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QUEER MARX

John Andrews

The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism by Kevin Floyd. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. Pp. 304, 4 black-and-white photos. $75.00 cloth, $25.00 paper.

In the introduction to his collection of essays *For Marx* (1965), Louis Althusser tells us that one of Marxian philosophy's unique assets—and one of its ongoing challenges—is its ability to account for itself, "to take itself as its own object."[1] Certainly, Marxism's historical reflexivity has propelled its enduring power to describe and explain the fallouts and reinventions of capitalism. Yet this power has in recent decades been eclipsed by critiques of its tendency to reduce all of social relations to relations of economic production, relegating particularities such as race or sex "in the final instance" (as Althusser might say) to class. One of the most trenchant of these critiques has come from queer theory, a field whose own critical efficacy has also been called into question in recent years. The wholesale "queering" of any fixed epistemological category alongside the "homonormalization" of LGBT politics prompted the editors of a special volume of *Social Text* to ask "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?"[2] The issue of Marxism's and queer theory's ongoing critical power—and their seeming incommensurability—sets the backdrop for Kevin Floyd's ambitious and careful book *The Reification of Desire*. A primary aim of the book is to demonstrate how these two theoretical projects' weaknesses can reinvigorate one another—particularly at a moment in history when the social

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differentiation entailed by global capitalism has increasingly tended to deradicalize politics, including queer politics.

Floyd's approach, however, is explicitly Marxian, and he seems to devote more adroit care in addressing this potentially skeptical audience than a queer one. To this end, his guide (and sometimes object of critique) is Georg Lukács, a theorist who reminds us that Marxian orthodoxy refers not necessarily to the content but to the *method* of critique; that is, fidelity to the dialectic. And, indeed, the structure of *The Reification of Desire* mirrors that of Lukács's chapter on reification in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (1923), moving from the objective to the subjective moment of reification at different points in twentieth-century history. Importantly, Floyd recognizes that reification as a concept is one most susceptible to reification itself simply because the ever-commodifying world tends to dehistoricize human experience and knowledge by proliferating equivalences via market exchange. In this sense, reification is conceptually always-already reified. By bringing in a queer critique, Floyd aims to salvage reification from its passive, contemplative usage by demonstrating how "the merely cultural" in all its particularities can engender active, conscious subjectivities—that is, the precondition for praxis. Along the way, Floyd complicates queer histories in elaborating some of the material bases often ignored by the field, in particular here the entrance of Fordism in the twentieth century and the transition to post-Fordism. The book as a whole or totality (reification's dialectical other) succeeds because of the openings generated by juxtaposing these two critical knowledges and reversing (or, more nearly, "queering") their reifying tendencies: for Marxism by concretizing subjectivity, sexuality in particular; for queer theory, by expanding the scope of its critical tools to include dialectical materialism.

The individual chapters in *The Reification of Desire* offer many (often incisive) insights. Chapter 1 on "Disciplined Bodies" examines the reifying consequences of the expropriation of scientific knowledge from bodies at a point in the early twentieth century when capital is increasingly "freed" from labor, and the market becomes oriented toward service and consumption. For example, by regimenting the time and space of production, the logics of Taylorism sought to maximize output and cheapen labor; concomitantly the emergent science of psychoanalysis regimented the time and space of therapeutic services, deploying sexuality—especially male sexuality—to be reproductively active and unwasteful. For Floyd, these two epistemological innovations operated in tandem to institute differentiations that would not only organize social

life in the first half of the twentieth century (work/leisure; production/consumption; private/public), but also establish sexual subjectivities in terms of gendered objects of desire. Thus, the appearance of "heterosexual" and "homosexual" as discrete categories is the reification of desire itself, one that always reconstitutes the gender epistemology that mediates it. Chapter 2 concretizes this argument by showing how the shift from an emphasis on production to one of consumption coincided with the introduction of "masculinity" (rather than manhood) as a performative ideal. As represented by *Esquire* magazine or the works of Hemingway, masculinity Floyd argues becomes a sort of embodied knowledge within the now-sedimented practices of Taylorism and Fordism: as something to be consumed by and taught to a labor force with increasing leisure time, but also used in the shop or factory as an instrumental performance, thereby easing the smooth accumulation of capital. As Floyd puts it, "[The] masculinized body becomes a subject *of* technical knowledge precisely in becoming subject *to* technical knowledge" (109, emphasis in the original). Thus, Floyd in this chapter succeeds in adding a necessary historical component to Judith Butler's theory of gender performance.

