

“Safe Sane Consensual”

The Making of a Shibboleth

by slave david stein

under the Guardianship of Master Steve of Butchmann’s

History is what happens while you’re doing something else — and it may not be until years later that you discover what you did was “historic.” When i agreed in mid-1983 to be part of a committee charged with drafting a new “statement of identity and purpose” for New York’s Gay Male S/M Activists (GMSMA), which i’d co-founded two years earlier, i had no idea that what most people would remember of our work would be a single phrase: “safe, sane, and consensual S/M.”

Tens of thousands — maybe hundreds of thousands — of kinky men and women all over North America and around the world, many of whom have no idea what “GMSMA” stands for, know “Safe Sane Consensual” (SSC). They’ve seen those words on T-shirts, on Web sites, in personal ads, in the bylaws and foundation statements of hundreds of organizations, on porn videos, in virtually every kink magazine, in every book or pamphlet or instructional video produced for kink-curious audiences. It has become literally a shibboleth: a linguistic marker used to distinguish “us” from “them.”

Blame me, if you must, though it was not a result i ever intended. The August 1983 report of that GMSMA committee contains the earliest use of the phrase anyone has found, and it seems very likely that i was its author. The statement we drafted reads in full:

GMSMA is a not-for-profit organization of gay males in the New York City area who are seriously interested in safe, sane, and consensual S/M. Our purpose is to help create a more supportive S/M community for gay males, whether they desire a total lifestyle or an occasional adventure, whether they are just coming out into S/M or are long experienced.

Our regular meetings and other activities attempt to build a sense of community by exploring common feelings and concerns. We aim to raise awareness about issues of safety and responsibility, to recover elements of our tradition, and to disseminate the best available medical and technical information about S/M practices. We seek to establish a recognized political presence in the wider gay community in order to combat the prevailing stereotypes and misconceptions about S/M while working with others for the common goals of gay liberation.

This wording was adopted without change by the board of directors on August 17, 1983, and from then on the statement has appeared in every GMSMA brochure and membership application as well as other literature distributed at meetings and events or mailed to thousands of individuals and hundreds of other organizations. (The only changes made over the years were to drop the reference to New York City and to replace “males” with “men.”)

While i have no specific memory of coining “safe, sane, and consensual S/M,” i do remember that i came to the committee meeting where we hashed out the statement

with a complete draft that was close to the final text. Both of the other members of the committee, Martin Berkenwald and Bob Gillespie, are now gone, but before his death in September 2000, Bob told Gil Kessler (who discovered the committee report in the GMSMA archives) that he believed i had come up with the formulation. It certainly sounds like my style, and it seems to grow out of other pieces i wrote in the early 1980s where i struggled to distinguish the kind of S/M i wanted to do from the criminally abusive or neurotically self-destructive behavior popularly associated with the term "sodomasochism." However, i'm not claiming authorship out of pride — i think the phrase's popularity may have done as much harm as good — but to support my interpretation of its origin.

The Past Recaptured

Looking back, i'm convinced that "safe" and "sane" were not conjoined by chance but derived from an exhortation familiar to most Americans, "Have a safe and sane Fourth of July." Every year while i was growing up, i heard that phrase on TV, or saw it in the newspapers and on billboards, and it stuck. Apparently it stuck with the late Tony DeBlase, too, because "safe and sane" appears in an unsigned essay he wrote for the Chicago Hellfire Club's *Inferno 10* (1981) run book:

In 1980 the following was adopted as the club's statement of purpose: ". . . to provide education and opportunities for participation in S&M sex among consenting adult men and to foster communication among such individuals." Responsible S&M has become more popular and less feared in the gay community and Chicago Hellfire Club continues to serve its community — striving always to educate and promote safe and sane enjoyment of men by men.

Inferno 10 was the first i attended, and it made a big impression on me, so Tony's words may have suggested the application of "safe and sane" to S/M, and even the association with "consensual." But the GMSMA statement of purpose was the first place all three terms were jointly applied to S/M.

