

ATLANTIS

Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies

39.2 (December 2017): 247-251

ISSN 0210-6124 | e-ISSN 1989-6840

DOI: 10.28914/ATLANTIS-2017-39.2.18

David Alderson. 2016. *Sex, Needs & Queer Culture. From Liberation to the Post-Gay*. London: Zed Books. 316 pp. ISBN: 978-1-78360-513-2.

JOSÉ MARÍA YEBRA PERTUSA

Universidad de Zaragoza

jyebra@unizar.es

In *Sex, Needs & Queer Culture. From Liberation to the Post-Gay*, David Alderson defends a humanist conviction whereby “the subject is not merely discursively produced, but a substantial entity in its own right” (18).¹ In opposition to the queer performative principle, the book is based on the reality principle, mostly through its alignment with cultural materialism and socialist politics. Drawing on Alan Sinfield (1998), Alderson calls for an organic role for the critic, well beyond the straightjacketed limits of academic tradition. That the critic intervenes socially does not convert him into a protagonist, but into a part of a relational community.

At first glance, *Sex, Needs & Queer Culture* strongly recalls Alan Sinfield’s *Gay and After* (1998). The limitations that might have resulted from Sinfield’s influence are, though, offset because Alderson updates cultural materialism to twenty-first-century demands. Thus he rejects James Penney’s judgmental reading of queer theory in *After Queer Theory* (2013), and he tries to integrate queer poetics of subcultural solidarity as evinced by Judith Halberstam (2005), despite the coercive radicalism and exclusion often claimed by queer theory (Alderson 207, 228). Alderson’s discourse is not ambiguous, though. It is, I would say, strategic since it responds to a panorama far more complex than the one the Marxist referents he is indebted to had to grapple with.

Michael Warner’s *The Trouble with Normal* (1999) and Jose Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009) previously addressed the anti-assimilation agenda *Sex, Needs & Queer Culture* endorses. Holly Lewis’s *The Politics of Everybody: Feminism, Queer Theory and Marxism at the Intersection* (2016) also merged (post)identity politics and Marxist politics. However, Alderson’s study gives a particularly comprehensive, diachronic and insightful analysis, addressing

¹ The research carried out for the writing of this review is part of a project financed by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (MINECO) (code FFI2015-65775-P). The author is also grateful for the support of the Government of Aragón and the European Social Fund (ESF) (code H05).

both a rich theoretical framework and practical elucidation. It explores the complex relation between queer culture and capitalism, and more specifically neoliberalism. It starts with the gay liberation movement, when capitalism was perceived as heteronormative, and moves on to explore the marketization of queerness and a post-gayness that distrusts the socio-economic normativization of queer culture. With this purpose, Alderson firstly defines his socialist humanist framework through Herbert Marcuse, Raymond Williams and Alan Sinfield, which he does so as to determine whether radical stands are still present in (queer) counterculture and subculture under neoliberalism.

The introductory chapter outlines some key issues: the politics of resistance, the need for theory, the author's reservations about gayness as a class-inflected concept and about queer anti-humanism, socio-economic relations and their cultural manifestations as determined by Marcuse's "repressive tolerance" ([1965] 1969). From the beginning, however, Alderson makes the difference between old Marxist "one-dimensionality" (Marcuse [1964] 1991) and (his) more nuanced, albeit also politically committed, cultural materialism (27).

Chapter one, "Transitions," deals with the problematic transition from modernity to postmodernity, or rather the way the process has been approached by Fredric Jameson and Marianne Dekoven. However, Alderson firstly focuses on how their adaptation of Williams's forces of power and resistance helps to understand the ultimate shift, namely that of neoliberalism. In this sense, the critic speaks of "diversified dominant"—undoubtedly one of the main contributions of the book—to address the assimilation of sexual dissidence in a standardizing market. Indeed, Alderson opts for neoliberal capitalism rather than postmodernism as the hegemonic post-Fordist paradigm. The main problem with this chapter is its density. The theoretical framework provided is as useful as it is intricate, which delays his discussion of the ultimate goal, namely sex and its discourses. Sex is primarily related to Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* ([1956] 1974), which acknowledges how social control is exerted through "heterosacramentalism." In other words, *Sex, Needs & Queer Culture* contributes to the field by focusing on the replacement of former dominant bourgeois societies by a "diversified dominant" that, despite being flexible, is immersed in "cultural integrity and conservatism" (91).

The second chapter—"Is Capitalism Progressive (for Queers)?"—is also of a contextualizing nature and particularly dense. Drawing on his post-Marxist affiliation, Alderson analyses what the meaning of progress(ive) is under neoliberalism so as to eventually explore the commodification of masculine desire. To reach this point, some theoretical issues are raised, namely, John D'Emilio's theory on capitalism and the expansion of gay lifestyles, Marcuse's "false needs," the tensions between neoliberalism and neoconservatism and between freedom and commitment under capitalism. Again, the theoretical framework is massive and occasionally convoluted. Yet, the last point of the chapter brilliantly describes the politics of queer assimilation. Alderson points

to “repressive incitement,” another key issue, which refers to the assimilation of sex as fun (147). The oxymoron of the concept addresses how capitalism confers queers some freedom as long as they abide by the rules of exchange value and the private.

