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Queerness

Sudeep Dasgupta

Indifference, if not outright hostility, have marked the relations between the disciplinary formations around the study of sexuality (including feminist, gay and lesbian, and queer theory) and engagements with Marx's writings and Marxist thought in general. The seeming lack of fit between critiques of sexual normalization in queer theory, and materialist analyses of capitalist exploitation and domination, can be approached through juxtaposed terms such as need vs. desire (Morton 1995), recognition vs. redistribution (Fraser 1995), sexuality vs. class, domination vs. exploitation, identity vs. class (Butler 1998) etc. I do not mean to imply there is no intrinsic relation between the terms. However, within the disciplinary domains of Marxist materialist approaches and queer critiques of sexuality (and gender), these terms have formed points of organization around which sometimes strident articulations of fundamental opposition are constructed. Take for example the introduction to the anthology *The Material Queer* which claims that queer theory opens "a new space for the subject of desire, a space in which *sexuality becomes primary*" (Morton 1996, 1, emphasis in original). He further argues that postmodern theorizations of queerness assert "the *primariness of sexuality/libidanimity, the autonomy of desire, and the freedom of the sexual subject from all constraints*" (ibid., 2).

Morton claims to speak from a specific form of *Marxist* materialism which analyses sexuality from the vantage point of the "mode of production", in opposition to the postmodern queer focus on "mode of signification" (ibid., 3). This stark opposition frames queer theory too simply. Firstly, one would be hard put to find any queer theorist who would assert "the freedom of the sexual subject from all constraints". In fact, as the sociologist Steven Seidman argues, queer theory and politics aims at a sustained critique of all forms of "normalization" of sexuality precisely by attending to the discursive and material resources through which institutions constrain sexual subjects (2001, 326). The overlap of interests between Marxist and queer analyses of sexuality can be articulated precisely by asking *how* both approaches understand, analyze and critique the constitution of the sexual subject. Two examples which help address this question illustrate the possibility of such an overlap. The historian John D'Emilio's (1983) now canonical, if controversial, essay "Capitalism and Gay Identity" provided a compelling historical and materialist analysis of how shifts produced by the introduction of capitalism provided the conditions of possibility for the emergence of a gay male sexual *identity*. Rather than arguing for a *causal link between capitalism and homosexuality*, his analysis articulated the *relation between economic transformation and the naturalization of sexual identity*. The essay was not an example of economic reductionism (sexuality is an effect of capitalism) but of a conjunctural understanding of how forms of sexual selfhood (identity) emerged through changes in the economy. It demonstrated precisely the sort of materialist understanding of how sexuality as an object of discourse is converted into an identity, and later a form of identity politics. In other words, the relevance of Marxist analyses of capitalism for the formation of *sexual identity* (rather than sexuality) was established with important implications for queer theory.

The overlap can also be seen in Danae Clark's (1991) essay "Commodity Lesbianism". Clark's analysis of the appearance of an ambivalently pitched "lesbian" in popular culture, including advertising, does not prioritize the "mode of production" over the "mode of signification". Instead, it tracks the relationship between the dominance of consumer culture in contemporary capitalism and the strategic deployment of depoliticized identity politics by the advertising industry

through a textual analysis of the discourses and images of “lesbians”. Modes of signification and production are analyzed together at a specific historical moment to produce an analysis of a queer subject, the “lesbian”, who can be consumed by niche audiences (such as lesbian subcultures) while also appearing suitably normalized and therefore palatable for heterosexual women.

The influence of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality: Volume 1* for queer theory, as well as the importance of Derridean deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis in the formation of queer theory, however, clearly points to the possible problems for thinking Marxist and queer theory together, since these influences do not sit easily with an understanding of “materialism” within Marxist thought. The now widespread intellectual purchase of the concept of “matter”, from Judith Butler’s *Bodies that Matter* (1993) to the recent New Materialisms, have been understood as offering a quite different understanding of what a materialist analysis could be. However, particularly in the work of Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and others, the crucial importance given to analyses of the normalization of the sexed and gendered body, and of (homo)sexual desire can be related to the more historical-materialist analyses of sexuality. If, as Butler argues, the sexually-desiring gendered body is not natural, but is materialized continually through the discursive and institutional operations of a hetero-normative social matrix, then an analysis of the historically-specific constellation of economic, political and cultural forces which constitute sexuality would seem quite closely related to queer analyses of processes of normalization.

In Kevin Floyd’s (2009) book-length *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism*, precisely such a rapprochement between queer theory and Marxism is substantially attempted. The conjunction of the terms “reification” and “desire” in the title already point to the inadequacy of Morton’s formulation of a stark opposition between materialism and idealism, need and desire, use-value and exchange-value (1996, 5). Floyd clearly states “in explicitly approaching the insights of queer critical practice from a Marxian perspective, my central objective is to indicate some of the ways in which this very move requires a fundamental rethinking of that perspective itself” (2009, 4). Rather than *overcoming* one

perspective by another, Floyd rethinks the central categories of “totality” and “reification” within Marxist thought, and that of György Lukács in particular, to understand how in different historical moments from the late 19th century in the United States, homosexual desire gets reified through discourses of masculinity, labour, consumption, and pleasure. By reworking, critiquing and deploying Lukács’ concept of reification, and substantially engaging with the work of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, Floyd analyzes the shifting normalization of masculinity and homosexual desire in the context of post-Fordist modes of economic deregulation and the rise of consumer culture. At the same time, he expands on and fleshes out the discursive normalization of sexuality (his focus here is primarily Judith Butler’s work) by asking how at specific historical moments, economic transformations in U.S. capitalism, and political and social discourses on masculinity produce discourses of sexual normalcy and deviance. The psychoanalytical, deconstructive, and discursive approaches to sexual normalization within queer theory are integrated with materialist critiques of sexual politics by deploying *reworked* understandings of desire and reification. The transformation of central concepts in the fields of queer theory and Marxism is convincingly deployed to expose the poverty of both simplistic queer critiques of Marxism and of Marxist critiques of queer theory. Given these writings, one could argue that the stark opposition between the Discursive and Textual Queer Subject of Desire on the one hand, and the “Material Queer” on the other, misrepresents a potentially fruitful if fractious dialogue between Marxism and queer theory.

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