

A Queer Classical Marxism

written by Peter Drucker | August 11, 2025



Throughout the development of queer Marxism over the past fifteen years, Alan Sears has been a constant presence in the field—in fact since even before queer Marxism took coherent shape. He has engaged in constructive dialogue with all its leading figures and their different approaches from a wide range of angles, from Kevin Floyd’s pioneering application of György Lukács’s concept of reification to gender and sexuality, to my focus on the periodization of capitalism and its different “same-sex formations,” to Holly Lewis’s use of social reproduction theory to illuminate the role of gendered bodies and especially transgender bodies.¹

Going back to the start of the twenty-first century, Sears himself has consistently linked the study of sexuality to the foundations of Marxism. He has explored the sexual implications of neoliberalism in “moral deregulation.” He has shown how struggles for sexual liberation are an integral part of the endeavor to found the “next new left,” following the faded lefts of the 1920s/1930s and 1960s/1970s.² He has also increasingly foregrounded his debt to racialized queer scholars, with a particular emphasis on Indigenous activism and theory in the Canadian state. Throughout his work he has been distinguished by a steadfast commitment to a classical though contemporary Marxism.

Alienation

Sears’s latest book, his major contribution to queer Marxism to date, evokes in its title Herbert Marcuse’s still-crucial *Eros and Civilization* and deserves a place alongside it. Sears’s book shows its classical credentials above all through its focus on alienation. Despite the prominence of alienation in Marx’s own work, the concept was eclipsed in the Second and Third Internationals. It reemerged in Marxist debates from the mid-twentieth century in efforts to move beyond social democracy and Stalinism, particularly following the rediscovery of the young Marx. Yet it remained controversial, notably because of Louis Althusser’s insistence that the concept predated Marx’s “epistemological break” and had no place in Marx’s mature scientific thought. While Sears does not go into these old Marxological debates, he implicitly upholds a vision of alienation as central to the entirety of Marx’s work, including *Capital* itself.

While past Marxist discussions of alienation were mainly philosophical—about human beings’ alienation from nature and one another—or economic—about workers’ alienation from the process and product of labor—Sears makes the concept broader, including people’s alienation from their bodies and sexualities. “The project of this book is to locate making love within the broader panoply of human making,” including sexual alienation, he writes. The “everyday compulsion and violence shaping the contemporary organization of gender and sexuality” is an “anti-queer logic set deep in ... the alienation of labor at the heart of the system” (3). Linking sexual alienation to productive alienation may seem “at first sight ... a bit of a stretch,” he concedes, but not when alienation is seen not just in paid employment but also in unpaid reproductive labor (“caregiving, cleaning and cooking”) (4).

Sears describes the organization of sexuality under capitalism as “erotic enclosure” (40). Sex is “confined to the margins of the day” (42), “often under cover of darkness, fueled by only the depleted energy left over after completing the work required to sustain survival” (6). To fuel consumption while sustaining production, “[t]he moral regulation of the working class in capitalist societies involves a complex and shifting balance between constraining and unleashing desire” (89). The resulting sex is like processed food, a poor simulacrum. Its truth is to be found in pornography and sex work. The “money shot” in pornography reflects the “orgasmic imperative” imposed on sex in these conditions (78). Sex work is “one of a range of survival strategies in conditions of alienation that compel the dispossessed to trade on their human capacities” (52).

Neoliberalism—here *Eros and Alienation* draws on insights Sears has been deepening for twenty years—specifically, intensifies the capitalist alienation of sexuality, in which laboring, disabled, and racialized bodies are seen as lesser and non-erotic. Yet it has also been a period of growing gay normality. A fair proportion of gay men and lesbians can manage today to fit into the pattern of sexual liberalism, which assumes a “contract frame” of fake equality (61). In this frame formal consent ignores and flattens out the complexities of desire that “can flare up and be followed by a change of heart in the space of a single breath” (to quote Jacqueline Rose) (77). As long as both partners say “Yes” to sex and neither stops consenting, they are both supposed to be going along with whatever happens. This is assumed to override the realities of racism, power differentials, and other forms of inequality, and if a participant is left feeling used and unfulfilled, well, they should have remembered to “let the buyer beware.” Real human desire gives way under capitalism to trading in “sexual allure as alienable property” (66), and once the bait has been swallowed the deal is done. In the absence of a community bound together and sustained by a commitment to love as a dimension of collective life-making, people are left to their own devices and frequently disappointed by sexual encounters’ failure to lead to the dreamed-of, enduring romantic partnership.

Nature

One of the most outstanding parts of *Eros and Alienation* is its pathbreaking foundation of a queer ecology. Sears relies for this on Neil Smith’s distinction between “first” and “second nature.” In both cases humans are part of nature, and human production and reproduction are a metabolic interaction with the rest of nature. In first nature, however, an “ecology of intimacy” knits together household, workshop, and language in a cohesive way of life (to quote Indigenous theorist Leane Simpson) (18/105). In second nature, capitalism undermines this harmony, producing a “metabolic rift” (a concept ascribed to Marx by John Bellamy Foster).

