

The New York Review of Books

Questioning Desire

Elaine Blair

September 22, 2022 issue

Amia Srinivasan's *The Right to Sex* is rare in its ability to speak to a plural audience—queer and straight, multiracial and multigendered—with the assumption that we have some common interests in sex and dating even if we have varied experiences of them.



Amia Srinivasan; illustration by Harriet Lee-Merrion

Reviewed:

The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century

by Amia Srinivasan

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 276 pp., \$28.00; \$18.00 (paper)

Second-wave feminism was a movement with many fronts: antidiscrimination and legal equality; subsidized child care; health care and reproductive rights; the prevention and prosecution of domestic and sexual violence; the redefinition of gender roles. Radical feminists came out of the student left of the 1960s, thought of themselves as (nonviolent) revolutionaries rather than reformers, and, at the beginning of the movement, held strongly anticapitalist and communitarian views. These radicals made feminism popular: their political actions, reported in the media, drew large numbers of women to the movement; their books became best sellers. But as the US took a strong rightward turn in the late 1970s, feminism, like other liberation movements, tended to succeed best where it least threatened moneyed and conservative interests. The communitarian ideals of radical women's groups faded from public memory, and feminism was glossed as a movement for female careers.

Amia Srinivasan's *The Right to Sex* puts radical feminists back into the story of how we've arrived, for better or worse, at our current state of gender politics. It's a collection of six essays on sexual ethics in the broadest sense. The essays cover sexual assault and workplace harassment; pornography; professor–student affairs; the haves and have-nots of the so-called sexual marketplace; and the negative consequences of relying on the police and the justice system for enforcement of laws against sex crimes. In each of the essays, Srinivasan draws on radical feminist thought of the Sixties, Seventies, and Eighties. But hers is not a simple project of recuperation. In each case, she writes about early radical feminism's encounters with political complications and opposition—from its own breakaway factions, from new developments in Black feminist thought, from the conservative public mood and deregulatory frenzy of the Eighties and Nineties.

“I know two men who were, I am fairly confident, falsely accused of rape,” begins her essay “The Conspiracy Against Men,” in which she considers the claims of due process and presumption of innocence against the popular feminist injunction to “believe women,” and then weighs “believe women” against the question that Black feminists have long posed in response: *Which* women? “The white woman who says she was raped, or the black or brown woman who insists that her son is being set up?”

With a great gift for synthesis, Srinivasan brings together ideas that have been circulating in various academic disciplines, the press, and social media. Her essays move swiftly yet are dense with arguments and information. She works her way through data on exonerations for rape cases, campus sexual assault accusations, and rape and harassment claims by Black women and white women. Gradually, these parts come together to reveal a landscape of competing interests in which regulations and laws that punish perpetrators of sexual assault have been of limited help to women, while also being biased against the least socially powerful of the men who are accused. She makes her way to this question: Could it be that when it comes to preventing sexual assault, “the law is simply the wrong tool for the job?”

That is a big question, and it comes up throughout the book. As Srinivasan shows in many of her essays, feminist attempts to punish, prohibit, or interdict—through law enforcement, workplace harassment policy, and attempted bans on pornography and prostitution—have tended to be used disproportionately against vulnerable groups (Black men, poor men, sexual minorities, women themselves) while leaving untouched the networks of privilege and corruption at the top. Does that mean that the law *can't* do better?

Srinivasan's bracing tours of recent political history have a way of stopping abruptly the moment she brings us up to the present, just as we find ourselves with a lot of new questions. Should people who've been sexually assaulted boycott the legal system? Could community-administered restorative justice work for socially powerful men? (For one's *boss*?) Is it odd to pull back from the criminal justice system just when it has finally, as a result of Me Too activism, succeeded in holding some powerful white men accountable for sex crimes? And how do we cultivate a stronger sense of sexual ethics? Here the essays get quieter—searching, yet hesitant to articulate an alternative vision. To see how and why this happens, it might help to look at three of them closely.

When Srinivasan began teaching an undergraduate class on feminist philosophy, she writes in "Talking to My Students About Porn," she dreaded the section of the syllabus on pornography. She feared that the antipornography writing of Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon would sound overwrought and antiquated to a generation of students who grew up with online porn. Instead, she found her class nodding along to their arguments:

Could it be that pornography doesn't merely depict the subordination of women, but actually makes it real, I asked? Yes, they said. Does porn silence women, making it harder for them to protest against unwanted sex, and harder for men to hear those protests? Yes, they said. Does porn bear responsibility for the objectification of women, for the marginalization of women, for sexual violence against women? Yes, they said, yes to all of it.

