

## Questions About Sex with Socialist Answers

*Amia Srinivasan: The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century. London, Bloomsbury, 2021, xi+276 pp, £18.00 (HB) ISBN: 9781526612533*

Amidst the lively and often highly positive reception of this best-selling collection of six essays in feminist philosophy, some critics have complained that it does not seem to argue for very much.<sup>1</sup> They appeal to Srinivasan's questioning rhetorical style, and her own declaration that her goal is not always to be decisive, but to be ambivalent on some matters so as to do justice to their complexity (p. xiv). The book achieves its goal of drawing out some uncomfortable puzzles in contemporary feminist politics, but in doing so it puts forwards many interesting and persuasive arguments. So, the criticism that it is devoid of argument is unfair. Since this is a matter about which there has apparently been some confusion, in this review I will articulate what I take to be the key claims that the book sets out to defend, and outline its main arguments. I will then comment on Srinivasan's distinctive rhetorical style, before discussing where I think the book leaves us.

Chapter 1, "The Conspiracy Against Men", analyses two dominant political convictions of the #MeToo movement: the slogan "believe women", and the further view that perpetrators of sexual violence should be held accountable far more thoroughly than they are by various institutions such as workplaces, universities, legislatures, police forces and courts. The main claim of the chapter is that both principles of #MeToo – the slogan and the programme of institutional reform – are morally problematic if left unqualified. Srinivasan's argument draws from intersectional feminist thought to bring out this problematic with stark clarity. In short, the key point is that rape accusations are systematically weaponized by systems of race- and class-based oppression. As such, the feminist spirit of #MeToo cannot be realized through unequivocal support for better institutional accountability. The political demands of feminists must be alive to the consequences that such reforms bring to marginalized groups. This argument is nested in a richly researched discussion of some recent history of sexual assault allegations. That broader discussion provides a robust response to the right-wing talking point that the #MeToo era has made every man into the victim of a feminist conspiracy.

Chapter 2, "Talking to My Students About Porn", revisits the critiques of pornography levelled by radical feminists in the 1960s, '70s and '80s. Srinivasan argues, against a perceived sex-positive orthodoxy, that the radical critique of porn is fundamentally right on several points. Specifically, she claims that porn is pervasively influential in shaping engrained patterns of sexual thought and action, and that porn's misogynistic tendencies have predictably harmful consequences. Enforcing this predicament, Srinivasan argues against the liberal response that the harmful effects of pornography could be adequately combated with better sex education in schools. But besides advancing these arguments, the chapter provides an engaging narrative history of the divisions within the organized feminism of the late Twentieth Century over disagreements about the politics of sex.

Chapters 3 and 4 are the flagship essay, "The Right to Sex" – the original publication of which, in the LRB, prompted a lively reaction – and a coda to the essay digesting some of that reaction. The main claim here is that a dominant tendency in contemporary feminist thought about the ethics of sex wrongly confines its focus to consent, thereby failing to scrutinize the moral

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Haslanger, 2021; Stock, 2021.

character of sexual desires. Srinivasan argues that feminists – both individually and collectively – should critically assess the nature of their sexual desires, identifying which desires are imbued with unethical characters by the misogynistic, racist, ableist, class- and caste- prejudiced, transphobic, and heteronormative political forces that influence desire-formation. Although Srinivasan avoids putting too fine a point on it, the upshot of the argument is the further conclusion that where one’s desires have such a morally ugly character, one ought to liberate oneself from such desires, as far as possible. Once again, the discussion that presents this argument also does much more, in this case giving a critical analysis of “incel” ideology, and developing the book’s account of the history of the sex wars in Western feminism.

Chapter 5, “On Not Sleeping With Your Students”, discusses the ethics of romantic relationships between teachers and students, and the politics of legal and institutional prohibition of such relationships. Srinivasan’s main claim is that the moral problem that is held in common by all instances of teachers forming romantic connections with their students is the failure of the teacher to respect the student’s pedagogical interests. Srinivasan does not deny that fruitful pedagogical relations can have an erotic dynamic of sorts, nor that teacher-student relationships can be genuinely, autonomously desired by both parties: she argues that such relationships are always morally problematic even despite these possible factors.

Chapter 6, “Sex, Carceralism, Capitalism”, turns to explicitly address the book’s most persistent theme, which is an intersectional critique of ‘carceral feminism’, i.e. the tendency within the movement to advocate for stricter laws, more rigorous enforcement, and harsher sentences for crimes against women. Here at the end of the book, Srinivasan’s positive vision is most forthright. From a recognition of the far-reaching harms that carceral feminism brings to a racialized working-class of women, she constructs an argument for a sober, socialist agenda. The demands are straightforward (p. 172): decriminalisation of drug use and sex work; a “restructuring of economic relations” to bring end to poverty; “public housing, healthcare, education and childcare; decent jobs in democratically organized workplaces; guaranteed basic income; local democratic control of community spending and priorities; spaces for leisure, play and social gathering; clean air and water”; and a justice system based principally on “repair and reconciliation”. For all its nuance, the collection of essays in the book has an overarching strategy and that is to argue that this agenda is called for by a feminist understanding of society. If the core spirit of #MeToo and Black Lives Matter resonated with you, the book contends, then you should be organizing for socialist demands, and protesting against punitive measures which actively worsen the immiseration of working-class women under capitalism.

