



Vol. 40 No. 6 · 22 March 2018

Does anyone have the right to sex?

Amia Srinivasan



ON 23 May 2014, Elliot Rodger, a 22-year-old college dropout, became the world's most famous 'incel' – involuntary celibate. The term can, in theory, be applied to both men and women, but in practice it picks out not sexless men in general, but a certain kind of sexless man: the kind who is convinced he is owed sex, and is enraged by the women who deprive him of it. Rodger stabbed to death his two housemates, Weihan Wang and Cheng Hong, and a friend, George Chen, as they entered his apartment on Seville Road in Isla Vista, California. Three hours later he drove to the Alpha Phi sorority house near the campus of UC Santa Barbara. He shot three women on the lawn, killing two of them, Katherine Cooper and Veronika Weiss. Rodger then went on a drive-by shooting spree through Isla Vista, killing Christopher Michaels-Martinez, also a student at UCSB, with a single bullet to the chest inside a Deli Mart, and wounding 14 others. He eventually crashed his BMW coupé at an intersection. He was found dead by the police, having shot himself in the head.

In the hours between murdering three men in his apartment and driving to Alpha Phi, Rodger went to Starbucks, ordered coffee, and uploaded a video, 'Elliot Rodger's Retribution', to his YouTube channel. He also emailed a 107,000-word memoir-manifesto, 'My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger', to a group of people including his parents, his therapist, former schoolteachers and childhood friends. Together these two documents detail the massacre to come and Rodger's motivation. 'All I ever wanted was to fit in and live a happy life,' he explains at the beginning of 'My Twisted World', 'but I was cast out and rejected, forced to endure an existence of loneliness and insignificance, all because the females of the human species were incapable of seeing the value in me.'

He goes on to describe his privileged and happy early childhood in England – Rodger was the son of a successful British filmmaker – followed by his privileged and unhappy adolescence in Los Angeles as a short, bad-at-sports, shy, weird, friendless kid, desperate to be cool. He writes of dyeing his hair blond (Rodger was half-white and half-Malaysian; blond people were 'so much more beautiful'); of finding 'sanctuary' in *Halo* and *World of Warcraft*; being shoved by a pretty girl at summer camp ('That was the first experience of

female cruelty I endured, and it traumatised me to no end’); becoming incensed by the sex lives of his peers (‘How could an inferior, ugly black boy be able to get a white girl and not me? I am beautiful, and I am half-white myself. I am descended from British aristocracy. He is descended from slaves’); dropping out of successive schools and then community college; and fantasising about a political order in which he ruled the world and sex was outlawed (‘All women must be quarantined like the plague they are’). The necessary result of all this, Rodger said, was his ‘War on Women’, in the course of which he would ‘punish all females’ for the crime of depriving him of sex. He would target the Alpha Phi sorority, ‘the hottest sorority of UCSB’, because it contained ‘the very girls who represent everything I hate in the female gender ... hot, beautiful blonde girls ... spoiled, heartless, wicked bitches’. He would show everyone that he was ‘the superior one, the true alpha male’.

Late in 2017, the online discussion forum Reddit closed down its 40,000-member ‘Incel’ support group, for ‘people who lack romantic relationships and sex’. Reddit took the action after introducing a new policy of prohibiting content that ‘encourages, glorifies, incites or calls for violence’. What had started out as a support group for the lonely and sexually isolated had become a forum whose users not only raged against women and the ‘noncels’ and ‘normies’ who get to sleep with them, but also frequently advocated rape. A second incel Reddit group, ‘Truecels’, was also banned following the site’s policy change. Its sidebar read: ‘No encouraging or inciting violence, or other illegal activities such as rape. But of course it is OK to say, for example, that rape should have a lighter punishment or even that it should be legalised and that slutty women deserve rape.’

Soon after Rodger’s killings, incels took to the manosphere to explain that women (and feminism) were in the end responsible for what had happened. Had one of those ‘wicked bitches’ just fucked Elliot Rodger he wouldn’t have had to kill anyone. (Nikolas Cruz, who gunned down 17 students and staff members at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida on Valentine’s Day, vowed in a comment on a YouTube video that ‘Elliot Rodger will not be forgotten.’) Feminist commentators were quick to point out what should have been obvious: that no woman was obligated to have sex with Rodger; that his sense of sexual entitlement was a case-study in patriarchal ideology; that his actions were a predictable if extreme response to the thwarting of that entitlement. They could have added that feminism, far from being Rodger’s enemy, may well be the primary force resisting the very system that made him feel – as a short, clumsy, effeminate, interracial boy – inadequate. His manifesto reveals that it was overwhelmingly boys, not girls, who bullied him: who pushed him into lockers, called him a loser, made fun of him for his virginity. But it was the girls who deprived him of sex, and the girls, therefore, who had to be destroyed.

