

Twenty-first Century Sex

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Introduction

What is sexual freedom? If anarchism has anything to offer for the twenty-first century, it has to begin rethinking this question. New ways of thinking about sexuality in recent years have emerged not so much from anarchist theorists, many of whom are stuck in the sixties as far as thinking (or fantasizing) about sex goes, as from the women's and gay and lesbian liberation movements, and their successor issue-based campaigns. Today, new sexual and social movements proliferate. The direct action and spectacular demonstrations of AIDS activists, Lesbian Avengers, Outrage, feminists for and against pornography, catch the headlines, while postmodern feminists and Queer theorists join science fiction authors and songwriters in speculation about the transcending of gender and sexual categories. Developments in biotechnology and virtual reality pose difficult questions about how we understand the boundaries and limitations of our bodies.

In this article I will look at some underlying implications of different approaches to sex and the body, and question whether new theories and new technologies pose a real challenge to existing power relationships. Will twenty-first century sex really be different?

True Natures

One night at a party in the nineteen-sixties, I was trapped against a wall by a drunken member of my local anarchist group. As I pushed him off me, he said bitterly, 'Call yourself an anarchist?' This attitude that sexual freedom meant women on demand was one of the factors propelling many of us a few years later into the first Women's Liberation groups, where we were able to begin formulating demands on our own terms. There is a long history of association between anarchism and sexual freedom, but sexual freedom means different things to different people at different times, and has complex connections to ideas about nature, bodies, gender, power, and social organisation. The concept of freedom, though it can seem like an absolute, is shaped by specific social experiences of constraint.

Although many anarchists have led entirely conventional sexual lives, a theory which rejects authority implies at the least a rejection of formal marriage, seen as State/religious interference in human relationships. Critics of anarchism have always claimed it would mean sexual licence, the absence of restraint, shameless women and irresponsible men indulging every passing lust. In such images, which mingle fascination and disgust, sexual order and political order are tied (or handcuffed) together. Some anarchists, particularly women and gay men, have also linked sexual and political order, using the language of equality, reciprocity, autonomy and democracy to develop a critique of power relationships between men and women and to try and work out a practice of everyday anarchism.

For well over a century, such anarchists have been criticizing marriage and experimenting with alternatives. They have focused on economic, household and childrearing arrangements — how best to structure personal relationships.¹ Underlying much of the discussion, however, is a model of an instinctive self, repressed by social convention. Love, passion, and sexuality are understood as natural feelings which should ideally be unconstrained. Our natural selves are repressed and distorted by social restrictions, both external and internalized, so sexual freedom is not just freedom from church or state intervention, but is about self expression, liberating our

¹ Greenway, Judy, (1993).

true natures. Such ideas have led some anarchists to be among the pioneers for sexual education, for birth control and for the acceptance of sexual diversity, including homosexuality.²

In the years since World War Two, these things, though still controversial, have become part of the mainstream of most Western cultures. Sex, love, and childbearing — never as securely tied to marriage as they were meant to be — have become increasingly deinstitutionalised. Serial monogamy is commonplace. Sexual pleasure as a basic human need is taken for granted, and every woman's magazine gives advice on how to achieve it. Postwar contraceptive technologies, particularly the Pill, are claimed to have separated sex from reproduction, making sexual liberation possible for heterosexual women. Although the rhetoric of sexual libertarianism is no longer as popular as it was, the imagery of sexual transgression has become a marketing cliché. The explanation for these changes may lie in demographic and economic shifts and complex social developments, but the way in which they are widely understood and debated is still in terms of natural sexualities.

Leaving the Twentieth Century: Sexual Anarchies

... we have decided to take up the struggle against capitalist oppression where it is most deeply rooted — in the quick of our body. It is the space of the body, with all the desires that it produces, that we want to liberate from the occupying forces ... 'Revolutionary consciousness' is a mystification so long as it doesn't pass through *the revolutionary body*, the body which produces the conditions of its own liberation. It's women in revolt against male power — implanted for centuries in their own bodies; homosexuals in revolt against terroristic normality; the young in revolt against the pathological authority of adults.

