

Sexuelle Kultur II: Sexpositivities in Bulletpoints

The past few months I've been thinking a lot about the sex-positive community in Germany. What do we actually mean when we say "sex-positive"? Who are "we"?

There seem to be different mindsets that have slightly different values and visions. This is due to the history of the sex-positive movement, which brought about different understandings of the term. It is also the consequence of a differentiation within the sex-positive movement today. So far, we don't even really have labels for those sub-groups, or at least they are not widely used.

Based on a presentation I have prepared with Alexander Horscroft for the Xplore 2020 as well as two inspiring texts by Beata Absalon (sex-moralistic, sex-negative, sex-positive)

<https://luhmendarc.blog/2020/05/03/sexmoralism-compulsory-sex-sexpositivity-sexnegativity/> and Anna Mense (mainstream, alternative, experimental sex-positivity;

unpublished), I have collected some thoughts on the issue.

I believe that in order to create a strong sex-positive vision, **we need to understand where we're coming from as well as what is happening within our sexual culture at the moment.**

That is quite an undertaking, though. My musings are not meant to be a precise analysis; they are neither complete nor thorough. So, please forgive my numerous oversimplifications. Also keep in mind that the map is not the territory – this is not an accurate description of reality, but one possible way of differentiation, hopefully providing a starting point for further discussion.

Disclaimer: I am being critical here and sometimes intentionally sharp in tone. This does not mean I am being spiteful (I am probably guilty of every single thing I'm picking at, by the way). **It is essential to be able to disagree with one another while pursuing a common project, like creating a better sexual culture.**

Before we get to the history of sex-positive culture, let's start with who we're certainly not...

Sex- Negative I (sex-moralistic, anti-sexual)

Question:

“What may I want?”

Features:

Moral judgment; assessment of natural=healthy=right=good sex and unnatural=dangerous=wrong=bad sex; stigma, shame & guilt; insists on binary of gender

Worships:

Heterosexual marriage and family

Personal needs:

Safety, belongingness

Personal identity:

Conformist, conscientious

Consent:

The lust of a woman has to be “awakened” by a man

Opposes:

Change (=Chaos), empowerment (especially female), sexual freedom (especially female)

***Sex-moralism* is a more precise term for what we call “sex-negativity” today. It aims to control sexual expression on the basis of moral judgments. In** our culture, roughly until the middle of the 20th century, basically the only legitimate framework of sexuality was heterosexual marriage. Homosexuality, promiscuity and sex-work were considered bad, dangerous and sick. Sex was deemed to hold some ominous power, able to jeopardize societal stability. The “eros” or “libido” was considered a strong force that needs to be properly canalized in order to make

civilization possible. Even though the general attitude towards sexuality has changed a lot, sex-moralistic ideas and assumptions are still present in our culture today.

Products:

Various forms of -isms and -phobias; sexual deformations due to shame and suppression; sexual diseases and unwanted pregnancy due to lack of information, ...

Sexual Revolution (“Free Love”)

Question:

“What could I want?”

Features:

Fight for women’s rights, peace, and environmental protection; intentional violation of traditional values; trying to break free through transgression, rapture and ecstasy (sex, drugs, music); spirituality (“New Age”)

Worships:

Freedom, Love, Joy

Personal needs:

Self-Fulfillment

Personal identity:

Individualistic, autonomous

Consent:

“Love is good for you!”

Opposes:

Sex-Moralism

The term “sex-positivity” has been arguably coined by Wilhelm Reich in the early 20th century, but has not been widely used until the last two decades. **Influenced by some of Sigmund Freuds findings, attitudes towards sexuality started to change. Aside from a means to procreate, sex was now recognized as a pleasurable leisure activity.** However, the focus was almost only on penis-in-vagina-sex, while female desire and pleasure were invisible or even denied. This only changed with the “sexual revolution”, which was originally the title of a book written by Wilhelm Reich in 1945. There, he criticized the sexual morals of his time, claiming that **a suppressed sexuality would lead to deformations of the personality, frustration, aggression and a paralysis of creativity. Consequently, sexual liberation would entail the dissolution of power structures and a peaceful society.** These thoughts were very influential for the Flower-Power-Movement with its characteristic love of experimentation and exploration. While this counterculture’s hopes for societal change were not fulfilled, they did succeed in inducing a historical change of public sexual morals. By the 1960s, the erotic was established as a normal part of life.

