

# Queer Marxism: a reading guide

Friday 27 April 2018, by [DRUCKER Peter](#) (Date first published: 27 April 2018).

**Queer Marxism has been founding a body of theory synthesizing Marxist concepts like class, reification and totality with concepts from other paradigms like performativity, homonationalism and intersectionality.**

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The roots of queer Marxism go back to the first interactions between socialist movements and homosexual emancipation (explored in the first section of this reading guide). German Social Democracy's support for the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee was reflected in the Russian Bolsheviks' decriminalization of homosexuality. Alexandra Kollontai largely set the tone for international Marxism in the 1920s with her rejection of anti-homosexual repression. In a later period in Latin America in the 1970s and '80s, as the hegemony of Stalinism weakened and the left's sexual Puritanism with it, the encounter between gay movements and Marxism was especially fruitful in Nicaragua, Brazil and Mexico.

The near-simultaneous rise of New Left Marxism and lesbian/gay liberation in the 1960s produced a flowering of lesbian/gay Marxist politics (charted in the second section of this guide). London gay liberation in particular yielded work by Mario Mieli and David Fernbach. By the 1990s Marxist Leslie Feinberg was helping to lay the foundations of trans liberation. Theoretically (as reflected in the third section of this guide), the sexual attitudes of pre-Stalinist Marxism were further theorized with Herbert Marcuse's defence of the 'perversions' in *Eros and Civilization*. US John D'Emilio's essay 'Capitalism and Gay Identity' linked 'free' labour under capitalism to identity formation. Rosemary Hennessy's *Profit and Pleasure* was a key text that summed up earlier Marxist work on sexuality on the eve of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century emergence of queer Marxism.

Queer Marxism strictly speaking (the subject of this reading guide's final and main section) is a product of the rapid growth of queer studies in this century, particularly in North American universities. Its academic foundations help explain its concentration in imperialist countries, where Alan Sears, Kevin Floyd, Peter Drucker and Holly Lewis have all produced important queer Marxist works. There has also been a node of queer Marxism in Asia, notably the work of Taiwanese queer Marxists Ding Naifei and Petrus Liu.

Queer Marxists in general have a strong aversion to economic reductionism. They acknowledge their debt to Marxist feminist theorists (e.g. Iris Young, Johanna Brenner and Lise Vogel). Floyd has shown how Judith Butler's concept of performative gender can and should be historicized. Queer Marxists have welcomed the rise of intersectional analysis and focused on trans struggles as cutting-edge. Racism and imperialism are central preoccupations for them, drawing on Jasbir Puar's concept of homonationalism. At the same time, they all stress the importance of class and explore the sexual

dimensions of different concepts of Marxist political economy (e.g. reification (Floyd), deregulation (Sears), combined and uneven development, and long waves (Drucker)).

### **Precursors: earlier Marxist sexual politics**

Lauritsen, John and David Thorstad 1995, *The Early Homosexual Rights Movement (1864-1934)*, New York: Times Change.

Although Dan Healey's more recent book provides a more scholarly and thorough account of homosexuality in revolutionary Russia, Lauritsen and Thorstad's overview of the interactions between early socialist movements and homosexual activism is still sound and useful.

Drucker, Peter 1997, '[Gays and the Left : Scratching the Surface](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article11128)', *Against the Current* 68: 35-37, available at ESSF (article 11128):  
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article11128>.

A critical review of an anthology on early socialist movements and their attitudes towards homosexuality, which suggests directions for future research.

Rowbotham, Sheila 1977, 'Edward Carpenter: Prophet of the New Life', in Rowbotham and Jeffrey Weeks 1977, *Socialism and the New Life: The Personal and Sexual Politics of Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis*, London: Pluto Press, 1977.

A profile of an English leader of the early socialist movement who was also an open campaigner for homosexual freedom and the first president of the British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology.

Healey, Dan 2001, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

The definitive history of research, legislation and policy on homosexuality in the Russian Revolution and early Soviet Union.

Randall, Margaret 2000, 'To Change Our Own Reality and the World: A Conversation with Lesbians in Nicaragua', in Peter Drucker (ed.), *Different Rainbows*, London: Millivres/Gay Men's Press.

A dialogue among lesbian Sandinista militants that reveals how the FSLN's early intolerance was challenged both internationally and from within, with a significant measure of success.

Green, James N. 2000, 'Desire and Militancy: Lesbians, Gays, and the Brazilian Workers Party', in Peter Drucker (ed.), *Different Rainbows*, London: Millivres/Gay Men's Press.