As a kid, what i took "Have a safe and sane Fourth" to mean was, "Have a good time, but don't be stupid and burn the house down or blow your hand off." More than two decades later, that seemed to fit S/M just fine. What we meant by "safe and sane S/M" in 1983 was, "Have a good time, but keep your head and understand what you're doing so you don't end up dead or in the hospital — or send someone else there." It seems likely that the echo of a phrase trusted authority figures (like firemen and police officers) have used for many years explains why many Americans felt immediately comfortable with "safe, sane, and consensual" — and also why many others, less inclined to trust authority, were immediately turned off by it.¹

Clearly, GMSMA's consistent use and dissemination of the phrase through the 1980s and beyond laid the groundwork for its explosive spread in the next decade.

¹ The S/M community often splits along a fault line defined by divergent responses to authority. Some of us are drawn to authority, and even fetishize it, while others rebel against authority and cultivate an outlaw aura. These divergent tastes are expressed not only in how we dress for sex, what kind of playspace décor turns us on, how we talk during a scene, and how we behave toward our sex partners and peers, but also in how we respond to efforts at organizing and mobilizing the community. To go into this in any depth, however, would require an entirely different article.

But the most important vectors were the S/M-Leather Contingent in the 1987 March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights and the even larger S/M-Leather-Fetish Contingent in the 1993 March on Washington. During a planning session for the 1987 march called by GMSMA and held at New York's Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center on April 21, 1987, representatives of the S/M-Leather Contingent discussed the pros and cons of "Safe Sane Consensual" and various alternatives ("Safe Responsible Consensual" is the only one I still remember). At length we settled on SSC as the most effective slogan for leather-oriented march publicity — never dreaming how fateful our choice would turn out to be. From June 10, 1987, onward, the slogan appeared at the top of all correspondence, press releases, and newsletters from the contingent, and it was the centerpiece of thousands of T-shirts as well.

The 1993 march may have been even more instrumental in popularizing the SSC slogan, since in addition to its use in publicity material and on T-shirts, it was also emblazoned on the S/M-Leather-Fetish Contingent's 20-foot-wide banner. For the entire day preceding the march, that same banner hung across the grand entrance of the government building on Constitution Avenue that hosted our huge S/M-Leather-Fetish Conference. Thousands of men and women from all over the U.S. and many foreign countries saw those three words, identified with them, and took them back to their local communities.²

The Devolution of a Slogan

The trouble is, once an idea is reduced to a slogan that can fit on a button or T-shirt, no one can control its meaning. Everyone who sees it interprets it with his or her own prejudices and preconceptions — it all depends on how you understand the key terms. If you read "safe," for instance, as "avoiding pointless or unnecessary risks," then SSC will look very different from the way it does if you read "safe" as "risk-free."

While most people active in S/M organizations have taken SSC as validating a form of sexuality still considered "sick" or "crazy" by much of our society, others have read the same formula as devaluing "edgeplay" and even simple excitement in favor of cautious, conventional, and completely scripted sex games. Shortly after the 1987 March on Washington, T-shirts appeared reading, "Unsafe Insane Nonconsensual," and some prominent S/M educators were seen wearing them once or twice, but these were more of a joke than a serious critique. Thoughtful, articulate attacks on SSC didn't appear until later, particularly Laura Antoniou's "Unsafe at Any Speed, or Safe, Sane, and Consensual, My Fanny,"³ Joseph W. Bean's "The SSC Mistake"⁴ and "The Future of Leather,"⁵ Phil Julian's "Beyond Safe Sane

² Earlier versions of this essay stated that "Safe Sane Consensual" appeared on the 1987 S/M-Leather Contingent banner and that the slogan was chosen for the contingent by GMSMA's Community Involvement Committee. Bruce Marcus, a longtime GMSMA board member and officer who was a key figure (along with his partner, the late Barry Douglas) in organizing both contingents, recently corrected these points based on documents and photos in his files.

³ Delivered as part of a 1995 speech in Seattle and subsequently published in Tristan Taormina's short-lived zine, *Pucker Up*; a transcript of the whole speech is currently available on the Web at www.sexuality.org/latrans.html.

⁴ Published in the newsletter of Vancouver Activists in S/M, *VASM Scene* (January/February 1998, Vol. 16, No. 2), and available online at www.iron-rose.com in the Library area as well as on other sites.

