

Liberating Ourselves in the Boudoir

An Anarchist-Feminist Perspective Against BDSM



by Usul of the Blackfoot

Introductory Thoughts

I understand as I begin writing this zine that I'm going to piss off a lot of folks; people don't like to hear opinions that contradict or oppose their behaviors. Besides that, I know all too well from personal experience that I'm in the minority on this one. And this subject matter (unsurprisingly) seems to evoke a rare and aggressive vehemence in people- particularly radicals- that other realms of conversation do not.

I chose to write this zine because I'm tired of being persecuted for *not* having interest in BDSM and all it entails. I'm writing this because I'm exhausted by the near-ubiquity of positive thoughts and words on the matter, I'm tired of being constantly bombarded by people's stories of "kinky" sexual conquest. I'm absolutely sick of being in infoshops and houses designated "safe spaces" (those apparently devoted to abolishing oppressive speech and action and making everyone feel safe and comfortable), and being regaled by a never ending supply of bondage stories, domination fantasies.

I'm writing this because, to be upfront, I think the various behaviors encouraged by BDSM are fucked up and oppressive, and I just can't understand how so many anarchists and feminists I meet tout these acts as "hot," and even worse, as "liberating." And I'm writing this because I think, no, I know there are many others out there who also find the actions and mindsets of BDSM unpalatable, but are too afraid to speak up because it's accepted (at least in radical circles) as a given and wonderful aspect of human sexuality. *Everybody does it, something must be wrong with me.* I want these men, women, and others to be able to speak up without fear of reprisal or rejection, just as I hope to be able to.

I want to lay out some things about myself, so those who read this who don't know me can understand better where I'm coming from. I also want to avoid speculation about my person instead of contemplation of the ideas presented

herein. I'm male bodied and I identify as male. I'm 25. My ancestry is mostly Scottish and Native American (Cherokee, or *aniyvwiyá*), with a sprinkling of French. As far as civilized family units go, mine was poor but functional and loving growing up, and my childhood- compared to many I've witnessed- was fucking sweet. I am a green anarchist and a feminist. I hate civilization and look forward to its downfall, but I am not a primitivist. I've never been raped (in terms of full-on, unconsensual intercourse- I know this isn't the only definition of rape, it's just the one I choose to use), but I have been molested on several occasions (as in wandering hands, forcefulness, and unwelcome advances after clearly saying "no"). This includes being propositioned by one of my high-school teachers to engage in BDSM with a friend and fellow student. I enjoy the emotional and sexual company of men and women, and, though I've never yet been with such a person, I'm attracted to people who don't identify as either. I enjoy emotional intimacy and asexual relationships as much as I enjoy sex.

It might seem odd to state such things outright, but I want to be very honest and straightforward throughout this zine. It is not my intention to attack those who are into BDSM. Too often, conversations from which all involved should benefit are instead battlefields in which all parties are trying to "win." I have no desire to win this discussion. I also understand that like-minded adults can do whatever they want in private, and I don't intend to tell anyone what they can and can't do.

But I'm not going easy on the subject. I *do* intend to attack BDSM itself, as a set of behaviors, as a set of ideas and attitudes, as a civilized tradition, as a reflection of oppression, patriarchy, and violence, and, to borrow a term from Derrick Jensen, as a *toxic mimic* of healthy adult human sexuality.

Defining BDSM

BDSM is a complex acronym embodying a number of words and practices. Extracted completely this includes bondage, discipline, domination, submission, sadism, and masochism. Quite a mouthful. Let's look at each of these individually, just to make clear what we're talking about.

Bondage is the act of being bound (or binding others, in the case of those in "dominant" roles), usually, though not always, for sexual pleasure. It is also sometimes known as *vincilagnia*, from the Latin meaning "the lust to be bound with chains." The practice of bondage involves an expansive arsenal of paraphernalia, including chains, ropes, collars, gags and bits (like those used on horses), handcuffs, straitjackets, leather and latex clothes specifically designed for bondage, thumb cuffs, St. Andrew's crosses (large, x-shaped racks), slings, tape, and a number of other devices.

