

After Queer Theory

James Penney. London: Pluto Press, 2014

Reviewed by Ian Sinclair

An initial inspection of the alleged ambit of *After Queer Theory*, offered in the introduction, suggests a greater reach of the overall argument than materialises within the text itself. Penney claims “queer theory has run its own course, made obsolete by the elaboration of its own logic within capitalism” (p. 1), but arguments or evidence in support of this claim are in scant supply. This is not to imply that there exists no reason for at least some sympathy with Penney’s point of departure: queer theory, if an isolated theoretical or political outlook, becomes self-defeating, and is left susceptible to co-option within the logics of capitalism. At best, queer theory replicates the ‘lifestyle politics’ it sought to overcome, with the marketisation of desire being but one symptom. At worst, queer theory has become domesticated and “alarmingly distanced from the critique of capitalism or any thorough-going social change” (p. 2). Penney’s effort to rethink a collective politics in light of this might be welcomed, and indeed necessary. But, attempting to overcome the isolation of political issues and struggles is not itself a novel venture, and it is at times unclear what Penney is specifically adding to the debate, save for a re-assertion of a Marxist class-based politics.

Part of the problem is that the arguments that Penney offers in order to rethink a collective politics that is also beholden to a critique of capitalism are often unsubstantiated. Claims are bereft of argumentative force, and instead depend upon a seemingly unwavering fidelity to specific traditions of thought, resulting in a theoretical parochialism. Specifically, Penney asserts that ‘queer’ ought be read in an explicitly Marxist and psychoanalytic vein. Marxism because Penney “foregrounds the strong, if not absolute, determination of sexual identities by economically structured social relations” (p. 4). Regarding psychoanalysis, Penney goes even further, positing that “All valuable points queer theory has made about human sexuality were previously made by Freud and developed in (aspects of) the psychoanalytic tradition” (p. 5).

I will leave the figuration of Marxism to one side for the moment and suggest only that, at points, Penney seems to advocate a view in which the mode of production is the strongest determinant of sexuality and sexual identity (p.64, p. 86–88), though I shall admit this relies on a particular reading of his statement regarding the ‘economically structured social relations’ (p. 4) read in tandem with his briefer comments on the mode of production. Instead, I want to focus on Penney’s resolute

emphasis on psychoanalysis because the issues that emerge as a result of this adherence are symptomatic of some general issues latent in the text. If Penney's claim that all *valuable* contributions of queer theory can be detected in psychoanalytical theory *first*, he can go full circle and argue any claims that do not originate in psychoanalysis, and relevant theories of it, are not valuable. Even if Penney is correct in this claim, it does not follow that psychoanalysis is the exclusive theoretical outlook through which statements regarding sexuality can be issued. This view would only impede a collective politics by refusing the possibility that shared political trajectories can begin from different theoretical avenues. I would argue that Penney's claim is quite simply wrong, if only because many examples of queer theory are explicitly hostile to psychoanalytical theory and the premises on which it depends. I will not engage in a taxonomy of names in order to convince the reader of this point, but hope that, at the very least, the need to treat Penney's claim with greater suspicion than his bombast allows is self-evident.

Part of the problem in assessing Penney's attempted critique of queer theory is that it unclear what he understands queer theory to be. Even if queer is taken to be a term that resists definition, by its very character, this does not mean that nothing can be said of it. There are serious efforts to clarify the varied and muddled usage of 'queer' (Walters 2005), and Penney would do well to be more attentive and historically sensitive to its diverse instantiations. At once he wants to make claims about *all* that has dared been called queer, whilst engaging with only a threadbare patchwork of specific examples in order to support his case. Either all that can be located under the signifier 'queer' share a common feature or features that Penney can indicate and then criticise *or* there are differences within queer theory such that Penney cannot get away with treating it as unproblematic term in need of no further clarification.

