

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7601>



In Memoriam

Kevin Floyd's Foundational Queer Marxism: A Tribute

- Features - Sexual politics -

Publication date: Thursday 21 April 2022

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

Marxists working in queer studies have gradually been building a body of theory during the first decades of the 21st century. We have been synthesizing core Marxist concepts, like class, totality and reification, with concepts from other paradigms, such as social construction, performativity and intersectionality. In the small boomlet of publications that has marked this queer Marxist renaissance, one moment stands out: the publication in 2009 of Kevin Floyd's *The Reification of Desire*. [1] All of us queer Marxists who have published since then have been in dialogue with this seminal work. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that we have been writing a series of glosses on it.

The queer Marxism in which Floyd played a foundational role is a new turn in Marxism's more-than-century-old dialogue with same-sex activism and theorizing. The roots of Marxist queer studies go back to the first interactions between Marxist theorists linked to socialist labour movements, on the one hand, and successive waves of homosexual emancipation and lesbian/gay liberation, on the other. The story goes back to German Marxist Eduard Bernstein's critique in *Die Neue Zeit* of sexually repressive legislation in response to the 1895 trial of Oscar Wilde, and to the Russian Bolsheviks' post-revolutionary decriminalization of homosexuality and support for research in sexology. [2] The near-simultaneous rise of New Left Marxism and of lesbian/gay liberation in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in a new flowering of lesbian/gay Marxist theory. John D'Emilio's seminal essay "Capitalism and Gay Identity" (1983), linking "free" labour under capitalism to identity formation, was widely and lastingly influential. [3] Floyd, too, knew this history – he called D'Emilio's article "crucial" – and drew on it. [4]

In his deep readings of queer theory and his open-minded attitude toward it, however, Floyd broke with the dominant tone of the Marxists who came before him. As queer theory had spread and became increasingly hegemonic in lesbian/gay studies in the course of the 1990s, many Marxists had responded initially with skepticism or outright hostility. Teresa Ebert and Donald Morton exemplified Marxists' sometimes tendentious dismissal of queer theory's contributions. [5] In a very different key, Rosemary Hennessy's *Profit and Pleasure* (2000), though it can be seen in retrospect as a key early text of queer Marxism, was still characterized by a strong critique of the queer theory of the 1990s. [6] Floyd changed the discourse. More than any other person he heralded a new wave, in which dismissal increasingly gave way to efforts to forge a new queer Marxism, engaging more deeply with queer theory while trying to avoid its idealist and postmodernist pitfalls.

Floyd's Synthesis

Fully versed in queer theory, Kevin Floyd forged a synthesis in which old Marxist concepts were equally central and invented anew. The synthesis took him a long way from the Texas childhood and Midwestern life he later recalled in sketching his trajectory. [7] In the tradition he helped found, the category of totality has been important to queer Marxists seeking a global, non-reductionist vision. The concept of reification, too, has been both key to Marxist approaches to queer studies and a fruitful source of divergences. Queer Marxist debates about these concepts today are unthinkable without Floyd's ground-breaking work on them.

The queer Marxism Floyd pioneered is strictly speaking a 21st-century phenomenon. The "Marxist renaissance" in queer studies has largely been a by-product of the continuing rapid growth of queer studies generally, particularly in North American universities. [8] At first Marxist approaches in the field were very marginalized. As Floyd wrote, by the 1990s "what was once a healthy queer skepticism about the Marxist tradition ... congeal[ed] into something more automatic, dismissive, phobic." [9] It was only after 2007 that several years of intense capitalist crisis provoked a

rethinking of Marxism's possible "explanatory power." [10] Published in 2009, *The Reification of Desire* seized the moment – and was marked by the moment.

While the book brought a hefty dose of socioeconomic reality to a burgeoning academic field, it could not reflect an activist upsurge that did not particularly characterize the time. The academic setting of most Marxist queer studies has resulted in focuses ranging beyond core concerns of historical materialism – political economy, social struggles and transformations, and political power – to the more common concentration in queer studies on philosophy, literature, film and other arts. *The Reification of Desire*, too, focused largely on this sort of philosophical and cultural critique. Like other Marxists working in queer studies, Floyd had a strong aversion to economic reductionism, which has traditionally contributed to Marxists' neglect of sexuality.

Yet although much of Floyd's academic work dealt with literature and the Marxist Literary Group was his home ground, his knowledge and his concerns always ranged further. He forcefully rejected "depictions of my work as (merely) culturalist." [11] He participated in North American conferences of the Historical Materialism network, helping to bring a queer perspective to a largely new generation of hundreds of Marxist scholars. Though his department's travel budget never stretched far enough to allow him to join the even bigger gatherings of queer Marxists at the annual Historical Materialism conferences in London, the Sexuality and Political Economy Network that was born there was in this sense his offspring as well.

