

**KEVIN FLOYD (2009). *THE REIFICATION OF
DESIRE: TOWARD A QUEER MARXISM.*
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During the last decade, queer studies has become increasingly engaged with the critical analysis of class and capital. As gay men and lesbians have achieved new levels of media visibility and legislative equality in the West, scholars and activists have traced the emergence of a new homonormativity, a rerouting of the queer agenda into a politics based on consumption and privatised rights that willingly colludes with the wider dynamics of contemporary neoliberalism. Fifteen years ago, these critical developments could hardly have been foreseen within the queer academy. The initial wave of queer texts that broke across the shores of Anglophone universities in the mid-1990s – dominated by the foundational work of Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and by the take up of Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* – set Marxists and queer theorists defiantly at odds. The problem with queer theory, Marxists proclaimed, was that its deconstructive impulse seemed constitutionally unable to take account of the basic forces of material production. The problem with Marxist theory, queer advocates countered, lay in its wilful myopia around issues of sexual identity, something mistakenly treated as epiphenomenal and irrelevant to the project of historical materialism. Such heterosexist presumptions, the argument ran, could only be critiqued from a position exterior to Marxism itself.

Kevin Floyd's *The Reification of Desire* sets out to redress this earlier conflict by staging a kind of retroactive encounter between these once seemingly incommensurable bodies of thought. His project is thus firmly revisionist, seeking to force two intellectual traditions into an uneasy but productive dialogue which might both reveal their points of analytical confluence and strengthen each position via

a process of reciprocal critique. The result is a rich and stimulating book, but one whose sheer ambition risks leaving many of its readers feeling a little under-served.

The fertile terrain for this basic concordance, Floyd argues, is provided by queer theory's and Marxism's common concern to articulate and supersede an historical experience of social reification. As Georg Lukács famously announced in *History and Class Consciousness*, modern capital has been marked by its progressive tendency to fragment everyday life, parcelling up ordinary experience into a series of separate domains that are kept in check by discrete professional disciplines and regimes of knowledge. Lukács's particular concern was with the reification of labour in the early twentieth century. As it had become submitted to the orderings of industrial experts, its structuring relationship to the social whole had become increasingly obscured. Yet for Lukács, this produced a paradox, for such basic alienation had manoeuvred the proletariat into a privileged perspective from which to discern these mechanics of mystification and – by developing its own critical praxis – to recover a sense of the totality once more. Floyd's central tenet is that a similar dialectic has determined the historical experience of North American queers. Viable forms of homosexual identity were likewise formed by the reification of the sexual to the realm of private life, in turn producing an activism whose principal aim was to challenge this confinement both socially and epistemologically. Like the Lukácsian labour movement, Gay Liberation – and its successor, queer theory – has been built on a similar aspiration to recapture the totality, to overcome the reification that has brought it into being, through an engaged and expansive form of critical praxis.

The book unpacks this argument through its successive chapters, beginning with a bold rereading of *The History of Sexuality's* first volume. Here, the development of psychoanalytic practice in the late nineteenth century is viewed through the prism of Lukács's original dialectic and recast as the material reification of erotic life. Forced to submit to a class of psychic experts, Floyd suggests, desire became abstracted from the autonomous sexual body and was circumscribed within the more manageable terrain of the discursive psyche. Within this account, sexuality is reframed as the product of an emergent service industry, an opening up of an inner pathology within the desiring subject that helped secure the bourgeois family as an amenable unit of consumption. Floyd's suggestion is that the historical emergence of hetero- and homosexual subjectivities represented far more than the extension of disciplinary power; it was

fundamentally integral to the basic consolidation of a Fordist regime of managed accumulation.

Subsequent chapters extend this historical narrative in surprising and innovative ways. Particularly cunning is Floyd's reworked account of the melancholic performance of heterosexual masculinity, as first proposed by Butler in her influential *Gender Trouble*. Butler's early work has often been criticised for its ahistorical abstraction, but here Floyd locates her central dynamic within the same structural shift towards an economy of mass production. Here, the force that perpetuates masculinity's compulsory citation of heterosexual desire becomes, most crucially, the sudden imposition of the Taylorist regime upon the labouring male body. The divestiture of skill and (comparative) autonomy that accompanied the experience of being 'scientifically managed' were so traumatic to experiences of manhood, Floyd contends, that they were easily reincorporated as a set of degraded technicities within emergent forms of masculine consumption. Leisure activities such as DIY, for example, can be retrospectively seen as the melancholic citation of a lost artisanal labour, now reified as a set of corporeal capabilities through which the masculine body avails itself to Fordism's demands. As the twentieth century progressed, Floyd goes on, such laboured performances would be taken up and ironically reworked within the commodified circuits of erotic queer culture; indeed, such disruptive citations were historically instrumental in forming a nascent gay collective consciousness.

