

Book Review: *Histoire politique du clitoris* by Delphine Gardey, Textuel, 2021, 154 pages. ISBN: 9782845978621



REDESCRIPTIONS

Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory

BOOK REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Delphine Gardey offers an original and ambitious work which aims, according to the translation of its title in French, to produce a “political history of the clitoris”. Historian and sociologist, professor at the Institute of Gender Studies at the University of Geneva, she is a specialist in the thought of Judith Butler, but also well known for her work on gender, technology and science, including psychoanalysis.

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Delphine Gardey offers an original and ambitious work, which aims, according to the translation of its title in French, to produce a ‘political history of the clitoris’.¹ Historian and sociologist, professor at the Institute of Gender Studies at the University of Geneva, she is a specialist in the thought of Judith Butler, but also well known for her work on gender, technology and science, including psychoanalysis.

The introduction to the book explains very precisely the author’s project. The aim is to produce a ‘feminist and social reading of the sciences’ (p. 15), enlightening ‘the multiple facets of a “clitoris” that is denied, misunderstood, minimised, “objectified” or, on the contrary, recognised, redefined, reinvested, “agentified”’ (p. 17). The form, however, is particular. It is not really a chronological history, even less a continuous one, insofar as the short chapters present dives into specific events, periods or themes that are explored mainly from secondary rather than primary sources: ‘It is a question of following men of science and women of letters, politicians and activists, men and women from here and elsewhere who, from yesterday to today, have written or spoken about the clitoris’ (pp. 14–15). This form, which proceeds by successive zooms, allows us to see the personal, social and political effects of these texts and scholarly discourses. We are facing a historical work, but more fundamentally, it is a *political* history that aims to question knowledge and to bring to light ‘the question of power issues at work in the struggles for knowledge and recognition’ (p. 16). In this sense, the book is part of a recent wave of French language publications in which gender specialists offer texts that are on the edge of a classic academic contribution, sometimes shorter, more accessible, but above all linked to and in dialogue with contemporary mobilisations on the subject (e.g., Brugère 2020; Dorlin, 2021; Froideveaux-Metterie 2020; Lépinard & Mazouz 2021).

Beyond the form, the chosen plan also says a lot about the project of the book. The text is organised in three parts and ‘progresses from the more concrete to the more social and political’ (p. 15).

The first part (*ClitOccident. Clito d’ici*) is devoted to the scientific history of the clitoris in the West. These are the most traditional chapters of the book from a history of science point of view. They start from existing Latin, Arabic and late Greek denominations and descriptions that were lost in the Middle Ages, before Gabriele Fallope, a professor of anatomy in Pisa and Padua in the mid-16th century, claimed to be the self-proclaimed ‘discoverer’ of the clitoris, much as Christopher Columbus ‘discovered’ America. The book insists on the existence, for several centuries, on a certain fluidity and a form of recognition of ‘tribad’ women, hermaphrodites with a large clitoris who constitute an intermediate sex, even if the transgression of gender roles and ‘sodomy’, i.e., sexual relations between men or between women, are not admitted. However, a turning point occurred during the 19th century: ‘the plasticity of representations and beings on the continuous sex/gender scale tended to diminish [...] with the affirmation of a two-category classification system based on the functionality of the genitalia and their reproductive capacities’ (p. 36). Freudian psychoanalysis plays no small part in imposing an asymmetrical conception of the masculine and feminine, with the former acting as a referent and the latter being defined by absence and lack (p. 48). For Freud, the clitoris, the erogenous zone of early childhood, must necessarily give way to the vagina to allow the entry into sexual maturity. It was not until the work done by the sexologists Masters and Johnson in the 1950s and 1960s, but above all

1 All the quotations from the book are translated by the author .

by feminist and lesbian activists in the 1970s, that women were able to reclaim their clitoris, which went hand in hand with the recognition of a sexuality that was not necessarily heterosexual and not necessarily penetrative.

The second part (*'ClitOrientaux, clito d'ailleurs, néo- et post-coloniaux'*) deals first of all with the attention paid to the genital and sexual anatomy of colonised women by travellers, naturalists, doctors and then anthropologists, particularly in Africa. Delphine Gardey shows in an enlightening way how the insatiable curiosity of scientists serves to produce difference and hierarchy and to justify the colonial enterprise. The second part also focuses on the issue of sexual mutilation and excision. The author explains to what extent this issue becomes not so much a concern as a marker of a society's 'degree of civilisation' for anthropologists in the inter-war period. However, the text itself takes a turn with the evocation of the first campaigns of the 1980s led by feminist activists against the sexual mutilation of 'third world women'. The reflection takes a slightly different, more personal, more reflexive direction. Taking up the words of Soheir A. Morsy, Delphine Gardey asks: 'does "Western compassion" not serve only to reproduce "neo-colonial" relations and to stage a "legendary other"?' (p. 83). By questioning the universalism of Western feminism, the aim is to present the contributions of postcolonial studies and to learn to make room for diversity and complexity, beyond a simplistic dichotomy of domination/emancipation or victim/saviour, while giving a voice to women who have been 'repaired' by surgery. Reparation is then seen as the possibility of a capacity to act which is also at the heart of the third part of the book.