———— 2012, '"Who Is the Macho who Wants to Kill Me?" Male Homosexuality, Revolutionary Masculinity, and the Brazilian Armed Struggle of the 1960s and 1970s', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 92, 3, 437-69.

The second article explores anti-lesbian/gay attitudes among Brazilian Guevarista guerrillas; the first is an account of lesbian/gay activism in the early PT.

## **Precursors: Marxism and lesbian/gay liberation**

Mieli, Mario 1980, *Homosexuality and Liberation: Elements of a Gay Critique*, London: Gay Men's Press. (A new updated issue will be/is available from Pluto  
<https://www.plutobooks.com/9780745399515/towards-a-gay-communism/>)

A pioneering and idiosyncratic work that draws both on the strength and theoretical originality at the time of the Italian far left and on Mieli's activism in the London Gay Liberation Front.

Fernbach, David 1981, *The Spiral Path: A Gay Contribution to Human Survival*, Boston/London: Alyson/Gay Men's Press.

Another leader of the London GLF, Fernbach explains the uniqueness of lesbian/gay identity under capitalism and lays out a strategy for social, sexual and ecological transformation. His Maoist background is manifest in his use of the 'national front' tactics of 1941-45 as a positive example.

Gough, Jamie and Mike MacNair 1985, *Gay Liberation in the Eighties*, London: Pluto Press.

Gough and MacNair's analysis of heterosexuality and homosexuality as forms of fetishism, which in some ways foreshadows Kevin Floyd's later exploration of sexual reification, lays the groundwork for their Marxist approach to lesbian/gay politics.

Feinberg, Leslie 1998, *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue*, Boston: Beacon Press.

Although the book does not make Feinberg's Marxism explicit, this founding text of trans liberation anticipates many later queer Marxist positions.

## **Precursors: Marxist approaches to lesbian/gay studies**

Marcuse, Herbert 1966, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, Boston: Beacon Press.

By far the outstanding work produced by the Freudian left, this book's concepts of 'the performance principle' (a specifically capitalist form of Freud's 'reality principle'), 'surplus' as opposed to 'socially necessary' repression, and 'repressive desublimation' have had a major influence not only on lesbian/gay liberation during the period of the New Left but also on many queer Marxists today.

D'Emilio, John 1983, 'Capitalism and Gay Identity', in Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson (eds.) 1983, *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, New York: Monthly Review Press, available at:  
<https://rosswolfe.files.wordpress.com/2016/06/john-demilio-capitalism-and-gay-identity.pdf>.

A seminal and widely influential essay linking gay identity with 'free labour' under capitalism.

Padgug, Robert 1989, 'Sexual Matters: Rethinking Sexuality in History', in Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey, Jr. (eds.) 1989, *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, New York: Penguin.

An early and insightful argument for a dialectical approach to the history of sexuality.

Ebert, Teresa 1996, 'The Matter of Materialism', and Donald Morton 1996, 'Changing the Terms: (Virtual) Desire and (Actual) Reality', in Morton (ed.), *The Material Queer: A LesBiGay Cultural*

Studies Reader, Boulder: Westview Press.

While somewhat sectarian in their dismissal of queer theory, these articles have a keen eye for its idealist failings and for its roots in the changing political economy of neoliberal capitalism.

Escoffier, Jeffrey 1997, 'The Political Economy of the Closet: Notes Towards an Economic History of Gay and Lesbian Life before Stonewall', in Amy Gluckman and Betsy Reed, *Homo Economics: Capitalism, Community and Lesbian and Gay Life*, London: Routledge.

A perceptive account of how the expansion of gay commercial scenes has segmented LGBTIQ communities by class, race and gender.

Valocchi, Steve 1999, 'The Class-Inflected Nature of Gay Identity', *Social Problems*, 46, 2: 207-24, available at:  
<http://web.archive.org/web/20010410191544/http://www.wcb.vcu.edu/wcb/schools/HAS/soc/nbryant/15/files/classandgayidentity.htm>.

Valocchi shows how the emergence of gay identity and the rise of lesbian/gay movements were inflected along class lines.

Drucker, Peter 2000, 'Introduction: Remapping Sexualities', and 'Reinventing Liberation: Strategic Challenges for Lesbian/Gay Movements', in Drucker (ed.), *Different Rainbows*, London: Millivres/Gay Men's Press; 'Reinventing Liberation' available at ESSF (article 4879), [Reinventing liberation: Strategic questions for lesbian/gay movements: http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article4879](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article4879).

