The Politics of Power: Masochism and Enlightenment Political Theory

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Named for Austrian author Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, masochism has become almost exclusively associated with flagellation and sexuality in contemporary discourse. His 1870 novella *Venus im Pelz* has long been considered the keystone to our understanding of masochistic relationships, wherein the dominant woman subjects the submissive man to physical and emotional torture at his request. Sacher-Masoch's text, however, might also be read as part of the French libertine tradition in which the (overtly) erotic text makes greater critiques of the political, religious, and social state of affairs. In fact, there is growing suspicion among literary scholars concerning the validity of understanding masochism as a purely erotic phenomenon. This wariness at limiting the scope of masochism leads us to consider the political statements at play in masochistic texts as well as the masochism inherent in political philosophy, all of which are grounded not in overt sexuality but rather in notions of individual freedom and agency which we begin to see in eighteenth-century Enlightenment liberal political thought. As we compare these power relationships with those at the center of masochism, parallels begin to emerge that are impossible to ignore. Analyzing these similarities also requires us to reconsider how we might rethink masochism with a deliberate eye to the exercise of power. The following
essay will consider masochistic interaction as a perpetual renegotiation of the power relationship between dominant and submissive, whereby both positions are held by free subjects, or institutions, which voluntarily enter into explicit and implicit contracts. Understanding these interactions and how they lead to a continual reaffirmation of the subject position of both parties involved can help us to consider the analogous nature of masochism and Enlightenment political thought in order to define what we might term 'political masochism', and rescue masochism from the realm of the perverse.

Rules and Regulations

In his 1982 essay The Subject and Power Michel Foucault argues that "power relations are rooted in the whole network of the social".¹ He goes on to clarify this statement by explaining that there is not "a primary and fundamental principle of power which dominates society down to the smallest detail", but rather that all forms of social interaction form the basis for power.² This understanding that power is at the center of all social interaction from the personal and sexual to the public and political does not originate with Foucault. However, he emphasizes that the prospect of individuals questioning and influencing this interplay of power begins only when the subject is free to participate in the power relationship. This marks the creation of this subject capable of critique which takes on particular importance in the philosophy of Enlightenment Europe. Foucault's 1976 essay What is Critique? defines critique not as a singular phenomenon, but rather as a "critical attitude" that has permeated philosophical discourse since the period between the fifteenth century and the Reformation.³ He utilizes this time period because of the expansion of what he terms the "art of governing"⁴, which is evidenced by the secular, rather than pastoral, methods of control and authority developed at this time. Foucault contends that: "How to govern was [...] one of the fundamental questions about what was happening in the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries."⁵ Foucault's argument focuses on these institutions of governance not only as mechanisms of control, but also as producers of knowledge and arbiters of truth. Critique emerges at this point to call into question not only the modes of governance themselves, but also the truth produced by these governing bodies. "Critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on the effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth.\"
[...] critique will be the art of voluntary insubordination. This insubordination attempts to reveal the fabrication of this dominant truth, to understand that knowledge is produced for a specific reason, namely to maintain the status quo and systems of power - which also leads to liberal political theory and the critical subject in the eighteenth century. This voluntary insubordination also leads us to a type of voluntary subordination of the subject, where the critique of the liberated subject leads him to conceive of governments to which he is willing to submit. He is not only able to imagine an ideal political state, but also to choose voluntary deference to this state, the general will, or the social contract which then guarantees the rights of that subject. This interplay of power, through which the rational subject surrenders to the state in order to guarantee his or her freedom, is not only seen in political theory, but is also similar in structure to the interplay of power in masochism.

It might be considered problematic to contemplate masochism as connected to the project of Enlightenment, particularly as an extension of liberal philosophy. Within traditional understandings of masochism, dictatorships or monarchies, where an autocrat or sovereign rules absolutely over its subjects, would seem better examples of political masochism than those based on Enlightenment liberal politics. This, however, only takes into account theories of masochism built on the assumption that masochism is, at its core, a perversion and distinctly irrational, rather than accepting that there may be a rational and non-erotic desire to submit. In fact, this non-erotic rational submission stems from a critique of political systems engaged in forced submission. If we maintain that individuals must actively and rationally consent for a system to be considered masochistic, then monarchies, dictatorships, and other political systems with authoritarian structures cannot possibly meet our definition of the masochistic. Masochism at its most basic level is a relationship focused on power rather than love, friendship, or familial hereditary bonds which are important in other sorts of relationships. Political masochism functions similarly as a form of government based on a negotiation between the power of the individual and the power of the state rather than the absolute rule of the monarch, dictator, or lord. This also means that the political masochist rationally and voluntarily chooses to participate in a relationship, where he or she submits to someone (or something) else. In the case of a personal relationship, this is another person. In the case of liberal politics, this means submission to the state. When we typically consider masochism, we assume that the masochist submits because
he or she is aroused by erotic submission, but if the submission is not erotically-based, we must identify an alternate objective for it and in order to do so, a distinction between erotic and the non-erotic masochism as defined in contemporary debates must be considered.

