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**BDSM under Security:
Radical Resistance via Contingent Subjectivities**

Abstract

In recent decades, BDSM communities have engaged in a political struggle for rights by separating their practices from the oppressive gaze of legal and medical praxis, seeking to legitimize BDSM discourse and actions under the slogan of “safe, sane, and consensual.” The espousal of principles governed primarily by health and safety nonetheless carries a normalizing overtone, apparently trapping the community within the epistemic codes against which they struggle. This paper suggests that the security mechanism Foucault identifies as forming part of biopower can serve as a critical analytic capable of arbitrating between BDSM as a form of political resistance to hegemonic sexual norms and the restraints imposed by the “safe, sane, and consensual” code itself. We argue that communities using health and safety codes shift the political struggle from direct resistance to sovereign power to the transgression of hegemonic regimes of truth through contingent sexual identification and practice.

Keywords: BDSM, Foucault, security, contingent subjectivities

BDSM under Security: Radical Resistance via Contingent Subjectivities

Generally, it can be said that there are three types of struggles: either against forms of domination (ethnic, social, and religious); against forms of exploitation which separate individuals from what they produce; or against that which ties the individual to himself [sic] and submits him to others in this way (struggles against subjection, against forms of subjectivity and submission). . . . nowadays, the struggle against the forms of subjection—against the submission of subjectivity—is becoming more and more important, even though the struggles against forms of domination and exploitation have not disappeared. Quite the contrary. (Foucault, 1982: 781–782)

Introduction

One of the most influential contributions Foucault's thought has made to political criticism is its identification of a new domain of political struggle. Before Foucault, mainstream political theory focused largely on state force or exploitation by legal and/or institutional apparatus, ignoring the indirect instrumental tactics that tie the individual to self-knowledge determined by personal subjective truth.¹ In revealing the disciplinary structure that underpins such self-knowledge, Foucault (1977: 20–28) exposes the indirect weight of power that traps individuals under a strict set of behavioural codes and rules. Strategies of political resistance have now shifted from fights over sovereignty and juridical discourse to reflexive and interpretative action against hegemonic self-knowledge as a governmental practice of the self.

A prominent issue herein is the struggle against institutional and scientific sexual knowledge, which seeks to construct sexual subjectivity according to specific ideological positions. At the present time, such struggles tend to be directed towards a mode of experimentation that seeks to undermine the hegemonic discourse sustaining a particularly limited framework of desire. The use of Foucauldian theory (1977: 141–149) in the political struggle against hegemonic sexual knowledge has therefore found a central place in post-structural literatures as a way of offering new minority-community modes of action and self-identity (Halperin, 2002; Weeks, 2000).

In this context, BDSM - a compound term for a range of sexual practices, including bondage and discipline, domination and submission, and sadomasochism - as a form of sexual identity/practice incommensurate with hegemonic sexual

knowledge can serve as a contingent potentiality for political resistance.² This paper seeks to explore the complex processes undertaken by BDSM communities, within the context of the ‘safe, sane and consensual’ codes that they employ, as a new form of social organization that transgress self-normalization principles. Challenging the primary mechanisms of political domination, BDSM communities offer insight into a new mode of political struggle by promoting a radical erotic discourse (and material practice) that confronts the hegemonic discourse of sexuality.

The argument advanced in this article is based on a critical analysis of the normalization process the BDSM community has undergone following its adoption of safety codes (the ‘safe, sane, consensual’ mantra employed by most contemporary BDSM communities). We first examine the security mechanism Foucault identified as a potential form of political discourse under governmental strategies inflected by biopower. Deploying this mechanism effectively dismantles the universal and essential discourse that traps the community within an oppressive identity. We suggest that the political struggle against the oppressive discourse of hegemonic sexual knowledge also involves a critical transformation of the internal rules of the community from binding universal codes to contingent relative principles. That is, we argue that BDSM community discourse founded on a security mechanism allows space for contingent soma experiments at odds with hegemonic sexual discourse, in spite of the apparent ‘normalization’ of BDSM communities through the adoption of safety codes.

