
Andrea Beckmann is associate professor in criminology at Lincoln University in the United Kingdom. Her research is mainly devoted to the sociology of the body, sexuality and their criminal and pedagogical dimensions.

This book attempts to "deconstruct" the pathological characteristics of sadomasochism due to the consensual nature of SM play between consenting adults. She tries to show that consensual sadomasochistic play (what Willy Pasini refers to as "soft perversion") should not be considered as pathological and/or criminal in that they are being used for existential learning. The author's position is not simple; she is trying to exonerate the pathological (psycho-analysis always considers sadomasochism as a perversion), and criminal nature (on these same considerations, non-consensual sadomasochism can be considered as a criminal offence).

Her deconstruction of the concept of normality is an interesting position from which to later introduce consenting sadomasochistic experiences within the framework of freely consenting behaviours. Andrea Beckmann therefore describes sadomasochism as a social construction by the representations, which are made of it in the media and through the contradictory public images portrayed to demonstrate the psychosocial dimension of domination. Between consensual and non-consensual sadomasochism, the author explores the positions of submission and domination.

Andrea Beckmann goes much further by suggesting that consensual physical sadomasochistic practices could be interpreted as a form of mysticism within which the "living body" and in particular one's sensory capacities, are used as a medium. She makes reference to experiences of those she refers to as "modern primitives", fond of piercings, tattoos and other modifications to their bodies, as variations on the theme of consensual sadomasochism by presenting the body as an artistic medium.

Andrea Beckmann makes a link between sadomasochism and various other practices, which foster the concept of "detachment" and therefore mystical experience. The taste for potentially dangerous experiences, situations causing fear, the awakening of taboos, pain mixed with pleasure, would appear to confer upon physical practices of consensual sadomasochism an aim of distraction of the mind from preconceived ideas. She goes further in her analysis of the consensual sadomasochistic experience by drawing a parallel with the mystic experiences of Tantrism, Taoism and other initiated mystical practices presenting the same characteristics of passivity and/or irresponsibility.

The originality of this analysis of SM relations most certainly resides in the suggestion that these practices can be compared to the specific experience of those she calls the "modern primitives", thereby excluding any criminal or psychiatric dimension from their behaviour. The anthropological analysis of Andrea Beckmann of sadomasochism therefore seems to go beyond that of the legal or psychiatric framework.

P. Brenot (MD, MA, PhD)
54, rue de Prony, 75017 Paris, France
E-mail address: philipe.brenot@quidam.net
Available online 18 January 2010