Exchange of Power

Beginning with the theories of Richard von Krafft-Ebing and continuing to those of psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud and Theodor Reik, psychoanalysis in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries assumed not only that masochism was primarily sexual, but that it was a perversion primarily affecting men, since women were considered by their natures as masochistic and submissive.\(^7\) Later theories by contemporary psychoanalysts Melanie Klein and Jessica Benjamin, while building on these analyses, are able to break away from the idea of masochism as perversion, but still associate it with oedipal and pre-oedipal drives.\(^8\) Arguing that there is a phenomenon called masochism which stands on its own, separate and distinct from sadism, necessarily implies that we consider the theories of Gilles Deleuze and his 1967 essay on Sacher-Masoch, *Présentation de Sacher-Masoch. Le froid et le cruel*. Here Deleuze argues – primarily through arguments specifically associated with Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s texts – that the masochistic fantasy is not only ruled by the submissive, but that the dominant serves only as the object of his masochistic gaze with little agency other than to follow the masochist’s lead and fantasy.\(^9\) While this gets us closer to considering a submissive functioning as a rational subject, this is a fairly one-dimensional understanding of a complex interplay between dominant and submissive. It is also essentially a means of taking a concept identified as a perversion and renegotiating its meaning by shifting the power to the submissive male to make it less deviant. Instead of accepting the contention that the submissive is in control, it is perhaps more productive to explore masochism as a far more complicated interaction between two subjects and the power which they attempt to exert over each other. While Deleuze’s theories serve as the basis for most contemporary theoretical discussions of masochism, within the subculture of practitioners of masochism, there has emerged a distinctive self-identification in which the masochistic interplay of power has become known as ‘power exchange’ or ‘power transfer’ incorporating both rational submission and accepting that the dominant actively contributes to the exchange of power.\(^10\)
Recent discussions of masochism have come to accept that there may be two different types of power exchange when one refers to masochistic relationships. The differences between the two help us to move beyond the realm of Sacher-Masoch's literature and the psychoanalytic emphasis on his style of masochism, to understand masochism as something more complicated, involving constant renegotiation of the limits of interaction. This renegotiation includes considering what rights and responsibilities the interaction abides by and ultimately provides a baseline for our understanding of political masochism. The first type of power exchange is purely erotic - where limits and sexual pleasure are central. The other type of relationship focuses primarily on power and the displays of power beyond the erotic. This non-erotic conception of masochism acknowledges a more dynamic nature to the interaction between dominant and submissive actors and recognizes that both parties are subjects and consenting agents. By understanding that the dominant is not the object of the submissive (read masochistic) subject, as Deleuze argues, this masochistic exchange of power is subject-affirming and even -creating as the dominant and submissive are involved in a constant renegotiation of power. This idea of what has been termed 'Total Power Exchange' presents us with an interesting model of masochism which can then be applied to the political sphere because of its focus explicitly on power and not on sex.

**Freedom of Power**

There are several assumptions to a political organization formed on the basis of power exchange, the first of which is that the individuals forming the government and negotiating the power within it are free to do so, and are rational actors. Foucault argues that most human interaction relates to issues of power, but that subjects must be free to enter into and remove themselves from such situations. He insists that "[p]ower is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are 'free'. By this we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several kinds of conduct, several ways of reacting and modes of behavior are available." This sort of freedom is only conceivable after the Enlightenment when we see a desire for submissive political subjects to gain enough freedom to enable them to assert control over the dominant political structure, while still being ruled by self-same structures. Certainly, this was the goal of the French Revolution,

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11 Cf. Dancer et al. (2006), 84.
12 Foucault (1982), 342.
even if the institutions were not put in place, which enabled political freedom and a liberal political system to be sustainable. In order for the French Revolution to have been able to maintain government founded by the citizens, a social contract needed to be grounded in a political body which was open to negotiation and which protected the rights of all citizens, not just the individuals in charge. Whether one believes that the social contract is the foundation of the state, or one dismisses the social contract as overly capricious with regard to individual desires, the idea of a power struggle between the individual desires and the desires of the state are critical to this form of government.

Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and other eighteenth-century political philosophers argue that the social contract is seen as a means of binding people together such that their individual will is subordinated to the general will. Simply stated, individuals give up a portion of their freedom in order to obtain greater liberty with a hint of moral virtue. Rousseau argues that this is at the core of every form of government, whether democratic, aristocratic, or monarchical. Though he favors the democratic republic, Rousseau does not explain how this might function and remains wholly theoretical in his discussion of the social contract. Hegel critiques this sort of social contract, however, because a focus on the individual desires and rights has the potential to lead to terror and revolt—citing the French Revolution as an example of this. In his Vorlesungen zur Geschichte der Philosophie, he suggests that the modern liberal state refers "everything to the individual will. But here we have no guarantee that the will in question has that right disposition which is essential to the stability of the state." For this reason, Hegel supports a much stronger state, and a social contract not focused on the will of the individual. What is at issue in political masochism, however, is not necessarily the precise function of the social contract, but that such a contract exists or begins to come into being at all. The focus on the rights and needs of the individual as the basis for the society, and the rational desire to enter into an agreement with the state, while still maintaining the ability to critique such a system is what makes it masochistic. The state does not disintegrate under this critique, but instead becomes stronger through a renegotiation of the limits of the state and the individual as laid out in the social contract.

The suggestion of a contract forming the basis for political organization, however, mimics the masochistic contract which many see as foundational to masochism. If we view the social contract as one of the
key aspects of masochism that is connected with liberalist theories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it is necessary to understand the function of the contract in both systems. Deleuze suggests that the masochistic contract is not simply a contract for the submissive, but that dominant and submissive both participate equally in upholding their responsibilities as put forth in the contract. Building on Hegel’s Master/Slave dialectic, Deleuze misses the most important aspect of the contract when he argues that the dominant simply goes along with the contract written by the submissive. In fact, the contract is either co-written with or entirely written by the dominant. As such, this form of explicit contractual obligation is a limit on the actions of the submissive and the dominant, and it is mutually agreed upon. Deleuze’s analysis denies the dominant (or in the case of political masochism, the state) any active participation in the writing of the contract or the implementation of that contract, and instead claims that the submissive (citizen) completely controls the interaction. In the form of masochism known as ‘Total Power Exchange’, however, the idea of a contract is either less formalized, or left as a suggestion of what the ‘hard limits’ of the individuals might be. Examples of how this plays out in liberal governments can be seen in the U.S. Constitution and the German Grundgesetz. The documents themselves lay out very broadly the organization, rights, and responsibilities of the government as well as the essential rights of the individuals within that society. Further refinements of these laws and the precise implementation of these rights develop over time. Within power exchange relationships and forms of political masochism, the rights and responsibilities of the state and the individual are constantly renegotiated. As the limits of rights and laws are tested through critique, the laws themselves are renegotiated and reestablished. The ability to renegotiate the interaction between dominant and submissive, without destroying the relationship altogether, is an important aspect of political masochism, because it is what keeps it from falling into a cycle of instantiation and destruction at every impasse.

Politics of Masochism

In order to consider this model, we might see an attempt to create a liberal state involving two phases. The first phase is formed by popular uprising on the order of the French Revolution. Meaning that submissives, not in political situations which allow them the choice of submis-
sion, subvert the normal order of relationships by exposing the power structures and then seek out situations where they are able to consensually submit to a state of their own creation. This most closely matches Deleuze’s idea of the masochistic relationship as well as Marx’ idealized formation of society in Das Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei. When Marx begins by stating that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles”, he is offering the sort of critique which Foucault praises as both modernist and enlightened while at the same time instantiating the history of this class struggle through his analysis. Marx is laying bare the structures of power as he sees them in order to reshape society. Certainly, we could argue that Marxism requires some of the same types of submission that are required of citizens in liberal states. The problem, however, which we alluded to before in Hegel’s theory, is the instability in the creation of such a system.