— Wicked Messengers

In the new social and sexual movements of the late twentieth century, with their creative confusion of debate and activity, sexual politics and sex-as-politics are taken for granted; the meanings of sex and politics are not. I want to argue that strategies of visibility, transgression, prefiguration and transformation are key, but problematic, aspects of both theory and practice around sexuality and the politics of the body.

Visibility

A politics of visibility raises questions about what is taken for granted and what is missing from the social picture, and about how that picture is constructed. In 1969, the Miss World competition in London was disrupted by Mis-Conception, Mis-Placed and Mis-Fit women.³ For a while the term 'sex object' became part of everyday language, and the organisers of beauty contests went on the defensive. In smudgily duplicated pamphlets, French Situationist theories — or at least slogans — were recycled in debates about women both as consumers of the spectacle and as spectacular consumables.

² Haaland, Bonnie, (1993) illustrates these themes in her study of Emma Goldman.

³ O'Sullivan, Sue, (1988).

'We're here, we're queer, and we're not going shopping' went the chant on one of the earliest British Gay Liberation marches down London's Oxford Street in the late 1970s. A small contingent of drag queens teetered into Selfridges, to shock not to shop. (Now to be queer is to go shopping, if the rise of gay consumer culture is anything to go by). Some fifteen years later, gay activist group Outrage was disrupting church services to denounce religious hypocrisy. In the USA, fire-eating Lesbian Avengers rode into town on motorbikes, while their tamer British counterparts made themselves noticed by riding around on top of a bus with balloons. In such actions, visibility is in itself political, asserting the presence of what has usually been rendered invisible, disrupting the spectacle of normality. Today, when every soap opera has its lesbian or gay characters, it seems that after decades of activism, lesbians and gays have succeeded in making themselves visible within the mainstream (however temporarily). The debate now is about the range of representations and how these have been shaped for a (presumed) heterosexual audience. When a tiny segment of urban lesbian and gays are cast by advertising executives as style leaders, their images used to sell ballgowns and spirits, jeans and perfume, they are not disrupting the spectacle but becoming one.⁴

Making a spectacle of themselves has been on the agenda as a means of empowerment for successive generations of young women, too. Material Girl Madonna may just be playing with conventionally pornographic images of the sexual woman, but from Seventies Punk to the Riot Grrls, in music, comics, and the informal theatre of the streets and clubs, traditional notions of femininity and female sexuality have been challenged and rejected. Not just attitude, but *Bad Attitude*;⁵ being good or nice is now the fate worse than death. Often moralistic feminists are cast along with straight society as the enemies of sexual self expression, while feminists against censorship represent themselves as a sexual vanguard, and pornography as a site to be reclaimed by women. The full debate about what constitutes pornography and its effects is too complex to enter into here. But feminist critiques of sexual libertarianism are not necessarily anti-sexual or pro-censorship; they can be about trying to transform the power relationships involved, making those visible. Anarchist feminist activists, like USA's Nikki Craft and the Outlaws for Social Responsibility, argue:

Sex is not obscene. The real obscenity is the marketing of women as products ... We are in favour of nudity and sensuality ... There is a difference between a genuine love, acceptance and empowerment of the body, and the marketing of women and exploitation of women that is the trademark of pornography ... We advocate and commit civil disobedience ...⁶

Silence = Death

Dissent from mainstream representations of the body, sexuality and gender, through direct action and the creation of alternative representations, has also been an important part of AIDS activism, which particularly in the USA has emphasised the importance of visibility and participation for those affected by AIDS and HIV. As well as challenges to the medical and scientific

⁴ I am not suggesting that it is a negative development to have such images in the mainstream – far from it – simply that it raises contradictions around the notion of disrupting the normal.

⁵ 'Bad Attitude' is a 'radical women's newspaper' with a strong anarchist feminist input, published irregularly in London since 1992.

