

The Inverted ‘Rue d’Amour’

On Hans Peter Duerr’s *Der erotische Leib*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1997.

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Der erotische Leib, Hans Peter Duerr’s latest book and the fourth instalment of his *Der Mythos vom Zivilisationsprozess* (The Myth of the Civilising Process), deals with differences and similarities through time and place in the erotic appeal of breasts and in the standard of shame that surrounds them. It is an interesting topic and an amusing book, like the other volumes generously illustrated, even in the notes, with sexual and erotic pictures. As might be expected, there is a striking similarity between the ‘breasts pictures’ on the one hand, and Duerr’s writing on what could be called ‘breast cultures’, on the other hand: both the ‘breast pictures’ of women in all kinds of situations and from all kinds of times and places and the text on all kinds of ‘breast cultures’ are characterised by their large variety. Although the topic is titillating enough and Duerr has an entertaining style of writing, the description of ‘breast cultures’ is almost as flat as the ‘breast pictures’, that is, after a while they become rather boring, despite all variation, because Duerr’s theoretical framework is quite thin. In his description of the appearance on the scene of see-through blouses and monokinis (with pictures), for example, the question why this development – in the direction of greater shamelessness? – has occurred, is not seriously raised. Only in his concluding section did Duerr succeed in arousing some intellectual excitement in me. Whereas his description of a variety of breast cultures is rather poor from a theoretical perspective, this tiny concluding chapter finally reveals Duerr’s theoretical affinities.

In that chapter he turns out to be a sociobiologist closely affiliated to Desmond Morris. Why are breasts erotic? Well, for women simply because touching them, the nipples in particular, can produce a hormone that affects her uterus and vagina, or, in plain language, because touching them can make her horny. And with regard to men, the answer is just as simple: knockers can make them randy because they look like buttocks, and from an evolutionary perspective, buttocks form the classical arched gateway to the most female opening. In the history of humankind, the ‘rue d’amour’ (street of/to love), as the French call the cleavage between the breasts, would have increasingly become a replacement of the ‘rue d’amour’ of the buttocks. For, according to this theory, the evolutionary phase in which women (or female primates) offered their buttocks as their main or only way of seducing men (or male primates) has been succeeded by a phase in which they have successfully persuaded men into the ‘missionary position’. Duerr does mention a few

objections but in the same breath he draws attention to the fact that the Bonobos (a sort of chimpanzees described as ‘our closest relatives in the animal kingdom’) quite often make love in the missionary position too. And also orang-utans, Duerr hastens to add, appear to prefer this position. In short, this theory is taken very seriously, though not too literally; Duerr somewhat shades it by assuming ‘that women will have always invited the other sex for intercourse by spreading their legs or by posing in other seductive postures (ill. 186), because in that way they would possess more control over the sending of sexual stimuli than via swellings of whatever nature, or via smells (p. 346). Illustration 186 shows, next to someone who has been completely knocked out in satisfaction, a woman who entirely radiates, not just by her opened legs, that she would still have a whole lot to offer. This impressively illustrated nuance cannot conceal the conclusion that the missionary position resulted from a female ‘civilising offensive’. Duerr, however, does not draw this conclusion.

In presenting this 1970s theory, Duerr *does* refer to a scene from the movie ‘Quest for Fire’, which was produced with the help of advice by Desmond Morris. Duerr writes: ‘A Neanderthal-man (?) is ‘turned round’ by a woman, a villager (!) – after having assaulted her *a tergo*,¹ she teaches the astonished primitive the ‘missionary position’ and in doing so, she helps him to make up his leeway in the civilising process’ (p. 546). At the time when this film was shown in cinemas, in the early 1980s, I enjoyed the irony of this scene: precisely at a time when the ‘missionary position’ was attacked by mainstream feminists as symptomatically patriarchal, this scene presented that very position as bringing a more ‘civilised’ satisfaction, and thus as an important moment of victory in the history of women’s emancipation. Without stating so explicitly, Duerr perceives the intensified erotic appeal of breasts for men as an extension of this milestone. This is all that Duerr’s theory amounts to. Implicitly it means that all ‘breast-cultures’ are only variations upon these unchanged sociobiological points of departure, while the variations themselves nor changes in them need any further theoretical perspective. Only one loose theoretical remark indicates that social and psychic processes towards prudery are perceived as capable of explaining the American shift in sexual interest from buttocks to bosom. However interesting they might be, these processes themselves do not get any of Duerr’s attention. Yet, it would be

