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Bondage and Barbeques

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BONDAGE AND BARBECUES

AN INTERVIEW WITH ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF AMERICAN STUDIES AND ANTHROPOLOGY MARGOT WEISS

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WHILE POPULAR CONCEPTIONS VARY DRAMATICALLY IN THEIR ACCURACY, BDSM IS A DIVERSE AND HIGHLY ORGANIZED PRACTICE, FOUNDED ON THE CONSENSUAL EXCHANGE OF POWER (BDSM STANDS FOR BONDAGE AND DISCIPLINE, DOMINATION/SUBMISSION, AND SADO-MASOCHISM), TO MANY, THE WORDS BRING TO MIND FEMININE DOMINATRIXES, PORNOGRAPHIC ASSOCIATIONS, OR PULP FICTION'S DREAM IN REALITY, BDSM CULTURE REPRESENTS AN ENTIRELY UNIQUE APPROACH TO SEX AND SEXUALITY, IN ESSENCE, THE SCENES CONSTRUCTED DURING BDSM SESSIONS PURPOSEFULLY CONTRIVE ALTERNATE SEXUAL REALITIES WHERE PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL POWER (DOMINANCE) CAN BE MANIPULATED THROUGH CONSENT AND LIMITATIONS FOR PLEASURE.

Method Magazine was able to sit down with Margot Weiss, a Wesleyan University Assistant Professor of American Studies and Anthropology, to discuss issues around BDSM and her experience studying BDSM communities while conducting ethnographic research as an anthropologist. Professor Weiss has written extensively on the subject throughout several articles and book chapters. Her first book, Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality, is set to be released by Duke University Press.

METHOD: When did you become interested in writing about BDSM culture and what prompted the study you did? PROFESSOR MARGOT WEISS: When I was in college at the University of Chicago I did research on the coming out narratives of gay, lesbian and bi youth. I was interested in the repetition of that narrative over and over again. That every coming out narrative was structured in exactly the same way. I was working on that through college and after college, so when I went to graduate school I wanted to keep working on sexuality but I wasn’t really sure what to do. So when I applied to graduate school I had a statement that said maybe I’ll work on people who refuse to take a sexual identity. I was interested in the possibilities of non-binary, non-labeled sexuality -- like Michael Stipe’s (lead singer of R.E.M.) "labels are for fools" thing. But I was in an anthropology department so I needed to find a community or some place to go to do fieldwork, and there was no place to find these people; they were everywhere, they were my friends... but where would I go? You can do all sorts of ethnographic projects, but it’s easier if you go somewhere and stay there for about a year and do that kind of ethnographic research. So, I decided this wasn’t a good first project, but I was interested in those kinds of questions: what was transgressive or submissive or disruptive about sexuality that wasn’t organized in normative ways. I had done gender studies in college, so I knew about SM, but I didn’t know much about SM. I had really only read Pat (Patrick) Califia and other SM practitioner and advocates talking about how radical and transgressive SM was. And it’s a community, it exists somewhere and you can go there, and I thought, ‘ok this might be the thing’.
On the formation of identities through SM practices:

W: Well, I was influenced by people who were talking about SM as really transgressive. So Pat Califia (now Patrick Califia-Rice) says, "If I had a chance between being shipwrecked on a desert island with a vanilla lesbian and a hot male masochist, I'd pick the boy" and the point of this is that even though at the time Califia is a lesbian, her own bisexuality, SM desires, and her sexual orientation. This is how people were talking about SM. It was a place where gender was a free-for-all, where you can take on roles and performances.

M: A non-gendered sexual pleasure.

W: Right. And so, Foucault also, towards the end of his life, participated in SM in San Francisco and radical drug culture.

M: Were they entwined?

W: Kind of entwined, because he was interested in experiencing his body outside his subjectivity. So for him, SM was a practice that de-gendered sex. And for him, it's a whole discipline of anatomy that produced and reproduced SM, because its not genital, it's about being somebody's back, all the surfaces of the skin and the body, open up new sensations, so it's not about "sex-desires" but about bodies and pleasure.

M: He must also acknowledge that it's beyond biological sex, sex for reproduction.

