

# Theories of Sexual Stratification: Toward an Analytics of the Sexual Field and a Theory of Sexual Capital\*

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*The American tradition of action theory failed to produce a useful theory of the possible existence of trans-individual consistencies in sexual desirability. Instead, most sociological theorists have relied on market metaphors to account for the logic of sexual action. Through a critical survey of sociological attempts to explain the social organization of sexual desiring, this article demonstrates that the market approach is inadequate, and that its inadequacies can be remedied by studying sexual action as occurring within a specifically sexual field (in Bourdieu's sense), with a correlative sexual capital. Such a conception allows for historical and comparative analysis of changes in the organization of sexual action that are impeded by the use of a market metaphor, and also points to difficulties in Bourdieu's own treatment of the body qua body.*

Though group sex has certain attractions, its serving as a primary symbolization, even of wider solidarities, seems to be severely limited.

Talcott Parsons (1971)

In this work, Parsons took up theoretical arms against the prescription of the Aquarian Age that universal love would conquer all, which he took as a worrisome sign of de-differentiation. Even more, this vision undermined the edifice with which his theory began, namely, his solution to the Hobbesian problem of order, which was assumed to stem from scarcity of things desired. The vision of solidarity through group sex Parsons criticized not only violated the religious legitimacy of dyadic love, it was also based on a “non-zero-sum” vision of erotic abundance, which undermined the very need for a normatively structured solution of the Hobbesian problem in the first place. Yet that had been Parsons's (1968) fundamental point: while specific interests might in fact conflict, this does not mean they are idiosyncratic and un-organizable, for individual passions and desires (what we now call “interests”<sup>1</sup>) are systematically related to overarching value commitments (Parsons [1940] 1949:211). It was this argument of Parsons—that competing material interests must

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<sup>1</sup>On the development of “passion” to interest, see the wonderful account of Hirschman (1977).

be understood as embedded in a broader cultural framework of values—which lies at the root of the American tradition of action theory and continues, for better or worse, to orient much of American sociological theory.

However, one aspect of potentially unorganized desires was left untouched by the Parsonian theory, namely, sexual desire. Despite his incorporation of Freudian theory into his framework, Parsons ignored the social importance of sex, even though heterosexual desire was considered by Enlightenment thinkers to be one of the driving forces in the state of nature (where, as Hobbes ([1651] 1909:100) puts it, “every man has a Right to every thing; even to one another’s body”), and the exclusivity of mating to lead to an ever-present potential for conflict. Any resolution of the problem of order such as Parsons’s that ignores specifically sexual desire (and the related differentiation of persons into more and less desirable) is therefore problematic from the start. Although we do not ourselves hold to the Parsonian theory, it represents a key point in the evolution of a specifically American tradition of action theory. The analytic, if not always literary, clarity of Parsons’s formulation makes it a useful way to frame a significant question: If sociological theory answers the question of how individual desires are objectively organized, why has the American sociological tradition yet to consider how specifically *sexual* desire is socially organized?

By “socially organized,” we refer not to the *social construction* of sexual desire (how does desire “arise” in some society, what are its forms and modes of expression, who is allowed to have it), a topic that has attracted a great deal of attention (see, e.g., the collection of position papers in Stein (1992)), but, rather, the manner in which one specific type of desire, the desire to pair with one and only one person as opposed to another for heterosexual congress, displays supra-individual consistencies. (By “pairing” we do not imply any degree of permanence nor an act of sexual intercourse.) Thus it is not desire per se (not its *aim*, according to Freud’s (1938:553) usage) that is socially significant for the question of order, but the differential valorization of possible partners that could produce scarcity and conflict; for this reason we will henceforward speak of the social organization of sexual *desiring*. Is this valuation random, or does it follow the principles of organization and hierarchy that are found in other spheres of social life? This question has not been seriously addressed, despite the upsurge of interest in the body.<sup>2</sup>

One significant exception was the work of Kingsley Davis. Davis is perhaps best remembered for his functionalist explanation of income differentials in terms of the importance of the job performed and the scarcity of personnel (Davis and Moore 1945). But Davis had also perceived that the functionalist theory of differential valorization logically extended to the case of sexual desiring: “Sexual affection is . . . a distributive value. To let it go undistributed would introduce anarchy into the group and destroy the social ‘system’” (K. Davis 1936:402f, 1966:329, 332ff).

Davis’s preoccupation here suggests that it does not strain credibility to argue that a social organization of desiring is implied as a sociological problem of order

<sup>2</sup>In seeming contradiction to this last claim, Turner (1982) has argued that Foucault’s work “has to be located within a well-established tradition in social philosophy which recognized the problem of human passions as the critical factor in social order,” and in his own work explicitly begins, as do we, with the relevance of the body for the Hobbesian problem of order. However, in linking Foucault’s concerns to the Hobbesian problem of order, Turner has confused the functionalist problem of governance (a problem for sovereigns) with Hobbes’s problem of insecurity in the state of nature (a problem for desiring individuals). Because he does not begin from conflicting and intrinsically unlimited desires, Turner’s (1984:39) notion of the centrality of the body amounts to seeing the body as an internal environment with physiological needs; what then results is a set of wholly universal statements, as opposed to a theoretical framework that can begin an investigation of the social differentiation of bodies.

(cf. Tiryakian 1981). Furthermore, while they are few, there have been a number of explicit and noteworthy attempts in sociological theory to discuss this social organization of sexual desiring. We undertake an analytic review of these attempts, arguing that they tend to founder on market metaphors. We return to Weber, who also discussed (in different terms) the organization of a specifically sexual sphere of life, and then follow the alternate elaboration of Weber's action theory recently pursued by Pierre Bourdieu, arguing that an analytics of the sexual field allows us to rephrase the question asked by the authors we survey in a noncontradictory manner amenable to empirical exploration.

This issue is clearly of relevance to general questions regarding the relation between the sexes and prestige orders in feminist theory (e.g., Ortner and Whitehead 1981), and more specific questions regarding to what extent sexual resources or rankings are tied to or exchangeable for resources or rankings in other spheres, such as the economic (see Zelizer 1996).<sup>3</sup> Further, our extension of Bourdieu is relevant for theorists seeking to study how bodily capital is formed (Wacquant 1995) or how the emotional aspects of social life treated as residual by Bourdieu may be related to stratification (Illouz 1997; Reay 2004); it also suggests limitations to Bourdieu's treatment of the body.

Parsons's insight in the opening quotation was that despite the potential for social integration through unrestricted sexual contact, social life may require restricted and organized pairing (see also Parsons [1940] 1949a: 171–75); this was understood by the writers we will survey as implying a social consensus regarding a hierarchy of desirability or attractiveness in sexual pairing. We will begin our analysis of 20th-century sociological approaches to the social ordering of sexual desiring with Davis; this is fitting for two reasons. The first is that, as stated, Davis most clearly understood the relevance of sexual desire for the Hobbesian problem of order,<sup>4</sup> and attempted to demonstrate a normative organization of desiring. But he—like the other theorists we will survey—never actually found such a normative basis. Instead, as we shall see, he relied on market analogies. The second reason is that Davis was the first to focus on a *stratification* of sexual attractiveness as the fundamental basis of the social organization of sexual desiring, as opposed to simple mechanisms of heterophily (opposites attract) (e.g., Forel [1906] 1929:84) or social homophily (see Laumann et al. (1994:231ff) and England and Farkas (1986:34) for good discussions). This latter approach assumes that choices are made on *nonsexual* grounds, and hence that a structural analysis of pairing could dispense with the super-structural phenomenon of desiring. Arguments from homophily also deny the possibility of one stable ranking, since there are structured disagreements in taste. In contrast, the theories of sexual stratification put forward by Davis and the others we survey maintain that there is a specifically sexual ranking and that it is the subject of social consensus: hence those matched with “lows” have been so matched as the result of a market-like process in which they desired higher-ranking partners but could not attain them. We now turn to the specifics of Davis's theory.

<sup>3</sup>Some feminist appraisals of the sexual revolutions of the 1920s and 1960s have divided over whether it is liberatory for the sexual sphere to be divorced from the economic, or whether the divorce weakens women's positions by “increasing and legitimating male right of sexual access to women” (Jackson 1987:52). For a further discussion, see George (1996).

<sup>4</sup>“Unless there is some kind of social order in the distribution of sexual favors, a war of all against all will tend to result” (K. Davis 1966:350).

## THEORIES OF SEXUAL STRATIFICATION

*Davis and the System of Generalized Prostitution*

We have seen above that Davis believed that a theory of society had to account for the normative allocation of desirable persons. The existence of such “desirable persons” implied not only a differentiation of attractiveness, but also a “gradation from extremely attractive to extremely unattractive, with an unfavorable balance of the old, ugly, and/or deformed.”<sup>5</sup> But Davis’s erotic ranking was primarily a ranking of *women*, not so much of men. “Out of the total female population there are relatively few who are young and pretty; they are in great demand by virtually the entire adult male population” (K. Davis 1966:370f).