This third part (*'Clito-today: clitartefact, clito straight, lesbien ou queer?'*) looks at current resignifications and tackles quite different issues. The first chapter deals with cosmetic surgery of the genitals and is certainly the least convincing of the whole book because it is the most prescriptive, the least supported by a history of knowledge and aimed above all at denouncing 'a new cultural pressure that is being exerted on Western women' (p. 112). In a somewhat generalised way, the book asserts, after the advances of the 1970s, the existence of a 'clitoral backlash' in the 1980s which could only be overcome thanks to the work of the Australian urologist Helen O'Connell, who, from the end of the 1990s, succeeded in imposing a three-dimensional representation of the 'clitoral complex' in its entirety and allowed a real 'Renaissance' for the clitoris by also highlighting its dense innervation. The new technologies of magnetic resonance imaging are essential in this process. The next chapter deals with the clinic of intersexuality and then transsexuality and their evolution outside the binarity of sex and gender and heterosexuality, notably thanks to the mobilisation of trans people themselves. The author reminds us to what extent the clitoris is representative of these evolutions: forgotten at first, insofar as it was the penis and its size that guided the decision to assign one sex or the other by doctors; then central in the alternative techniques of sex reassignment; representative finally of the care henceforth given to the preservation of sensations and sexual pleasure. The text ends with a chapter that definitively leaves the historical vocation of the book to bring into dialogue authors who clearly count for Delphine Gardey: Judith Butler, of course, but also Monique Wittig, Audre Lorde or Adrienne Rich. The convocation of these tutelary figures aims at not fetishizing the clitoris and at not focusing on physiology alone. This reductionist confinement runs the risk of being reductive, particularly from an erotic point of view. It is a question of being attentive to disturbances, to the multiplicity of identities and to the need to 'move beyond anatomy' (p. 152).

If we want to take a panoramic view of the whole book, we could say that the path constituted by the author takes us from the idea of *spectacle* to the notion of *performance*. The journey begins with the show staged by doctors and scientists, for the eyes of doctors and scientists. For centuries, the (pre- or post-mortem, often public) examination of women's clitorises has aimed to provide answers to scientific questions, but it is also a spectacle in which the objectification of women serves more broadly to determine their 'natural' place in Western society, to decree the 'civilisational' inferiority of colonised societies or to put forward hypotheses on the evolution and hierarchy of human races. Thus, Delphine Gardey mentions the case of Marie le Marcis, examined by six doctors, two surgeons and two midwives during her trial at the very beginning of the 17th century to determine whether Marin, as he calls himself, who dresses as a man and married Jeanne, is, according to the size of her clitoris in particular, a 'girl' or a man and should or should not be sentenced to death. She also recalls the exploitation and exhibition of Saartjie Baartman, known as the Hottentot Venus, at the beginning of the 19th century, whose body the anatomist Georges Cuvier obtained to mould after her death and to preserve her brain and vulva in formaldehyde. The end of the tour takes us to a very different form of representation and evokes performances that are based on the practices of the self, the uses of the body and on diversions and artifices (surgery, dissonant bodies, etc., p. 153). Thus, in the course of the reading, we move symbolically from a situation of dispossession with the spectacle to acts of reappropriation with the performance.

It should also be noted that these performances are essential for Delphine Gardey as she calls for the (re)invention of bodies, identities and of the presentation of the self, with and beyond the clitoris. According to her, this will be done not so much through a reinvestment of science or history, but through art. Referring to the artist Sophie Wallace's 'cliteracy', she writes 'since science and technology transform our lives and our worlds both materially and metaphorically, we need to deploy (counter) strategies of appropriation and transformation that are also material and metaphorical [...], we need art as much as science' (pp. 131–132).

All in all, this book is presented as a journey, a trajectory along which Delphine Gardey invites us to follow her. We accompany her in the history she reconstructs, we also accompany her in her reflections and readings, with all that this entails of reflexivity and subjectivity. In this way, this history of the clitoris is undeniably political, claiming to be situated in the tradition of feminist history, and this is where it finds its strength. We can only hope that a translation into English of a book that presents a point of view on history and is at the same time strongly inscribed in contemporary debates and mobilisations will be published soon.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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