Discipline is pretty self-explanatory. It usually involves a "dom," or dominant party, disciplining a "sub," or submissive party. This can come in the form of commands, bondage, whipping, hot wax, physical blows, humiliation (such as licking the soles of the dominant party's shoes, or demeaning the submissive verbally), and so on.

Domination and submission are equally self-defining. Domination is the act of dominating, submission the act of submitting. In a sexual context, this can include a variety of behavior, but is generally characterized by two polarized roles: "dom," or dominant, and "sub," or submissive. Dominant people sometimes also use the term "top," while submissives occasionally use the word "bottom" in place of dom and sub. "Switch" describes those who alternate between roles.

Sadism is the act of inflicting pain, torment, or humiliation upon another to achieve sexual gratification. Masochism, quite similarly, is the act of *receiving* pain, torment, or humiliation to gain pleasure. Because they so often go

together, these terms are collectively known as sadomasochism. The term sadism was inspired by the life and writings of Donatien Alphonse Francois de Sade, better known as the Marquis de Sade. The term is well-deserved, as the Marquis lived a life of extremely abusive, violent, painful sexuality, and was on more than one occasion imprisoned by the austere French authorities for his actions. Masochism is derived from Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, who wrote many works including the 1869 novel *Venus in Furs*. Sacher-Masoch was also a socialist, philosemite (an opponent of discrimination against Jews), and, in his later years, a feminist. Seems BDSM has been common in radical circles for quite a long time...

A Brief History of BD&M

The origins of BDSM are not definitively agreed upon. The Cult of Orthia, one of the most important religions of ancient Sparta (one of the most violent, slave-driven, dominant, militaristic societies of all time), performed ritual flagellation- called *diamastigosis*- on a regular basis. The *Tomba della Fustigazione*, or Flogging Grave, is an Etruscan burial site in Tarquinia dating to the sixth century BCE that depicts quite graphically the whipping of a woman by two men with whom she's having sex. The writings of the Roman authors Juvenal and Petronius both contain references to flagellation for pleasure.

Many Roman rituals have also contributed to the origins of BDSM. One of the most notable characteristics of the Roman holiday *Saturnalia* was the exchanging of roles- the exchanging of *power*- between master and slave. Perhaps even more obvious is the Roman holiday *Lupercalia*, during which sacrifices were made, thongs cut from the hides of the victims, and young men, dressed in the hides of the sacrificed animals, chased women through the streets whipping them to ensure fertility and to ease the pain of childbirth. Though it is not nearly as blatant a mingling of violence, death, dominance, and sexuality, *Lupercalia's* tradition of flagellation lives on in certain Christian Easter Monday whippings.

Of course, flagellation is by no means an exclusively Roman or pagan phenomenon. In the tumultuous European medieval era, Christian flagellants practiced the “mortification of flesh” that has come to illustrate their way of life. Although sexuality is absent in the rituals of Christian flagellants, dominance and submission, sadomasochism, a life of mental bondage and vassalage to God, body hatred, physical discipline (flagellants were called *disciplinati* in Italian), and public humiliation are omnipresent. The practice of ritual Christian flagellation is much less common today than it was in the middle ages, but the legacy of Christian BDSM lives on in our society.

Ritual flagellation is also present in several forms of Islam, and ritual whipping (for women) and spanking (for men) is present in Taoist temples.

More recently, in the Western world, there is an abundance of literature and artwork containing references to or full depictions of BDSM-related activities from the mid-1700s onward. Such prurient literature culminated, of course, in the writings of the previously mentioned Marquis de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch.

Many years after the writings of de Sade and Sacher-Masoch, BDSM finds influences in the gay male leather subculture, particularly in the U.S.. The leather movement, now sometimes called “Old Guard Leather,” is one of the most potent influences on the attitudes and actions of modern

BDSM, and its origins are perhaps the most patriarchal. Leather culture came about in the period just following World War II, as soldiers returned home from the European and Pacific theaters. These soldiers became addicted to a life surrounded and defined by men, traditional “masculinity,” enforced structure and hierarchy, dominance and submission, discipline, extreme violence, servitude, and an atmosphere of command and obedience. Upon returning home, this morphed into a gay (that is, queer male, and *only* queer male) subculture involving all of the same traits. This subculture is arguably the most influential element in the formation of modern BDSM.

