

O'Brien on Drucker, 'Warped: Gay Normality and Queer Anti-Capitalism'

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Peter Drucker. *Warped: Gay Normality and Queer Anti-Capitalism*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015. 446 pp. \$36.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-60846-636-8.

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Queer in the Eras of Capital

For many gay people today, life has never been better. Gays and lesbians living in the major liberal cities of the United States and much of western Europe largely enjoy full legal equality, including protection from discrimination and the right to state recognition of their relationships. Following organizing in the 1980s and 1990s, most major American and European companies have adopted voluntary measures to support gay and lesbian employees, and many make every effort to cater to gay and lesbian clients and customers. Though the sitting US vice president is a long-standing opponent to gay rights, the current rollback of gay rights has been uneven, largely confined to the American South and Midwest, and some movement gains seem well protected against attack. Sympathetic gay and lesbian characters frequently appear in mainstream media, including television and film. The devastating crisis and mass death of AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s in gay men's communities has abated; now an HIV+ person with adequate access to healthcare and stable housing can expect to live a long and, drug side effects aside, reasonably comfortable life. Pride marches and parades are some of the largest parties in the world; New York City's march drew two million people in 2016.

A certain narrative of liberal progress appears in gay rights campaigning. Linda Hirshman's well-titled *Victory: The Triumphant Gay Revolution* (2012) considers the gay movement as the third great civil rights movement of American history, following the struggle for racial justice and women's rights. Prominent gay marriage advocate Evan Wolfson, author of *Why Marriage Matters: America, Equality, and Gay People's Right to Marry* (2005), describes marriage as the condition for "full citizenship," as fulfilling "America's promise of liberty, dignity, equality and freedom for all." [1] The gay movement, in this imagination, was demanding what is due all American citizens. A natural progression in expanding civil liberties is reaching its zenith, aided by the latest civil rights struggle. I've encountered such a liberal progress narrative in my research interviews with major donors who generously backed the 2011 New York State marriage equality campaign. Professionally and politically successful, these gays and lesbians working in financial services, law, and real estate identified access to legal marriage as of central personal and political importance. Gay marriage marked the final reminder of homophobic stigma and exclusion, the one way they were denied belonging in society. When marriage equality passed the New York State legislature, many major gay donors turned away further LGBTQ organizing.

Yet much is omitted from this triumphalist narrative. Queer people broadly face much higher rates

of poverty than their straight counterparts. [2] The worst experiences are faced by transgender people, particularly trans women of color. A national report on anti-trans discrimination found trans people of color were four times more likely to be unemployed than the general population. Ninety percent of trans people had faced harassment and mistreatment at their job as a result of their gender identity. [3] Another report indicates that trans people are four times more likely to live in poverty, with over a third of Black trans people reporting extreme poverty (less than \$10,000 in annual income). [4] This anti-trans exclusion is not limited to those regions lacking in legal protections. New York City passed a trans rights bill in 2002, yet trans people continue to face rampant employment discrimination. In conducting interviews for the New York City Trans Oral History Project (<http://oralhistory.nypl.org/neighborhoods/trans-history>), I've found most trans people, and nearly every Black and Latinx trans person, report severe and persistent employment discrimination. Such experiences have been corroborated by audit research. [5] Trans people face devastating rates of violence. Seventeen trans women of color were murdered in the US in 2016. [6] One in six Black transgender people report physical assault by police; one in fourteen, sexual assault by police. Among transgender people who came out while in K-12 school, 35 percent were physically assaulted. [7]

How can we understand the rise and cresting of gay rights, amidst the crises of poverty and violence faced by many queer and trans people? This disjunction between formal and material equality, and between the concerns of wealthy and working-class members of marginalized communities, lends itself to a Marxist analytic. Marxists have long reflected on the relationship between formal, so-called bourgeois legal freedoms, and real inequalities of wealth and class power. Socialists have joined in struggles for universal suffrage, for women's equality, for the end of codified racial domination, and for the rights of sexual minorities. Unlike their occasional liberal allies in these fights, socialists have linked these struggles for legal equality to campaigns for working-class power and the transformation of class relations. The rights to form and dissolve families, to select one's sexual partners, to engage in consensual sexual activity, and to express one's gender in an unexpected fashion have one by one become included among the formal, legal equalities which modern, liberal citizens may demand of their states.