Products: Acceptance for different sexual needs, orientations and ways of loving; tolerance of premarital sex; normalization of masturbation and pornography; sex education in schools; decriminalization of homosexuality and abortion; empowerment of women; LGBT movement; Women’s Studies and Gender Studies; ZEGG and other sex-positive communities; Tantra Massage; Workshops and Seminars, ...

“Counterculture” describes a certain subgroup of a given culture that has long-term societal influence. In contrast to “subculture”, counterculture is understood as the questioning of primary values and norms of the mainstream culture. Visions and utopian concepts often play a role.

Sex-Positive Movement

Today, “sex-positive” serves as an umbrella term and self-designation for those who advocate the acknowledgment and appreciation of adult, consensual sexuality as a natural and healthy part of life. They emphasize autonomy, sexual education and safer sex. We can distinguish two forms of sex-positive culture that overlap somewhat: Mainstream/conventional and subculture/alternative.

Sex-Positive (mainstream / conventional)

Question:

“What should I want?”

Features:

Assessment of bodies, sexual desires and practices on the basis of what counts as “normal”, at the same time obligation to seek and find ones own unique/individual sexuality; pressure to achieve and perform; goal-orientation

Worships:

Beauty (as in appearance); visibility (as in display of sexiness); bodily autonomy; pleasure; self-optimization

Personal need:

Self-Esteem

Personal identity:

Conformist-individualistic

Consent:

“No means No”

Opposes:

Sex-Moralism

Those who grew up in the 90s or later are more than used to sexual freedom and liberality. There are less and less shared moral guidelines. By now, the media is full of sexualized displays, pornography and well-meant advice. The use of dating apps is widespread. However, restriction and control work very well without moral pressure: Sexual liberation in this mindset means that a “good” sex life is pretty much obligatory, since it is healthy and good for you as well as an essential part of your self-esteem. You better constantly “work on it”, preferably within the framework of a heterosexual, (semi-)monogamous, long-term relationship. Experimentation and a spirit of adventure is expected (in the form of sex positions, toys, porn, threesomes and mild SM), but be careful to not get too kinky. Make sure you appear as “normal”, even though you’re not sure what that means exactly. Feel insecure and helpless when your body does not function as it should, since the only sex that really counts follows the standard-script of erection – penetration – ejaculation. If that does not work, spend a lot of of money on help and solutions (books, therapy, drugs).

The good news is that the acknowledgment of non-binary/non-normative sexualities and relationships is constantly growing. It might even be fashionable to try out non-monogamous lifestyles (especially when your relationship gets boring) and playful encounters with the same sex.

Even though they have the same “opponent” (sex-moralism), **mainstream sex-positive culture seems to look down on the idealism and radicalism of the sexual revolution. There is no political momentum to be found here.**

It is questionable if this mindset should be counted “sex-positive” at all. Sex-commercial?

Products:

Phenomena such as “erotic capital”, “performance anxiety”, “involuntary celibates”, “date-rape” and “slut-shaming”; toys in all forms and colors; zillions of books on how to be better lovers; free (mainstream) porn; safer sex routines, ...

Sex-Positive (subculture / alternative)

Question:

“What do I really want?”

Features:

Equality of humans, genders, sexual preferences and sexual practices; diversity (of sexualities); sense of community; process-oriented sex

Worships:

Consent, personal growth, self-awareness, authenticity, happiness, connection, mindfulness

Personal need:

Self-actualization, (self-)validation

Personal identity:

Individualistic, autonomous

Consent:

“Yes means Yes”, enthusiastic, negotiation

Opposes:

Sex-moralism, sex-positive mainstream

“Subculture” is a sociological term for the more or less diverging culture of a part of a society. It is used to describe different lifestyles. They are characterized by norms that can differ strongly from those of the bigger social system. Nevertheless they keep in a certain accordance with some of the basic norms; otherwise they would no longer be part of it.