Safe, sane, and consensual codes: from flexibility to contingency

Despite growing public awareness - exemplified in such popular representations as *Fifty Shades of Grey* - the critical political potential of BDSM communities continues to be misunderstood, at least in part because the popular representations themselves are often gross *mis*representations. People who engage in BDSM continue to be subject to considerable opprobrium, in large part as a result of the pathologising discourses of the medical and legal professions (Langdridge, 2014; Langdridge & Barker, 2013). Indeed, most of the traditional academic literature on BDSM has focused on aetiology, understanding these sexual practices as a form of pathology in need of treatment and cure (ibid). More recently, however, critical studies of sexual sub-cultures have emerged that, together with community activism, have sought a more phenomenological comprehension of BDSM as part of the diversity of sexual

life (e.g., Beckmann, 2009; Langdrige & Barker, 2007; Moser & Madson, 1996; Newmahr, 2008; Weiss, 2011). An important part of this movement has been work to adduce the creative potential in BDSM identities and practices for more general sexual cultures - a direction the present article hopes to develop.

The theoretical shifting of BDSM from a pathological trait under the medical gaze to an infrastructure for self-determination under erotic experience has resulted, in large part, from Foucault's political criticism and Rubin's critical engagement with BDSM and feminism. Foucault (1984: 26–30; 1997a) perceived SM (one element within BDSM identities/practice) as an alternative form of community and relationality. Dissociating bodily pleasure from its traditional linkage with genitalia and seeking to reveal the limitations of such sexual experience by expanding the parameters of consciousness, it offers a new form of self-subjectivity to replace the dominant episteme of sexual theology. In her well-known rebuttal of the feminist argument against SM, Rubin (2011, 171 -180) delineates SM activity as a unique form of resistance to the hegemonic hierarchal structure of sexual meaning that prioritizes the superiority of genital sexuality, reduction of sexual practice to objective (invariably reproductive) goals, and the non-public (private) nature of sexual behaviour and experience. BDSM identities and practices provide a contingent soma experiment that break the internalizing chains that fetter the individual to a (hetero-) normative sexual identity founded on a sexual identity/practice that is essentially private, genital, and reproductive.

Since the 1980s and the emergence of greater cultural visibility, BDSM communities have increasingly sought to ensure a safe environment for practice (Newmahr, 2011; Sisson, 2013). Indeed, a central precept of most BDSM communities is that all (sexual) practice must be “safe, sane, consensual” (SSC) - a term allegedly coined by David Stein (2003). This construction serves to help separate consensual (and pleasurable) BDSM practices/identities from sadistic acts of non-consensual violence and abuse (Downing, 2007: 120). SSC also serves as an attempt at prevention of external legal and institutional attention and persecution, and the infiltration of non-welcome participants, in the wake of the increased popularity of BDSM in recent decades (Weeks, 2011: 77–80). The SSC motto is somewhat controversial within BDSM communities, with some people preferring the use of RACK (Risk Aware Consensual Kink) for the way that it acknowledges risk, as opposed to safety, and eschews the need to satisfy the externally driven criterion of

“sanity” as a precondition for sexual practice (Langdridge, 2014). However, in spite of these arguments, SSC remains the dominant discursive construction in most (Western) BDSM communities.

Developing within the context of broader socio-cultural norms, SSC acts within and on behalf of BDSM identities/practices as a public contingency against sexual identities being determined by external (invariably oppressive) knowledge regimes. As Downing argues,

The community motto “Safe, Sane, and Consensual” ... neatly encapsulates the spirit of this rhetoric ... the sanctioning of certain forms of behaviour and interaction ... and the exclusion and indeed condemnation of others, those that fail to meet easily the common definition of “safe” and “sane.” (2007: 120)

Ethnographic research conducted in recent decades (Weiss, 2011: 75–80) evinces that the BDSM community has exhibited a marked shift away from spontaneous practice towards deliberate and learned skills and activities designed to preserve the participants’ physical and mental health. Paradoxically, this has meant that these communities risk committing themselves to a limited form of ideological knowledge. That is, one that eschews risk-taking and sacrifices its contingent uniqueness and potential for political and social resistance.

The contingent identities these communities have formed have been established in relation to a historical framework of pathologisation (e.g. through the psychiatric diagnostic manuals) and criminalization (Taylor, 1997). This is likely to change, at least in part, in the light of recent changes to the American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic Manual (DSM-5), with BDSM practice/identity now no longer sufficient for a diagnosis of psychiatric disorder. This is unlikely to fundamentally challenge the more fundamental division that exists in Western cultures between pleasure and pain, life (sex) and death (risk), however. Whilst the SSC codes have helped the community constitute a form of political resistance in relation to external epistemological boundary setting, they are not natural codes, representing instead an engagement with external (invariably oppressive) discourses. So, rather than constituting a natural regulative function of erotic power exchange, the terms “safety” and in particular “sanity” signify a value assumption concerned with condemning any risk to life as part of erotic enjoyment as fundamentally irrational. If they are necessary for political

assembly and resistance, however, how do they fall outside the immanent operations that link them to hegemonic sexual epistemological principles?

