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DIALOGUE



Queer Post-Politics

JOHN BRENKMAN

When I originally heard Lee Edelman give his lecture “The Future is Kid Stuff,” I found it so compelling in its passion and coherence and so disturbing in its conclusions that I had to look back at its argument and ask whether perhaps what was wrong with the argument was its very coherence—its seamless synthesis of political theory and cultural criticism through a psychoanalytic conception of the “subject” and the signifier, *jouissance* and the death drive. The horizon of my commentary will be to question whether psychoanalytic concepts can provide the building blocks of political theory, whether they can sustain a viable theory or analysis of the body politic. My view is that they cannot. The view that they can is central to Edelman and other queer theorists, especially Judith Butler, as it is to the quite different projects of Slavoj Žižek and Ernesto Laclau.

First, though, I want to acknowledge the unassailable insight and compelling protest at the heart of Edelman’s lecture, published since in *Narrative* and titled “The Future is Kid Stuff: Queer Theory, Disidentification, and the Death Drive.”

As cultural criticism, Edelman’s commentary deconstructs a ubiquitous icon in contemporary American politics and culture: the figure of the child, innocence incarnate, full of promise, and destined to fulfillment through whatever norms the prevailing order cherishes and enforces: heterosexuality, homogeneity, affluence. Edelman tracks down this figure through everything from public service announcements of the liberal Coalition for America’s Children to anti-abortion billboards announcing, “It’s not a choice; it’s a child”; from Anita Bryant’s anti-gay campaign Save Our Children to the Army of God, a group that claimed responsibility for attacks on an abortion

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clinic and a lesbian bar in Atlanta and declared its mission to "disrupt and ultimately destroy Satan's power to kill our children, God's children"; from Broadway's *Annie* and *Les Misérables* to P. D. James's dystopian novel *The Children of Men*, which "attempts to imagine the effects of a future in which the human race has suffered a seemingly absolute loss of the capacity to reproduce" (21). Edelman argues, very convincingly, that the appeal of these figures of the child lies in their power to awaken our nostalgic identification with the innocent and fulfillable child (the image of what we have always already failed to be) and then link the child's promised fulfillment and identity to a better future, which inevitably turns out to be the present social and cultural order purged of its troubling and threatening elements. In the discourse of the Christian Right this figure of the child is the symbol thrown in opposition to the anti-symbol of the queer or the woman aborting her fetus: the child, whom everyone loves and yearns to be, becomes the weapon to stigmatize those who dare to elude the social imperative of sexual reproduction.

Edelman voices an unflinching protest against the body politic's cheerful and menacing images of the child-as-future. Speaking from the state of civic siege in which the gay community finds itself, faced with continual physical and juridical vulnerability in neighborhood, workplace, school, and home, in public and private space, even as it copes with illness and death from AIDS, Edelman repudiates the cultural and political discourse that openly or tacitly pits the symbol of the child against the anti-symbol of the queer:

Choosing to stand, as many of us do, outside the cycles of reproduction, choosing to stand, as we also do, by the side of those living and dying each day from the complications of AIDS, we know the deception of the societal lie that endlessly looks toward a future whose promise is always a day away. We can tell ourselves that with patience, with work, with generous contributions to lobbying groups, or generous participation in activist groups, or general doses of political savvy and electoral sophistication, the future will hold a place for us—a place at the political table that won't have to come, as it were, at the cost of our place in the bed, or the bar, or the baths. But there are no *queers* in that future as there can be no future for queers. (29)

As a protest, a rhetoric of rage against deferrals and alibis in the midst of unrelenting crisis, this statement makes dramatically clear that the body politic will keep failing to recognize queers so long as it averts its eyes from their experience of scapegoating, vulnerability, and death. And, indeed, liberal as well as conservative politics continues to avert its eyes. The sham of the "don't ask, don't tell" rule in the military showed, from the first days of the Clinton administration, that nonrecognition rather than recognition would remain at the core of liberal attitudes toward sexuality in the dominant political culture.