¹ Duerr states explicitly that the term *coitus a tergo* does, ‘of course’, not refer to anal intercourse, but to vaginal intercourse from behind.

interesting to find out how they would fit into the long-term process of eroticisation and sexualisation of Western images of breasts, as observed by Marilyn Yalom in her *recent A History of the Breast* (1997, Knopf, NY). According to her, the milk-producing function of breasts dominated the history of human kind until the late Middle Ages; from then on, images of breast become increasingly erotic and sexual. Duerr does not spend a word on such trends. Quite the contrary: he tends to mock at any attempt directed at further, more sociological explanation. For example, ‘Later, when the sexes more often approached each other frontally, the breasts have taken over the function of the main stimulant’ (p. 345) – and, as one could add here, the mouth has at least partly taken over the function of the vagina: an inverted ‘rue d’amour’. Who knows?

But how could these changes be explained? Could they possibly have occurred without a continued ‘civilising offensive’ on the part of women? The explanatory power of the biological mainspring of women – foreplay with breasts and nipples enhances lecherousness and the chance of reaching an orgasm – is clearly insufficient, if only because of the large difference between women’s physiological sexual arousal and their reported, subjective sexual arousal.² The fact that the bodies of (twentieth-century, western) women react to certain sexual stimuli with physiological sexual arousal whilst the women themselves do not experience that arousal as such – physical arousal often coincides with psychic repulsion – points in the direction of an explanation in terms of cultural or civilising changes and differences. If Duerr had thought (and written) more strongly in terms of changing power and dependency relationships, he might have described this development as a success of women in their power struggle with men, particularly with respect to enlarging their chances of enjoyment in making love by prolonging foreplay. And in a much later phase, as an extension of this development, the rising importance of ‘talking to each other’ could be similarly illuminated – and here I do not think of the ‘chat me up’ lingo of ‘telephone sex’.

After all,

If a man accepted his wife fully as a discussion partner, that would irrevocably imply some curtailing of his freedom. He would have to listen, argue, refute, but above all he would have to admit and moderate; in short, he would have to restrain himself more strongly. That outlook did not entice him, it corroded his male pride or self-esteem and as long as he was able, he preferred the pleasures of a larger independence. Even though his wife tried to

² This difference was assessed in research by Ellen Laan and reported in her *Determinants of sexual arousal in women. Genital and subjective components of sexual response*, University of Amsterdam, dissertation 1994. See also my lust balance article (forthcoming).

convince him that a more equal relationship in the end would be more satisfying for both of them, he could not yet imagine the pleasures of an enlarged commitment to her – the more ‘civilised’ satisfaction it could bring.³

In a review of Duerr’s latest book, published in the Dutch weekly *Vrij Nederland* (9 August 1997), the Dutch journalist Cyrille Offermans has written that over the years, Duerr’s critique has led not to any profound response, neither from Elias himself nor from his followers, ‘but all the more to slashing and slander’. The latter accusation brings me to reveal an old correspondence with Duerr: some years ago, I received a postcard from Duerr on which he asked me to send him my working notes on ‘Elias and Duerr’, later to be included in my review of the first three instalments.⁴ In reaction to reading these working notes, Duerr wrote me another postcard: ‘Thanks for your fair and unaggressive argumentation, to which I am not accustomed in Germany. You Dutch are really a liberal and more tolerant people than the Germans...’

As to the other accusation: I’m not sure whether a profound discussion is lacking, but as far as I am concerned, Duerr would have himself to blame, as he did not respond to my main argument: the theory of informalisation. In my review of his first three instalments, published in the *Zeitschrift für Sexualforschung*, the main argument consisted of this thesis, and in 1990, Michael Schröter had also pointed to it.⁵ And although Duerr spends more than 60 pages on polemical skirmishes, he avoids any discussion of informalisation. In my opinion, even the ‘liberal and more tolerant Dutch’ do not think it is ‘fair’ to persist neglecting this important point of view for such a long time.

In part four of his critique on the theory of civilising processes, Duerr did write one page (p. 375/6) in reaction to my review of the first three instalments. There, he only deals with an hypothesis formulated at the end of my review: the assumption of a close connection between the

³ Bram van Stolk and Cas Wouters, *Frauen im Zwiespalt. Beziehungsprobleme im Wohlfahrtsstaat*, übersetzt von Michael Schröter, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1987, p. 133.