The rise of critical scholarship on sexual minorities since the 1980s has largely coincided with an increased preoccupation with identity formation as a process, often articulated in opposition to Marxism. But a few notable theorists sought to use a Marxist analytic to understand not only why sexual minorities might face repression or deserve legal equality, but also why particular terms of identity took shape when and where they did. The rightfully canonical 1983 essay "Capitalism and Gay Identity," by John D'Emilio, argues that the gay-identity movement could only take shape following mass proletarianization. [8] Whatever subjugation wage laborers faced on the job, they were afforded a limited autonomy, when off the clock, not available to peasants and family farmers. Unlike those who rely for their survival on the narrow cultural approval of their families, urban proletarians had opportunities to establish long-lasting same-sex sexual relationships. D'Emilio elsewhere attributes the emergence of a (small) American gay rights movement in the 1950s to the mass proletarianization of World War II. [9] *Gay New York*, a 1995 breakthrough historical study by George Chauncey, uses key elements of D'Emilio's analysis to analyze bourgeois gay identity formation in the half-century prior to WWII. Only in the 2000s did research emerge that began to synthesize the sophisticated theoretical work on identity formation and literature that had developed under the auspices of queer theory. Kevin Floyd, for example, incorporates Georg Lukács's concept of reification and a Foucauldian interest in the rise of sexual identities in Victorian England to articulate the relationship between commodification and the production of internal sexual subjectivities. [10]

The central questions all these texts grapple with, in varying ways, are why those engaging in same-

sex relationships adopted differing languages and modes through which they identified and came together, and how they were identified and understood by others. As far as anthropological research extends, it appears all cultures and all eras have shown sexual and gender diversity beyond heterosexuality. Yet prior to the twentieth century, and still today in much of the world, most men who had sex with other men did not understand themselves as being part of a distinct, identifiable group. For them, those sexual acts did not reflect anything essential about their being. Instead, the sexual world was divided by gender deviancy. Some people expressed their gender in ways that differed dramatically from cultural norms. The terms for these people, and how they were treated, varied widely across centuries and continents. Other people, without this casting any implication on their sexuality, would occasionally have sex with them. It was only in a few urban contexts at the end of the nineteenth century, and much more broadly following WWII, that a group emerged that identified themselves not around their gender, but around their sexual activity. For the first time, men were identifying themselves, first to each other, as different by virtue of having sex with other men.

No work, however, has previously synthesized these insights into an account of the overall development of sexual identities under capitalist society. Peter Drucker finally offers it with *Warped: Gay Normality and Queer Anti-Capitalism*. Drucker's account simultaneously manages a vast historical and geographical breath, a depth of theoretical sophistication, and a density of citations and evidence. He synthesizes the existing sociological, anthropological, and historical literature on minority sexual identities and movements globally, weaving them into a coherent overall theoretical narrative that makes distinct and convincing arguments on the interrelationship between sexual identity and capitalism. He titles the book for the impact of neoliberalism on gay identities, "warping" them into new patterns of cultural conservatism and homonormativity. This is the kind of book that could provide the framework for decades of cross-disciplinary research and offer a thorough introduction to the dynamism and potentials of queer Marxism for generations of graduate students, curious scholars, and overly literate queer activists. Though quite dense and a bit imposing, *Warped* manages an accessible, low-jargon prose and repeatedly articulates the political implications of its account for movement militants.

Unfortunately, in the three years since its publication, the book has not garnered the attention it deserves. This book should be of great concern to the burgeoning world of queer studies, and all whose research addresses the historical emergence and transformation of identities in modern society. Instead, only a handful of reviews have appeared, largely on European socialist websites. Alan Sears, a major queer Marxist theorist who shares much in politics and concerns with Drucker, offered a review in 2015 on Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières (<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article36236>). The British site rs21 published a short review combining praise and criticism in June 2016 (<https://rs21.org.uk/2016/06/01/marxism-and-lgbt-politics-a-new-wave-of-discussion/>). Few other reviews have appeared in any context. *Warped* is widely cited in the workshops on sexuality that appear at Historical Materialism conferences, with the second year of a sexuality-themed stream at the London conference planned for November 2017. Peter Drucker's academic standing as a fellow at the Dutch Marxist nonprofit International Institute for Research and Education, no doubt aided in the writing and publication of this remarkable book, published through both Brill and Haymarket. But his lack of a professorship likely has contributed to the distinct neglect from the prestigious circle of American tenured academics.

