

DEBT

Experience & Critique

Social Theory Centre

February 24th 16.00-19.00, A0.23
(FME Building, Social Sciences, Warwick)

Professor Lisa Adkins (University of Newcastle, AUS)
Some Notes Towards a Sociology of Debt

Joe Deville (University of Lancaster)
Debt and the arts of market attachment

Samuel Kirwan (University of Bristol)
Seeking the sociology of debt advice

**Discussants: Lynne Pettinger, Leon Sealey-Huggins
& Nathaniel Tkacz**

Chairs: Claire Blencowe & Nicholas Gane

ABSTRACTS:

Professor Lisa Adkins Some Notes Towards a Sociology of Debt

In this talk I offer some notes towards a sociology of debt and indebtedness. My interventions are two-fold. First I argue against the sociological reflex to embed debt in social relations to arrive at a sociology of debt. Such a manoeuvre, I will suggest, sidesteps how the calculus of contemporary debt involves a double movement in regard to the social: it works on the social and transforms it. Sociologists, I will argue, should not ask how is debt social, but instead map how the social is being actively transformed by the calculus of contemporary debt. Second, I will suggest that any serious sociology of debt must confront how what is usually understood as mass indebtedness in practice concerns the activation of the capacities of populations in regard to flows of money, and specifically, everyday payment streams. I suggest that a sociology of debt that focuses on indebtedness as a social disorder or malady is likely to miss this process of enrolment, and as a consequence miss how surplus is generated from everyday household payment streams. I suggest that to apprehend the significance of mass debt sociologists must focus on money.

Joe Deville: Debt and the arts of market attachment

This paper outlines an approach to the study of debt focused on the intimate and organisational dynamics of market attachment – on the manner in which individuals and groups become enrolled in (credit) markets, in other words. Part of the proposition is methodological. I will make a case for following the ways in which debt is distributed across a diversity of times and places, from moments of lending to default, from body to crystallised emotion, from home to organisation, and beyond. In attending to this diverse distribution of debt, some of the precise ways in which the everyday life of debt mixes the social and the economic, the technical and the affective come more clearly into view. The paper will also propose some theoretical resources that may be helpful along the way, notably an approach to the study of economic life informed by currents within both process philosophy and science and technology studies. Finally, I will offer some brief speculations on how the sociological and critical study of debt might benefit from attending to what Anna Tsing calls the 'rough edges' of capitalism: moments of instability or friction to which political and intellectual work can become attached.

Samuel Kirwan: Seeking the sociology of debt advice

The paper builds upon research into the UK Citizens Advice focusing upon the work and experiences of debt advisers. The paper begins by describing how advisers occupy a specific space in the field of debt and credit through their mapping of, and interventions into, 'debt topologies' on two planes: first between the debtor and their creditors, establishing the specific powers, procedures and actors associated with each debt; and second between the debtor and their significant others, assigning relevant flows of liability and financial responsibility. Following the process of the debt advice interview, the paper describes the forms of emotional and communicative labour that compose debt advice work; the 'affective capture' through which clients are bound to a financial plan; and the manner in which the everyday – the domestic rhythms of care, work and pleasure – is recreated and intervened upon in the space of the interview room.

Identifying certain logics guiding these interventions and re-compositions, the paper maps out the distinctive sociological imagining of debt that guides this field of debt advice, one formed around a 'holistic' presumption of debts as always already co-constitutive of other problems and a recognition of the way the legal/economic self can form the basis for self-transformations of the emotional/relational self. The paper argues that, in this specific interventionary process, held in tension between the limited time-space of the interview room and the everyday rhythms of indebtedness, debt emerges less as a quantifiable 'burden' or system of oppression than a specific set of injunctions to 'deal with' debts, and that it is the specific ways in which these injunctions are framed – whether by government agencies, debt collectors or advice agencies – that play a key role in how debt topologies recompose the social.