

The Secret Life of Crowds: Gender, Sexuality, and the Masses

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Keynote speaker: Professor Klaus Theweleit

Critical discourses about gender and sexuality frequently find their starting point in the body of an individual. This individual body performatively constitutes its gender, experiences desire for other (individual) bodies, undergoes biopolitical administration, and operates as the proverbial battleground for a range of political struggles. Yet the collective body—the body of political assembly, of masses and crowds—is an equally generative basis for the analysis of gendered and sexual processes. Congealing in physical and conceptual spaces alike, crowds and masses invoke, rehearse, and destabilize the terrain of gender and sexuality.

The fourth annual conference of the Princeton Department of Comparative Literature will grapple with this fraught but productive entanglement. How can we think of gender and sexuality operating not on (or between) individual bodies but on bodies gathered in space, legible in moments of collective excitation and assembly? How do crowds and masses rely on gendered imaginaries, social practices, or divisions of labor? How does the form of the crowd, broadly conceived, put pressure on the categories and processes of gender and sexuality—or on our ability to analyze and describe them—and vice versa?

Moreover, how are gender and sexuality shaped or affected by the discourses, structures, or cultural practices that form alongside crowds and masses? After all, just as masses themselves are conditioned and disrupted by gender and sexuality, so, too, are the technologies, institutions, and symbolic regimes that analyze, represent, and contain those masses. The image of the crowd, for instance—raucous, frenzied, ecstatic, by turns genderless and indelibly gendered—occupies a central place in the imaginaries of democracy and popular sovereignty, in visions of revolutionary upheaval, and in fascist dreams of rapturous, obedient throngs. The gendering and sexualization of crowds likewise manifests in anxieties of ruling elites, ranging from paranoid obsession and prurient fascination with impoverished urban masses to racist fearmongering about rape, contamination, and disease. Institutions and systems built up around real or potential masses—policing and incarceration; public health and epidemiology; immigration policy and border control; mass communication and social media; urban infrastructure and public space—are mediated in innumerable ways by the forces and fissures of gender and sexuality.

We welcome explorations of these topics from across the humanities and social sciences, making no limitation on modes of reflection or objects of study. The following is a list of possible areas of inquiry:

- Gender and sexuality in mass mobilization and social movements
- Social reproduction and the gendered division of labor
- Gendered domination on mass scales: immigration, war, sexual violence, reproduction, etc.
- Collective effervescence: from the dance floor to the public square
- Gender, mass media, and public spheres
- Sexual and gender politics of online communities
- Ecstasy, de-individuation, and aesthetic experience
- Queer collectives, assemblages, and erotics
- Gender and sexuality in urban aesthetics and politics
- Crowds as spectators: the collective erotics of film and performance
- Sexual and gender politics of fascism and ethnonationalism
- Crowd psychology and political psychoanalysis
- Immunity, contamination, homeostasis: biopolitics and 'political physiology'
- Gender and sexuality in smaller collectives—groups, clubs, picnics, and other mesoscalar happenings

Conference format: Paper drafts will be pre-circulated to allow for shorter panel presentations with more extensive discussion and constructive feedback. On the last day, there will be a roundtable featuring a selection of moderators, participants, and invited speakers.

Submission details: We welcome proposals from graduate students, recent PhDs, and independent scholars. Abstracts (max. 300 words) should be sent with a separate cover sheet featuring the applicant's name, affiliation, and email address to comconf@princeton.edu by **February 2, 2018**.