Little attention is paid in the current literature to the radical nature of BDSM identities and the ethical and subjective difficulties this raises. Some scholars have addressed the division between BDSM and non-consensual violence and abuse, especially in relation to feminist arguments (Hopkins, 1995: 66; Stear, 2007: 22–38). Others have discussed the community's institutional rights (Weait, 2007: 63–87). An interesting discourse has also arisen with regard to the emergence of new narratives of BDSM, sexual citizenship, and the transformation of intimacy (Newmahr, 2011: 67–80; Langdrige, 2006). The process whereby the BDSM community has constituted itself as a creative form of subjectivity within the framework of (often oppressive) hegemonic sexual knowledge, and the political implications of its discursive rules and practice under the shadow of the scientific and institutional apparatus have been relatively ignored, however.

Two scholars in particular have adopted a Foucauldian approach to analyse the development of strategies of resistance within BDSM community discourses to (internalized) hegemonic (hetero- and mono-normative) sexual knowledge, albeit in quite different ways. Through a Foucauldian theoretical analysis of discourses of erotic asphyxiation, Downing (2007) contends that mainstream elements within some BDSM communities, notably those that embrace the notion that sexual practice must always be safe, sane and consensual, construct their position regarding the internalized legitimacy of sexual activity around constraining ideological principles of physical and mental safety.³ As a result, contingent experiences such as breath control that form a part of the BDSM experience for some cannot be accommodated and so must necessarily undergo allocation processes, with them excluded from some BDSM communities' collective identities (Downing, 2004: 3–17; 2007: 119–135). Because the “radical political gesture would be to seek out precisely those bodily acts that are capable of disrupting identity rather than fixing and shoring them up” (2007: 128), Downing argues that these communities have sacrificed their potential for resistance and radical challenge to mainstream sexuality, merely “parroting back” norms around sexual health and safety in their use of SSC codes. According to this theoretical account, the prevention of reinvention due to the pressure of prevalent sexual theology has driven its members—in Halperin's (2002) terms—to make their

activities subservient to a “new form of discipline,” BDSM practitioners constructing “even more insidious processes of normalisation” (ibid).

Weiss addresses community safety codes and rules from a more optimistic and contingent perspective via an ethnographic account of the so-called “new guard” practitioners of BDSM, based in the San Francisco Bay Area of the USA (2011: 60–100). *Contra* Downing, she regards BDSM practice that focuses on health and life enhancement as a cognitively-based reflective element in the community, rather than as an expression of ideological attachment to a specific (externally-driven) discourse. She also views the community’s strict monitoring of preservation of life and health standards as symbolizing the development of a reflexive awareness that opens the way for the construction of ethical subjectivity rather than destroying the potential for resistance (ibid: 74–80). While not ignoring the effect arbitrary codes and rules exert on spontaneous activity, she argues that external health rules serve as an infrastructure for a reflective interpretation that enables a new mode of living. Following Foucault, she posits that this potentiality rests on a notion of flexibility around choice that allows a broad range of reflective activity and interpretation rather than blind devotion to particular sub-cultural expectations (ibid: 80–85).

Herein, we seek to develop Weiss’s argument. While the flexibility around the use of particular safety codes allows for diverse forms of subjectivity, it remains subservient to normative sexual ideology. The individual is thus still tied to his or her own identity, with the hegemonic external scientific and institutional interpretation of sexuality (and the sexual aim) retaining its validity. We thus contend that the radical political disruptive use of SSC codes lies in its *contingency* rather than its flexibility, acting as a web of discursive rules and material techniques that enable BDSM participants not only to choose between diverse options but also to exchange and reject their internal meaning.

The shift from flexibility to contingency is commensurate with Foucault’s (1997a: 36–36) well-known ethical positing of political struggle as a permanent form of resistance to exterior rules rather than the destruction of all political and social authority. While power relations are crucial for the constitution of discourse and practice, the individual is not a static function of exterior values and signification. An ethical struggle based on an alternative to normative discursive hegemonic practice constitutes a new mode of subjectivity. The tension between BDSM communities’ subordination to SSC rules driven by exterior demands and the subversive function of

BDSM itself must be elaborated within an ethical practice predicated upon an infrastructure that promotes the realization of a radical subjectivity.

