

## Towards a Queer Realism

Christopher Chitty:

### **Sexual Hegemony: Statecraft, Sodomy, and Capital in the Rise of the World System**

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Unfinished before his death, the work that would become Christopher Chitty's *Sexual Hegemony* (2020) traces the history of bourgeois regulation of homosexuality under capitalism along with the particular social formations of male intimacy that shifting hegemonic centres of capitalism enabled and were partly constituted by. Max Fox has done an excellent job in bringing together Chitty's work and editing the texts into a coherent volume that (I have no doubt) will go down as a classic in queer history and political theory.

Chitty introduces many useful theoretical tools, including 'sexual hegemony', which exists whenever the sexual norms of dominant social groups shape the sexual conduct and understandings of other groups. Similarly, Chitty introduces the framework of 'queer realism', the thought that the *normal* is not a free-floating regulative ideal, but a status that under particular socio-economic conditions, accrues advantages to those who have it. Fundamentally, he is concerned to undermine the claim that sexual oppression is ultimately to

be explained only by religious intolerance and moralistic disgust to the exclusion of material explanations. Rather, for Chitty, queerness is defined by a particular dispossession: the precarious lack of the status provided by the institutions of marriage, property, and the couple-form (26). In this he provides a useful rejoinder to those who would define queerness in a way divorced from the material realities of sexual and gender minorities. Chitty and the framework of queer realism attend to the details of queer life: not the abstract idea of play, deviancy, or disorientation that allows, for instance, drone warfare to count as queer (see Daggett 2015), but rather the ways in which certain economic, social, and legal arrangements promoted and restricted different types of (male) intimacy. Such an approach, whilst certainly materialist and Marxist, does not reduce to a crude economism – instead, to be a queer realist is to engage with a variety of social formations to understand how sexual hegemony is formed and maintained, how sexuality is employed in intra- and inter-class

conflict, and how particular moments of capitalist accumulation gave rise to and were shaped by different forms of intimacy.

Chitty argues that at various moments, primarily those identified by Giovanni Arrighi as moments of world-systemic crisis, we saw (in addition to the traditionally recognised features of these moments such as financialisation and the destabilisation of the global balance of power) an increased politicisation of male homosexuality. The heart of the book is Chitty's case studies of three such moments: late medieval and early modern Florence; the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Dutch Republic; and revolutionary France.<sup>1</sup> Each case study looks in detail at the queer lives made possible by different economic, political, and social arrangements, the variation in attempts by the state to enforce political power over queer life, and the use of social relations of queer life in intra- and inter-class conflict. Of note is the interesting discussion of the varied approaches to the regulation of sodomy in Florence, especially the so-called 'Officers of the Night' and the role that cross-class homosexual relations played in maintaining and extending the hegemony of the ruling classes.

The last fifty pages of the book turn to historiographical and political issues of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. Chapter 5 contains a call for a dialectical approach to homosexuality and queer intimacy, one which attends to how social forces in conflict produced particular forms of life and rejects simplistic narratives of both continuity and discontinuity regarding the nature of 'homosexuality'. This chapter also features Chitty's most extended critical discussion of Michel Foucault – a figure to whom Chitty is undoubtedly indebted, but whose work he nonetheless supersedes in important ways, not least in his contention that Foucault "proceeds by assuming bourgeois sexuality to be hegemonic, rather than rigorously accounting for how it came to be so" (156). The final chapter turns to contemporary queer struggles, and in particular an analysis of the rise of the hegemonic American vision of sexual expression and liberation. This sees Chitty engage with another of Arrighi's centres of capital accumulation, the United States, attempting to wrest understandings of the

formation of the dominant forms of homosexuality away from an inappropriate focus almost solely on cultural objects. Instead, Chitty turns towards the social relations and technologies that emerged over the course of the past 70 years, not least the internet, which, rather than the family, now serves as the primary transmitter of sexual norms, and the destruction of the welfare state and stable employment under neoliberalism. Chitty ends the book by lamenting the market capture of once counterhegemonic forces via a neoliberal politics of recognition, and the continued use of repression and force by elites (including lesbian and gay elites) to maintain power. Here, lesbian and gay elites are precisely *not* queer in the sense of queer realism – they find themselves in a position to (collectively) dictate some of the norms that constitute American sexual hegemony, and have access to the security of various legal and economic institutions.

One might, upon finishing the book, be left with the sense that though Chitty has pointed out important phenomena at historical junctures of economic upheaval, a more substantive explanatory thesis is missing. That is, can we say anything systematic about what social mechanism(s) tie economic crises to state regulation and repression of queer life? Is it that during times of economic upheaval there is a general trend of elites spotting an opportunity to productively manipulate the charge of sodomy in such a way that allows them to attempt to maintain power? Or is the repression of queer life a specific instance of the (putative) general case that repressive laws more generally are instituted during crises? Chitty's analyses tend (for better or worse) to elide answering these sorts of questions, tending instead to give us concrete examples of the changes in queer life wrought at times of economic change. This sort of socio-historical speculation regarding broad explanatory generalisations might also lead us to wonder about the predictive capacity of Chitty's observations – if we take Chitty to be correct in his observation that homophobic repression and/or regulation tends to accompany economic upheaval, the queer community would be well-advised to keep an eye on the economy, not merely

for material concerns, but also as a bellwether for state repression.<sup>2</sup>

The book already covers a great swathe of historical ground, and it seems indulgent to exclaim 'I wish there were more!'. However, this is precisely what I want; Chitty's book is excellent, and I would have loved to have seen it cover other historical moments and other queer peoples.<sup>3</sup> Insofar as there are any particularly striking omissions, I think that the absence of queer women, and relative lack of focus on rural England in the 16<sup>th</sup> century stand out. But this is just to point to future directions for fruitful engagement with Chitty's

work – whether that be applying the framework of queer realism to lesbian history, or political Marxists using Chitty's work to look closely at queer life in the agrarian origins of capitalism in England. One further area that I am keen to see developed from this book is an application of queer realism and sexual hegemony to our current milieu. I believe that a fruitful engagement between Chitty and contemporary trans Marxisms (see Gleeson and O'Rourke 2021) is possible and may provide an insightful framework for critiquing bourgeois anti-transgender legislation and activism around the world.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> London, another of Arrighi's central examples, does not see a chapter of its own, but is referenced throughout the book.
- <sup>2</sup> Here I eye nervously the ongoing economic crisis deepened by the COVID-19 pandemic, and repressive legislations being considered by legislatures around the world, not least the UK's Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill 2021.
- <sup>3</sup> The foreword references essays by Chitty that did not make it into *Sexual Hegemony*, which I hope will emerge one day.

## Literature

- Arrighi, G. 1994. *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times*. London: Verso.
- Daggett, C. 2015. Drone Disorientations. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. 17(3), 361-379. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2015.1075317>
- Gleeson, J. J. and O'Rourke, E. eds. 2021. *Transgender Marxism*. London: Pluto Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1n9dkjc>