Could it also be said that Rodger’s unfuckability was a symptom of the internalisation of patriarchal norms of men’s sexual attractiveness on the part of women? The answer to that question is complicated by two things. First, Rodger was a creep, and it was at least partly his insistence on his own aesthetic, moral and racial superiority, and whatever it was in

him that made him capable of stabbing his housemates and his friend a total of 134 times, not his failure to meet the demands of heteromascularity, that kept women away. Second, plenty of non-homicidal nerdy guys get laid. Indeed part of the injustice of patriarchy, something unnoticed by incels and other ‘men’s rights activists’, is the way it makes even supposedly unattractive categories of men attractive: geeks, nerds, effete men, old men, men with ‘dad bods’. Meanwhile there are sexy schoolgirls and sexy teachers, manic pixie dreamgirls and Milfs, but they’re all taut-bodied and hot, minor variations on the same normative paradigm. (Can we imagine GQ carrying an article celebrating ‘mom bod’?)

That said, it’s true that the kind of women Rodger wanted to have sex with – hot sorority blondes – don’t as a rule date men like Rodger, even the non-creepy, non-homicidal ones, at least not until they make their fortune in Silicon Valley. It’s also true that this has something to do with the rigid gender norms enforced by patriarchy: alpha females want alpha males. And it’s true that Rodger’s desires – his erotic fixation on the ‘spoiled, stuck-up, blonde slut’ – are themselves a function of patriarchy, as is the way the ‘hot blonde slut’ becomes a metonym for all women. (Many in the manosphere gleefully pointed out that Rodger didn’t even succeed in killing the women he lusted after, as if in final confirmation of his ‘omega’ sexual status: Katherine Cooper and Veronika Weiss were non ‘hot blondes’ from Delta Delta Delta who just happened to be standing outside the Alpha Phi house.) Feminist commentary on Elliot Rodger and the incel phenomenon more broadly has said much about male sexual entitlement, objectification and violence. But so far it has said little about desire: men’s desire, women’s desire, and the ideological shaping of both.

IT USED to be the case that if you wanted a political critique of desire, feminism was where you would turn. A few decades ago feminists were nearly alone in thinking about the way sexual desire – its objects and expressions, fetishes and fantasies – is shaped by oppression. (Frantz Fanon and Edward Said’s discussions of the erotics of racial and colonial oppression are important exceptions.) Beginning in the late 1970s, Catharine MacKinnon demanded that we abandon the Freudian view of sexual desire as ‘an innate primary natural prepolitical unconditioned drive divided along the biological gender line’ and recognise that sex under patriarchy is inherently violent; that ‘hostility and contempt, or arousal of master to slave, together with awe and vulnerability, or arousal of slave to master’ are its constitutive emotions. For the radical feminists who shared MacKinnon’s view, the terms and texture of sex were set by patriarchal domination – and embodied in, and sustained by, pornography. (In Robin Morgan’s words, ‘Pornography is the theory, rape is the practice.’) That there were women who seemed capable of achieving pleasure under these conditions was a sign of how bad things were. For some the solution lay in the self-disciplining of desire demanded by political lesbianism. But perhaps even lesbian sex offered no decisive escape: as MacKinnon suggested, sex under male supremacy might well be ‘so gender marked that it carries dominance and submission with it, no matter the gender of its participants’.

