

Sexuality Beyond Consent: Risk, race, traumatophilia

Avgi Saketopoulou, 2023. New York: NYU Press.

"I wanted experience to lead where it would, not to some end point given in advance"

(Bataille, 1988: 3)

This daring book, dedicated in Greek to the author's grandmother, "the first feminist in my life". This untimely book, in Nietzsche's manifold sense. Unfashionable. Unsettling. Occasioning the visceral responses elicited by (rare) art and (rare) sexual encounters. Exceeding instruction. Defamiliarising. Quickening. Drafting a portal to invigorating experience.

Once I revered *Erlebnis*, the 'lived experience' of phenomenologists. Until a closer look at Husserl's decisive version made me realise that it boils down to 'mental episodes' and 'events' whose aim is to unify internal consciousness. A sad realisation. Within hermeneutics, the subject retains copyright on experience. Sat smugly in its colonial showroom, proud of trophies pilfered through package holidays into a 'wild' and 'natural' unconscious, sailing risky waters in its Ark, armed with the first disposable *Arché* at hand; attachment theory, intersubjectivity, the symbolic order. But experience is experiment. It relates to the dynamic, "enigmatic quality that extends beyond what the subject intends or aims for". It involves "an interaction with an object *outside* the self – a person, a work of art, an encounter – and the interior process it sparks" (Saketopoulou, 2023:14, emphasis added).

'Outside' is key – a move inspired by Laplanche. "Where it was, I shall be", Freud famously declared; an ambivalent stance with the ego wearing the dual costumes of conquistador and explorer. Laplanche's edit is less ambivalent: "Where it was, the other shall be." I would add: "Where it was, others shall be": the 'it' cannot be reduced to the unitary will of Schopenhauer (an indigestible influence in Freud), nor can it be generalised as the phenomenologists' 'world'. The 'it' is multiple. It is multiplicity.

For Laplanche, the core of psychical life is ex-centric, 'Copernican', centrifugal, incited by the enigma (not a riddle, not a mystery) inadvertently transmitted to the infant by primary caregivers. However, the subversive potential of Laplanche's shift has yet to be realised. The psychoanalytic gaze, transfixed by Oedipus, has consistently neglected the Sphinx. Riffing on, augmenting, queering Laplanche, Saketopoulou's book partly attempts, in my reading of it, to veer our gaze towards the Sphinx; an unsettling endeavour, but worth pursuing because potentially transformative.

Experience is no longer something we own, but "something that we risk when we soften our grasp" (ibid: 37) in order to secure the expected outcome. Shreds of ephemeral life in the accountant's claws. Sample of flowing river jailed in a jar for subsequent study in the lab. The rush to equalise

uncurbed instances of generosity with aesthetic/therapeutic/spiritual/material gain. Turning experience, as everything else, into another form of hygiene and another commodity. Libidinal double-entry book-keeping. We all do it: I love you but can't let this love mess up my schedule. Love is too much, and "too muchness" (Benjamin & Atlas, 2015) dis-regulates me. I'll be off to the library, the gym, to frantic walks around the block in the London drizzle. Give me mindfulness and affect-regulation. Give me exotic snorkelling in Tycoon Wharf. Give me tantric titillation and new-agey consolation on a retreat led by Godley Didgeridoo, Grand Master of Windfart Sanctuary.

There is no other way of saying this: experience (some aesthetic and sexual experiences in particular) incites self-shattering, a disruption of the ego's internal unity and a dissolution of its boundaries (Bersani, 1986). Saketopoulou proposes a slightly different notion: overwhelm, turned into a noun. Aesthetic and sexual experience operate outside the boundaries of the ego, upsetting its constitutive hubris. Overwhelm comes close to Laplanche's detranslation, i.e., the unbinding "of the myths and ideologies through which the ego constructed itself" (Laplanche, 1996: 198). The author likens de-translation to "pulling on a dangling thread left behind when a sweater has snagged: if one keeps going, the sweater will be reduced to mere string" (p46). An apt description of analysis, from *analuein*, a term first used in the Odyssey to describe Penelope's unravelling the cloth she wove during the day to defer her pledge to remarry. Analysis itself as endless deferral, *entretien infini*, approaching a truth which is never unveiled, despite the hubristic endeavours of the hermeneutic tradition within which psychotherapies of all orientations are now safely entrapped.

