SEX, TIME AND POWER: HOW WOMEN’S SEXUALITY SHAPED HUMAN EVOLUTION

Reviewed by Dene Grigar, Texas Woman’s University, Denton, TX, U.S.A. E-mail: <dgrigar@twu.edu>.

When encountering a book concerning a subject like the anthropology of sexual attraction and social evolution published by a non-academic press and written by an author with no discernible training in the field, an educated reader knows to approach the ideas advanced in that book as interesting if fanciful. When the publisher in question is a large popular press with a vast marketing department and the author appears to be a charming and fascinating storyteller, then it is likely that some readers may allow themselves to be seduced by the flight of fancy and be taken on a wild goose chase—and end up the goose.

This is precisely the problem with Sex, Time and Power: How Women’s Sexuality Shaped Human Evolution, by Leonard Shlain. A cursory search on the Web reveals the extent of the damage such whimsy can wreak. Web sites ranging from “Why Your Wife Won’t Have Sex With You” to a delineation of the brain power of Biblical characters in “Time, Menses, Left Brain,” to “passing the vetting process of a reputable science journal or the scientific review board of an academic press. This reviewer counted no less than 39 instances where faulty logic and gross generalizations were used to make a point.

Some of the most pernicious include the idea that early Homo sapiens women “after a lifetime of lovemaking . . . would have spent hours discussing the sexual idiosyncrasies of their diverse male partners and comparing their experiences” (p. 93). He then comes to the conclusion that these women would have been responsible for promoting male circumcision as a way of delaying their lovers’ orgasms (p. 93)—an interesting idea that flies in the face of circumcision rites performed by older men upon younger ones.

Another is his adopted view of the relations between genders, which reduces man’s value to his ability to provide meat and woman’s to her ability to give sex (p. 113). While some may look around at some of today’s couples and agree with this assertion, this theory disregards the possibility that man’s need to satisfy his own hunger and woman’s interest in her own orgasm also could have shaped our social development.

But truly the most awful claims remain in his discussions about rape and pornography. In terms of the former, he asserts that “speech affords a woman the chance to determine in advance . . . whether her suitor has the predisposition or intention to harm her” (p. 205). How many women who have been date-raped would agree that they could have known their suitors had darker intentions in mind by simply talking to these men? About the latter, he tells us that “pornography would disappear tomorrow if women were as eager to have sex and behaved sexually as indiscriminately as men” (p. 352). From that standpoint, pornography is women’s fault. Rest assured, there are 35 more of these jewels in this tome, and these do not include the problem of his chronology: that all of these innovations regarding sex, time and power occurred in 40,000 B.C., an idea that stands against the discoveries of birth goddess artifacts by Marija Gimbutas and others.

Anyone who seeks to end misogyny and who questions the power inequities between the sexes rates our attention. And as stated previously, when that person has a gift for storytelling, we may not even mind wading through a mire of misinterpreted data to hear the teller out. But in the end, the most discriminating of readers should realize that the stories told are simply that, stories. The problem lies in that they are presented as “The Truth.” This is the point where the stories cease to be amusing and become insidious, and we can say that the book is seriously flawed.

THE PUPPET AND THE DWARF: THE PERVERSE CORE OF CHRISTIANITY

Reviewed by Rick Mitchell, Associate Professor, Department of English, California State University-Northridge, 18111 Nordhoff Street, Northridge, CA 91330-8248, U.S.A. E-mail: <rick.mitchell@csun.edu>.

Slavoj Žižek’s The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity borrows part of its title from the first of Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” the one in which an automaton, or puppet (historical materialism), “wins all the time” in chess (or historiography) with the crucial assistance of a hidden dwarf (theology). According to Žižek, we must now “reverse” Benjamin’s thesis so that theology always wins by enlisting “the service of historical materialism, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight” (p. 3). Theology, particularly Christianity, has moved center stage, and the cultural theorist must read it dialectically—through the mate-
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Fall, in order to save them?” (p. 15).

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and Christ’s sacrifice. Žižek asks, for
example, “if it is prohibited to eat from
the Tree of Knowledge in Paradise, why
itself—like Christ, who had to die

Founding gestures and principles as
continually returns to Christianity’s
end. As his wide-ranging argument
zigzags back and forth from the
Bible to critical theories to today’s
consumerist, globalized societies, Žižek
continually returns to Christianity’s
founding gestures and principles as
seen through the writings of St. Paul,
which he implies are increasingly relevant
in an always-catastrophic world
whose current manifestations include
the War on Terror, pleasures without
substance, and the “weird,” fetishistic
trend of victims (and/or their heirs)
seeking monetary reparations for such
post-Enlightenment catastrophes as
American slavery, the Holocaust or a
steady diet of unhealthy meals from
McDonalds.

