

Review article

Toward A Queer Marxism?

Saturday 5 March 2011, by [DRUCKER Peter](#) (Date first published: 1 March 2011).

***Sexuality and Socialism: History, Politics, and Theory of LGBT Liberation*, By Sherry Wolf, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009, pages, \$12 paperback.**

***The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism*, By Kevin Floyd, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, 271 pages, \$25 paperback.**

Contents

- [Uneven Theory](#)
- [“Polishing a Turd”](#)
- [The Marriage Debate](#)
- [Constructing Manhood](#)
- [Homonormativity](#)

SCHOLARLY APPROACHES TO sexuality since the 1980s have become increasingly divorced from practical sexual politics, and both have largely given up on earlier attempts to engage with Marxism. Now this may be changing. A stimulating new book by Kevin Floyd maintains that people in queer studies are paying more attention to Marxism’s “explanatory power.” (2) From the activist side, Sherry Wolf of the International Socialist Organization (ISO) has made an impressive effort to sum up LGBT (lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender) theory and practice from a Marxist perspective.

Both books make a useful contribution. Wolf is especially strong on gay labor activism, the dangers of the Democratic Party and the flawed logic of biological determinism. Floyd applies Marxist concepts developed by the Hungarian Marxist György Lukács in fascinating ways to problems of sexuality and recent queer theory.

Unfortunately, the two books reflect — from opposite sides of the divide — the estrangement of politics from academia. Wolf gives too short shrift to the contributions of recent gender and queer studies. Floyd (who teaches English) focuses more on novels like Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* and films like “Midnight Cowboy” than he does on politics.

At the same time, these two very different books have some limitations in common. Neither draws much on the body of socialist-feminist thought that has been developed since the 1970s. Wolf’s Marxism links women’s and LGBT liberation, but does not sufficiently integrate feminism. Floyd makes important connections between gender and sexuality, but focuses one-sidedly on U.S. middle-class gay men. And while both books show the historical character of the categories of heterosexuality and homosexuality, neither focuses on queer radicals’ efforts today to challenge the gay/straight binary.

The strongest parts of Sherry Wolf's *Sexuality and Socialism* are its sections on class and party politics. She has a keen eye, backed up by statistics, for class divisions in LGBT communities. Her portrayals of the gay commercial scene, the lesbian/gay bourgeoisie and the rise of the "homocons" are unsparing. Her book also gives a solid and useful account of lesbian/gay labor organizing. It rightly insists, "Any attempt to try and live sexually liberated lives under the current material circumstances will always come up against the real limitations of people's daily existence." (276)

A special strength of *Sexuality and Socialism* is its history of lesbian/gay subordination to the Democratic Party. Despite Obama's belated delivery on Bill Clinton's 1992 promise to eliminate anti-gay discrimination in the military, Wolf's conclusion stands up well: LGBT activists' relationship to the Democrats has been "dysfunctional ... — the Democrats court gays' and lesbians' votes and money but offer few gains." (139)

Democrats in Congress helped pass the Defense of Marriage Act and have kept the United States from having a national anti-discrimination law, years after most other advanced capitalist countries enacted one.

Uneven Theory

The theoretical basis of Wolf's politics is more uneven. Her starting point is, I believe, the right one: "LGBT oppression, like women's oppression, is tied to the centrality of the nuclear family as one of capitalism's means to both inculcate gender norms and outsource care for the current and future generations of workers at little cost to the state." (19)

As she writes, mustering historical evidence, it was capitalism that "created the conditions for people to have intimate lives based on personal desire." (21) She cites John D'Emilio's key essay "Capitalism and Gay Identity" to explain how this played out in the 19th- and 20th-century development of lesbian/gay communities and identities. Wolf includes a useful capsule summary of recent work on U.S. lesbian/gay history.

In one of the book's most valuable chapters, Wolf shows the superiority of a social and historical approach to the biological determinism that pervades the media. Putting most "science journalists" to shame, she dissects the fallacies underlying studies that conclude there must be a "gay gene."

She looks insightfully and in depth at studies of childhood sexual development. As she writes, "The prevalence of a sexual binary in most gay gene studies flies in the face of both long-standing empirical research and at least some LGBT people's lived experience: much of sexual identity is fluid and not fixed." (217-8)

In all these ways Wolf's analysis converges with the socialist-feminist analysis of LGBT oppression and liberation that was developed beginning in the 1970s. But she shies away from the word "feminist." This is not mere semantics. It has deep roots in the Marxist tradition, as well as more recent roots in Wolf's own political current.