This is not to say that the agenda advanced here would adequately address all of the problematic issues drawn out in the earlier chapters – far from it. Indeed, as noted above, while the arguments of the book are more plentiful and more forthright than some critics would allow, the defining tone of Srinivasan’s approach is ambivalence. The resulting style is Socratic. (At times, especially Chapter 2, the feel of a Platonic dialogue is accentuated by Srinivasan ventriloquizing her students to advance positions with implied authorial endorsement.) The essays ask questions and surround the questions with their moral, political, historical and economic context, enlisting the reader in the collective enterprise of seeking answers. This use of this classical rhetorical style brings a democratic approach to theory befitting of a mass political movement.

Nonetheless, the book casts light on the importance of several questions to which it does not provide answers. In fact, there are questions to which it does not seem to find any answers promising. Consider two. How can we combat the damaging influence of porn on the formation of sexual desire? Are the essential contours of heterosexual desire necessarily misogynistic? In the spirit of taking up the open questions posed, and furthering the discussion of the book, I'd like to offer something to each of these.

Regarding porn, and what to do about its harmful impact on our collective sexual imagination, the official conclusion of Srinivasan's discussion is pessimistic: "How such a negative education is to be achieved is unclear. 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" (p. 71). But before reaching this point, the discussion contains several constructive proposals that might be able to respond to their dismissals in the text. First, there is the idea of fighting the propaganda of mainstream porn with the proliferation and foregrounding of non-mainstream, indeed counter-mainstream porn. The problem with porn (well, one of) is that it creates the impression that the sexual domination of women by men is sexy, and that nothing else is. It then embeds this impression resolutely in the libidos of its viewers. This process might well be disrupted and even to an extent counteracted by greater exposure to presentations of how sexy things other than the domination of women can be. So, here's the first demand: more queer porn now.

The second demand is for a massive campaign of information and education targeting not only school pupils and their teachers, but everyone. The mass-scale presentation of feminist ideas exposing the moral hideousness of patriarchal ideology, unmasking the politics of male power which is embodied in the erotic media that is now mainstream and the sexual imaginary that it promotes. This demand is briefly referred to in the text as "full feminist consciousness-raising" (p. 63).

Both demands are rejected by Srinivasan for being too ambitious. Queer porn "would hardly fly as formal sex education" (p. 70), while of the large-scale consciousness raising programme, she asks, "which state is going to pay for that?" (p. 63). As I see it, this is just to say that like all ambitious radical demands worth fighting for, these will surely face intense, hostile receptions from the socially conservative forces of vested interests. But I think it is worth pointing out that rather than aporia and apathy, the considerations in this chapter could just as well have yielded a conclusion of some strategy-directed open questions: what would a rolled-out programme of 'full feminist consciousness raising' look like? How can we bring it about? How can communities provide resources for the increased production of counter-mainstream porn? How is it best disseminated?

Finally, let me return to a question that is often between the lines in *The Right to Sex* but never given as much explicit attention as others. Radical feminists such as Andrea Dworkin, whose perspective Srinivasan sets out to reconsider, held that heterosexual desire, as such, is inherently misogynistic. The basic idea being that the eroticisation of masculinity and femininity just is the eroticisation of the aesthetics of the domination of women and the subordination of women, respectively. The question, then, is what truth there is in this idea, if any. Perhaps preliminarily, how is that radical claim to be evaluated?

Unlike on the porn debate, Srinivasan's text does not seem to have even the seeds of a constructive answer on this score. I do not think that is a shortcoming of the text, so much as

an important call for further thought. What the book does accomplish is a reopening of these questions about the political and moral character of various sexualities. It does this by showing that critical discussion of sexual desire need not be moralizing (see especially p. 100), and thereby ends a de facto embargo on such discussion in the wake of the sex wars.

Since this response to the charge of moralizing is a key contribution of the book it is worth summarizing, by way of a conclusion. It would be moralizing for anyone to adjudicate for anyone else whether their sexual desires are morally wrong, or to pass moral judgement over whether they are doing enough to dismantle such desires. That is moralizing, and it is objectionable, because no-one has either the epistemic vantage-point, nor the moral authority to judge anyone else on such things. The only person who has such a vantage point, and such moral authority, is oneself as the desiring subject. But once this point is clear, the worry that has led some feminists to refrain from discussing the ethics of sex slips away. When a book like this raises a question for one to ask of oneself – as a reader, a subject of desire, a political agent – it asks the question to the only person with the authority to answer it, and thereby avoids moralizing.<sup>2</sup>

## References

Haslanger, S. (2021). Feminism and the Question of Theory. *The Raven Magazine*.

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<sup>2</sup> Many thanks to Herj Marway for comments on a draft of this review.