

**Article**

**Resisting Subjection, Subjected Resistance:  
Sadomasochism, Feminism, Moral Regulation and Self-  
Formation**

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Once the technologies of control become the object of erotic attachment, who is to say whether control is subverted by eroticism, or whether eroticism is reintegrated into control?  
(John K. Noyes, 1997:14)

***Introduction:***

Just as Foucault has lamented on how the “homosexual became a personage” (Foucault, 1978:43) in the late nineteenth century, so too did sadomasochism (SM), a term originally coined by Krafft-Ebbing, become a medicalized identity. However, while the incorporation of sadomasochism into the discourse on sexuality may have occurred over a century ago, it has only been in the late twentieth century that practitioners of sadomasochism have begun to positively embrace their identities, form ‘communities’ and establish themselves as a political constituency. The reasons for this can be traced to numerous events including the rise of consumerist culture, the development of gay and lesbian communities, and the re-emergence of feminism. For the present purpose, the link between feminism and sadomasochism is particularly insightful because SM has been a point of both celebration and contestation within lesbian-feminist communities. On the one hand, anti-SM lesbian-feminists have attempted to morally regulate SM practices and practitioners by claiming that SM is harmful to all women and that the pro-SM position is a form of subjection to ‘false consciousness’ and

'patriarchal values'. To counter this, lesbian SMers claim to be engaging in transgressive political acts that resist and challenge forms of oppression. Furthermore, they claim that SM plays a therapeutic role and is a means to self-actualization and 'truth.'

Both the pro- and anti-SM positions within lesbian-feminist communities can be seen as attempts to integrate lesbian-feminist theory with personal desire (Butler, 1982) and lifestyle. While there are many differences between the two positions, they both hold on to some notion of the 'truth' about sex and grant it explanatory power, either as the site of women's oppression or as a path to individual self-fulfillment. This dialectic has been evident throughout the 'sex wars'. It is my view that the 'sex wars', including the debate over SM, have been occurring in the context of a partial move away from emancipatory movements informed by Marxist frameworks towards what Giddens's (1991) has termed "life politics." I use this term of Giddens's to reflect a politics that does not entirely abandon the emancipatory or liberatory agenda of movements like feminism, but tends to conjoin this approach with one that focuses on personal and collective fulfillment and actualization. The move away from emancipatory movements and their attendant obligations and duties is reflective of a move towards an ethic that stresses individual autonomy and where group membership is exercised through freedom of choice and consumption (Rose, 1989,1994).

The debate between anti-SM lesbian-feminists and their pro-SM counterparts raises numerous questions about the relationship between subjectification and regulation on the one hand, and the potential for resistance and liberation on the other. It is my argument that SM does have the potential to resist certain forms of subjectification and that claims that it represents a threat of harm to the social body are not adequately substantiated. At the same time, by adopting certain technologies of control from the larger social context, such as a power-powerless or dominant-submissive dynamic, SM's potential for resistance is seriously curtailed. Furthermore, while anti-SM lesbian-feminists are chastising their pro-SM counterparts' immorality and lack of discipline, and while SM lesbian-feminists herald their 'sexual liberation', there is a third issue that needs to be articulated: the targets of moral regulation have, as is consistent with patterns of moral regulation (Hunt, 1997:281), taken it upon themselves to engage in a process of self- and community-formation. This process is therapeutic in nature and, in my view, may become

a point of resistance in itself. The emphasis on self- and community-formation, as I hope to show, amount to new regulatory regimes within SM communities. While this regulation cannot be assumed to be positive or negative, it does serve as a reminder of Foucault's (1978) insistence that 'liberation', defined as freedom from regulation, is not possible.

Before discussing the main arguments within the SM debate, I would like to briefly address the reasons for my own interest in this topic. I am writing from a position that distinguishes between morality and my own personal distaste and unease with simulations that blur distinctions between sex and violence. My own sense of taste, then, is different from my sense of morality in that a substantiated claim of social harm needs to be evident before I accept something as inherently moral in nature. As a self-identified pro-feminist man, it has been my project for many years to develop an ethical position that is congruent with my identity and with my sexuality. Included in this project is my desire to construct a political approach to SM other than those currently offered. In light of this, the intellectual endeavor I am undertaking can also be understood as a project of self-formation.

### *SM as Subjectification: The Radical Feminist Critique*

The existence of self-identified lesbian-feminist sadomasochists poses a direct challenge to both feminist and lesbian-feminist theories. To begin, the idea that women who identify as lesbian and as feminists could be engaged in consensual 'violence' challenges a view of "lesbianism as the beginning of passion, vulnerability, mutuality and trust" that offers the possibility for a "re-posing of power as the extension and creation of new ways of loving" (Butler, 1982:169). Inherent in this is also a challenge to how women are defined, which for many radical feminists has included a moral differentiation from men. Lesbian-feminism, it appears, has been faced with both a theoretical contradiction and a crisis of discipline within its ranks. As a response, anti-SMers need a theoretical and moral position to reassert 'true' feminist self-formation and purposeful solidarity.<sup>1</sup>

The general response from radical feminists<sup>2</sup> has been that willful participation in SM is a form of 'false consciousness' that is consistent with patriarchal relations:

The primary claim of [radical feminism] is that the eroticization of violence or domination, and of pain or powerlessness, is at the core of sadomasochism and, consequently, that the practice of sadomasochism embodies the same values as heterosexual practices of sexual domination in general and sexually violent practices like rape in particular (Bar-On, 1982:75).