I would argue that Penney's book cannot be read as a sustained engagement with queer theory, but is rather a defence of psychoanalytical theory and Marxism made in light of reading specific queer *theories*. This is evident in his propensity to measure (queer) arguments according to the degree to which they accord with psychoanalytic propositions. If there is no degree of overlap between the theory under consideration and the relevant bits of psychoanalysis, the theory is given decidedly scant regard. For example, when discussing the work of Sara Ahmed, Penney writes that her conceptualisation of space, within a 'queer phenomenological approach', "when viewed from the psychoanalytic perspective, fails to take account of the effects of the unconscious" (p. 16). I am not concerned with whether this is true of Ahmed, or phenomenology in general, because it *does not matter*. What matters is that the claim can be made about *any* theory or theoretical approach that does not make reference to the unconscious.

This is not to say that Penney makes no serious engagement with, for example, Ahmed, or offers no perceptive comments about her approach. I want to suggest only that where insightful commentary is present, it is sometimes undermined by the presumed validity of psychoanalytic premises. In order to take seriously Penney's argument that the unconscious affects our relation to our phenomenological experience and the signifiers with which we associate experience, one has to already assume that that is what the unconscious does. It is not only with Ahmed that 'the unconscious' serves as a litmus test of conceptual legitimacy. Later in the text, Penney writes of

another supposed exemplar of queer theory, “From the psychoanalytic perspective, Floyd’s argument fails to consider how Freud’s idea of the unconscious throws a wrench into the theoretical machine [of Floyd’s argument]” (p. 84). Penney does not expand on this point because the strategy of the rhetoric is the same: reference to a lack of Freudian foundation is taken to invalidate, or at least ‘throw a wrench’ into the respective argument.

Psychoanalysis *might* have important contributions to the theorisation of sexuality and sexual politics, but if this is the case it has to be defended on its own terms. One of Penney’s defences as to psychoanalytic origins of queer is that “in any event, we already know all about [queer] from Freud’s strong theses about a constitutive bisexuality in the subject and the drive’s resistance to reproductive normalisation” (p. 4). The question here is do *we*? Indeed, who is the ‘we’ that Penney represents? Penney’s own commitments that prompt him to make such claims are not, necessarily, at fault. What is problematic is the ease with which Penney invites divisiveness in challenging hitherto existing queer theory. At one point in the book, Penney bemoans that a “‘badly’ educated, working-class lesbian toiling away at several part-time jobs to support her family” and a “crypto-gay Iranian man contemplating a sex-change operation” are unlikely to side with “bourgeois and staunchly secularist queer movement” (p. 68). Rhetorically, Penney might have a point; but this is stated at the end of a chapter containing dense discussion on Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, and entirely without irony. Presumably, the working-class lesbian and crypto-gay Iranian male would be better served by lengthy discussions of, for example, *jouissance* and the Big Other.

Whilst alluding to the need to combine a critique of capitalism and socialist ethos with queer theory, Penney offers little in way of elaboration to this end. Unfortunately, the short-sightedness that characterises his discussions of psychoanalysis also besets his attempts to show the necessity of Marxism in developing a more radical queer theory. Opening a chapter asking, “Is there a queer Marxism”, Penney lambasts the way in which queer theory has become commodified, manifest in repetitious and banal textbooks and ‘fashionable’ lecture circuits. At no point does Penney consider that the institutionalisation of which he speaks is not peculiar to queer theory; Marxism itself is susceptible to similar criticism. More problematic is Penney’s reconstruction of the relation, or lack of, between queer politics and Marxism. Citing Teresa Ebert, Penney states that queer theory has “repressed the historical memory of the inaugural break with the Marxist tradition” (p. 72). Of course, Marxists and Socialists are exonerated for being at all responsible for this occurrence, and it is *they* who have been waiting for the queers to return to the fold. The history of socialism, Marxism, and sexual politics is more complicated than Penney’s narrative, pivoted around “authentic socialist praxis” (p. 2) allows. Given Penney’s own references to, for example, the post-Marxism of Laclau and Mouffe, it is surprising that he does not acknowledge the relegation of sexual movements, amongst others, as secondary to class struggle as contributing to the ‘inaugural break with Marxism’ as not just a theoretical possibility but also a historical occurrence (see Parker 1993: 21–23 and Seidman 1993: 107).

