

‡ AFTER QUEER THEORY: THE LIMITS OF SEXUAL POLITICS

By James Penney. London, New York: Pluto Press, 2014. pp. vii, 212.

REVIEWED BY ALLAN PERO

James Penney's latest book will prove to be, if it receives the critical attention it deserves, an important and timely intervention in the field of queer theory. I say "if" because if his text is read seriously, it cannot help but be seen as a provocation. However, I think it is just as crucial to say that if Penney is an *agent provocateur*, he is so for no one but himself; he is not interested in dismissing, or even minimizing, the dangers, sometimes lethal ones, which queer subjects face. He is more concerned with re-imagining a kind of politics (through thinkers like Marx, Lacan, and Badiou) which orients itself around the universal, the real, and the eternal, rather than one which continues to shadowbox with particular ideological phantasms. Dogged as the field of queer theory is by a moribund identity politics (which it disavows with statements like the following: "We know very well that identity is very much the trap of racist, heteronormative privilege, and as such, must be subverted, but we should fight all the harder to create identities of our own that receive the support and endorsement of our trappers"), on the one hand, and an emerging discourse of nihilism on the other, Penney takes careful, painstaking aim at dismantling many of the long-held, but rarely troubled, theoretical and political assumptions about its efficacy—namely, the discourses of subversion and transgression that have peppered conference papers, articles, and books for the past three decades. He proceeds to demonstrate that many of the long-held, hard-won critical insights about sexuality made by queer theory

were already substantively made by Freud (who persists as a straw figure of paternalistic heteronormativity in many an argument). Further, he challenges the very notions of heteronormativity that have become structural “givens” in queer studies; he quite rightly contends that if sexuality has been persistently shown to be a fluid, amorphous—in other words, that there is “no such thing as reproductive or fully heterosexual—‘normal’ sex” (6)—then sex itself, as a dimension of the real, is inherently transgressive. That is to say, there cannot be a privileged or particularly “transgressive” sexuality, since all sexuality, whatever the practice, whatever the body, however imagined, however symbolized, encounters the real of sex.

Queer, Penney insists, is not the real of sex; humanity is generically sexed (in Lacanian terms, through sexuation); we are not oriented in terms of sexuality by symbolic law. Instead, we are oriented by our relation to the phallic function—masculine or feminine. As Penney (and other Lacanians) are at pains to argue, sexuation has nothing to do with gender or sexuality. This point is essential to any critique of homophobic laws or edicts, Penney shows, because once one is forced to acknowledge sexuation as universal, then there cannot be a “stable position”—straight, queer, or otherwise—from which to make pronouncements about which sexuality is ethical, proper, true, or normal. This is one of the important reasons why he continues to argue for a psychoanalytic critique of sexuality. Since sexuation is, perforce, utterly unconcerned with gender and sexuality (that is, there is no moral weight attached to them), then a psychoanalytic conception of sexual difference cannot be conscripted to support reactionary notions like heterosexism and anti-feminism. An important consequence of Lacan’s notorious aphorism “there is no sexual relationship (or *rappor*t)” is that if it disrupts the fantasy that heterosexuality is the privileged site of sexual union, then it is just as true for same-sex couples. By implication, there is no utopian vision that can articulate itself exclusively around sexuality. For Penney, these are liberal and libertarian fantasies which are indices of the kind of boutique politics which have effectively abandoned the field of radical political transformation. Homophobia and its heinous implications can be better denounced and fought when it is recognized that they reveal “the disjunction between the true cause or object of homophobic violence—a psychological object of fantasy—and the actual, ‘real-life’ persons whom it affects” (14). Another way of putting it is to saying that if homophobic fantasy is just that—a fantasy—so too are the queer and heteronormative

identities which structure and respond to their hate.

As the first chapter unfolds, one encounters the fetishization of “unconventionality” that marks the queer phenomenology of thinkers like Sara Ahmed, which, for Penney, ultimately falters because of their reliance on anecdotes and narratives of affect utterly divorced from ideological critique; we must keep in mind that it is not only heterosexual notions of, say, the family, that are working in tandem with modes of production, but also queer notions of experiential life which are constituent elements of contemporary capitalism. Affect theory (Penney’s reading of Sedgwick and Klein is especially good) is also taken to task for largely failing to consider that affects are (anxiety excepted) generally narcissistic forms of defence; they can be a good starting point for analysis, but they run the serious risk of offering “a sort of intellectual alibi for wallowing in them” (31) if they are protected and overvalued as being somehow “beyond” political and psychoanalytical critique.

The second chapter stakes a new claim for the universal (a turn that Penney rightly attributes to scholars like Judith Butler and Slavoj Žižek) as beneficial for everyone—queer and straight alike—by offering particular avenues of critique of the universal by what the text calls “concrete agencies” (54) within it, like capitalism, without falling into more helpless gesturing towards the vagaries of Foucauldian “power.” In this way, one can begin to explore the substantive differences between what law or authority imagines it is doing, and what its material effects are. One implication of an approach like this is that one is that subversion and transgression are viewed as the opposite of power. Rather, one should instead focus on the unconscious accounting for transgression in the very structure of the law itself; transgression in this reading becomes merely another means of hysterically confirming the law’s claims to authority.

