

# **“BDSM and anarchism share a common fascination with power”**

**An interview with anarchist author and translator  
Jean-Manuel Traimond on sexual play and the dismantling of  
hierarchies**

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In December 2005, the anarchist author, city guide, and translator Jean-Manuel Traimond published a book in French under the provocative title *Dissection of Organized Sadomasochism: Anarchist Approaches* with the publishing house *Atelier de création Libertaire*. A new Italian edition was recently released (2024) by the anarchist publisher *Elèuthera*, but it has not appeared in English.

The topics covered by the author, who regularly contributes to the anarchist weekly *Le Monde Libertaire* and has published several monographs (*Récits de Christiania*, *Comment fabriquer une religion*) on various aspects of anarchism with *Atelier Libertaire*, include critiques of religion, the Christiania commune, and anarchist humour.

Traimond, who explicitly states that he is not a practicing BDSM participant himself, argued in *the book* that there is a fundamental commonality between anarchists and members of the BDSM subculture—namely, their engagement with power. His book, structured into three sections, offers an outsider’s perspective on the BDSM subculture, which he does not further differentiate. The book addresses topics such as “Consensual Sadomasochism”, “Psychoanalysis and BDSM”, and “Sadomasochism and Society”. His references include the frequently cited study *SM: Studies in Dominance & Submission*, led by Thomas S. Weinberg, as well as texts from the field of so-called sex-positive feminism (Gayle Rubin, Pat Califia) and, to some extent, queer theory (Judith Butler).

For a long time, it remained the only monograph exploring BDSM from an anarchist perspective—and it is still one of the few publications attempting to connect both spheres. Perhaps even the only one of its kind. The book refrains from using sensationalist imagery, instead focusing entirely on its content. Among its anarchist and libertarian references are figures like Alex Comfort, Gerard Winstanley, and Étienne de La Boétie.

I personally bought the book at an anarchist book fair in Paris in the early 2010s—and at the time, I found it empowering, especially considering that (heterosexual) BDSM was still heavily stigmatised in leftist and anarchist circles in Germany. Around 2002-3, the first left-wing radical and explicit anarchist association of BDSM practitioners and fetishists in Germany came into being under the name ‘Böse Blumen’ (Bad Flowers). Shortly after its foundation, the first nationwide meeting took place in Berlin in 2003. The spectrum of participants ranged from DKP members to classic autonomists of various facets and on to anarcho-syndicalists and grassroots activists who saw themselves united in the fact that they did not dare to come out in their respective political contexts or experienced reprisals after coming out. There are now a large number of anarchist-orientated regulars’ tables and groups on the scene’s own social media platforms, such as Fetlife.

Nearly twenty years after the book’s release—and following the hype around *Fifty Shades of Grey* (which was mostly ridiculed within the BDSM subculture)—I conducted the following email interview with the author in December 2024.

**Maurice Schuhmann:** Twenty years ago, you published *Dissection du sado-masochisme organisé*. If you were to write such an analysis today, what would you

change? A lot has happened since its release, and *Fifty Shades of Grey* led to a veritable boom and (supposed) increase in acceptance.

**Jean-Manuel Traimond:** Initially, I proposed this book to *La Musardine*, which had previously published another of my works. They rejected it with the reasoning: “There are not 500 real sadomasochists in France”. Today, however, I wouldn’t change much about it. My fourfold goal remains the same and is still relevant: to explain what conscious sadomasochism is about, to provide good advice for risk-free practice, to highlight how widespread and dangerous unconscious sadomasochism is (for example, in the military, religion, etc.), and finally, to show that responsible BDSM can encourage reflection on power, which, paradoxically, can lead to anarchism.

**MS:** How did you come up with the idea of writing a book about the anarchist approach to BDSM—as someone who is not a practicing BDSM participant?

**JMT:** For two reasons—one small, one big. The small one? I am both highly sensitive to pain and highly sexual. It seemed impossible to me to experience sexual arousal through pain, yet masochistic practice proved the opposite. I wanted to understand. The big reason: BDSM and anarchism share a common fascination—power. Anarchism seeks to fight it, while BDSM plays with it. And yet, at least at first glance, no one seemed to be making the connection. At the time of publication, things were different.

**MS:** You wrote: “*Sadomasochism occasionally, more or less directly, intersects with anarchist circles. Some anarchists, mostly young people, dance a strange dance around sadomasochism, wondering if this is the last sexual bastion left to be liberated*”. What do you think about this today? What have you observed? How has this changed over time?

