



Orgasm

and the West

History of Pleasure from the 19th Century to the Present

Robert Muchembled

ORGASM AND THE WEST

A History of Pleasure
From the Sixteenth Century to
the Present

ROBERT MUCHEMBLED

Translated by Jean Birrell

polity

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ORGASM AND THE WEST

A YEAR OF PLEASURE

The abbey of Thélème exists. Rabelais would have loved to spend a calm and productive year there, as I did, in a select society, doing what he wanted, on the sole condition of residence. At the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, I found peace of mind, the warmth of friendship and the refined taste for all the pleasures of the intellect; those of the body too, sometimes, as long as I avoided the excess of powdered garlic in the sauces of the remarkable restaurant and as long as I did not too openly display a penchant for artificial paradises. No one who has not seen 39 pairs of eyes range from his own glass of wine to 39 other glasses of water can appreciate the power of personal self-control under the weight of social pressure! To conform becomes a joy, or at least a relief.

In this Eden of researchers, with its huge libraries open day and night, even on Sundays, work becomes an ethic, an art of living, even a sign of predestination for the heirs of the Protestant spirit. Confronted with this world, the European hedonist finds plenty to incite him to efficiency. I was surprised to discover how much the enjoyment of simple pleasures is enhanced when some of them are missing. Absence and lack have taught me the full value of champagne, foie gras and aromatic cheese. I have been better able to understand, as a result, the extent to which 'old Europe' today differs from this country born of its labours, still attached to a virile and competitive view of life that leaves less space than at home for the immediate delectations. These two great cultures manage pleasure very differently, as we will see from the conclusion to this book. It was a long immersion in the United States that enabled me to appreciate this more clearly. I remember the comment of a philosopher after I had addressed my peers on the subject of carnal pleasure. At table, next

day, he snarkily observed: 'I've been here for more than 30 years. It's the first time I've heard the word "fuck" in public.'

I am filled with nostalgia when I think of the days I spent at the Institute. On the path leading to my office, in front of Fuld Hall, still haunted by the shadow of Albert Einstein, I bumped into colleagues and friends every day. I talked to them often and at length, watching the antics of squirrels, birds and rabbits in spring, and in May I saw cicadas fall from the trees, insects that emerge from the ground once every 17 years only to reproduce and die in July. I wondered if these creatures, too, experienced pleasure, in particular the pleasure of sex; but without talking about it too much to my American colleagues, for fear of being considered too French, too interested in subjects best kept for the privacy of the bedroom . . .

May all those who helped me to conceive and write this book find here the expression of my sincere gratitude:

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INTRODUCTION

The idea of pleasure covers a multiform reality. From sensual gratification to the aesthetic delights or the bliss of the spiritual life, by way of the pleasures of the table and not forgetting the perverse thrills, the spectrum of human happiness is very varied. In ancient China, under the Han dynasty, scholars defined the term precisely by relating it to an action (to take or to seek pleasure), to a state (such as euphoria) or to feelings and needs. They distinguished three possible forms of pleasure: the immediate satisfaction of the desires; the delight associated with pride of possession, of goods and of persons (palaces and gardens, fine horses, beautiful women, magnificent robes, good cooking, exquisite wines, etc.); and the pleasure derived from a philosophical reflection on the perception of joys experienced, which sometimes led to one of them being deferred in order ultimately to obtain a more extended and more intense rapture, even to its being spurned. The great sages advised the emperors to pursue a true politics of pleasure, so as to give to the expenditure of energy, time and wealth entailed in seeking it forms likely to strengthen the state, the family and the person, rather than corrupt them.¹ They believed that the virtue and the asceticism of the Confucian way crowned the edifice that led mankind towards what Westerners would call happiness.²

But let me not overreach myself. This book makes no claim to range so widely. I have chosen to confine it to sexuality, returning from this perspective to a subject that has been little studied in spite of the synthesizing work of Michel Foucault in 1976.³ Contrary to Foucault, I believe that a powerful repression of the carnal appetites was established at the very heart of our civilization around the middle of the sixteenth century, and that it only really lost ground in the

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1960s. Producing a fundamental tension between the libido of each individual and the collective ideals, this process constantly promoted a powerful labour of sublimation throughout this long period, under the successive cultural covers of religion, Catholic or Protestant, of the ideal of moderation of the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment and the doctors of the nineteenth century, and of the laws of the capitalist market. On the coercive base laid down in the seventeenth century were then imposed alternate cycles of liberation and constraint, whose fluctuations I believe to be fundamental to an explanation of the general dynamism of Europe, because they persistently created the need to compensate for the mental disequilibrium they caused. On the one hand, the accumulation of unsatisfied desires during periods of intense frustration gave rise to a growing demand for emancipation, which eventually unleashed a libertine surge; on the other, many people subjected, willingly or not, to the tyrannies of moral rigour developed a behavioural structure which literally drove them forward, helping to develop their personal talents to the full in many fields of activity, such as religious proselytism, war and world conquest, artistic and intellectual activities and international trade.