Here, terms like “sex-positive” or “sex-positive movement” often indicate the *non-mainstream forms* of it. The lines between them are all but clear, though. It looks like the characteristics of this undercurrent of sex-positive culture have started to develop in the 1980s, partly as a reaction to HIV/AIDS (new ways of safe sexual interaction for LGBT-people), partly in the context of the split between sex-positive and sex-negative feminism.

In alternative sex-positive culture we still find many of the values present during the sexual revolution: Environmentalism, new forms of spirituality, sex as a path towards self-knowledge and general happiness, liberated sexuality as precondition for a peaceful, egalitarian society. Sex is regarded somehow magical, holy and powerful, while the power now seems to lie not in rapture, transgression, ecstasy, and revolution. Rather, **sex is being worshiped as a facilitator of interpersonal connection, intimacy, community and authentic self-development.** Even though today the political ambition has become fairly small, a certain ethos of deviancy is frequently attributed to individual and collective activities – sex as an act of civil disobedience.

So, for the sake of precision, we could also call this “sex-positive cultural-political activism”.

“Deviance” describes an activity or behavior that violates social norms. It is a behavioral disposition that is not in conformity with an institutionalized set-up or code of conduct. Although deviance may have a negative connotation, the violation of social norms is not always a negative action; positive deviation exists in some situations. Although a norm is violated, a behavior can still be classified as positive or acceptable.

Products:

Better advice literature; good sex education on the internet; numerous variations of erotic parties, festivals & retreats; sex-positive conferences; professional training for tantra massage, sexual assistance, BDSM professions and other forms of sex-work; LGBT/Trans Toys; homosexual marriage; associations and NGOs; ethical, consensual non-monogamy; regular local gatherings for polyamorous and BDSM folks, ...

Sex-Negative II (feminism)

Question:

“Who/what determines what I want?”

Features:

Critical analysis, awareness of power structures (especially patriarchy, capitalism)

Worships:

Equality of men and women, true freedom of choice

Personal need:

Self-transcendence

Personal identity:

Autonomous, construct-aware (integrated)

Consent:

Is it even possible?

Opposes:

Sex-moralism, many aspects of mainstream and alternative sex-positivity, especially compulsory/obligatory sex

The sex-negative feminist movement has its roots in the 60s and continues until today. It is trying to get to the bottom of the entanglements between sex, power and violence caused by patriarchy and tries to free women from all kinds of violence and compulsory sex. In contrast to sex-positive feminism, these folks do not consider sexual freedom to be intrinsically emancipatory. But note that many of them claim to not judge people or their desires, but societal and political structures. They encourage us to ask if and how our supposedly free choices are influenced by the culture that surrounds us. Also note that sex-negative feminism

is not a counter-movement against the sex-positive feminist counter-movement against sex-moralism. Their relationship is complex, but not hostile.

Products:

Countless misunderstandings on all sides; nuanced blogs and detailed analyses; incredibly uncomfortable questions

Sex-Critical

Question:

“Why do I want what I want?”

Features:

(Self-)reflection; solidarity; radical inquiry; critical analysis (discussion, comment, evaluation and assessment)

Worships:

Discernment

Personal need:

Self-transcendence

Personal identity:

Autonomous, integrated

Consent:

Collaborative discussion (e.g. Betty Martins “Wheel of Consent”)

Opposes:

Ignorance and deliberate blindness

"Discernment" is the ability to form your own judgment. "Judgment" denotes the correct classification of a situation or a fact and is a prerequisite for action based on rationality. A discerning individual is considered to possess wisdom, and be of good judgment; especially so with regard to subject matters often overlooked by others.

As we have seen above, in general sex-positivity proclaims that the only valid benchmark for sexual activities is the well-being and agreement of the people involved. You might have noticed that **every one of these aspects is much more complex than they seem at first glance.** **Recently, critical voices make themselves heard within the sex-positive movement, asking the ensuing questions.** Much of the criticism could actually be coined "sex-negative", but mixes and mingles with other issues. Since this discussion is only beginning and many of the questions have not been asked yet, I can only give a fragmentary outline of the presumably most important topics:

Subversion

What is subversive about sex-positive culture today?