Central to Žižek’s thesis is that the
Christianity so prevalent in the every-
day machine of modernity maintains
a “hidden perverse core” (p. 15)
that is particularly evident within two
founding ‘Events’: Adam and Eve’s Fall
and Christ’s sacrifice. Žižek asks, for
example, “if it is prohibited to eat from
the Tree of Knowledge in Paradise, why
did God put it there in the first place,”
if not as “a part of His perverse strategy
first to seduce Adam and Eve into the
Fall, in order to save them?” (p. 15).

Similarly, God creates Judas, “the ulti-
mate hero of the New Testament, the
one ready to lose his soul and accept
eternal damnation so that the divine
plan could be accomplished” (p. 16).

Although Žižek implies that God is a
perverse opportunist who introduces
the world to misery so that He can later
save the world, God’s power is by no
means absolute. While suffering on the
cross, for example, Christ calls out,
“Father, why hast thou forsaken me?”,
thereby committing “what is, for a
Christian, the ultimate sin: he wavers
in his Faith” (p. 15), suggesting that:
1) God is not divine, for He (in the
form of his son) does not understand
why He has been hung up to die in the
desert; or 2) (and more importantly)
that God is unable to help his son be-
cause God is impotent, and, ultimately,
absent, a reading that seems to be in
agreement with “Lacan’s thesis that the
big Other no longer exists” (p. 53).

Žižek’s often devastating critique of
conventional Christianity and the con-
temporary world, neither of which we
can view in isolation, hinges upon
Pauline Christianity’s radicalness,
which, when followed to its logical
conclusion, results in Christianity’s
death (and subsequent radical rebirth
as something else). And Žižek’s empha-
is on Christianity’s “perverse core”
enables him to embrace “Christianity as
the religion of atheism . . . [which]
attacks the religious hardcore that
survives even in humanism, even up to
Stalinism [and the War on Terror],
with its belief in History as the ‘big
Other’ that decides the ‘objective
meaning’ of our deeds” (p. 171). Fol-
lowing Judas’s example, the world’s
next “hero” of Christianity will partici-
pate in a major (self) sacrifice, “the
ultimate heroic gesture that awaits
Christianity. In order to save its trea-
ure [the obscene fact that there
is no big Other], it has to sacrifice
itself—like Christ, who had to die
do to Christianity could emerge”
(p. 171). Since the “big Other” remains
so central to oppression and alienation
within a variety of (interrelated)
cultural forms—including religion,
democracy, totalitarianism, the family,
and everyday life—awareness that the
absent “big Other” no longer exists (the
central objective of Lacanian psycho-
analysis) must become, according to
Žižek, the major goal of a radical theo-
logical/materialist social praxis that
can renew the world not through a
messianic reintroduction of the big
“big Other,” but through its wholesale
liquidation.

The Puppet and the Dwarf, frequently
punctuated with jokes that exemplify
abstract concepts, provides the reader
with a witty, informative trip through
Paul’s subversive Christianity, related
philosophies and critical theories,
popular culture, and pressing problems
of the early 21st century. This volume,
both erudite and accessible, will be a
welcome addition to research and large
public libraries, and it should prove
valuable to students of cultural studies,
philosophy, Lacanian psychoanalysis
and theological excess.

SPECTRAL EVIDENCE: THE
PHOTOGRAPHY OF TRAUMA
by Ulrich Baer. MIT Press, Cambridge,
MA, U.S.A., 2002. 182 pp., illus. ISBN:
0-262-02515-9.

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According to Ulrich Baer, “Each photo-

graph, by virtue of the medium,
inevitably turns the viewer into a late-
comer at the depicted site” (p. 181),
unifying in some paradoxical way the
present and the past. Given that we are
in some sense “present” at the scene,
how are we to read photographs of sites
that elicit some of the most awful asso-
ciations it is possible to imagine?
Should we do so as passive observers
who are shielded by the buffer of his-
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argues, witnesses to an event that is
not entombed in the past, but part of
an ongoing process of seeing and
knowing?

Analyzing a range of images of
“trauma,” from Charcot’s flash-frozen
hysterics in the Salpêtrière to a Nazi
official’s matter-of-fact color slides of
life in the Polish ghetto of Lodz, Baer
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