



Sexual Myths of Modernity: Sadism, Masochism, and Historical Teleology

By Alison M. Moore

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The notion of sexual sadism emerged from nineteenth-century alienist attempts to imagine the pleasure of the torturer or mass killer. This was a time in which sexuality was mapped to social progress, so that perversions were always related either to degeneration or decadence. These ideas were internalized in later Freudian views of the drives within the self, and of their repression under the demands of modern European civilization. Sadism was always presented as the barbarous past that lurked within each of us, ready to burst forth into murderous violence, crime, anti-Semitism, and finally genocide. This idea maintained its currency in European thought after the Second World War as Freudian-influenced accounts of the history of philosophy configured the Marquis de Sade as a kind of Kantian “superego” in a framework that viewed the Western Enlightenment as unraveled by its own inner demons. In this way, a straight line was imagined from the late eighteenth century to the Holocaust. These ideas have had an ongoing legacy in debates about sexual perversion, feminism, genocide representation, and historical memory of Nazism. However, recent genocide research has massively debunked assumptions that perpetrators of mass violence are especially sexually motivated in their cruelty. This book considers how the late twentieth-century imagination eroticized Nazism for its own ends, but also how it has been informed by nineteenth-century formulations of the idea of mass violence as a sexual problem.

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Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #2678535 in Books
- Published on: 2015-11-19
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.25" h x .90" w x 6.34" l, 1.20 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 288 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

Alison M. Moore traces the origins of sadism and masochism back to a rich cultural discourse about sexuality that Krafft-Ebing condensed and transformed. She demonstrates with lucidity and depth that so-called perversion has and continues to stand in for the perceived decadence of modern culture in a variety of Left and Right-wing responses to sadomasochism, manifested most often in discussions about the Marquis de Sade. Her work addresses Freud, Horkheimer and Adorno, Gilles Deleuze and others with great agility, and her discussion of the historiography of Nazism in relation to tired discussions of Nazi 'perversion' is particularly illuminating. The book is original, thought-provoking, and combats the 'historical teleology' it identifies by demonstrating brilliantly how it came to be. (Carolyn J. Dean, Yale University)

This important new book provides an insightful and original analysis of the complex inter-relationships between politics, history, and sexuality, as mediated through cultural conceptualizations of masochism and sadism. Moore's text, which ranges from the nineteenth century to the postwar period, constitutes an exciting intervention in contemporary studies of sexuality and the place of sadomasochism within these. Essential reading for scholars and students of sexual history and politics. (Elizabeth Stephens, Southern Cross University)

Working across an impressive range of genres and disciplinary fields, this richly documented study will bring a thoroughly revised understanding of sadism and masochism. It shows convincingly how contemporary understandings of sexuality continue to be shaped by nineteenth-century notions of progress and decadence. (Peter Cryle, University of Queensland)

About the Author

Alison M. Moore is senior lecturer at Western Sydney University.

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Margaret Head:

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Walter Reeves:

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