⁶ quoted in lootens, tricia and henry, alice, (1985), p.7.

research establishments, health education work by activist groups has given a new urgency to debates about sexual identities and definitions.

With each daily restraint and frustration, capitalism imposes its norms ... it thrusts its roots into our bowels ... confiscating our organs, diverting our vital functions, maiming our pleasures ...

– Wicked Messengers

But what is it, exactly, that has been invisible, Mis-Represented, silenced? When the Situationists painted ‘Speak your desires’ on Paris walls, when the women’s health movement brought out ‘Our Bodies, Ourselves’,⁷ when gays and lesbians chanted, ‘2-4-6-8, Is your girlfriend really straight?’, the implication was that there are genuine desires, natural bodies, true sexualities, to be revealed and asserted against the repression, misconceptions and misconstructions of an oppressive society. When lesbians abseiled into the House of Lords, or people with AIDS invaded medical conferences and demanded to speak from the platform, they may have been, as Simon Watney says, constructing ‘an effective theatre of images ... seducing the voyeuristic mass media, invading “public” space’;⁸ they were also publicly claiming an identity.

For all the intensive debates among feminists and Queer theorists about the shortcomings of identity politics, and the discussions in academic circles about Foucault’s argument that there is no inner sexuality or true self to be discovered, the old ideas persist. Can there be a vision of liberation if there is nothing there to be liberated?

Transgression

Transgression, the deliberate and visible breaking of social rules, also raises difficult questions for a politics of sexuality. The boundary between public and private, constantly being renegotiated, and central to liberal sex reforms, seems to be under attack from the new generation of ‘in your face’ sexual libertarians claiming the right to do what they want where they want. At its simplest, transgressive sexual behaviour or appearance is seen as important for its shock value – the old game of scandalising the bourgeoisie. But shock can become its own value, requiring a constant supply of shockees. If one thing becomes acceptable, then a new unacceptability has to be found. This use of transgression depends on its opposition to existing values, so cannot be about broad social change, even though it may result in changing the boundaries of permissibility (e.g. the mainstreaming of images formerly confined to top-shelf pornography). Transgression in this sense is about the pleasure of self-expression – a self which is defined by its differentiation from a dominant other. For instance in a recent interview, lesbian photographer Della Grace talks about how her images explore our fear of otherness (who is the ‘our’ here?), then goes on to tell of an encounter with a hostile neighbour who was:

... very upset that I was in the garden photographing three naked, scarred, bald tattooed and pierced dykes ... Afterwards I was, like, shave me. I needed to have my head completely bald. I didn’t want to be associated with her brand of normalcy.⁹

⁷ Boston Women’s Health Collective, (1978).

⁸ Watney, Simon, in Carter, Erica and Watney, Simon, (1989), quoted in Boffin, Tessa, and Gupta, Sunil, (1990), p.164.

⁹ quoted in Gray, Louise, (1996).

Even when sexual transgression seems to be about creating new versions of sexuality, the language of the true inner self recurs. Speaking our desires is seen as revealing an inner truth, with assertions that take the form: this is who I really am, and this is how I will live it out. Sometimes, for instance in the debates around the limits of consensual sado-masochism, its defenders use the traditional rhetoric of civil liberties, maintaining the public/private distinction. Other groups and individuals reject the notion of tolerance, and demand more (for instance the right to public sex, or self-mutilation): see me; accept me; make it possible for me to live out my desires; realise your own.

It is the space of the body that we want to liberate from the occupying forces. It is in this way that we want to work for the liberation of social space: there is no frontier between the two.

– Wicked Messengers

Transgression can work in a more complex way, using disruption, a version of the Situationist *détournement*, with the aim of rendering visible to both participants and observers power relations which are normally hidden. When Nikki Craft was arrested in 1981 for exposing her breasts on a beach, and supporters demonstrated topless outside the courtroom, she argued:

We're living in a society that sells women's breasts in topless bars, in advertising and pornography, and then attempts at the same time to deny them rights over their own bodies. I wish women would demand control at every level.¹⁰

In England in the mid 1990s a woman who tries to breast feed her baby in public can still be abused on buses or asked to leave a restaurant. Where does this fit on the spectrum of normality and transgression?

