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Challenging Claims of a Non-violent Modernity

The previous chapter, in analysing signifiers of the social constructions of ‘Sadomasochism’, demonstrated how these are intimately connected with power relationships and illustrated how public representations of ‘SM’ bodily practices contradict the ‘subjugated knowledges’ and ‘lived experiences’ of practitioners of consensual ‘SM’. These contradictions were evident in the examples presented and, in particular, in my discussion of the distinction between the practice of ‘torture’ within consensual ‘SM’ as opposed to how torture is conventionally understood and represented. In this chapter the broader social meanings of both the social censure of ‘Sadomasochism’ on an ideological-symbolical level as well as the socio-cultural meanings of the social phenomenon of consensual ‘SM’ ‘body practices’ are analysed. The chapter begins by discussing the concept of ‘civilization’, represented in its highest form by the ‘Enlightenment’ and its supplementary construction of ‘wilderness’, which serve as a point of departure for an explorative reflection on the socio-ideological operations of these constructed dualisms and their relation to the ‘bodily practices’ of consensual ‘Sadomasochism’. Inherent contradictions within these dualisms and within conventional interpretations of consensual ‘SM’ that are based on the modern ‘order of things’ (Foucault 1971) are noted and then compared to the ‘lived experiences’ of consensual ‘SM’ practitioners.

One of the consequences of the formation of modern power-knowledge-subject relations that is of central relevance to this piece of work is the selective legitimacy of ‘risk taking’ and potential resulting production of ‘harm’ within ‘risk societies’ (Beck 1994). As the notion of ‘risk’ appears to be one factor that attracts some people to engage in these ‘bodily practices’, the latter sections of this chapter compare the operations of the discourses and practices surrounding this notion and contrast legitimate forms of ‘risk-taking’ activities with ‘risk-taking’ activities that are selectively rendered illegal. In this context the permissiveness of ‘risk taking’ and related potential production of harm will be problematized.


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5.1 The dichotomy of ‘Enlightenment’ and ‘wilderness’ or surveilling the boundaries of social constructions

The materialist view of the individual was responsible for that central characteristic of the new technology of sex, which Foucault defined as the demand that the social body as a whole and ‘virtually all of its individuals’ place themselves under surveillance. Surveillance was necessary because the new desiring individual, imagined as fundamentally egotistical, threatened constantly to undermine the requirements of the social. Sade captured this same need for surveillance in his endless obsession with establishing rules.

(Hunt in Stanton 1992: 91)

This obsession with control and compulsion for rules, de Sade shared not only with his ‘enlightened’ era but this heritage still continues to be a dominant feature of contemporary times.

It appears to be legally and morally acceptable to ignore the factuality of ‘civilized’ consent that was established between a group of people as Lord Templeman’s comment in his ruling over the so-called ‘Spanner’-case explicitly labelled the behaviour of the ‘playing’ men “…uncivilized” (Times Law Reports 12.3.93: 42). The modern binarism of ‘civilization’/’wilderness’ make this comment a value judgment that effectively dismisses the ‘lived experience’ of consensual ‘SM’. The experiences and the understanding of consensual ‘SM’ practitioners presented in Chapter 3 gave a different impression of their interactions. The planning of ‘scenes’, the crucial importance of negotiations to establish consent and the amount of time invested in these private ‘bodily practices’, conventionally represented as ‘perverse’, do not really suggest a lack of ‘civilization’ but rather a sophisticated application of one of its assumed core-preconditions [the control of the ‘sex drive’]. “…SM exhibits a high degree of theatricality; which belies the simplistic assertion that no one is able to control their desires. On the contrary, active SM is the perfect means by which one learns to do just that” (Thompson 1994: 160).

One of the interviewees, Anthony, describes his perception and experiences of the ‘bodily practices’ of consensual ‘SM’ in connection to time which I found to be representative for most people I encountered on London’s Scene:

Basically, I think good SM-sex is very controlled, very controlled. At every stage, extremely controlled. I think that the system likes to paint the idea that it’s deviant sex and it’s wild. Most people hear misconceptions around SM-sex and that’s what they are used to hear. You have to talk to an insider to know how it is exactly. If I’m having a ‘scene’ with my Asian ‘slave’ for example, I might plan for two hours what exactly is going to