H-Net Reviews in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert Muchembled. Orgasm and the West: A History of Pleasure from the 16th Century to the Present. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008. x + 323 pp. \$64.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7456-3875-1; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7456-3876-8.

Reviewed by Amanda Hobson (Ohio University) Published on H-German (March, 2013) Commissioned by Shannon Nagy

Sex and Pleasure: A Transatlantic Study

Pervasive images of sexuality demonstrate that sex can sell everything from food to toilet bowl cleaner, and perhaps even persuade undergraduate students to take Western civilization courses. For Robert Muchembled, sexuality is the "key to modern [Western] civilization" (p. 254). If one were to turn on any television set in the United States, it would certainly reinforce his assertion. Covering everything from gay marriage to contraception, pornography, monogamy, and love, Muchembled writes a transatlantic overview of the evolution of cultural responses to sexuality and pleasure. Muchembled's Orgasm and the West: A History of Pleasure from the Sixteenth Century to the Present examines the societal institutions and cultural mores of France, England, and the United States using sexuality as his lens. He does occasionally discuss examples from the broader European landscape. For German historians, Orgasm gives context to the larger European discussion and examination of post-Wende sexuality. This book would be particularly valuable in courses that examine the history of sexuality but could also provide a counterpoint to a general textbook in a Western civilization course, as the book is accessible, interesting, and potentially divisive. In an American or European history survey course, Orgasm can be used as an example of a historian using one issue's impact on many aspects of human civilization and cultural institutions. Muchembled's transatlantic history of sexuality demonstrates both cultural transference and the evolutionary differences in cultural structures and influences.

By examining laws, moral codes, scientific theories, psychological studies, and religion, Muchembled provides a dynamic overview of sexuality and the structures and issues that influence it. His exploration of psychological studies constitutes a great deal of his work. He includes studies by Michel Foucault, Sigmund Freud, Nor-

bert Elias, Desmond Morris, Alfred Kinsey, and Richard von Krafft-Ebing. He also provides discussion of religious institutions' attempts to control sexuality. In Muchembled's transatlantic exploration of sexuality, he sets American Puritanism against "French epicurean hedonism," and argues that "Puritanism continues to influence American responses to sexuality" (p. 245). Pornography is central to his discussion of cultural responses to sexuality. For Muchembled, a cultural response to pornography reveals cultural mores and the manner in which a culture reacts to individual sexuality. In addition, he highlights the consumer aspects of sexuality through his discussion of the commercialism of mainstream pornography and sex toys. He argues that rising consumerism relating to sexuality led to greater sexual freedom, though he also refers to the rise of "plastic sexuality" in the West (p. 255).

Where Muchembled falters a bit is in his discussions of gender issues. For example, he refers to women as "daughters of Eve" throughout the work. Muchembled discusses women within the dichotomy of wife or whore, with the wifely role being occupied by a "pure woman" who is "frigid" (p. 178). Additionally, he argues that women have seized control of the sexual contract since the rise of birth control: "These innovations [the pill and abortion] herald the end of male control in the sexual sphere" (p. 35). He does not reference feminism or the women's movements nor does he examine any of the French feminist responses to sexuality, such as the writings of Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, or Monica Wittig. When paired with other texts, Muchembled's Orgasm and the West will offer a multilayered approach to understanding the evolution of cultural differences and exchange over the past four centuries in the West while allowing the reader to contemplate the ways cultural institutions influence cultural norms and vice versa.

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