Almost all Marxists in the Second and Third Internationals, including pioneering thinkers on women's liberation like Clara Zetkin, dismissed feminism as a middle-class ideology and rejected the idea of a broad, cross-class, independent women's movement. Only in the 1970s did socialist-feminists begin to forge a new synthesis of Marxism and feminism, which gradually won over many Marxist currents.

Wolf's own organization, the ISO, at first played a significant role in this socialist-feminist

breakthrough; its early leader Barbara Winslow was a prominent reproductive rights activist and a socialist-feminist theorist. By the early 1980s, however, the ISO's British parent organization, having renamed itself the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), turned away from learning from broad social movements and towards a more self-promoting version of Leninist party building. It dissolved the autonomous women's paper it had sponsored, *Women's Voice*, declared that Friedrich Engels' book *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* was still a sound basic text on women's emancipation, and essentially purged Winslow when she protested.

The ISO broke with the British SWP several years ago, so it is now free to rethink its position on feminism. Unfortunately, *Sexuality and Socialism* suggests that it hasn't. Wolf hardly mentions feminism except to attack what she calls "patriarchy theory," the idea that men's domination of women is an independent oppressive system separate from capitalism.

Wolf never mentions the extensive, sophisticated debates among socialist-feminists on this very issue, beginning with Iris Young's pioneering 1980 article "Socialist Feminism and the Limits of Dual Systems Theory." [1] She does not engage at all with the analysis that many socialist-feminists share today of patriarchal capitalism as a unified system in which gender as well as class is a "moving contradiction" (in Stephanie Coontz's term).

Wolf still believes that "Marx and Engels ... provide the theoretical tools necessary to both analyze and wage a successful battle against [LGBT] oppression." (9-10) She makes the questionable assertion (based on only a couple of references to an extensive feminist debate) that "Engels's theoretical conclusions [in *Origin of the Family*] have been substantiated by more recent historical research." (26)

Essentially she credits Marxists with understanding that the ruling class divides in order to rule. This is a useful idea, up to a point. But it is not enough to understand the power of the heterosexual norm, or the persistence of anti-LGBT prejudice even in the absence of direct or visible ruling class influence.

“Polishing a Turd”

Wolf rightly defends the early record of the German Social Democratic Party and the Russian revolution, refuting some crude anti-socialist distortions. She highlights the young Soviet regime's decriminalization of homosexuality. But her account, based largely on the indispensable work of historian Dan Healey, cherry-picks the bright spots and underplays the problems.

For example, she rejects Healey's criticism of Lenin's disparaging remarks about Zetkin and Alexandra Kollontai's efforts to promote sexual freedom. Wolf blames the Bolsheviks' limitations entirely on "the impossible conditions that revolutionaries faced." (99) After 90 years, the Bolsheviks don't need this kind of uncritical defense.

Against the Current readers will agree with Wolf that later Soviet, Chinese and Cuban homophobia reflected these regime's departures from Marxism's democratic essence, not Marxism's inherent homophobia. But she goes further: she dismisses the idea of a homophobic strain within Marxism as a myth. [2]

After citing some of the notorious homophobic remarks from Marx and Engels' letters — complete with a jokingly expressed fear of getting fucked — she comments, "There is no sense in trying to polish a turd here." (77-8) Yet she proceeds to try something very like it. In the face of Marx's suggestion that Engels attack gay socialist Johann von Schweitzer by circulating homophobic jokes

about him, Wolf's discussion of Von Schweitzer's political sins is at best irrelevant.

Wolf's lack of a critical Marxism that theoretically integrates feminism has political consequences. Based on their understanding of male domination and class domination as distinct though interlocking, socialist-feminists argue for an independent women's movement that chooses its own leadership and charts its own course alongside an independent labor movement — in both of which socialist-feminists need to fight for their politics.

Lacking this theoretical basis, Wolf never makes a case in her book for an independent women's or LGBT movement. Given the manipulative practices of some groups that have helped discredit Marxism in LGBT and other movements, this is a problem.

The Marriage Debate

Wolf's lack of an explicit feminist politics also has consequences for the political issue that *Sexuality and Socialism* focuses on most: same-sex marriage. Her vigorous defense of equal rights for same-sex marriage rightly underlines the urgency of same-sex partners' practical needs for health benefits, tax breaks, immigrant status and housing rights. But she does not leave enough room for a critique of the institution of marriage as such.

