

Beyond Yes and No: A Communist's Guide to Consent

By J.K. Singh

Talking about sex is hard—but talking about consent is even harder. Between poor sex education and misleading media portrayals, we rarely learn how to communicate boundaries and desires openly. A communist guide on the topic.

We are not taught much in sex education classes at school. We can consider ourselves lucky if we learn how to put condoms on bananas or get handed a tampon. But it's not really that helpful when you're trying to have sex. In class, the focus is on genitals, with the female ones often being misrepresented (for example, the clitoris is not a small spot that is veeeeery hard to find), and homosexuality, bisexuality and asexuality are not really touched upon. Intimacy, responsibility or feelings are hardly ever talked about. Instead, sex education falls back on the wide range of distorted representations of intimacy and sexuality in bourgeois society.

Um, what does that mean?

Whether in movies or series: intimacy is portrayed in extremes. Either the basis is love until the end of the infinite universe, or it's about proving one's own wo

rth by getting someone into bed. There's not much in between. Usually, of course, the man also knows what the woman needs. Without asking, he can just feel that the woman wants to be kissed and, through telekinesis, everything fits together seamlessly until suddenly you're naked – and the woman gets an orgasm from pure penetration. That's the "nice" version; after all, there are still plenty of moments where the woman says no, but the man of course knows very well that this is just a secret code word for "fuck me". Accordingly, he acts on it, and as a spectator, you don't know what to do with the sexual violence you've just seen.

What can happen as a result?

In summary, that doesn't sound very sexy. And it isn't. The idea that you have to "conquer" your love interest leads to many problems in practice. This is how sexual boundaries are crossed and assaults occur. This can happen consciously, for example, if you do not take a "no" as a "no" because you believe that you have to convince the other person. Or unconsciously, when you just do it because you believe that asking is a sign of ignorance and weakness. Likewise, you feel pressured yourself because you are trying to live up to an ideal standard that does not even exist. Thus, sexuality degenerates into an individual performance in which you magically know what the other person is thinking and have to "prove" yourself.

But why is that so?

This is mainly because, in bourgeois society, sex is primarily there to ensure reproduction. For the ruling class, that means offspring to whom they can pass on their property (this inheritance usually takes place through the male line). For the working class, this further secures the existence of the family, which, among other things, is also the place where one can recover and reproduce one's own labor. This may sound quite outdated, but it is the basis on which much is happening today.

Under capitalism, 1. bourgeois states and large corporations are always in economic competition and therefore need as many new workers as possible on the market. And 2., especially in the oppression of women, that they must be pushed into unpaid domestic work and the role of the educator, so that the capitalists have to spend as little as possible on reproductive work - otherwise they would make less profit. Thus, domestic labor is pressed into the private sphere. Both patriarchal inheritance and private reproductive labor ensure that women are supposed to fit into the typical bourgeois family, because only in this way can the man also inherit his property to "his children" and have a place to retreat to in the working class for recreation. Women are degraded to mere birth and child-rearing machines that don't need to enjoy sex. They are supposed to fixate on only one man, whom they love for life, and to justify the fact that they now also have to do most of the

housework (in addition to their jobs) unpaid, they are portrayed as being worth less and more stupid. All of this is reflected in our society. Like housework, sex is increasingly being pushed into the private sphere. The 1968 movement played an important role in pushing back outdated sexual morals, but it was unable to address the fundamental problem. As a result, we now have a more open approach to sexuality in many areas, but this has also led to a liberalization of the sex market with all its negative facets.

This means that sexuality under capitalism is not intended for personal development. Even if it seems that as an individual you can enjoy unlimited freedoms, that is not the point at all. Rather, sexuality is strongly influenced by the fact that existing patterns of oppression such as racism, sexism and LGBTIA+ discrimination are reproduced, which actively prevent us from developing freely and reflecting prejudices. For example, women of colour are often exoticized or there is a very strong focus on the man as the initiator, while the woman is often a silent accessory. Our sex life is therefore always a question of our socialization and cannot be considered separately from society.

What can help?

Feminist movements have developed two concepts in this context. On the one hand, there is the “No means No!” concept. This is based on recognizing a “no” as such, without asking follow-up questions that can build up pressure (Are you sure? Don’t you want to drink more?) and accepting the other person’s boundaries. However, this concept also excludes a few important things. In our society, we are socialized with certain role models. Not everyone finds it equally easy to say “no”. In addition, you only get feedback when it’s too late – that is when you are about to cross a line. That’s why the concept “Yes means yes” was developed. By actively asking a person what they want to do and if they are enjoying themselves, a violation of boundaries can be avoided more easily. Sexual acts are not just a one-way street, after all.

That’s easy to say, isn’t it?

Let's be honest: actively asking is damn hard. The generally existing image of sex in our corner of society tells us that sex is always great and super hot, and that our value is determined by bringing our partner to orgasm without talking. As a result, sex becomes more of an individual achievement and not something that you share. On top of that, there are the stereotypical expectations. In male socialization, asking is considered weak - after all, a "real man" takes what he wants and thus shows his strength. Female socialization is characterized by playing an accepting role, after all, you have to please the guy.

Apart from that, depending on the situation, there are still fears of failure and the fear of being judged for one's own needs. All in all, this results in a cocktail of doubts that is not easy to swallow. So no. Actively asking questions or talking about your own sexual desires is damn hard for many of us. It's uncomfortable, embarrassing and you're afraid. But it's worth it. The only question is:

Where do you even start?

Confronting yourself?