The greater importance of erotic rank for women comes about because Davis took the principle of the ranking to be, on the one hand, *exogenous* to the sexual system (people are born more or less attractive), and, on the other, one resource among the many that enter into pairing. “Sexual attractiveness becomes a value that can be traded for economic and social advantage, and unattractiveness becomes a handicap that can be overcome by control of nonsexual means” (K. Davis 1966:324). According to Davis, since men have greater economic resources than women, the pairing system tends to involve an exchange of female attractiveness for male money. Attractive women can capitalize on their rank (as do most) through marriage, which gives security against loss of beauty; others enter the labor force in an occupation where looks help, and, finally, some become prostitutes. Women’s options thus become minor variations on the major theme of prostitution, “for in consenting to get married a woman exchanges her sexual favors for economic support.” Skeptical as to the difficulty of the prostitute’s actual labor, or its draining effects, Davis argued that “[t]he interesting question is not why so many become prostitutes, but why so few of them do” (K. Davis 1966:349, 361, 371).

In sum, Davis took for granted that the system of sexual pairing involved both ranking and exchange, where men and women had relatively similar demand structures but very different resources. Although Davis held that the ranking of women leads some to be relatively scarce, and therefore draw a higher price in exchange, he did not problematize this ranking or see it as endogenous to the pairing system, as did Willard Waller.

*Waller and the Rating-Dating Complex*

The first sociological account of the generation of a ranking of attractiveness of which we are aware was Willard Waller’s (1937) remarks on the “rating and dating complex” at college campuses in the 1920s. Despite the association of dating with sexual exploration, this system was not oriented toward sexual gratification first and foremost, but toward *competition* and *ranking*. “Within the universe which we have described, competition for dates among both men and women is extremely keen. Like every other process of competition, this one determines a distributive order” (Waller 1937:730). Some are at the top, others toward the bottom. But the *principle* of this ranking is different for men and women.

<sup>5</sup>It is worth noting that Murray Davis (1983) also begins from this premise of absolute scarcity of “lovables”; see Hume ([1777] 1985) and Levi-Strauss ([1949] 1969:38) for a critique of this premise.

In order to have Class A rating [men] must belong to one of the better fraternities, be prominent in activities, have a copious supply of spending money, be well-dressed, be “smooth” in manners and appearance, have a “good line,” dance well, and have access to an automobile. . . . The factors which appear to be important for girls are good clothes, a smooth line, ability to dance well, and popularity as a date. The most important of these factors is the last, for the girl’s prestige depends upon dating more than anything else; here as nowhere else nothing succeeds like success.

Hence, women would manipulate their perceived scarcity in order to inflate their rank, which would then be a self-fulfilling prophecy (1937:730).

Scarcity is the key to relative power in this system, not only on the individual level (the scarcer woman is the more valuable) but also on the level of the sexes. When women are scarce (e.g., during the winter term in one school described by Waller), the coeds have “a relatively high bargaining power,” but when school teachers come for the summer term, the balance of power reverses, and men get easy sexual access (1937:732). At the same time, one’s dating scarcity is not the only factor contributing to one’s rank—indeed, for men, it is not even the primary one. It is quite interesting that beyond the fact that men paid for dates, and that various institutions arose (such as the corsage<sup>6</sup>) to allow the man to publicly demonstrate the money spent on the date (and therefore the equilibrium of her worth and his supply), the system does *not* involve an exchange of economic support (which the college woman has) for sexual access. The logic of Davis’s sexual market is unnecessary. Yet again, men’s ranks seem to be closely aligned with ranks in other spheres, while women’s ranks are more autonomously generated within the system. Finally, Waller clearly saw the ranking as taking into account a number of different attributes—such that we might conceive of a woman’s overall dating rank as being a combination of her endogenous dating rank (her popularity, proportional to her scarcity), and her exogenous rank (e.g., clothes, “line”).

Thus Waller, like Davis, perceived there to be a system of exchange between men and women, and a system that implies the ranking of men and women according to their dating attractiveness. But in contrast to Davis’s reliance on a preexisting degree of attractiveness in everybody, Waller proposed that, to a certain degree, attractiveness is a result of the ranking system itself. Thus, scarcity becomes not simply a way of increasing the price of a good that one may happen to hold, but the very good itself. A man wishes to go out with a scarce woman because she is scarce—it is not that attractive women *are* scarce, or that the attractive woman, by withholding sex (as in Davis’s account), increases her bargain. The idea that one’s value within the ranking system might be different from one’s visible attractiveness is amplified in the arguments of Zetterberg, to which we now turn.

### *Zetterberg and the Erotic Ranking*

Hans Zetterberg is probably now best remembered for his methodological treatise, *On Theory and Verification in Sociology* (Zetterberg 1954), but he also achieved some attention for his daring piece, “The Secret Ranking,” in 1966, which posits an invisible “erotic stratification.” This ranking is secret because it is not reducible to visible attractiveness or to popularity, but is a latent probability each and every person

<sup>6</sup>See Bailey (1988:65ff).

carries “that he can induce an emotional overcome-ness among persons of the opposite sex.” This probability is actualized—and changed—in erotic contests. “The steps up and down [the erotic ranking] are not necessarily signalled in the form of sexual relations between the principles . . . but as events when someone no longer is master of his feelings” (Zetterberg 1966:135).<sup>7</sup>

Zetterberg suggested that erotic rank entered into rating and dating courtship à la Waller,<sup>8</sup> but he emphasized its independence from other forms of stratification, including dating popularity. Despite its secret existential basis, Zetterberg believed that the effects of the erotic ranking could be manifested in social disruption, especially when there was a disjunction between one’s erotic rank and one’s other ranks.

The tournament of erotic contests that gives rise to this rank seems quite divorced from the stable pairings associated with marriage; however, Zetterberg believed the erotic stratification to be relevant for such pairings. “We may take it as a worthwhile assumption that equals in erotic rank get along best.” At the same time, Zetterberg, like K. Davis (1966), claimed that persons of low erotic ranks may have offsetting characteristics that lead to stable unions. This led Zetterberg (1966:136, 138, 139) to ask “in what settings this ranking becomes dominant,” a key question he never answered.

### *Collins and the Historical Positioning of Sexual Exchange*

The writers we have analyzed share the belief that men and women are ranked in terms of their attractiveness for sexual pairing, and that these rankings are connected with, but not wholly reducible to, rankings in other spheres. We have also seen a leaning toward market metaphors to explain this allocation of partners; in one case (Davis) this was because there is a *substantive* connection to economic activity (women’s need for material support), while in another it was because of a *formal* correspondence to economic activity due to the centrality of scarcity (Waller). We close this section with the work of Randall Collins, since he, more rigorously—and with more historical scope—than others, completed this line of theorizing in the 1970s by explicitly claiming a market-like mechanism that included both the substantive tradeoff of male money and female sexual access, and the formal characteristics of supply and demand.<sup>9</sup> We also think that his analysis took the market metaphor to its rigorous conclusion, and thereby disclosed its inherent limitations, limits that reappear in later attempts (examined below) to use market metaphors to analyze the social organization of sexual desiring.

Collins’s (1971:7)<sup>10</sup> primary interest was the historical development of what he called sexual stratification, namely, the relation between the sexes (as opposed to our use of the term to denote a stratification of sexual desirability), and its “basic feature,” “the institution of sexual property,” chiefly male sexual property in women.

<sup>7</sup>Zetterberg is usually given priority here; however, J. Richard Udry (1966) in the same year put forward a similar analysis of dating as a complicated game in which the victor “is the one who makes the other lose self-control without losing it him- (or her-) self.”

<sup>8</sup>There cruelly mis-cited as Wallace Walter.

<sup>9</sup>We are in the somewhat awkward position of focusing critical attention on the earlier work of a theorist whose approach has since evolved. Indeed, recent work on this topic by Collins (2004) in many respects parallels the Bourdieuan perspective we will propose. We consider it an open question as to when the two perspectives are empirically distinguishable and, if so, which is superior. We restrict our attention to his early work because it exemplified a consistent market approach, our focus here.

<sup>10</sup>This article was included with modifications in Collins (1975); we use the original version, though making a few references to the later emendations.

The story Collins told was a historical one of the development of a free market in this property, culminating in the “personal sexual market” of the modern era.

There are, of course, rankings of men and women in terms of attractiveness in this market, as discussed by Davis. But this ranking, for women at least, *preceded* the emergence of this market, although at the dawn of modernity, sexual rank was well synchronized with social rank. But with the emergence of market society, the middle classes, the smaller household, and the state’s restriction on the use of violence against women, women become “at least potentially free to negotiate their sexual relationships.” This is done through the marriage market, in which the man trades “economic and status resources for possession of a woman” whose “main resource” is her sexuality. With the emergence of this market, women try to manipulate their scarcity: “The most favorable female strategy, in a situation in which men control the economic world, is to maximize her bargaining power by appearing both as attractive and as inaccessible as possible,” and to promote monogamy and stigmatize the promiscuous. But with the entry of women into the paid labor force, they became more “free to strike their bargains without economic compulsion” (1971:13f, 16).