The prevalence of violent male-on-female pornography online has made Dworkin's and MacKinnon's work on these subjects seem prescient, Srinivasan writes, echoing other contemporary feminist voices. Srinivasan's students seem to be quite familiar with this kind of porn, some of them actively prefer it, but all apparently agree that it has had a detrimental effect on sexual relations between men and women. "Men believe what pornography says about women," Dworkin wrote in 1981. To Srinivasan's students, it remains a shimmering truth.

Dworkin and MacKinnon didn't just write about pornography; they tried to have it banned, as Srinivasan recounts, drafting ordinances that would have allowed women to bring civil suits against pornographers who depicted the sexual subordination of women, and against the vendors of such pornography, on the grounds that it was effectively hate speech that caused harm to all women. The porn industry fought the ordinances. So did some feminist and queer

activists (with fewer resources): they observed that queer pornography was getting swept up in antiporn bans. They argued that the antiporn feminists' view of sexuality was narrow and literal-minded, untrue to the workings of the sexual imagination.

The ordinances passed in Minneapolis and Indianapolis, but were vetoed by the mayor and struck down by the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals, respectively, in both cases on the grounds of free speech protection for pornography. This is the shape of the stalemate that followed: pornography is protected speech; there's little practical hope of regulating it*; direct links between watching porn and committing violence, though suspected, have been hard to prove.

Srinivasan argues that even without being able to demonstrate a direct connection between porn and violence or coercion, we should be concerned about the way that porn shapes heterosexual expectations. She cites interviews from a 2013 report on pornography by the UK Office of the Children's Commissioner, in which teenage viewers describe porn as essentially a form of sex education, "an authority on how to have sex." This matter of porn's authority is at the heart of the problem—if porn didn't have cultural authority, Srinivasan writes, it would "be able to depict women as inferior but not to make them inferior."

But when it comes to intervening in porn's authority, she is notably pessimistic. She doesn't see "porn literacy" becoming part of sex-ed curricula. Her students say it's too late for them to switch to egalitarian porn. She ends in pastoral, wishing away the tide of sexual images and evoking an idealized erotic past:

There are no laws to draft, no easy curriculums to roll out. Rather than more speech or more images, it is their onslaught that would have to be arrested. Perhaps then the sexual imagination could be coaxed, even briefly, to recall its lost power.

The subject of pornography seems to yield feminist despair, as if, having taken interdiction off the table (as Srinivasan has), feminists have only two weak options: ignore porn or express concern from the sidelines. The gloom is somewhat understandable; there's nothing good about the ease with which children can find realistic-looking violent pornography. Worse, pornography sites—as well as Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and other social media companies—have thus far failed to keep images of child abuse and other sex crimes off their sites.

In theory, it should be possible to address the urgent problem of illegal material, to consider tightening online access, and even to debate the ethics of filming and selling realistic violent scenes, all while keeping in mind—and reassuring the younger generation—that sexual fantasy is quite commonly inconsistent with one's social values and that this is not in itself a cause for alarm. But the moving pictures seem to have transfixed everyone, gotten us stuck in a loop of horror or arousal (or both). And when it comes to being caught in loops of horror, it seems doubtful that Dworkin is going to be the right feminist to get us out.

In her classroom Srinivasan finds a group of porn consumers, among them heterosexual men, who testify to the negative, misogynistic effects porn has on their own sex lives. This seems like evidentiary gold (pornography *is* making sex bad for women!), but it turns, I think, into a trap, locking her into antiporn habits of thought that are of questionable use in the age of porn ubiquity.

Antiporn feminists made their case by collapsing distinctions: between staged fantasy and actual abuse; between voluntary and involuntary participation in the production of pornography; between consuming, selling, and producing pornography; between men who do and don't like pornography, or do and don't commit violence; between female performers directly involved in the production of porn and women on the outside who are merely—putatively—affected by its circulation. This refusal of distinctions makes tactical sense if you are trying to have pornography banned (and, to be sure, the distinctions are not always clean or simple). But if we believe that porn is endemic and we are trying to figure out how to live with it, distinctions become very important.

To begin with, what kind of porn are we talking about? Srinivasan continues the antiporn feminist convention of referring to porn as a single entity, even while the focus of her concern is a particular subset of porn—that which depicts male-on-female violence or verbal abuse or contempt.

Though Srinivasan acknowledges the great variety of porn online and mentions some common tropes (stepmom and MILF scenarios, fem-dom porn), the implications of this variety aren't absorbed into her argument. Yet the question of *which* porn is crucial. It can be simultaneously true that the ubiquity of online porn has messed up the sex lives of many heterosexual people *and* that the ubiquity of online porn makes it clearer than ever that a lot of pornography has nothing to do with men abusing women. To address the former situation without leaning on the law, we could use the help of the latter.