Learning to reach sexual consent doesn't happen overnight, it's a process. Start by confronting yourself: examine your own needs, your own desires, your own limits. If you've never done this before, it's probably quite difficult. Female socialization and some mental illnesses make it more difficult to deal with. In practice, this can mean asking yourself questions and answering them one by one. For example: Am I good at saying "no" and "yes"? Can I accept myself? What do I actually feel like, what do I want to experience? Am I afraid of rejection? If so, what does that do to me?

In addition, it can help to put in the work to accept your body. Social beauty ideals can exert huge pressure: whether it's breasts that are "too large" or a penis that is "too small", 99% of all people do not feel comfortable in their own skin. This automatically also affects how we feel about others. You should be aware of this and start to critically question existing beauty ideals.

And lastly: seriously talk with friends about sexuality. It may sound strange to

talk about it with people you don't want to be intimate with, but exchanging ideas with others can show you what boundaries look like for others or that you may not be alone with your fears and difficulties. This is especially difficult in male circles of friends, because there is a great inhibition to talk about feelings and especially in school sexuality is something that is used to distinguish oneself. But that can be dealt with too. It may help to discuss it in a conversation with a particularly good friend, as opposed to a group. If there is no way to talk to friends about it, you can look for other ways. For example, talking to your parents if they are relatively open-minded or, if nothing else works, you can also try to see a psychologist. Contrary to popular clichés, they are not only there for mental illnesses, but also for simple mental problems.

Even if it sounds exhausting, it is worth trying these steps and developing further. Finding out your own needs, limits and desires – and then being able to express them – is a good basis for seeking conversation with others.

Where do you start as a couple?

In reality, your heart is beating wildly and you're not quite sure what's happening and somehow you end up kissing. Or you're drunk at a party. But rarely have you taken the time to ask what the other person wants. You haven't learned that either. But it's not as hard as it may seem. A good starting point is to ask how well they can express their own needs and limits. In other words, how easy is it for them to say "no" in specific moments? Is it easy for them to do so, or would a hand signal be better? How do I know what the other person likes? How do you get out of uncomfortable situations? What provides security? What causes fear? What is extremely embarrassing?

The list of questions can be extended by a few more. The rule here is: instead of assuming that you know what you are doing, just ask. On this basis, agreements can be made between people, such as non-verbal communication. Or you may find it difficult to take the initiative and appreciate it when someone else takes it and you want them to follow through – but intentionally and not just out of the blue.

At the same time, one should be aware that there are certain power relations that can distort the answers and stand in the way of dealing with each other as equals. These are often associated with existing mechanisms of oppression, such as sexism or racism, such as typical female socialization, which ensures that one is more likely to accept what the other person does. Other dynamics such as experience gaps, drug use, relationships of dependency (financial, for example) or a large age difference can also lead to one person being attributed more awareness and the other person simply subordinating.

This also means being aware that consent does not always ensure that everything goes smoothly. The “Yes means Yes”-principle is not an abstract, rigid set of rules in this context. While some things are clear, such as “No means No”, sexual consent actually describes a relationship between people who become intimate with each other and can therefore be practised and exercised in very different ways. It’s about trying not to reproduce violence and not just imposing your own needs, but doing what you enjoy together. It’s about knowing and taking into account that socialization and social patterns of oppression exist and can get in the way or make it difficult to access each other. Sometimes you only realize afterwards that the situation didn’t go the way you wanted it to. That can happen, even if you try your best. Sexuality is a field of tension and at the same time there are an incredible number of oppressive moments in our society. That’s why it’s also important to be willing to talk about what you’ve experienced afterwards, to accept criticism and to actively address things you were unsure about yourself. Sex can only be really enjoyable and beautiful for both parties with a basis of cooperation, mutual consideration and trust.

All of this sounds exhausting and not romantic at all!

For some people, it is exhausting to deal with themselves and the needs of others. But if you don’t like hurting others (which is perfectly ok, provided it happens within a consensual framework) and putting your own needs above others, then you realize that this is the most practical way. The idea of romance that we are taught in movies and Netflix shows is based on the fact that it crosses boundaries. And what is romantic about that? It just seems

easier because you avoid the danger of getting rejected. Such statements are just statements with which one wants to be freed from responsibility.

So we all ask for consent and we have a liberated society?

No. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Some people benefit from the current social dynamics. They have no interest in changing anything because to end the root cause of these forms of oppression, they would have to give up their possessions and privileges. The idea that it is okay to sleep with people without asking them for consent stems from patriarchal-capitalist dynamics. And they are reproduced, for example through socialization. In order to change that on a fundamental level, we have to create new material conditions.

So we might as well leave it at that?

No. As revolutionaries, we know that we cannot simply live liberated lives in bourgeois society. After all, we cannot simply get rid of the constraints, such as the one of having to sell our labor power. We can't just wash away the way we were socialized and start over. But we can be aware of the mechanisms within bourgeois society. Actually, this is a must.

After all, we are fighting for a liberated society without exploitation and oppression. This works best when we fight for improvements in the here and now and try to deal with social discrimination, instead of postponing that until "after the revolution". That is why we demand, for example, socialization of housework, because it attacks bourgeois society's sexist material basis and would be an enormous relief for the working class. Furthermore, as an organization, we have decided to actively include sexual consent as part of our debating practice and education. However, this can only be successful on a large scale if we remove the system's basis by banishing the bourgeois family and gender stereotypes to the dustbin of history! We can only do this in a system without wage labor, where decision-making is no longer in the hands of the (mostly male) ruling class. That is why we have to collectively take ownership of production, expropriate the core industries and place them under the democratic planning of the working

class. Only in this way can we collectively determine the reproduction of labor and thus remove the basis for the double exploitation of women, sexism and role clichés.