Prefiguration

Prefiguration, the demonstration or rehearsal or sample of how life could be in a better world is usually but not always transgressive. Often it is about experimenting with different ways of living, from the anarchist colonies of the late nineteenth century and the communes of the nineteen-sixties and seventies, to the New Age travelers of the nineteen-nineties. Attempts are made, with varying degrees of success, to challenge dominant forms of sexual relationship. Non-monogamy, serial monogamy, anonymous sex, celibacy, polymorphous perversity have all at some point been argued for as ways of breaking down internalised oppression and relating to one another in a non-capitalist and/or non-patriarchal manner. The importance of friendship has been asserted over the isolation of coupledness, and the chosen family replaces blood ties. The stereotypical lone mothers and lonely homosexuals who serve as warnings to those who live outside conventional family structures may have support networks unimaginable to those who have not had to create their own communities.¹¹

Whether sexuality can be the basis for rather than an aspect of community has been a central debate for lesbian and gay activists. Most recently, originating in the USA and drawing on

¹⁰ lootens, patrica, and henry, alice, (1985), p.7.

¹¹ Weeks, J., Donovan, C., and Heaphy, B., (1995 and 1996).

rhetoric from Third World nationalism, the concept of a *Queer Nation* has been used in attempts to draw together groups of sexual outsiders, men and women, black and white, gay and non-gay (but definitely not straight), in an inclusive movement. The language of nationalism is one most anarchists would reject as rooted in a history of definition through exclusion and domination. However, the idea of an imagined community based less on shared identity than on shared oppression, or sexual otherness, has more to offer.¹² In particular, it makes possible the move from organisation based on affinity groups, to the development of coalitions, working with difference rather than by separation.¹³ How far this is really prefigurative is questionable however: a community based on shared oppression may come to need oppression in order to maintain its identity. An emphasis on difference and diversity may end up fossilising the sexual/social categories of a particular moment in time, (see some equal opportunities checklists for examples). And the celebration of difference can obscure inequalities in power, which is a major reason why it is so hard for groups like *Queer Nation* to sustain themselves over time. What can be prefigurative, however, is not the specific composition of particular communities or organisations, but the creative attempt to live and work in new ways; the process rather than the result. (Seeing it like this can also undercut the pessimism that often follows painful failures).

Transformation

Prefiguration is about more than making a safe space for yourself (important though that is). Both the disruptions of transgression and the experimentation of prefiguration can be part of an attempt to transform a whole society. Whether or not sexuality and sexual relationships are seen as central to social change, they must be part of it. It is easy to see (after many illustrative failures of attempts to live a new life) how both external factors such as economic insecurity and internal ones such as emotional insecurity help to reinforce the sexual status quo. Rather than leading to pessimism, these connections can inspire attempts to rethink the ways in which change is possible. Although single issue campaigns focusing on legislation around the body and sexual behaviour are to that extent reformist, they generate new constituencies, and enable new and more radical questions to be raised about sex, society, and the state. The conflicts and contradictions of campaigns aimed at a broader notion of sexual liberation allow difficult questions to be asked about the shaping of our desires and fantasies, and the extent to which they can be separated from the society which produces them.

Imagining the Twenty-first Century

Chaos: the order of the day

Postmodernist theory, making its breakthrough from academic subculture to style magazines, claims to challenge the idea of authoritative forms of knowledge, and rejects traditional ways of understanding and explaining the world, or even the possibility of doing so. Although it puts anarchism as a world view in the dustbin of history along with every other ism (except postmodern/ism — perhaps best seen as itself the dustbin), the rejection of hierarchy and authority, the

¹² The idea of imagined community is taken from Benedict Anderson, who uses it as a way of understanding how nationalism gets constructed. Anderson, Benedict, (1991).