**JMT:** Since I do not practice (I hope my use of the word “practice” brings a smile...), I am neither an expert on the broader BDSM scene today nor, I assume, on the smaller Anarcho-BDSM scene. However, one thing has clearly changed: 20 years ago, BDSM was still classified as a dangerous psychological disorder that needed to be vigorously combated. Through my work on this book, however, I came to understand that conscious and responsible BDSM practice can promote excellent emotional hygiene—provided it remains deep, strictly consensual, and consistently negotiated.

**MS:** Have you written any other texts on sexuality?

**JMT:** I had a lot of fun writing *The Erotic Guide to the Louvre and the Musée d’Orsay*, since I make a living as a tour guide (today, they call it a “cultural mediator”), including in these two museums. After that, I worked on two commissioned books: *69 Stories of Desire*, an illustrated volume on erotic art, and *How to Make Love in the USA*. Despite the seemingly silly title, I’m quite proud of it, as I was able to include a rather important study on the American sexual context.

**MS:** How did you conduct your research? How did you approach your interviewees?

**JMT:** It all started in Sydney when I came across Pat (now Patrick) Califia’s excellent book, *The Lesbian S/M Safety Manual*. The apparent contradiction between sadomasochism and safety puzzled me. But I discovered a smart, useful book written by a psychotherapist. Fascinated, I read almost everything published by Greenery Press

and Daedalus. And, of course, Krafft-Ebing. I also explored less interesting authors like John Norman, the highly kitschy Sacher-Masoch, and de Sade, who bored me just as much as the few psychoanalytic books I read on the subject. Then I encountered Elaine Scarry's outstanding work, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Additionally, I had read extensively about concentration camps and prisons, as well as Joseph Saadé's harrowing book *Victime et Bourreau*, written by a man who killed around a hundred Palestinians. I reread *Story of O* and laughed out loud at the thought of Jean Paulhan as the (fantasised? only fantasised?) dom of *Dominique Aury*. Finally, I read the very, very delightful, very, very witty, very, very insightful, and brilliantly written book by Faty (probably with help from Paul Fournel), a sex worker specialising in BDSM. For the interviews, the internet was a great help, and I also received valuable leads from a dom—though I distanced myself from him when I realised he was more of a pimp than a dom.

**MS:** How was the book received in anarchist circles at the time? In Germany, BDSM was still highly stigmatised within leftist and anarchist circles, heavily influenced by the so-called anti-sex feminism of Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin. Was it different in France? How was the book received within the francophone BDSM scene? Were you invited to debates or presentations of the book in specialised spaces?

**JMT:** I expected both the worst—in a way—and that anarchists would recognise how directly useful responsible BDSM could be for anarchism. From what I observed, both were true.

I encountered narrow-minded reactions like: "*Sadists are always men, masochists are always women*", from people who simply refused to engage with the content. Period. But I also saw that many people—though surprised, often *very* surprised, just as I had been when I first read Pat Califia's book—immediately grasped my perspective. One thing did surprise me, though. Although I believed it was obvious that I was writing from an outsider's perspective, several people saw me as a "grand master", an expert. The connection between BDSM and anarchism probably unsettled practitioners from other political backgrounds. In such cases, my emphasis on my lack of personal involvement allowed non-anarchists to avoid potentially uncomfortable debates—especially about unconscious sadomasochism in the military and religion, or about people who take the practice far too seriously and deny both authentic consent and humanistic boundaries.

As for La Musardine's refusal to publish the book—despite having previously published *The Erotic Guide*—I suspect it was precisely the anarchist perspective that put them off. Because barely five years later, *La Musardine* picked up the topic—without the slightest political reference!

Similarly, *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Was this bestseller useful? Yes and no. The same applies to the explosion of BDSM pornography online, much of which I consider dangerous—although some platforms are wise enough to highlight consent and after-care.

**MS:** At the time, Michel Foucault—who was himself active in BDSM—was our primary reference. How do you see this from the outside? Can Foucault’s analysis of power be applied to BDSM? What, in your view, can the anarchist scene learn from the BDSM subculture regarding power analysis and sensitivity to power dynamics? Did you get the impression that anarchists who also practiced BDSM had a sharper awareness of power relations—or were at least more sensitive to them?

**JMT:** I was... fifteen years old? I’m crossing Rue Saint-Jacques, at the level of the Collège de France. A car brakes sharply—right in front of me. Surprised, a little startled, I look at the driver. A bald head. A fine pair of glasses. Michel Foucault! He looks at me—with a... hungry gaze. And he obviously hopes that I’ll speak to him. I keep on walking. Back then, in the ’70s, I knew he was homosexual. But that he practiced BDSM? No, of course not. Well, from a less self-centred perspective... it’s obvious that Foucault talks so much about power because—excuse the expression—power turns him on. In the most physical sense of the word. And I think he’s both right and wrong to see power everywhere. Right, because no human relationship can do without an element of power—whether it be an atom or a galaxy. But saying that is banal, and I don’t believe that Foucault’s very general notion has significantly advanced anarchism. Foucault was far more useful in his precise analyses—especially in the history of madness. What a loss that Foucault never dared to write an analysis of BDSM! He undoubtedly feared being exposed, which would have ruined his reputation and, with it, the effectiveness of his work.

