

H-France Review Vol. 3 (September 2003), No. 101

Pamela Cheek, *Sexual Antipodes: Enlightenment Globalization and the Placing of Sex*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003. xi + 320 pages. Notes and index. \$49.50 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8047-4663-X.

Review by Jennifer Heuer, Middlebury College.

This deliberately provocative work makes ambitious claims about the importance of sex in eighteenth-century politics and society. The book advances “two central contentions: first, identity in modernity is contingent on the placing of sexuality; second, in the eighteenth century, colonial representations were the field in which competing metropolises expressed binding notions of sexual identity” (p. 7). More specifically and narrowly, Cheek focuses first on the ways in which British and French print culture used the idea of sexual order to demonstrate and assess national differences between the two rival powers. She then turns to the “Antipodes,” particularly Tahiti, suggesting that the visibility of sexual practice in the South Seas was problematic for European writers. Writing about Tahitian society served as a proving ground for contestation between British and French models of interpreting gender relations, population politics, and race.

The first half of the book focuses on “metropolitan allegories,” or representations of sex in France and Britain in relation to public life. Chapter one, “National Character, Publicity, and Sex,” sketches out contemporary views about national character, particularly the association of Britain with liberty and France with civility. Cheek relates national character to national institutions, contending that domesticity was seen as fundamentally British and public mixing of the sexes as French, and that these associations shaped contemporary views about the role of “publicity” and the way it could and should function. Indeed, her argument goes beyond association to causality: “I am arguing that sexual language, sexual characters, and theorizations of sexual-social order enabled the formation of a public identity” (p. 37).

Chapter two, “Public Women in the French Body Politic,” focuses on actresses and prostitutes and uses them to explore two contemporary transformations: “the challenge to the representational politics...in which the king’s body represented the body politic, and the emergence of sex as a representative feature of French public life” (p. 46). Cheek argues that while British actors and actresses successfully overcame associations with illicit sex, this was not the case in France. Furthermore, describing star actresses and their liaisons meant representing and commenting on public life. She bases her analysis primarily on the *Mémoires secrets* (1762-1775), a clandestine 32-volume serial about the Parisian cultural world, juxtaposing the actresses’ on-stage embodiment of virtue (especially the problematic representation of monarchical and aristocratic figures) with salacious accounts of their private affairs. She then turns to police inspectors’ reports from the 1750s and 1760s on brothels. She analyzes the ways in which police and literary accounts of prostitution drew on one another and the interest both expressed in the relationship between sex, performance, and surveillance. She argues that such reports increasingly helped detach sexualized publicity from the royal body and transfer it onto the state.

Chapter three compares British and French pornography and links it directly to political life, noting that both used languages of natural history and exploration and that both assessed state power in terms of the size and health of its population. Cheek explicitly contrasts the genres associated with each country. She claims that British public life was “delibidinized” after the 1660 Restoration, and that British eroticism thus took particular, often allegorical, forms. It focused on the trope of woman as land (and vice versa). She suggests that this linkage made the abstraction of public life in print culture appear open to possession, and argues that by 1760, print had become integral to sexual humor for those involved in British public life. In contrast, French eroticism often focused on plans for an ideal brothel. Such proposals not only responded, in part, to the increasing regulation of prostitution and the general growth of state intervention in private lives but also depicted ways in which institutions might destroy or regenerate the people of a nation. Natalist strands of such writing, in which the brothel helped populate the state, also co-existed uneasily with the image of the prostitute as a degenerate who contributed to depopulation and illness.