This is inconsistent with her basic critique of the way the capitalist nuclear family privatizes the satisfaction of social needs. Wolf claims that legalization of same-sex marriage "creates an obvious confrontation with the very idea that there is anything natural about the heterosexual nuclear family," (36) without pausing to consider how the spread of same-sex marriage might extend the sway of the nuclear family.

She acknowledges in one sentence that Judith Butler, probably the most influential of today's queer theorists, opposes homophobic attacks on same-sex marriage; then in the next sentence Wolf turns around to attack Butler for suggesting that a focus on the demand "somehow diminishes the alternative lifestyles of LGBT people with no partner or with multiple partners, and attempts to promote an image of gays as 'a religious or state-sanctioned set of upstanding couples.'" Well, doesn't it? [3] However much marriage has evolved over the past century, isn't it still part of the nuclear family?

This fits a general pattern in *Sexuality and Socialism* of sniping at what Wolf calls "gay separatism" and "identity politics" — including much of radical LGBT activism. She has a long diatribe against ACT UP that uses criticisms from the left and right almost indiscriminately. Her account downplays the breadth of the organization — how many progressive groups manage to bring 500 people to a weekly general meeting, as ACT UP New York did at its height? — and the victories it won.

On at least one point she gets the record wrong: she claims that ACT UP's fight for universal healthcare only began in 2007. (189) An ACT UP committee worked hard in the late 1980s and early 1990s to build a coalition for a national march for single-payer health insurance. The effort failed, not because of lack of support from ACT UP, but because progressive unions and NOW never really got on board with money or staff. Queer Nation's tone of self-affirmation and even bitterness in the early 1990s was in large part a response to the lack of solidarity from those who should have been LGBT allies. [4]

Wolf has little sympathy for today's radical, queer-identified activists, admitting to a strong personal distaste for the word "queer." Her call for "a truce on the issue of LGBT nomenclature," and her argument that she like other oppressed people has the right to call herself what she chooses, seem

reasonable. (17-8) But the problem goes deeper. She sees queer activists' provocative language and tactics as "an embrace of social exile." (184)

She fails to acknowledge queers' rightful anger at the heterosexual norm that pervades society or the creativity of queers' challenge to it. [5] She even rejects the concept of "straight society" outright, arguing that it's wrong to apply the same concept to working-class and middle-class straights. (198)

Unsympathetic to queer activism, Wolf shows little understanding of the queer theory that sometimes inspires it. Her long critique of Michel Foucault and queer theory makes valid points about the retreat from class. But she throws every thinker who's ever been called "postmodernist" into one noxious stew.

She hardly gives any account of Foucault's or Butler's contributions. For example, she does not discuss Butler's exploration of the way gender is "performative:" not only socially constructed, but creating roles that must be reenacted and reinvented on a daily basis. She does credit Butler with the insight — crucial for transgender and intersex activism — that even sex, and not just gender, can sometimes be socially constructed. But she suggests that Butler's questioning of identity undermines collective organizing — an implication that Butler has rejected. [6]

Constructing Manhood

Kevin Floyd is more knowledgeable than Wolf about contemporary queer theory and more attuned to its insights. He shows that the "performative" masculinity and femininity that Butler has analyzed are not eternal, but emerged under specific historical conditions.

The capitalist societies of the 19th century were less concerned with masculinity than with "manhood." Like masculinity, manhood was a social construction; but it emphasized the kind of rigid personality structure that was required for male participation in the production process and for reproduction of the working class. Contemporary masculinity and femininity, with their focus on everyday behavior and clothing, are better suited to today's capitalism, with its dependence on consumption and the desires that are needed to stimulate consumption.

Insightful as Floyd is on this point, his account would have benefited from more reliance on socialist-feminist historians who have mapped this and other transitions in U.S. social history. Stephanie Coontz, for example, wrote over twenty years ago about the socioeconomic trends from the 1890s to the 1920s that propelled the shift in gender roles:

"Men had their own identity crisis in this period. As an impersonal work and political order ignored men's individual values, skills, and reputation, masculinity lost its organic connection with work and politics, its material base. The loss of opportunities for middle-class men to succeed to self-employment and the growing subordination of skilled workers to management contradicted traditional definitions of manliness. The qualities men now needed to work in industrial America were almost feminine ones: tact, teamwork, the ability to accept direction. New definitions of masculinity had to be constructed that did not derive directly from the work process." [7]

Unfortunately, Coontz and other socialist-feminists are not to be found in Floyd's footnotes. However, Floyd cannot be accused of trendiness when he relies on past Marxist thinkers like Lukács, who made the concept of "totality" central to his presentation of Marxism in his 1922 book *History and Class Consciousness*.