Collins recognized that this was only a partial change, but that “it is now at least possible for a number of different things to be bargained: income resources as well as sexual attractiveness, social status, personal compatibility, deference, and emotional support. . . . Where women bring economic resources of their own, they may concentrate on bargaining for sexual attractiveness on the part of men,” which leads to the rise of the ideal of male sexual attractiveness. “A pure market based on rankings in terms of sexuality, in the sense discussed by Zetterberg, thus becomes more prominent for both men and women, but as only one of the many sexual markets in existence” (1971:17, 19).

Thus Collins integrated the timeless idea that women’s sexual scarcity is the key to what power they have with a general and theoretically consistent approach to social action as a combination of conflict and exchange. He discussed both the system of exchange of male support for female sex à la Davis and the more autonomous sexual ranking à la Zetterberg as being different, though overlapping, historical types. We might therefore assume that such a market perspective is the most general and reasonable one for the subject in question. But surely it seems somewhat odd to begin by looking for a social organization of sexual desiring akin to the organization of values of sociological theory, and end up with the apparently anomic world of the market—in other words, the very historical circumstance of atomized action that prompted the question! In fact, this tension was perceived by some of the authors. We go on to demonstrate the weaknesses of the market approach.

## FROM THE SEXUAL MARKET TO THE SEXUAL FIELD

### *What is a Sexual Market?*

Both Davis (1936:395, 405) and Zetterberg (1966:140f) discussed the problem of “anomie” in sexual ranks, but neither realized that the anomie was in their analyses, not the world. Both began by asserting the importance of the normative regulation of sexual ranks, but provided analyses that included only the barest normative elements. The only entrance of those norms Davis considered essential was the rather feeble one that losing participants must accept defeat—that possessions must be seen as property. “[Consider] the sudden entrance of a strange but attractive young woman. . . . Gradually a few competitors take the lead. Social order then requires

that the others recognize the superiority of these, quit struggling, and turn their attention elsewhere.” Similarly, Zetterberg (1966:141) argued that “[i]t is known that society regulates whatever places persons in any one of its dimensions of stratification. . . . If sexual relations produce ranks, that fact in itself will generate a set of social norms,” but the only norms he brought into play were those stemming from the fact that the ranking was to be kept secret.

This paradox of beginning with strong talk about the importance of norms and ending up without any indicates the ambiguous nature of a sociological reliance on anomic market metaphors to explain the social regulation of action. Although the current work in economic sociology finds markets—real economic markets, even the stock market—to be social institutions, not incarnated economic abstractions (Lie 1997; classic examples are White (1981), Baker (1984), and Fligstein (2001)), the understanding of market behavior used to discuss sexuality tends to assume an abstract and perfect market.

As Swedberg (1994) has stressed, classic economic treatments of markets have been surprisingly undertheorized—what was meant by “market” was generally more implicit than explicit. We may say that an efficient market exists when the following conditions are met (see Stigler 1968:5–12): there are a large number of buyers and sellers, none of whom commands a large proportion of the market, and all of whom are free to decline any offered trade.<sup>11</sup> Trades are made in money prices, and the costs of making any transaction are negligible. Goods traded are divisible and comparable, and their quality can be determined easily, or at least any information about their quality not accessible to buyers would not alter buyers’ offered prices. Information about the transactions made by others is public, and people rationally attempt to maximize their own subjective utility. These assumptions lead to powerful results—items carry prices that allow all individuals to increase their subjective utility and that efficiently distribute supplies and direct production. Most relevant to us, the marginal cost of a good to a buyer is the same as the marginal cost to a seller, and so we may say that these prices bring “equality.”

If the market approach made analytical sense, it would be rather unscientific to reject it merely on the grounds of a disciplinary prejudice for stronger social factors. But when we seek to uncover the social logic of sexual desiring, the market approach fails us in two important ways. The first has to do with the oft-mentioned point that a market approach dissolves into tautology when there are unobservable utility functions (not to mention unobservable supply schedules, as in this case), as any outcome can be explained by crafting appropriate utilities (see, e.g., Etzioni 1988). More importantly, to ask *why* there is consensus regarding a principle of stratification in sexual desirability is to ask a question about the basis of one of these utilities, that is, the utility of one body as opposed to another. To make all utilities exogenous to the analysis is then—as noted by Collins (1993:204) and Kanazawa (2001:1133)—to fail to answer the question. Instead of having a useful framework in which to ask an empirical question, we have a one-size-fits-all story that tells us nothing in particular.

The second failure is more particular to the case of a “sexual” market, in which no objects are exchanged that carry prices. This drowns whatever tautological virtues the market approach might have when utilities are unobservable in a sea of confusion, as analysts cannot separate the *price* of an object, its *utility* for a purchaser, its intrinsic *value*, and the object itself. As England and Farkas (1986:53) point out in their

<sup>11</sup>This last point is generally forgotten by rational choice theorists, such as Coleman (1990), who consider any fight an exchange and any meleé a market.

discussion of marriage markets, economists assume that “interpersonal utility comparisons are meaningless.” Yet because there are no prices, the market approach used by sociologists here not only assumes that such comparisons can be made meaningful, but that these utilities can be assumed to be exactly the same. Because of this, even an approach that admits that the market metaphor is immune to disproof, but sees it as theoretically generative, collapses—instead of generating theory, this approach breeds paradox. We examine not only Davis’s and Collins’s use of market logic, but also the arguments of Posner (1992) and the analyses of Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels (1994), the most important empirical investigation in the sociology of sexuality to date.<sup>12</sup>

To conduct this critique with the greatest clarity and rigor, given that arguments as stark as ours regarding the empty nature of the market model require clear support, it is necessary to introduce some simple notation consistent with the market model (though such notation is *not* consistent with our own approach). Define the overall utility of some potential partner  $j$  for any person  $i$  as:

$$v_{ij} = \alpha_i x_j + \sum_k \beta_{ik} z_{jk}; \quad \text{where } x_j = x^*_j + \sum_l w_{jl}.$$

The first component of this utility,  $x_j$ , is the “attractiveness” of the potential partner, however defined, while the various  $z_{jk}$  are all those factors affecting the utility of the partner that are *not* perceived as “attractiveness” *per se*. For example, in Davis’s model, one such  $z$  might be wealth. The weights  $\alpha_i$  and  $\beta_i$  indicate that various factors are weighed differently by different persons; if we wanted to fully replicate Davis’s analysis, these would be functions of the marginal utility of person  $j$ ’s contribution of some factor to person  $i$ ’s existing stock. The social organization here is found in the fact that the factors only have  $j$  subscripts, not  $i$ ’s—there is no disagreement among persons as to how others “rate” on various attributes. None of the authors we reviewed introduced such disagreement.

If we are to give the market model fullest flexibility, the “attractiveness” component  $x$  must be potentially decomposable into two portions: one  $x^*$  that has to do with some specific bodily attractiveness, and others  $w$  that are not directly bodily yet are immediately perceived in the form of greater attractiveness.<sup>13</sup> To illustrate: if women follow Davis’s logic or Parsons’s ([1942] 1949c:225) “female glamour pattern” and prefer “rich and powerful men” because they are willing to *give up* some attractiveness in a potential partner to gain riches and power, then “riches” and “power” enter into this model as  $z$ s. If, however, women *perceive* rich and powerful men as attractive, then riches and power enter this model as  $w$ s. The distinction between these two types of elements is clearly central for any sociological investigation of the organization of desiring.

The market approach we analyze not only defines the utility of one person for another as above, it also makes the substantive claim that as a market, the sexual

<sup>12</sup>The Laumann et al. volume, being the result of collaboration between researchers of different backgrounds, has overlapping and at times frankly competing explanatory strategies; here, we focus only on the market approach. But we wish to note that two of the authors, in recent theoretical work (Laumann and Gagnon 1995, esp. at p. 204), have called for a study of the social structuring of sexual pairing in terms compatible with our approach below. Further, we must acknowledge that our general approach has been greatly influenced by the earlier work of Laumann on networks and Gagnon on scripting. Once again, we subject this work to critical attention precisely because we believe that it is exemplary, and hence any analytic problems can be traced back to the use of market metaphors.

<sup>13</sup>Because of this immediacy, we refrain from assigning weights to the different components.

market leads to exchanges of equal utilities. As emphasized below, in the absence of measures of resources ( $z$ ) and preference structures ( $\beta$ ), this claim is untestable. But we may at least *use* the assumption that equal utilities are exchanged to get conditional information about the joint effect of person  $i$ 's preference and person  $j$ 's attributes (though we may not be able to disaggregate them)—conditional, that is, on our assumption being correct. But we shall demonstrate that rather than leading to reasonable, if conditional, analyses, this approach necessarily degenerates; finally, we demonstrate that it is not simply that there is no reason for the core postulates and conclusions of this approach to be necessarily true; they are actually unreasonable, unproductive, and false.