W: Absolutely, it's also most often not about orgasm. It's not goal directed sex, it's about experiencing sensations. It has a rhythm and a pattern but it's not a hetero intercourse-organism pattern. So it also goes outside the temporal and normative sex. So I went to San Francisco in the summer of 2000. I had no idea what to do and I was really nervous. I really just had to go and talk to people on my own, which took me a while, a couple weeks of paralysis, before I could actually do anything. But I started sending emails to different local Bay Area SM listservs, and tons of people wrote back. So then I had endless numbers of people to talk to and events to go to. The first event I went to was a play party. It was billed as a slave auction, but it was also a goods auction. There were all sorts of SM toys being auctioned off, and then there was a play party after the event. When I walked in, everybody there was 45-55 years old. They were white and not from San Francisco, they lived in the suburbs. A lot of heterosexual men who were married to bisexual women...

M: Who were at the event?

W: Yes. Everyone was just hanging around, talking, eating burgers in side rooms, chatting and catching up on stuff. It was not the radical scene that I had imagined at all.

M: Like a barbecue!

W: It was like a barbecue on a Sunday afternoon. It was really... nobody was in, like, chaps and riding off on a motorcycle.

M: Not the popular conception.

W: No, and not my conception either. So then I became interested in thinking about the relationship between the claims that SM is really radical and the practices and practitioners who make up the community. So that's actually what my work became about. But I was initially interested in SM for precisely what I argue against in the end.

M: Do you think it was always a more leisurely, baroque environment or was it more intense and radical when Foucault was practicing SM? Did those people grow up and calm down?

W: It's a historical shift from SM being primarily gay men with some lesbians, leatherdrones who were important to the men's scenes, and those were the people with whom Foucault interacted. But that was a scene where people didn't have a lot of money, events were held in the backrooms of bars. It wasn't a hyper-organized, developed scene that you see today, where there are workshops and classes and membership organizations. It was a much smaller scene, a much more urban scene, and really a men's scene. What happened was HIV and AIDS in San Francisco, the gentrification of the city, which made it very difficult for sexual minority organizations to exist there... and the big change was the Internet. Technology in the Bay Area, as one of the original hubs of the internet, allowed all these people to get online really early. They get online, and they're searching "bondage" or "flogging," and they're finding chat groups and saying, "Let's meet in person. Let's go to this burger place," and that's the first munch.

M: And instinctively, that's how you sought to find these communities.

W: Yes, and what happened was that from the mid-90s onwards, this huge influx of people who are predominately straight, professional class, computer workers who found SM over the internet, flooded all these organizations, and that's who the community is. There are still alternative communities, but they're much smaller, much less central than they were.

M: So would you describe the culture as being "mainstream" now?

W: That's a good question. In a way it has become mainstream, you certainly see more representations of it and the people who are in SM are more mainstream. But even if you get mainstream representation of SM it still carries that mark of pathology. Have you seen Secretary (2002)?

M: I haven't, is that with Maggie Gyllenhaal?

W: Yes. Well, members of the SM community were really happy that there was this sort of mainstream movie about SM. But she's a cutter, and she uses submission in the context of an SM relationship as a way of managing her own pathology. So even when SM is represented it's often represented as...

M: Not entirely healthy...

W: Yeah, in this sort of pathologized sexuality. People in SM communities are really worried that SM has become too mainstream.

M: And that would be a bad thing? That it loses its edge.

W: Yeah. That's not sexy and radical and out there and against the law.

M: Part of the pleasure is the risk aspect.

W: Absolutely. And what's happened in the scene is the development of rules and regulations. There are very elaborate consent negotiations that happen, check list forms of negotiation that make people feel safe to play. But at the same time, SM has to be risky enough, or what's the point in doing it. It's about being a radical sex practice.

M: I thought it was really interesting to look at SM as a performance art, something that requires skill to perform well enough. So that someone can be taken out if the thought that they are in a constrained environment and be cautioned that they are being coerced or in an interrogation.

W: In that way, what helps is that SM performances rely on broader normative roles. So if you want to do a gender...
play scene, or a slavery scene, you have the isomorphism of slavery or of gender inequality, or something that has a real world reference, and it's the play between those real world roles that everybody knows, and their performance within a scene that's supposed to be safe and therefore not the unconscionable forms of inequality you face in the real world.