Here, we respond to Downing's claim (2007: 123–125) that BDSM communities remain subject to the (internally hegemonic) rejection of risk to life as a part of erotic pleasure by opening up BDSM discourse to a new and contingent practice whose primary goal is not preservation of life and health. As Rorty's (1991: 45–51) liberal argument posits, contingency is a minimal agreement to respect consensual rules that enables the transgression of social prejudices and dogmas that determine the proper and essential aspects of individual identities. We shall examine herein the ways in which BDSM agency can—and does—subvert the prevalent dogma that eschews any notion of risk in sexual life by offering a radical discourse in place of narrow consensual agreements.

Situating BDSM practice within the institutional web of power and knowledge allows us to adduce a biopower perspective on this sexual phenomenon. As is well known, Foucault (1980: 139; 2007a: 1) distinguishes between discipline as a form of power that seeks to optimize the individual's capacity to increase his or her usefulness and docility, and biopower relating to humanity as a species that is operationalized via complex techniques that focus on innate biological features pertaining to birth rate, hygiene, and mortality. The tension between these in the post-Foucauldian era (serving as both complementary and contradictory elements), played a major role in twentieth-century genocides, the distinction between ethical self-realization and biopower techniques, and the growth of post-liberal and post-Marxist critiques (Agamben, 1995; Bauman, 1999; Hardt and Negri, 2005; Fassin, 2011; Lemke, 2011; Rose, 2000, 2007).

We wish to argue for the potential for radical resistance within BDSM when it moves beyond traditional biopower techniques into the realm of security. At first glance, this methodological move appears to be at odds with the post-Foucauldian trend towards understanding post-industrial society as post-disciplinary (McWhorter, 2012). But rather than rejecting the disciplinary aspects of BDSM or ignoring the contingent performative disciplinary potential of SM experimentation, we wish to identify the contingent force of BDSM rules and their potential for creative moves of self-subjectivity within the security mechanism, and suggest a new form of political struggle operating within exterior and interior forms of power.

Security as contingency: BDSM and subjectivity

In his lectures at the College de France between 1977 and 1979, Foucault (2007: 323–352; 2008: 61–69) identified security as one of the primary features of the biopower strategies adopted by government from the seventeenth century onwards. In contrast to discipline, which permeates every aspect of individual life, security regards society as a field natural to human beings, operating in accordance with naturally-occurring processes. Hereby, governmental security logic involves subjecting the institutional and scientific apparatus to managing the needs of diverse functions of human traits as part of the natural collective organism, limiting it to arbitrating between diverse and unique individual wills and the collective needs of the species, namely survival and preservation. In this context, rather than attempting to direct natural human forces in particular directions, the state established procedures that increased the successful implementation of governmental strategy while removing those that interfered with its execution. Here, security demonstrates a positive rather than merely negative role, functioning as an institutional mechanism that determines the space in which freedoms may emerge through normalization strategies designed to alter the frequencies of particular phenomena (ibid).

Under biopower techniques, security laid a foundation for self-realization. No longer regarded merely as territorial-bound participants obligated to submit to their ruler or disciplined individual bodies operating under exterior restraints, citizens have become recognized as vital beings with their own habits, behaviours, and daily forms of life that enable them to fulfil their desires and aspirations. Rather than seeking to subjugate human needs and desires to particular conventions and norms, security allows for the “deviant” homosexual couple next door to be neither normal nor abnormal but simply part of the variegation of the social fabric (McWhorter, 2012: 66). In this context, security logic addresses the social deviant within a framework of economic efficacy. Herein, as long as it meets the requirements of the delicate balance between individual desires and the social need for the expansion of its resources, sexual deviation becomes a tolerable form of individual and collective experiment.

The emergence of security society is reflected in the growth of the lesbian, gay, and bisexual consumption culture of recent years (ibid, 68). It is also echoed in ethical readings that seek to recognize constituted contingent experience as a mode of subjectivity (McWhorter, 2012; Harvey, 2003; Hardt and Negri, 2009). The state’s

limited function as arbitrator shifts the discourse of biopower to experimental needs - beauty, sexuality, and happiness - based on the individual's reflective interpretation of the knowledge propounded by science and state institutions, thereby facilitating the individual determination of one's own desires and needs. This direction is represented most prominently by Rose (2000: 167–172; 2001: 7–12; 2007) and Rabinow (1996; Rabinow & Rose, 2003). Rather than directly placing political practice under the security mechanism, these scholars view it as a government of the self and others. We suggest that it is conditioned by the institutional and scientific apparatus that lies behind the narrow - direct and indirect - constraint of sovereignty and discipline.