But Edelman interprets this nonrecognition in very different terms from those I have just used. When he asserts that "there are no *queers* in that future as there can be no future for queers," he is not making a mere statement of protest; rather, he is announcing the theoretical position that is the explicit stake of his entire argument. I

now want to turn to his theoretical project, which involves an argument in political theory and an argument from psychoanalysis and a link between the two.

THE POLITICAL THEORY ARGUMENT

For Edelman the image of the child-as-future is more than a powerful trope in the political discourse of the moment. It in effect defines the political realm: “For politics, however radical the means by which some of its practitioners seek to effect a more desirable social order, is conservative insofar as it necessarily works to *affirm* a social order, defining various strategies aimed at actualizing social reality and transmitting it into the future it aims to bequeath to its inner child” (19).

The burden of this argument is that a genuinely critical discourse cannot arise via the marking or symbolizing of the gap between the present and the future. Such symbolizing has indeed been the defining feature of modern critical social discourse, whether among the Enlightenment’s *philosophes*, French revolutionaries, Marxists, social democrats, or contemporary socialists and democrats. Jürgen Habermas, in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, defines modern time-consciousness itself as a taking of responsibility for the future. Edelman sees in such a time-consciousness an inescapable trap. For him any such political discourse or activity steps into “the logic by which political engagement serves always as the medium for reproducing our social reality” (26). Certainly the political realm—whether viewed from the perspective of the state, the political community and citizenship, or political movements—is a medium of social reproduction, in the sense that it serves the relative continuity of innumerable economic and non-economic institutions. But it is not simply a mechanism of social reproduction; it is also the site and instrument of social change. Nor is it simply the field of existing power relations; it is also the terrain of contestation and compromise.

Edelman compounds his reductive concept of the political realm by in turn postulating an ironclad intermeshing of social reproduction and sexual reproduction. Here too he takes a fundamental feature of modern society, or any society, and absolutizes it. Sexual reproduction is a necessary dimension of social reproduction, almost by definition, in the sense that a society’s survival depends upon, among many other things, the fact that its members reproduce. Kinship practices, customs, religious authorities, and civil and criminal law variously regulate sexual reproduction. However, that is not to say that the imperatives of social reproduction dictate or determine or fully functionalize the institutions and practices of sexual reproduction.

The failure to recognize the relative autonomy of those institutions and practices underestimates how seriously feminism and the gay and lesbian movement have already challenged the norms and institutions of compulsory heterosexuality in our society. They have done so through creative transformations in civil society and everyday life and through cultural initiatives and political and legal reforms. The anti-abortion and anti-gay activism of the Christian Right arose, in response, to alter and reverse the fundamental achievements of these movements.

How then to analyze or theorize this struggle? A motif in Edelman’s analysis

takes the rhetoric and imagery of the Christian Right and traditional Catholicism to be a more insightful discourse than liberalism when it comes to understanding the underlying politics of sexuality today. I think this is extremely misguided. The Right does not have a truer sense of the social-symbolic order than liberals and radicals; it simply has more reactionary aims and has mobilized with significant effect to impose its phobic and repressive values on civil society and through the state. The Christian Right is itself a "new social movement" that contests the feminist and gay and lesbian social movements. To grant the Right the status of exemplary articulators of "the" social order strikes me as politically self-destructive and theoretically just plain wrong.

THE PSYCHOANALYTIC ARGUMENT

On the psychoanalytic side of the argument, Edelman starts from a basic premise of psychoanalysis concerning psychic life: that there are "overdeterminations of libidinal positions and inconsistencies of psychic defenses occasioned by the intractable force of the drives unassimilable to" the social-symbolic order in which individuals establish their identities (20). Drawing on a variety of psychoanalytically informed reflections on scapegoating, homophobia, and other kinds of individual or collective phobic projections of anxiety onto others, that is, onto some figure or figuration of another, Edelman argues that queers become this abjected object because they figure the nonreproductive sexuality which the society rejects, from within itself, to maintain the social-symbolic order of reproduction. In its broadest outlines, this basic interpretation of homophobia is well supported by a wealth of historical and psychological reflections on anti-Semitism and racism as well as homophobia.

