

Prof. Alain Pottage (LSE)

Addictio. A Legal Archaeology of Alienation

Tuesday 3 December 2013

What is addiction? Are we all already addicted? These are two of the leading questions that Alain Pottage sought to address during his recent *laboratorium lucernaiuris* lecture, held at the beginning of December 2013.

Pottage is Professor of Law at the London School of Economics (LSE), where he undertakes innovative research on the intersections of law, science, anthropology and sociology. Taking a legal archaeological approach to the subject matter, Pottage explored during his talk the definition of “addiction” and its meaning in, and relevance to, our modern knowledge-based society. There is, he argued, a relatively new phenomenon of addiction to information, or the flow of information and communication. As a society, we are compelled to be “up to speed”, particularly with what Pottage called “social information”, or that which is churned out by mass media. We are always demanding new information, or rather a “new angle” on issues, because – according to Niklas Luhmann – as soon as we learn about a piece of information, it is no longer information.



But, what is “addiction”? The task of defining the term is difficult. For example, where exactly is the line between someone who enjoys a couple of glasses of wine every evening and an alcoholic? The word “addiction” comes from the Latin term *addictio*, which described the process of creating the relationship between a debtor (the *addictus*) and a creditor. Upon the acknowledgement by a debtor of their debt, or after a debtor was judged to be in debt, the debtor became an *addictus*, not a slave. The key distinction resides here in the fact that an *addictus* only gave up their labour, not their body, whereas a slave lost both. Labour was, thus, an immaterial thing that could nonetheless be “enslaved” to another, independent and apart from the body.

Taking bearing from this historical meaning of the term, Pottage looked to trace a connection to the modern knowledge-society context and our need to be “up to speed”. Addiction could, he contended, be seen as a modern form of “enslavement”. An example of this might be seen in the advertising/branding industry. This industry must continually re-position the brand, constantly refreshing it. Today, this happens through a process of “co-creation”, whereby consumers are used for their feedback in order to develop the brand. In other words, consumers are exploited for their labour, in order to create a more valuable brand and stimulate the consumers desire to buy it. We have, thus, the *addictus*, who is “enslaved” to the need of the constant re-design of the brand and has his/her labour appropriated for this purpose.

Approaching the issue of modern-day addiction, and its historical roots, from a theoretical perspective, Pottage succeeded in raising a variety of interesting, current and thought-provoking issues. This was reflected in the lively discussion round which followed upon the talk, during which further questions regarding content, methodology and etymology were posed and a range of insights offered.

[Jessica C. Lai]