The contributions of this introduction and conclusion were incorporated into and refined in Drucker's later queer Marxist book *Warped*, but they are still interesting expositions of the combined and uneven social construction of sexuality and of an anti-Eurocentrist, anti-imperialist sexual politics.

Hennessy, Rosemary 1994, 'Queer Theory, Left Politics', *Rethinking Marxism*, 7, 3: 85-111, available at:  
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/08935699408658114> (restricted access).

———— 2000, *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*. New York: Routledge.

———— 2006, 'Returning to Reproduction Queerly: Sex, Labor, Need', *Rethinking Marxism*, 18, 3: 387-95, available at:  
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08935690600748074> (restricted access).

(The book *Profit and Pleasure* is the best source for Hennessy's thought; the articles are included in case they are more easily accessible.)

Even if Hennessy does not identify in *Profit and Pleasure* as a queer Marxist, this landmark book is in many ways a founding text of queer Marxism, and her criticisms of queer theory and activism are shared by many later queer-identified Marxists. Besides a far-reaching synthesis of lesbian feminism with Marxism, the book shows the usefulness for sexual theory of e.g. Althusser's concept of overdetermination. It identifies a realm of 'outlawed needs', 'the monstrous outside to capitalism that haunts it', and calls for a critical examination of identities.

## Queer Marxism

Cohen, Cathy J. 1997, 'Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?', GLQ 3:4, 437-65, available at:  
<http://glq.dukejournals.org/content/3/4/437.citation> (restricted access).

While not explicitly Marxist, Cohen's article insightfully analyzes the promise and above all the pitfalls of queer theory and activism for a radical, anti-racist, class-aware politics.

Sears, Alan 2000, 'Queer in a Lean World', *Against the Current*, 89, available at:  
<http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/965>.

———— 2005, 'Queer Anti-Capitalism: What's Left of Lesbian and Gay Liberation?' *Science and Society*, 69, 1: 92-112, available at:  
[https://www.jstor.org/stable/40404230?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/40404230?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents).

Sears' groundbreaking work insists on the radical potential of queer politics even as it exposes the cooptation of the lesbian/gay mainstream in a neoliberal era of 'moral deregulation'.

Floyd, Kevin 1998, 'Making History: Marxism, Queer Theory, and Contradiction in the Future of American Studies', *Cultural Critique*, 40: 167-201.

———— 2006, 'Lukács and Sexual Humanism', *Rethinking Marxism*, 18, 3: 397-403, available at:  
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08935690600748108?src=recsys> (restricted access).

———— 2009, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

(The book *The Reification of Desire* is the best source for Floyd's thought; the articles are included in case they are more easily accessible.)

Floyd masterfully reveals the historical roots of Judith Butler's concept of performativity, applies Marxist concepts like totality and reification (particularly as understood by Lukács) to the study of sexuality, and insists on the political importance of 'the use of the body as a pleasurable means'. However, he ends up viewing sexual reification, like sexual objectification, as inevitable and in some ways positive.

Wolf, Sherry 2009, *Sexuality and Socialism: History, Politics and Theory of LGBT Liberation*, Chicago: Haymarket Books.

Wolf's book does not really fall under the heading of queer Marxism, since she is a harsh critic of queer theory and activism, averse to the word 'queer', and less critical of same-sex marriage than most queer-identified Marxists. Nevertheless, she gives a good Marxist account of the social construction of sexuality and a strong defence of independent working-class sexual politics.

Girard, Gabriel 2009, [-art14760]', ESSF (article 14760):  
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article14760>.

Girard lays out from a Marxist point of view the importance of e.g. Judith Butler's demonstration that not only gender but also sex itself are socially constructed.

Rosenberg, Jordana and Amy Villarejo 2012, 'Introduction: Queerness, Norms, Utopia', GLQ, 18, 1: 1-18, and 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: 127-47, available at: <http://glq.dukejournals.org/content/18/1.toc> (restricted access).

GLQ's special issue on the crisis, which includes both these pieces, was a high point of recent queer theory's attempts to engage with Marxism, even if most of the participants seemed to shrink from a full theoretical embrace of totality or a political commitment to a project of global transformation.

Arruzza, Cinzia 2013, *Dangerous Liaisons: The Marriages and Divorces of Marxism and Feminism*, London/Amsterdam/Pontypool: Resistance Books/IIRE/Merlin Press.

A recent exploration of Marxism and feminism that pays particular attention to the contributions of queer theory.