It is the next moves in Edelman's argument that concern me. Having postulated in his political theory argument the intermeshed unity of social reproduction, sexual reproduction, and politics, he is led to suggest that the phobic position of queers is the quintessential requirement of the social-symbolic order as such. Having postulated that the very projection of a narrative of social change from the present toward a future is inescapably complicit in this whole mechanism of social-sexual-political reproduction, he is led to cast all social and political reforms as in essence perpetuations of the anti-queer imperatives of the social-symbolic order. The true queer politics is therefore beyond politics. Edelman formulates this post-politics in the following passage (at the same time equivocating by affirming the importance of the actual extension of tolerance, rights, and interests achieved by the gay and lesbian movement—an equivocation I will not dwell on, since politically it is a welcome ambiguity, though it highlights the faultlines of his theoretical position): "[T]he true oppositional politics implicit in the practice of queer sexualities lies not in the liberal discourse, the patient negotiation, of tolerances and rights, important as these undoubtedly are to all of us still denied them, but rather in the capacity of queer sexualities to figure the radical dissolution of the contract, in every sense social and symbolic, on which the future as guarantee against the real, and so against the insistence of the death drive, depends" (23).

To formulate this beyond-politics of queer sexualities Edelman adapts certain Lacanian theorems to the larger pattern of his argument. He starts from the notion that the subject is constituted in subjection to the signifier, in the gaps or voids of the (unconscious) signifying chain; he then argues that when the signifying chain is re-ordered in discourse, more specifically, narrative discourse, the subject is offered the consistencies of identity, meaning, and the temporal ordering of past and future. These consistencies are all in a sense imaginary or fantasmal. Edelman cinches the Lacanian theorem to his own view of the fantasmal narrative of political discourse via another striking theorem, namely, Paul de Man's concerning the strife between narrative and irony. According to de Man, all narrative is the attempt to project the ineluctable meaninglessness (or undecidability) of the signifier into a consistency of meaning, identity, and temporality; the effort is doomed, and the inevitable failings of narrative de Man calls irony. Edelman points up the resonance between de Manian irony and the Lacanian death drive, their "corrosive force" against the symbolic order, by quoting the following passage from de Man: "Words have a way of saying things which you do not want them to say. . . . There is a machine there, a text machine, an implacable determination and a total arbitrariness . . . which inhabits words on the level of the play of the signifier, which undoes any narrative consistency" (26; qtg. de Man 181).

Thus, Edelman's next and synthesizing move: on the one hand, politics is the mere instrument of social and sexual reproduction through its intrinsic narrativity (the relentless projection of the future); on the other hand, it abjects queerness as the figure (now in the de Manian sense) that undoes narrativized identity, meaning, and temporal orientation:

Queer theory, then, should be viewed as a site at which a culturally repudiated irony, phobically displaced by the dominant culture onto the figure of the queer, is uncannily returned by those who propose to embrace such a figural identity with the *figuralization* of identity itself. . . .

. . . [O]nly by making the ethical choice of acceding to that position, only by assuming the truth of our queer capacity to figure the undoing of the symbolic and the subject of the symbolic can we undertake the impossible project of imagining an oppositional political position exempt from the repetitive necessity of reproducing the politics of the signifier—the politics aimed at eliminating the gap opened up by the signifier itself—which can only return us, by way of the child, to the politics of reproduction. (27–28)

THE FINAL SYNTHESIS

Is the *practice* of queer sexualities the bearer of a "true oppositional politics"—possible or impossible—a politics beyond the political realm because aimed at undoing it? In asserting that this is indeed the import of queer sexualities, Edelman makes his ultimate synthesis between a Lacanian theorem and sexual politics. From