We don't typically worry, for instance, that male fans of fem-dom porn will be victims of nonconsensual bullying by women in their lives, that MILF and stepmom scenarios will lead to a spike in mother-son incest, or that leatherdyke porn will lead to unwanted violence among women. (Though the last was a significant target of antiporn feminists' opprobrium in the 1980s.) Nor do we think that these tropes tell a transcendent truth about men or women—we don't fear that viewers will "believe" these kinds of pornography. One way to imagine a post-misogynist utopia is to picture a world where sexual fantasies of male dominance and female submission are no more threatening than any of these other configurations, because we're reasonably confident that no one is going to believe them in the Dworkinian sense.

How do we get there? When it comes to writing about pornography, we should act as if we've already arrived. Through scrupulous attention to its critical terms, any feminist discussion of pornography—including one that investigates pornography's effects on social life—can be a

demonstration of unbelief that helps sever the referential links between male performers playing sexually dominant roles and “men,” female performers playing submissive roles and “women.”

We could, for example, give what Srinivasan calls “mainstream” porn a descriptive name, making it visible as one specific predilection among many—call it hetero-male contempt porn. If this genre is especially popular, and if some kids see it as a guide to heterosexual sex, that’s all the more reason to be careful not to let it stand, at the level of terminology, for pornography or heterosexual fantasy generally. To do so is to inadvertently shore up its authority.

Likewise, to recommend egalitarian porn to those who prefer the inegalitarian kind suggests that it’s impossible to watch hetero-male contempt porn without believing what it says about women. There may be good reasons to avoid certain pornography (including the exploitative conditions of its production), but the idea that pornographic fantasy should be egalitarian is preposterous and muddies questions of ethical responsibility.

With this in mind, perhaps the most effective way to undermine the authority of hetero-male contempt porn is to accept the fact that some significant number of men (as well as other people) like it. Not out of complacency, but in order to mark even more brightly the distinction between the irresponsible spirit of masturbatory fantasy and the responsibilities of partnered sex. In the 1980s pornography’s defenders said, dismissively, it’s fantasy, leave it alone. The pro-sex feminists whom Srinivasan cites said, pragmatically, with a touch of misgiving, it’s fantasy, let’s focus on preventing real-life violence. It seems to me that our answer, too, has to be, it’s fantasy—said incredulously, as though it should really go without saying. Of course it’s fantasy, and of course bringing any kind of sexual fantasy to life entails responsibility and care.

The centerpieces of Srinivasan’s book are two chapters called “The Right to Sex” and “The Politics of Desire.” The first is an essay that Srinivasan originally published in the *London Review of Books*, and the second is a follow-up in which she elaborates and refines some of her ideas, taking into account the many responses, positive and negative, that the first essay provoked. Srinivasan writes about punishingly narrow standards of beauty and how they play out in people’s searches for sexual and romantic partners. The territory is well-trod, but it’s Srinivasan’s achievement to avoid the familiar grooves of the subject.

She begins where you think a feminist couldn’t possibly—with a semi-sympathetic reading of the manifesto of the mass murderer Elliot Rodger, who killed six people and himself in 2014 in avowed retaliation for having been denied sex by women all his life. Rodger identified as an incel, an involuntary celibate, a term that in theory could apply to any kind of person but in practice has been embraced by a certain kind of heterosexual man: “The kind who is convinced he is owed sex, and is enraged by the women who deprive him of it.” In his manifesto, which he distributed shortly before his killing spree, Rodger wrote of his inability to meet women; the childhood bullies who teased him for being unathletic, small, and biracial (his father was white, his mother Malaysian Chinese); and his belief that women, having denied him sex because of his looks, deserved violent retribution.

Srinivasan's reading of the manifesto comes with many qualifications recognizing the unacceptability of Rodger's actions and misogynist beliefs. That said, she takes his complaints of discrimination in the sexual arena seriously enough to point out that while the feminist response to Rodger had much to say about male sexual entitlement, it was regrettably silent on the subject of desirability and desire—"men's desire, women's desire, and the ideological shaping of both."

Srinivasan traces her argument to the radical feminists of the late Sixties and Seventies who, during the free-for-all of the sexual revolution, were nearly alone on the left in taking a critical look at romance, love, and sex. They were unsentimental about desire; romance was a head trip worked on women to get them to agree to family arrangements that were to their economic and legal disadvantage, and the whole array of what you "wanted"—men, marriage, lipstick, miniskirts—was to be examined with suspicion, a probable Trojan horse smuggling more gender oppression into your life. (They were, at the beginning of the movement, mostly straight-identified and mostly concerned with heterosexual discontents.)