### *From Rational Action to Rationalizing Action*

Returning to our central issue of the social organization of sexual desiring, we may begin with the most fundamental question, namely, the nature of attractiveness itself. Is it a singular bodily attractiveness (which might be asocially organized), or is it composed of additional components? The simplest response of the market theorists is to refuse to analyze the social components of attractiveness. There are two subversions of this, both employed by Posner (1992). In one version, one may simply declare that all utilities are defined in relation to exogenous preference structures, about which we know nothing. In matters of taste, there is not only no dispute—there is no analysis. In this case, the “economic” analysis then becomes only a dreary exercise in translation: one simply calls every apparent inclination someone seems to have a “benefit” and any apparent disinclination a “cost,” and, given any decision, proclaims (to no one's surprise) that the benefits outweigh the costs. In the other version, one may come up with *nonsociological* explanations for this bodily utility. Here, Posner (1992:93) uses sociobiology to explain (suspiciously time-bound) standards of attractiveness (such as that women with larger breasts have been found to eke out a slightly larger amount of milk when lactating).

When either of these tactics are employed, the market metaphor, whatever possible attractions it might have, tells us nothing about the social organization of sexual desiring. But market analyses usually do not renounce such explanatory potential—instead, they use the assumption of an exchange of equal utilities to comprehend the logic of the choice process as a whole. That is, if we assume that  $v_{ij} = v_{ji}$ , and we also know that there are some cases in which  $x^*_i > x^*_j$ , we can hunt for some other factor, say  $w_j$ , that balances the exchange. Let us follow the analysts as they pursue this from the reasonable to the tautological.

Imagine we have found a case of apparently unequal exchange of bodily attractiveness. We may propose that other characteristics not reducible to bodily attractiveness enter into the pairing decision, and hence that this exchange is in fact equal. Laumann et al. (1994:11) take the notion of human capital, normally used to account for wage differentials, and propose that “there are also types of human capital that facilitate the pursuit of sexual objectives.” Further, one may posit as do Posner (1992:118) and Laumann et al. (1994:11; also see England and Farkas 1986:44) that in a companionate relationship, some of these sexual human capital skills are partner specific, and hence give an additional utility to preserving the relationship that can compensate for the lack of the utility of newness that comes with a different sexual partner. Here, it seems as if the market approach has produced an interesting contribution, namely, the existence of a possible  $w$  component of attractiveness not reducible to some totally exogenous bodily attractiveness. This contribution, it must be admitted, is

substantively empty, since this utility is totally invisible, and one is free to postulate an equally plausible, and equally invisible, utility pulling in the opposite direction. In other words, the addition of a utility to partner specificity can explain why there is less changing of partners than might otherwise be expected—if this is observed. But, of course, were people to change partners *more* often than might be expected, this can be explained with equal ease—the utility coming from novelty outweighs that coming from asset specificity. The same theoretical apparatus can be invoked to account for totally opposite findings.

A reasonable response would be that one should not fault theory for missing observations; it is in principle possible to measure the acquisition of partner-specific skills, in which case this becomes a testable claim. But—and here is the key point—given the market assumption, any such data only force us to repeat the cycle of inventing new utilities to balance the equation. That is, we may compute new predicted utilities that take into account this new factor we have measured, but still find some difference  $\epsilon'$  between them. Indeed, such an  $\epsilon'$  is certainly expected if, like Collins, one posits an infinite number of other possible factors that go into the general utility. We see Laumann et al. (1994:11) inexorably drawn along in this direction: they continue their analysis by reasonably suggesting that “[a]nother type of human capital used to secure sexual activity is the skills necessary for maintaining an existing relationship. These might include . . . the ability to accommodate his or her personality and interests, to get along with his or her family and friends and so forth.”

There are two things to note here, in addition to the fundamental point that this is indeed a logically sound extension of the market approach. The first is that we are clearly moving away from the identification of factors that are components of “attractiveness” per se ( $w$ s in the model above), and moving toward ones that are theoretically opposing, namely, factors that can *compensate* for a lack of attractiveness ( $z$ s). Yet there is nothing in the market model that can distinguish between the utility gained by that portion of one’s partner’s human capital that is realized in the form of one’s increased sexual pleasure, and that which is realized in the form of easier relations with one’s parents. Accordingly, while this may have relevance for issues of choice (Laumann et al.’s primary concern), this seems unlikely to be a fruitful way to understand desiring.

The second thing to note is that not only does such an approach seem to miss the “desiring” aspect of the organization of desiring, it also misses the *organization*. Laumann et al. clearly consider this sexual human capital as something that should be stable in terms of its differential distribution—accordingly, they attempt to discuss those who “possess more of the traits most valued.” Yet their definition of such resources resists any such definition. The analogous situation in economics to Laumann et al.’s “human capital” for dates (which includes the ability to get along with one’s partner’s family) would be to attempt to construct a theory in which human capital included being the same height as one’s boss. It would be impossible then to speak of people who had “more” human capital than others. In other words, we logically *must* abandon the constraints on those weights ( $\beta$ ) that would allow us to use the assumption of equal exchange to identify factors ( $z$ ) contributing to increased utility.

Thus the market approach’s strength—its ability to consistently find creative terms to justify its assumption of equal exchange—is its weakness. But imagine that the market analyst is eventually faced with evidence of stubborn differences in utilities that will not go away. What can be done? In a brilliant move, the analyst can postulate that the very disutility of the less attractive partner is a utility. Collins

(1975:253) writes: “A highly secure and (erotically or economically) attractive person can profit from a ‘mismatch’ to a less attractive person, by demanding greater subservience from him or her as the price of staying.” But if one’s disutility is one’s very utility (the more attractive chooses the less attractive in order to get the subservience), then it seems that *any* pairing is matched in terms of price by fiat.

The only response to the charge of tautology is to admit that there could be situations in which the more attractive partner refuses to exact any surplus subservience from the less attractive. But it is hard to imagine that a market theorist would need to accept this as a falsification of the postulate of equal exchange; one simply brings in the well-known egoistic utility of altruism, and hence the pleasure taken in refraining from obtaining subservience, and the equation is again balanced. Indeed, it is not hard to imagine the most rarified utility of all being the second-order pleasure taken in *not* taking pleasure in refraining from exacting subservience. The point is not that such utilities are impossible, it is that this line of theorizing is necessarily flawed if any disproof is handled by the creation of a utility that only serves to cancel the disproof. It is as if the error term in an equation were instantly made into a theoretical term, leading a model to fit perfectly. We go from a model of rational action to a model rationalizing action; we can come up with a seemingly good excuse for any observation.<sup>14</sup>

### *The Utility of Disutility or the Disutility of Utility?*

Not only does the market metaphor distract us from the search for the social logic of partnering by offering a story for all problems, but it postulates an equality of exchange that is unjustified according to economic logic. Even where objects carry prices, for any buyer and seller, there are frequently a range of possible terms of trade that will clear the market, in that each produces an increase in the marginal utility of the participants (see Coleman 1990:670–74). Where objects do not carry prices (which is, as said by Laumann et al. (1994:111f), the case for sexual markets), assuming equal utilities *necessarily* leads to paradox.

For example, Collins (1975:253) proposed that “[u]nattractive persons of both sexes . . . may be motivated toward a lasting formal contract out of their weak market positions: they would have trouble getting anyone better.” But if the sexual market gave each person a price based on the combination of their sexual value and their other attributes, and people then matched price for price, why would the unattractive people marry their early partners? Indeed, for every mismatched low person marrying a high person, there must be a high person marrying a low. What is the motivation for the mismatched highs to lock in this bargain? If it is the subservience claimed above, why would the lows want to lock in such a (no longer fortuitous) deal?

We do not mean to comb through Collins’s writings and pick nits; rather, we believe that the idea is substantively quite reasonable but formally bizarre given the orthodox market approach.<sup>15</sup> The market metaphor requires that one’s “value-in-

<sup>14</sup>We note that there is a formal homology between these market analyses of sexual desiring and those coming from so-called evolutionary psychology, which lead to the same paradox of postulating a utility of disutility (see Batten 1992:48; Zahavi 1975).

<sup>15</sup>For one example, Holland and Eisenhart (1990:95; cf. Holland and Skinner 1987:102) found evidence among college women that differences in attractiveness between dating partners could be compensated for by better/worse treatment, as Collins says. For another, Burgess and Locke ([1945] 1950:386) cite informants who make it clear that going steady *is* a retreat from competition on the part of those with lower ratings, and Elder (1969:526) found “going steady” negatively associated with later upward mobility for women. This supports what Collins has suggested above, even though it leads to paradox in the market metaphor. Furthermore, it is a pattern that is probably specific to a particular constellation of the sexual field—in other contexts, the opposite pattern has been observed (Holmes and Hatch 1938).

oneself” is the same as one’s “value-for-another”—as noted above, a real market produces this by assigning a single price to every good, hence ensuring that we can ignore idiosyncrasies in preference structures when examining the value of any commodity (see Coleman (1984) and Frey and Eichenberger (1996) on the deviations of marriage from a perfect market). But the commitment to the same outcome in the absence of a price-setting market leads to wild fluctuations in value as the person of low attractiveness is construed as desirable because of the subservience that accompanies low attractiveness. The use of market logic where there is no market leads to a total inability to identify the social organization of sexual desiring—instead, analysts are forced to embrace an orthodox economic model where this desiring *must* be fundamentally idiosyncratic, asocial, and inexplicable.<sup>16</sup> Thus while Posner (1992:111ff) admits that one motivation for sexual activity is irreducibly *sociable*, he ignores this possibility in all of his analyses. To follow through on this idea would lead us to question the idea that “desires” exist independently of “markets” that allocate goods.