Thoughts and Arguments Against BD&M

As I mentioned before, I fully understand that in any society—whether it be, say, a terrifyingly powerful police state like the Western world at present, or a fictional, yet to be achieved anarchist paradise some of us are working toward—two (or more) consenting adults can do whatever they want in private. But, as with all other behaviors and ideas, just because folks have (or *should* have, in the case of sexual legislation in Statist societies) the right to do something doesn't mean I have to like it or think it's good and wonderful and *liberating*.

And I *don't* think BDSM is good and wonderful and liberating, no matter how many people insist that it is. I also don't think for half a second that just because it's consensual, it's good and healthy. Pretty much every time I've had a discussion about this topic in person, people are quick to dismiss any rejection or questioning of BDSM with, “It's *consensual!*” I wonder if these people know the horrifying and vomit-inducing story of Armin Meiwes and his victim Bernd Brandes, who consented to being fucked, and killed, and eaten. Good job, civilization; well done, patriarchy.

No, whether it is consensual or not, I see BDSM as oppressive, patriarchal in every sense of the word, and as a poisonous charade of healthy, mutually beneficial love and sex. It's difficult for me to understand how other people feel differently.

I found a post some time ago on the feminist blog Angry For a Reason that I can't resist using to open this critique. User Twisty writes:

“Like it or lump it, BDSM *is* patriarchy, the whole patriarchy, and nothin' but the patriarchy, in a black latex nutshell. It is, I unwaveringly assert according to the Honor Code of the Blaming Spinsters, the eroticization of a vastly horrific social order that has, over the millennia, generated the suffering of untold millions, and against which I am sworn to vituperate.

BDSM's got it all: sex, power, rape, pain, dominance, submission, the *false pretext of freedom* [emphasis added], delusions of superiority, sublimation of the orgasm at all costs, *women who think it liberates them* [emphasis added again], a conservative orthodoxy, compulsory conformity, absurd, exaggerated gender roles, and a silly dress code. It is profoundly anti-feminist... anti-individual, and unattractive."

The conversation that follows is what I'd like to see a lot more of in anarchist and feminist circles. It can be viewed in full at <http://angryforareason.blogspot.com/2006/02/as-always.html>.

Most of the traits Twisty lists can also be applied to Civilization, and aptly so. BDSM is in every way tied to and a product of Civilization. There are few, if any, anthropological indications that the behaviors and mental atmospheres encouraged by BDSM existed in societies before the world was poisoned by pandemic civilization. Considering the nature of civilized societies, it's not really surprising that BDSM is as common as it is.

During the last six thousand years as civilization has conquered and destroyed, its many defining characteristics have remained unchanged. A quick glance at any fallen or contemporary civilized society reveals that they all depend on and benefit from slavery, violence, subjugation, mental and physical torture, imaginary guises of freedom and superiority, self-destruction and personal sacrifice of those not in power, domination and humiliation of those not in power, strict gender roles, compulsion in so many ways, power structures and established hierarchies ruling over every aspect of life, and discipline and punishment for rule-breakers. Sound familiar?

Throughout his works, anti-civ author Derrick Jensen frequently alludes to oppressed peoples fetishizing and glorifying their own suffering in religious beliefs that reinforce the socio-political structures keeping them down. Many African slaves, for example, adopted Christianity, which

teaches: "Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ (Ephesians 6:5-7)" and "If you are willing and obedient, You shall eat the good of the land (Isaiah, 1:19)." It might have uplifted the spirits of impoverished and beaten slaves, but adopting the religion of white Westerners didn't do a bit of fucking good in terms of stopping slavery. It, in fact, reinforced and strengthened slavery.

BDSM is the same. As Twisty said, it is qualified in part by the "false pretext of freedom." It glorifies and eroticizes slavery and submissiveness, authority and subjugation, embarrassment and punishment, and promises "heaven" in the form of pleasure and release for its followers. Many who practice BDSM insist that it sets them free, but, like Christian dogma to slavery, how is BDSM stopping or even challenging the social and political institutions that keep us all imprisoned?