SOME FEMINISTS in the 1980s and 1990s pushed back against the radical critique of sex advanced by MacKinnon and other anti-porn feminists. They insisted on the possibility of genuine sexual pleasure under patriarchy, and the importance of allowing women the freedom to pursue it. MacKinnon disparaged such ‘pro-sex’ feminists for confusing accommodation with freedom, and for buying into the idea that ‘women do just need a good fuck.’ To be fair, MacKinnon’s pro-sex adversaries weren’t arguing that women needed a good fuck – though some came uncomfortably close to suggesting that MacKinnon did. Instead they insisted that women were entitled to sex free of guilt, including heterosexual sex, if they wanted it. In ‘Lust Horizons: Is the Women’s Movement Pro-Sex?’, the essay that inaugurated sex-positive feminism, Ellen Willis set out the basic case against the MacKinnonite critique of sex: that it not only denied women the right to sexual pleasure, but also reinforced the ‘neo-Victorian’ idea that men desire sex while women merely put up with it, an idea whose ‘chief social function’, Willis said, was to curtail women’s autonomy in areas outside the bedroom (or the alleyway). Anti-porn feminism, Willis wrote, asked ‘women to accept a spurious moral superiority as a substitute for sexual pleasure, and curbs on men’s sexual freedom as a substitute for real power’.

Since Willis, the case for pro-sex feminism has been buttressed by feminism’s turn towards intersectionality. Thinking about how patriarchal oppression is inflected by race and class – patriarchy doesn’t express itself uniformly, and cannot be understood independently of other systems of oppression – has made feminists reluctant to prescribe universal policies, including universal sexual policies. Demands for equal access to the workplace will be more resonant for white, middle-class women who have been forced to stay home than it will be for the black and working-class women who have always been expected to labour alongside men. Similarly, sexual self-objectification may mean one thing for a woman who, by virtue of her whiteness, is already taken to be a paradigm of female beauty, but quite another thing for a black or brown woman, or a trans woman. The turn towards intersectionality has also made feminists uncomfortable with thinking in terms of false consciousness: that’s to say, with the idea that women often act against their own interests, even when they take themselves to be doing what they wanted to do. The important thing now is to take women at their word. If a woman says she enjoys working in porn, or being paid to have sex with men, or engaging in rape fantasies, or wearing stilettos – and even that she doesn’t just enjoy these things but finds them emancipatory, part of her feminist praxis – then we are required, as feminists, to trust her. This is not merely an epistemic claim: that a woman’s saying something about her own experience gives us strong, if not indefeasible, reason to think it true. It is also, or perhaps primarily, an ethical claim: a feminism that trades too freely in notions of self-deception is a feminism that risks dominating the subjects it wants to liberate.

The case made by Willis in ‘Lust Horizons’ has so far proved the enduring one. Since the 1980s, the wind has been behind a feminism which takes desire for the most part as given – your desire takes the shape that it takes – and which insists that acting on that desire is

morally constrained only by the boundaries of consent. Sex is no longer morally problematic or unproblematic: it is instead merely wanted or unwanted. In this sense, 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 labour while others buy it – but only that both buyer and seller have agreed to the transfer. It would be too easy, though, to say that sex positivity represents the co-option of feminism by liberalism. Generations of feminists and gay and lesbian activists have fought hard to free sex from shame, stigma, coercion, abuse and unwanted pain. It has been essential to this project to stress that there are limits to what can be understood about sex from the outside, that sexual acts can have private meanings that cannot be grasped from a public perspective, that there are times when we must take it on trust that a particular instance of sex is OK, even when we can't imagine how it could be. Thus feminism finds itself not only questioning the liberal distinction between the public and the private, but also insisting on it.

Yet it would be disingenuous to make nothing of the convergence, however unintentional, between sex positivity and liberalism in their shared reluctance to interrogate the formation of our desires. Third and fourth-wave feminists are right to say, for example, that sex work is work, and can be better work than the menial labour undertaken by most women. And they are right to say that what sex workers need are legal and material protections, safety and security, not rescue or rehabilitation. But to understand what sort of work sex work is – just what physical and psychical acts are being bought and sold, and why it is overwhelmingly women who do it, and overwhelmingly men who pay for it – surely we have to say something about the political formation of male desire. And surely there will be similar things to say about other forms of women's work: teaching, nursing, caring, mothering. To say that sex work is 'just work' is to forget that all work – men's work, women's work – is never just work: it is also sexed.

Willis concludes 'Lust Horizons' by saying that for her it is 'axiomatic that consenting partners have a right to their sexual proclivities, and that authoritarian moralism has no place' in feminism. And yet, she goes on, 'a truly radical movement must look ... beyond the right to choose, and keep focusing on the fundamental questions. Why do we choose what we choose? What would we choose if we had a real choice?' This is an extraordinary reversal on Willis's part, which often goes unnoticed even by those familiar with the contours of the sex wars. After laying out the ethical case for taking our sexual preferences, whatever they may be, as fixed points, protected from moral inquisition, Willis tells us that a 'truly radical' feminism would ask precisely the question that gives rise to 'authoritarian moralism': what would women's sexual choices look like if we were not merely 'negotiating', but really free? One might feel that Willis has given with one hand and taken away with the other. But really she has given with both. Here, she tells us, is the task of feminism: to treat as axiomatic our free sexual choices, while also seeing why, as MacKinnon has always said, such choices, under patriarchy, are rarely free. What I am suggesting is that, in our rush to do the former, feminists risk forgetting to do the latter.