Overwhelm is risky, and plainly situated outside the terrain of affirmative consent, which is the only form of consent acceptable within contemporary prevailing narratives.

Saketopoulou quotes the queer writer Tim Dean who recounts an experience in a gay club when one night he decided to follow a stranger into an unlit area:

[The stranger] pushed me to my knees...encouraging me to work his soft cock through the mesh of his jockstrap. My mouth registered that the jockstrap was already damp...When I became aware that he was gently pissing through the jock, the tasteless warm fluid flooding my lips, I spontaneously ejaculated. Both his piss and my body's response took me completely by surprise. I did not consent – and would not have consented – to being pissed on; yet I loved it. That night the man in leather cap, whose face I never saw, gave me the gift of erotic astonishment.

(pp95-96)

How are we to understand this and why should we care? The author comments:

Is his erotic astonishment, which I argue amounts to more than just physical pleasure, related to the absence of his consent? I think that it is. Of course, even intimating that a sexuality beyond consent is worth theorising – let alone having – will raise eyebrows. Affirmative consent, we are told, is key to ethical sexual relations; it ensures that power differentials are well tended...It also promises mutual sexual pleasure and a protection from trauma, not to mention legal liability. Established as the sole acceptable ethical rudder, the discourse on consent has utterly 'magnetised us'...Today, writes the analyst Anne Dufourmantelle, "the principle of precaution has become the norm"...Not just the lawman but the actuary now also oversees our sexual encounters. But while the absence or violation of consent is a meaningful and important analytic for psychic and political life, affirmative consent is conceptually thin – and, to me, not very useful. In short, affirmative consent fails to deliver on its promises of mutual pleasure and safety or to adjudicate desire.

(p96)

There is an important difference, the author maintains, between affirmative consent and what she calls 'limit consent'. The former is based on Hegel's ethics of recognition and its attendant belief in "individuals with distinct centres of subjectivity who inform, negotiate, and reach agreements to minimize misunderstandings and manage expectations" (p63). Saketopoulou is describing what I would call normative consent, the prevailing mode of consent – a travesty, in my view, of Hegel's ethics of recognition, and closer to Jessica Benjamin's intersubjectivist, diluted version of Hegel, a version devoid of negation, risk and conflict – all present in Hegel's dialectical *Anerkennung* (recognition/acknowledgement) alongside the possibility of transformation.

Normative consent is illusory. It lures us into believing that the self and its motives can be easily grasped. But grasping, a notion which draws on the work of Édouard Glissant, is "neither harmless nor politically neutral" (p7).

All the same, to believe that "from a psychoanalytic perspective...affirmative consent is revealed to be but a ruse" (ibid) is to inflate the scope of psychoanalysis. It is, of course, crucial to bring to the fore Copernican, de-centred perspectives inferred but unrealised by Freud. However, these remain marginal. As with authors who utilise critiques of psychoanalysis to eventually bolster it (Adam Phillips comes to mind) while leaving it fundamentally unscathed, Saketopoulou remains faithful, despite her forays into uncharted waters, to the psychoanalytic matrix. I am ambivalent about this. Perhaps psychoanalysis (unlike existential

