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Reviews

Anti-Capitalism & Queer Liberation

- Reviews section -

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Foe many, Pride Day 2015 turned into a celebration of the June 26 announcement that the U.S. Supreme Court had recognized lesbian and gay marriage rights. This decision marks an important step towards the elimination of legal discrimination against lesbians and gays. The Supreme Court decision served as a gift to mark the 46th anniversary of the Stonewall Riot that launched the contemporary lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) movement.

Peter Drucker's new book *Warped* is an essential resource for those who seek to understand how a liberation movement born out of a riot came to focus on marriage rights. At one level, this move towards legal equality is a sign of how far the movement has come.

At the time of the 1969 Stonewall riot, lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgendered (LGBT) people were largely invisible, and openly persecuted. In Canada, homosexual activity itself was only legalized in 1969, coincidentally at the time of the Stonewall riot. In many American states, homosexual activity remained illegal until 2003 under the sodomy laws.

In 1969, there was almost no LGBT presence in movies, books or television programs, aside from a few negative stereotypes. The mainstream media did not cover queer issues, except as a crime or a scandal. People were fired for being LGBT, without legal recourse. Indeed, security forces in Canada attempted to develop a "fruit machine" to identify queer government employees so they could be fired.

We have seen remarkable changes in the 46 years since Stonewall, in terms of greater rights and cultural visibility for LGBT people. There was indeed something to celebrate on Pride Day 2015.

But not everyone was putting on their party hats to mark this occasion. After all, marriage is a pretty far cry from liberation, and some people see it as a serious step backwards into conformism.

Gay Normality: Who's In, Who's Out

Rather than challenging the family and the authority of church and state over our lives, lesbian and gay marriage rights represent settling for a place inside the system. That leaves a lot of people out, those who do not fit the model of a nice settled couple dedicated to raising property values and possibly children together.

Queers of color, trans people, bisexuals, people with low incomes or without status, indigenous queers, people who are single or non-monogamous and many women do not have a place in this new lesbian and gay world of marriage and consumerism.

In the current political climate, we are often confronted with a polarized choice between celebrating lesbian and gay marriage as a great achievement or condemning it as a setback to our liberation struggles.

Activists looking to make sense of this contradictory victory will find no better source than *Warped*. This book gives us the tools to navigate beyond the choice between conformism and eternal outlaw status by locating sexual liberation as part of a broader anti-capitalist project of social transformation.

The Supreme Court decision recognizing gay marriage rights is an important feature of what Drucker calls “gay normality,” wherein certain lesbian and gay lifestyles gain broad legal and cultural legitimacy while other queers face increasing marginalization.

Same-sex couples who live together gain important partner rights and wider cultural recognition. Yet gay normality also entails “the exclusion of trans people and sexually marginalized queers, a racist and Islamophobic integration into dominant nations and the formation of normative families based on marriage.” (8)

Still, this book does not simply paint gay normality as a wrong turn on the road to freedom, a sellout political strategy developed by the more conservative wing of the LGBT movement in their own self-interest. Drucker offers neither condemnation nor celebration of gay normality, but an understanding of how it came to be, and an assessment of its strengths and limitations.

Normality Under Neoliberalism

Drucker portrays gay normality as the outcome of political struggles in the particular social context of capitalism entering its neoliberal phase.

It is only because people fought long and hard in very difficult situations that gay normality is possible today. But at the same time, gay normality is the result of the channeling of those freedom struggles as neoliberalism created certain openings while reinforcing other barriers.

We are all quite familiar with the barriers created by neoliberalism since the 1970s. It has been a toxic policy for working class people, people of color and those with limited incomes. The core of neoliberalism is the use of state power to orient our lives around the market, both selling our capacity to work to employers and buying the necessities of life.

This focus on the market has led to the suppression of alternative ways of meeting our needs. Education, health and social programs have been slashed or reorganized around user pay to eliminate non-commercial services.

This has gone along with a crackdown to create a more vulnerable and precarious population. The incarceration rate has increased sharply, especially for people of color. Policing has been militarized, with deadly results in racialized communities. Borders have been made impassable for people and opened up for investments.