When we see consent as the sole constraint on OK sex, we are pushed towards a naturalisation of sexual preference in which the rape fantasy becomes a primordial rather than a political fact. But not only the rape fantasy. Consider the supreme fuckability of ‘hot blonde sluts’ and East Asian women, the comparative unfuckability of black women and Asian men, the fetishisation and fear of black male sexuality, the sexual disgust expressed towards disabled, trans and fat bodies. These too are political facts, which a truly intersectional feminism should demand that we take seriously. But the sex-positive gaze, unmoored from Willis’s call to ambivalence, threatens to neutralise these facts, treating them as pre-political givens. In other words, the sex-positive gaze risks covering not only for misogyny, but for racism, ableism, transphobia, and every other oppressive system that makes its way into the bedroom through the seemingly innocuous mechanism of ‘personal preference’.

‘THE BEAUTIFUL torsos on Grindr are mostly Asian men hiding their faces,’ a gay friend of mine says. The next day I see on Facebook that Grindr has started a web series called ‘What the Flip?’ In its first three-minute episode, a beautiful, blue-haired East Asian guy and a well-groomed, good-looking white guy trade Grindr profiles. The results are predictably grim. The white guy, now using the Asian guy’s profile, 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’. When he ignores their messages, abuse is hurled at him. The Asian guy’s inbox, meanwhile, is inundated with admirers. Talking about it afterwards, the white guy expresses his shock, the Asian guy cheerful resignation. ‘You’re not everybody’s cup of tea, but you’re going to be somebody’s,’ the white guy offers, feebly, before they hug it out. In the next episode, a ripped Ryan Gosling-type switches profiles with a pretty-faced chubby guy. In episode three a fem guy trades with a masc guy. The results are as one would expect.

The obvious irony of ‘What the Flip?’ is that Grindr, by its nature, encourages its users to divide the world into those who are and those who are not viable sexual objects according to crude markers of identity – to think in terms of sexual ‘deal-breakers’ and ‘requirements’. In so doing, Grindr simply deepens the discriminatory grooves along which our sexual desires already move. But online dating – and especially the abstracted interfaces of Tinder and Grindr, which distil attraction down to the essentials: face, height, weight, age, race, witty tagline – has arguably taken what is worst about the current state of sexuality and institutionalised it on our screens.

A presupposition of ‘What the Flip?’ is that this is a peculiarly gay problem: that the gay male community is too superficial, too body-fascist, too judgy. The gay men in my life say this sort of thing all the time; they all feel bad about it, perpetrators and victims alike (most see themselves as both). I’m unconvinced. Can we imagine predominantly straight dating apps like OKCupid or Tinder creating a web series that encouraged the straight ‘community’ to confront its sexual racism or fatphobia? If that is an unlikely prospect, and I think it is, it’s hardly because straight people aren’t body fascists or sexual racists. It’s because straight people – or, I should say, white, able-bodied cis straight people – aren’t

much in the habit of thinking there's anything wrong with how they have sex. By contrast, gay men – even the beautiful, white, rich, able-bodied ones – know that who we have sex with, and how, is a political question.