Consensual,"⁶ and Gary Switch's "The Origin of RACK / RACK vs. SSC,"⁷ which proposes "Risk-Aware Consensual Kink" as an alternative slogan.⁸

In the beginning, however, "safe, sane, and consensual S/M" wasn't a slogan but simply the preamble to a statement of purpose that goes on to talk about such things as community, responsibility, tradition, education, and gay liberation. Moreover, in that statement the SSC formula was explicitly said to embrace all levels of S/M practice, from the first steps of novices to the edgeplay of veterans, as well as all degrees of commitment, from "a total lifestyle" to "an occasional adventure." This context demonstrates that SSC was originally intended neither as an ideal to live up to nor as a way of defining S/M in general. But it was definitely intended to draw lines between S/M behavior we wanted to encourage and other behavior we wanted to distance ourselves from.

Being sexually aroused by the infliction or suffering of pain, bondage, or humiliation can lead not only to ecstasy and fulfillment, but also to destructive or self-destructive behavior that no ethical, grounded person would condone. S/M releases powerful emotions and involves intense vulnerability, and the results aren't always pretty. Sometimes people do things because of their kinks that wreck their lives — or the lives of others. *This must not be forgotten or swept under the rug in the quest for social acceptance.*

The "safe, sane, and consensual" formula was put forward as a *minimum standard for ethically defensible S/M*, because that must be the basis for any defense of S/M rights. Today, however, and especially in the hetero and pansexual communities, S/M itself (or "BDSM," which some find more palatable) is frequently defined in terms of SSC, while the SSC slogan is treated with quasi-religious reverence and even explicitly referred to as a "credo" or "creed." Instead of asking people to think about what it means to do S/M ethically, and to make the hard choices that are sometimes necessary (if only between what's right and what's right *now*), many organizations today act as if these issues have all been settled, assuring us that sadistic or masochistic behavior not deemed SSC isn't S/M at all but something else — abuse, usually, or domestic violence or poor self-esteem.

As a result, some people use simplistic conceptions of SSC as sticks to beat anyone whose limits go beyond theirs, while others apparently think mere lip service to the SSC idol absolves them of any responsibility to behave with decency or compassion. The idea has taken root that whatever is safe, sane, and consensual is good, and whatever isn't is bad. But that's as cockeyed as saying that all food approved as safe

⁵ Delivered as the keynote address at the Great Lakes Leather Conference in Louisville, Kentucky, on Saturday, September 30, 2000, and available online at www.leatherpage.com, under Columns/Opinions.

⁶ Posted on www.L LeatherNavigator.com in 1999 as one of his "Black and Blue" columns but no longer available.

⁷ Published in *Prometheus* #37 (May 2001), the magazine of The Eulenspiegel Society (TES) in New York. Gary coined the term RACK on the TES-Friends list on 11/25/99, and it has been discussed on a number of lists since.

⁸ According to e-mail from an Australian leather Master who goes by the name SARRAS, in some "old guard" circles the slogan was "Committed Compassionate Consensual," but I haven't found any independent corroboration of this.

by the U.S. government is equally nourishing and flavorful, while whatever hasn't been approved isn't food at all. Just because an S/M interaction is safe, sane, and consensual doesn't mean that it's well done, mutually satisfying, or worth emulating! Even experienced tops and bottoms can have an off day, and even if nothing goes obviously wrong, a well-planned scene may fizzle rather than sizzle. On the other hand, an extremely risky, "lunatic," or dubiously consensual scene might provide peak experiences that neither party — assuming they survive it — would want to have missed. *Being SSC alone is not enough*, because it says nothing about why we do S/M in the first place. Or maybe it says too much? The idolization of SSC occurred during the same period that S/M activity came to be almost universally referred to as "play," S/M practitioners as "players," and the tools we use as "toys." This is probably no accident: no one tells us to "Have a safe and sane" — let alone consensual — day at work. Sensing something lacking in SSC as an ideal, Race Bannon and John Warren,⁹ among others, have suggested that a fourth term should be added: "fun." But even while conveying that good S/M is more than just SSC, the amended formula — "safe, sane, consensual, and fun" — reinforces not only the mistaken notion that SSC is a criterion of value at all, but also that S/M is something you do merely "for fun" and not with any serious intent.

There is, indeed, such a thing as "serious play" — some of humanity's finest artistic, intellectual, and spiritual achievements fall into that category — but it's not what most people think of as "having fun." The same revolution that decoupled heterosex from procreation and gave us sport-fucking has turned S/M into a sex-optional form of recreation (explicit equations of S/M with sports are commonplace in pro-S/M discourse today). Less hazardous than football but almost as strenuous, it even has aerobic benefits.

