

Book Review

our dark side: a history of perversion (2009) by Elisabeth Roudinesco.¹

George Habib²

In this book, the French historian and psychoanalyst Elisabeth Roudinesco, turns her pen to an examination of the history of perversion. The book followed a lecture in 2004 at the Federation of Psychoanalytic Societies in Belo Horizonte (Brazil) on the many faces of perversion and her addressing a similar theme during the 2005-2006 academic year. *Our Dark Side* appears as a culmination of this period of profundity. From the beginning, it is evident that Roudinesco addresses her examination of perversion from the position of an historian. She examines perversion as a structure through an examination of the changes of discourses on the perverse from the 1300s to the present day, rather than a clinical structure. This is despite at times her position as historian/psychoanalyst being evident in her examination of the discourses and practices of perversion through the ages. Perversion as a clinical structure is alluded to, intimated throughout the book, but not examined in the manner in which Lacan sought to do in examining perversion as a disavowal of castration. In addressing the question of where perversion begins and who are the perverse, the book examines changes in discourse through a plethora of historical references. In this regard, the book belongs to the lineage of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* trilogy, and pays significant homage to Foucault's examination of sexuality through the centuries.

Our Dark Side portrays the perverse through the ages from the mystical saints and the flagellants, to an exploration of figures such as Gilles de Rais, the Marquis de Sade, and the emblematic figures of the homosexual, the masturbating child and the hysteric. The work culminates in Roudinesco's critique of the discourses and practices from the nineteenth century onwards, exploring the emergence of science as barbaric through figures such as Tissot and Tardieu, to the discourses and practices that lead to the rise of Nazism in the twentieth century, and the figures of the paedophile and the terrorist in the twenty-first.

The book struggles between being a study of the practices of perversions and an examination of the structure of perversion. Roudinesco does address the problematics of perversion through an explication of these difficulties through an explication of the writings of Freud and the dominant discourse of the time. Roudinesco emphasized that Freud's era saw the rise of the categorization and moralization regarding perversions that situated them as biological aberrations, outside of the structure of human desire. As indicated in the title, Roudinesco seeks to emphasize that perversion, in acts and structure, cannot be considered as outside of the human condition. Despite an unfortunate emphasis of it being "Our Dark Side", the title shows that perversion is all too human, a structure made emblematic through a range of practices threatening man's relation to God, the Sovereign Good, and to the bourgeois ideals of marriage, procreation and the regulation and distribution of jouissance through kinship structures.

The book is comprehensive in scope with a range of practices being explored in relation to discourse and it includes extensive citations that allow a pursuit of many areas of interest at

one's discretion. For example, in examining the tide of revulsion, including the containing practices against masturbation, Roudinesco, refers to the use of the term onanism, writing:

The term onanism comes from an episode in the Bible. Onan, as we know, refused to father children in the body of his dead brother's wife, as the so-called law of levirate required him to do. According to that law, the younger brother in the family had a duty to father children in his dead brother's place, and thus became the guardian of his own biological children, who were not regarded as his because of the elder brother, though dead, was still their father [...] Rebelling against this law, Onan defied God by spilling his seed outside the body of the wife he had been given.³

This passage emphasizes an auto-erotic sexuality that is preferred over procreative sexuality, also explored by Foucault⁴ through the three figures of the homosexual, the masturbating child and the hysteric as embodying an infernal trio that subverts the procreative order. This places in jeopardy the ties that bind, thus creating a need to categorize and disavow the infernal trio in the name of science. Roudinesco examines the disavowal of polymorphous forms of pleasure in the work of Samuel Tissot, a doctor of the enlightenment, who takes up the theme that masturbation will make you go blind or, in medical terms, give rise to organic diseases. Tissot's work is made explicit by Roudinesco in a passage where he describes a man who was dying of a masturbation-induced insanity. Roudinesco explores the rise of the discourse on deviant sexuality of which the democratic state sought to protect itself, revealing the discourses and practices of science in relation to onanism and children as the more flamboyant users of Rousseau's⁵ "worrisome dangerous supplement". This led to the categorization and surgical interventions that became prevalent in the 1850s and 1900s. Roudinesco in her writing also provides a context for modern medicine's concerns with sexual arousal, a modern malady illustrative of that which may pervert the procreative order whether through active or passive means. In this, and made explicit in the chapter *Dark Enlightenment or Barbaric Science*, Roudinesco seeks to show the lineage of practices of the perverse as a jouissance constantly threatening society.

In her final two chapters, Roudinesco shows how the implications of the scientific project culminated in the biocracy of the scientific authorities in Germany. This biocracy, born from the human sciences that utilized the sexologists' classifications of perversions in the name of positivist medicine, eventuated in the criminal science of racial hygiene (or what is today known as *ethnic cleansing*). Roudinesco writes that following the victory over Nazism, all excesses that revealed the presence of our dark side would be overcome, with the ideal of no perversion and no more sublimation in the modern nation state at risk of being formative of a perverse society.

It is in these last two chapters that Roudinesco, in a similar manner to her previous work *Why Psychoanalysis?*⁶, traverses what it is that holds the reader regarding humanity's "accursed share"⁷. She thus further develops a complaint of what is wrong with the world, thereby imbuing her writing with a moral tone. As a study of the discourses and practices of perversion, Roudinesco is recognisable as a historian, and the work gives considerable context, across the centuries, to the attempt to tame a worrisome supplement. If Roudinesco is described as both a psychoanalyst and an historian, we would have to conclude that *Our Dark Side* is a work more on the side of the historian.

References

- ¹ Roudinesco, Elisabeth *Our Dark Side: A History of Perversion*. Tr. David Macey. Cambridge & Malden M A, Polity Press, 2009: 1-188.
- ² Member of *The Freudian School of Melbourne, School of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*.
- ³ Roudinesco, Elisabeth *Our Dark Side: A History of Perversion*. Cambridge & Malden M A, Polity Press, 2009. 66.
- ⁴ Foucault, Michel (1976). *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*. Tr. Robert Hurley. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981.
- ⁵ Rousseau, Jean-Jacques (1781). *The Confessions*. Tr. J.M. Cohen. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953.
- ⁶ Roudinesco, Elisabeth. *Why Psychoanalysis?* New York: Columbia University Press, 2002
- ⁷ Bataille, Georges. *The Accursed Share. Volume 1:* Tr. Robert Hurley. New York: Urzone, 1988.