Could he have analysed the psychological dynamics of BDSM as well as the authors of Greenery Press and Daedalus? One can only hope. Is Foucault useful for BDSM practitioners? In my opinion, much less so than those authors, though not entirely useless—especially when it comes to thinking about language. Is Foucault useful for anarchism? He could be much more so if someone were to write a short, very clear, anarchist book to popularise his ideas. One should remember the following: Foucault aims to reveal where power exists—even in places you wouldn’t expect it. In contrast, responsible BDSM seeks to stage power, to portray it theatrically. The exact opposite! Foucault digs and uncovers power where it was hidden, whereas BDSM consciously creates power where none existed before the relationship began. Foucault exposes a reality by tearing off a mask. BDSM makes a fiction visible by donning masks—and usually only temporarily. Foucault shouts, “This is reality!” Responsible BDSM reminds us, “Don’t confuse that too much with reality!”

**MS:** Can anarchism learn from BDSM—and if so, what exactly?

**JMT:** Oh yes, very much! I used to be a little scout... For the rest of my life, ranks and badges will, to me, bear the mark of the infantile. An excellent antidote! The same goes for BDSM. When power is reduced to matters of bodily fluids and role-playing, BDSM becomes an outstanding countermeasure! I hope—without knowing for sure—that anarchist BDSM practitioners are indeed developing a special sensitivity and a finer competence in perceiving and dismantling power. In any case, if homosexuals have the famous “gaydar”—a radar for spotting other gay people—then since working

on this book I've developed a "radar", a wonderful tool for detecting unconscious or hidden sadomasochism. I sincerely hope that I have helped to awaken that radar among vanillas and to strengthen it among BDSM practitioners.

**MS:** Apolitical BDSM practitioners often accused us as a group—"Bad Flowers"—of politicising sexuality, and, in a way, of mimicking the struggles of the queer movement. Do you think it makes sense to view any form of sexuality through a political lens? What does that mean to you?

**JMT:** Politics is the art of collective human coexistence. Sexuality is rather dismal when it remains solely individual. In reality, sexuality is almost always simultaneously individual, interpersonal, and collective—on the one hand because every human society, without exception, establishes thousands of rules about sexuality; on the other because we have hormones; and finally because we have parents—or at least adults—who educate us, serving as both role models and deterrents. To overly politicise sexuality is an abuse—and not just on the right wing of the spectrum. But not politicising sexuality at all, not reflecting on the often dangerous connections between politics and sexuality? That would be a political failure and a recipe for sexual misery.

**MS:** One aspect that struck me is your choice of references. You rely heavily on feminist authors like Judith Butler, Pat Califia, and Gayle Rubin. Aside from Alex Comfort—whom you label an anarchist—I found no classic anarchist women referenced. Was there nothing? The only sources I recall—and that we discussed back then—were Charles Fourier's *From the Free World of Love* and an interview with an anarchist dominatrix published by the British Anarchist Federation.

**JMT:** When classical anarchism emerged in the 19th century, what would later be called BDSM was universally and officially regarded as a dangerous pathology. How many positive references to non-vanilla sexuality can you find in classical anarchist writings? As for Fourier: He would surely have rejoiced in today's diversity of genders, but I do not recall—correct me if I'm wrong—that he explicitly, and I emphasise explicitly, praised practices such as flagellation, cock and ball torture, St. Andrew's crosses, and the like. One might assume that he would have approved of responsible BDSM—safe and consensual, no less. Presumably. I regret not having found the interview you mentioned. The idea that freedom should not stop at the bedroom will take a very, very long time to catch on. One had to wait until the 20th century.

**MS:** Another aspect I noticed is that you never mention the Marquis de Sade. How come? It would have been natural—after all, the term "sexual sadism" derives from his name.

**JMT:** His books bore me. They are the only great French classics of the 18th century that bore me. Why? His works strike me as purely masturbatory—in the most literal sense. Had he written just one, very short, powerful work—something like *Story of O*—it might have been a pleasure to read. But if one found so much joy in devouring d'Holbach's marvellous work *The Unmasked Christianity*, then how is one supposed to endure the 128th sodomy and the 623rd whipping that only serve the solitary ejaculations of Monsieur le Marquis?

**MS:** Two aspects you haven't addressed, yet which are often mentioned in this context: a) the violent character of BDSM and b) its alleged reproduction and reinforcement of power structures.