Additionally, SM actually strengthens these relations:

To degrade someone, even with that person's consent, is to *endorse* the degradation of persons. It is to affirm that the abuse of persons is *acceptable*. For if some people may be humiliated and despised, all may be (Hein, 1982:87; emphasis in original).

SM is seen as an intolerable perpetuation of violence against women, 'male values' and 'patriarchal relations' that also mocks the very real suffering of oppressed groups. As Herman states,

I am condemning s/m sex – sex that necessarily involves *and takes its pleasures in* the (consensual and ritualized) infliction of pain and humiliation within a setting that draws upon and mimics the non-consensual abuse (as in mainstream) of real-people – raped women, subjugated slaves, and tortured prisoners (1996:152; emphasis in original).

These anti-SM critiques view SM practices as being appropriated from the dominant culture (Herman, 1996:150) or, as Rich has stated, an "acceptance by some lesbians of male homosexual mores" (1983:203). Thus, when Davis, a lesbian-feminist sadomasochist, calls on lesbian-feminism to "own your 'illegitimate' children" (1987:13), the response from radical-feminist Atkinson is direct: "Your 'enemy' is not the Establishment per se. In *fact*, you claim *as your life force* the distillation of the *essence* of that Establishment. Your *enemy* is the *resistance* of the Establishment to *recognize* you as its *own*" (1982:91; emphasis in original).

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While pro-SM advocacy has not been welcome by most radical-feminists, there seems to be a hesitancy amongst some radicals to be overly critical of lesbian SM practitioners. One reason for this is the belief that SM, although not justifiable, is a means to escape feelings of powerlessness that are inflicted upon lesbians and is a result of being "conditioned to making bland observations and cynical jokes in response to obscenities of a national scale and perversity of universal magnitude. We are numbed to the point of being at home with cruelty and despair" (Hein, 1982:88). The argument that lesbians have been subjected to a form of conditioning or 'false consciousness' is central to the rejection of SM practitioners' ability to consent. In essence, Marxist critiques of contract theory are applied to sexual intercourse with the result that consent is not possible in a patriarchal context where, it is argued, "men have power" and "women are powerless" (Morgan, 1982:117). Just as some radical-feminists argue that heterosexual intercourse cannot be separated from rape because of structural inequities (i.e. MacKinnon, 1987), lesbian sadomasochists cannot consent to practicing SM because their subjectivities and "desires are formed largely by social ideologies and institutions" (Saxe, 1992:60). As Russell states,

Women have been reared to be submissive, to anticipate and even want domination by men. But wanting or consenting to domination and humiliation does not make it nonoppressive. It merely demonstrates how deep and profound the oppression is (1982:177).

Clearly there are problems with this claim, not the least of which is its circular and self-supporting logic: what lesbian SMers do with each other is patriarchy's fault and, rather than revealing a problem in radical feminist logic, the existence of lesbian sadomasochists only serves to prove how powerful patriarchy actually is. A related problem, which is addressed by many SM lesbians, is the disempowerment that results from a renunciation of women's potential for individual agency.

The claim that SM is a private practice has also been denounced by many radical-feminists. For Saxe, the acts themselves and their consequences cannot be considered private. Even if they could be considered private, she reminds us that "the so-called private sphere of the bedroom is the site of much of women's worst misogynist oppression" (1992:61).

She believes that SM is highly visible, a concern that Morgan furthers by arguing that depictions of lesbian SM reflect and reinforce patriarchal portrayals of women as naturally masochistic (1982:110). This is viewed as dangerous for women because, regardless of the participants' intentions, the context in which these depictions are interpreted cannot be controlled (see Star, 1982). Bar-On (1982) has reached the conclusion that the social nature of sex means that sexual choices cannot rightfully be decided upon by the individual alone. She argues that everything that is social is rule governed and warns of the dangers that disallowing sexual regulation could incite (1982:74). In many ways, as Rose (1989) has pointed out, she is correct in that what is often considered private is in fact public to the extent that it is governable. Nonetheless, the trend towards legislating correct and incorrect sexual behaviour within feminist communities led Butler, somewhat sympathetically, to site this as a reason for the growth of SM. This is what she terms the "paradox" of "the personal is political": when personal life is expected to conform to a strict politics, sex seems to become "radically public" and open to communal scrutiny (1982:171).

