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‘Ideological miscegenation’: Anti-materialism and the tropes of homosexuality and transgenderism as cultural degeneracy in the works of James Howard Kunstler and Michel Houellebecq.

ABSTRACT

Homosexuality and transgenderism have a long history of being attacked and slandered as somehow ‘unnatural’ and as a sign of decadence and degeneration in culture and society. This article demonstrates that this mischaracterization continues today with homosexuality and transgenderism still being used as a marker and symptom of decadence and degeneracy in contemporary literature. This article will examine how this perpetuation is an aspect of an ideology of anti-materialism that has a long and disturbing lineage in Western thought and culture and will discuss how current manifestations of this ideology attempt to justify their prejudices by conflating liberationary movements with consumerism to imply that they are a manifestation of an unsustainable and decadent modern liberal society.

KEYWORDS

homosexuality
transgenderism
decadence
degeneracy
modernity

This article discusses the curious recrudescence of homosexuality and transgenderism as tropes used to represent decadence, decay and degeneration in ostensibly left-leaning contemporary literature. As well as outlining the natures of these tropes the article will note how the use of such tropes is tied in with a peculiar strain of cultural criticism which is in revolt against both neoliberalism and liberalism in a way which transgresses established political and ideological boundaries. To illustrate these themes this article refers to the works of two best-selling authors, James Howard Kunstler and Michel Houellebecq. Whereas antipathy towards homosexuality and transgenderism is often based on religious beliefs and more strongly identified with right-wing authoritarian ideologies (Jäckle and Wenzelburger 2015; Whitley and Lee 2000), neither Kunstler or Houellebecq are religious and both come from left-liberal backgrounds: Kunstler, a registered Democrat and self-described

‘progressive’ (Staggs 2014) began his writing career as a journalist with *Rolling Stone* and Houellebecq began his career as a founding member of the left-wing writer’s editorial collective *Perpendiculaire* (Sweeney 2013: 17). Their animus springs rather from their emphasis on the primary importance of a cohesive cultural identity for society and a belief that materialism has engendered a hedonistic individualism that splinters cultural identity thereby facilitating neoliberalism’s colonization of all areas of life.

Thus both authors transgress established normative political and ideological categories. As Sweeney notes Houellebecq is merely an extreme version of an already extant tendency in French thought and writing as ‘a steady trickle of writers [have] been addressing the relationship between neoliberalism and the emancipatory politics of [19]68 since the early 1970s’ and therefore Houellebecq’s ‘ideological miscegenation’ is identifiable though still highly controversial (2013: 19, 26). As an American Kunstler’s ‘ideological miscegenation’ is of a slightly different character, recalling the muscular anti-communist liberalism of the *New Republic* which offered a seemingly progressive ‘vision of America united under strong leaders’ and articulated the anxieties of a particular segment of white middle-class liberals who ‘reacted so badly to the rise of social movements in the 1960s [that] challenged the myth of national consensus’ (Heer 2014). Hence both authors share a concern with cultural and social cohesiveness, a loathing for globalization and neoliberalism and a belief that by fostering an ethos of hedonism and individualism the politics of sexual liberation has been a bridgehead for unrestrained materialism, alienation, cultural decline and fragmentation and the near-complete domination of life by market forces. As such their work presents an opportunity to illuminate the way in which antipathy towards materialism and individualism can in certain cases eventuate in a critique of society and culture. Such a critique harnesses putatively left-liberal criticisms of neoliberalism to a reactionary rejection of emancipatory politics, particularly sexual emancipation, that can be clearly located within a literary tradition of cultural criticism articulating middle-class anxieties about the direction of modernity.

The idea of cultural decline and degeneracy in the modern era arose around the middle of the nineteenth century as accelerating industrialization caused a mass migration from the country and cities became ever larger, more complex and more anonymous (Jordan 1993). Largely a concern of the rising professional middle class, anxiety about degeneracy functioned as a normalizing and controlling force and sprang from the paradoxical fear that as an increasingly urban society became materially wealthier it would become more liberal and

individualistic, thus leading to a weakening of the culture and morality that had ameliorated humanity's fundamentally primitive and savage nature. As Martin Weiner has documented, this anxiety spanned the political and ideological spectrum with both liberals and conservatives voicing similar concerns about the direction of modernity (Weiner 1981: 96-118). A heightened preoccupation with what was then perceived as sexual deviancy accompanied 'a more generalized move away from *laissez-faire* . . . to a new interventionism' as middle-class fears about 'degeneracy' and 'national decay' increasingly identified uncontrolled industrialism and materialism as threats to social stability (Weeks 2012: 160).