Penney replicates the subordination of issues of sexuality to economic issues rather than show the imbrication. He states of the book, *The Pleasure of the Text*,

that "the methodological foregrounding of sexuality is objectively bourgeois" because sexuality cannot matter if "one isn't sure where the next meal is coming from" (p. 93). As much caution should be taken to avoid the pitfalls of identity politics wherein individual feelings of want and desire become self-legitimised sites of political struggle, the avenue Penney points to too easily leads to the rejection of any concerns that are not immediately related to economic well-being. If Penney is correct that "the satisfaction of basic needs is still *the* primary problem of day-to-day life" (p. 96), one wonders why sex is of political concern *at all*, let alone to Penney? It is not that economic or material disparity is not a central concern that must be overcome to the end of radical social change, or that inequality of wealth does not intersect with sexuality in particular ways, but that, to paraphrase Iris Marion Young, oppression can take many forms, not just in terms of economic repression. To be committed to an ideal of social justice or radical transformation, all forms of oppression are to be combatted without *predetermining* which is of most significance (Young 1990: 39–65). It is not clear whether Penney is suggesting there is no form of oppression that is not always already linked to the economic aspect of society, or that those which do not correspond to economic concerns are simply not important.

Although Penney's own reference to "epistemological and methodological centrality of economic organisation" (p. 87) offers little more than an orthodox view of Marxism, there are instructive passages that extract the relation between sexual identity and economic logics of capitalism. This is particularly the case where Penney suggests that (queer) identity itself has become a site of profit. Unfortunately, his insight on this point is undermined when used to suggest that 'queer' has no escape from the catch of capitalism, whether in terms of maintained zones of commerce ('the gay scene') or patterns of urban migration that attract the 'well-to-do homosexual' to the upmarket areas of town. He writes "the evidence suggests that self-identified homosexuals and queers in [the post-industrial global North] demonstrate average earnings significantly above the norm" (p. 87). There is no instruction as to what 'the evidence' is. Whether or not he is correct, the insinuation that prosperity is near intrinsic to gay or queer identity overlooks the more harrowing history of gentrification, sexuality, and material wealth; particularly within North America during the AIDS epidemic (Schulman 2012 *esp* pp. 25–40). Penney is most perceptive when he states that "not everyone can afford to come out" (p. 87) and that to come out "implies tacit acceptance of the mainstream commercial gay-queer culture to which any queer Marxism worth of the name should stand opposed" (p. 87). Although we would need to know what this mainstream culture is in order for the point to stand, what I think can be fruitfully read from this is that the articulation of identity is, in part, subject to material conditions and access to material resources. This would have been a point worth exploring, but instead Penney is content to state, at least of the book he is suggesting, "there's a glaring lack of evidence to show that the queer phenomenon, in concrete class terms, is anything but bourgeois" (p. 88).

It is striking that where evidence ought to be offered in support of a particular point, often we are left to take the claim at face value without any demonstrable reason. The worst example is perhaps Penney's discussion of the neo-Nazi David Copeland, who successfully bombed the Admiral Duncan pub in Soho in 1999. Penney writes "It doesn't require an investment in psychoanalysis to think that in det-

onating the bomb, the perpetrator seeks unknowingly to cleanse himself of his own unconscious 'queer' sexual fantasies" (p. 13). A fidelity to psychoanalysis might not be necessary, though it might help, but at least *some* form of reasoning to support this point is needed to avoid this claim being little more than *ad hoc* reckoning.

As a collection of essays offering psychoanalytic readings of particular theorists and theories, one might find passages that are useful engagements. The lattermost chapters, engaging with Deleuze and Guattari, and Edelman, represent some of the most tightly-argued sections of the book, and engage in a close reading of the respective theorists, and offer immanent critique. However, as a treatise on queer theory that professes to transcend the limits of queer, *After Queer Theory* falls far short of the mark. Penney's insistence that psychoanalysis and Marxism are the exclusive avenues through which sexuality should be thought is not only an unnecessary limitation to a serious engagement with queer theory, but also taken as an *a priori* starting point that fails to recognise its own limits.

References

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