

### **A New Direction for Marxism**

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*The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism*, by Kevin Floyd.  
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Two theorists lie at the heart of Kevin Floyd's powerful contribution to the debate of the future of Marxism: Judith Butler and Fredric Jameson. Floyd's project is to put these two in conversation and with them, to include Michel Foucault, Georg Lukács, Herbert Marcuse, Eve Sedgwick, Michael Warner, David Wojnarowicz, as well as reification totality, gender, and sexuality. The project of *The Reification of Desire* is, as Floyd writes, to track the "divergence and convergence" of queer and Marxist theory; what Floyd accomplishes is a lot more complex (9).

At certain moments in the book, one theoretical position is privileged over the other. For example, in his historical reading of masculinity, the rise of Taylorism and consumer culture is used to help explain how new notions of male sexuality, desire, and gender became entrenched within American culture. However, in critiques of totality and reification, queer theory reveals the ways that these terms have stagnated over time and can be revitalized. More than simply showing the reader how useful both queer theory and Marxism are, and how much more useful they are when brought together, Floyd sheds new light on some of the key terms and orthodox arguments of both.

The divergences between queer and Marxist theory are well known, so Floyd starts with where they agree. A shared trait of Marxist and queer theory is totality thinking. In Marxism, this comes as a relentless critique of capitalism's particularizing logic; in queer theory, it comes as an insistence

on the centrality of sexuality to all parts of life. While queer theory has often (and rightly) objected that Marxism's focus on the conditions of production, consumption, and accumulation ignores the centrality of sex to human history, Floyd convincingly shows that the focus of much of queer theory's work is on the impact that heteronormativity has had on those aspects of life, thought, and politics that seem at best tangentially related to sexuality. Both share a desire to understand the social as a whole, rather than as strictly divided between public and private or normal and abnormal. In *The Reification of Desire*, however, totality begins to get slippery, as Floyd uses it also to refer to specific social formations that aim toward totalization; in the final chapter, which considers the fragmented status of queer social movements in the wake of neoliberal privatization, he considers the claims of some queer theorists towards "world-making," defined here as "historically conditioned totalities of social, sexual, epistemological, and critical practice" (210). His attention to the historical nature of these groups indicates a rethinking of totality as stable; it reveals a desire that pervades the text to keep all of the key terms in motion. This slipperiness is not a problem; in fact, it seems central to his project that terms like "totality" and "reification" remain in play. However, more elaboration on the term "totality" in social formations like the queer movement is needed.

Alongside totality must come reification, and it does for both Marxism and queer theory. This term occurs most forcefully in Floyd's historical account of masculinity from the late nineteenth century to the present day. Linking Lukács and Foucault, Floyd argues that the effects of the Taylorist factory on the male body were the same as the effects of psychoanalytic theory on gender and sexuality. In both cases, the process is one of reification. For the laborer, this means that labor time is so abstracted as to separate the labor from the product it makes, eventually displacing all knowledge of production into consumptive knowledge. For the psychoanalytic patient, sexuality is given a special place in the psyche and within the family unit (as opposed to within a social whole). Thus, desire – sexual desire, productive desire, and consumptive desire – become reified: objects abstracted from the site of their creation.

The developments on the shop floor and on the analyst's couch had an incredible impact on gender, an impact that has been documented by both queer and Marxist scholars. However, Floyd's combinatory reading adds a new dimension to this historical development. While masculinity has always been identified with the public world and labor (while femininity is associated with the private home and a different kind of labor entirely) the increasing abstraction of labor time – alongside sexuality's founding as a psychological event – meant that masculinity could no longer be performed

by a body alone. Instead, consumption replaced activity as the defining characteristic of masculinity. Floyd traces the rise of periodicals about leisure time for the male reader, showing that activities like hunting, fishing, and eventually working on cars would suffice as proper "masculine" activities once they were evacuated from labor. As Floyd elaborates in a later chapter, this consumer culture is the basis for the early formation of the queer movement. In this moment, the tension between Marxism (which must find the rise of consumerism and commodity fetishism as negative) and queer theory (which is founded, to some extent, on those networks made available through consumption and commodity fetishism) come out most strongly. In an orthodox queer or Marxist reading of this same period, much of this history would be lost.

This crystallizes in Floyd's reading of Hemingway, in which the author's hypermasculine characters attempt to reclaim the masculine, laboring body. Using an emblematic fishing scene from *The Sun Also Rises*, Floyd notes the way that, despite Jake Barnes's encounter with the natural during trout fishing, Hemingway's catalog-esque style renders the fish as so many mass-produced commodities meant for display. Floyd writes,

Though such escapes from the tedium of de-skilled labor into nature constitute supposed returns to more simple, presumably pre- or extracapitalist forms of work and life, famously sparse descriptions like this one ultimately reify nature, producing a landscape of pure immediacy, a landscape of what we might call, following Lukács, a 'second nature' that only purports to transcend the abstraction of labor capital enforces (106-107).

By tracing the norm of a skilled, masculine labor from the body into the ego and finally into a relationship with nature that has been abstracted and reified, Floyd shows the effect of capital production on traditional notions of masculinity and reveals the way that the totality of capital is, especially at this period in time, all-consuming: not even nature is safe from the process of abstraction and reification.

Having traced the shifts of the normative account of masculine behavior, Floyd moves into his reading of the queer movement of the 1960s and 1970s, one that depends on this abstracted space of masculinity. Floyd here uses Marcuse, in some part because of his centrality to the early queer movement, but also because of Marcuse's new use of reification in *Eros and Civilization*. Here, Marcuse understands the effects of capitalism to be analogous to repression – another reason that Marcuse figures so heavily in a book that attempts to find the convergences and divergences of Lukács and Foucault,

among others – and reification as the way out of that repression. Here, Marcuse tracks the opposition between a body objectified for labor (positive under capitalism) and a body objectified for pleasure (bad under capitalism). Embracing this latter, erotic objectification will undo the negative objectification of labor.