Throughout his chapters, Floyd's analysis is both provocative and rich, and his original narratives offer some startling new perspectives. Yet the terms of his project produce an underlying tension that is only partially resolved within the confines of his book. Here, for instance, is the clearest statement of his foundational objectives:

[*The Reification of Desire*] offers not a continuous historical narrative but a reading of this dialectic [of reification and totality] from a queer vantage, and in relation to a series of conjectures understood in terms of ongoing corporate and state efforts to avoid accumulation crisis. What links the chapters is finally a method, a triangulation of Marxian and queer perspectives on totality with historically specific analysis. (38)

As this first sentence clearly warns, not all of the vectors that make up this triangulation will be pursued with equal force. Ultimately Floyd ranks his three intellectual impulses in order of critical importance: firstly, to 'queer' a certain tradition of heterosexist Marxist thought; secondly, to root a body of often ahistorical queer theory within a revised historical materialism; and, thirdly, to offer a new materialist perspective on the history of sexuality. As his subtitle suggests, this book moves 'toward a queer Marxism' – neither toward a 'Marxist queer theory' nor a 'queer Marxist analysis'. His chapters thus balance rather precariously at the centre of an intellectual Venn diagram, pursuing three distinct agendas though not on equal terms. The result, I suspect, is that amongst the wide audiences that the book addresses, some may feel frustrated at what might be perceived as an underattention to their own concerns.

With his sights set primarily on revising the terms of the Marxist canon, Floyd mounts insightful critiques of three major theoretical proponents of his reification dialectic: Lukács, Herbert Marcuse and Fredric Jameson. He convincingly shows how any queer appropriation of Lukács's work must fundamentally reject the latter's simplistic equation between all instances of sexual objectification and the inevitable exploitation of the other; on the contrary, queers have known for a considerable time that 'casual' promiscuity can be an important source of both community and critique. In a similar vein, he berates both Marcuse and Jameson for developing dialectical programmes too rooted in the abstractions of Freudian schemata. For both writers, sexuality is allowed to reveal privileged insights into the social totality only in so far as it is kept in inverted commas, away from the concrete contingencies of actually desiring queer subjects.

Yet when Floyd seeks to ground queer theory within a less abstract historical materialism, the stresses in his project begin to show. As with all such analyses, a great deal of pressure comes to bear on the author's power as a historian. Two things should probably be noted here. The first is that Floyd primarily depends on existing literature to carve out his central historical narrative. He assembles this well and has a keen eye for wresting the significant detail from larger historical studies, but there are times when the fabric of his argument feels rather thinly woven. For instance, the connection he asserts between the psychoanalytic pathologisation of the family and its reconstitution as a site of manageable consumption could have benefitted from a much firmer grounding in archival evidence.

More troubling, however, is the selectivity of the book's historical focus. The particular dialectic of reification and totality on which Floyd has chosen to build his revision of Marxist theory is largely that of metropolitan, white, North American gay men. Indeed, New York City echoes through the book as the privileged vanguard of queer formations – whether via the Bowery fairies of the early twentieth century, Joe's hustling around Times Square in *Midnight Cowboy*, or David Wojnarowicz's sexual pursuits within the post-industrial landscape of the Hudson River piers. Regrettably, this reinforces a wider dominant impression that this was the only queer dialectic at work in the twentieth century, or certainly that it was the most important. Notably absent, for instance, is any reworking of Butler's account of melancholic femininity, a construction far less amenable to narratives of industrial deskilling. And since feminism was one of the most historically efficacious articulations of totality to emerge out of processes of sexual reification, it seems unfortunate to find it absent from the index. The inevitable irony is that by casually disengaging with these other, less prominent facets of historical queer experience, Floyd risks replicating the same sexual, racial, and geographic occlusions as the homonormative agenda he sets out to critique.

Yet whilst these shortcomings must certainly be recognised, I'm not sure how far they invalidate Floyd's project. Developed out of his doctoral dissertation, the book's subtitle is clearly aware of the work to be done - particularly if we read its article as a call to plurality rather than the assertion of a monolithic edifice. Indeed, as Floyd makes explicit, a major critical strength that unites both queer and Marxian intellectual traditions is their internal mechanisms of self-critique, a willingness to adjust and differentiate their theoretical constructions in the face of the complexity of actual concrete life. *The Reification of Desire* is perhaps best read in this spirit, as an engaging and intelligent attempt to map out some pathways to a more sophisticated queer Marxism. Surely, the responses it solicits and the reactions it provokes will serve to extend this project even further.

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