

Book Review: Sex, Needs and Queer Culture: From Liberation to the Post-Gay by David Alderson

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*If corporate backing for Pride events is one example of queer subcultures becoming increasingly commercialised, does this threaten the capacity to resist or might capitalism be progressive for queer subjects? In **Sex, Needs and Queer Culture: From Liberation to the Post-Gay**, David Alderson draws upon the work of Herbert Marcuse and Raymond Williams to examine processes of assimilation and resistance as well as the distinctions between countercultural and subcultural movements. Although she questions the particular focus on gay male culture, Sofia Ropak Hewson welcomes this rich and absorbing text for probing into the present relationship between capitalism, queer culture and political resistance.*

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

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David Alderson's new book, *Sex, Needs and Queer Culture: From Liberation to the Post-Gay*, is concerned with analysing processes of assimilation and resistance, countercultures and subcultures as well as the historical and political contexts in which they have developed. Alderson's book is introduced with an autobiographical aside, and his voice and personal history are welcomingly present in the text. *Sex, Needs and Queer Culture* is rich and engaging, contending with a wide sweep of queer history and, crucially, attempting to understand the intertwined relationship between capitalism, queer culture and political resistance.

Alderson's dominant theme is contemporary capitalism's feigned embrace of 'difference', which obscures oppositional political praxis. The queer community appears to be divided into Michael Warner's 'stigmaphobes' and 'stigmaphiles' (borrowing from Erving Goffman), referring to vying demands for assimilation and for the subversion of dominant norms. Yet, when Barclays sponsors Pride and Magnum advertises ice creams with drag queens, how do we identify, or invent, queer political resistance?

Alderson's book is divided into the following chapters: 'Transitions', which explores the shifts in queer culture in relation to the expansion of capital into unforeseen areas; 'Is Capitalism Progressive (for Queers)?'; and, finally, two chapters that analyse 'Counterculture' and 'Subculture and Postgay Dynamics'.

'Transitions' is a compelling examination of hierarchies, which, Alderson notes, are not affected by general democratisation and the breakdown of low and high culture; instead, hierarchies are reproduced and sustained under contemporary capitalism. Pop music, for example, is dominated by the wealthy and privately educated despite 'reproducing the gestural repertoire of revolt'. And hegemony (ideological dominance by a particular group) cements these hierarchies: as Alderson quotes Raymond Williams, 'the hegemonic project saturates society to such an extent that it corresponds to the reality of social experience'.





Image Credit: Queer bloc protesting against rainbow capitalism at Dublin Pride, 2016
(Aloysius CC4.0)

Alderson's reading of Herbert Marcuse is particularly helpful here in relation to capitalist cultural saturation. Alderson writes that queer theorists have often repudiated the Marxist focus on economics, aligning neoconservatism with neoliberalism to dismiss capitalism as a normative force. But when capitalism 'sponsors' 'queerness' or antinormative identification, queer theory's eschewing of political economy becomes problematic. Marcuse, Alderson contends, provides a substantial analysis of the relationship between political economy and sexuality, which is essential in terms of understanding the current mutation of neoliberalism – which embraces (or feigns to embrace) queer sexualities. Alderson encourages readers to try Marcuse's *Eros and Civilisation* and to ignore Michel Foucault's rejection of Marcuse as a 'Freudo-Marxist'.

Although Alderson writes that there are 'no real grounds for optimism' in terms of resistance to hegemony and hierarchies, he notes that we are not socially constructed in a passive sense: instead, social construction is a 'relation of active and passive: that which we do and that which is done to us'. Accordingly, we have a degree of agency: we are capable, to some extent, of self-construction and self-alteration. Another possible strategy of resistance ventured in Alderson's second chapter is the unappealing path of 'being puritanical'. Alderson writes that superabundance and commodification define contemporary capitalism, thus being 'more or less monastic' becomes the only way of avoiding it to any real extent – although he stops short of endorsing this. Instead, he tentatively supports 'alternative hedonism' as an inducement to nostalgic pleasures. [In a working paper on 'alternative hedonism'](#), Kate Soper and Lyn Thomas examine the contemporary predilection for lifestyle television programmes that focus on, for example, 'relocation to the rural' or 'heritage cooking', and conclude that capitalist consumerism provokes the desire for 'less tangible' pleasures like 'more free time, less stress, more personal contacts, a slower pace of life'.

Alderson's final two chapters analyse countercultures and subcultures: counterculture is defined as being relatively privileged in its origins – emerging from university campuses rather than 'satanic mills' – whereas subculture has 'class implications' and connotations. As examples of subculture, Alderson examines the TV sketch show *Little Britain* as well as the work of Mark Ravenhill and of Russell T. Davies (including the latter's television series, *Queer as Folk*). Here, Alderson's analysis of 'mainstreaming' – the representation of gay men in mainstream culture – is particularly interesting: he writes of the pressure on subcultures caused by this as businesses 'pursue' gay culture

as 'proof of their modernity'. Alderson writes that gay life is portrayed as inherently and 'pioneeringly modern' in an 'entirely uncritical "post"-kind of way that is exceptionally good for markets'. He adds that mainstreaming pressures undermine the 'relative autonomy of subculture': the market has rendered 'gay life' more visible, but also 'domesticated'. Significantly, Alderson writes that subcultures develop in response to stigma and marginalisation instead of emerging from countercultures, and are heterogeneous rather than naturally radical – thus they are possibly more vulnerable to assimilation.

Ultimately, *Sex, Needs and Queer Culture* is effective in its examination of the historical and political development of 'gay lives', as well as its analysis of countercultures and subcultures. But the book is primarily about (predominantly white and relatively privileged) cisgender gay men, and books and films written and produced by them. As Alderson admits: 'what could be more un-queer than that?' In light of this acknowledgement, the book's title and its claim to examine 'queer culture' are a bit misleading. I also found the author's misgendering and naming of Jack Halberstam frustrating, considering the book's remit. However, Alderson's overview of queer theory and its relation to resistance, as well as his reading of the work of Marcuse, is thorough, absorbing and readable for an audience beyond queer theory students and academics. When Virgin promote their credit cards with slogans like 'Bring a Bit of Rebellion to Your Wallet' and Gü advertise their chocolate desserts with an added incitement to 'Break Free', books analysing the neutralisation of transgression under contemporary capitalist consumerism are timely and necessary.

Sofia Ropek Hewson is a French PhD student at Cambridge, researching transgression and political literature. She tweets at [@sofiahehewson](https://twitter.com/sofiahehewson). [Read more by Sofia Ropek Hewson](#).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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