Conceiving biopower through the lens of security allows us to expand our horizons beyond those that currently bind the literature to such areas as bloody mass murders, imprisonment of criminals and deviants etc. (see, for instance, Bauman, 2002; Agamben, 1995, 2003). At the same time, we must critically examine the way in which it increases the commodification of desire within BDSM communities (Weiss, 2011:102–141), challenging in particular overly-optimistic liberal views and essential, foundational dogmas. The tactics of sovereignty and discipline as associated with governmental hygiene and reproduction principles, for example, continue to be enforced in today's world (Ramman and Tutton, 2010: 711–734). Likewise, the balance between human diversity and the interests of 'the many' may normalize the former under oppressive dictates from the latter.

More significantly for our present argument is the way in which the security mechanism may preserve hierarchal knowledge within civil society as part of the hegemonic division of power relations (Shusterman, 2008: 35–36). This Foucauldian "danger" (Foucault, 1997b: 335) lies at the basis of the universal values of external codes (such as the SSC motto) designed to regulate and stabilize the balance between natural needs and desires and collective interests. Although security only deals with probabilities and chances, via discursive mechanisms of risk reduction that implicate bodies of various kinds, individual subjectivity can be established through universal and perhaps even essential codes.

One of the most prominent forms of this issue relates to the question of life and death under a discourse of biopower. The enhancement and preservation of living organic forces remain supreme values, with death outside public consciousness in many Western societies (Foucault, 1997b: 347). While the security apparatus may respect the natural function and desires of subjective agents, it can also subjugate their

discursive practice and activity to the drive for life, thereby excluding them if contingent experiments (in, for example, sexual life) are incommensurate with its reasoning. Thus, for example, euthanasia is only legitimate within a modern medical discourse, which presents an alternative to preferring death over life in very specific circumstances, which are also highly regulated by legal and medical authorities. As Tierney (2006: 254–258) argues, however, it conforms to the liberal value of the superiority of life, only allowing organ function to cease under a medicated haze. Agamben (1995: 148–153) cautiously but radically suggests that it is a form of exclusion that replaces the natural selection of the orthodox mechanism. The preference for death over health for aesthetic and/or pleasurable purposes is still regarded as a sign of depression or mental disorder (Foucault, 1992: 295–296).

The criticism of universal values has not ignored the contingent potential of self-practice under biopower. The security mechanism establishes a complex, reflective, bidirectional relation between the self and the social environment that is open to self-constitution and realization under hegemonic knowledge rather than being confined to blind adoption.⁴ In our opinion, the relational communal discursive and material activity that disrupts identity and thereby undermines the hegemony of individuality lies at the root of rather than outside security. Social and collective assembly under security conditions thus *enable* effective political resistance.

In the following, we present SSC codes as a discursive practice commensurate with security reasoning, facilitating BDSM communities' struggles against inherent universal reason via collective practice as a mode of subjectivity. Security can be fruitfully conceived of as a constitutive mechanism of contingent rules that diminishes universal meaning, allowing the development of a discursive and experimental realm for self subjectivity. Within the BDSM context, it finds preeminent expression in the undermining of the hegemonic drive for life by combining risk-to-life with pleasurable erotic experience. This facilitates an understanding of the BDSM community's adoption of an exclusive normative mechanism and emphasis on contingent self-practice within the communal context of radical politics.

SSC and contingency

The SSC code represents a system of rules governing consensual BDSM practice that seeks to preserve the participants' physical and mental safety at the same time as giving them the opportunity to engage in erotic pleasure (Wiseman, 1997). As Weiss

(2011: 65–70) notes, this biopolitical structural relationship represents the height of neoliberal thought, transferring responsibility for biopolitical techniques from the state to the participants. As a governmental move, it enables recognition of the natural desires of consensual partners. Rather than seeking to conform individual needs and desires to scientific norms, it sanctions consensually-agreed practices within the community—bondage, master/slave relations, etc.—that scientific orthodoxy continues to pathologise as paraphilia (Sisson, 2007). Under the framework of SSC practice, BDSM practices operate as a legitimate practice/identity engaged within a natural social and biological environment. It thus acknowledges and sustains individual and collective self-determination.

This governmental shift is not self-evident. As we noted at the beginning, the BDSM community has recently come under criticism for far more than its emphasis on eroticism. A medical and juridical fight for legitimacy thus accompanies the struggle for recognition of communities' rights to operate under SSC principles. Foucault (1997a: 135–139) anticipates this development in his reference to the strategy of resistance the gay community must adopt to attain a self-determined identity. The community's critical and juridical struggle in recent decades has found prominent expression in Rubin's (2011, 177 -179) discussion of the feminist charge that SM exemplifies hegemonic masculine violence, the critical and public struggle to distinguish SM from non-consensual violence and psychopathology (Hopkins, 1993; Stear, 2007; Langdridge and Butt, 2005; Langdridge and Barker, 2007), and the legal cases in the UK that have involved the prosecution of BDSM practitioners (Weait, 2007).