However, it is precisely such questioning of the independence of desires that we saw in Waller’s analysis of the case where a person’s value was affected by her *deliberately contrived* scarcity. It is important to realize that this is actually different from the case in which the *price* paid for an object increases with its scarcity (the logic used by Collins). Waller instead points to the case in which, at the limit, there is no “object” apart from the scarcity itself—there is no bodily “there” there, one might say. As Burgess and Locke ([1945] 1950:384; also see Adler and Adler 1998:52) argued in their later discussion of the rating-dating complex, each partner’s rating is affected by those of the other partners, and so in perpetual flux (though men’s rating is more tied to extra-dating ranks). Thus the woman’s value (in the pure form of this situation) is more akin to that of paper money, which has value merely because of its scarcity, than to that of a commodity (even gold) that has a preexisting demand.<sup>17</sup> To the extent that scarcity is manipulable, and one person’s estimation of another’s value is a function only of the estimates of *other* persons, there are no efficient prices at all. This elaboration requires that we treat the attractiveness of some person  $j^*$  ( $x_{j^*}$ ) as a function of all  $v_{ij^*}$ , transforming the individual utility function into a set of nonrecursive equations. As Orléan (1988:110) has pointed out, such a set of utilities corresponding to a market based on “mimetic speculation” can be modeled as a Markov process with an infinite number of distinct equilibria. Hence any relaxation of the above model that allows one person’s evaluation of a prospective partner to affect those of others—unless coupled with extremely strong assumptions about the nature of interpersonal influence in this particular group—undermines the application of the market model.

<sup>16</sup>On the connection between orthodox economics and the rise of the idea of desire as fundamentally idiosyncratic, see Birken (1988).

<sup>17</sup>It is worth speculatively amplifying this contrast. An analysis along these lines might then suggest that in such a system women are the currency that gives the price for men, who have an indexically formed value from other systems (fraternity, sports). Although the idea of an “exchange of women” underlying the general “political economy” of the sex/gender system à la Rubin (1985) is historically untenable, in such cases as the rating-dating game, *to the extent* that women’s dating value is *only* a function of their scarcity (and not, as is also the case, a function of their sorority, looks, dancing, etc.), then women may approximate the free-floating significance function of money in ordering male prestige. Evidence of this in college dating is given by Holland and Eisenhart (1990:96, 99, 105, 212; also see Irigaray 1985:170–91). It is perhaps not without significance that Levi-Strauss’s own preemptive critique of Rubin’s approach holds that “women are not primarily a sign of social value, but a natural stimulant”—not simply a sign of value but the value itself (Levi-Strauss [1949] 1969:62, 496), thus corroborating the implication of the above analysis that the dissociation of the sexual field from sexual satisfaction allows the function of social valuation to become primary.

In sum, whatever virtues the market approach has in constructing a “just-so story” for whatever is observed, these vanish in the situations where the attractiveness of any person for another is shaped by the opinions of third parties. What, then, is left? Most important is the assumption that if persons  $i$  and  $j$  successfully pair, then  $v_{ij} = v_{ji}$ . In other words, each person’s utility is a sufficient measure of the “price” of the other. Indeed, were there a sexual market, this is what it would accomplish, for a market—as opposed to just any conjunction of individuals pursuing their ends—is a place where efficient prices are made. But as noted above, the sexual market produces *no* prices, and if it is any kind of market, the sexual market must be a *barter* market (also see Collins (1993:213f) regarding the more general case of symbolic interactions), which unfortunately possesses none of the qualities that most endear markets to social theorists (e.g., utility maximization).

As we have seen above, Laumann et al. recognized this difficulty due to an absence of prices, but maintained that the pairing is sufficiently market-like to ensure the matching of persons of equal value. “Anyone who has participated in the market for sex partners knows that those possessing more of the traits most valued in a particular culture have more opportunities for exchange than those possessing fewer. The majority of these opportunities are likely to involve similarly or less attractive potential partners, from among whom each individual is expected to choose the ‘best deal’ that he or she can get. This mechanism of competition generates partnerships in which the two partners are likely to have similar ‘values’ on the partner market” (1994:12), since a partner will withdraw from a relationship where the costs outweighs the benefits (1994:21).

However, this is to confuse a Panglossian comparison to an alternative road not taken (you chose this person as opposed to *not* choosing, so the benefit must outweigh the cost) with a wholly different issue of equal exchanges (your net gain is the same as your partner’s net gain). Analysts seem to make the unreasonable assumption that the cost to oneself of consenting to the pairing is the same as one’s utility for the other, again a result of the confusion between value-in-oneself and value-for-another; it is this assumption that leads to the belief that consent implies equality. But this is not necessarily so. If we imagine a population divided into two subgroups A and B, with identical preferences, and similar distributions in terms of “attractiveness” ( $x$ ) differing only in mean “quality” (say the mean for group A is greater than that for B, i.e.,  $E[x^A] > E[x^B]$ ), then all persons might pair according to rank in their respective subgroup ( $A_1$  matched with  $B_1$ ,  $A_2$  with  $B_2$ , etc.), while *every single A* comes off worse than the corresponding B. That is, for person  $i$  from group A and person  $j$  from group B,  $(v_{ij} = \alpha x_j) < (v_{ji} = \alpha x_i)$  where  $\alpha$  is some positive scaling constant; this can be true even if the net gain for the member of group A is positive, that is,  $v_{ij} > 0$ . In short, the fact that one has consented to an exchange does not imply that the exchange is equal.

Indeed, the most rigorous economic approach to this issue has taken the form of what is called a two-sided matching game, where we assume that all unions are serially monogamous, that each man has a partial order of preferences for female partners, and that each woman has a partial order of preferences for male partners. (Here, we rely on Roth and Sotomayor (1990).) Several important conclusions have been drawn from such modeling, but they are not at all those derived on the basis of the market metaphor. First, while it can be proved that such games have stable equilibria closely analogous to a Nash equilibrium (there is no M1 matched to W1 and W2 matched to M2 such that W1 prefers M2 to M1, and M2 prefers W1 to M2), it is not true that just any process of social interaction will actually reach such an equilibrium—indeed, the more plausible mechanisms do not.

Second, such equilibria are not guaranteed to exist for single-sided matching (e.g., homosexual fields). None of the authors we reviewed would have been likely to propose that the dynamics of heterosexual fields were integrally dependent on the twoness of the choice process. (The extent to which homosexual pairing may have a two-sided nature is of great importance and has been explored by Wiley and Herschkorn (1989).) Third, the matching process does not allow us to conclude that the utility contributed by the partners is equal; indeed, it necessarily follows that the interests of men as a whole run counter to those of women. The matching that is best for the men is worst for the women. And certainly, one cannot make any conclusions as to the tradeoffs between different utilities that might enter the matching process—all of this is folded into each individual's ranking, which is treated as given and nonproblematic.

Thus the simple claim of equal exchange does not follow from the axiom of rational and free actors, nor, accepted as an postulate, does it have any theoretically productive consequences.<sup>18</sup> What is left of the market approach, then, is only the cost-benefit rationality of the actors. But in the absence of a true market, we can derive nothing from this; furthermore, this is the one thing we know *not* to be generally the case: to the extent that persons adopt a cost-benefit subjectivity to ensure their happiness in sexual relationships, they are more likely to be *unhappy* (see Sprecher 1998). The only recourse left is to claim the rationality of choosing not to be rational; we leave it to others to determine what explanatory power such a formulation has.<sup>19</sup>

In sum, we must accept the fundamental poverty of the market approach in the analyses reviewed; far from simply being tautological, it is an approach that aspires to tautology and only reaches paradox. We emphasize that our claim is not that a market analysis cannot treat sexual decision making; indeed, it may be empirically testable, but only when attractiveness is exogenously given (e.g., some people *are* beautiful). To the extent that trans-individual consistencies in sexual desiring are more complex than this, and we seek to explain them, the market approach fails us spectacularly. Further, we do not object to the particular assumptions that often go into the market metaphor (e.g., high agreement on attractiveness, compensating utilities, self-interested behavior). Our point is that even if these assumptions are empirically justified, the social organization of pairing is not such as to lead to the strong conclusions made by analysts. Finally, we do not claim that sexual decision making cannot be rigorously modeled using approaches pioneered in economics, but such modeling does not rehabilitate the conclusions that have been drawn from the market metaphor.

Be that as it may, a market model of *anything* generates a tremendous degree of face plausibility in 21st-century America. Accordingly, sympathetic readers often note that modifications to the classical market model that allow for a more realistic application to actual economic markets also produce models that do not necessarily suffer the

<sup>18</sup>Analyses of mate choice that take seriously the process involved propose that information on the distribution of possible partners' quality is so costly that rational individuals do not try to maximize the quality of their partner, but "satisfice," or take the first one over a "reservation threshold." See England and Farkas (1986:39f) and Todd and Miller (1999).

