?
Profitless usurer, why dost thou use
So great a sum of sums yet canst not live?

Having 'traffic with thyself alone', the poet tells the young man, will leave no 'acceptable audit'. The masturbator 'spending upon himself' wastes his investment; the father puts it usefully into circulation. This predates Bennett's case by some decades, but anticipates his argument. The gendering of my example is deliberate, and Bennett's history traces an exclusively masculine, and heterosexual, lineage. A wider consideration of queer and feminist accounting for spending, sexual and otherwise, alongside feminist critiques of sexual revolution more generally, would have added theoretical and political currency to this story. It is the sign of a fine piece of scholarship, however, that one is left with productive quarrels and questions, and these are quibbling objections to a finely-written study of cultural history.

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