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## Credit, Fashion, Sex: Economies of Regard in Old Regime France

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## *Credit, Fashion, Sex: Economies of Regard in Old Regime France*

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By Clare Haru Crowston. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013. Pp. xiii, 424. \$ 27.95. ISBN: 978-0-8223-5528-1.)

Reviewed by Nadejda Bontcheva-Loyaga

WITH *CREDIT, Fashion, Sex: Economies of Regard in Old Regime France*, Crowston makes two central claims: that credit was the most important concept in Old Regime France, and that understanding its use and the discussions it engendered will improve our understanding of France during this period. The concept of credit was well understood and widely applied by contemporaries in Old Regime France and permeated all fields of life (court, family, intellectual world, economy, religion). While nowadays we understand the term ‘credit’ as having only material connotations, as access to financial resources, Crowston reveals that in Old Regime France the term had both material meaning (such as bills of exchange, promissory notes, etc), but more importantly, it had a myriad of nonmaterial connotations signifying influence, power, respect, and esteem. These different understandings of credit coexisted, intertwined, and were in a constant conversion among political, social, cultural, and economic manifestations. This understanding of credit’s metamorphosis in between the domains of the political, economic, social, and cultural, Crowston claims, affected the way in which people during Old Regime France perceived these domains. While today we see them as separate spheres, as economy, policy, society, and culture, the French society of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries saw them as overlapping and inseparable domains. According to Crowston, “our own perceptions of distinct

realms of human existence is a historic construct born of the disavowal of the credit regime ... and thus foreign to the early modern period” (3).

The lack of distinction between the above-mentioned realms of human existence, Crowston asserts, influenced the way people in Old Regime France saw value. Value could be expressed not only in money, but also in nonmaterial ways. Borrowing Avner Offer’s thesis of gift economies as “economies of regard”, where value is not necessarily measured in financial terms, Crowston asserts that in Old Regime France, people relied on such ‘economies of regard’ much more often than on the financial one. “Multiple, intersecting economies of regard operated in Old Regime France. They included political economies of power in court patronage and royal administration, economies of trust and affection within families, economies of prestige and renown within intellectual life, economies of desire in sexual relations, economies of money in the myriad form of stipends, pensions, commerce, and public finance, and economies of information and publicity” (316). While, as Pierre Bourdieu, Crowston accepts that there are different forms of capital, she distances herself from his thesis that other forms of capital derive from the economic one. “At stake in exchanges of credit,” Crowston argues, “was not merely the acquisition of economic capital but gaining advantage in the struggle over access to limited resources ... I mean resources writ large: status, reputa-

tion, honor, power, as well as wealth” (15). Crowston also adopts Gabriel Tarde’s definition that value arises from “collective and subjective judgements about the aptitude of objects to be more or less - and by a greater or lesser number of people - believed, desired, or enjoyed” (323). This definition accepts that beauty or honesty would be as important as utility in judging value. Crowston argues that such understanding of value was accepted in Old Regime France which explains the predominance of ‘economies of regard’ where money was one among many measuring systems.

Crowston’s research not only defines the credit system existing during the Old Regime, but also adds to our understanding of its workings by highlighting the role of women in dispensing and wielding credit, explaining how the concept of credit extended to non-elites, revealing the close relations between credit and fashion, and demonstrating how credit changed over time.

While women were legally subordinated to their husbands and usually unable to wield much power and influence during Old Regime France, Crowston reveals that the credit system helped them overcome such restrictions. Through credit obtained in the libidinal economy, women could gain unofficial power and authority. Crowston offers the examples of Madame de Maintenon (Louis XIV’s mistress) and Madame de Pompadour (Louis XV’s mistress) who, due to their closeness to the king, were able to convert sexual credit in political influence and wielded considerable power affairs of state. Women also enjoyed credit as producers and consumers. Crowston reveals the significant social, cultural, and economic credit female fashion merchants could obtain, such as Rose Bertin (fashion designer to queen Marie Antoinette), but also the significant financial credit that wealthy women enjoyed in the form of shop credit. Rose Bertin’s wealthy female clients, for example, owed her at the time of her death in 1813 a debt

at the amount of 1.5 million livre.