<sup>19</sup>Posner (1992:85) finally throws out this one substantive element of the rational choice approach, namely, the assumption of rationality: "Responding appropriately to incentives, whether consciously or not, is rational; so animals are rational as well as people." Now it may be true that much of animal behavior can be profitably studied in terms of rational action, such as foraging behavior (see, e.g., Drent 1982), but one can be sure that Posner means to include *all* animal action—the lemming hurling itself off a cliff is, in a sense, rational, and it is this sense that is a dead end for sociology. It is not necessary that respecting the exogenous and idiosyncratic nature of preferences structures necessarily leads to abandoning a substantively meaningful definition of rationality: for example, see von Magnus (1984:640).

deficits we have outlined here. Exactly—for these modifications entail the systematic unraveling of the very constraints that give the market model any *general* explanatory power, and simply replace “market” with “interpersonal interactions.” Since we know already that sexual behavior falls into this category, the use of such weakened market terminology clearly adds nothing.<sup>20</sup> Put another way, everyone agrees that sexual pairing is *not* a strict price-making market, but that it is *like* a market. But the possibility of metaphor is not itself a sufficient justification for an analytic approach devoid of explanatory power.

What happens, then, when we cast aside the market metaphor? We need not only follow Waller in examining the principle whereby differential evaluation is assigned to prospective partners, but also to problematize the goal of sexual action. In what follows we go on to use field theory to discuss how such a problematization can be made; we argue that this extends Weberian action theory in a more satisfactory manner than the market approach. Indeed, the question of the organization of sexual value comes directly out of Weber’s own work, but his approach relies on surprisingly a-sociological premises that are remedied by attention to the sexual field.

### *Weber and the Erotic Value Sphere*

In “Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions,” Max Weber ([1915] 1946:323–24) put forward an idea of “spheres of value” in the modern world, areas in which there is a potential purified subjective orientation that can maximize (speaking loosely) the “value” of that sphere. Because the nature of the value imposes substantive constraints on effective action, the purification of action orientations (a process Weber believed was underway) leads to clear standards of the consistency of practical conduct in each sphere. Each value sphere accordingly possesses an inner lawfulness, or a tendency toward its distinct principles (*eigengesetzlichkeit*). One of these value spheres, according to Weber, was the erotic.<sup>21</sup> Although “sexual love” is the “greatest irrational force of life,” it may still be the basis for consistent conduct following a purified orientation. This has happened through the sublimation of naturalistic sexuality into the “consciously cultivated” and purified sphere of eroticism (1946:343f).<sup>22</sup>

This purified eroticism stands in stark contrast to the emphasis on *ecstatic* and *orgiastic* sexual experience associated with mysticism that comes into necessary conflict with the rationalization of knowledge and culture (Weber 1958:138, 149, 151). But paradoxically, precisely as it is differentiated from “natural” sex and subjected to its own regulations, eroticism is seen as “a gate into the most irrational and thereby real kernel of life, as compared with the mechanisms of rationalization.” Weber traced the development of the erotic sphere from courtly love to modern intellectualist vocationalism, where eroticism remains the only possible connection to animality and a “sensation of an inner-worldly salvation from rationalization” (Weber [1915] 1946:345–47).

<sup>20</sup>It is also possible to use the same formal approach of decision-making theory to handle sexual decision making without assuming a rational subjectivity, but the consequences are quite at odds with what is assumed by the market theorists (see Loewenstein (1996) for a rigorous elaboration).

<sup>21</sup>The inclusion of the erotic value sphere is far from an afterthought—Schluchter (1996:59) makes the case that it was precisely his encounter with the “sexual-erotic ‘liberation movement’” that led Weber to recognize the necessity of distinguishing between different types of values.

<sup>22</sup>Weber gets the idea of an erotic value sphere from Rickert. Rickert (1913:313–19, 323) had used eroticism as the chief example of a more general sphere of life values, those values that were *social* (as opposed to contemplative), and oriented toward the *present*, having chiefly to do with social bonds, especially personal union. Furthermore, Rickert argued that there was an aspect of sexual life that was not merely an instinct, instinct being indifferent to values.

Weber argued, then, that modernization has led to the creation of a distinct value sphere of eroticism, with its own goal that is necessarily distinct from “organic” sex *per se*. It possesses its own laws of action and development, and correspondingly appears in distinct unions (extramarital affairs). Although it is a sphere of opposition to the rationalization of life in general, its existence is negatively defined by this very rationalization, and while it claims to transcend other conflicting values on the grounds of a destined conjunction of two souls, it is unavoidably a contest à la Zetterberg of “the most intimate coercion of the soul of the less brutal partner” (1946:348).

Weber thus proceeded beyond the others in suggesting that the sexual system can have goals somewhat detached from the simple satisfaction of a biological impulse, but he nowhere explained how he had deduced that such eroticism *is* a necessarily fundamental value sphere (as opposed to, say, a Wallerian sphere of popularity). As mentioned above (note 22), Weber drew this idea of value spheres from Rickert (1913), but Rickert’s system of values was constructed on trans-historical principles unappealing to sociologists. Weber’s formulation of an erotic value sphere also contained something profoundly asocial—while its pairings have a distinct institutional form (the affair), the laws of the erotic value sphere are unrelated to concrete institutions.

Contemporary Weberians tend to ignore this sexual aspect of Weber’s understanding of the effects of rationalization;<sup>23</sup> however, we see it as a significant precedent for theorizing the formation of an autonomous sphere of specifically sexual action with its own logic—but a precedent with a philosophical grounding untenable for a flexible sociological theory. This leads us to the field theory of Pierre Bourdieu, which, we hope to show, can generalize and position both the market-based approaches to sexual stratification found in Davis et al., and the value-spheres-based approach to the goal of sexual action of Weber. To summarize our review, the American tradition of action theory understood “value” to imply both an integrative function, and a correspondence to price; hence discussions slipped from analyzing the social construction of sexual desiring to analyzing the sexual construction of social desiring—allowing theorists to uncover their usual suspects for explaining macro order (rationality and integration) applied to a new domain. While the American tradition built on one portion of Weber’s work, it ignored what Roth has called Weber’s sociology of domination. Bourdieu begins with this portion of Weber, but integrates it with the conception of fields, preserving the distinct laws (*eigengesetzlichkeit*) that Weber saw as characteristic of value spheres (Bourdieu 1990a:389, [1989] 1996:433, n. 2), but without making transcendent philosophical assumptions.

<sup>23</sup>It is interesting that Habermas (1987:326) excises eroticism as one of the value spheres when discussing the above work of Weber (he also excises power as a value sphere in its own right), so as to make it compatible with his own trinitarian formula of self/other/thing. But he then must include sexual stratification in an entirely different form: in his explication of the sources of prestige, he divides attributes from resources, and both are in turn divided into empirical versus rational (a division that corresponds roughly to whether they motivate via systemic media or via communication oriented to mutual understanding). Among the empirical attributes are strength (which allows reward or punishment), know-how (which produces expectations of success), and physical attractiveness (which produces emotional ties) (Habermas 1987:182). He then not only ignores erotic know-how and makes it a merely physical attribute, but because of his refusal to consider sex a fundamental “moment,” he links this *physical* attribute to *emotional* ties that the body somehow inspires. Parsons (1979:2), however, did not make this excision—instead, he proposed a triad of erotic/economic/intellectual spheres for explaining social evolution.

*Bourdieu's Field Theory*

We consider Bourdieu's field theory to be a useful if imperfect vocabulary to formulate the fundamental question regarding the social organization of sexual desiring, namely, the extent to which it possesses an autonomous logic of striving and of hierarchy.<sup>24</sup> The benefit of Bourdieu's approach comes not in the mere *description* of the question of the social organization of desiring, but in the capacity to formulate it in a way that is largely independent of the answer. Because of the familiarity of Bourdieu's theoretical terminology, we merely review the most important terms for our use, the correlative "capital" and "field." Bourdieu's use of the word "field" combines two senses; that of a field in the physical sciences with that of a military metaphor of a field of contestation (see, e.g., Bourdieu 1990c:143). Perhaps more than Bourdieu, we conceive of a field as being defined by a set of interlocking institutions (cf. DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Each field generates a specific form of "capital," a composite of relational resources that determine dominance in the field, endow it with a particular libido or interest, and sustain its relatively autonomous—and in part historically contingent—principle of striving and optimization (Bourdieu 1990c:87). The coordinating "mechanism" of the practical microcosm of the field is the *habitus*, "a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a *matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions*" (Bourdieu 1977:82f). Habitus, as the internalization of the structures of fields, allows us to incorporate institutional sensibilities and gives us the capacity for objectively strategic action and "traversal" of fields without positing generic Machiavellian subjectivity nor wholly static and omnipotent social structure.

A field, in order to be a field, must possess some degree of autonomy from other fields, yet fields tend toward alignment, most importantly through the *convertibility* of one form of capital into another. Although these different capitals are conceptually and formally independent, one may be able to trade in one form for another at a given discount rate; Bourdieu's later publications attempted (perhaps with only moderate success) to specify how these rates of exchange are influenced by a kind of overall cultural geography fashioned by activities of the state and economic sector (see Wacquant 1993:12; Bourdieu [1989] 1996).