Sears queers this concept of second nature by citing New York’s Central Park Ramble and other urban “natural” spaces as examples of a kind of romanticized human creation (described by Marxist ecologist Andreas Malm as “relative wilderness”), well suited as gay male cruising grounds and “erotic oases” of white masculinity (114–15). Without “networks of mutuality [this is] a new kind of loneliness,” inhabited by new kinds of bodies. In capitalist second nature, bodies are valued that look like products, and people are shamed when their bodies are not “shaped by training, diet and fashion” (107). In this world, Black feminist Roxane Gay has described her own real body as “wildly undisciplined” (120). But disciplined hot bodies, Sears notes, “are literally unsustainable, captured at a transient moment of aesthetic peak” (121). The gyms that turn out desirable bodies reproduce the logic of factories and depend on unhealthy practices, “beating nature out of their physique” (127).

We can no more return to first nature than we can live sustainably in second nature, Sears concludes. He endorses Edward Said’s concept of a third nature, in which connection to the earth (and our bodies) is recovered on a new basis, including reparation for ecological destruction, redress for theft of land, and newly sustainable relationships with our bodies. Only in this way can

reciprocity be reestablished among humans and with the natural environment.

Utopia

This utopia of third nature is also, for Sears, a queer utopia. Citing José Muñoz, he sees queerness “as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality” (3). Not merely a synonym for LGBTQ, queer is “a way into seeing a better world we have not yet attained” (143). “This liberation needs to go beyond transgression to transformation,” Sears contends (21). He draws on a range of thinkers to define his utopian vision. For example, he embraces Dennis Altman’s injunction to “take enjoyment from the total body” (142). Drawing on M.E. O’Brien’s excellent book *Family Abolition*,³ he envisions a world of love as “shared practices of mutual care” (136). Given the increased role of family in capitalist hegemony under neoliberalism, this necessarily entails abolition of the actually existing family: in O’Brien’s words, “The family’s horrors are vast, its abuses widespread, its logic coercive” (26). Journeying from Edward Carpenter to sci-fi utopias (Ursula le Guin, Marge Piercy, Samuel Delany) and from Rosemary Hennessy to bell hooks, Sears continually reaffirms that love is crucial. And sexuality can provide “tastes of freedom” (29), especially once we break with a transactional approach to it.

Beyond that, Sears makes no claim to having a road map toward a glorious future of sexual liberation. Instead he embraces a perspective of “permanent sexual revolution” (151), in which a society-wide seizure of power from below can open the way to finding new ways of life through ongoing debate and experimentation.

Meanwhile...

The timing of *Eros and Alienation*, completed before Trump’s re-election, prevented Sears from tackling more than glancingly the newest immediate threats and challenges to LGBTIQ liberation. He acknowledges in his introduction that the rise of the far right, especially the current deluge of transphobia and racism, makes LGBTIQ normality “fragile and embattled” (2), and the gains of LGBTIQ movements very much contested. Responding to this challenge will require extensive discussion, since the survival and refoundation of the queer left is at stake in this fight.

As I have argued elsewhere,⁴ a full-fledged queer contribution to the fight against the far right will require a sharp break with the homonormativity defined by Lisa Duggan: the mimicry of the gender divide and straight families that allows the right to hold out the possibility of toleration to *some* gays and lesbians, but banishes trans and nonbinary people to outer darkness. Fighting the far right also demands a no-holds-barred battle against the homonationalism—LGBTIQ complicity with imperialism—defined by Jasbir Puar.⁵ This break with homonationalism is being splendidly exemplified in radical queer participation in solidarity with Palestine. Since Sears has himself been active in Palestine solidarity, I’m confident that he would agree with me on this. I have no doubt that he can make a major contribution to this discussion, linking up with and deepening his analysis in *Eros and Alienation*. I very much look forward to reading and engaging with his reflections along these lines.

Notes

1. Kevin Floyd, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Peter Drucker, *Warped: Gay Normality and Queer Anticapitalism* (Leiden/Chicago: Brill/Haymarket, 2014/2015); Holly Lewis, *The Politics of Everybody: Feminism, Queer Theory, and Marxism at the Intersection* (London: Bloomsbury, 2024, rev. ed.).

2. Alan Sears, “Queer in a Lean World,” *Against the Current* 89 (Nov.–Dec. 2000),

againstthecurrent.org/atc089/p965/; Alan Sears, *The Next New Left: A History of the Future* (Halifax, NS: Fernwood, 2014).

3. M.E. O'Brien, *Family Abolition: Capitalism and the Communizing of Care* (London: Pluto Press, 2023).

4. Peter Drucker, "Far-Right Antisemitism and Heteronationalism: Building Jewish and Queer Resistance," *Historical Materialism* (Vol. 32, No. 1, 2024).

5. Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003); Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).