Eros, figured in primarily homoerotic terms in Marcuse's early work, is the opposite of the "performance principle" that dominates capitalist life. Floyd writes, "identifying the reality principles with 'productiveness', and the pleasure principle with 'receptiveness', Marcuse asserts that Orpheus and Narcissus [the mythic figures that are central for Marcuse] represent a passive, receptive relation to the natural world" (138). Both Narcissus and Orpheus reject a heteronormative sexuality: the first withdraws from the world into a state of self-contemplation and the latter, despite the tragic heterosexual love story that is part of his mythos, is identified by Marcuse with nature and his "love for 'young boys'" (138). It is clear how these figures would become central in the queer movement's early days. Rather than imagining homosexual subjects as equivalent to heterosexual subjects, much of the early queer movement attempted to replace a heteronormative state with an (imagined) homonormative state. Just as Marcuse replaced the traditional mythic figures at the heart of philosophy – Prometheus, Oedipus, and so on – the queer movement imagined that through objectifying sexual practices, they might replace heteronormativity in the world.

Floyd here deploys his second reading of fiction with a chapter devoted to 1969's *Midnight Cowboy*. Floyd sets aside the most common readings of the text, which focus on how homosexuality is portrayed between Joe Buck and his clients or between Buck and Ratso Rizzo, to argue that the film is an allegory for the historical shift from Fordist capitalism to neoliberalism. The figure of the cowboy – which Joe Buck believes will entice hundreds of rich city women to pay to have sex with him – has, by the time he reaches New York in the late sixties, been claimed as sex symbol by the queer community. Floyd traces the queer appropriation of traditionally masculine figures, epitomized by the Village People, to "physique" magazines that became popular in the 1950s. These magazines, which feature young men wearing just enough clothing to identify them with masculine labor (the sailor, the construction worker, and, of course, the cowboy), were distributed through the mail, providing outlets for otherwise closeted or conservative gay men and providing income for the photographers, models, and publishers. In this way, the commodity as fetish (perhaps the most literal example of this in Marxist writing) serves a liberatory function at the same time as it shows the increasing reach of capitalism. While these magazines provided the groundwork for an underground gay community that would explode in 1969, they

also showed the way that capitalism, at least during Taylorism, was able to commodify any market, no matter how far outside the mainstream it was. The presence of Joe Buck, as authentic a cowboy as any in New York, shows the similarity, and ultimate tension, between the mainstream and queer versions of masculinity.

This almost unnoticeable difference between the mainstream, heteronormative cowboy and the underground, queer cowboy reveals, for Floyd, the way that either way you cut it, the cowboy is now a commodity. By placing this commodity in the confusing socioeconomic climate of New York in the late sixties, where enticements to spend money are contrasted with Buck's poverty, Floyd argues that the film stages a conflict between Fordist values of production (the American cowboy) and the global space of capital that began overcoming the United States' supremacy during the sixties. Thus, Buck's eventual dustbinning of the outfit is allegorically understood as the end of not only an era of uncomplicated masculinity but also an era of increasing productivity to match the country's ever-expanding consumption.

Here, we enter into what is for me Floyd's most insightful and thought-provoking chapter. He begins by contrasting the Fordist strategy of ensuring social stability to shore up means of production and areas for consumption with the neoliberal strategy that emphasizes widespread social instability. While Fordism was able to bring the world together through consumerism, neoliberalism separates and privatizes consumer groups, effectively preventing the creation of any meaningful social formation. The current political issues facing the queer community, including, but certainly not limited to, the fight for marriage equality and the inclusion in the military, are arguments about equality. In contrast to the radical queer movements of the 1970s, which anticipated a queer planet to overtake the heterosexual one, the contemporary queer movement is concerned with making itself equal, or equivalent, to the straight community. As a result, sexuality, as a marker of difference between queer and straight, has gone back into hiding. This is no more apparent than in New York, the site of both Stonewall and *Midnight Cowboy*, where Giuliani's aggressive cleanup of the city has sanitized what were once openly gay neighborhoods. By closing sex shops, pornographic bookstores, bars, and clubs, while simultaneously pricing out all but the wealthiest gays from traditionally gay neighborhoods, the boisterous and open queer culture of New York has all but disappeared. This prevents any kind of social formation from getting started, as the public space has been replaced with private space. Thus, Christopher Street in New York is home to the wealthy, white queer community, while poorer queers, many of whom are people of color, are separated into other neighborhoods. This segregation

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stalls the formation of a unified movement. While this reading – as the rest of the book does – focuses on the queer community, the impact on other potential movements, be they feminist, race-based, class-based, or otherwise, is unmistakable. As our world is privatized, there is no more public space in which to enact change.

Floyd's *The Reification of Desire* is a valuable addition to the catalog of books that try to make sense of the place of Marxism in neoliberal capitalism. Its analyses of both modes of thought, as well as those terms central to their elaboration, offer new perspectives on terms that most of us take for granted. Women are largely absent in this text, except when their own gendered history is contrasted with that of masculinity. They are entirely absent from Floyd's reading of the AIDS epidemic, which is the only misstep in a work that is otherwise perfectly choreographed. While this is certainly a criticism of the text, and one that could be applied equally to most mainstream queer and Marxist theory, what Floyd offers here is an invitation to create a companion that understands the evolution of the "feminine" in the past one hundred and fifty-odd years of social and economic history. It is a history worth telling, and one that can only add to the work Floyd has here begun.