¹³ Reagon, (1983).

emphasis on diversity can be seen as anarchism under an alias: theoretical outlawry. The association between anarchism and chaos, which has so often been a source of irritation and disavowal for anarchists, becomes a virtue when chaos theory is proposed on T-shirts and greeting cards as a paradigm of post-modern life. If anarchism can after all be thought of as an approach, a critique, a set of questions to be asked about power relations, rather than a theory or set of answers, then perhaps it can escape the fate of yesterday's discarded ideologies.¹⁴

Postmodern Bodies and Sexualities

In postmodernist rhetoric, fixed identities become fluid, boundaries dissolve, fragmentation replaces illusions of wholeness, nothing is natural and everything is constructed. If ideas about human nature no longer seem an adequate basis for discussing sexual and social possibilities, the approach of the twenty-first century has seen dramatic changes in ways of understanding the body. If the Pill made sex possible without reproduction, new reproductive technologies are making reproduction possible without sex.¹⁵ If woman's body has been conceptualised by traditionalists and by many feminist theorists as reproductive body, what happens when that link is broken? Will there be 'women' in the twenty-first century? Or 'men'? (Are men conceptualised in bodily terms in the same way as women?) Medical technologies seem to promise the deconstruction and reconstruction of bodies, genders, sexualities, which appear at the same time utterly interwoven and yet capable of separation. In terms of bodily transformation, sex-change surgery was only a start; now the taking of hormones to produce what some proponents describe as a third sex, or the use of plastic surgery as a radical aesthetic statement suggest the limitless possibilities of high technology. Orlan, the French performance artist who broadcasts the surgical transformation of her body on live video link says:

The body itself is an object for redesign. It is redundant, failing to meet the demands of the modern world My work raises questions about its status in our society and the future for coming generations.¹⁶

The body is conceptualised as matter, as personal property to be remodeled. Not just by medical professionals — there is a thriving do-it-yourself and artisanal culture as well, of bodybuilding, tattooing and piercing, while therapists provide the interior redesign.

Recent developments in genetics and biotechnology, not just the crossing of species to create new kinds of animals, or the exchange of human with non-human genes, but the very idea of biological engineering and genetic recombination pose new challenges to the boundaries between humans and other animals.¹⁷ Meanwhile, cyborg theorists claim that the human/machine distinction is finally on its way out with the latest developments in information technology.

Why should our bodies start or end at the skin? On a computer network there is no ultimate distinction between the human and mechanical components. The Cartesian

¹⁴ To argue *for* anarchism as an approach, though, is to assert a value for it which has no place in a fully fledged postmodernist perspective. But then neither does postmodernism.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Spallone, Patricia, (1989), and Van Dyck, José, (1995). Thanks to the students in my class on Women Health and Reproduction who have helped me to formulate these issues.

¹⁶ quoted in Armstrong, Rachel, (1996), p.90.

¹⁷ Spallone, (1989).

mind/body, machine/organism, male/female/life/death distinctions are meaningless ... in cyberspace. We are all hybrids, mosaics, chimaeras.¹⁸

In this scenario, your grandmother's pacemaker or hearing aid makes her a cyborg without knowing it, using technology to overcome bodily limitations. Her grandchildren are already beginning to be conscious cyborgs, welcoming the dissolution of boundaries in a world without limits. And sex? In Sadie Plant's story 'Cybersex' she writes:

... the telecom's revolution is accompanied by a sexual revolution that is making old style masculinity increasingly obsolete. To be sure, this is a quieter change than the great 'liberation' of the 1960s, but only because it is more widespread, diffuser, diverse, and so difficult to name and define. 'Queer' is one way of putting it, but even this has limits when dealing with 1990's galaxy of explorations of sexuality and experiments with — and beyond sex. Dance and drugs began to rival the sexual experience altogether, and there were years of lesbian chic, fashionable S&M and a widespread interest in piercing and tattooing all of which contributed to a new willingness to experiment with the human organism and what it can do and feel. Normality became obsolete.¹⁹

And if normality is obsolete, transgression becomes the new normality. Does this kind of theorising challenge or transform existing power relations, or does it mask them with yet another fantasy of power and control?