Many of the classic explanations for the originality of the European experience revolve around the antagonistic pairing of spirituality and economics. It seems to me, however, that to refer primarily to Christianity or to capitalism is not wholly satisfactory, because these notions, while they describe objective realities, are also cultural products, the translation into discourse of the social and material facts whose contours they define. This is why I propose a broader interpretation which involves the totality of human relations, maintaining that the sublimation of the erotic impulses has been the basis of the originality of our continent since the Renaissance. It went well beyond the norms imposed by the theologians and governments, permanently controlling the explosive and highly destabilizing potential of sexuality by constantly adapting to major changes. I believe that its apparent form, the repression of lust, is an essential element in the invention of Western modernity and provides the key to understanding the intimate relationship forged between the spiritual and the material, the body and the mind, one human being and others. Max Weber linked the birth and development of capitalism to the Calvinist ethic, a way of explaining the European genius by religious sociology.⁴ Broadening his perspective, I consider that the fundamental originalities of our collective 'fabric' are the product of an intense effort to control and reorient carnal desire; however, I see this as something consistently distilled by all the life forces at work in the common

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matrix for nearly five centuries, not as a simple moral consequence of the Protestant spirit. Here, I agree with Norbert Elias, who described the dynamic of our culture in terms of personal sublimation put at the service of overall progress, through 'the civilizing process',⁵ but I wish to complement his work, primarily focused on the generic evolution of the phenomenon and the production of the social bond, in a way that will expose the functioning of the hidden mechanism that has allowed this evolution by taming the volcanic power of the sensual appetites. Since Freud, such an approach may appear banal. However, it remains to be explained how society, source of invisible powers, is able to channel our intimate desires so as to sublimate them and make them serve the group as a whole. My theme combines a history of sexual pleasure, a consideration of the body, both in scholarly theory and in its concrete perception, and an investigation of the human Subject, from the age of contempt and almost total taboo, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to the present triumph of narcissism.

For the purposes of this book, I have decided to restrict my study to the 500 years between the Renaissance and our own day, a period I see as possessing a profound unity, and to compare two great countries, France and England. Significantly different, according to well-established stereotypes, implacable rival possessors of the greatest world empires until recent decolonizations, both upholding prestigious traditions, they prove surprisingly similar in the matter of the perception and management of the orgasm. One Catholic, the other Protestant, their long parallel evolution encourages me to play down the importance of religion in the definition and the establishment of an identical self-control of the physical passions, culminating in the production of a 'libidinal economy' which has been the basis of the extraordinary European growth since the Great Discoveries. Rival capitals, Paris and London were its favoured laboratories. At the end of this period, the United States – both rebellious heir of proud Albion and fascinated by her French rival at the time of La Fayette – will serve as a third yardstick by which to measure both the ancient similarities with the hedonistic Old Continent and the recent increasing divergences from it.

My book is in four parts. In the first I present my thesis, through the main characteristics of the Western approach to carnal pleasure over the last five centuries and the way in which it has formed a particular pact with our civilization. Christianity tried from the beginning to confine the molten lava of the vital instinct under a carapace