psychotherapy, whose fragile and rigid canon falls to smithereens at the first hint of critical thinking) does have greater capacity to absorb and incorporate subversions, deviations and innovations. Mainstream psychoanalysis and psychodynamic psychotherapy, at least in the UK where Object Relations reigns, have nevertheless succeeded in fumigating the unconscious and biologising human experience. Which may well be one more reason for relishing this book. Questioning normative consent is an urgent and vital task. It does not at any time entail violating professional boundaries. It does entail, however, some degree of experimentation within an alternative frame of consent – what Saketopoulou brilliantly calls limit consent. Limit consent speaks a different language. Its starting point is that self-consciousness remains inaccessible to us. It does not recognise the possessive individualism of the subject, its risible declarations of self-boundedness. It is (in a Levinasian sense) other-centred. It implies surrender. Not compliance to the established role of the submissive enforced by the taxidermy of dating apps (a pantomime of surrender) but “surrendering to another – risking coming up against one’s own and the other’s opacity” (p64). Does surrendering to another mean surrendering to the other’s ego? I once asked Saketopoulou. No, it does not, she replied. One surrenders to the other’s (and one’s own) opacity – a key term, borrowed from Glissant (1997) and implying, among other things, much-needed acknowledgement of our own intrinsic otherness, and of the sheer intractability of human interactions. This does not have to lead to impasse, as a hyper-rationalist approach would have it, but instead to a poetics of relation. For the author, consent cannot be established by a system of determined paradigms delimiting ethical encounters and directing sexual politics. Of course, violation does exist, and it is painfully real. But a different paradigm is needed:

Limit consent has ties to the rousing of the sexual drive and entails a nuanced negotiation of limits that belongs neither to the domain of activity nor to the sphere of passivity.

(p3)

Why then run the risk (by moving into the ‘more and more’ of rising excitement, by exceeding the limit of what our body habitually accepts) of having one’s own boundaries invaded? Because the more and more of experience “can produce states of overwhelm that... may catalyse significant psychic transformations” (p69). Limit consent may also provide us with the frame for the uncertainty and transformative potential of psychotherapeutic work itself.

We are decisively in an area of what is normally apprehended as the perverse, the ‘turning about’, according to late Middle English etymology, ‘from what is right and good’. Freud famously referred to sexuality as

polymorphously perverse; he also ended up reframing the perverse to the area of sexual accessories, as it were. Foreplay is right and good as long as it does not last too long. The goal is reaching orgasm in penetrative heterosexual sex. As with his generalised theory of seduction, eventually discarded and, despite his wavering back and forth on the issue of perversion, Freud ends up bolstering the norm, a point Saketopoulou acknowledges:

The terms ‘developmental theory’ and ‘developmental stages’ are, of course, psychoanalytic jargon for normalization: by telling us how things are expected to evolve, they direct the analyst’s clinical attention to where intervention is needed.

(p33)

What would it mean to seriously entertain the notion that the polymorphous perverse is the foundation of sexuality rather than a picturesque adjunct? It would dramatically turn the tables of contemporary psychotherapeutic discourse. It would mean no longer demanding that the perverse explain itself, and ask instead whether “docile, tame and subdued sexualities... may suffer from having lost their footing in the perverse (p31). The liberal consensus on these matters is to avoid pathologisation at all costs by emphasising, for instance, that BDSM is ‘fine’, as long as enacted within the confines of an intimate normative relationship. It would appear that dominant culture (and dominant psychoanalytic/psychotherapy culture) is still in the grip of Kraft-Ebing’s *Pathologia Sexualis*. The author shows us a way out: “masochism, sadism, exhibitionism and voyeurism are *endemic* to the sexual rather than being the defensively sexualised debris of trauma or overstimulation” (p69, emphasis added). It is not about kicks, nor is it about annexing the perverse within the structure of our identity so as to tame its subversiveness. Unlike more normative models, which rely on an economy of discharge of tension, what characterizes the perverse dimension is continuous increase – Bataille’s continuous expenditure.

Very crudely put, the death drive is for Laplanche the undercover sex drive. Bataille, another inspiration behind this book, reverses the equation: eros is in the end a deadly pursuit – especially when viewed from the vantage point of the ego.

Saketopoulou flirts with Bataille’s incandescent writing, trying to bend it to a psychoanalytic frame. But this is a tricky proposition. I throw myself into the night dressed in white sunlight, Bataille says unequivocally. He remains sovereignly remote to the Northern sensibilities which regaled us with psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, endeavours inevitably bent on the very opposite of expenditure, namely self-improvement.