Lacan he extrapolates the notion that there are two "versions" of *jouissance*, distinguished according to whether the *jouissance* congeals one's identity or ruptures it, fetishizes the object or defetishizes it. Edelman glosses the double definition of *jouissance* as follows: "the sense of a violent passage beyond the circumscriptions inherent in meaning that [1] can have the effect, insofar as it gets attached, fetishistically, to a privileged object, of defining and congealing our experiential identities around fantasies of fulfillment through that object, but that also [2] can function, insofar as it escapes such fetishistic reification, to rupture, or at least seem to rupture, the consistency of a symbolic reality organized around the signifier as substantial identity, as name" (27). It is difficult not to read in this distinction between the "privileged object" of the first version of *jouissance* and the nameless object of the second version the juxtaposition of heterosexuality and the promiscuous anonymous sex practiced by many gay men. I'm not sure this is precisely Edelman's intent, but it is consistent with the whole drift of the essay as it turns the opposition between heteronormativity and queerness into the essential polarity of the entire dialectic of the social-symbolic order. Whether gay male promiscuity is here the intended epitome of queerness or not, Edelman is clearly postulating queer sexualities as an enactment of the second version of *jouissance*.

He proceeds to argue that in the two versions of *jouissance* the death drive manifests itself in two likewise distinct ways, and here the parallelism to heteronormativity versus queerness is overt:

To the extent that *jouissance*, as fantasmatic escape from the alienation intrinsic to meaning, and thus to the symbolic, lodges itself in an object on which our identities then come to depend, it produces those identities as mortifications, reenactments of the very constraints of meaning they were intended to help us escape; but to the extent that *jouissance* as a tear in the fabric of symbolic reality as we know it unravels the solidity of every object, including the object as which the subject necessarily takes itself, it evokes the death drive that always insists as the void both in and of the subject beyond its fantasy of self-realization in the domain of the pleasure principle. (27)

What I want to question here is the idea that queer sexualities can be said to enact or embody or afford the experience of the underlying mechanism of the subject and the signifier, *jouissance* and the death drive, in the psychoanalytic sense. More generally, I am questioning whether any sexual practice can be equated with the logic of the signifier, the structure of desire, and so on. This is more than a philosophical category mistake, though it is that too.

First of all, sexual practices and experiences, unlike the logic of the signifier or the structure of desire (assuming these are plausible concepts in the first place), are carried out by individuals through the whole of their being, putting in play their identity formations, their fantasies and fetishes, their social embodiment. In short, sexuality is practiced and experienced not by the "subject" but by the "person."

Second, assuming that the second version of *jouissance* and the death drive is

the secret of the force within the social-symbolic order that ruptures the symbolic and the subject, then this *jouissance* and death drive are surely at work in all sexualities, including the straightest heterosexual practices and experiences.

Third, while queer sexualities are obviously in this historical moment anti-social, it does not follow that they are the very embodiment or enactment of asociality or the asymbolic. What has given, for example, anonymous sex its value in the gay community—what has made it worth fighting for—is its role in creating an alternative sociality. The bars and the baths are a cultural creation, a subculture, which makes certain sexual practices and experiences possible. Queerness is not outside sociality; it is an innovation in sociality.

In sum, there is no match between sexualities of any sort and the “structure” or “logic” or “mechanism” of the psyche.

Edelman’s articulation of the relation between the death drive and queerness is so powerful and resonant, I believe, because in the AIDS epidemic the confluence of sex and death, which is deeply and ambiguously embedded in all human experience, has taken on an unbearably traumatic and catastrophic form. Edelman expresses the sorrow and joy and defiance of gay life today in words that are as poetic as theoretical language gets: “The future is kid stuff, reborn each day to postpone the encounter with the gap, the void, the emptiness, that gapes like a grave from within the lifeless mechanism of the signifier that animates the subject by spinning the gossamer web of the social reality within which that subject lives” (29). This sentence is genuinely polyvalent, but its various meanings do not all have the same validity. In its admixture of queer excess and Lacanian asceticism, it expresses a poignant individual ethic and attitude toward life that can be embraced or refused but not proved or refuted. As a theorem about the relation of queer sexualities and the social-symbolic order, it is an obfuscation. And finally, in its poetry and protest, it makes a jarring statement of conscience—a statement that belongs to the very political realm that queer post-politics imagines it could transcend.

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