Drucker's account is organized around a periodization of sexual identity within distinct phases of capitalist development. Each period, he argues, has an associated system of regulating sexuality and norms of sexual expression. Each has a unique "same-sex formation," "a distinctive combination of several different same-sex patterns (such as transgender, intergenerational and lesbian/gay) in

which one pattern is culturally dominant, and which occupies a specific place in an overall mode of production (like feudalism) or capitalist regime of accumulation (like neoliberalism)” (p. 6). Each period is characterized by an organization of political economy, which lent itself to particular forms of political contestation around sexuality, and a set of organizing sexual minority identities. In each era, though one form (or pairing) of same-sex sexual identity was dominant, we can identify traces of previous eras and the beginnings of the identities associated with the coming era. Drucker distinguishes between 1) precapitalist societies, 2) an early capitalist period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, 3) an era of classical imperialism in the late nineteenth century, 4) the Fordist era, dominant after WWII, and 5) a post-Fordist/neoliberal era, since the 1980s.

Drucker opens with a prologue considering sexual identities in pre-industrial societies. First, precapitalist societies largely organized same-sex relations in one of two ways. Many slave-based, feudal, and imperial premodern societies included a romantic appreciation of intergenerational sex between property- or slave-owning men, and teenage or preteen boys. More egalitarian indigenous societies often featured gender-nonconforming identities, sometimes in positions of spiritual or social authority. This is most recognized today in the United States through recent organizing of “Two-Spirited” people, drawing on a wealth of third-gender identities in precolonial North American indigenous nations. The rise and spread of early capitalism in Europe brought a new transitional configuration of sexual identity. Drucker calls this “molly-dominant,” named for new forms of commodified transgender identities. “Mollies” were young, working-class, male-assigned feminine people who sold sex in English, Dutch, and French cities (p. 90). Similarly, masculine-presenting, female-assigned “sapphists” emerged in similar underground street communities. In parallel, middle-class people, with the new independence of careers and urban life, formed intimate same-sex romantic friendships.

In the late nineteenth century, the peak of racialized colonialism, industrial production, and scientific rationalism as organizing principles of European capitalism produced a new constellation of sexual identities. The new attention on sciences of the human mind and society reflected the concerns and structures of imperialism as an era of capitalism. The emerging fields of psychoanalysis and sexology combined the prior era’s transgender working-class identities and bourgeois romantic friendships, treating them as objects of intense (pseudo-)scientific study. They produced a new sexual identity, the “invert,” who engaged in same-gender sexual relations because they had somehow been born with the mind and temperament of the opposite gender. This “hermaphrodisy of the mind” (p. 115) was manifest both through same-sex sexual activity and nonconformity in gender expression. Inversion was understood as a biological difference, creating a new taxonomy of sexological research.

This framework of sexual inversion lent itself to both repressive and liberatory possibilities. This era saw an intensification of state repression and policing of sexuality. Simultaneously, progressive sexologists argued that inversion should be decriminalized and treated as part of the natural range of human sexual expression. Freud, for example, argued that all people were naturally bisexual, and only early childhood socialization guided children into repressive normative heterosexuality. These sexologists gained significant allies in the European socialist movement. From the turn of the century to the rise of Nazi Party, sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld developed ties with the leadership of the German Social Democratic Party, the leading force of the Socialist Second International. Through the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee, Hirschfeld used third-sex arguments to campaign for decriminalization of same-sex sexual activity. These arguments of progressive sexologists influenced leading figures of the Bolshevik Party. Revolutionary Russia was the first modern state to entirely decriminalize homosexuality, and it funded international campaigns and research for gay rights. The advances made by progressive sexologists, however, were reversed in the 1930s, under Stalin in the Soviet Union and Nazi occupation across continental Europe.

Drucker goes on to identify the rise of a modern gay identity as rooted in Fordist capitalism. These new gay identities depended on the broad working-class prosperity of social democratic Europe and the New Deal United States, where rising wages, consumerism, urbanization, and some political freedom enabled working- and middle-class people to claim minority sexual identities. In the 1950s, these early gays organized discreetly as “homophiles,” building the beginnings of the modern gay rights movement. This was the first separation of transgender and gay identity. In the 1950s and 1960s we see the persistence of gender-nonconforming transgender sex-worker urban scenes (with a broad host of self-identifying terms), Butch women accessing blue-collar industrial work, and middle-class, gender-conforming homophiles building the beginnings of national organizations and the gay rights movement. Drucker only briefly references a point that deserves more extensive elaborations: the role of gender conformity as a condition of labor market participation, and hence in distributing uneven life chances between queer people. Drucker groups the gay liberation movements of the 1970s in this same era of Fordist affluence, though here the tensions between gender-conforming gays and transgender people was briefly bridged in a wave of political insurgency.

