

Katherine Sender, **Business Not Politics: The Making of the Gay Market**, New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, 331 pp., \$37.00 (hardcover).

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I often struggle to explain to my students why the catapulting of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans (GLBT) people into the public eye is not an unequivocal political victory. To paraphrase sociologist Suzanna Danuta Walters, being “all the rage” by no means guarantees concrete improvements in GLBT lives. While a growing literature analyzes the relationship of gay and lesbian visibility to consumer and popular culture, Katherine Sender’s *Business Not Politics: The Making of the Gay Market* breaks new ground. Definitively moving forward, Sender shifts the debate from the pros and cons of GLBT media and market visibility to a sophisticated and complex study that asks how the dynamics of consumer culture produce and articulate contemporary gay (and, as Sender persuasively argues, it is overwhelmingly “gay” not GLBT) identity in the United States. Importantly, Sender does not assume a preexisting gay market waiting to be tapped. Instead, she plumbs the history of advertising in early gay publications, interviews “professional homosexuals”—predominantly white, male, and gay-identifying media industry insiders—and traces the ties that bind the business of GLBT marketing to a mythically affluent gay niche. Deftly attentive to how race, gender, sex, and class assumptions shape formulations of a gay market, *Business Not Politics* offers a comprehensive case study of the relationship between capitalism, markets, and political identities.

Business Not Politics begins by dismantling industry claims that gay markets and marketing to gays are simply good for business and not about politics. We could attribute this emphatic disclaimer as bluster businesses use to prevent appearing “too gay” while they cultivate the desires of a GLBT audience (in fact, Sender gives ample evidence that this is an underlying tension). But, it runs deeper than this. As Sender states “[b]y separating business from politics, marketers appeal to a liberal-utilitarian economic model in which financial decisions can be made free of political motivations or ramifications...[y]et the division of business from politics disavows the extent to which all economic activity has political effects” (p. 3). To imagine business divorced of politics is to believe in a politically neutral marketplace and deny that politics happen through the workings of capital. However, as Sender lays out in her introduction, the history of the gay market—like that of other marginalized groups—is one that graphs on to the social movement of stigmatized subcultures from abject others to recognizable consumer citizens. The irony Sender seeks to underscore is that “the gay community, on a national scale at least, is not a preexisting entity that marketers simply need to appeal to, but is a construction, an imagined community formed not only through political activism but through an increasingly sophisticated, commercially supported, national media” (p. 5). Sure to unsettle political purists (this one included), Sender makes a solid case that GLBT political action has happened and continues to happen through market forces. So, for example, as national media recognized GLBT political work, independent gay community media grew. Gay-owned media subsequently became channels for shaping and speaking to a primarily GLBT audience and general marketing firms increasingly hired what they imagined to be the expertise of community insiders—gay-identifying individuals invested in promoting positive images for the GLBT community. In tracing the

layers and crossroads of this media-identity-consumer culture feedback loop, Sender expands what we might count as politics calling on her readers to “consider the impact of marketing on the cultural politics of sexuality” (p. 10). In doing so, Sender is making a rather radical claim that markets are central to the construction of modern sociopolitical identities.

Sender makes the case for a “nuanced approach to studying the gay market...[that] consider[s] how marketing does not merely represent gay and lesbian people, but produces recognizable—and sellable—definitions of what it means to be gay or lesbian” (p. 11). In addition to systematically examining early and contemporary gay publications and parallel histories of other “minoritized markets” (p. 12) Sender sought out the experiences of advertising executives, marketers, and media workers to capture a sense of how creative workers and the production routines of advertising, marketing, and media industries intersect to “produce an image of the ideal gay consumer” (p. 21). Sender applies theories of consumer culture, salient theories of sociality, political science, and communication and draws on the traditional methods of content analysis and more than forty ethnographically informed interviews among media workers. This multifaceted approach could prove unwieldy for many scholars but Sender blends the analytical frameworks and materials seamlessly. Indeed, the fullness of her treatment of the data makes a case for (and, is an exemplar of) more interdisciplinary approaches to such complex questions.

The dirty little secret of capitalism is that it does not inherently fill needs but must drive desire to build consumers. The last century, as Sender argues through references to historian John D’Emilo and others, is marked by the organization of desires, bodies, and products into social identities. In chapters 1 and 2, Sender historicizes the rise of the gay market noting that its creation “reflects a growing tendency throughout the 20th century to segment potential consumers into ever more narrowly defined niche markets” (p. 58). As Sender notes “youth, women, African Americans, and other groups had already been courted as coherent target markets” long before the crafting of a gay market (p. 25). Marketers, therefore, had templates in place for reaching stigmatized or marginalized communities. Marketing used existing channels of communication, gay-owned local magazines and newspapers. In doing so, marketers necessarily had to navigate the politics and sexual content of these early publications. While Sender carefully draws parallels between the development of the gay market and other identity-based niche markets, she is attentive to the specific conditions and contexts that generate differences among these markets and how they are positioned in the larger culture.