Critiques of the pro-SM position often include a challenge to its liberatory potential. Herman, wary of the possibility of sliding down the slippery relativist slope, asserts that "radical pluralist" approaches to difference need not cede the right to make value judgements (1996:151). Similarly, Hein warns of the inherent liberalist approach to the realization of the self that characterizes SM (1982:84). True liberation, it is argued, is impossible under conditions of abuse – regardless of whether the abuse is consensual (Bar-On, 1982) – and cannot be reached through the fulfillment of individual desires. As Butler states, in response to Califia's previous claim that desire is "impeccably honest", "to conceive of desire as [an] 'impeccably honest' law unto itself as key to destroying repressive sexual orders is to exaggerate the autonomy and intelligence of desire" (1982:173). Desire, Butler argues, can only be as free as its holders. In fact, some writers, such as Atkinson, argue that sexual liberation is not a feminist goal because "feminists are women who are sick to death of being defined sexually" (1982:91). However, other writers do consider sexual liberation to be important but reject SM because it does not involve making a personal and political choice to construct one's own sexuality on one's own terms. If sexuality is socially constructed, as most feminist theory posits, then the correct approach is to reconstruct

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desire in such a way as to eliminate power dynamics from all relationships. While it is observed that "perfect feminist relationships" are impossible within a male-controlled society (Rian, 1982:47), it is nonetheless "crucial that both power and politics get reshaped and deepened from having passed through the lesbian experience" (Butler, 1982:173). Sexual relationships can also not be separated from the rest of life, a separation that is "patriarchal through and through" and associated with SM (Bar-On, 1982:80).

For radical-feminists, sex represents an expression of intimacy and a political bond that needs to be carefully managed. While its 'truths' can be reclaimed only by cleansing it of patriarchy, it is also, as Foucault has said, "the point of weakness where evil portents reach through to us" (1978:69). Within this framework sex cannot be a means to self-realization until after women have acquired self-determination and control over the social structures that shape women's lives and sexual imagination. Until that point, lesbians need to be vigilant in their moral self-formation, if for no other reason than for the sake of the movement.

In exploring the radical-feminist position, it is worth noting that the Marxist roots of this emancipatory movement are clearly evident in many respects. The approach taken is based largely upon Marx's historical materialism and has privileged one form of oppression as being determinant. The privileged form of oppression of course revolves around gender, or men's oppression of women within patriarchy, although the specific way that this is formulated varies (for instance, some emphasize reproduction, others emphasize sex itself, etc.). The oppressed – women – are clearly distinguished from the oppressors and are completely devoid of power. Women who disagree with this account of their social position are deemed to have internalized a false consciousness which, in conjunction with their totalizing and absolute powerlessness in relation to men, nullifies their ability to consent to anything. Fortunately, there is hope for a revolution that will bring true liberation and freedom. And, just as Marx did not anticipate any flexibility in capitalism, so too do radical-feminists believe that neither their politics nor their identities will need to change in the process of subverting patriarchy.

It needs to be mentioned that I have focused primarily on one form of radical feminism for my analysis. I have intentionally presented a relatively unified position and have tried to present some of the basic tenets

for analytical purposes. There are several radical feminist objections to SM that have not been mentioned thus far, such as the racism and anti-semitism that some believe to be inherent in it (see Sims *et. al.*, 1982). It will become apparent through the course of my argument that my intent is not to discard feminism or Marxism per se. Rather, my intent is to provide an account of the arguments put forth and to begin examining the foundations upon which they rest in anticipation of a comparison to the arguments and foundations of the pro-SM position.

### ***SM as Resistance: The Pro-SM Position***

As sadomasochists 'come out' in increasing numbers, the position that they articulate has moved from a defense of their right to privacy to an emphasis on political identity, spirituality and epistemology. Included in this shift has been an insistence that SM is a legitimate sexual orientation (Noyes, 1994:4) and, as such, deserves the same respect and protection as other cultural minorities (i.e. Davis, 1987). In this sense, anti-SM discourse is deemed similar to racism and homophobia. The literature that has been produced is diverse and, while academic literature has increased, the majority claims its authority from the experience of SM practitioners. It is important to note that the pro-SM position often (but not always) aligns itself with feminism, and as such, has articulated itself as a liberatory movement.

One of the impetuses for the growth in literature has been radical feminist critiques of SM. These critiques, according to Rubin, force members of "minority sexual communities" to "face an endless stream of propaganda which rationalizes abuses against them, attempts to impair their self esteem, and exhorts them to recant" (1987:225-6). Rubin recognizes a need to evaluate sexual behaviour, but insists that an all-engulfing attack on SM is a form of "cultural imperialism" that bases its judgement not on issues of consent or harm, but rather on an inability "to digest the concept of benign sexual variation" (1987:226). The argument here is that the radical feminist position problematizes conventional styles of sex while simultaneously refusing to consider the possibility that other styles exist. The reason for this, according to Rubin, is because "if S/M is understood as the dark opposite of happy and healthy lesbianism, accepting that happy and healthy lesbians do S/M would threaten the logic of the belief system out of which this opposi-



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tion was generated" (1987:215). The system of logic Rubin criticizes, in addition to attributing oppression to particular styles of sexuality, insists that certain sex acts are the 'cause' for other acts. By expanding the scope to include a threat of harm not only to SM practitioners but to the entire social body, the radical feminists have constructed a justification for increased regulation.

In the context of the radical feminist position, SMers, particularly lesbian-feminist SMers, have expanded the type and range of their claims to legitimacy. Not only is SM defended as an individual freedom of choice, it is positioned as being capable of providing numerous personal benefits to its practitioners and as being an act of resistance that challenges current oppressive structures. In addition, increased emphasis has been placed on the role of consent, fantasy, interpretation and the simulative nature of SM 'play'.