Twisty lists "women who think it liberates them" as one of the defining points of BDSM. I would extend this to men, transfolks, and genderless/genderqueer people, ending with *people* who think it liberates them. I certainly know many such people, and I'm sure you do too.

All of the friends and acquaintances I've known who are into BDSM are victims of one or more of the previously listed symptoms of civilized life/patriarchy/oppression, &c.. It's entirely subjective, of course, because there are countless others who enjoy BDSM whom I don't know. However, it's these close relationships and the critical thinking I've applied to them that really made me begin to doubt BDSM as a natural part of human sexuality.

One friend, a privileged white male, likes being bound, whipped, spanked, humiliated, lambasted, and punched in the face- like, actually *punched* in the face- during sex. Another friend loves being bound and silenced, she likes playing the role of a little girl being raped by an older man,

she enjoys being strangled and cut during sex, and all of her relationships are with older, overbearing dominant men who keep her in mental slavery and emotional dependency to their abuse. A third friend loves being tied up and talked down to, spanked and told he's bad.

I could go on and on, but with each and every one of the folks I know who enjoy such things, the reasons are blatant. A repressed childhood of Catholic school and abusive male figures, being told as a young girl that masturbation is poison and you'll go to hell if god catches you doing it, a lifetime of gender confusion, the feeling of being held down and choked by the conditions of growing up, seeking retribution for one's patriarchal bullshit instead of seeking solutions and making amends: all of these things, and other forms of psychophysical repression, manifest themselves in the pursuits and behaviors of BDSM.

I think most of the people who view BDSM as liberating don't realize that the power of these various oppressive institutions we've been discussing is actually *reinforced* by BDSM, as it also relies on and encourages the exchange of power. What this essentially means is that those who practice BDSM recognize that there is a power structure, really many overlapping hierarchies, in our society. However, instead of battling these structures and actively seeking their annihilation, people fetishize *exchanging* power briefly in hopes of getting off. More often than not, those most interested in exchanging power are those *in power*. A quick glance at Craigslist or any other website advertising erotic "services" shows that there is an endless supply of wealthy (powerful) white (powerful) men (powerful) who can't wait for the next dominatrix to come along and sell them some punishment for being "bad little boys." These fuckers are fully aware how awful their lives and actions are, maybe they're even aware how puerile and held back they are mentally, and they're totally willing to exchange their blood money for the hot commodity of poor powerless people to discipline them. Surely, helping these rotten bastards get off in exchange for money only cements the idea in their head that they own the

world, that they own all the people in it, and that they can buy whatever that want, even remonstrations and punishment for their misdeeds.

This brings up an entirely different aspect of BDSM that disgusts me; that is, the consumerism and capitalism driving it and profiting from it. You name it, BDSM is all about buying and selling it: toys, props, absurd costumes, sex acts, professional domination, overpriced conventions and fetish balls, porn, porn, porn. I'm sure there are folks out there who make all their own BDSM gear, but even so, BDSM is undeniably money-driven, money-making, money-oriented. Probably because in our society money is the same as *power*, and that's really what it's all about, isn't it?

The assorted miscellany available for BDSM "play" is pretty telling itself. Many of these "toys" are overt in their relationship to the multifarious onslaught of oppression. Hell, even calling these implements toys (when they are clearly made for less-than-playful means) demonstrates the kind of sophistry that must go on in the minds of folks who see BDSM as a freeing force. Bits and whips, to take two examples, have been used to drive animal slavery (including humans) for as long as domestication has existed. Among certain practitioners of BDSM chains and shackles- serious, heavy, transport-to-the-New-World shackles- are used as restraints. Does this even need discussing? And among others handcuffs, thumbcuffs, anklecuffs, and straitjackets predominate bedroom activities. These are the same devices used by those who "protect and serve" the dominant culture and its insane policies and practices by arresting, imprisoning, and enslaving those on lower rungs of the hierarchy. Of course, some people toss out the props and get straight to the point by donning the costumes of cops, businessmen, doctors, slave masters, and soldiers.