Homosexual artists and writers like Oscar Wilde were therefore predictably targets for vilification with charges of pederasty being seen as confirmation that ease and refinement invited corruption and depravity, a perception reinforced by Wilde's apology recounting his downfall: 'I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease. I amused myself with being a *flâneur*, a dandy, a man of fashion . . . Tired of being on the heights, I deliberately went to the depths in the search for new sensation . . . I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in horrible disgrace' (1905: 162-3).

Despite such prosecutions the greater anonymity and relative liberalism of the city had long been crucial in the development of a distinct homosexual culture as David F. Greenberg and others have documented (Greenberg 1988), but this relationship was fraught. As Elizabeth Wilson observes, by the time Proust came to write about gay and lesbian culture in Paris homosexuals had become seen as 'a race apart, one of the mysterious, and many felt sinister, groups that inhabited the labyrinth of that once great city' (1992: 61). In literature from Emile Zola to Thomas Mann the homosexual or transgender individual became symbolic of a vague but widely-understood fear of decadence which revolved around their identification with the city as site of materialism, individualism and sexual licence (Leehan 1998). Such fears and anxieties are still surprisingly common and sadly the use of homosexuality or transgenderism as tropes signifying decadence and degeneracy is still in use even today. James Howard Kunstler, an American novelist, environmentalist, cultural critic and prolific blogger who writes about sustainability and urban planning issues and is best known for his 2005 environmental work *The Long Emergency* exemplifies how such tropes are used as part of a broader indictment of modernity.

The fundamental premise which underpins and informs all of Kunstler's writing is that the tremendous growth in the economy in the twentieth century which was enabled by

advancing technology and exploitation of natural resources has been a disaster in cultural as well as environmental terms because the material wealth they have given us has created a relativistic and solipsistic consumer culture of instant gratification. Though Kunstler himself identifies as a progressive, he believes the Left made a fatal mistake in critiquing and undermining the cultural norms and standards that as he sees it constituted a set of values beyond mere material concerns and so provided a defence against neoliberal capitalism and the commodification of everyday life. He attacks the ‘trashiness’ of contemporary American culture, claiming the pursuit of dissipations such as watching television, shopping, microwaved snack foods, and ‘kinky sex’ are leading to the population degenerating physically, mentally and culturally into a nation of ‘overfed clowns, crybabies, slackers, deadbeats, sadists, cads, whores, and crooks’ to such a degree that it ‘call[s] into question the value of technological progress itself’ (1992: 82). Immersed in such decadence, Kunstler believes we accept what he sees as the promotion of deviant sexuality in the media as just another form of gratification because materialism has made us all libertines and hedonists for whom pleasure is the sole meaningful pursuit.

Hence the media coverage of Caitlyn Jenner’s transition and gossip about Kim Kardashian is for Kunstler proof that our fragmented consumerist society was already far along the road to decadence and degeneration:

Of course the Kardashians are a mere metaphor for what has happened to this country, and Jenner is a metaphor for what has happened to American men. Maybe that’s why [the extended Kardashian clan] persist in the spotlight. It is a well-known fact that motorists on a highway always slow down to see just what happened at the grisly scene of the accident. We can’t take our eyes off these freaks and geeks. The Romans, on their journey to decadence, lacked the voltage and the wiring to amplify the anomie overtaking them. We’re bathed and bombarded with the images of exactly how disgusting we are. People of WalMart, throw off your chains of debt, indeed! (Kunstler 2015.)

Kunstler identifies Caitlyn Jenner as both product and symbol of jaded appetites and monstrous American consumption, capitalism and liberalism run amok. Paraphrasing Marx and Engel’s call for the workers of the world to unite and throw off their chains, Kunstler makes Jenner as a transgendered individual representative of repressive sublimation, the capitalist distraction and emasculation of the masses masquerading as liberation.