Union rights have been attacked at every level. Employers have dramatically restructured paid work through lean production.

Of course, none of this sounds like an opening for LGBT rights. Indeed, neoliberalism in its early days was closely tied to a social conservatism that was viciously anti-gay. In the late 1970s and 1980s, politicians like Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in Britain married the economic policy of neoliberalism to anti-abortion and anti-gay positions as well as unrelenting opposition to affirmative action and other anti-racist measures.

Neoliberalism and social conservatism still tend to align in the politics of the U.S. Republican Party, as the leadup to the 2016 primaries demonstrates. But over time it has become clear that neoliberalism doesn't necessarily need social conservatism.

Indeed, as Drucker writes, “One added twist of the neoliberal offensive has been the way in which the marketplace undermines conservative moralizing.” (223) Neoliberalism is ultimately about the bottom line, and a relentless pursuit of profit can be quite corrosive to any ideas of morality. Sex sells, and restrictions on sexuality can impede commerce.

The forms of lesbian and gay life that have thrived under neoliberalism have been focused around “commercial gay scenes and sexual identities compatible with these scenes.” (228) Visible gayness is associated with going to certain bars, cafes or restaurants, dressing and grooming with a particular sensibility (call it “queer eye”), or attending specific cultural events.

This gay commercial scene is very compatible with the neoliberal commitment to the bottom line, in which profit trumps everything. One feature of neoliberalism’s elimination of alternatives to the market is that people are pushed to make meaning in their lives through market choices. Thus gayness becomes a kind of consumerist identity; indeed a rather lucrative one.

Gay consumerism played a pioneering role in linking identity and consumption. Gay men modeled new forms of male consumerism that broke the old rule that real men don’t shop except for hardware, beer and sports equipment.

The gay market opened up new frontiers of sexualization in advertising, especially in the display of male bodies. The formation of commercial and residential communities for better-off lesbians and gays contributed to gentrification in many North American cities.

The Marginalized

Mainstream acceptance of lesbians and gays, represented in part by legal equality, has been driven by gay commerce that is very compatible with neoliberalism.

This acceptance could not have happened without militant mobilization and hard struggle, but this movement found openings at a time when many others (workers, people of color, indigenous people, migrants) were losing ground. This is largely due to the compatibility of gay consumerism with neoliberal capitalism.

Further, governments that not very long ago were hostile to gay rights are now claiming these equality rights as a marker of cultural and political superiority to justify conquest and exclusion.

Islamophobia is a crucial dimension of the so-called “war on terror,” and gay rights have become part of the tool chest to legitimize discrimination at home and war abroad. Some lesbians and gays have joined the parade, waving the flames and blaming Islam for homophobia.

Gay commerce left out or displaced people without money to spend, and those who did not fit the mold of this consumerist lifestyle. Street youth, people of color, indigenous people and trans people, who had played an important role in the Stonewall riot, were marginalized and excluded as queerness was oriented around commerce.

Racialized queers, and particular those of North African, West Asian or South Asian ancestry, face a growing tide of Islamophobia and lesbian/gay organizations that often buy into claims of Western superiority.

The Rise of the Gay

Drucker is not the first to write about gay normality in the context of neoliberalism. He draws on the pioneering contributions of Lisa Duggan, Jasbir Puar and Rosemary Hennessey among others. His great contribution is that he pushes much further than these other writers in locating neoliberalism within the history of capitalism and gay normality within the history of forms of same-sex activity.

Specifically, Drucker connects changing forms of sexuality to “accumulation regimes,” phases of capitalist development characterized by a specific set of management strategies, state policies and imperialist relations. These employer and state strategies develop in response to resistance, and establish the ground for freedom struggles.

The contemporary gay movement arose before the development of neoliberalism in the context of Fordism, which lasted roughly from the 1940s-1970s. Fordism, with an accompanying welfare state, was based on the role of mass production as a key economic driving force, leading to the development of massive factories, the expansion of transportation infrastructure, the growth of cities and intensified resource extraction.