**JMT:** The violence that characterises many BDSM practices is clearly a central feature. The same applies to rugby, American football, wrestling, boxing, martial arts, etc. As long as everything takes place under the banner of "Safe, Sane, Consensual"—that is, among aware, voluntary adults who know their limits—where is the problem? I think that responsible BDSM, on the contrary, offers an excellent way to discharge one's desires for dominance so that these desires do not poison the rest of one's life.

**MS:** You say you've developed a "radar" to identify BDSM practitioners. What typical traits enable you to spot them?

**JMT:** The radar isn't so much for directly recognising BDSM practitioners as it is for detecting unconscious or hidden sadomasochism—or hints of BDSM. Of course, a black leather collar with a padlock often points to a submissive person—but not always. Certain body language or a particular energy—a burst of energy that emerges impulsively but is immediately reined in—is typical of some masochists. Likewise, there are dominant individuals who exude an astonishing mix of self-assurance and cunning. But my radar is more about the portrayal of BDSM than about the people themselves. Conversely, I must admit I sometimes wonder about myself, since I've been approached several times: first by actively interested dominatrices and then by even more interested male submissives. I can only imagine what their radar must have detected. For those who understand, may it be granted!

An example of my radar: At the Louvre, two slaves sculpted by masochist Michelangelo are on display. One has his eyes closed. He accepts his bonds—and with them, that sexual desire blinds him and blocks his path to Christian salvation. The other slave, however, who rebels against desire, has his eyes open, for he sees salvation. Beneath the hips of the slave with closed eyes—the lascivious slave—one finds a baboon. An unfinished baboon, perhaps, but still a baboon. In Western classical art, the monkey symbolises the artist: the monkey mimics man, and the artist mimics nature.

**MS:** In a rather short chapter you address the topic of "militarism". Personally, I was a bit surprised by that. There is no doubt that the fetish for uniforms exists—and that there have been discussions about their use in our leftist circles. At large BDSM/fetish events in France, these fetishes are sometimes not accepted or even rejected because they don't conform to the dress code requirements. Where do you see the connections between the army, militarism, and BDSM?

**JMT:** The connections between militarism and BDSM shine so brightly that they could illuminate entire metropolises! Especially among switches—those who both give and receive orders. Hundreds of thousands, even millions of men have loved becoming soldiers because they wanted to feel bound by discipline, protected, carried, elevated, consoled. Every rank, every award offers a remedy, a boost for fragile or incomplete egos. The orders received allow one to maintain mental and emotional inertia. The orders given cause vanity to swell. Irresponsible sadism feels extremely at home in

an institution of professional murderers, while uncontrolled, misunderstood, or unconscious masochism is downright happy in a hierarchy that is almost always well-staffed with superiors.

In the army, the uncertainty that torments some simply disappears. And the certainties are explicit, unmistakable. I suspect that in the minds of the vast majority of volunteers, unconscious sadomasochism runs wild unimpeded—and many of them know exactly why they committed themselves. Finally: the theatricality of BDSM... a joke compared to that of the armies! What is a sub who licks a dom's boots compared to five thousand men marching in step? What is a signed contract or a collar presentation compared to the awarding of a military medal before the troops' frontline or in the honour court of veterans?

Regarding the second topic—the uniform fetish. This is no accident. Uniforms disgust me as much as they make me laugh. There's only a small step from theatricality to ridiculousness. One final personal anecdote, which partly explains why my revulsion is so intense and why I would have been incapable of writing politely about uniforms: I was sent to primary school two years earlier than the other children—at 4, not at 6, I was sent to preschool. I spent almost my entire school career in boys' schools, gymnasiums, and boarding schools. As a result, I was always convinced that I was physically weaker—much weaker—than the others. A false assumption—I have a perfectly normal body. But all the other boys were superior to me in every athletic exercise and would often beat me up if I hadn't wisely sought the friendship of one of the strongest boys in the class.

When I was thirteen and my mother—desperately trying to turn me into an elegant teenager—asked what beautiful article of clothing she could give me, I answered: “A pair of boots”. “Oh, really?” “Black”. “Oh”. “High”. My mother was, as you can imagine, appalled. It suddenly occurred to me that I had just asked for SS boots. Phallus symbols. And when it comes to the fetishisation of uniforms, that's ideal—something well known in BDSM circles. A uniform is a green light for the institution that demands it. “One does not greet the man, one greets the uniform”, the military teaches very clearly. By asking for SS boots, I was asking to become a man—a strong, cruel man, and thus a feared one. My shame was deep. However, it had the excellent effect that for the rest of my life I lost all respect for uniforms—regardless of their type.



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