For historical materialism, economics, politics and ideology cannot be understood as separate

domains, but only as parts of a structured whole. Floyd shows that the structures of gender and sexuality can and should also be seen as integral parts of a capitalist totality. Gender and sexuality are not merely local aspects of a social formation — though too many Marxists have treated them as such — but central to the process of capitalist accumulation. Production, reproduction and consumption are all gendered from their inception.

Another key concept that Floyd borrows from Lukács is “reification.” Marx had shown in *Capital* that commodities are fetishized in capitalist societies; people attribute an almost magical power to them, which tends to conceal the social relations that make them commodities and give them their social function. Lukács deepened that insight by further developing the concept of reification: an overarching term for the ways in which relations between human beings are disguised in capitalist societies as relations with, or even between, things.

For Floyd, homosexuality and heterosexuality, two categories that only emerged under capitalism, are examples of reification. Only under capitalism do people consistently and centrally classify their own desire according to the sex of the people at whom it is directed, abstracting maleness and femaleness from the network of kinship and social ties in which other societies embed them.

Male and female bodies are thus reduced to things that can and must be obtained, notably by acquiring all sorts of other things (from one’s own gym body to the right brand of deodorant). This application of the concept of reification to gender and sex explains people’s fierce attachment to their gender and sexual identities more convincingly than Wolf’s invocation of ruling class divide-and-rule does.

As Floyd notes, Lukács in 1967 criticized his own earlier use of the concept of reification in *History and Class Consciousness* by writing that he had blurred the distinction between reification and objectification. In human interactions, including production and sex, people continually alternate between being active subjects and passive objects that are acted upon by others. By confusing this temporary objectification with permanent reification — by suggesting that people are reduced to things whenever they are acted upon by others — Lukács later wrote, he had repudiated the materialist basis of Marxism. [8]

Oddly, Floyd himself repeats Lukács’ confusion, while turning it upside down. He sees that objectification is an innocent and even inevitable part of sexuality, and concludes that reification (as in the reification of desire into heterosexual and homosexual desire) is equally innocent and inevitable. He goes further, arguing that reification is essential for sexual liberation. Following Foucault, Floyd writes that reification of desire should be celebrated as “a condition of possibility for a complex, variable history of sexually nonnormative discourses, practices, sites, subjectivities, imaginaries, collective formations, and collective aspirations.” (74-5) He suggests for example that the homosexual images in physique magazines of the 1950s constituted a break with postwar mass production and undermined the dominant masculinity.

Homonormativity

As Floyd shows, Herbert Marcuse was one Marxist who was exceptional in recognizing the potential role of reified “perversions” in the liberation of sexuality. Yet Floyd criticizes Marcuse for celebrating homosexual Eros and other “subversive utopian fantasies” but not “the noun form of ‘homosexual.’” (150) Here Floyd breaks with some of the most radical pioneers of lesbian/gay liberation in the 1970s who, influenced by Marcuse, saw its ultimate goal as the abolition of both heterosexuality and homosexuality as social categories. [9]

Contemporary queer theorists like Lisa Duggan are also exploring the limits and taboos (“homonormativity”) of contemporary gay sexuality, challenging gay organizations that have grown respectable, and inspiring more boundary-defying queer activists. Like 1960s gay liberationists, today’s queers offer a critique of the gay commercial scene, which Marcuse saw as part of late capitalist “repressive desublimation.”

By comparison, the way in which Floyd uses Marxism to champion actually existing gay identities — though he is more interested in images than political movements, and not at all in drafting a program — leaves some key political questions unanswered. He suggests that the physique magazines of the 1950s and the gay clone culture of the 1970s “actively wreaked havoc with the presumed heterosexuality of masculinity itself.” (164) But the history of early lesbian/gay liberation suggests that both gender-subversive and gender-conformist potentials were present from the start.

The two tendencies clashed, for example, in the 1969 split in New York between the substantively radical, multi-issue Gay Liberation Front and the tactically radical but single-issue Gay Activists Alliance. Floyd himself contrasts gay male New Leftists who admired macho straight revolutionaries with anti-macho gays like the Effeminists and Flaming Faggots and the Street Transvestites Action Revolutionaries, without indicating any preference. (168-70)

Floyd’s argument that the gay niche market constituted a break with Fordist mass production is not borne out by the recent history of neoliberal capitalism. Fordist mass markets, though shrinking in relative terms as labor’s share of income has declined, have coexisted comfortably with a growing range of capitalist niche markets. He describes how the expanding gay commercial scene has been marginalizing and dispossessing less affluent queers, less conformist queers and queers of color; but he never clarifies the crucial distinction between gay and queer.

