



# WHAT IS SEXUAL CAPITAL?

DANA KAPLAN AND EVA ILLOUZ

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These are just snapshots of a postindustrial, global and mediatic regime that [...] I will call *pharmacopornographic*. *The term refers to the processes of a biomolecular (pharmaco) and semiotic-technical (pornographic) government of sexual subjectivity.* [...] There is nothing to discover in sex or in sexual identity; there is no *inside*. The truth about sex is not a disclosure. It is *sexdesign*. Pharmacopornographic biocapitalism does not produce *things*. It produces mobile ideas, living organs, symbols, desires, chemical reactions and conditions of the soul. In biotechnology and in pornocommunication there is no object to be produced. The pharmacopornographic business is the *invention of a subject* and then its global reproduction.

Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, New York 2013, 33–6

# **What Is Sexual Capital?**

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Eva Illouz

polity

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Ella and Gal, this is for you.

# 1

## **Introduction *Sex and Sociological Metaphors***

Two sociologists have recently called on their profession to be more modest, more ambitious and more joyful in its endeavor to explain the social world.<sup>1</sup> While sociology cannot make the world a better place, they go on to claim, it can certainly offer fresh ways of understanding it through its theories, concepts, and metaphors. In this study we scrutinize one sociological metaphor that has been gaining considerable traction: that of sexual capital, which is increasingly being used—and not only by sociologists, gender scholars, and sex researchers. In everyday talk sexual capital has become a common metaphor for addressing the actual social and individual consequences of “our world made sexy” and how people “make do.”<sup>2</sup>

Ordinary people will cringe at the use of capital for a domain like sexuality: after all, isn’t sexuality a realm of pleasure, self-abandon, improvisation, play? Why should we connect it to the economic-sociological metaphor of capital? It is because sexuality is always “in society” and is regulated by changing societal forces. The three monotheistic religions have relentlessly regulated sexuality, making it central to the ideology of purity, to the family, and to political power. The way sexuality appears in ideals of the self is always social. If in the traditional world sexuality was shaped by religion, in late modernity it has become chiefly intertwined with the economy.



The metaphor of sexual capital assumes that sex is a resource for future gains in a way that goes well beyond sexual activity per se. Unlike concepts whose meanings, at least in theory, are widely shared and accepted, metaphors are more open and less precise. They have a certain vehicular quality, and it is their conceptual imprecision that sometimes makes them useful to the sociologist's imagination.<sup>3</sup> But, although the sexual capital metaphor has become quite popular, on the whole it remains undertheorized.

In common sociological usage, sexual capital refers to the returns people may receive from investing money, time, knowledge, and affective energy in constructing and enhancing their sexual self, the aspect of their identity that concerns sexuality. Some may opt for plastic surgery in a bid to beautify their face or body, while others may consume popular sex advice or join 'seduction communities' in order to train their sexual subjectivity to become more confident. These different investments may generate a better position from which to compete on sexual access to the bodies of others. This sexual competition can be oriented toward pleasure maximization or toward the mere feeling of being desired by others.

In this study we will describe the historical conditions under which four different forms of sexual capital have appeared, thrived, and sometimes waned. We will further suggest that under neoliberalism these forms of sexual capital change, and their transformation is responsible for phenomena as diverse as Silicone Valley sex parties as expressions of high-tech ideals of creative, fun, and collaborative work, genital plastic surgery among upper-middle-class patients, and even some sex workers' beliefs that through their services they are able to garner self-esteem and develop emotional resilience and other employable skills.<sup>4</sup> Through the lens of capital, we offer a

detailed analysis of the effects of neoliberal capitalism on sex and sexuality. Neoliberal sexual capital, as we dub it, designates the ability to glean self-appreciation from sexual encounters and to use this self-value so as to foster employability.

To be sure, the idea that sexuality may increase one's self-value is not new. After all, the character of *Don Juan* offers a paradigm of masculinity in which sexual conquests are undertaken for their own sake, independently of marriage and institutions, because they presumably confer a value to the self. Don Juan embodies an attribute of masculinity increasingly independent of the power of the church and defined by a capacity to generate desire in women and to satisfy the subject's own desires. Such masculinity appears as a form of domination over women when a man like Don Juan would ruin their reputation and leave them without their only resource on the marriage market, namely their virginity. Yet, at least in Molière's play and in Mozart's opera, that character was punished by God himself, which thus suggests that, for serial sexuality to generate a socially recognized value to the self, it must be embedded in a social and normative order that makes it operative. In fact, in the era when Christianity was dominant, women were by default defined by a sort of sexual capital, namely by chastity. In traditional marriage markets, the woman's (and, to a lesser extent, the man's) reputation depended on virginity. Chastity—the lack of sexual activity—thus played the role of signaling woman's conformity to Christian ideals, thereby increasing her value. By default, sexuality played an important role in mate selection, because in traditional societies a marriage market was based both on reputation and on the economic assets of the prospective mate. In many ways, it is this normative order, which protected women from predators, that Don Juan challenges; and in consequence his sexuality is still highly

constrained by the normative order of Christian patriarchy. For a full-fledged sexual capital to emerge, sexuality needs to autonomize itself vis-à-vis religion.<sup>5</sup> What has enabled the formation of a sexual capital is the loosening of the norms and taboos that regulate sexuality, along with the increasing incorporation of sexuality into the economic field. When sexuality becomes structured by economic strategies, yields economic advantages, and becomes key to the economic sphere itself, we speak of sexual capital organized in a neoliberal culture, or neoliberal sexual capital.

Our understanding of neoliberal sexual capital in particular should be distinguished from three main arguments that are usually brought up when thinking about the relationship between sex and capitalism. These are: sex as redress to gender imbalances; sexual identities as a platform for sexual citizenship; and sexual commodification or the monetization of sexuality. Let us briefly address each of the three and explain how our approach to neoliberal sexual capital may differ, improve, or complement them.

First, we write against a well-known and controversial conceptualization of sexual capital by sociologist Catherine Hakim, who has defined erotic capital as a (markedly feminine) personal asset that women can use in the labor market and in intimate relations. In her view, erotic capital combines “beauty, sex appeal, liveliness, a talent for dressing well, charm and social skills and sexual competence. It is a mixture of physical and social attractiveness”—and these, she claims, can be capitalized on to get better jobs or negotiate “better deals” in intimate relationships.<sup>6</sup> Catherine Hakim’s understanding of erotic capital points to a real and powerful social reality, made more acutely relevant by the various industries that use, exploit, and expose the (woman’s) body: sexuality, as an attribute of the person, became increasingly transformed