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of interdicts and prohibitions, but it was only in the middle of the sixteenth century that the moral pressure intensified, among Catholics and Protestants alike, whose action was supported by strict new laws promulgated by the civil powers. Personal self-control and the guilt increasingly attached to immodest or obscene behaviour helped to impose a system of sexuality that was purely procreative, acceptable solely within the context of marriage, its pleasures even then to be enjoyed only in moderation. All other behaviour was condemned. Although such a glaciation of behaviour was more moralist's dream than true reflection of reality, it still contributed to the growth of an inner tension in those who tried to master or curtail their desires in obedience to the commandments of the Church and of monarchical legislation. The vital energy thus channelled was frequently reoriented to the benefit of the great collective ideals. In fact, the increasing surveillance of the body and the mind denounced by Michel Foucault had unintended positive consequences, because society benefited from the accumulation of energies that ensued.⁶ It also helped to imprint deep in our culture, generation after generation, the indelible mark of the suffering at the heart of pleasure, accompanied in some people by a pronounced taste for transgression. The erotic unsayable was therefore transformed into a secret motor of human actions; it produced an instinctual personal imbalance that was more creative than destructive and it generated alternating phases of repression and liberation that enriched society. Vice and virtue succeeded one another, each in its turn putting its mark on a century, on a few decades or on a short space of time, until the 1960s, when women's sexual liberation and the unstoppable advance of the aspiration to instant happiness signalled major changes, even a revolution.

The three parts that follow describe the main stages in this evolution since the Renaissance.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, pleasure could be conceived of only in pain, sorrow or rebellion. This was not only due to the ancient Christian mentality which opposed the exaltation of the body the better to save the soul. The tradition now found a new consensus among decision-makers and men of power. States became increasingly concerned to ensure the obedience of their subjects, and the towns, thriving thanks to nascent capitalism and obsessed with economic efficiency, demanded more discipline on the part of their inhabitants. The individual emerged, because men and women were driven to affirm their existence and to experience their guilt more deeply before God, the king and the representatives of governments. Indelible imprints, the prohibitions linked pleasure closely to sin.

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Strict enforcement of the laws made only too real the mortal danger threatening transgressors, as some were publicly burned for speaking too openly about the delights of physical love. Such memories would linger in the West for a long time to come, right up to the radical changes of the 1960s. Perhaps they have not entirely disappeared in our age of epicureanism?

Between 1700 and 1960, two great cycles succeeded one another, the first of moral laxity, the second of Puritanism. The Enlightenment showed eroticism in a new light and pornography flourished, but the Victorian veil came down with a vengeance, between 1800 and 1960, concealing breasts and other things that could not decently be contemplated. Nineteenth-century medicine seized control of sexual power, which it bestowed in its entirety on adult married men. By emphasizing the natural coldness, even frigidity, of their chaste spouses, it assured the triumph of the double standard of masculine behaviour, which allowed men to have no complexes about frequenting the prostitutes who alone were capable of offering them sexual satisfaction. It imposed a form of laicized sublimation, however, insisting on the absolute necessity of moderating the instincts, because it likened sexual excess to a sickness that might prove fatal, in particular for boys who indulged in masturbation. The insistent theme of pleasure in suffering thus continued on its course by draping itself in scientific certitudes.

Since the 1960s, the old rigorist model has persisted in the United States, but in Europe hedonism rules. The basic principles governing the sexual act seem to have been transformed in the Old Continent. The human sciences now openly describe notions and attitudes that caused deep embarrassment only a few decades ago, excitedly probing into the private life of one and all, uninhibitedly explaining what was for earlier centuries a mysterious and sacred paradigm. The traditional equilibrium, anchored in the dogma of shameful sensuality and the concealed body, is seriously threatened by the sudden irruption of the female orgasm onto the public and the private stage, an unprecedented innovation with major consequences in the short term and incalculable effects in the long term. The carnal pact, basis of the social contract in our world, because it produces the conjugal tie whose importance was until recently considered primordial, is now being renegotiated by the two halves of the human race; a third actor has meanwhile emerged, the homosexual Subject, who is openly demanding his or her rights.

The whole construction has been badly shaken, in an age when navel-gazing, even egoism, seems to prevail. This conclusion raises

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questions about the huge transformations which are pulling contemporary European societies towards the good life, while the United States cultivates a nostalgia for the familial and sexual archetype bequeathed by the repressive tradition, so is much more suspicious of the lure of pleasure.

The phenomenon merits particular attention at a time when major upheavals are looming on the world stage, which call for dynamic and inventive changes to the Western model. This requirement intersects with the process by which the couple is adapting to the challenges of modernity, because the concordant discourses promoted by many prescriptive authorities urge partners with increasing insistence to separate the sexual drive for pleasure from the desire for a child. I have tried in this book to formulate a broader form of the cultural history of societies, taking account of the contributions of different disciplines and of the anxieties and questions of our times. An exchange of views is necessary to an attempt to provide new answers to one of the oldest enigmas in the world: what is pleasure and what purpose does it serve?

Part I

ORGASM AND THE WEST