Liking sex and saying it does not shock anyone anymore (wouldn't it be more subversive to be truly monogamous until death? Or to not like sex? Or even be indifferent about it?). Our culture is not sex-negative in the sense that it suppresses sexual expression in general and, fortunately, mainstream sex-positivity seems to be constantly influenced by alternative sex-positivity.

"Underground" is a term that in many branches of art describes the part of a scene that is not aimed at the masses, produces independently and often also represents a counterculture. Its opposite pole is the so-called mainstream, the art which is generally established or produced for the "mass". The underground often plays the role of an avant-garde; its patterns are later taken up in the mainstream, but deprived of their subversive content.

Representatives of the so-called underground often attack established or commercial art publicly and deny their artistic quality: A shallow mass product that is only interested in commercial success and also mostly represents reactionary content.

People who create underground culture claim to provide the more sophisticated (such as more experimental) events that are also independent from commercial success and therefore arise purely out of creativity and idealism.

So who or what are we fighting?

In my opinion, the true danger right now is to get stuck in an uncritical attitude. Few want to be critical after decades of fighting against being judged. Can't we just love each other?

Solidarity and mutual appreciation are essential values that we should definitely keep cultivating. At the same time, **disputes and struggles might be the only way to collaboratively unveil traps and predetermined breaking points that would otherwise stay invisible. Those lurk beneath the surface, wherever norms and values sneak in through the backdoor that we thought we had dismissed. And that's why it is worthwhile to think critically about all forms of sexualities – including non-normative ones.**

Economy

How do we save our sex from being commodified?

The transformation of sexual morals still continues – quite unspectacularly, but nonetheless profound. Looks like progress. But: **The sexual freedom we are enjoying today is not the result of a societal or political interest in our well-being. Sex is (erroneously) not considered powerful anymore. It actually seems to have become a somewhat ordinary matter. Capitalism has no reason to object against sexual liberty either:** The more we diversify our lifestyles, the more individual and flexible we become, the better! (Have more dates. Buy more sexy stuff. Buy more books. Book more workshops. Bring your friends.)

Sex-positivity is not for free. Rents and infrastructure must be paid, professionals must make a living. There's pretty much nothing we can do about it. Can we still make a statement against the commercial exploitation of desire and "libidinal mass consumption" (thanks, Houellebecq!)? Can we provide equal chances to develop an erotically fulfilling life? Can we ensure that the necessities of life do not put us under too much pressure?

Power Structures

Can we want whatever we want?

A common misunderstanding within sex-positive culture is that every sexual choice we make is empowering, because we are presumably surrounded by a culture that tries to prevent that. If a person enthusiastically and authentically consents to a sexual interaction, they are acting against the status quo, which makes it liberating, right?

Wrong. **We are never free from our socialization, it influences all our actions and decisions. We learn what is sexy and what is not. So what does it mean, to be “authentic”?**

We might also ask if activities that feel emancipatory for us, are also emancipatory for others.

An example:

Power structures between men and women are being eroticized; we can see that everywhere. Imagine a female professional submissive working in a dungeon out of presumably free choice, and because she finds it incredibly hot. Is she liberating herself? Or is she reproducing and reinforcing patriarchal power structures? How do we evaluate personal preferences in relation to possible societal consequences?

Another example:

Is that praised sexual freedom of women (which is becoming the *new norm*) yet another form of semi-forced female sexual availability?

Sex-positive culture is not free from power structures and violence. They are just less obvious. If we value negotiation and consent, we must think about what freedom means and where violence begins. How do we find out if the necessary conditions for consent are given? What would we choose if we had a real choice?

Compulsory/obligatory sex

Is being liberated, liking sex and finding it easy the “new normal”, like some sex-negative feminists believe to observe?

Often enough sex-positivity is being confused with enthusiasm for sex, with having a preference for lots of unconventional sex with lots of people. A possibility becomes a norm becomes an expectation becomes an obligation. What are the expectations we are trying to meet? Do we try to perform in a certain way? Do we feel pressure to not be prude, insecure or uncertain? How much self-esteem do we derive from our “fuckability” and the amount of sex we

have? What do we think about those considered “unfuckable” (fat, black, old, disabled, poor, uneducated, trans-people, ...)?