Despite the economic metaphor of "capital," it is important to realize that a field is not a market—indeed, Bourdieu suggests that it was only for a relatively brief period that the economic field enjoyed such autonomy from other fields that its logic was wholly that of an economic market (Bourdieu [1980] 1990b:133). In stark contrast to those who tend to assume market behavior as a neutral template arising from atomistic action, for Bourdieu any field, even the economic, has concrete *institutions* in which players operate; the market may be one such institution.

Further, the "interest" or "libido" of each field is *endogenous* to that field, not exogenously given (Bourdieu 1990c:88, 91, 110). This means that in contrast to the approach of the market metaphor, here the social determination of value is not excluded from the realm of discussion as an irreducible idiosyncrasy of wholly subjective preferences. But neither are preferences assumed (as by Parsons) to be anchored in shared values. Rather, preferences can, at least as a first approximation, be taken to indicate some social position.

<sup>24</sup>For example, despite the looseness of Bourdieu's equation of capital with "that which can be the basis of power," we still prefer "capital" over the seemingly more neutral "resources" of James Coleman (1990), since from Marx sociologists are likely to understand capital not as a thing, but as a *relation*, and it is such a relation that underlies the "sexual capital" that is equivalent to a consensus regarding desirability.

We propose that what all the authors reviewed above have been discussing is the sexual *field*, that is, the field in which the “libido” as discussed by Bourdieu is socially identical to the specifically sexual libido; the riddle on which the market metaphors foundered was determining the nature of specifically sexual capital and its degrees of convertibility.<sup>25</sup>

Bourdieu himself does not see sexuality as being institutionalized in a particular field; we argue that this is related to certain inconsistencies and loosenesses in his usage. First of all, being mainly concerned with class exclusion and taste in *Distinction* (which contains his most developed theory of attraction), he emphasizes homogamy as the principle not only of marriage but also of love: “Love is also a way of loving one’s own destiny in someone else and so feeling loved in one’s own destiny” (Bourdieu [1979] 1984:243). Intentionally or not, Bourdieu ironically echoes the romantic definition of love as destiny—also discussed by Weber ([1915] 1946:348)—but replaces the romantic’s vision of a supra-mundane order of souls and sensibilities with predictable trajectories through social space.

When it comes to sexual attraction, as opposed to love, Bourdieu has not been wholly consistent (also see McNay 1999:96). At some points, he suggests that class homogamy operates: thus Bourdieu ([1989] 1996:180, 182) argues that as different schoolings inculcate differences in bodily hexis “and even sexual habits” as well as differences in habitus, there will be a tendency for like to like (at least within the dominant class that he is here examining). “As social positions embodied in bodily dispositions, habitus contribute to determining whether (biological) bodies come together or stay apart by inscribing between two bodies the attractions and repulsions that correspond to the relationship between the positions of which they are the embodiment.” But in other places, he parses sexual desirability into one element coming from what the body signifies about the agent’s trajectory through social space, and a second element, exogenous beauty, which is an accident of birth. Thus Bourdieu ([1979] 1984:91) admits that “[e]ducationally equivalent individuals . . . may differ radically as regards bodily hexis,” and that the latter can be used to accumulate social capital.<sup>26</sup> Bourdieu assumes that what is specific to sexual attractiveness (as opposed to the valorization of class bodies) is “natural,” which is clearly incompatible with a notion of sexual capital.

Bourdieu ([1979] 1984:152f) recognizes “the constitution of a socially recognized corps of experts specializing in advice on sexuality,” but he does not take this to imply

<sup>25</sup>Chancer has also proposed that “looks” can function “as a form of capital, as Bourdieu depicts” (1998:117f); while there are clear convergences between her approach and ours, there are important differences. Most important, she defines capital in nonautonomous terms: because of her interest in the use of women as a status signal among men (1998:114ff), sexual capital becomes something that women possess but is used by men as a form of symbolic capital. Because she sees this system as at the heart of sexism, Chancer then views sexual capital as a resource that disempowers those who hold it (1998:261). This definition of sexual capital as something women are forced to have means that rather than formulate a specifically sexual field, with its own mode of domination, Chancer posits a synchronization with other forms of domination (e.g., race, sex, class) (1998:120). Although not using the term “sexual capital,” Holland and Eisenhart (1990:102f, 212, 218) make analogies to Bourdieu’s work on symbolic capital when analyzing the logic of attractiveness.

<sup>26</sup>“One can begin to map out a universe of class bodies, which (biological accidents apart) tends to reproduce in its specific logic the universe of the social structure. It is no accident that bodily properties are perceived through social systems of classification which are not independent of the distribution of these properties among the social classes. . . . Thus, bodies would have every likelihood of receiving a value strictly corresponding to the positions of their owners in the distribution of the other fundamental properties—but for the fact that the logic of social heredity sometimes endows those least endowed in all other respects with the rarest bodily properties, such as beauty (sometimes ‘fatally’ attractive, because it threatens the other hierarchies), and, conversely, sometimes denies the ‘high and mighty’ the bodily attributes of their positions, such as height and beauty” (Bourdieu [1979] 1984:193).

the autonomy of the sexual field and hence a sexual capital; rather, attractiveness is merely a form of “physical charm” that is, oddly, part of “cultural capital.” And finally, while Bourdieu has occasionally (e.g., Bourdieu 1978:832) discussed sexual attractiveness as a convertible resource, it has only been in the form of a general physical capital available to the dominated classes, and it is gendered female, as opposed to male, physical capital that leads to the sporting field (Wacquant 2003; cf. Shilling 1993:127–47).

To some extent, these ambiguities come from his trying to discuss a form of convertible capital that is not generated by a specific field, but they also seem related to a more general ambiguity in Bourdieu’s notion of the habitus. Since the habitus, as a set of classifying practices, is not conscious, Bourdieu (as any good Cartesian) tends to assimilate it to the “body”; further, the connotations of the Latin “habitus” include “bearing” or “deportment.” Thus Bourdieu tends to assume an inseparability between the unconscious disposition that classifies bodies and the socially shaped bodily hexis that is classified. Logic leads Bourdieu then to look for the homogenous attraction due to the naturalizing process whereby the body classifying and the body classified are shaped by the same social environment. But Bourdieu recognizes the insufficiency of such an explanation, and so (not wholly unlike the market theorists we criticized) he relies on an “accident of birth” to explain the rest.

These contradictions can be eliminated by considering the possibility of a specifically sexual field with a bodily capital that is not wholly indexical (i.e., that has no value in itself, but merely points to the value of the person in some other social space), but—to the extent that the field is autonomous—has its own genetic logic. Indeed, other theorists have pointed to what may be seen as the creation of an autonomous sexual field in the West during the past century.<sup>27</sup> But the virtue of the vocabulary of field is not its parsimony, nor the ability to retell the analyses of other theorists. Instead, it directs us to certain empirical and historical questions that are difficult to frame within the market perspective, and that also seem to us to be reasonable avenues of investigation. We conclude by outlining three.

### *The Uses of the Field*

Recasting the riddle posed by sexual stratification in the terms of field theory opens three meaningful avenues of inquiry, all specifications of the general question whether and in what ways a sexual field could be said to exist. The first is an attempt to gauge the *extent* of the field effect, that is, to determine how—and with what intensity—sexual

<sup>27</sup>Most importantly, Giddens (1992:27, 174) has argued that there has been an autonomization of sexuality, which he links to the development of birth control. Although Giddens (1992:58, 144–47, 1991:93f, 205f) is more interested in the “pure relationship” and in *intimacy* than in sexual pairing, he points to an institutional analysis stressing not only (like Altman (1983)) that developments in the heterosexual field seem to have followed the homosexual field, but also the influence of expert knowledge.

Foucault, of course, has also put forward an argument as to the increasing autonomization of sexuality. But Foucault privileges developments in medical science and demographic politics when accounting for what might be seen as the autonomization of the sexual field, especially the increased interest in “sex itself.” Further, Foucault’s ([1976] 1980:48) vision of sex as one of the “multifarious power devices” deployed as part of an increasing control over the body frequently verges on the conspiratorial. Increasing medical knowledge might in some way be related to the increasing autonomization of sexual conduct, but more prosaic factors that have been proposed for the latter since the turn of the century (birth control, weakening of religious values, and changing childbirth patterns due to changing career imperatives (see Martin 1996)) seem sufficient to explain any autonomization, at least in roughest outlines. We note that Foucault ([1984] 1986:74) himself relies on such prosaic factors when, in the third volume, he ties the rise of what we might call “marriage itself”—marriage that is privatized, companionate, and general—to changing patterns of upper-class mobility decreasing the importance of alliance in determining rank.

behavior and attitudes might be incited and coordinated by hegemonic systems of judgment. There is no reason to assume that the degree of consensus regarding standards of desirability is a constant across time and space: in contrast to the universalism of the market approach, we may conclude that a field analysis is unwarranted due to underlying disorganization in preferences. Thus we seek to determine the boundaries of the field and their permeability, its division into subfields, and the sanctions for those evading its dictates.