There are of course real risks associated with subjecting our sexual preferences to political scrutiny. We want feminism to be able to interrogate the grounds of desire, but without slut-shaming, prudery or self-denial: without telling individual women that they don't really know what they want, or can't enjoy what they do in fact want, within the bounds of consent. Some feminists think this is impossible, that any openness to desire-critique will inevitably lead to authoritarian moralism. (We can think of such feminists as making the case for a kind of 'sex positivity of fear', just as Judith Shklar once made the case for a 'liberalism of fear' – that is, a liberalism motivated by a fear of authoritarian alternatives.) But there is a risk too that repoliticising desire will encourage a discourse of sexual entitlement. Talk of people who are unjustly sexually marginalised or excluded can pave the way to the thought that these people have a right to sex, a right that is being violated by those who refuse to have sex with them. That view is galling: no one is under an obligation to have sex with anyone else. This too is axiomatic. And this, of course, is what Elliot Rodger, like the legions of angry incels who celebrate him as a martyr, refused to see. On the now defunct Reddit group, a post titled 'It should be legal for incels to rape women' explained that 'No starving man should have to go to prison for stealing food, and no sexually starved man should have to go to prison for raping a woman.' It is a sickening false equivalence, which reveals the violent misconception at the heart of patriarchy. Some men are excluded from the sexual sphere for politically suspect reasons – including, perhaps, some of the men driven to vent their despair on anonymous forums – but the moment their unhappiness is transmuted into a rage at the women 'denying' them sex, rather than at the systems that shape desire (their own and others'), they have crossed a line into something morally ugly and confused.

In her shrewd essay 'Men Explain *Lolita* to Me', Rebecca Solnit reminds us that 'you don't get to have sex with someone unless they want to have sex with you,' just as 'you don't get to share someone's sandwich unless they want to share their sandwich with you.' Not getting a bite of someone's sandwich is 'not a form of oppression, either', Solnit says. But the analogy complicates as much as it elucidates. Suppose your child came home from primary school and told you that the other children share their sandwiches with each other, but not with her. And suppose further that your child is brown, or fat, or disabled, or doesn't speak English very well, and that you suspect that this is the reason for her exclusion from the sandwich-sharing. Suddenly it hardly seems sufficient to say that none of the other children is obligated to share with your child, true as that might be.

Sex is not a sandwich. While your child does not want to be shared with out of pity – just as no one really wants a mercy fuck, and certainly not from a racist or a transphobe – we wouldn't think it coercive were the teacher to encourage the other students to share with your daughter, or were they to institute an equal sharing policy. But a state that made analogous interventions in the sexual preference and practices of its citizens – that

encouraged us to ‘share’ sex equally – would probably be thought grossly authoritarian. (The utopian socialist Charles Fourier proposed a guaranteed ‘sexual minimum’, akin to a guaranteed basic income, for every man and woman, regardless of age or infirmity; only with sexual deprivation eliminated, Fourier thought, could romantic relationships be truly free. This social service would be provided by an ‘amorous nobility’ who, Fourier said, ‘know how to subordinate love to the dictates of honour’.) Of course, it matters just what those interventions would look like: disability activists, for example, have long called for more inclusive sex education in schools, and many would welcome regulation that ensured diversity in advertising and the media. But to think that such measures would be enough to alter our sexual desires, to free them entirely from the grooves of discrimination, is naive. And whereas you can quite reasonably demand that a group of children share their sandwiches inclusively, you just can’t do the same with sex. What works in one case will not work in the other. Sex isn’t a sandwich, and it isn’t really like anything else either. There is nothing else so riven with politics and yet so inviolably personal. For better or worse, we must find a way to take sex on its own terms.

The difficulties I have been discussing are currently posed in the most vexed form within feminism by the experience of trans women. Trans women often face sexual exclusion from lesbian cis women who at the same time claim to take them seriously as women. This phenomenon was named the ‘cotton ceiling’ – ‘cotton’ as in underwear – by the trans porn actress and activist Drew DeVeaux. The phenomenon is real, but, as many trans women have noted, the phrase itself is unfortunate. While the ‘glass ceiling’ implies the violation of a woman’s right to advance on the basis of her work, the ‘cotton ceiling’ describes a lack of access to what no one is obligated to give (though DeVeaux has since claimed that the ‘cotton’ refers to the trans woman’s underwear, not the underwear of the cis lesbian who doesn’t want to have sex with her). Yet simply to say to a trans woman, or a disabled woman, or an Asian man, ‘No one is required to have sex with you,’ is to skate over something crucial. There is no entitlement to sex, and everyone is entitled to want what they want, but personal preferences – NO DICKS, NO FEMS, NO FATS, NO BLACKS, NO ARABS, NO RICE NO SPICE, MASC-FOR-MASC – are never just personal.