There are plenty of people for whom sex is neither “good” nor easy. The slogan “sex is nice and good for you” that permeates through sex-positive media might not be very reassuring for those. Might we consider that sex is neither bad, wrong and dangerous *nor* inherently good, pleasurable and healthy?

Bubble-Building

What is our relationship with the rest of the world?

A strong and supporting community is undoubtedly essential. Unfortunately the sex-positive community seems to be characterized by a strong focus on safety, security and homogeneity of opinion in many regards. That is especially obvious where it is closely interlinked with what we might call the new-age-community or contemporary eco-spirituals. There’s nothing wrong with that in principal, but it comes along with a certain amount of political ignorance and laziness. Let’s be honest: **Most of us live a perfectly conformist life, while celebrating the nonconformism we identify with in a purely sexual way, within the provided times and spaces.**

And it better be pleasant. Negativity has such a bad reputation that we simply pretend it is non-existent. This is true for unpleasant emotions on the one hand: Those are not really negative, but “learning experiences”, and we take the full responsibility for them even when it is obvious that they are caused by political, societal, economical or power structures. It is also true for disagreement.

We have to stay aware of the fact that the small size of our communities puts us in the danger of quickly developing new normativities and small-minded group-think. At the same time our networks provide excellent opportunities for fruitful friendly dispute, cooperative thinking and for practicing alternative, maybe even original ways of living.

Aside from that, it looks like somewhere on the way we have lost much of the collective aspect of our movement. In line with the ultra-individualistic attitude prevalent in western culture, we seem to be celebrating an extremely hedonistic and egocentric form of sexuality. Sexologist and sociologist Volkmar Sigusch calls this “Selfsex”. Self-exploration, self-improvement and self-awareness are extremely useful abilities, and indispensable for building a healthy, sustainable subculture. But let’s not forget that one of our goals is to make sexual happiness possible for

everyone (right?), be it the unfuckables at some specific event or all those clueless people out there who don't even know we exist.

Products:

Polyamory-Teach-Ins; salons and discussion groups; even better blogs and even better books, ...

“Subversion” refers to a process by which the values and principles of a system in place are contradicted or reversed, in an attempt to transform the established social order and its structures of power, authority, hierarchy, and social norms.

Are you cringing? I have cringed, for sure. What are they suggesting? Being discerning about the very thing that is supposed to provide relief from that cold, ultra-rational world out there? Being critical of the very people that are supposed to form my fluffy little bubble where everyone loves each other unconditionally and respects each others opinions as equally legitimate? Dismiss my deep subjective experiences and feelings as the only source of meaning and orientation? Question the intrinsic value and holiness of my body and desires? Abandon the comfort of believing in something and making it part of my very identity? Yuck!

Well. Let's keep our fluffy unicornesse, please. I'm not saying it's wrong. I am asking: **Is it smart to content ourselves with that?** I don't think so, for various reasons. Here are two of them. One: If “we” want to be recognized and heard, we have to play “their” game, at least to some degree. Two: If we really mean it when we say “holistic”, “informed” or “conscious”, it would make a lot of sense to develop a habit of critical thinking.

Sex-Positive (experimental)

Question:

“What do we want together?”

Features:

Acknowledgement of ambiguity, ambivalence and uncertainty; develops ethics and ways of cultivation; emphasises learning and practicing

Worships:

Responsibility, creativity, courage, aesthetics

Personal needs:

Self-actualization, self-transcendence

Personal identity:

Integral, transpersonal

Consent:

Multimodal ways of understanding, continuous agreement

Opposes:

Standstill, Status Quo

Experimental sex-positivity aims to understand and explore the complexities of sexuality in thought and action.

What does “experimental” mean here?

Open and unbiased

Experimental sex-positive spaces do not serve the sole purpose of having an exciting and erotically fulfilling time. They invite sexuality as one of many ways to enjoy oneself and each other. Sex is considered neither to be especially special or important, nor to be commonplace and innocent. It does not occur to anyone to justify their not being sexual. Feeling good is not the goal here. The whole variety of emotions is welcome.