This self-determination requires positive as well as negative forms of community governance. While the natural function of most forms of individual desire and need are accepted, external discursive meanings imposed on the individual are rejected. External rules thus receive their validation as regulative instruments determined by sub-cultural norms, speaking to both internal and external needs. SSC therefore reduces the risk of physical and mental damage and increases the opportunity for pleasure, ensuring that participants know how to protect themselves while engaging in diverse aspects of BDSM practice as equally legitimate partners. A BDSM community's self-determination thus derives from the precedence given to reflective decisions from within set against the contingency of exterior rules. The former encourage respect for natural desires, physical and mental fantasies and urges, while

not being subservient to the confirmative model.⁵ The latter prevent individual judgment being confined to an ideological range of fixed identities, thereby opening the way for experimentation in elaborate fantasy worlds framed by consensual agreement.

A community's practical organization does not exemplify its potential for self-practice in the context of the precedence of the contingent security mechanism, however. In recent decades, the community adoption of SSC as a form of constitutive identity has found expression in the renunciation of those practices that are incommensurate with the universal codes of safety and sanity. This takes the form first and foremost of communities providing practical facilities and instruction with regard to physical and mental safety. BDSM communities commonly offer workshops for acquiring somatic skills that reduce the risks involved in such activities as bondage, knife play, submission and dominance etc. (Weiss, 2011: 75–90). Participation in BDSM play is also conditional upon explicit and on-going consent agreements between participants. The institutional hierarchal organization thus determines the rules for preserving life and safety more broadly (Newmahr, 2011: 70–90).

There is also extensive discussion - and at times condemnation - of practices such as erotic asphyxiation for carrying an excess of risk, some communities excluding them entirely from the range of accepted BDSM practices (see, for instance, Wiseman, 1997). Here, the community has established its identity via an exclusionary act, renouncing any practices that make a link between risk-to-life and sexuality. In other words, the universal value of life-enhancement determines the community's self-realization as a limited experimental set of discursive rules and material practice.

A prominent - and much discussed - example in this regard is Sharon Loptaka's consensual death at the hands of Robert Glass (Downing, 2004: 6–8), whom the court indicted for murder. Via hundreds of emails, the two fantasized about fulfilling Loptaka's erotic desire to take her life. While she actively solicited this sexual service, obtaining from it what she desired, the court found her to be a victim, the internet providing her with a "tragically convenient" forum through which to meet someone looking to abuse someone else (ibid: 7). As Downing observes, what is of interest here is not so much the judicial discourse regarding the distinction between erotic pleasure and death but the community's support of the verdict. As Nancy Ava Miller, a sex educator and member of a BDSM support group, stated: "I don't know

what they were doing, but it wasn't SM" (ibid). The community displays here the same kind of paternalism against which it fights in the name of free, consensual choice. If feminist and liberal movements might reject BDSM as an illegitimate form of consent because it promotes social violence (Rubin, 2011), the mainstream community, led by internal professional sexologist elites and the institutional organizers of BDSM communities (Wiseman, 1997; Newmahr, 2011: 63–70), reject a consensual choice to seek death through sexual enjoyment as an irrational preference that transgresses mutual intersubjective agreements (Downing, 2005: 8–12).

By this reading, the security logic thus suffers from a serious contradiction. On the one hand, the community struggles against medical definitions of their activity in order to get diverse sexual forms and tendencies accepted as a legitimate part of society. On the other hand, it has apparently adopted a universal code that rejects the idea that erotic pleasure may be gained through the death drive, serving to mediate between the interest of the individual and the healthiness of society as a whole. Placing the hegemonic institutional and scientific knowledge under the security mechanism prohibits the community from respecting all aspects of BDSM sexual desire.

The way in which BDSM communities determine their identities under conservative principles of exclusion highlights the dominance of externally-driven modes of (largely oppressive) governmentality. Those who interpret the relation between the twenty-first century state and biological human features in purely optimistic democratic terms tend to ignore this fact (Rose, 2001: 17–19). Understanding the concept of wellbeing in universal terms, the community seeks political recognition of the diversity of its members' natural social desires while simultaneously accepting the principle that their bodies are subject to a disciplinary confirmative model (Weinberg, 2016). The mental-health discourse (signalled by the reference to "sanity" in SSC) pervades the relational structure of many communities, contingent experiences sometimes being subservient to scientific norms. Although discipline under security can maintain the collective interests of BDSM communities, here the value of preserving health and life overrides contingent self-realization in relation to normative sexual domination by interpreting it in the light of the internal hegemonic logic.

