

Is there sex after marriage?

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They've taken the sex out of sexual orientation! The movement for sexual liberation has gone all domestic. We hear a lot about same-sex marriage these days, but very little about the vision of unbounded sexuality that was associated with gay liberation.

The gay liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s developed a sexual libertarian politics to combat the policing of sexual activity between consenting persons. The goal was that people should have the freedom and the resources to freely explore sexuality. This sexual libertarian politics had real strengths and it was part of the reason that the lesbian and gay movement could mobilize so effectively to challenge the state officials and health care practitioners who tried to shut down gay sex altogether in the early days of the AIDS epidemic.

But this sexual libertarianism had big blind spots too, and these were often identified by lesbian feminists. The realm of sexuality is not free of the power inequalities that shape this society. Sexual consent and erotic imagery raise complex issues precisely because of the impact of very real relations of inequality along lines of class, gender, race, sexuality and age.

Queer socialist feminists began to pull together the best of sexual libertarianism with an analysis of the ways power relations crosscut sexual practices, for example in the journal *Rites* in the 1980s. This was an important contribution to AIDS activism and to the short burst of militant queer activism in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Those sexual liberation politics have been eclipsed, due to the decline of the Left and of queer militancy. Now it's all about love and marriage and settling down. It is a tremendous victory that lesbians and gays have won the right to marriage, which is an important recognition of legal equality. But sex doesn't have to lead to marriage!

Sexuality desexed

Marriage is only one of the ways they've taken the sex out of sexuality. It seems that the sex has been bled out of sexual orientation as the cultural visibility of lesbians and gay men has increased. It is generally the chaste lesbian or gay man who appears in television programmes and movies. These folks sublimate their sexuality into witty, bitchy repartee and great taste in bathroom fixtures. Their lives are as clean as their sparkling floors and no one watching the show needs to worry that they might actually be getting it on when the camera turns off.

And it is not only queer sexuality that is desexed, though that is a particularly blatant case. Sex is used to sell everything in this society, except for condoms and birth control information. Condoms

are sold boringly as safety devices (except in campaigns developed by gay men for gay men). Sex education is presented as dull mechanics, drained of any hint of hotness.

In short, we are in a society where everything is sexualized – except sex. In general, sexual activity tends to be treated as shameful, unspeakable and invisible. We all know that lots of high school students are having sex, but it is pushed underground into the nether lands of drunken groping in the back seats of cars or quickies before the parental figures get home from work. People are often not good at communicating their sexual desires to partners, except in the form of coded messages like the old cliché about headaches.

Sex is everywhere and nowhere in this society. Growing up in these conditions, we tend to assume that it is simply a characteristic of human sexuality to be omnipresent, alluring and elusive. But there is nothing natural about this experience of sexuality, which has to do with the particular features of capitalist society.

Hot commodities

The sexualization of everything in this society has to do with the role of market forces in our daily lives. At the most obvious level, sex is used to sell everything from beer to cars. This seems to be a simple advertising ploy to channel our sexual desires towards commodities we can buy on the market place. But it is not only an advertising gimmick. The redirection of our desires away from actual human bodies and towards commodities exchanged on the marketplace is actually a core feature of capitalist society.

Marx argued that in capitalist societies we tend to fetishize commodities, or in other words we attribute mystical powers to things that are exchanged on the market. Our daily experience tends to convince us that commodities have the real power in society. Suddenly the price of oil skyrockets, stocks plummet, currencies rise or fall. It all seems quite beyond our control and yet it has a huge impact on our lives. We can get tossed out of work, or told that we have to accept concessions on wages or benefits to keep our jobs. Our employers blame market conditions, as if the commodities made them do it.

In this situation, it makes sense that we want to be like commodities. It seems like humans do the crap work to service the commodities who have the real power to make things happen. We seek to shed the dreary daily grind of existence in a human body, which mainly means labour under the control of others, and to enter into the glorious realm of exchange, where the big decisions are made.

Commodity fetishism

There is nothing natural about commodity fetishism. Indeed, people do have the power to change things and commodities are merely the products of our labour. The real power in our society is not held by a bunch of commodities haggling over the conditions of our existence, but by a dominant class of employers backed by the state. But our daily experience seems to point to wonderful powers in the circulation of commodities.

Therefore, a shirt at the mall, still in the realm of exchange, seems to have the transformative powers to make me look like a star. But when I get it home and try it on, it is only a use value, a shirt to wear. I look in the mirror and see the same guy now wearing an ill-fitting and perhaps age-inappropriate shirt. What was I thinking? Somehow when the thing was still in the realm of

circulation, it was more than a shirt, it was a totem with the power to make a difference.

Commodities, then, seem hot and desirable while human bodies appear to be mere things, instruments of tedious labour. The commodified and unattainable image seems far more desirable than any real human body. The merely human is measured against the unattainable image in the realm of exchange. It is not only that the image captures a model who has not eaten a carbohydrate in days and who is deliberately sculpted, perfectly posed, ideally lit and then air-brushed and processed to eliminate any contaminating evidence of humanity. It is also that the image is bathed in the mystical light of the powers we attribute to commodities.

Sexual freedom, then, is not only about the realm of sexuality but about the way we live our lives. We have made real gains over the last century in control over our bodies and our lives, because people fought for access to contraception and abortion, for lesbian and gay liberation, against sexual coercion and for sex education and the right to distribute sexual information. But we still have a long fight to win for liberation.

Sexual freedom under capitalism slides into the unbounded desire for commodities. The virtual sexuality of the internet, whether in the form of porn or chat sites, would seem to be an ideal expression of sexual freedom under capitalism. The flight from actual human bodies into the realm of circulation seems to be accomplished when our desire is virtualized. Sexuality is one of the realms in which the limits of freedom under capitalism become apparent.

P.S.

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<http://newsocialist.org/newsite/index.php?id=493>