Crowston discusses not only the relation between credit and the underprivileged sex in Old Regime France, but also between credit and the underprivileged orders. She describes how authors from the period referred to non-elite leaders as possessing political and social credit among ordinary people, and offers the example of books targeted for the peasant class which used ‘credit’ in its nonmaterial meanings.

Because credit depended not only on rank and fortune, but to a large extent on performances, Crowston argues, fashion came to the forefront of credit relations. Material objects could endow their possessors with a positive image that could lead to the accumulation of credit. In Nicolas Faret’s words, “fine dress was potentially more important for success at court than birth or merit” (100). Being in fashion meant being popular and possessing cultural capital that could be turned into political or social capital. As Crowston explains, fashion and credit became “complementary systems for acquiring reputation and for circulating judgments on value” (318). Crowston looks at credit and fashion as ‘systems of information exchange’ in which advantage had the ones who possessed the most up-do-date information. Because both systems relied on collective and informal judgment of value, the ability to display one’s access to information was itself a distinction (13).

The system of credit was widely used and accepted by Old Regime society, but it was also the cause of wide criticism and calls for change. While during Louis XIV’s rule criticism centered on the conflict between artifice and reality (credit had to be bestowed on the basis of virtue, and be used in support of higher values, such as friendship, rather than in the pursuit of self-interest and material profit), from the late seventeenth century there was an increased perception of credit as having harmful effects on

politics and government. Critics saw as harmful the role of courtiers, especially women, and financiers on the nation and the public good. Crowston considers John Law's unsuccessful efforts to impose a new public finance system in France during this period as such type of criticism. She sees it as an attempt to wrestle control over France's finances out of the hands of financiers, whose credit was determined in the shady dealings at court, and put it in a national bank that derived its credit from public opinion and the people's faith in the system. Others, such as Montesquieu, Abbe de Saint-Pierre, and the Jansenist priest Jacques-Joseph Duguet, concentrated their criticism on the illegitimacy of women's informal power (through credit), their vanity and involvement in public affairs. During Louis XVI's rule, Charles Duclos, called for reforms to the court's credit regime that would rid it of hypocrisy and artifice, and reorient it towards the public good through its grounding in virtue and merit.

Criticism of credit was closely related to criticism of fashion and the ruinous expenses that the striving for luxury items generated at court. Both credit and fashion were attacked as showing the falsity of court life and bestowing fame and power on caprice. While some, like La Bruyere and Moliere, saw fashion as superficial display that was not connected to virtue, Mothe-Fenelon specifically targeted the connection between women and fashion and saw it as leading to ruinous expenses. The indulgence of noble women came to symbolize the corruption of the regime itself. According to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the cultural decay that women of the Old Regime represented "was inextricably linked to social disorder and political legitimacy" (304). Crowston reveals that during the late eighteenth century criticism centered on one particular individual seen as the embodiment of all that was wrong with credit and fashion - Queen Marie Antoinette. She was seen as responsible for the colossal French debt (with her

expenses on fashion and gambling). Her close relation with Rose Bertin, a working class woman, was perceived as the collapse of traditional boundaries (between city and court, between commerce and nobility), and her influence over the king (as the only woman in his life) was scorned and detested.

While Crowston is careful to underline several times that neither the relations between Rose Beritn and Marie Antoinette, nor the credit regime in court (with its hypocrisy, low morals, and debt) brought the Revolution of 1789, she suggest that they contributed to the collapse of credibility in the regime and facilitated the 1789 upheaval. Crowston specifically singles out the scorn that Marie Antoinette attracted (her nickname was Madame Deficit), as putting public opinion against the monarchy and its wastefulness. The queen, and aristocracy in general, were perceived by many ordinary people as malicious and frivolous parasites, rather than the brave, honorable and virtuous statesman they were supposed to be.

Crowston's *Credit, Fashion, Sex* improves our understanding of Old Regime France and the undercurrents that might have affected the Revolution of 1789. While Crowston's research is based on a wide array of sources - both fiction and non-fiction, she heavily relies on fiction, novels and plays, as representing the concept of credit in Old Regime France. A representation of credit in seventeenth and eighteenth century literature, however, does not necessarily have to reflect the reality existing at the time. Crowston, while refuting Bourdieu's claim that at the base of credit was always the economic gain, is not very successful in proving it. Her claims of credit conversion between the cultural, social, and political do not refute the assertion that the ultimate goal of all credit machinations at court was financial gain.