There is potential for constant unrest since the state is never able to guarantee the freedom of the subjects. It is always responding to the desires of the individuals and never able to establish itself. When Hegel argues against the French Revolution and is criticized for being anti-liberal, it is this stage of political masochism that he is criticizing. In order to get to a place beyond this cycle of unrest, there is a need for a political system which can guarantee the rights of the individuals and protect them from being infringed upon by others – including by the state itself. Hegel suggests that this political system is not just the civil state, but also a monarchy. The insistence on a monarch as the powerful head of the system makes Hegel’s writings somewhat less liberal, but as has been argued by F.R. Cristi, scholar of Enlightenment philosophy, we might identify Hegel’s system as conservatively liberal – in that it suggests the importance of liberal ideals, while at the same time holding on to conservative notions of a supreme ruler. Ultimately, Hegel is committed to a political system which is flexible enough to support the rights of the individual, yet strong enough to protect them, similar to that of political masochism. What we see happen throughout liberal political theory is the development of political systems, which take into account the changing needs of the government, the majority, the minority, and any number of actors in order to account for the shifting requirements of the polis or political body of citizens as expressed through their critique. One example of such a development of rights in a political system is the extension of rights to previously disenfranchised groups. As citizens begin to push for their rights to be respected, the government, though
still maintaining control, extends rights to these groups. Examples might include voting rights for women as well as civil rights for immigrant, racial, and religious groups. Though governments once limited rights for these groups and individuals, these governments became open to change and pushed the boundaries of their implicit contract with their citizens. From the other perspective, the individual may be required to give up some rights, in order to protect the government. What is most important, however, is that this second phase of political masochism requires a strong political entity in order to guarantee the rights of the citizens who submit. There is, nonetheless, a constant renegotiation, such that the will of the people shapes the will of those who govern and therefore the rule of law to which individuals must submit. Simultaneously, the rule of law shapes the individuals. Instead of focusing on whether the social contract allows for individual life, liberty, and property, as in Rousseau, we see that political masochism asks how the state serves to establish a structure in order to guarantee stability, which then allows for the individual to have these rights of life, liberty, and property. It is a shift away from focusing on each individual and how it is able to realize its desires to a focus on the structures necessary to allow for the pursuit of one’s desires at all. In fact, as argued earlier, masochism – and therefore political masochism – has as its primary focus this interplay of power between the dominant and the submissive. One might even argue that this is its means of maintaining the system at all, when the masochist has enough freedom to be able to choose to submit because this submission protects his or her rights. This is not a sort of slavery in which the masochist has no power, but instead an acknowledgement that power is inherent within all relationships, that it cannot be avoided.

We must, however, stress how truly different this is from slavery or serfdom. Neither the serf nor the slave are able to consent to their conditions, since they are not afforded the freedom to make decisions relating to their status. They cannot meaningfully change their situation without either purchasing their release or revolting. In terms associated with the industrial revolution and economics, Friedrich Engels points to this self-determination of the proletariat through consent and freedom in his work *Grundsätze des Kommunismus*, written in 1847 as a precursor to the *Manifest*. Here he outlines the difference between the proletariat in contrast to the slave and the serf.20 While he very specifically develops his argument around issues of economic classes and argues that the industrial revolution of the eighteenth century has led to the oppression of the

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20 Cf. Engels (1847), 346-347.
proletariat, using his same language, we can also argue that Enlighten­ment thinking led to an idea of citizens divided from the economic sys­tem of industrialization. These citizens are likewise differentiated from both the slave and the serf in that they are self-determining and able to create their own political system. Marx and Engels see the development of the proletariat as wholly negative and call therefore for revolution on economic grounds -- but we could just as easily argue that the revolution called for is an extension of a revolution, which started in the late eighteenth century. Because the theories of the Enlightenment were not as successful in their implementation as the industrial revolution, except for in a very few cases, for many nations, the goal of the Enlightenment was postponed until well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As a result, this first stage of the politically liberal -- namely, the cycle of revolution -- persists until stronger political institutions are established to which individuals are willing to submit. Though Marx and Engels suggest that the freedom and desire to submit to the will of others (the market, and the state) is impossible for the proletariat, it is the political economy of classical eighteenth-century liberal politics, which they argue gives individuals the illusion of freedom, and which Foucault suggests is necessary for individuals to actually be free to submit.

Accepting that Enlightenment liberal politics, and therefore modern democracy, functions as a form of non-erotic masochism requires us to accept that there exists a substantial pre-history to the phenomenon which was hidden in the late nineteenth century through a focus on the erotic. The question that perhaps remains is: What does identifying Enlightenment political liberal theory as masochism get us? I would suggest we gain a better understanding of what is most important to the Enlightenment project, and what has been maintained into the twenty-first century: namely, the right to critique. In the light of our understanding of masochism, we may rethink other forms of interaction which expose power to see how they contribute to our understanding of masochism, and how masochism might contribute to our understanding of them. Rather than being a circular argument, it is, in fact, merely an aspect of masochistic discourse for each subject to redefine and renegotiate itself and its rights in relation to other free subjects. Considering masochism as political also gets us away from thinking in the purely dualistic mode of subject and object, male and female, dominant and submissive, to see that power relationships are far more complex. We can take into account this complexity when we consider not only liberal thought but also texts that in the past
have been interpreted as purely erotic masochistic. Political masochism, particularly as we have seen it expressed in the aftermath of the French Revolution, strives to find a balance between the individual and the state in a sustainable way, but in a way that is still true to the principles of rational subjects and individual freedoms.

Bibliography