Individual practitioners of SM have claimed to receive numerous personal benefits through the staged simulation of fantasy and desire. Included amongst these benefits are therapeutic effects such as assertiveness training, release from tension, an ability to 'come to power', increased bodily awareness, and assistance in dealing with personal fears and experiences of abuse<sup>3</sup> (see Thompson, 1991 and Portillo, 1991). While many radical feminists have suggested that any problems experienced by SMers are the result of patriarchy and are being addressed through the re-enactment of patriarchal values and power structures, SM practitioners focus on the simulative context and on the individual interpretation and meaning attributed to 'playing' through 'scenes.' Much of the sociological literature supports the interpretive approach to SM, citing the emphasis placed on control, trust and consent in its enactment, as well as research findings in which the majority of SMers have been found to feel positive about themselves and their sexuality (see studies cited in Weinberg, 1994).

Hopkins has suggested that the simulative nature of SM needs to be distinguished from replications of patriarchal relationships. He acknowledges that SM is not unproblematic within a context of patriarchal inequality while simultaneously noting that the core features of patriarchy, such as coercive violence, are absent in SM settings. The stance taken by Hopkins is premised on his acceptance of the "radically honest, democratic model of consent" developed within SM communities (1994:127). He has also noted the potential for gender subversion within SM prac-

tices in the way they can challenge a static patriarchal framework in which men are dominant and women submissive.

Radical feminists generally do not accept the argument that SM can subvert women's traditionally submissive role because they believe that power cannot be defeated by enacting it. SM practitioners, on the other hand, view power as inevitable. Rather than forming what one could consider fantasies of a power-free society, the pro-SM position argues that parodying power relations is a form of resistance that also enables them to gain a better understanding of power – an understanding that some perceive to be withheld by elites who have a vested interest in maintaining its invisibility. Undoubtedly, as Foucault has argued, "power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself" (1978:86). Attempting to escape the subjectivizing function attached to power could be viewed as a radically transgressive form of resistance. As stated by Noyes, "the masochistic move is to seize upon the machinery of domination and pervert its usage, attempting to derive nothing but sexual pleasure from machines that were designed to effect the smooth running of social structures" (1997:12).

While Noyes argues that parodying technologies of control is subversive, he simultaneously questions its revolutionary potential by arguing that such parodies can perpetuate technologies of social control. This latter insight is neither recognized nor accepted by many practitioners of SM. For instance, in a recent anthology, "leatherfolk" (a term used for SM practitioners who wear leather attire) are described as being the "avatars of the new" (Thompson, 1991:xx), the "next generation" in the "evolution of sexuality" (Portillo, 1991:50) who are committing "the ultimate act of defiance" (Portillo, 1991:55). This "ultimate act" is aimed at challenging "a world that functions on sexual repression", a world in which "The explosion of private sexual fantasy into public view is a powerful political statement" (Bronski, 1991:64). It is ironic that the SM literature argues that oppression is not reducible to sex and simultaneously claims either that radical sex has revolutionary potential or that freedom is synonymous with sexual liberation. This is an important point that will be raised again shortly.

***SM, Self-Formation and Community-Formation***

One component of moral regulation noted by Hunt is that it “characteristically incites those at whom it is directed to engage in practices of self formation” (1997:281). This is particularly true of SMers, although I would also add that, in some circumstances, moral regulation also incites processes of community-formation. While the processes through which many sadomasochists have developed personal and community identities differ to varying degrees, attempts to regulate and morally indict sadomasochists has spawned some consistency in efforts to instruct the subjectivities of its practitioners. This maneuver can be interpreted as primarily defensive, although it could be argued that other influences, such as self-help and new age movements, have also acted as impetuses. However, based on the evidence available, I would conclude that these latter movements have primarily facilitated, not caused, the trend towards self- and community-formation within sadomasochist communities.

For the most part, medical and psychiatric expertise have been drawn upon only insofar as SM confronts medical and legal prohibitions or in the dispensing of knowledge for the purpose of healthy sexual practice. The primary form of expertise evident in the literature is experience itself, which is fitting given the emphasis placed upon the *self* in the process of formation. The credibility of experience as expertise can perhaps also be understood in the context of SM’s contested relationship with the professions. Clearly, self-formation aims towards a positive definition of the self, something that may not be possible from those who have historically been complicit with sanctions against SM. An additional form of expertise that is increasingly referenced is spiritual expertise, although this form of expertise is itself generally based in personal experience.

Self-formation amongst SM practitioners is simultaneously diverse and isomorphic. In many respects, it reflects what Simonds (1995) refers to as the “paradox of self-help literature”: on the one hand, the self is viewed as a project that is constantly being constructed; on the other hand, a true self already exists and is waiting for discovery. While this paradox is reflected in the SM community, it requires two additional considerations. First, while many SMers are searching for their ‘truth’, they may not locate it within the mind. Rather, for some, the body holds the key to the self (see Farr, 1987:184). I do realize that some commentators, such as Giddens (1991), have remarked that in late modernity the

body has become reflexive and a site to be controlled and constructed, but this does not necessarily equate with a search for truth itself in the body.