In a recent piece for *n+1*, the feminist and trans theorist Andrea Long Chu argued that the trans experience, contrary to how we have become accustomed to think of it, ‘expresses not the truth of an identity but the force of a desire’. Being trans, she says, is ‘a matter not of who one is, but of what one wants’. She goes on:

I transitioned for gossip and compliments, lipstick and mascara, for crying at the movies, for being someone’s girlfriend, for letting her pay the check or carry my bags, for the benevolent chauvinism of bank tellers and cable guys, for the telephonic intimacy of long-distance female friendship, for fixing my make-up in the bathroom flanked like Christ by a sinner on each side, for sex toys, for feeling hot, for getting hit on by butches, for that secret knowledge of which dykes to watch out for, for Daisy Dukes, bikini tops, and all the dresses, and, my god, for the breasts. But now you begin to see the problem with desire: we rarely want the things we should.

This declaration, as Chu is well aware, threatens to bolster the argument made by anti-trans feminists: that trans women equate, and conflate, womanhood with the trappings of traditional femininity, thereby strengthening the hand of patriarchy. Chu's response is not to insist, as many trans women do, that being trans is about identity rather than desire: about already being a woman, rather than wanting to become a woman. (Once one recognises that trans women are women, complaints about their 'excessive femininity' – one doesn't hear so many complaints about the 'excessive femininity' of cis women – begin to look invidious.) Instead, Chu insists that 'nothing good comes of forcing desire to conform to political principle,' including desire for the very things that are the symptoms of women's oppression: Daisy Dukes, bikini tops and 'benevolent chauvinism'. She takes this to be 'the true lesson of political lesbianism as a failed project'. What we need, in other words, is to fully exorcise the radical feminist ambition to develop a political critique of sex.

The argument cuts both ways. If all desire must be immune from political critique, then so must the desires that exclude and marginalise trans women: not just erotic desires for certain kinds of body, but the desire not to share womanhood itself with the 'wrong' kinds of woman. The dichotomy between identity and desire, as Chu suggests, is surely a false one; and in any case the rights of trans people should not rest on it, any more than the rights of gay people should rest on the idea that homosexuality is innate rather than chosen (a matter of who gay people are rather than what they want). But a feminism that totally abjures the political critique of desire is a feminism with little to say about the injustices of exclusion and misrecognition suffered by the women who arguably need feminism the most.

THE QUESTION, then, is how to dwell in the ambivalent place where we acknowledge that no one is obligated to desire anyone else, that no one has a right to be desired, but also that who is desired and who isn't is a political question, a question usually answered by more general patterns of domination and exclusion. It is striking, though unsurprising, that while men tend to respond to sexual marginalisation with a sense of entitlement to women's bodies, women who experience sexual marginalisation typically respond with talk not of entitlement but empowerment. Or, insofar as they do speak of entitlement, it is entitlement to respect, not to other people's bodies. That said, the radical self-love movements among black, fat and disabled women do ask us to treat our sexual preferences as less than perfectly fixed. 'Black is beautiful' and 'Big is beautiful' are not just slogans of empowerment, but proposals for a revaluation of our values. Lindy West describes studying photographs of fat women and asking herself what it would be to see these bodies – bodies that previously filled her with shame and self-loathing – as objectively beautiful. This, she says, isn't a theoretical issue, but a perceptual one: a way of looking at certain bodies – one's own and others' – sidelong, inviting and coaxing a gestalt-shift from revulsion to admiration. The question posed by radical self-love movements is not whether there is a right to sex (there isn't), but whether there is a duty to transfigure, as best we can, our desires.

To take this question seriously requires that we recognise that the very idea of fixed sexual preference is political, not metaphysical. As a matter of good politics, we treat the preferences of others as sacred: we are rightly wary of speaking of what people *really* want, or what some idealised version of them *would* want. That way, we know, authoritarianism lies. This is true, most of all, in sex, where invocations of real or ideal desires have long been used as a cover for the rape of women and gay men. But the fact is that our sexual preferences can and do alter, sometimes under the operation of our own wills – not automatically, but not impossibly either. What's more, sexual desire doesn't always neatly conform to our own sense of it, as generations of gay men and women can attest. Desire can take us by surprise, leading us somewhere we hadn't imagined we would ever go, or towards someone we never thought we would lust after, or love. In the very best cases, the cases that perhaps ground our best hope, desire can cut against what politics has chosen for us, and choose for itself.