As Sender so provocatively explores in chapter 3 through interviews with “professional homosexuals,” gay-identifying creative workers who parley their “subcultural capital” to become industry insiders, a substantial amount of identity work comes from inside the offices of general marketing firms (p. 78). Those fearful of the further commoditization of gayness may find gay-identifying media workers equating increases in market visibility with political gains somewhat chilling. It is clear from Sender’s interviews with gay marketing and media professionals that they see their greatest contribution to be the replacement of “bad” gay images with “good” ones. Regardless of where one stands on the issue of gay visibility in the marketplace, Sender documents the complex interplay of agency and structure that produces and circulates “the gay market.” As Sender states “[g]ay marketers . . . occupy a pivotal role in shaping gay consumer culture and, beyond gay marketing, help to circulate ideas about gayness in the national imagination” but their “professional credibility both rests upon and risks being undermined by

their sexual identity" (p. 64-65). Ironically, then, while "professional homosexuals" are in powerful positions to sculpt the body of the gay consumer they must also weather and adhere to the same combative heterosexism that frames any GLBT or queer person's work environment—more often than not they are expected to comply to a code of silence around their sexuality and acquiesce to gender normativity. Professional homosexuals' need to fit in to their largely conservative professional world inhibits explicit references to their sexuality in the workplace. Sender offers myriad examples that this ethos of de-sexualization makes it way into the mainstream marketing that "professional homosexuals" and their agencies produce.

Having made a case that gay-identifying men in the marketing business play a key part in the construction of the gay market, Sender's 4th and 5th chapters point to how the industry's work routines prove integral to the shape and contours the market takes. In short, there is no intentional political agenda driven by media insiders but rather the co-mingling of market forces, professionals, and "marketing routines" producing the ideology of a "visibly gay consumer culture" (p. 96). Marketing, like all modes of communication rely on visual codes. Marketers and the media in general must resort to assumptions, mass-circulated clichés, or what Sender refers to as "typification" nodding to film theorist Richard Dyer's work, to get their message across to a broad audience. To make this case, Sender moves us through the history of products imagined to go naturally with the interests of GLBT folks (drugs, booze, and sex in the beginning) and details how, as presumptions of what gays and lesbians want change, so do the products marketed to us. So, while alcohol and cigarettes may continue to be contested products in the gay and lesbian community, antiviral drugs, travel, and financial services are increasingly sold as (and, imagined to be) a positive reflection of the gay consumer market. Sender points out that whether representations of affluence and independence are better for gay and lesbian people is beside the point; we must recognize how these new modes of gay typification still reproduce an image that keeps us at a distance from the lived realities and range of GLBT lives.

It is Sender's convincing analysis of the "routines of market segmentation" found in chapter 5 that grounds the book's most provocative claim: "mechanisms of market segmentation . . . have implications not only in the realm of consumer institution . . . but have broader political implications for how GLBT subjects are situated in the public sphere" (p. 139). So, for example, stereotypes of lesbians as anti-consumerist feminists and the absence of lesbian marketing professionals combine to work against the growth of a robust consumer base visibly identifiable as "lesbian." This lack of consumer visibility, in turn, has political consequences in that it reduces the amount of capital flowing to publications by and for lesbians. Sender, building on the important work of Lee Badgett in *Money, Myths, and Change: The Economic Lives of Lesbians and Gay Men* points out that the shape of the gay market is determined through polling "people who can afford to be open about their sexual identity" (p. 148) and often project marketing data based on Kinsey's now infamous studies that estimated anywhere from 3 to 10 percent of the population could be considered bisexual or gay (p. 149). And, even though it is common to speak of a GLBT market, studies routinely ignore bisexual and trans consumers altogether reproducing the ambivalence felt toward bisexuals and trans people in lesbian and gay politics. As Sender also points out "the ambiguities of both bisexual and transgender identities present an epistemological crisis for a coherent notion of the gay market insofar as they complicate the discrete boundaries of a stabled, gendered sexuality upon which the separation of markets depends" (p. 167). In short, Sender argues,

“the ‘gay market’ is not fact but rather represents a set of methods for organizing a group of gay-identified and identifiable, respectable, privileged people—methods that perpetuate the myth of normalcy of professional-managerial class life” (p. 173). In many ways, I believe Sender gives us room to say that the “gay market” reflects what professional homosexuals and the broader mainstream public expect of its GLBT citizens—muted sexuality from gay men that can be sublimated into a “taste culture” for mass consumption and degrees of invisibility or silence from bisexuals, lesbians, and trans people.

In the final two chapters, Sender joins other culture critics in voicing concern that gay visibility in the marketplace may come at the expense of queer political challenges to mainstream consumer culture. Indeed, this was the rallying cry of activist and author Alexandra Chasin in *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market*. However, Sender resists an essentialized gay subject suffering the exploitation of the market. Instead, she highlights the interdependency of mass and subcultures—they need and feed each other. What concerns Sender is that “as gay subcultures have become the focus of corporate interest the balance of power has shifted, particularly in terms of who has control over cultural definitions and who reaps profits” (p. 232). This seems an important front to take up in the battle for GLBT social justice. *Business Not Politics* not only underscores this point but it also helps us find the frontlines in this battle.

Sender offers wonderfully informative histories of advertising, marketing, public relations as professions that give her analyses breadth and depth. We learn about the origins of these professions as they grow with industrial capitalism at the turn of the 20th century. The dominance of men in executive positions explains the absence of women from Sender’s interviews but because she notes the greater number of women in the “softer” side of marketing—particularly account management—it does leave a reader wondering what Sender might have learned from interviewing these women as well. That said this is more a curiosity than a critique of Sender’s method.

Sender ends with a powerful set of counter-intuitive claims that push against easy celebration or vilification of the growth of a gay market niche. While “[t]he threat that gay marketing poses to gay culture is commonly assumed to come from assimilation” Sender argues “gay marketing is troubling not because it is assimilationist but because it promotes particular kinds of distinction” (p. 236). Because this book looks at the kinds of cultural and social forces that produce identity in a modern, market economy *Business Not Politics* offers lessons for students of social movements, communication scholars, gender and queer studies scholars, economists, political scientists, and business executives and programs. Sender leaves a clear set of considerations for both scholars and GLBT communities to mull and does so with humor, elegance, and sharp insight.

References

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Alexandra Chasin, *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market*, Palgrave, 2001.

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