A significant gap exists, however, between the constitutive function of SSC codes as an infrastructure for an intersubjective self-practice of diverse and open self-

realization and its disciplinary elaboration under the community's hegemonic health rules. While BDSM communities frequently acknowledge the neoliberal economic factors that have promoted particular cultural and identity discourses (Harvey, 2007; McWhorter, 2012; Winnubst, 2012), they also demonstrate a shift from institutional and scientific discourse to an open relationality in which internal fantasies offer the possibility of an alternative identity to prevalent sexual theology, one which involves the rejection of essentialism and universalism in favour of contingent consensual wellbeing.

Here, biopower discourse and practice form a necessary part of these communities' lives, possessing a constitutive social power that links individual urges and fantasies to its social establishment. These rules must function as contingent options on the basis of temporal consensual agreement rather than as universal binding norms encompassing every aspect of BDSM practice. Thus, for example, intersubjective dynamics between a top and bottom engaged in dominance and submission must normally ensure the health of the bottom as primary. In other cases, however, the latter may seek to engage in activity that may put life at risk. In such circumstances, the consensual takes priority over the universal as the key value within the SSC codes.

This organizational principle is first and foremost a political declaration against the social codes that decree (consensual) BDSM practice to be unsafe, non-consensual and/or even insane. Consent is prioritised over safety with acknowledgment that risk is an acceptable part of sexual life, much as extreme sports, for example, are predicated in social and popular terms upon the risks attendant upon the particular sporting pleasure (Weait, 2007: 65–69; Weinberg, 2016). BDSM practices that involve high levels of risk (as is seen in so-called “edge play”), with this on occasion even constituting their ultimate purpose, violate the social codes that resist the link between sexuality and death, however. Prioritizing consensuality over the universal prohibition of risk in sexual practice leads to the violation of these essential codes, enabling the community to forge a new mode of subjectivity that gives room to fantasies and urges that would otherwise be delegitimized within the dominant hegemonic discourse of reproductive (genitally driven) sexuality.

At this stage in these communities' histories, discipline must mostly override the calculated risk, subjugating the body to the values of life and health.⁶ Only by means of a mutually agreed-upon process that cedes consensual relationships to exterior restraint can the community create a balance between individual desires and collective

interests, between the community's will to preserve life and health as far as possible and any individual's choice to put them at risk. While this forms an important part of the community's process of self-realization, providing room for risk, its greater significance lies in the fact that it establishes a new mode of experimental existence that enriches BDSM discourse, creating an expressive somatic contingency independent of its contemporary discursive practice.

Rather than being limited to individual desire or denoting community membership, the focus on managing safety also signals the greater legitimacy of BDSM within a broader public context. As Weinberg (2016) argues, in contrast to extreme sports, public awareness of BDSM means that discursive rules that convey legitimacy have to be formulated and gain awareness while remaining independent of institutional legitimization. To the extent that there is a general public consensus concerning the life/death dichotomy, BDSM must necessarily engage critically with this discourse in order to gain public legitimization. This strategy operates in many queer communities but carries the risk of reinforcing a neoliberal subjectivity (Winnubst, 2016: 152–159). While BDSM discursive practice expands hegemonic sexual discourses by legitimizing erotic practice that explicitly involves risk, it simultaneously introduces a new figure of sexual subjectivity into the public sphere, subjecting it to hegemonic constitutive knowledge.

This shift represents a new stage in the development of BDSM sexual citizenship, and the relationship between this particular sexual practice/identity, the state, market and wider society. As Langdridge and Butt (2005) and Langdridge (2006) observe, during the first stage of community development under the safe, sane, and consensual code, BDSM sexual citizenship was constituted by discourses invoking a relatively simple division between pathology and consensual relational agreements. This is expressed not only via the ongoing cultural struggle in the mass media and commercial and services apparatus but also through recent changes in psychiatric diagnosis. Now, however, there is a need for a change to the prevailing sub-cultural discourse of sexual citizenship, as BDSM communities must engage in a new struggle against the legislative hegemony of their internal discursive practices and the normative mechanism of its conditional consensuality. That is, whilst the struggle against criminalization and for wider public acknowledgement (Phelan, 2001) continues, BDSM communities must be alert to the risk of internalising a normalizing

tendency without sufficient contingency that is necessarily associated with a political strategy founded on the security mechanism.