Camfield, David 2014, 'Theoretical Foundations of an Anti-Racist Queer Feminist Historical Materialism', *Critical Sociology*, available at: <http://crs.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/02/17/0896920513507790.abstract?rss=1&patientinform-links=yes&legid=spcrs;0896920513507790v1>.

Likewise, a contemporary overview that is particularly sensitive to queer issues.

Drucker, Peter 2010, 'The New Sexual Radicalism: Socialist Feminist Reflections on Queer Activism', *Against the Current* 146: 23-8: <https://www.solidarity-us.org/node/2803>  
Available at ESSF (article 17843), [The New Sexual Radicalism: http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article17843](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article17843)

———— 2014, 'La fragmentation des identités LGBT à l'ère du néolibéralisme', *Période*, available at: <http://revueperiode.net/la-fragmentation-des-identites-lgbt-a-lere-du-neoliberalisme/>.  
Available at ESSF (article 44222), [ar 44222: http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article44222](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article44222)

———— 2014, 'Conceptions of Sexual Freedom in Marcuse, Foucault and Rubin', in *Journal of the International Network of Sexual Ethics and Politics (INSEP)*, vol. 2, no. 2, available at ESSF (article 35687), [LGBT movements over the past 40 years and the conceptions of sexual freedom in Marcuse, Foucault and Rubin: http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article35687](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article35687).

———— 2015, *Warped: Gay Normality and Queer Anti-Capitalism*, Leiden/Chicago: Brill/Haymarket.

———— 2015, 'Gay Normality and Queer Transformation', in *Zapruder World: International Journal for the History of Social Conflict*, vol. 2, available at: <http://zapruderworld.org/content/peter-drucker-gay-normality-and-queer-transformation>.  
Also available on ESSF (article 35249), [Gay Normality and Queer Transformation - "The problem is not so much winning and holding on to victories, as the form the victories take": http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article35249](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article35249)

(The book *Warped* is the best single source for Drucker's queer Marxist thought; the articles are included in case they are more easily accessible.)

*Warped* is an ambitious book that tackles several different projects at once: an illumination of sexual history through the concept of 'same-sex formations', linked specifically under capitalism to different



regimes of accumulation; a Marxist account of ‘homonormativity’ (Lisa Duggan) and ‘homonationalism’ (Jasbir Puar) that links them to neoliberalism and neoliberal globalization; and a primer of radical queer politics that advocates both bringing a working-class, feminist, anti-racist perspective to sexual issues and queering class-based and other mass social movements.

Liu, Petrus 2015, *Queer Marxism in Two Chinas*, Durham: Duke University Press.

An intriguing book that juxtaposes Taiwan’s radical queer theorists and activists with queers in the People’s Republic who are still wrestling with the legacy of Maoism.

Alderson, David, 2016, *Sex, Needs and Queer Culture: From Liberation to the Post-Gay*, London: Zed.

Alderson argues that while capitalism is ‘progressive for queers’ inasmuch as it ‘renders sex profane’, it is characterized under the conditions of the neoliberal ‘diversified dominant’ by (in a Foucauldian twist on Marcuse) ‘repressive incitement’. He is attuned (like Floyd but unlike Hennessy or Drucker) to what he considers the upside of reification.

Lewis, Holly, 2016, *The Politics of Everybody: Feminism, Queer Theory and Marxism at the Intersection*, London: Zed.

*The Politics of Everybody* is an important addition to the growing body of queer Marxist work, which makes especially valuable contributions to the understanding of the significance of social reproduction theory for sexuality and of this theory’s its implications for trans struggles. While unlike Sherry Wolf Lewis identifies as a queer Marxist feminist and welcomes the critiques of homonationalism and of transnormativity, Lewis like Wolf rejects the related concept of homonormativity and is not very critical of same-sex marriage.

Drucker, Peter 2016, ‘Homonationalism, Heteronationalism, and LGBTI Rights in the EU’, Public Seminar, available at:

<http://www.publicseminar.org/2016/08/homonationalism-heteronationalism-and-lgbti-rights-in-the-eu/#.WISfn4V9G3c>.

Coining the concept of ‘heteronationalism’ (the deployment of anti-LGBTI prejudice in defence of national identities perceived as threatened), this piece argues for a queer internationalist response to the escalating vicious circle of ‘pro-’ and anti-LGBTI nationalisms.

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## **P.S.**

\* Original publication in English at:

<http://www.historicalmaterialism.org/reading-guides/queer-marxism-peter-drucker>

\* Available on ESSF in both languages, this piece was originally published in French at:

<http://revueperiode.net/guide-de-lecture-pour-un-marxisme-queer/>