This is not the first time that Kunstler has sounded the alarm about sexual morality and the decline of culture. A few years earlier Kunstler took issue with the ‘promotion’ of transgenderism at universities and with marriage equality for homosexual couples, both of which he identified as prime symbols of decadence in a society that should be more concerned with rejecting consumerism and initiating a return to a more sustainable way of life. Resurrecting the old paradoxical slur that homosexuals were both cosseted decadents and sexual predators who preyed on the innocent Kunstler declared that ‘in reality, the norm of male gay social behavior is extreme promiscuity with predatory overtones’ and excoriated discussion of marriage equality as a distraction that facilitated the domination of neoliberal globalization:

It seems to me that this kind of lazy relativism [on marriage equality] is a luxury that can only be enjoyed by a cosseted elite luxuriating in a high entropy economy. Why else would the students at elite universities like Brown be so preoccupied by adolescent sexual confusion? I would think that [these students] would be more concerned with how our society is going to function in the permanent energy crisis soon to come, or how we are going to reorganize farming so we can feed ourselves when oil-based agriculture ends, or how we are going to reestablish local networks of economic interdependency when WalMart globalism grinds to a halt. (Kunstler 2004.) The reference to a return to traditional farming and localism in this context is important because Kunstler, identifying homosexuality and transgenderism with modernity’s individualism, urbanism and materialism, wants to believe that the coming collapse of our unsustainable urban civilization might also mean the abandonment of diversity in sexual identity and the re-establishment of heteronormativity in the public sphere.

This is the scenario Kunstler explores in *A History of the Future* (2014), the third installment in his *World Made by Hand* series of novels which imagine life in a post-oil agrarian America. Through the character of Andrew Prendergast, Kunstler explores how the self-perception and hence public performance of homosexuality might differ in a world which has reverted to small-scale organic farming in scattered rural communities. Formerly a successful and openly gay literary agent in New York, Prendergast now lives in the small village of Union Grove in upstate New York.

Whereas ‘in the old times he defined himself as gay[, now] with the old contexts dissolved it was no longer possible to think that way’ because the end of the city and its consumerist lifestyle have apparently rendered such identification meaningless:

Since the world and everything in it had changed he had come to re-examine the question of his sexual orientation, wondering whether it was even an orientation or something less fixed in his persona than a fragment from a bygone cultural ideology. He wondered how much of the story he had told himself back then was just a story scripted for him by others, a convenient explanation for a sequence of acts undertaken to stick to the script. Despite the enormous pressures to conform to it, the script did not validate his deeper feelings of uncertainty and shame . . . He recognized the paradox of wanting to escape into femininity as represented by his idolized dead sister, whilst associating sexually only with other males, many of whom made a fetish of mocking the femininity they affected to imitate . . . That was all over for him now. He hadn’t heard the word ‘gay’ in as long as he could remember and at one point he realized what a relief that was. (Kunstler 2014: 11.)

Prendergast represents the reassertion of ‘real’ culture over degenerate capitalist consumerism and the subsequent return to public heteronormativity in the novel. In a rather clumsy attempt at irony the literary agent is himself portrayed as acting out a story ‘scripted for him by others’ in the superficial world of entertainment and consumption. Freed from the false liberation of capitalist modernity, Prendergast is able to better fulfil his artistic nature in suitably non-hedonistic ways such as portrait-painting for local worthies.

In Michel Houellebecq’s breakthrough novel, *Atomized*, first published in English in 2001 homosexuality is portrayed as the archetypal sexuality of materialistic modernity, a precursor and pattern for the consumer society where the ideal of relationships is transformed from mutual support and commitment to the fulfilment of a desire, a consumer choice as mutable as any other. Slavoj Žižek has remarked that *Atomized* ‘is the story of radical DESUBLIMATION, if there ever was one . . . a superb example of what some critics perspicuously baptized “Left Conservatism”’ (2008). Houellebecq’s writing is more complex and intellectual than Kunstler’s viscerally phobic reactions but nevertheless makes broadly the same identifications of homosexuality with cultural decadence and degeneracy and employs homosexuality as a trope for the atomization of liberal hedonistic society.

Houellebecq suggests that advances and reforms like the birth control pill and abortion have made sex part of the consumerist leisure society, something we do for pleasure and not procreation, bringing the rest of society closer to what Houellebecq sees as the norm of homosexual culture where sex is a hedonistic pursuit between self-sufficient partners for only as long as both find it mutually satisfying and convenient. Relationships thus become commodified and fetishized like everything else in a convenience-based consumer society; tenuous, contingent and competitive.

In *Atomized* Houellebecq writes that:

It is interesting to note that the 'sexual revolution' was sometimes portrayed as a communal utopia, whereas in fact it was simply another stage in the historical rise of individualism. As the lovely word 'household' suggests, the couple and the family would be the last bastion of primitive communism in liberal society. The sexual revolution was to destroy these intermediary communities, the last to separate the individual from the market. The destruction continues to this day. (2001: 135-6.)