Fordism initially took its shape in the 1930s-1940s in response to a massive wave of activism that included worker mobilization, rising decolonization struggles and anti-racist movements, among others.

Employers viciously resisted unionization as long as they could, fully backed by the state. Imperialist powers resisted national liberation with a singular brutality. But once these movements reached a certain level of insurgency and won significant victories, capitalists developed new strategies for profitability that recognized union rights, granted a degree of security to sections of the working class, and recognized national independence under certain conditions.

The contemporary LGBT movement developed through the Fordist period and burst into full visibility in the late 1960s. The Stonewall riot in 1969 occurred at a time of rising struggles waged by those who had second-class status in the welfare state, including women, people of color, Indigenous people, those still colonized, youth, and the poor.

The 1960s movements rebelled against the stultifying repression and conformity of the Cold War world, developing rich ideas of freedom at all levels of society. The LGBT movement was inspired by these struggles and ideas of freedom that included sexuality.

This emerging movement galvanized LGBT communities that were being reorganized through the Fordist period around new models of same-sex relationship. Previously the dominant model of same-sex relationship in capitalist societies had been characterized by differences in gender, class, race and/or age. For example, in butch/femme relationships among women, one partner would tend to identify as masculine and the other as feminine.

People who identified themselves as homosexual (though often using their own words) tended to be gender non-conformists in the period from the 1870s-1940s. Those who were more gender conformist in these relations, for example masculine men, “still did not identify as homosexuals or see themselves as part of a distinct community.” (115) Many masculine men who engaged in homosexual activity were married to women.

The core of the self-identified homosexual community that was emerging, particularly in large cities, was made up of gender non-conforming trans people.

Drucker also notes the importance of imperialism in the development of these patterns of polarized homosexuality.

European colonialism generally attempted to suppress indigenous forms of same-sex and gender non-conforming activity while imposing new forms associated with European sex tourism and new rhythms of work and life. Wealthier European men often sought asymmetrical relations with younger working-class men at home or with racialized men in colonial settings.

The Fordist era saw the growth of a more symmetrical model of lesbian and gay relationships, where both women or men in a couple basically shared the same gender identity. It was no longer primarily gender non-conformists who identified as queer. Thus trans life and lesbian/gay experiences began to diverge.

Sexual Liberation and Anti-Capitalism

Drucker presents a dynamic picture of the ways sexualities developed and sexual politics were fought out in the context of different phases of capitalist development. While same-sex activity was pervasive in non-capitalist societies, it is only with the separation of paid work and household in capitalist societies that we see the rise of “the homosexual,” a person characterized by a specific sexual identity.

In the 1870s-1940s it was primarily gender non-conformists who developed these “queer” sexual identities. The Fordist era of the 1940-70s saw the rise of new forms of more symmetrical lesbian and gay identities which tended to diverge from trans life, and the growth of freedom struggles around sexual identity. The neoliberal era since the 1980s has seen the development of gay normality, which grants some homosexual identities full status in society while marginalizing others.

This rich historical analysis is critical for making sense of the contradictory character of gains in the neoliberal period. Drucker argues that a queer liberation agenda, to move beyond equality rights, must take account of the ways these relations are bound up in the broader organization of work and life in capitalist societies. It is crucial to understand how and why the energies of a liberation movement born in a riot were channeled towards marriage and equality rights.

The gap between formal equality and substantive inequality is not a uniquely queer problem, and the solution is not simply to refuse normality in the name of transgressive outsider status. The most effective strategies of social transformation map paths from where we are now to where we want to be, understanding the obstacles we face and the potential power we have.

Drucker’s book is a crucial resource for mapping such paths to gender and sexual liberation. He develops a rich analytical framework in which a dynamic Marxist account of capitalist society is integrated with crucial aspects of queer, feminist, anti-racist and anti-colonial perspectives.

The net result is a deeper understanding of sexualities and an enhanced understanding of class. Drucker draws on political and academic sources, crafting a rich picture of a politics of sexual liberation integrally related to other freedom struggles that strives to be genuinely global.

This remarkable achievement makes the book required reading for both queer activists and anti-capitalists seeking to develop an emancipatory politics for these times.

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