“Is there a Queer Marxism?,” the book’s third chapter, bemoans the radical break of queer theory from the Marxist tradition that Teresa Ebert worked to warn us about in the 1990s, when a ludic, ultimately quietist play of irony and parody that characterized a particular strain of postmodern thought, allowed us to dump ideological critique (and the historical materialism it implies) in favour of hand-wringing alibis about power’s non-subjective and purely intentional force. History, as a force, was essentially theoretically wrested from our all-too-human hands, and unwittingly aided and abetted the dismantling the very mechanisms of critique and control that had been

built to steer capitalism in the post-war period. In his reading of Kevin Floyd, Penney shows how devastating the uncoupling of the modes of production from social relations and sexuality are—the reason is that there is a causal relation between them. Second, Penney undercuts the “universality” of heteronormativity by quite logically arguing that if it is in fact universal, then there would be no room from which to launch a critique of heterosexism. Perhaps most important, one must acknowledge that the emergence of queer identity is largely a Northern hemisphere, bourgeois phenomenon, and as such, has nothing substantive to contribute to a critique of global capital, since it is ultimately concerned with nothing but itself. For Penney, a return to Lacan, Freud, and Marx is imperative to help bring our attention to the relation between and among psychoanalysis, politics, and capitalism (specifically that the critique of the ego and the critique of surplus value, in different theoretical registers, uncover the unconscious forms of enjoyment that the ego requires in order to sustain itself, just as the reification of people and their sexuality in relation to the commodity reduces qualitative relations to purely quantitative ones, thus allowing capitalism to continue unfettered).

The fourth chapter uses a clever re-reading of Guy Hocquenghem’s little-read (and proto-anti-oedipal) *Homosexual Desire* in the context of a critique of Deleuze and Guattari’s assault on psychoanalysis and Lacan’s famed configuration of desire as lack. Since I cannot do justice to the finesse of this reading here, I will say that the critique of Deleuze and Guattari is a tonic. Deleuze and Guattari praise Lacan for his discovery of *objet a* (the symptomatic unconscious object of fantasy), but then chastise him for structuring the object around fantasy and the symbolic, as impediments to the desiring machine’s production, failing to realize that Lacan is not prescribing a “hindering” of desire’s possibility. On the contrary, Lacan’s point, which he makes repeatedly in several seminars, is that desire “sustains itself by sabotaging its own fulfilment” (121). Situating politics at the level of desire itself—that is, at its “negativity”—is, for Penney, precisely their blind spot—because desire cannot be “normalized” (that is, by signification), then the dizzying claims to desire’s liberation are simply misplaced, and merely idealize the drive as the site of freedom from repression.

In the final two chapters, Penney offers thoughtful, crystalline critiques of Tim Dean, Serge André, and Lee Edelman. Chapter five suggests, in its conclusion, that male homosexuality (he restricts his speculation to gay

men) may have an easier time, because of their different relationship both to the phallic function and to object-choice, of raising “the libidinal object of the drive through idealisation as a means of circumventing its disruptive emergence” (173), and of working towards the separation of the idealized narcissistic object from the object of *jouissance*. This possibility is evoked as a means of re-casting the commodified versions of masculinity which populate the pages of gay men’s magazines, and in turn, engaging (perhaps loving?) the disavowed gay male subjects who are the hidden, ideological truth which functions as the support for the white, bourgeois, gentrified gay men who are the visible faces of what we now call “the gay community.” The exploration of Edelman’s currently fashionable *No Future*, with its privileging of the death drive, is described as part of the “anti-social turn” in queer theory, and is understandably found wanting for its “undialectical notion of a radically pure brand of negativity” (181). This is not simply a rhetorical problem for Penney; in its nihilism, Edelman’s argument consigns all notions of the future to the Imaginary, ignoring the important roles versions of the future play in the subject’s life (e.g., the future perfect of analysis, as Lacan explains in his Rome Discourse, and the “anticipated certitude” considered in the *écrit* “Logical Time”—both of which are, in different ways, dialectical, and thus acknowledge the space, political or subjective, in which the impossible can happen). The idealization of the death drive that Edelman evinces fails to take account of the discontinuities which inhere in psychoanalytic conceptions of temporality—discontinuities which open up spaces for critique and agency. Edelman’s privileging of particular queer subjects—that is, those who will have no truck with reproduction and its responsibilities—necessarily excludes the hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of LGBTQ couples who are parenting children across the globe. His nihilistic notion of the death drive fails, as Penney convincingly demonstrates, to recognize that desire’s relation to the drive, which is marked by the signifier, is a form of “eternalization” (193)—that is, that the drives are not just “death,” but are the excess of life. Desire’s most radical instantiation, that is, the real of desire, is the eternal which outstrips or stands outside the blandishments of everyday life. As *After Queer Theory* shows us, “we must choose not between life and death, but rather between life and immortality” (196). This study is an important step towards making a choice which truly, and not just rhetorically, moves beyond queer theory’s stultifying identitarian impasse.