Feminists eventually became passionately divided over questions of whether they should participate in heterosexuality at all, or, if they were gay, in what manner it was OK to have sex with other women. Sex-skeptical feminists lost the argument (sex had some powerful commercial interests behind it), and by the 1990s there emerged, in Srinivasan's retelling, a pro-sex détente in which everyone agreed not to apply political standards to other people's sexual desires. Matters of consent became the only grounds on which to intervene in anyone else's sex life, and an atmosphere of nonjudgmental, laissez-faire complacency settled over the land.

But could it be time to question these attitudes? Srinivasan cites numerous kinds of sexual discrimination, such as trans women facing sexual exclusion by cis lesbians and instances of Asian American and Asian Australian women publicly declaring their lack of sexual interest in men of Asian descent. She describes the Grindr Web series *What the Flip?*, in which users of different races and ages exchange profiles to see how people respond to them when they're disguised behind someone else's photos and physical stats. "The results are predictably grim," Srinivasan writes. A white man using the profile of "a beautiful, blue-haired East Asian guy" is "hardly approached, and when he is it's by men announcing that they're 'Rice Queens' and like Asian men for being 'good at bottoming.'" The Asian man using the "well-groomed, good-looking" white guy's profile "is inundated with admirers."

Srinivasan asks us to consider whether there might also be such a thing as being overfond of your desires—so ready to elaborate your likes and dislikes that you don't hear their Hollywood-casting-call conventionality and their potentially hateful resonance. Do we accept too readily, under the cover of "personal preferences," a sexual landscape that is in fact riven by discrimination by race, body type, and gender expression? What use is our putative sexual freedom if we find ourselves undatable or unfuckable?

In asking these questions, Srinivasan is staking out a left position on sexuality that isn't limited to championing pluralism. Sexual freedom shouldn't merely be freedom from interference, it should also mean a right *to* something—a minimum guarantee, a safety net. But a right to what, exactly? What is the sexual equivalent of food, housing, and a living wage? Here things get uneasy.

Srinivasan leans hard on the analogy between sexual liberalism and economic liberalism. Sexual liberalism is a cold place of self-interested pursuit, a place of haves and have-nots where everyone is supposedly free but some people have vastly more choices and resources than others. "In this sense," she writes,

the norms of sex are like the norms of capitalist free exchange. What matters is not what conditions give rise to the dynamics of supply and demand—why some people need to sell their labor while others buy it—but only that both buyer and seller have agreed to the transfer.

Certainly the sexual "marketplace" can sometimes feel like it deserves that name. But to what extent is sexual liberalism actually *like* economic liberalism, beyond the limited sense, indicated by the use of "liberalism," that they both involve a loosening of regulation?

Where Srinivasan puts a lot of weight on the market analogy, it gives her trouble. For one thing, the analogy is beloved by incels themselves, who like to say that they are the oppressed victims of a sexual free market, the proverbial starving men who are justified in stealing a loaf of bread—i.e., raping women who refuse to have sex with them. That's "a sickening false equivalence," Srinivasan writes, but she has to take her argument through several extra convolutions to try to shake off incel logic, by which time we start to get the feeling that we've tangoed with the incels longer than we should. "The idea of 'redistributing' sex is problematic for at least two reasons," she writes well into the second essay. "Talk of 'redistribution' immediately raises the spectre of coercion." I suppose that's true—but who besides incels is talking about it? Outside of an incel context, what could the right to sex possibly mean? Government-subsidized sexual services? Assigned partnerships? What would any such entitlement have to do with the problem that the essay initially laid out?

Srinivasan's sexual have-nots—the luckless men of Grindr, the trans lesbians being rejected by cis lesbians—are not asking for access to sexual services or assigned partners. They want to be found hot. They want to be wanted. They want what truly can't be compelled. And we can't make ourselves want someone we don't for the sake of the social good—can we?

In response to questions like these, Srinivasan refines her argument in the second essay, "The Politics of Desire." What she invites us to do is not to change our desires, but to broaden them; not to stamp out our attraction to well-toned blonds, but to set free our culturally suppressed desires for everyone else:

There is a kind of discipline here, in that it requires us to quiet the voices that have spoken to us since birth, the voices that tell us which bodies and ways of being in the world are worthy and which are unworthy. What is disciplined here isn't desire itself, but the political forces that presume to instruct it.