While Floyd’s application of the concept of reification to sexuality is brilliant, therefore, the way he uses it is not above criticism. The same applies to his conception of capitalism as a totality. The French Marxist Louis Althusser in his *Reading Capital* criticized Lukács and others for a conception of totality in which developments at one level of capitalism are expressed simultaneously at other levels. Capitalist social formations do not in fact develop in this synchronous way, either at different levels (economic and cultural, for instance) or in different regions (North America and Africa). Floyd sometimes neglects this unevenness in capitalist development and the relative autonomy of different levels.

For example, Floyd pays no attention to the slower pace and lesser extent to which the category of homosexuality initially influenced working-class as opposed to middle-class men (as Foucault noted and George Chauncey has documented). [10] He claims that there is “an ongoing, radical uncertainty about whether gay male sexual practice feminizes any of the men involved” (64); in fact, this uncertainty exists mainly at transitional moments or locations, between a transgender model that insists that same-sex practice does feminize one partner and a gay model that insists just as emphatically that it does no such thing.

Floyd writes of a “heterosexual matrix” in which “masculine identification presupposes the exclusion of desire for a masculine object” (164); but it is precisely this matrix that gradually gave way in the 20th century to an equally rigid gay/straight binary, in which either straight women or gay men can desire masculine men. [11]

Nor does Floyd recognize the disproportionate importance of transgender among poorer people in dependent countries. In the United States too, transgender politics is increasingly the cutting edge of LGBT activism today. This suggests that the categories of lesbian/gay, bisexual and straight may already be losing some of their centrality for sexual politics. Yet Floyd gives middle-class gay male

sexuality pride of place in his account, and neglects the openings in crisis-ridden capitalism that may make it possible to begin moving beyond it.

But all these are discussions that are framed and in part made possible by Floyd's trailblazing work. We can hope that Wolf and Floyd's books will only be the first of many to open the way to a reinvigorated queer Marxism.

Peter Drucker

P.S.

* Against the Current, March/April 2011, No. 151.

Footnotes

[1] Socialist Review no. 50/51 (summer 1980), 169-88, reprinted in Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham, *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference, and Women's Lives*, New York: Routledge, 1997.

[2] See on these issues Peter Drucker, "[Gays and the Left : Scratching the Surface](#)," in ESSF (article 11128) and Drucker, "The left's unhappy marriage with LGBTs," in Drucker (ed.), *Different Rainbows*, London: GMP, 2000, 33-5.

[3] For an attempt to defend same-sex marriage rights while linking this fight to a critique of the institution of marriage, see on ESSF (article 12476) the text "[On Lesbian/Gay Liberation](#)" adopted by the 15th World Congress of the Fourth International (2003), point 17.

[4] For my analysis at the time, see Peter Drucker, "What is queer nationalism?" in *Against the Current* 43 (Mar./Apr. 1993).

[5] or a more nuanced assessment of queer activism, see Peter Drucker, "[The New Sexual Radicalism](#)," on ESSF (article 17843).

[6] For a critical Marxist appreciation of queer theory, see on ESSF (article 14760) Gabriel Girard, "[Théories et militantismes queer : réflexion à partir de l'exemple français](#)" (2009); a shorter English version is available at [Queer theories and militant practices](#) (article 14759).

[7] Stephanie Coontz, *The Social Origins of Private Life: A History of American Families, 1600-1900*, London/New York: Verso, 1988, 339.

[8] Georg Lukács, "Preface to the new edition" (1967), in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, Cambridge [Ma]: MIT Press, 1968, xxiii-xxv.

[9] See Dennis Altman, "The end of the homosexual?" in *Homosexual Oppression and Liberation*, New York: Avon Books, 1971, 227-38; Mario Mieli, "Polymorphous 'perversity,' bisexuality and trans-sexuality," in *Homosexuality and Liberation: Elements of a Gay Critique*, London: Gay Men's Press, 1980, 23-31; David Fernbach, "Sexual liberation and gender liberation," in *The Spiral Path*:

A Gay Contribution to Human Survival, London: Gay Men's Press, 1981, 105-12.

[10] See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, New York: Pantheon, 1978, 121; George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, New York: Basic Books, 1994, 27.

[11] Floyd himself (91) gives an example of a location in this transition, when one male character in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* remarks to another in Spain, "I'm fonder of you than anybody on earth," adding, "I couldn't tell you that in New York. It'd mean I was a faggot."