

Preface

There is a tendency today to neglect the issue of sexual pleasure or even to surrender it in favour of a politics of asceticism. Sexual pleasure, it is argued, keeps us caught up in unproductive codes of sexuality in terms of liberation and repression, fuels the nihilism of enjoyment of capitalism and prevents us from recognising other more enabling modes of engagement between self and other. While this 'anti-sex' position, or impasse, opens new and possibly rewarding venues of exploration, it is the contention of this book that giving up sexual pleasure is, and perhaps always will be, premature. It is like giving up the fight. Like letting the big boy take your toys and letting him keep them because you know he will always try to steal them again or, to pursue a more mature metaphor, to surrender the flows of desire because they are repeatedly channelled in the service of social and political control.

This book, therefore, is about the importance of sexual pleasure. It works to underline and explore, not so much the relevance of pleasure on an individual and personal level, but rather the political, cultural and conceptual significance of such pleasure. In the past decades, sexuality has been an important political question relating to issues such as the rights to and for various sexual identities and practices, sexual equality, sexual violence and abuse, reproductive rights and sexual health. Of course, sexual pleasure and its possibility, absence or role constitutes an integral part of many of these questions, but what about sexual pleasure in itself? How is it inscribed into conceptions of the body, of gender, of health, of the human and what, conversely, constitutes its role in the construction of such notions? And, most importantly, how can it contribute to an expansion of what they mean? Mapping both historical and contemporary configurations of the sexual body along with its functions and sensations, this book identifies disabling conceptions and constructions of pleasure at the same time as it searches for the possibility of claiming sexual pleasure as a constructive and politically enabling notion today.

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The present project started as an enquiry into Deleuze's philosophy and his understanding of desire and pleasure specifically, and while this remains a key point, the issues of sexual pleasure that have emerged here are also of relevance much more generally. Readers interested, for instance, in the role of sexual pleasure in the historical construction of gender roles, or in how the reconfiguration of the contemporary body through biotechnological and biocultural discoveries affects our understanding of sexual pleasure, or in how sexual pleasure is claimed by commercial interests today may find this book illuminating. Hopefully, they will also find that a Deleuzian perspective, despite the fact that Deleuze himself is rather sceptical about the productive potential of sexual pleasure, may be useful to projects interested in pursuing the wide range of ways in which sexual bodies and pleasures matter.

This project was conceived during my employment at the Department of English at Uppsala University where I was granted important research time to prepare the outline of this book. The main task of writing it has been funded by a generous grant from the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet). The process has also benefited from the warm welcome I received from the Department of Thematic Studies at Linköping University.

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