A second concern I have with the paradox is that the message presented by some SM advocates is to accept yourself as you are, not as what you should or could become (see Davis, 1987; Jacques, 1993). This could be interpreted as an essentialist position, and some SM practitioners do indeed perceive themselves to be 'born that way' (i.e. Vesta, 1991), but it is intended (at least by some) as a statement about accepting your desires and subjectivity without judgement. In this regard the goal is to unapologetically abandon normative expectations.

The spiritual and epistemological aspects are perhaps the most interesting developments in the trend towards self-formation amongst SMers. For instance, in the introduction to *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics and Practice*, Thompson describes leatherfolk as "the most expert investigators of eros" (1991:xiii) for whom "radical sexual experience is a triumphant reminder to live in the Now" and a "fierce commitment to life" (xvi). The message is that SM is "a process of liberation" (xiv) or self-formation that can "serve deep spiritual needs for wholeness and completion" (xvii). SM, according to Thompson, appears to be a very enticing means to heal wounds, erase shame and come to terms with negative aspects of our selves. It is worth quoting liberally from his writing:

Through erotic enactment and the emotional catharsis it provides, radical sexuality can be an empowering, soul-making process...For many in the leather community today, S/M actually means "sex magic." It is their art, and craft, and means of taking a shamanic journey into the "other world" of personal and collective myth. It is in that secret inner place where the healing occurs. The soul is an earthy place, and we cannot sanitize it in order to make claims of "getting well." As we descend through the psyche's strata we discover violence: Dream images of strange drama and torture are not uncommon. The inner world is a place of blood and fire, tears and mud. It is the soul's nature to be in organic upheaval, a perpetual state of death and rebirth, just like the

outer world around it. We cannot put a lid on our soul business and its disquieting work. In this context, to acknowledge and explore one's S/M interests and instincts is to act in the truth (xviii).

Thompson's writing actively implores the reader to seek help, to address the dangers that lie deep within the self and to act in the name of 'truth.' His perspective is not unique within the anthology he edited; in fact, there is an entire section addressing such topics as "the spiritual dimensions of bondage," complete with interviews from spiritual leaders like Purusha the Androgyne and the "magical masochist" Fakir Musafar.

Despite differences in the content and process of self-formation, there are similarities in how the technologies of the self are deployed. For instance, there are many references to what Foucault (1978) has described as the urge to discover the secrets that sex holds and an insistence that it reveals its truths about ourselves. In fact, the emphasis on 'truth' and its accessibility is a frequent theme throughout much of the literature. The discovery or construction of 'truth' is presented as self-actualization through the mastery of one's own experience – especially sexual experience. Giddens (1991) has commented upon the increased tendency to focus on self-actualization as a goal that can be achieved through the mastery of the body and sexuality. In order for the process of separating 'true' from 'false' selves to be successful, it requires authenticity – which, according to Giddens, is dependent upon understanding one's own self-formation and identity as being distinct from the technologies of control. Without such a distinction, the moral meaning is lost. This insight from Giddens may be helpful, at least to some degree, in explaining the seeming need for SMers to claim a distance from sexual mores and regulatory systems. Then again, it is possible that this distance is simply for pleasure – as Foucault (1978) has commented, the act of resisting sexual regulation is a source of pleasure in itself.

Ironically, Rose (1989) has pointed out that managing the self is partially about the repression or even obliteration of the self. In other words, as one forms the self, any previous selves or alternative choices are subsumed. This insight is particularly applicable to SM, not only because the construction of the self represses other selves, but because the very nature of SM involves playing artificial roles in circumstances in which

the participants may be entirely interchangeable. One's individual identity may not really matter that much in SM scenes.

The formation of a SM identity is a prerequisite for joining a SM community. For all intensive purposes, SM communities can be characterized by voluntary associations with others who share similar interests in sadomasochistic sexual consumption. While there seems to be increasing acceptance of SM as a cultural minority, it would be premature to assume that all SM practitioners take this position. Indeed, it would be problematic to assume that all SM practitioners are involved in a SM community because these communities take many forms and are not always visible. For instance, SM communities may not have a spatially defined location as they often develop over the internet or through newsletters and magazines (see Houllberg, 1995). It is also important to note that there are often different SM communities, even within the same geographical area.

Regulation is an important aspect of the SM community. The primary role that it plays in this regard is to police the sexual conduct of its members, although this does not occur in a formal manner. Rather, SM practitioners have repeatedly claimed that the importance of reputation within small minority communities acts to ensure that people who do not accept the rules around consent and safety are identified and have difficulty finding willing partners (i.e. Rubin, 1987; Weinberg, 1994). In addition to this, there have been numerous SM manuals and guides that have been published for the purpose of creating shared understandings of the expectations of SM participants (i.e. Jacques, 1993). While these developments are definitely positive, there seems to be an assumption that the formation of communities negates problems related to sexualized violence. Certainly not all SM practitioners are involved in a close-knit community. The tendency for SMers to glorify the lovingness and mutuality of the SM community has been commented upon by Bersani (1995:87), although I suspect that the vulnerability felt within the SM community is the impetus for the overly cheery depictions in the literature.