Postfeminism and Postanarchism?

Fantasy and Cyberspace

What is missing from visions like these is any sense of history or social or economic context. Experiments 'with — and beyond — sex' are not new. Their fashion and visibility in the 1990s are shaped by factors such as responses to the threat of AIDS, commercial imperatives, and socio-economic developments which make possible the places and spaces where such changes can happen for small numbers of people. Experimentation with 'the human organism and what it can do and feel' has a long and terrible history, which has marked the very fantasies which are claimed as liberatory. For chains and black leather to have their power as sexual fetishes, they have to have been used in non-fantasised, non-consenting situations. Subversion? Or is that claim itself a fantasy of power and control, of imaginary freedoms unaffected by social constraints?

Technological developments are accorded enormous power:

Virtual reality is a space that is neither real in the old sense nor is it nothing nor is it fantasy...That alone is devastating to the whole philosophical world view and undermines all the gender and power relations.²⁰

¹⁸ Armstrong, Rachel, (1996), p. 90

¹⁹ Plant, Sadie, (1994/5), p.92.

²⁰ Plant, Sadie, quoted in Grant, Linda, (1994).

In cyberspace, you can represent yourself as whatever gender, race, or bodily conformation you choose, and engage in virtual encounters with others who may be playing the same games. Sexualised interactions have become common, and the first allegations of virtual adultery are about to hit the divorce courts in the USA. Is this the imagination in power? Yes, the internet can provide a space where people can experiment with identities, fantasise other worlds and perhaps thereby change their own. So can the printed word or traditional storytelling.²¹ Women, people with disabilities, and black people using the internet have been subjected to abuse and harassment. The fact that they could disguise themselves, or that their abusers can, seems to miss the point, which is that it is the imagined reality of the body which invites the replication of off-line power relations. Whatever identity we construct for ourselves on the net is rooted in what we understand ourselves and others to be in the bodies hunched over the keyboard.

Liberatory Technologies?

The idea of the integrity of the human body, problematic though it is, has been useful as a way of arguing against medical approaches which treat the body as a collection of parts. Theories about the dissolution of bodily boundaries look rather different from the perspective of Indian peasants forced by poverty to sell their kidneys, working class women in the United States acting as surrogate mothers for the rich, or middle-aged women having unnecessary hysterectomies. Virtual reality is hardly accessible to those whose labour in the other kind of reality produces the raw material for the computers and the food for their operators. No theory of the liberatory powers of technology can afford to overlook or downplay the conditions of its production and consumption.

This is more than a question of asking who gets left out or made invisible in these imaginings of the future. There is also the point that technology embodies social relations and would itself need to be transformed as part of a wider process of social transformation.²² Too often, new forms of technological and biological determinism are masquerading as fluidity. If biology is not destiny, why do we need to change our bodies with drugs or surgery, or pretend we have a different one in cyberspace in order to challenge existing notions of sex and gender? The idea that technology will do away with the social relations which produce it is to look for a technological fix for problems which need to be addressed in far more complex ways. The issue is not technology on the one hand versus nature on the other. Where does the technology come from? How are our understandings of it produced? Who designed it, who made it, who uses it, what and who is excluded by it?

Fantatising about the future is itself an important kind of prefiguration. If we want actively to transform the world, imagination is crucial. But fantasies that deny the limitations of our bodies are not transcending the Cartesian split between mind and body, they are reinforcing it. Undermining existing power and gender relations needs an understanding of the way they, too, are embedded in a material reality which is all too resistant to our attempts to change it. What will twenty-first century sex be like? I don't know. The question is not whether there is a true inner sexuality to be liberated, but which ways of understanding ourselves make it possible to act with some chance of bringing about positive changes. The dreams of the future are embedded

²¹ Piercy, Marge, (1993), is an inspiring science-fiction exploration of the potential of biological and computer technologies.

²² Albury, David, and Schwartz, Joseph, (1982).

in the power relations of the present. A materialist, embodied anarchism will try to encompass both.

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