The major changes in political economy of the 1970s and 1980s associated with “neoliberalism” then produced the current era. The recent, “post-Fordist” era is the main contribution of the book, and reflects Drucker’s most thorough and original thinking. The crushing of unions and working-class power, income polarization, wealth disparities, and the dismantling and privatization of state services, have “warped” gay identity into a “new gay normality, characterized by growing ghettoization, gender conformity, the exclusion of trans people and sexually marginalized queers, a racist and Islamophobic integration into dominant nations and the formation of normative families founded on marriage” (p. 220). This is the basis of the new gay conservatism, a neoliberal politics that advocates legal equality but shows little concern for queer poverty. Drucker argues that these affluent mainstream gays are challenged by radical gender-transgressive young queer movements. Here Drucker offers a rich and comprehensive political economic account of the puzzle that opens this review, the simultaneous institutionalization of gay rights with the persistent reality of queer and trans poverty.

The victories of LGBT movements since the 1960s made possible the emergence of lesbian/gay petty-bourgeois layers leading relatively comfortable lives in neoliberal societies, which in turn has made possible the development of homonormative ideologies and politics in a tolerated corner of a heteronormative world. At the same time, the growth of layers of younger LGBT working-class and marginalized people, with lower incomes and less economic security, has been crucial for a queer rebellion against the new gay normality. While affluent gays reflect the intensification of hyperconsumerism among urban elites, queer and trans radicals reflect the fragmentation of working-class life.

This is one of the outstanding features of Drucker’s argument. Since the early 1990s, queer and trans radicals have built campaigns against poverty and state violence. Often, these interconnected communities of queer radicals have been driven by gender-nonconforming and transgender people. They draw from the legacies of AIDS struggles and sex-worker of color organizing, and often combine mutual aid with a strong anti-prison, anti-police politics. These radical queer communities include many working-class and poor trans people of color, occasionally alongside middle-class youth versed in academic queer theory. Such radical queer movements have been driving leaders in anti-police organizing, Palestine solidarity, opposition to corporate sponsorship of Pride events, and left skepticism toward marriage equality. These queer radical movements often rest on highly developed subcultural communities, such as an African American and Latinx ball/house scene with substantial leadership from trans women, punk anarchist scenes, gamer and game design communities, and extensive online support networks. Largely, the Marxist Left has been unable to appropriately theorize, understand, or support this organizing, or the queer and trans communities

driving it. Drucker's analysis offers a way of locating the emergence of these radical queer movements, reflecting the particular violences of neoliberalism, reacting to the logic of homonormativity, and seizing the new opportunities for resistance and rebellion.

Warped is also remarkable for its substantial attention to sexual minority identities and movements outside of the United States and Europe. Every section includes extensive examples from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Drucker has a long-standing interest in broadening queer studies and research on LGBT people to include the world outside of the major cities of western Europe and the US. A previous anthology Drucker edited, *Different Rainbows* (2000), is one of the only available collections that attempts a global account of lesbian and gay organizing in the the global south. Drucker's politics and analytic framework draw from the Trotskyist tradition, wherein "combined and uneven development" was invoked to explain the revolutionary possibility of underdeveloped nations like tsarist Russia. Here Drucker puts that to good use, simultaneously recognizing the dramatic influence US and western European gay and lesbian cultures have on the rest of world, and how that is transformed and resisted across diverse contexts. Further, he grasps how this process is shaped by a common logic of capitalist development in which the US and western Europe were often the first places to experience social transformations that other regions are facing now, yet late developers face the constraints of neocolonialism and a saturated global market. The languages, identities, and expressions of gender-nonconforming people, in particular, take dramatically different forms throughout the world. Drucker is skilled at recognizing the common elements of these diverse gender expressions, without collapsing them into the specific form of contemporary transgender identity.

Drucker's writing style offers theoretical framing, followed by an immense density of anecdotal evidence. These anecdotes draw heavily from a vast array of existing historical, anthropological, literary, and sociological research. Collecting all this material into a single volume is a major contribution to future work. This form of argumentation, however, makes it difficult to confidently assess the accuracy of the arguments. It would be difficult, perhaps impossible, to organize evidence on historical sexual identities systematically, even more so given that Drucker is concerned with identities of not only literate bourgeois writers, but also poor and working-class people. Much research has successfully and convincingly unearthed historical sexual identities in particular regions and eras. Drucker has attempted to synthesize this existing work into an overall, thematic, theoretically driven, global account of sexual minority life under capitalism. In many ways, he is successful. I am convinced of his account in its broad outlines, and it is definitely the most thorough and coherent research to date on how gender and sexual identities have transformed in successive periods of capitalist development. But this relationship between claims and evidence makes it difficult to be confident of every element of his argument, or to know exactly where its limitations may lie.