In the face of all of these arguments to the contrary, people who participate in BDSM still claim that it is liberating. If it's not liberating them from patriarchy, capitalism, fucked up childhoods, slavery, gender roles, groupthink, or the dark

shadow cast by nation states (which it absolutely isn't on all accounts), what the hell exactly is it liberating them from?

Radicals and, to a much greater degree, queer folks are two of the most vilified, persecuted groups of people in the world at present. I suspect, then, that due to constant abuse and due to constantly paying attention to just how abusive this world is, many queer and radical (and radical queer) individuals don't know how to express love and sexuality any other way than through violence and abuse.

In every city and small town I've been to that hosts an anarchist community, there are ongoing projects aimed at mental healing, mediating conflicts between people, healing our bodies from the poison of industrial society, and groups to help survivors of rape. And yet, there are no discussion groups aimed at rooting out the patriarchy, violence, and desire to lord over others in our sex lives. There is only positive affirmation- "ooh babys!" and "hell yeahs!"- toward a system of false freedom and continued constraint.

And there's a lot of rhetoric, too. People have invented a whole slew of sophisticated, gentle vocabulary to soften the image of BDSM. These include SSC- safe, sane, and consensual- and RACK- risk aware consensual kink. But these clever titles completely ignore the historical roots and modern linkages of BDSM to just about all the tremendously bad crap in the world. Sex involving BDSM can be as consensual, aware of risk, safe, and sane as possible, but it's still patriarchy, it's still domination, it's still slavery. And those who consent to slavery, domination, and patriarchy are helping these things thrive just as much as the slavers, dominators, and patriarchs. Doesn't sound very safe or sane to me.

It's exactly this kind of language and attitude that makes BDSM a toxic mimic of healthy love and sex. Clever lingo disguising horrors underneath the surface is a technique as old as the oppressive forces who use it. Military officials insist that Our Glorious Empire's wars abroad are liberating people.

Liberals demand angrily that voting is responsible and will free us if only we'll all vote the right way. The hordes of religious zealots here and elsewhere insist that obedience, worship, prostration, loyalty, and the complete revocation of personal choice and responsibility will bring us eternal happiness. When disaster strikes the Empire, our political leaders tell us to go shopping- that'll make everything alright. Instead of allowing and helping our kids to educate themselves, we send them to schools where their heads are filled with garbage and propaganda, because it's the responsible decision, the choice that will make them free people in a free country.

These examples all imitate actual responsibility and healthy adult decision making. Instead of allowing all people their autonomy, we conquer, err, liberate them and make their choices for them. Instead of abolishing all governments and governing ourselves, we continue to rely on Statist governments to make decisions for us; we continue voting to convince ourselves we have a voice, that we have responsibility. Instead of freeing our minds, taking action when action is called for, and seeking to attain our own happiness, now, in the *real world*, we trust in god to take care of us, make decisions for us, guide our lives. Rather than removing ourselves entirely from capitalist economies and making all of our own necessities, we make the most responsible, freedom-loving choices when we go shopping. When our kids could be learning naturally as children do, we send them to government schools in hopes that they'll get good jobs.

We've all seen through this obvious bullshit, we're all fighting hard against such clouded, insane doublethink and the systems that bring it about. And yet, many still think BDSM will free them. As long as we practice capturing, binding, enslaving, silencing, flogging, torturing, dominating, submitting, berating, humiliating, and otherwise abusing one another, we're all free and liberated and happy. As long as we imitate the social and political structures destroying our lives and minds and bodies and the world, we're free of those

things. Yeah, right.

I think it's time we all started thinking a little more critically about our sexual behaviors and attitudes. I think it's time we anarchists, we feminists start discussing which sexual behaviors are good and liberating and which aren't, instead of just accepting BDSM as an inseparable aspect of human sexuality, as a universal presence in social spaces, as a given interest we must all have. I assert it's time for us all to engage in truly safe, sane, consensual sex and asexual relationships; it's time for us all to be aware of the risks of imitating and engaging in oppressive behaviors under the guise of freedom and pleasure. Maybe then, we can all heal that much more from this society's mistreatment and insanity.



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