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Sex, Or The Unbearable (Theory Q)



Synopsis

Sex, or the Unbearable is a dialogue between Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, two of our leading theorists of sexuality, politics, and culture. In juxtaposing sex and the unbearable they don't propose that sex is unbearable, only that it unleashes unbearable contradictions that we nonetheless struggle to bear. In Berlant and Edelman's exchange, those terms invoke disturbances produced in encounters with others, ourselves, and the world, disturbances that tap into threats induced by fears of loss or rupture as well as by our hopes for repair. Through virtuoso interpretations of works of cinema, photography, critical theory, and literature, including Lydia Davis's story "Break It Down" (reprinted in full here), Berlant and Edelman explore what it means to live with negativity, with those divisions that may be irreparable. Together, they consider how such negativity affects politics, theory, and intimately felt encounters. But where their critical approaches differ, neither hesitates to voice disagreement. Their very discussion "punctuated with moments of frustration, misconception, anxiety, aggression, recognition, exhilaration, and inspiration" enacts both the difficulty and the potential of encounter, the subject of this unusual exchange between two eminent critics and close friends.

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Customer Reviews

The dialogue between critical theorists Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman in *Sex, or the Unbearable* is crucial for anyone who, like me, just doesn't get Lee Edelman. Edelman has gained notoreity in critical circles for his radically antisocial position in his 2006 book *No Future*, but it's not that I don't get his relentlessly hammered point about the exclusionariness inherent in any account of social order, even an avowedly critical or inclusionary one. Rather, I don't get why he wants to keep making it. The most eye-opening thing about this book is that Berlant, his compatriot in negativity, doesn't get it either. For her, articulating the negativity/nonsovereignty inherent in any relational encounter is helpful for herself and others in shifting the atmospheres around which such encounters take place, allowing for movement beyond a pointless (because inevitably failed) struggle with negativity. When Edelman insists that even a hope such as this is rife with negativity, Berlant asks him what he sees as the implications of his work. To her, his work makes him just as complicit in the kinds of pedagogical optimism to which she is self-professedly committed. Why else would he bother articulating it? Among other things, this book's portrayal of Berlant and Edelman's live, embroiled disagreement has helped me to escape being rendered mute by my fear of mischaracterizing Edelman's argument, which has proven so endlessly mischaracterizable by so many smarter people than me, if his multiple MLA rebuttals of them are any indication.* But those mutual rebuttals have unfolded in the slow time of monographic work and conference Q&As.

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