Conclusion

The institutional processes of BDSM practice under the SSC codes constitutes first and foremost a pursuit of self-determination that calls for recognition of diverse forms sexual behaviour in the face of (often oppressive) hegemonic sexual values. This enables both the distinction between sexual violence and abuse and BDSM practice and espousal of a liberal radical view that respects contingent experience on the basis of diverse fantasies and wishes. Herein, we developed a critical view that propounds that BDSM communal self-determination has had to move from power relations based on sovereignty and disciplinary tactics to a security governmental mechanism.

As McWhorter (2012) argues, the self-determination demands of minorities that involve issues of wellbeing are increasingly moving from a disciplinary context to a more subtle and indirect power relation based on diverse recognition, in particular with regard to individual self-practice as constitutive of a unique mode of subjectivity. The contingent form of the SSC codes, the precedence of internal over external rules, and the consistent undermining of normative sexual values offer a political form of resistance against hegemonic knowledge in general and normative sexual epistemes in particular, severing the individual and collective from the chains binding them to institutional and scientific identities. This potential can only be realized by a shift from an institutional organization operating under a biopower reasoning focused on exclusion to a much more inclusive acceptance of erotic fantasies governed by contingent self-interpretative rules: from the censorship of erotic relations incommensurate with universal health values to consensual relations bound by exterior rules that balance diversity with safety.

As briefly noted above, the security politics of BDSM communities are not cost free, calling for what appears at times to be an excessive embrace of neoliberalism (Weiss, 2011) and all the subsequent exclusionary consequences. In other words, the individualization and professionalization of BDSM community life can block members without the necessary capital, whether financial or social. The commodification of desire has long been identified as a key element in contemporary sexual citizenship under capitalism (Evans, 1993), and there is a risk that - at least, some - BDSM communities may be following many other queer communities in

joining the growing trend towards the commodification of desire. Room for optimism exists, however, as there are BDSM communities still existing that actively resist the worst excesses of neoliberalism via the strategic use of a politics of security.

Communities employ all three elements of the strategy for queering neoliberal governmentality proposed by McWhorter (2012: 1) resistance to the use of financial language (e.g., through parody of the commodification of desire); 2) recognition of desires that are not market based or valued (e.g., through the embrace of non-reproductive sexuality); and 3) direct resistance to the market economies of queer life (e.g., through the refusal of some communities to allow financial matters to interfere with membership).

If we think about the analysis advanced here beyond BDSM communities and practices, the resistance strategy we describe signifies a crucial shift from political struggle against sovereign policy or oppression in the service of the interests of the dominant group to a principled opposition to the discursive hegemonic structure that subjugates individuals to monolithic regimes of truth. The critical tactic is facilitated by the security mechanism. Rather than existing outside power relations, the optimistic declaration of rights by minorities constitutes a subtle mechanism that challenges the hegemonic structural discourse by giving precedence to individual fantasies and urges as an expressive process of self-realization. This experimental existence contravenes the epistemic social lines. While it is highly relevant for communal organization against hegemonic sexual knowledge - as we see with LGBTQ movements, for instance - it may also form a weapon in the arsenal of every political struggle working to effect political resistance against sovereign power and hegemonic class relations.

Notes

¹ Radical liberalism and pragmatic thinking constitute efforts in this direction, as well, of course, as neo-Marxism. In the wake of Foucault's writings, however, this trend has become dominant in political thought: see Davidson (2006); Foucault (2002).

² BDSM can be a practice or an identity, some practitioners understanding it as their central sexual identity, others as a practice unrelated to their sexual identity.

³ We shall ignore the issue of consent in this article.

⁴ In some ways, *Security, Territory, Population* constitutes a starting point for passing from disciplinary description to selfhood and self-practice. The link between pastoral power, security, and self-practice is therefore not coincidental, signifying Foucault's dramatic shift towards ethics: see Davidson (2011).

⁵ We find here an echo of Rorty's (1991) argument for the non-contingency of non-essential moral stands. This point cannot be developed from an empirical examination of the community, however.

⁶ The well-known dispute regarding the positive function of disciplinary mechanism has its source in the Foucault-Butler discussion (Butler, 1993, 2001). As noted above, we do not regard discipline as an oppressive mechanism. Rather than ignoring its positive function it recognizes the potential for self-realization the community possesses under the security mechanism.

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