M: This reaches further back in our conversation, but given that first meeting you want to, would you say it was easy as an anthropologist conducting ethnographic fieldwork to study this culture? Did they accept you? Were they excited to have somebody studying them?

W: Yes for the most part people were hoping that I would dispel all the negative stereotypes about SM practitioners. They were overly optimistic about who would actually read what I wrote and the great reach that my book would have; that it would be, you know, a best seller. And so a lot of people wanted to talk to me because they thought I would make it clear that they aren't all abused as children or pathological in various ways, which is the way they're represented. They didn't always have the same motivation that I had, but that's the way that ethnographic research really goes.

M: That sounds in some ways ideal, to have conflicting agendas.

W: It's a massive community and I was there for three years, so I was around a lot. I would do a one-on-one interview with somebody and they'd say, "You should come on Friday to this thing," and they'd introduce me, "She's an anthropologist and doing a blah blah blah," and at some point, maybe a couple months in, everybody knew me as the anthropologist so they'd be like, "Oh good the anthropologist is here! Let me show you this thing!"

M: Is it unusual for anthropologists to study BDSM culture?

W: Yes. I think they get a lot of curious students on email lists, psychology students who want to do surveys, but not people who are just hanging out at various parties and going to classes. I also joined several organizations and was the archivist for the main organization. I was doing work trying to get their archives to a more stable location.

M: That was probably invaluable.

W: Definitely invaluable. So I got to know people and kept working with people; I had close relationships with some people in the scene. And the people who didn't want to talk to me just didn't talk to me. If I was in an event with 500 people, I didn't stand up and announce I was there, but in most settings I was obviously there and I had done all this work in the beginning where I would stand up at a munch and say "I'm an anthropologist and I'm doing research." I was always nervous about how people would respond, but I was really relieved that people were so welcoming.

M: You mentioned that working as an undergraduate student you found that there were almost homogeneous ways in which gay and lesbians came out. Did you find that there was a general means in which people entered the BDSM community or found it? Was it through a partner, maybe? Or was it a self-initiative?

W: That's a great question. There was more diversity in people coming out into SM stories because it's not a coded story in the same way as the gay and lesbian stories. So, for some people, they lived in San Francisco or near San Francisco, they saw some flyer or a notice or had a friend, and they went to an event and said, "Oh, this is cool." And they stayed. Some people talked about how they had always had these desires. When they were a little kid, they tied up their neighborhood friend or did self-bondage. When they finally found the community they realized they weren't alone. That's much more of a traditional coming out narrative. Other people had a partner who was really into SM, they themselves weren't but they would occasionally go just to be a supportive partner and to socialize. People's relationships with BDSM really varied. Women's stories and men's stories were also different. Women emphasized how SM was appealing because of the emphasis on consent and the ways you have to actually verbalize your desires: "I want you to do this...I want to do that."

M: There's a lot more control.

W: Yes, and actually owning your desires and pleasures.

M: How would you describe the differences between a more professional BDSM organization where you pay someone to be the dominant versus the more informal organizations?

W: My research wasn't about professional SM at all, except insofar as the professional dominants were personally interested in SM so they were also in the non-professional community. There are some professional houses that are more associated with the non-professional community; they were founded by people who were in both communities or had close relationships. And there are some that are not, that are outgrowths of other forms of sex work, using that term broadly. It's a huge debate whether professional domination is sex work.

M: What do you think?

W: Well, I would call it sex work but...The issue is that it's illegal if it's sex. So the key issue is defining what they're doing as not sex. As far as I'm concerned, sex work should be entirely decriminalized, so I'm comfortable extending "sex work" to this exchange.

M: Do you think that people who practice BDSM would describe themselves as having sex?

W: That's a good question. Some people do and some people don't. So for some people BDSM is the epitome of sex. But for other people it isn't at all. I talked to a guy in his mid-twenties who was a really heavy bottom, a masochist bottom, really heavy SM for him was like a marathon.

M: And runners do experience a rush of endorphins post-race.

W: Yes, it was about how much he could take. Each play scene was about going further, pushing himself further. He said it wasn't sexual at all. He experienced his sexual- ity in a totally different way, but he experienced a kind of high, like marathon running, from SM. It's different for different people, but I would say he is unusual. For nearly everyone it's sexual or sexualized or erotic, but it's also often differentiated from sex, which people usually associate with intercourse or some sexual practice that's generally focused, not a four hour session that's about flogging and caning. So there are debates at play parties about whether there should be sex allowed, and that means genital sex.