The development of SM communities is premised on the exercising of citizenship through voluntary affiliation and sexual consumption.<sup>4</sup> However, these communities increasingly appear to be demanding members to regulate themselves in a manner that is in keeping with the rules of consent and safety. This is entirely justifiable. What may not be so

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justifiable and may in fact become a point of resistance within SM communities is the tendency to increasingly regulate members' identities and value systems. Similar to how gay and lesbian communities developed and imposed standards defining what it meant to be gay or lesbian, so too might SM communities adopt increasingly rigid identities and values. Duncan (1996) has already identified problems experienced by some SM lesbians of colour who feel that differences within SM communities have not been addressed and remain hierarchical.

Sexual identity categories are problematic in that they are inherently instruments of regulatory regimes. However, as Foucault (1978) has noted, they simultaneously facilitate resistance. They are a prerequisite for political mobilization and for the development of communities and a common language through which resistance can be expressed (Weeks, 1991:92). In short, sexual identities are both enabling and disabling. To avoid the regulative possibilities as well as the urge to essentialize, my own approach would be to adopt something akin to Epstein's (1987) notion of sexual identities and communities as consisting of a combination of external ascription and chosen affiliation. This could possibly provide the fluidity needed to accommodate difference while not abandoning the potential for developing a strong political constituency.

### ***Discussion and Conclusion:***

So what is an observer to make of this situation? As I stated in the introduction, one of my reasons for undertaking this project is an attempt to develop an ethical and political approach to SM. If one is generally supportive of emancipatory movements like feminism and is simultaneously committed to the 'liberal' values of 'free' choice,<sup>5</sup> what would be an ethical and politically desirable stance to take? The task of determining such a position is not made any easier when one considers that regulation, including moral regulation, is inherently neither positive nor negative (see Hunt, 1997). And, as Herman (1996:148) has pointed out, supporting sadomasochism and its practitioners is as much of a moral decision as it would be to not support them. What follows is not a comprehensive appraisal of all the issues that need to be considered, but rather it is my own attempt to begin addressing what I feel are some of the basic concerns and contradictions that have been raised.

Sadomasochism does occur within a context where social relations are imbued with a dominant-submissive dynamic. While this dynamic is apparent within work and family relationships, as Chancer (1992) and others have analyzed, it is perhaps most apparent within the realm of sex and sexuality. Regardless of whether the sexualization of power relationships is viewed as a 'natural' occurrence or a symptom of something like patriarchy, SM, even if considered as parody, does reflect and reify this context. In this regard, SM can be characterized as "profoundly conservative in that its imagination of pleasure is almost entirely defined by the dominant culture" (Bersani, 1995:87). The construction of a sexual orientation that defines itself through its participation in the technologies of control is an act of accepting power as it is already structured. By this account, SM – parody or not – supports the structures of power and, by giving them the appearance of being harmless and playful, gives these structures an attractiveness that is presented as being outside of ideology and politics (see Bersani, 1995). Contrary to the idealistic claims of SM practitioners, one cannot escape from and re-enter the social context at will.

It is my interpretation of the context in which SM occurs that keeps me from discarding the radical feminist argument entirely. Structural arguments, such as that put forth by radical feminists, are not holistic enough to provide a complete account of sex, power, or the social. Nonetheless, an awareness of oppression – and I support the use of the term 'oppression,' although I do not believe its form is as simple as posited by radical feminists – can cause a strong "gut" reaction<sup>6</sup> to images, for instance, of SM practitioners enacting scenes with dominant "Nazis" and submissive "Jews." Public statements that indicate an unapologetic enjoyment of torture can have a strong impact, regardless of the intent of the speaker. For instance, I had a negative reaction upon reading excerpts like this one from an SM practitioner who is reflecting on "stalking its prey": "I wanted to be mean, tough, vicious, revengeful, cruel, and cold. The women I found fed the dark side with their desires to be taken and beaten and told what to do. This paradise of hell was mine, and with consent!" (Antolovich, 1991:152). The writer, Antolovich, goes on to raise the issue of consent, although she does not answer her own question:



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Inside my own inner dungeon I asked myself, "What is their consent about anyway? What does their consent mean when all they've known is abusive relationships? With me they at least give permission. How can a person really consent when they think that their role is to do everything they are told to do? How can they give consent when they want to please absolutely, either because they are in lust/crush or codependence?" I started to wonder if the Law of the Universe – "Like attracts like" – was in action here: my dark side attracting their dark side. Meanwhile... (1991:252).

Antolovich herself questions the ability of her partners to consent and her only apparent answer is that, "With me they at least give permission." The question that Antolovich asked is left unanswered, thereby lending some credibility to the radical feminist argument that consent is not possible when power is unequally distributed.

