



## CULTURES OF CONSUMPTION PUBLIC LECTURE SERIES

# Consuming Sex: London and the "Sexual Revolution", 1950s–60s

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### ABSTRACT

Social and gender historians have identified the 1950s and 1960s as a period of profound if complex change in sexual behaviour and moral values in almost all of the western democracies. The shifting boundaries between public and private morality, the expansion of public anxieties over 'deviant' or dangerous sexualities, new social images of femininity and the cultural meanings attached to 'youth' have been among the most prominent themes. In British social history two associated arguments have also predominated; namely, the idea that shifts in the moral landscape were related to the increasing consumerisation of personal life and that metropolitan London acted as a forcing ground for such transformations.

This paper offers a detailed exploration of the interconnections between sexuality as consumption and the social and symbolic geography of London in the post-war period. In doing so it revisits historical arguments about the relationship between the genesis of liberal or 'permissive' morality and commercial culture in the metropolis. Emphasising that it was not London as a whole that was identified in this debate, but much more specific zones or quarters of the city, my study focuses one prominent site, Soho, in the West End. Since the later nineteenth century the area had been the home of English bohemianism and political radicalism, centre of a diverse range of European migrant and artisanal cultures and the focal point for a wide variety of commercialised forms of sex. During the post-war period publicans and night club owners, theatre managers and pornographic booksellers, drew on the cultural resources of this sedimented history of Soho's bohemianism in order to promote the area as a site for male homosexual cultures and the newer 'liberated' forms of heterosexuality. My paper will foreground the centrality of market-based structures in the development of the area's post-war sexual economy and their interaction with Soho's sexual consumers. In doing so it will highlight a more diffuse and mediated circuit for the consumer economy and its attendant cultural forms than has frequently been identified in recent studies of post-war consumer affluence.