*Who am I /not 'me' no no,/ but the desert the night the immensity/
which I am/ What are/ desert immensity night animal/ soon
irrevocable Nothingness/and without having known anything/
Death answer/ sponge streaming with solar /dreams/ enter me
so that I no longer know/ but these tears.*

(Bataille, 1988: 161)

Bataille is routinely avoided or viewed as a mere provocateur, his most popular book in the UK still being the 1928 novella *Story of the Eye* (Bataille, 1977). Another merit of Saketopoulou's book is her attempt to harness anarchic sexual vertigo into the thoroughly bourgeois frame of psychoanalysis. The result is refreshingly ambivalent and enigmatic. The commendable act of reframing (I nearly wrote 'exploding') the psychoanalytic foundations. The equally laudable stance of consolidating (despite the tears of Eros) the psychoanalytic frame, bent and stretched so as to bear witness to the struggles and joys of limit experiences. Historical backdrop: the elective perversions, introversions and subversion of queer twenty-first century New York, one generation away from Candy Darling and Marsha P. Johnson, and a long way from the moneyed bourgeois discontents in Freud's Viennese clinic a hundred years before.

The dilemma with a tradition is whether to dissipate it, dilute it, explode it or renew it by making it pliable to the winds of change. And when the winds are hurricanes, when we deal with vertiginously visible tectonic shifts, it is worth the gamble.

Proximity to the threshold flooding the subject with the blinding light from the abyss (far more terrifying and seductive than a dark abyss), opening new pathways, leading to transformation: is not precisely this that the 'work' is all about, transformation? This is where the potential of this book lies. Ground-breaking, that is, leading to groundlessness. Nietzsche, the other inspiration in Bataille's work (far more important than Sade) – curiously absent in Saketopoulou's book. Summoning Nietzsche would imply rapture from Sade's pedantic Enlightenment ideology. It would insert levity. It would spell out in no uncertain terms that the focus of analysis is no longer the human subject but what traverses the human.

What would it mean to adopt a more welcoming attitude to trauma? Against the dominant view that imagines trauma as inert and unchanging – a stance which Saketopoulou calls 'traumatophobia' – what would it be like to allow it to circulate? The notion advanced here is that trauma is crucial to the constitution of the self and also potentially transformative, a stance the author calls 'traumatophilia'. A trauma which is not "inserted into circulation does not wither and disappear: it stalls and it controls us"

(p2). Trauma “needs to circulate and to be revisited” (ibid). In this sense, traumatophilia becomes “a way of working with the recognition that we cannot turn away from our traumata, that we are strangely drawn to them” (ibid). Recognising that traumatic experiences cannot be erased is difficult; it requires strength but is far better than buying into the illusion peddled by the lucrative trauma industry and its gurus which says that trauma can be resolved. This idea has to be relinquished so that new pathways can open up. Promising to ‘cure’ trauma on one level simply means rewriting the experience within the norm and the social order; it means “turning the consulting room into a Procrustean bed of normative adaptation”, the author says, adding:

I would say that trauma is never cured and that no one has ever been delivered back to an intact, pretraumatic state, no matter how motivated they are or how good their access to care or their resources. This is a statement that many clinicians would agree with in theory. But when the rubber hits the road, that is, when we sit with patients who need help, many of us, just like many of our patients, get caught in the quicksand of imagining that psychoanalysis or therapy can restore mental health, that it can help repair and, in some way, undo wounds

(p133)

This notion is prevalent in the wider culture, sustained by a politics of injury which claims to heal societal and political wounds while at the same time cataloguing entire communities on the basis of their wounds alone, rather than being attentive to their desires and aspirations (Bazzano, 2023).

Our job as practitioners, Saketopoulou insists, is not to heal. We must resist the Hippocratic and societal injunction to repair; we must reject the notion that anyone can be restored to some “prelapsarian moment, to the restoration of innocence before trauma, or to a harmonious reconciliation toward a utopian future”. More significant than healing is a “nondominating relationship between the subject (the ego) and her unconscious, which also means a nondominating relationship between the subject and the object”. What this requires of us is to so sign up for “the unexpected, for surprise, and for contradiction” (p22). Then our practice becomes an adventure.

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References

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