The second half of the book, “Antipodes,” turns to the South Seas, particularly Tahiti. Chapter four provides a quick overview of pre-contact fiction and the tension between models that described mutual sexual desire between groups and ones that stressed a eugenic separation of homogenous group identity. Chapter five, “British encounter: Recognizing sensibility,” draws particularly on John Hawkesworth’s 1773 *Account*, a government-authorized report of British voyages to the South Seas. It explores the difficulties British authors faced when describing Tahitian social relations and sexual practices. Cheek argues that writers ultimately used techniques from sentimental novels to separate official travel and scientific reports from pornography. More precisely, she contends that these techniques made individuals seem responsible for expressions of their moral, physical, and sexual makeup. In this context, she also looks at how Bentham and Malthus incorporated stories from Tahiti into their population analyses. She notes that Bentham used the island example to call for the legalization of male homosexual activity in Britain, arguing that heterosexual sociability was unaffected by it in the South Seas. As for Malthus, he used the reports of a Tahitian paradise—seemingly more supportive of his opponents’ views that population growth was not a problem—to conclude that the islands were in fact riddled with vice and misery that served as checks on population.

The final chapter turns to the French utopias and travel narratives set in the South Seas. Here Cheek draws primarily on Restif de la Bretonne’s *Austral Discovery*, Diderot’s *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville*, and Sade’s *Aline and Valcour*. She explores the fascination in all three works with racial mixing and hybridity, incest, and national degeneration or regeneration. She claims that the works, influenced by contemporary natural history, were part of an Enlightenment critique of institutions and attempts to imagine a wholly egalitarian society. They often attempted to “craft transparency” or make identity physically readable.

Throughout the book, Cheek makes a number of entertaining and intriguing juxtapositions, drawing especially from novels but also from utopian fiction, travel accounts, pamphlet literature, and pornography. But readers, particularly historians, may find her theses more often asserted than definitively proven.

The chronology is particularly slippery. The book focuses on the late eighteenth century, a periodization implicitly justified by the timing of British and French encounters with Tahiti in the 1760s and the 1770s. Cheek also suggests that Europeans were reaching a point when it seemed that the globe could be known and dominated, and when “placing sex” increasingly substituted for an earlier model that imagined European expansion primarily as an extension of Christianity across the globe. As she acknowledges in the introduction, her chronological focus and conceptual apparatus are also strongly influenced by Jürgen Habermas’s *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* and by Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, though she inverts their geographical focuses to relate the emergence of a

bourgeois public sphere more closely to Britain and the “constitution of subjects through discourse of sexuality” to France (p. 11).

But as has sometimes been the case with the theorists who inspired Cheek, her analysis of the timing of such developments is often vague. This is particularly unfortunate since she is comparing two national trajectories and writing about periods of dramatic social change. For example, Cheek often treats French revolutionary writings as qualitatively the same as those earlier in the century, without explaining why she has chosen not to view the Revolution as a significant rupture in ideas about sexuality and publicity.

More generally, while Cheek’s attention to print culture suggests that sexual imagery and concerns about sexual behavior were connected with ideas about national identity and colonial power in new ways in the late eighteenth century, she does not demonstrate conclusively that such imagery was more central than in earlier periods. Indeed, it is sometimes unclear how strong an argument she wants to make. For example, at times she describes sex “as a representative feature of French public life”; elsewhere, she seems to imply that it was the central feature. She also does not show clearly that ethnographic or pseudo-ethnographic writings about sexual relations in the South Seas in fact mapped neatly onto rival British and French models of sexual order. Or rather, she suggests certain recurrent national concerns—for example, a persistent French concern with the role of institutions and the power of the state even, or perhaps especially, in the domain of sexuality. However, she does not demonstrate definitively how much different modes of writing about the South Seas were due to national differences, rather than to other factors, and how much they owed specifically to rival understandings about publicity and claims to power.

Many of her observations and interpretations are also likely to provoke more questions. For example, the contrast between British domesticity and French gaiety or civility is certainly a contemporary trope. But how extensive a trope was it? Was it used equally by both nationalities when describing public life? When did it emerge or become prominent? Was it as central to national identity as she portrays it? Did it play a role in descriptions of other colonial encounters?

Yet however frustrating her lack of clear answers, Cheek is to be admired for inspiring so many questions. Overall, *Sexual Antipodes* presents an original and stimulating analysis of national and colonial identity in eighteenth-century France and Britain, “placing sex” at the center of her interpretation.

Jennifer Heuer
Middlebury College
jheuer@middlebury.edu

Copyright © 2003 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172