By the middle of the twentieth century, the conservative medicalized version of psychoanalysis that prevailed in the United States became a primary reference both for the Cold War state that viewed homosexuals as a threat to national security and for burgeoning homophile movements that saw psychoanalysis as a barrier to their assimilationist politics. As Floyd details in chapter 3, the universalization and minoritization of homosexuality by the state and by homophile movements respectively resurfaced in Marxian thought of the time, most importantly in the work of Herbert Marcuse. For Floyd, Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* (1955) was unique not only because it represented a radical, historical reading of Freud but more importantly here because it introduced a *qualitative* component into the analysis of reification—that is, the erotic—which presents a libratory potential within the reifying process: the *passive* instrumentalization of the body for pleasure. Yet less than ten years later in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), Marcuse pointedly critiqued instrumental rationality's saturation of mass society; and, in particular, his discussion of "repressive desublimation" revoked the libratory potential of the erotic that he had previously articulated. This contradiction is particularly pronounced considering that a radical gay liberation movement had begun to emerge by the early 1960s. For Floyd this disconnect is symptomatic of Marcuse's inability in the earlier work to move beyond

thinking of the erotic as merely objective in or for the body; in other words, to deal with sexual subjectivity as such. Chapter 4 brings us to the late 1960s, when the Fordist organization of coordinated production and standardized consumption began to break down, including the rigorous heterosexual masculinity it necessitated and engendered. In analysis of erotic images of hypermasculinized men in *Physique Pictorial* magazine and the deterritorialization of the cowboy in James Leo Herlihy's *Midnight Cowboy* (1965), Floyd contends that the devaluations of labor, commodities, and ultimately the Fordist regime itself was concomitant with the "collective homosexualizing of masculinity" (171), a kind of devaluation of the gender norms that mediated the sexual categories of heterosexual and homosexual.

Some common threads connect these first chapters. Floyd insists that sexuality must be viewed as intimately intertwined with other social and historical developments in the twentieth century, an entanglement that operates in numerous, disparate fields. Because of this, the reification of desire at any point in history takes different forms vis-à-vis the totality of social relations. Implicit in Floyd's analysis are what Lukács calls *categories of mediation* that dialectically link reification and totality. Here, these are psychoanalysis (in chapters 1 and 3) and masculinity (in chapters 2 and 4). A tension arises between these two mediators and the historical and theoretical work that the book as a whole is attempting. For example, if masculinity mediated changing relations of production and emergent sexual identities, then a discussion of femininity and feminism also seems necessary especially when we consider the importance of women's labor (both in the factory and in the home), as well as the primary influence of feminist thought on queer theory itself. Similarly, if psychoanalysis facilitated the configuration of organized work and private consumption, and the cohesion of sexual subjectivities and gendered sex objects, then a discussion of the racialisms of Freud's metapsychology or of the vexed relationship psychoanalysis has had with its female subjects might complicate the whiteness and male-centrism presupposed in much of Marxian and queer thought. These problems do not necessarily weaken the book but more than anything open new avenues for ongoing inquiry within this exciting theoretical project.

One of the tendencies of capitalism in its epistemological claims to universalism is to dehistoricize human experience and social relationships. The imperative for Marxian analysis to "always historicize" presents a paradox of historicizing the now, where new social formations are in the making and old ones linger. (This may have been what Jacques Derrida meant when

he invokes Shakespeare in *Spectres of Marx* (1994) that "time is out of joint.") It is no wonder then that Floyd's final chapter "Notes on a Queer Horizon"—an analysis of the simultaneous social disintegration and homonormalization for queers precipitated by neoliberal governance—brings us just short of the present. Here, Floyd reads David Wojnarowicz's memoir *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (1991) as performing a refusal of both of these injunctions made by capital. At this point, some readers of the book may be left wondering where this leaves us, what new tools has this theoretical experiment supplied? More than anything, Floyd has energized the concept of *reification*—rescuing it from its own reification by demonstrating that Lukács's project is in fact (as Fredric Jameson contends) an unfinished one. Through his rigorous analysis of the reification of desire, Floyd shows us that a critical appropriation of "reification" needs to be contextualized historically and alongside multiple subjectivities. This may be an important lesson for many Marxists who insist that social relations are reducible "in the last instance" to the objective relations of production. But even Althusser tells us—and Kevin Floyd so aptly demonstrates—that the "lonely hour of the 'last instance' never comes."[3]

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NOTES

1. Louis Althusser, *For Marx,* trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2005).
2. David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?" *Social Text* 23, no. 4 (2005): 84–85.
3. Althusser, *For Marx,* 113.