Chapters three and four run much more smoothly, mixing theory with textual evidence. As Alderson points out, they deal with “a more typically cultural materialist preoccupation with the very category of culture” (31); chapter three deals with counterculture and chapter four with subculture. In fact, the author tries hard to set out the differences between both concepts, as they are often used interchangeably. “Feeling Radical: Versions of Counterculture” explains how counterculture was born out of the leftist movements of the sixties in the US. In opposition to European working-class socialism, American counterculture relied on a middle-class youth working as an idealistic force of resistance against the Establishment. In this light, Theodore Roszack’s radicalism is paradigmatic of US counterculture as a romantic and personalist philosophy. Another Marxist oxymoron, Marcuse’s “repressive tolerance,” serves Alderson to address countercultural products. This is the case of Robert Baker’s *Tom and Pete* (1993), which shows the radical anger the management of the AIDS crisis triggered among queers. Informed by Lee Edelman and Judith Halberstam’s discourses on queer authenticity, countercultural radicalism is also present in John Cameron Mitchell’s *Shortbus* (2006) and Manuel Puig’s *The Kiss of the Spiderwoman* (1976). The fact that Sinfield had already examined Puig’s text (1998, 45-54) may lead one to think that Alderson’s analysis is less valuable. However, *The Kiss of the Spiderwoman* proves to be too tempting a text to be ignored by a queer cultural materialist analysis. Moreover, Alderson puts forward a multilayered reading that opens the framework of liberatory struggle up well beyond his predecessors’ scope (221).

The last chapter—“Subculture and Postgay Dynamics”—examines subculture in the postgay era. Unlike middle-class counterculture, subculture constitutes the weakening of control of the youth from a subordinate class (226). Alan Sinfield’s subcultural materialism, as one of engagement, as opposed to identity affirmation, inspires this chapter. Hence, the emphasis that Dick Hebdige’s seminal *Subculture* (1979) and Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005) put on the radicalism of performativity is displaced by the reality principle of subcultural materialism. To address this issue Alderson analyses the television series *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005). Though mostly celebratory, the series opens the debate on assimilation, cosmopolitanism and neoliberal appropriation of queerness, as well as testifying to the narrowing of the subculture it represents (253). In moving on to Mark Ravenhill’s plays, Alderson addresses the postgay, particularly the loss of freedom of queers under the gay label. As usual, Alderson’s discourse is nuanced and, beyond one-dimensionality and assimilation, he still advocates for change from a humanistic stance. What I consider particularly valuable in his discourse is its sincerity and pragmatism in trying to adapt cultural materialism to the status quo, particularly the erosion of subculture and the inscription of queer culture in the “diversified dominant” (237, 269).

In “Postscripts,” Alderson makes reference to *Cucumber* (2015), a series where the boundary between gay and straight is conspicuously dissolving, though not exempt of anxiety. Indeed, the series bears witness to sex having become a weapon against repressive incitement. Although the author addresses how subcultural life has changed in recent decades, a more systematic comparison between *Cucumber* and *Queer as Folk* would shed more light on this issue.

The book closes with the author’s characteristic nuanced, yet firm, discourse. Assuming that freedom of choice is akin to the compulsion of repressive incitement (291), he has no problem in questioning his alleged coreligionists. This is the case with György Luckács’s downgrading of sexuality as a political weapon and James Penney’s criticism of the depoliticized consumerism allegedly fostered by queer theory. Instead, Alderson still believes in the possibilities granted by (queer) subculture. In a rather utopian fashion, he concludes by proposing spaces and projects that disengage queers from neoliberalism.

All in all, *Sex, Needs & Queer Culture* constitutes a thorough, brilliant analysis of queerness and the post-gay from a cultural materialist perspective that will illuminate readers interested in the field. Indeed, despite a clear commitment to socialism, the study escapes black-or-white readings of the politics of power and resistance, as it is patent in its challenging analysis of counterculture and subculture.

WORKS CITED

- ESTEBAN MUÑOZ, Jose. 2009. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York UP.
- HALBERSTAM, Judith. 2005. *In a Queer Time and Place*. New York: New York UP.
- HEBDIGE, Dick. 1979. *Subculture*. London and New York: Routledge.
- LEWIS, Holly. 2016. *The Politics of Everybody: Feminism, Queer Theory and Marxism at the Intersection*. London: Zed Books.
- MARCUSE, Herbert. (1956) 1974. *Eros and Civilization. A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- . (1964) 1991. *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- . (1965) 1969. “Repressive Tolerance.” In *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, by Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore Jr. and Herbert Marcuse, 95-137. Boston: Beacon Press.
- PENNEY, James. 2013. *After Queer Theory: The Limits of Sexual Politics*. London: Pluto Press.
- SINFIELD, Alan. 1998. *Gay and After*. London: Serpent’s Tail.
- WARNER, Michael. 1999. *The Trouble with Normal. Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.

Received 27 February 2017

Revised version accepted 17 July 2017

Jose María Yebra Pertusa is a Lecturer at the University of Zaragoza (Spain). He has published articles on British literature such as “‘A Terrible Beauty’: Ethics, Aesthetics and the ‘Trauma of Gayness’ in Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Line of Beauty*,” or “Transgenerational and Intergenerational Family Trauma in Colm Tóibín’s *The Blackwater Lightship* and “Three Friends.” His research interests include Postmodernism, Trauma and Queer Studies.

Address: Departamento de Filología Inglesa. Facultad de Ciencias Humanas y de la Educación, despacho 100. Universidad de Zaragoza. Calle Don Valentín Cardenera, 4. 22003, Huesca, Spain. Tel: +34 976761000; ext. 851739.