Warped is particularly weak on providing convincing accounts of causal relationships. Rarely does Drucker provide a clear causal explanation for how, in any given era, sexual identities take the particular forms they do. Drucker's analytic links between sexuality and economic relations share more with Max Weber's "elective affinities" of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* than the mode of analysis used in Karl Marx's *Capital*. Drucker describes concurrent sexual identities and major changes in state policy and capitalist production processes, but does not tease out how one may cause or necessitate another. Theoretical comments in the introduction emphasizing gendered capitalism as a unified totality, inseparably integrating gender, production, reproduction, and consumption, leaves unspecified how, exactly, these may be causally linked. Drucker's avoidance of economic reductionism, similarly admirable, further leaves unclear where gender patterns may be highly constrained or more contingently related to economic processes.

This problem of underspecified causal relationships is not unique to Drucker, but pervades the

current of social thought that puts much emphasis on “Fordist” and “post-Fordist” eras. These terms as a periodization of American capitalism reference the Regulationist school of French Marxism, especially the work of Michel Aglietti. This has been germinal research, and few other currents of contemporary Marxism could have served Drucker as effectively to provide a framework for identifying broad, changing patterns of sexuality. Unlike most who today periodize capitalism between Fordist and post-Fordist eras, Aglietti was quite clear in specifying precise causal relationships that linked together state policy, regimes of capital accumulation, labor market management, and consumption. Unfortunately, subsequent scholarship has effectively discredited the causal explanations argued by Aglietti. Robert Brenner and Mark Glick’s devastating 1991 critique of Regulationism and Aglietti make it clear that however evocative this approach may be, when it makes actually verifiable claims they do not empirically hold up. [11] Fordism may have existed, but never in the particular and specific senses to which Aglietti put it to use.

This does not dismiss the value of Drucker’s contribution, or the relevance of “post-Fordism” as a concept to tie together patterns of consumption, production, and reproduction since the 1970s. But where Drucker, and much work that uses a Fordist/post-Fordist schema, leaves underspecified the causal chains that link culture, state policy, and regimes of capital accumulation, we can do better. Social reproduction feminism, for example, offers a few conceptual tools that could give us greater analytical purchase on the causal constraints on patterns of sexual expression in any given era. It is through the family that generations are reproduced, people are socialized and disciplined into gender and sexual normative patterns, and survive the fluctuations in access to wage employment. Social reproduction feminists have produced a wealth of work that locates the changing patterns of the working-class family in labor market conditions, working-class organization, and state policy. Queer life has flourished when people are able to find alternatives to their families for their survival, and that survival has been sharply constrained by the gender-normative expectations built into social welfare programs and wage employment. It is this insight linking social reproduction and wage labor that is core to D’Emilio’s breakthrough essay, and identifies clear causes through which we can explain patterns of sexual expression. Social reproduction feminist research on the rise and fall of the family wage, the working-class single wage-earner household, changing state policies in enforcing and enabling nuclear family formation, the privatization of elder care and child-rearing, and much else, can then be brought to bear in understanding the evolution and transformation of gay and queer identities in capitalism. Unfortunately, this research has yet to result in an account similar in scope to *Warped*, or a comprehensive periodization of the family in capitalist development. Though Drucker would no doubt concur with the contributions of social reproduction feminism, and draws from them at points, the book would have been enriched with a more thorough theoretical rethinking through the concepts provided by such work.

Jules Joanne Gleason’s recent essay in *Viewpoint Magazine* suggests one example of using an analysis of social reproduction to understand the changing conditions of trans life (<https://www.viewpointmag.com/2017/07/19/transition-and-abolition-notes-on-marxism-and-trans-politics/>). She identifies the specific mutual aid networks and practices that have enabled trans women to come out in increasing numbers in recent years, despite still pervasive family hostility, extreme employment discrimination, and a mounting right-wing anti-trans backlash. Research into material strategies of queer reproduction, like Gleason’s, could enrich and clarify the evolving historical patterns of sexual identities Drucker provides.

All those concerned with sexual freedom and a full socialist politics owe a debt to Drucker for the remarkable achievements of *Warped*. We must extend the research program this book implies with future scholarship. Even more, however, we must apply its analysis in the political struggles to come. Trans lives are under mounting and vicious attack. Our gender and sexual freedom depends on extending the struggle beyond seeking trans inclusion within the constraints of liberal

triumphalist narratives. Research grasping the intimate relationship between gender and sexual identity and capitalist development can aid in understanding the scope and depth of social transformation needed to achieve queer freedom. Such understanding can serve us in the fight for full gender liberation through the abolition and transcendence of capitalist society and the heteronormative family.

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Footnotes

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