M: When someone like this heavy bottom lanes towards practices that are more masochistic or violent, are there generally accepted limits to what can be performed and how do they work within legal context? Or do they just do as long as it's consensual.

W: In SM, part of the reason there are so many classes and books is to teach you body safety. So if you're really into canes, you need to know where you can hit someone and where you can't, how to control the care, what the skin will do right at the time and ten hours later. These kinds of bodily techniques are really central to the knowledge practices of SM. So somebody like him (heavy bottom), he's interested in testing the limits of his body, which requires him to find a top who's willing to do that with him. The legality of SM is an open question: in part from the development of feminist efforts.
to legislate against domestic violence, you can't consent to assault. It's not a possible defense. You can't say, "Yes I was being this person, but it was consensual." That can't be considered in a court. So because of that, much of SM is illegal if it's understood as assault. This is where it gets really tricky. So when a play party is raided and cops come in and arrest everyone...

M: Does this happen often?
W: There were three big cases of this while I was doing fieldwork, but it doesn't happen often. Organizations are really worried about it so they have everyone sign indemnity forms and consent forms when you come in, to try and ward off that kind of prosecution. But it's difficult because of the legal questions. The SM community agrees on many things, and safe, sane, and consensual is the motto of SM. What counts as edge play or overly risky play is a matter of debate, but there's a limit to what heavy physical play is safe to the body.

M: But there isn't a strict limit like, 'I'm not going to break your leg'?
W: Well that would be really extreme, really extreme and weird and unusual. We're talking about figures that are made out of soft leather, castes, not like biting someone with a desk. So tools, toys that are specially designed to provide pleasure as well as pain sensations. I suppose it would be possible to negotiate a scene that would be really extreme, but you would have a hard time finding someone who would do it. Really, what you're talking about is a heavy scene is a scene that goes on for a long time, and there's bruising, maybe cutting. Not long term physical damage. You don't want to go to the hospital after, you want to have a nice time (laughs).

M: And that wouldn't be for months?
W: So that's one of the more inaccurate representations of SM. And many BDSM practices aren't physical, many practices are about psychological power and dominance. Many kinds of role play, like boss-secretary play, don't have anything physical in them. But it is SM because it's about power and inequality and eroticizing that inequality in the scene.

M: So has the mainstreaming of SM made it more safe or created more guidelines, or has it just made SM practice more... boring?
W: (laughs) Well, people don't really think it's boring, but they're sure that it used to be much better. But that is always how subcultures work. People are always sure that back in the day it was really hardcore and now it sucks. There is that nostalgia going on. I think the former scene wasn't as codified, in part because it was smaller and people also knew each other. There was more one-to-one networking. So if you were interested in SM, you would have to know someone who would bring you to a place and if you wanted to be a top, you'd have to be a bottom for many years and work your way up. There was none of an apparatus system, more community based controls. Now it's much bigger much more open and easy to find. Instead of that one-on-one control, there's a class you take that teaches you how to use a cane safely and responsibly.

M: As a top, or a dominant, is there a sense of pleasure from that role generally? Would they also describe it as sexualized even though they aren't the one being physically affected by the performance?
W: People in SM describe it as an exchange — this is why I use the term "circuit" in my ethnography. What's important is the link between the top and bottom, and whoever else is in the scene. For the top there are feelings of control and mastery, the pleasure of pleasing someone else and being in charge of someone else, of being trusted in that way and responsible, which is really profound. And also experiencing that person's pleasure as your own. It's not like you just stand there, hit someone, they feel good, and you're done. You create a kind of connection, it's not just good SM.

M: So is that hasn't really built momentum yet?
W: That's their feeling. I'm not really sure about that. There are certainly younger people who were in the BDSM scene in San Francisco. My sense is that younger people cross more borders, so for someone in their 40s or 50s it's important to join an organization and be located in a particular community. Many people who were younger were in multiple communities. SM wasn't the one thing for them. There were multiple things. They liked SM, but it wasn't the one focus of their sexual self.