Acknowledgement of complexity

Experimental sex-positive spaces attempt to build a compassionate collective that can handle difficult emotions as well as ambivalence and ambiguity. Sex can be complicated and our desires full of contradictions. Here we learn to handle tough situations gracefully and compassionately.

Risk awareness

Sex is never, ever harmless. Sexual spaces will never be safe, no matter how much effort we put into rules, norms and habits (and even if it were – would that still be sexy?).

Consent/negotiation is vital, but it does have its limits and weaknesses. Instead of trying to make things as safe as possible, experimental sex-positive spaces promote personal and collective responsibility. They also facilitate the development of values, virtues and skills we need for that.

Collectively created

Experimental sex-positive spaces encourage autonomous and independent action, trying to break with the abundant attitude of consumerism (and because it's so much more *interesting*). Instead of selling an experience, organizers provide their expertise in order to support a group to create something new. In order to explore the plethora of possibilities, it can be helpful to abstain from pursuing individual desires.

Engagement with various aspects of life

Experimental sex-positive spaces explore, on one side, how culture, society, politics and economy affect our sexuality. On the other, they seek to find out how sex-positive spaces can help acquire

knowledge and abilities that eventually influence their development. Collaborational and organizational structures often try to reflect that as much as possible.

Various interrelated ways of knowing, understanding and questioning

Experimental sex-positive spaces try to reconnect thought and action. “Unbiased” does not mean purposeless or unintentional. Most of these events are based on carefully crafted concepts, addressing specific topics or questions. They are often intentionally trying to avoid certain ideas, norms and language prevalent in sex-positive culture. Conversely, well-made sexual events provide a lot of food for thought.

Products:

Erotic art and performance; sensual-critical dadaism; humor and satire; sex-philosophy workshops; ethical principles in sexuality-related professions; avant-garde sexual sub-cultures, ...

Some final thoughts

It’s complicated, and rightfully so. After all, we’re dealing with one of the most complex, interrelated and essential parts of human life here. There are no easy answers.

Considering that, and considering the past, like, one hundred years, it’s time to honor the long, long way we’ve come already. That was only possible because people dared to ask uncomfortable questions and stand up for radical ideas. “Sex is nice and good for you” used to be one of them, but it is not any more. We need a new vision. **Sexual revolution is not over, and never will be.** There’s no point in denying that I do have an opinion as to which version of sex-positivity is the best. But honestly, I don’t know what to do with this. We need some common ground in order to be influential. We also need dissent in order to develop ever better ways of loving and changing the world. Can we have both?

Some people – including me – believe that by cultivating sexuality we can practice skills that help us living a good life. So we are actually not just creating better sex, but a lifestyle (*Lebensform*) – that is no trivial matter! Since we hope to infiltrate mainstream culture (right?), we are

developing something that will not only affect us and our community, but society as a whole.

With this in mind, what are the next steps on our path?

“Avant-garde”: In the broadest sense, the term assigns a 'pioneering role'. Avant-gardes are people who initiate new, groundbreaking developments. In contrast to the trendsetter, who only triggers short-term new fashions, the changes emanating from the avant-garde have a more fundamental and longer-term effect.

Avant-garde can generally be understood as a creative and innovative movement that rarely belongs to the dominant social and economic power elites. The term avant-garde appears in various contexts, but mostly refers to either a political, cultural or artistic movement that leaves the beaten track.

References

Many thanks to all those brilliant people who had the patience to discuss these topics endlessly with me: Corinna, Alex, Bernd, Johannes, and especially Anna as well as the “Sexual Culture” group, which is in the process of taking its shape this very moment.

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Volkmar Sigusch

Das Sex-ABC

Wikipedia

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https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexuelle_Revolution

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All text in italics is quoted from the german or english Wikipedia.

Also kindled by sparks coming from

Ken Wilber

JP Sears

Yuval Noah Harari

(For a detailed analysis of mainstream sexual culture, see: Iris Osswald-Rinner: Oversexed and Underfucked. Über die Gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Lust

For more on normativity and how to question it, see: Meg-John Barker: Re-writing the Rules. An Integrative Guide to Love, Sex and Relationships)