Indeed, we may be able to use empirical indications of agreement as a means of delimiting a sexual field or decomposing it into subfields. That is, we assume that there tends to be much higher consensus within subfields than across them. Yet we consider these to be “subfields” of a larger field, as opposed to independent fields, when any agent can generally take a single position overall. That is, either the agent can be in only one subfield and not the other, or position in one subfield is quite highly predicted by position in another.

The existence of such subfields may be understood as a form of horizontal as opposed to vertical differentiation—that is, persons are distinguishable in some relevant way without one being higher or lower in the field (see Martin 2003:34; cf. Butler 2004:105). We may expect further horizontal differentiation even within subfields. Detailed examination of what particular persons find attractive (e.g., Whittier and Simon 2001:144) finds a duality between sense-of-self and what sorts of others are desired. Because such senses-of-self are neither uniform nor randomly distributed, it may be that the field analysis can shed light not only on the distribution of sexual capital from more to less, but also on its qualitative variation. If, indeed, there is a single social logic to both horizontal and vertical differentiation, then the relations between subfields (e.g., stigmatization and emulation) may be explainable by the same dynamics that structure domination and contest *within* these subfields. From within the market metaphor, on the other hand, one cannot even ask such questions regarding the distinctive socio-logic of a subfield and its relation to other subfields, since the market approach assumes that people make use of a single calculating subjectivity when taking *any* kind of action.

Indeed, Bourdieu’s approach has the signal advantage of being able to explain the compatibility of objectively strategic practice with an absence of this strategic subjectivity (“Innocence is the privilege of those who move in their field of activity like fish in water” (Bourdieu [1983] 1986:257, n. 18)). The market analysts, on the contrary, have rested their derivations on the assumption of strategic subjectivity (“people try to get the best they can”), even though such subjectivity no more implies a market than it does a war. Further, as we have seen, the market logic pushes us inexorably either toward an exogenous bodily attractiveness, or toward an equation of attractiveness with the choice process itself. But the field approach, rather than producing a seamless transition between those factors that “make up” attractiveness and those factors that “make up for it”—and a consequent *formal* puzzle—postulates a palpable divide, the crossing of which produces the same subjective unease felt by the commercial artist or any other person who betrays or compromises the immanent logic of his or her field; the degree to which such compromises are made then becomes a *substantive* question.

A second direction toward establishing the possible existence of a sexual field is the attempt to isolate the specific constitution of the “interest-libido”: Is it rarified sensuality à la Weber, erotic power à la Zetterberg, or popularity pure and simple à la Waller? Or is it, perhaps, as most recent analysts have seemed to assume, but never made explicit, simply sexual contact with those of high sexual capital (and not sexual

release per se)? Certainly, we must be able to specify some such organizing principle that is distinct from marriage or nonsexual leisure activities (e.g., ballroom dancing).

Further, we can ask several questions about the nature of sexual capital. First, we attempt to specify not only what set of properties—or, perhaps better, what set of *relations*—functions as sexual capital (as, e.g., in the empirical work of Holland and Skinner (1987)), but also what field conditions allow this set of properties to function as capital (Bourdieu [1989] 1996:264). Although researchers have repeatedly demonstrated that there is a reasonably high agreement as to personal “attractiveness” (see Feingold’s (1988) meta-analysis), little has been done to explore the logic of this ranking, let alone its sociogenesis. But as Collins (1975:281) noted: “Attractiveness is a social role as much as a state of appearance; learning to play it with self-confidence results in a self-fulfilling prophecy, while the opposite process leads to cumulative failure through awkwardness of posture, complexion, and the like.” Although Collins (1993) has pointed to the possible cumulative nature of success in interaction ritual chains, and other researchers have noted that relative status position affects how people hold their bodies (see the review in Henley 1977:82–93), we propose that to understand the production of sexual capital, we must investigate not only what properties are conventionally labeled as “attractive,” but how they index a trajectory through the sexual field.

Second, we can attempt to determine the position of this capital on a general dimension. Bourdieu ([1980] 1990b:57, 130; cf. 1986:243) speaks of two states of capital, as objectified in institutions (the field) and as incorporated in the body as habitus; he then suggests that the degree of the objectification of capital—its position in the dialectic of the internalization of field as habitus and the externalization of habitus as trajectory—is the most important difference between modes of domination.<sup>28</sup> When fully exteriorized as in Waller’s endogenous dating rank, sexual capital, we hazard, is akin to Coleman’s social capital: it is a network property of a node, as opposed to an attribute of an isolated unit. When fully interiorized, sexual capital is wholly a matter of the body and its “bearing” or “hexis.”

There is reason not only to think that it is possible for sexual capital to vary in degree of objectification (with implications as to the volatility and “naturalization” of the sexual field), but also for this degree of objectification to differ for men and women. Indeed, it is possible that “gender”—that is, our cultural understandings of sexual difference—is a kind of folk-sociological attempt to reference the differences between the strategies of sexual capitalization of men and women, heterosexuals and homosexuals, normal and deviant (see also McNay 1999:112). Once again, such investigation is impossible from within the market perspective, where all desires are unfathomable, idiosyncratic, exogenous, and yet absolutely comparable. The market approach must posit a trans-historical attractiveness, as opposed to studying how concrete institutions of the sexual field—for example, the barn dance as opposed to the frat party—lead to different constitutions of sexual capital.

The third direction is to describe objectively the degree of *autonomy* of the sexual field. Previously, analysts have focused on the *disorganizing* potential of sexual desire, at least when this is joined with romantic love: it is that which messes up stratification systems (Goode 1959). But if this is because the sexual field has its own logic (as claimed by Weitman (1998:75)), and its own dictates, then the absence of one type of organization is due to the presence of another. Are there concrete institutions that are

<sup>28</sup>Interestingly, Laumann and Pappi (1976:188) also classified resources in terms of the degree to which they were network or individual phenomena, as well as their degree of convertibility.

primarily oriented toward the sexual field as opposed to marriage or heterosocial leisure (e.g., the “singles bar”)? Do institutions outside the field (e.g., legal institutions such as constraints on abortion) affect the distribution of sexual capital, or do they affect choices while leaving the sexual capital of actors untouched? Is there an institutional dispute over what constitutes valid meta-sexual authority, or is there established and legitimated expertise?<sup>29</sup> Does the capital of the field for men or for women convert directly from the capital of some other field, or must it be independently generated within the sexual field? Conversely, can specifically sexual capital (if it exists) be converted into other forms of capital? Rather than assume a homology of attractiveness to social class, as Bourdieu frequently does, we can investigate this as an empirical question. If the degree of autonomy has changed over time, historical explanations for such change will be of the greatest interest.

Once more, this final investigation regarding the degree of autonomization of the sexual field is difficult to frame within an orthodox market perspective where attractiveness is just one resource out of many contributing to a person’s “price.” Yet it may very well be that changes in the degree of autonomization of the sexual field (should one be found to exist) drive the historical changes of interest to Collins and others. The history of courtship (e.g., Bailey 1988) suggests that there were times when the sexual field—at least for the middle classes—became more autonomous and developed its own capital with relatively low convertibility to economic capital. But our review suggests an additional hypothesis. Since the formation of a truly autonomous sexual capital seems to involve the manipulation of scarcity and competition, it was likely to be seen both by participants and later analysts in economic terms. However, when the sexual field was closely connected to other fields, so that there was relatively little autonomous sexual decision making, then despite the far greater weight of economic considerations, economic metaphors were less likely to be used. We thus suggest a slightly paradoxical outcome: to the extent that sexual pairing is *substantively* tied to the economic field, it is naturalized and seen as noneconomic. But to the extent that sexual orders become autonomous, and have a logic of their own that has *formal* similarities to the economic field, this logic is understood in economic terms.

When we therefore take economic metaphors not as evidence of the actual organization of the sexual field, but of people’s *understandings* of it, we can then attempt to give a history of the understanding of sexual value in the past century, especially in feminist theory, which has traversed the range from Rubin’s (1985) belief that women’s sexual value is at the heart of patriarchy to Simone de Beauvoir’s optimistic (and Spencerian) embracing of those “sexually well-balanced couples” who were changing from seeing their relations in martial terms to seeing them as exchange, with her caution that “[w]oman has to learn that exchanges—it is a fundamental law of political economy—are based on the value the merchandise offered has for the buyer, and not for the seller” (de Beauvoir [1949] 1989:722, 728).<sup>30</sup> Our proposal does not answer these questions in advance; rather, it simply provides a reasonably structured framework for their exploration, one that does not assume in advance what is to be determined, nor put constraints upon our answers that lead to paradox or empty

<sup>29</sup>It is perhaps worth pointing out that, as noted by Kent (1983:312), the one example Weber ([1920] 1976:263, n. 22) provided of “[s]pecialists without spirit, sensualists without heart” was the new medicalized sexual expert wresting evaluation of sexual propriety from the puritan divine.

<sup>30</sup>It is interesting that this understanding of price is not that of the economists of DeBeauvoir’s days: it is that of Hobbes ([1651] 1909:67): “The *value*, or WORTH of a man, is . . . his Price. . . . And as in other things, so in men, not the seller, but the buyer determines the Price.”

explanations. We may hope that attention to the sexual field will allow us to empirically investigate these questions, if not to begin a critique of sexual judgment.

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