The Dangers of Definition

To define is to limit, and GMSMA's original purpose was not to establish an orthodoxy but to facilitate dialogue — that's why we resisted attempts to promulgate any "official" definition of S/M, or of SSC.¹⁰ Back in 1983, we knew that beyond the obvious applications of "safe," "sane," and "consensual," there are vast gray areas and no absolutes. Reasonable people can differ on what these terms mean or apply them differently in different contexts. But they provide a starting point for making choices about the *kind* of S/M you want to do (not the specific kinks and scenes, of course, but the ethical principles that shape your practice).

Safety, especially, differs from one individual and situation to another. A maneuver that's perfectly safe for a gymnast to perform could easily lead to a broken neck for an untrained tumbler. A flogging that one bottom finds exhilarating might damage another with less experience or preparation. A session of rigid bondage and sensory deprivation that leads me to ecstasy might send you to a mental hospital.

⁹ See Race Bannon, *Learning the Ropes: A Basic Guide to Safe and Fun S/M Lovemaking* (Daedalus, 1993), and John Warren, *Safe, Sane, Consensual and Fun* (Diversified Services, 1996).

¹⁰ Nonetheless, the evolution of SSC into a tribal shibboleth was already implicit in GMSMA's use of it.

Even crossing the street, we have to decide what level of risk is acceptable — why should our responsibility be any less in an S/M scene or relationship?

What we meant by "safe S/M" back in 1983 — as the full GMSMA statement of purpose implies — was the opposite of *careless, irresponsible, or uninformed* S/M. We meant doing your homework and taking reasonable precautions. We never intended to promote only G-rated S/M or to turn the leather scene into a risk-free playpen where pain doesn't really hurt, bondage isn't really constraining, and dominance is being ordered to do what you want to do anyway.

We left "sane" and "consensual" much vaguer, "sane" because it's pretty vague anyway once you get past the obvious meaning — "able to distinguish fantasy from reality" — and "consensual" because we didn't realize how tricky it is. We didn't have the benefit of a couple of decades of rising awareness of just how hard it can be to leave an abusive spouse. We did not discuss, back then, whether consent was something you could give once and for all, or if it has to be renewed continuously — the now-familiar paradoxes of "consensual nonconsensuality." Without such an analysis, however, it's all too easy to read the requirement of consensuality as analogous to the rules against "date rape," meaning that the top, dominant, or Master/Mistress has to stop and *ask permission* of the bottom, submissive, or slave at each point where the type of activity changes. This might work okay in a play session between people who are simply interested in sharing certain sensations, but it would fatally subvert any ongoing Dominant/submissive or Master/slave relationship — or even the kind of intense S/M scenes where the bottom goes nonverbal and is temporarily unable to make choices.

The choice GMSMA faced back in 1983 was whether to explore/discuss/defend the full range of S/M behavior — thus opening ourselves to attack based on every case of predatory sadomasochism critics could uncover, or invent — or to limit the field in some way. By saying we were interested in "safe, sane, and consensual S/M," we were trying to draw a very basic distinction: between, on one hand, the bondage, torture, or control inflicted on willing partners for mutual satisfaction and, on the other hand, the coercive abuse of unwilling victims. We thought this restriction would leave those hostile to all S/M no *rational* basis for objection to what GMSMA was up to, exposing the more fundamental sex phobia that underlies most attempts to police sexual expression. (Setting ourselves up as a new brand of sex police was the farthest thing from our minds.) At the same time, we felt that the SSC emphasis would help those of us who had to some extent internalized the same prejudices — which back then meant most of us! — to accept that you don't *have* to become a victim or a predator to satisfy sexual needs for pain or control.

Unfortunately, it is not only sensationalistic journalism and reactionary religion that persistently equates S/M with coercive behavior, but also much of our own erotica, and this, too, is no accident. Back when GMSMA was getting started, almost everyone understood S/M in coercive terms because those were the only terms we had. The first step in bringing consensual S/M out of the closet was to forge a language to talk about it. SSC was a spectacularly effective part of that process, but today it is sometimes more of an obstacle than a help in continuing the kind of dialogue that builds community — and even more of a hindrance to the partly

nonverbal dialogue of seduction and consent¹¹ that underlies satisfying leathersex between individuals.