Houellebecq indicts liberalism as the intellectual hand-maiden of neoliberalism, breaking down and dissolving the cultural values and customs that constituted a social space outside of economic and materialist criteria.

In his biography of the life and works of reactionary science fiction writer H.P. Lovecraft, Houellebecq condemns them both as twin dissolvents of culture and society:

The reach of liberal capitalism has extended over minds; in step and hand-in-hand with it are mercantilism, publicity, the absurd and sneering cult of economic efficiency, the exclusive and immoderate appetite for riches. Worse still, liberalism has spread from the domain of economics to the domain of sexuality. Every sentimental fiction has been eradicated. Purity, chastity, fidelity and decency are ridiculous stigmas. The value of a human being today is measured in terms of his economic efficiency and his erotic potential. (2006: 115-6.)

The bonds holding people and society together are therefore dissolved as the young and attractive are sought after and the older and less successful are excluded. As Carole Sweeney puts it, 'when sex becomes another market transition, it responds to exactly the same demand and supply dynamics as any other commodity' (2013: 140).

In short Houellebecq suggests that society is becoming atomized as everyone seeks to maximize their own happiness, the right to which becomes seen as the ultimate objective, the only unarguable truth. Houellebecq believes that people who are 'liberated from the constraints of ordinary morality' are not emancipated in any meaningful sense but become 'pure materialists' seeking novelty and their own hedonistic pleasure. Society degenerates into a Hobbesian world of all against all as each individual considers only their own momentary happiness.

Homosexual relationships are portrayed as the archetype of this solipsistic modern relationship. Like Kunstler, Houellebecq resurrects the old slur of homosexual men as

predatory pederasts for whom sex is an act of pure self-gratification divorced from any deeper emotional or social commitment:

Watch two old queens together, Bruno liked to say, watch them closely. They may be fond of one another, they may even be affectionate, but do they really want each other? No. As soon as some tight 15-25 year old arse walks past they will rip each other to pieces just for that tight little arse; that is what Bruno thought.

In this, as in many things, so-called homosexuals had led the way for society as whole, thought Bruno. (Houellebecq 2001: 123-4.)

Houellebecq depicts the result of a culture fixated on youth and hedonistic pleasure in a particularly symbolic scene in which the aging director of a molecular biology research institute uses a telescope to voyeuristically observe from the bay window of his office homosexual youths sunbathing on the opposite bank of the Seine. Now old and alone, he can no longer participate in a culture supposedly based on physical attraction and sex. He is of course the *flâneur*, the symbolic observer of urban life, who epitomizes the superficiality and disconnectedness of urban modernity, observing social life but not being a productive part of it. His alienation is an ironic commentary on his life as a scientist whose work decoding the human genome rests on a materialistic view of life itself.

Both Kunstler and Houellebecq use homosexuality and transgenderism as tropes for degeneracy and decadence because both see them as representative of hedonistic modernity, ‘avatars of the urban’ as Julie Abrahams puts it in *Metropolitan Lovers: The Homosexuality of Cities* (2009: xix). Both authors are reacting to a world in which they believe cultural and societal identity and belonging have been eroded by an ideology of personal choice and fulfilment which commodifies all aspects of life by supposedly denying the validity of any transcendent or universal values. The assertion of homosexual or transgender identity is therefore read as emblematic of a much broader cultural fragmentation which Kunstler and Houellebecq detect in western civilization, with dire consequences. As with earlier anxieties of cultural degeneration and decline they are reacting against what they perceive to be centripetal forces in modernity undermining societal and cultural cohesiveness. Just as Weeks observes that heightened middle-class concerns regarding sexual norms accompanied an increasing questioning and rejection of *laissez-faire* ideology in favour of a more interventionist approach to ordering society (2012), so the authors considered here represent a resurrection or continuation of sublimated fears of cultural fragmentation that transgress typical definitions of Left and Right, liberal and conservative.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Potts, M. (2015), “‘Ideological miscegenation’”: Anti-materialism and the tropes of homosexuality and transgenderism as cultural degeneracy in the works of James Howard Kunstler and Michel Houellebecq’, in Mountfort, P. (ed), *Peer Reviewed Proceedings: 6th Annual Conference, Popular Culture Association of Australia and New Zealand*, Wellington: PopCAANZ, pp. 74-83. Available from <http://popcaanz.com/conference-proceedings-2015/>.