Letters

Vol. 40 No. 8 · 26 April 2018

I was reading Amia Srinivasan's essay about 'the right to sex' and enjoying it very much when I ran into a surprise (LRB, 22 March). 'Rebecca Solnit,' she writes, 'reminds us that "you don't get to have sex with someone unless they want to have sex with you," just as "you don't get to share someone's sandwich unless they want to share their sandwich with you." Not getting a bite of someone's sandwich is "not a form of oppression, either", Solnit says. But the analogy complicates as much as it elucidates.' She then goes on to speculate on the right to a sandwich at lunchtime.

To be rabbinical, we're both right; there are indeed circumstances, if you push my analogy far enough, in which not having a sandwich is oppression, and Srinivasan enumerates some of them. But my analogy was made for a particular circumstance and indeed a particular misogynist, bitter that 'access to sex is strictly controlled by the woman.' That is, the woman is supposed to consent and have jurisdiction over her flesh, which he seemed to find oppressive because, as I noted, 'if you assume that sex with a female body is a right that heterosexual men have, then women are just these crazy illegitimate gatekeepers always trying to get in between you and your rights.' Srinivasan is arguing that maybe everyone should have a sandwich, and maybe they should, but my one point was that, when you yourself are the sandwich, you have the right to decide who gets a bite of you.

Rebecca Solnit
San Francisco

Amia Srinivasan writes: I entirely agree with Rebecca Solnit that women, despite what some men seem to think, ‘have the right to decide’ who gets to have sex with them, and that being denied sex by a woman isn’t a violation of any man’s rights. Indeed I describe this claim – right before I discuss Solnit’s sandwich analogy – as ‘axiomatic’. But my point is that this axiom does not, or should not, exhaust our thinking about the politics of sexual desire. The distribution of sexual desire, like the distribution of food, is shaped by oppressive forces. This does not take away from the fact that no one is entitled to anyone else’s body. But it does complicate it. Like Solnit, I discuss the analogy in the context of a particular, embittered misogynist, who likened raping a woman to stealing food when starving. Here the analogy between sex and food is used for precisely the misogynistic ends Solnit wants to condemn. That it can be repurposed in this way points to the limits of the analogy: while starvation excuses theft in many cases, sexual ‘starvation’ never excuses rape. What’s more, while many of us think it is the duty of the state to ensure a just distribution of basic goods like food, far fewer of us would welcome state intervention in our patterns of sexual desire.

Vol. 40 No. 9 · 10 May 2018

Quite often the *London Review* publishes articles containing quotations in foreign languages with no translation, as for example in T.J. Clark’s piece on Cézanne’s portraits (LRB, 25 January). My last year at comprehensive school was 2010 and, like more than 90 per cent of my classmates, I do not speak any foreign language fluently. I doubt that the majority of your readers are fluent in French. What’s more, I would be surprised if, in an article about a Vietnamese artist, you would publish an untranslated quotation in Vietnamese. Or in Polish or Arabic (which must be more commonly spoken in London than French).

Does the LRB have a well-defined policy on this? In the 8 March issue Marina Warner’s article appears with French quotations usefully translated, and there is a poem by Galen Strawson entirely in French, which I found evocative in the same way I find, say, Nadsat in *A Clockwork Orange* to be evocative, though one of the feelings evoked is alienation since none of these languages is intelligible to me.

I concede that there is something alluring about the old attitude of expecting everyone to know French, and I do wish it was still reasonable. When I first started to read the LRB, the occasional untranslated quotation contributed to the impression of intellectualism (along with the austere layout, which should last for ever). It is part of the tradition of literariness in Britain. But it seems more and more to me a pointless tradition. The LRB should be progressive and inclusive, not disdainful of its readers. It should be challenging because it deals with complex concepts and is written to the limits of the language. In Amia Srinivasan’s piece on the ‘right to sex’, the word ‘unfuckability’ is used without scare quotes (LRB, 22 March). It is ‘unfuckability’ that is dangerous, highbrow and literary; untranslated French is just atavism.

Conrad Teixeira
Manchester

Vol. 40 No. 11 · 7 June 2018

Conrad Teixeira describes the LRB's use of untranslated French as 'atavism' (Letters, 10 May). For me, emerging proudly monolingual from the same sort of comprehensive school as his, it was just such moments of untranslated French or German in the books I was reading that drew me into a lifelong obsession with language learning. To remove such passages from the LRB would be to remove yet another incentive, small but significant, for English readers to extend themselves beyond the Anglophone world. Indeed, as long as English remains so dominant, learning even the basics of a foreign language is a much more radical act than undertaking the linguistic play internal to English that Teixeira cites so admiringly.

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