Freedom from Fear

For most people in my generation and earlier, the images of S/M were initially as scary as they were arousing. And taking the first steps toward realizing our fantasies — from either side, top or bottom — was even scarier. We didn't yet have the benefit of two decades of S/M education and activism, and the iconography of gay S/M in *Drummer* magazine and elsewhere was very edgy, very "noncon." In the early 1980s, as again today in certain circles, being known as "dangerous" or "having no limits" could seem sexy or exciting, while being "taken" or forced into submission could seem more authentic than a negotiated encounter. While it was probably no more likely for an S/M scene back then to end up in the hospital than it is today — maybe less likely — the gay leather scene had an aura of danger that made me and many others hesitate to get involved in it, or have mixed feelings about it, despite our strong need for S/M. *A desire to reduce that aura of danger was one of the chief things that led us to form GMSMA in the first place*, and i'm sure there was a similar motive for founding many later organizations as well, particularly the heterosexual and pansexual ones.

Obviously, we've succeeded to a remarkable extent, with more than a little help from the zeitgeist. Since the 1980s S/M has grown progressively less scary, to the point that many teenagers today are more comfortable with piercing, bondage, and dominant/submissive role-play than their parents were with oral sex. For these kids, coming out into S/M is no big deal — much less of one, in fact, than coming out as gay or lesbian. (Thank you, Madonna and Trent Reznor!)

But maybe the pendulum has swung too far. The critics of SSC have focused mainly on the "vanillification" of S/M that an overemphasis on safety and mundane "sanity" can produce. For a good many bottoms, risk-taking is part of the *point* of doing S/M — if a scene doesn't get their adrenaline pumping, it's a waste of time. For me and many others, though, fear is a turn-off — we need to feel safe as a precondition for surrendering control; only then can we fly. Yet even for us, the transformation of "safe, sane, and consensual" from a vague guideline to an all too rigid ideology has a downside.

Fear can be a survival mechanism, and novices who rush into heavy scenes on a first date, counting on "safewords" or the SSC "credo" to protect them, can be horribly disillusioned even if they're not physically traumatized. The risk of being snuffed by a psychopath is minuscule (though not nonexistent). What seems all too common today, however, is for novice bottoms and submissives to be used and discarded by tops and dominants spoiled by the endless supply of fresh meat — and for novice tops and dom(me)s to be used and discarded by bottoms and subs who never learned that responsibility for a good scene goes both ways. Instead of approaching our S/M encounters like gourmets relishing a rare feast that required planning, skill, and perhaps some sacrifice to arrange, more and more of us are fast-

¹¹ Joseph W. Bean has suggested "seducing consent" as an alternative to the negotiation paradigm for leathersex encounters. See his *Flogging*, pages 18-20 (Greenery Press, 2000).

food junkies satisfied to eat and run. Instead of engaging with each other as unique individuals who happen to need or simply enjoy kinky sex, more and more we treat our partners — both short-term and long-term — merely as props for our fantasies (a tendency exacerbated by cybersex).

Safewords can't save you from a bad scene or a bad relationship with someone you didn't know as well as you thought you did, and chanting "Safe Sane Consensual" like a mantra can't replace years of study and practice in guiding you through the maze of choices we all must make. Whether you do S/M to achieve ecstasy, intimacy, or self-transformation, or simply to have a good time, all that the terms "safe, sane, and consensual" can do is suggest where to begin drawing some boundaries. After that, the real work of establishing — and testing — your individual limits begins.

Author's note: An early draft of this essay was presented in a workshop at the Leather Leadership Conference in Washington, D.C. in April 2000. It is available on the LLC Web site (www.leatherleadership.org) and was also published in one of the final issues of The Sandmutopia Guardian and later reworked slightly for the Spring 2001 issue of NewsLink, the GMSMA newsletter. Although my understanding of the genesis of the "safe sane consensual" idea hasn't changed, my views of its later development and possible future usefulness have evolved substantially since then. This more complete and fully thought through version — which also corrects some historical errors — was published in the 20th Anniversary issue, September/October 2002, of VASM Scene, the newsletter of Vancouver Activists in S/M of Vancouver, British Columbia. The essay was commissioned by Joseph W. Bean for an anthology on leather history to be published by the Leather Archives & Museum, and it may eventually appear in such a volume, though Mr. Bean retired as executive director of the LA&M before seeing that project through to completion.