The radical feminist argument against the acceptability of consent as a defense for SM is nonetheless very problematic. Theoretically, I would agree that true consent – that which is unaffected by power relations – is not possible in a SM relationship. I would also argue, and quite strongly, that this theoretical stance, while intellectually revealing, is inapplicable because no relationships have an equal distribution of power. Certainly differences or similarities in structural location – for instance class, gender, and race – affect the distribution of power, but so does personality, reputation, and other criteria. The gender reductionist stance adopted by radical feminism does not and cannot provide a full account of power, other than to wish it away – a wish that is as much a fantasy as any being acted out on the SM scene.

The argument that SM does take place within a social context where power is regularly used and abused is accepted for my purposes here, although accepting this is not meant to imply I agree with the radical feminist claim that SM is harmful to society generally or to women in particular. The evidence for such a claim does not exist beyond theoretical statements suggesting an intuitive relation between SM and violence against women. If the patriarchal context is to be considered in an analysis of SM, then it is important to consider the amount of violent imagery that is produced and consumed daily within that context. Sadomasoch-

ism is not unique: in fact, images of consensual flagellation are far less prevalent and arguably much less harmful than, for example, movies that are rife with graphic images of war and mindless cruelty. With this in mind, it is important to carefully consider claims that SM is responsible for or a contributing factor in 'real life' violent sexual acts anymore than *Rambo* is responsible for real massacres.

A full account of the context in which SM is practiced also requires a consideration of the increasingly 'virtual' or symbolic nature of popular culture. As early as 1969 Gebhard suggested that "it may be that a society must be extremely complex and heavily reliant upon symbolism before the inescapable repressions and frustrations of life...can be expressed symbolically in S&M" (cited in Weinberg, 1994:276). In this sense, then, perhaps SM can be viewed as a mere simulation amongst many simulations. However, Gebhard also notes that dominance-submission relationships must be embedded within a culture that values aggression before SM can become institutionalized (Weinberg, 1994:276-277). This latter consideration reinforces my hesitancy to whole-heartedly endorse SM. While there is some potential for resistance through SM, the subversive parody of power is always temporary and never mounts a substantial challenge to structural relations of power. If liberation requires attacking the roots of political rationality, as Foucault (1981) has claimed, then arguments positing the liberatory power of SM are seriously misguided.

Radical feminism requests that SM practitioners reconstruct their desires or, at the very least, repress them for the sake of the movement. Thinking critically of one's desires is laudable, although it is incorrect to assume that this is antithetical to SM. But this is not the point I wish to make. Rather, the concern I have is with attempts by a social movement to enforce such a strict regime of moral regulation upon its members. Such attempts, like moral regulation projects in general, can never be completely successful. This is not to suggest that creating shared values is a bad thing; what it does suggest is that the development of a social movement's subjective understanding of itself and its cause must be capable of change and be flexible enough to account for difference. In other words, standards need to be relative and not absolute, just as apparent contradictions within the movement need to be discussed but not arbitrarily and artificially legislated into silence.

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The tendency for emancipatory movements like radical feminism to morally regulate its supporters in an absolutist manner is one of the reasons, in my view, for the attractiveness of 'life politics.' A second reason for the growth of life politics, with its emphasis on empowerment through consumption, is a response to the lack of control people feel over what can broadly be deemed 'the social.' Structural approaches have been faced with resistance and an inability to counter the numerous ways in which their claims can be co-opted without necessarily resulting in a restructuring of power relations. Blame for this could arguably rest with the structural approaches themselves, but the increasingly international context in which their claims must be made has rendered the structural targets of change (politics, economics, and culture, for instance) unresponsive. A third reason, and perhaps the most important, is that consumer culture and life politics is simply more suited to a context of rampant individualism. In this context, the technologies that push people to develop themselves as unique individuals through consumption is at odds with the communal identification required by structural movements.

My reason for raising the move away from emancipatory politics and toward life politics is because it relates to SM in several ways. For the sake of clarity, it needs to be restated that my use of the term 'life politics' does not presuppose the disappearance or illegitimacy of emancipatory movements. This is particularly true for the SM communities' that ironically claim sex and sexuality do not cause oppression, and at the same time make claims of being structurally oppressed because of their sexuality. I do believe that sex and sexuality are repressed, contra Foucault, but the claim that SM practitioners are structurally oppressed similar to gays, lesbians, or people of colour requires some consideration. What is being posited is more than a claim for tolerance or even acceptance: the claim suggests that anyone committed to addressing inequality needs to be an advocate for SM in order to be authentic. Failing to do so would be an admission of intolerance, insensitivity and complacency – in effect, an act of oppression itself.

Butler (1997) has argued that culture-based identities can be the target of systemic oppression, but her argument is based on an analysis of sexual orientation, not SM. The experience of 'sexual minorities', namely gay men and lesbians, is often used by SM advocates to argue that they too are a sexual minority that deserves certain 'rights'.<sup>7</sup> While I

agree that SM practitioners do face discrimination in certain circumstances, for instance at some lesbian-feminist events, I do not consider this to be systemic (nor, in some situations, unjustified). In order to be systemic, SM would need to be recognized as an identity, a point that I shall now address.