Performativity and Reification

Queer Marxists all (to a greater or lesser extent) acknowledge their indebtedness to feminist theorists who since the 1970s have been emphasizing the conjoined centrality of class and gender. One of Floyd's greatest contributions was to show how Judith Butler's concept of performative gender should be historicized, as a form of gender that emerged due to changes in early 20th-century capitalism. [12] Shifting from the earlier, 19th-century emphasis on "manhood" and "womanhood," he showed, performative constructions of gender have been defined more by patterns of consumption, dress and everyday behaviour, linked to the "'scientific management' of anxieties about changing gender norms." [13]

To avoid any narrow economic determinism, Marxists in queer studies have deployed György Lukács' category of totality to explore how sexuality is embedded in broader power dynamics. Here too, Floyd made an absolutely vital contribution, showing the relevance of the category to the study of sexuality. At the same time, he warned against the dangers of a conception of totality that would relegate sexuality to the superstructure. In some of his later statements, moreover, he shrank from choosing between "characterizing global capitalism as either heterogeneous or unified," (thus opting for a contrast between heterogeneity and unity rather than a more dialectical formulation of unity in contradiction. [14]

In a third, particularly brilliant contribution, Floyd strikingly developed the sexual dimensions of the concept of reification (particularly as analyzed by Lukács). Drawing on historical analyses of the late 19th-century invention of heterosexual and homosexual persons, he pointed out the particular reification of gender manifest in these supposedly scientific sexual categories. Today, Marxists note, male and female bodies are reduced to things to be obtained, like so many other fetishized commodities.

Yet different Marxists in queer studies have drawn out different implications from the concept of reification. Floyd initially dwelled on Lukács' late self-criticism for failing to distinguish adequately between (humanly inevitable) objectification and (specifically capitalist) reification. [15] Yet in his desire to emphasize the political importance of "the use of the body as a pleasurable means," Floyd ended up emphasizing reification's positive role as "a condition

of possibility for ... sexually non-normative discourses.” [16] Curiously, this emphasis moved Floyd away both from traditional Marxist criticisms of all existing sexualities under capitalism and from queer theorists' advocacy of fluid sexualities at a certain distance from existing lesbian/gay identities. This reflected his nuanced take on queer politics. While he was one with queer theorists for example in strongly criticizing same-sex marriage, which he saw as “[p]art and parcel of neoliberalism,” he argued in an early article that it is not always “inherently conservative or assimilationalist.” [17]

It is a terrible loss for queer Marxism that Floyd is no longer here to help us engage with new upsurges and new debates, notably the transformative Black Lives Matter protests and the astonishing mobilizations that have accompanied them around the themes #BlackTransLivesMatter and #BlackQueerLivesMatter. Sadly, we will never know what insights Kevin would have contributed to understanding this pivotal juncture. All we can do is carry on in his spirit of theoretical daring and radical engagement.

Source: [Mediations: Journal of the Marxist Literary Group, Volume 34, No. 1 \(Fall 2020\)](#)

PS:

If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of *International Viewpoint*. Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.

[1] Kevin Floyd, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009)

[2] John Lauritsen and David Thorstad *The Early Homosexual Rights Movement (1864-1934)* (New York: Times Change, 1995), Dan Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

[3] John D'Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” in Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson (eds.), *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983).

[4] Email from Kevin Floyd to Peter Drucker, June 19, 2017.

[5] Teresa Ebert, “The Matter of Materialism,” and Donald Morton, “Changing the Terms: (Virtual) Desire and (Actual) Reality,” in Morton (ed.), *The Material Queer: A LesBiGay Cultural Studies Reader* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996).

[6] Rosemary Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

[7] Ayumu Tajiri, Asako Nakai and Shintaro Kono, “An Interview with Kevin Floyd,” *Correspondence: Hitotsubashi Journal of Arts & Literature* 3 (2018).

[8] Gianmaria Colpani, *Queer Hegemonies: Politics and Ideology in Contemporary Queer Debates* (Utrecht [unpublished PhD dissertation], 2017).

[9] Kevin Floyd, “Making History: Marxism, Queer Theory, and Contradiction in the Future of American Studies,” *Cultural Critique* 40 (1998): 171.

[10] Kevin Floyd, *Reification of Desire*, 2.

[11] Email from Kevin Floyd to Peter Drucker, June 19, 2017.

[12] Notably in Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

Kevin Floyd's Foundational Queer Marxism: A Tribute

[13] *Reification of Desire*, 57-66, Floyd, "Making History" 179.

[14] Christina Crosby, Lisa Duggan, Roderick Ferguson, Kevin Floyd, Miranda Joseph, Heather Love, Robert McRuer, Fred Moten, Tavia Nyong'o, Jordana Rosenberg, Gayle Salamon, Dean Spade and Amy Villarejo 2012, "Queer Studies, Materialism, and Crisis," *GLQ*, 18, 1 (2012): 127-47.

[15] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972 [1922]) xxiv; *Reification of Desire*, 23.

[16] Floyd, "Lukács and Sexual Humanism," *Rethinking Marxism* 18:3 (2006): 399-400. *Reification of Desire*, 74-75.

[17] Email from Kevin Floyd to Peter Drucker, June 19, 2017. "Making History" 179.