Fair enough, but aren't we basically in liberal pro-sex territory here—suspending judgments, cultivating a catholicity of taste, maintaining an openness to erotic surprise in order to finally make good on the sexual revolution's promise of a more sexually fulfilling place for all? No! says Srinivasan, it's nothing like that crypto-libertarian sell-out crap of the 1960s. "To liberate sex from the distortions of oppression," according to Srinivasan, is "a radical demand" as opposed to the "liberal" demand that "everyone can desire whatever or whomever they want."

I'm not convinced of the formal distinction. Doesn't saying everyone can desire whomever they want involve, among other things, liberating sex from the distortions of homophobia, a form of oppression? In any case, flying her argument under a Jacobin flag, Srinivasan forecloses a sense of political continuity with the self-described sex radicals, gay liberationists, and other activists of the twentieth century. Her acknowledgment of these movements in a sentence—"Generations of feminists and gay and lesbian activists have fought hard to free sex from shame, stigma, coercion, abuse, and unwanted pain"—seems like a pat on the head, and we can see how little room the liberal-radical schema gives her to account for those aspects of sexual liberalism that have been genuinely liberating, and the collective political efforts behind them.

The fact that a majority of Americans agree with a statement like "everyone can desire whatever or whomever they want" marks a profound social transformation from 1900, or 1950, or 1980. If that statement, and the world it describes, doesn't strike us as radical today, it should call into question the significance and usefulness of the term in sexual politics. Is "radical" just a word for what hasn't yet been accomplished? Is "liberal" an aspersion for a justice movement that hasn't fully succeeded, or hasn't managed to bring down capitalism?

But perhaps Srinivasan's distinction between liberal and radical goals is more apt when you look at the heterosexual side of the terrain, where the relaxation of sexual rules not only largely preserved male privilege and permitted male violence but loosed a cultural tidal wave of explicit female sexual objectification in ads, movies, books, and television such as the world had never seen. This points to the challenge that Srinivasan has taken on: it's hard to generalize about the sexual revolution or sexual liberalization because its meanings and consequences have been quite different depending on where you look.

In fact, hardly anyone does generalize. Public discussion tends to take up sexuality-related subjects in isolation from one another: an editorial here about abortion, there about LGBTQ book-banning. Elsewhere, columns about the emotional excruciations of dating. Rarely do writers give a panoramic view or help us to think about sexual liberalism as a form of social organization rather than a set of discrete political issues or personal experiences.

Srinivasan therefore does something in these two essays that few people attempt: she speaks to a plural audience—queer and straight, multiracial and multi-gendered—with the assumption that we have some common interests in sex and dating even if we have varied experiences of them. And, admittedly, the charisma of these pieces comes from Srinivasan's crisp notes of political indignation, her talk of rights and demands—rather than pity and compassion—for the sexually dispossessed. Indeed, she makes feminist indignation about sexual mores more interesting than I would have thought it could be—in part, I think, because she deploys it counterintuitively, on behalf of a variety of people not all of whom are women.

In these essays, unlike the one on pornography, Srinivasan keeps faith with earlier iterations of feminism while being willing to make its privileged categories, man and woman, temporarily recede. There aren't really women or men per se in the scenarios described in this pair of essays; there are Asian men, fat men, Asian women, white women, trans lesbians, cis lesbians, Black men, and Black women. Srinivasan never loses sight of the patterns of advantage that those broad categories, man and woman, continue to represent, but she brings them in and out of view as she creates a complex picture of the ambient environment of sexual liberalism.

By the end, a great many of us have been implicated in the problem she describes, and Srinivasan has drawn her readers—including her critics and skeptics—into an implicit community of people who are invested in improving our sexually permissive system. She reminds us that sexual ethics are a set of principles and obligations that must apply across gender—a fact that's obvious yet easy to lose sight of amid the post-Me Too talk of “protecting women.” I may be in the minority on this point, but to me there is a utopian thrill in seeing a feminist make men and women ever so briefly disappear.

Elaine Blair

Elaine Blair is a regular contributor to *The New York Review*. She is an inaugural winner of the Robert B. Silvers Prize for Literary Criticism. (September 2022)

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Srinivasan briefly discusses some recent attempts to regulate violent digital porn in the UK, Iceland, Australia, China, and Nepal, all of which either led to, or had the potential to lead to, a disproportionate crackdown on queer or feminist porn while leaving loopholes for male-on-female porn. This by no means exhausts the question of regulation, but Srinivasan focuses mainly on pornography's effects on viewers rather than the conditions under which it's made or the prospects for content control. ↩

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