There has been some movement within SM communities to define SM as a sexual orientation and a public identity. This is evident in the importance placed on publicly 'coming out' (for instance, Portillo, 1991). However, this approach contradicts some of the defenses for SM put forth, such as the claim that SM roles and power dynamics are kept in the 'playroom' and hence are not a threat to the larger society. More importantly, however, it suggests an essentialist notion of what SM signifies, which poses problems for SM communities' emphasis on the importance of interpretation and fluidity of meaning. If SM is presented as a (at least somewhat) static and fixed identity, then it would also follow that a definition of what constitutes a sadomasochist is required. I have avoided such an endeavor thus far because defining the sadomasochist requires placing boundaries around what constitutes SM. This has been done, but the definitions presented generally revolve around some notion of fantasy, interpretation, safety and consent (examples can be found in Jacques, 1993). These criteria are not sufficient for the task of differentiating SM from 'normal' sexual activity and hint that such a definition may very well be incompatible with SM's interpretive and fluid nature. It is my own view, which is shared by some SM practitioners (i.e. Thompson, 1991) that a concrete division between SMers and non-SMers is impossible, particularly since the acts that are assumed to comprise SM scenes are not uncommon (i.e. bondage).

The difficulty inherent in delineating the difference between SM and other, non-SM sexual activities suggests sexual acts themselves are not sufficient in the allocation of rights. The distinction Foucault has made between the 'freedom of relationships' and the 'freedom of sexual acts' is helpful in this regard (cited in Weeks, 1991:166). While Foucault was referring to 'freedoms', his framework can be applied to 'rights' such that there is a differentiation between 'relationship rights' and 'sexual rights.' The former would include the right to determine with whom and under what conditions one engages in sexual activity and personal relationships in general. The latter, on the other hand, refers to sexual acts or styles which individuals are free to participate in if they so choose. 'Sex-

ual rights,' because they are based on sexual style, are not subject to systemic discrimination. My argument here is different from some pro-SM positions, particularly that of Rubin (1987), which seems to claim that sexual 'style' equates with 'cultural minority' in a legal sense. If Rubin's connection is accepted, then any leisure activity and styles thereof could claim their own particular 'rights.'

Despite my argument that SM practitioners should not be recognized as a distinct constituency deserving their own 'rights,' I strongly oppose any form of regulation that inhibits their ability to freely participate in consensual SM activities. All remaining legal prohibitions against SM need to be challenged. Furthermore, public services, such as the legal system, the police, sexual assault centers, and the health care system need to offer services that are free from any discriminatory bias against SM practitioners. Similarly, public education on sexuality and health needs to include some basic information on SM. In essence, while I reject the notion that 'rights' should be allocated based on an individual or group's identification with SM, I do believe that the needs of SMers should be incorporated into public services and treated in the same manner as many other recreational activities.<sup>8</sup> I do realize that such an incorporation invariably risks increasing the degree to which SM communities are regulated, but I am not in a position to determine whether the net impact would be positive or negative for SM practitioners.

One of my main concerns in addressing SM is my own awareness of the ways in which it has been used to destabilize feminism and gay and lesbian politics. While debates over this issue within feminist and gay communities is inevitable, the existence of SM has contributed to a context in which these communities are increasingly pressured to govern themselves and regulate SM in order to acquire public approval, funding, and political credibility. This will not change in the future. To some extent, contradictions are inescapable within political movements that value difference. Other than what has already been stated here, I do not offer any additional recommendations except to emphasize the need for discussion and flexibility in the political approaches that are considered. While I have attempted to articulate my personal approach to SM and some possible future directions for sexual politics, my perspective is not fixed and will undoubtedly change as the political climate and my own subjective understanding of the issues evolve. In the end, however, per-

haps Rubin is correct when she states that, "ultimately, acceptance is gained by political power as much as by rational argument" (1987:225).

### *Notes*

1. Hunt (1997) discusses how moral self-formation is critical for the agents of moral regulation, as well as the tendency to institute self-control within social movements to promote the capacity for purposeful conduct.

2. The term 'radical feminist' or 'radical feminism' will be used to connote the anti-SM position. While this is not an entirely adequate signifier, there tends to be a relation between the more radical strands of feminism and the anti-SM position. By using this term, I also hope to avoid confusion between the anti-SM lesbian-feminist position and the pro-SM lesbian-feminist position.

3. Note that most SM practitioners reject the assumption that SM practice is the effect of personal histories of abuse.

4. I have adopted this description of citizenship from Rose (1989).

5. I have put 'liberal' in quotes simply because there seems to be a tendency in both the radical feminist and lesbian-feminist literature on sadomasochism to attach negative connotations to anything attributed to 'liberalism' (even while both positions incorporate some version of it). While values of 'free' choice are certainly liberal, I think it is dangerous to use 'liberal' as a code word to arbitrarily dismiss everything associated with it as 'bad' or even 'patriarchal.' 'Free' is in quotes simply to acknowledge that free choice is never truly 'free' in the sense that individual subjectivity and autonomy are far from absolute within a liberal social context.

6. I borrow this term from Hopkins (1994).

7. I have not been able to locate a clear articulation of what these 'rights' would entail, other than the eradication of explicit legal prohibitions and vague references to freedom from shame through social recognition.

8. I am thinking, for instance, about the health services provided to recreational sport associations.

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