⁴ Cas Wouters, ‘Duerr und Elias. Scham und Gewalt in Zivilisationsprozessen’, *Zeitschrift für Sexualforschung*, jrg. 7, nr. 3 (september 1994), pp. 203-216. Michael Schröter had mentioned my working notes in his essay ‘Scham im zivilisationsprozeß. Zur Diskussion mit Hans Peter Duer’ in Hermann Korte (ed.), *Gesellschaftliche Prozesse und individuelle Praxis*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1990: 42-85; Schröter’s article has been also published, lightly revised in his *Erfahrungen mit Norbert Elias*, Suhrkamp Frankfurt a.M. 1997: 71-109.

⁵ See note 4.

developments of (sexual) shame and of the means ways of controlling sexual violence. No, he asserts, that is beside the point as his primary aim never was to find out

what other phenomena might possibly be ‘connected’ to bodily shame, and what might influence or modify it, but what bodily or sexual shame *actually is*. That this shame cannot be ‘closely connected’ to ‘actual or remembered dangers of sexual violence’ is already obvious from the fact that women in societies *in which sexual violence is fully unknown*, nevertheless have extremely *high standards of shame*. (p. 376)

However, the existence of such societies, no matter how strongly emphasised (or italicised), does not refute the possibility of this connection. In my opinion it even seems likely, and at least it is possible, that in the history of these societies a continued social shaming of any sexual aggression has resulted in both a low level of sexual violence and high standards of shame. Duerr continues:

What I have criticised in Elias, is that he misunderstood *the essence* [*das Wesen*] of bodily shame by interpreting it as ‘a fear of social degradation’ or ‘a socially moulded fear’ for the superiority of other people. (376)

On the last page of the appendix to Duerr’s book (p. 388), one reads what an American soldier has said about his rather shameless feelings and behaviour during the Vietnam war:

... you realised you had the power to take a life. You had the power to rape a woman *and nobody could say nothing to you*. That godlike feeling you had was in the field. It was like I was a god. I could take a life, I could screw a woman. I can beat somebody up *and get away with it*.

At least to an important extent, I think, it is exactly this ‘getting away with it’ that may explain this shameless behaviour: the conditions of war in Vietnam stimulated unrestrained display of superiority, and the awareness of being able to get away with it especially undermined the fear of social degradation, and with it the socially moulded fear of the superiority of others. This is how Duerr continues:

... sexual shame has a completely different, a much more ‘positive’ function in social life than Elias believes, for it demands and protects the bonding of couples as societies’ basis. ... Thus, shame is nothing but a *reaction of privatisation* [*Privatisierungsreaktion*], a curtailment of sexual titillation regarding others [outside an exclusive bond]. (376)

In my view, however, Duerr’s ‘more positive’ function and Elias’s (by implication) ‘more negative’ function of shame may be ‘completely different’, but they are also completely compatible. Indeed, the social shaming of particular forms of sexual behaviour may function to

stimulate and protect the bonding of couples. These functions do not contradict; one might see them, I think, as two sides of the same coin. Moreover, Duerr is irresponsibly one-sided by only accepting one side of this coin. How could one possibly get to ‘the essence’ of shame without any knowledge about the processes of social shaming? Or, to put the same question differently, how could he possibly understand, interpret and explain the differences and developments in patterns of shame, or, reactions of privatisation, as he has described them, without taking notice of possible connections with differences and developments in relationships of power and dependency between men and women, established and outsiders, and the processes of social shaming effectuated in those relationships? However, Duerr has made it perfectly clear that he does not want to take notice of them. Thus, he robs himself of the possibility of interpreting the development towards an inverted *rue d’amour* – from a primordial *a tergo* approach via the missionary position to a much larger variety of sexual intercourse and a prolongation of ‘foreplay’ – in terms of changing interdependencies, including the emancipation of women. Because thinking in those terms seems to be rejected along with a rejection of civilising theory, Duerr also robs himself of the possibility of developing and applying his own theory more fully. This may be the reason why his final chapter is much smaller (nine pages text, that is, without counting the pictures) than the polemical appendix (over 31 pages of text), and why it is hardly connected to the many, much thicker chapters describing ‘breast cultures’.

I would like to end this review with a remark on Duerr’s opinion, repeated by quite a number of people, that Elias thought modern Western societies to be morally superior to pre-modern and non-Western societies. Neither in Elias’s work nor in his personality did I ever find any indication that would support this opinion. In fact, I think, Duerr accuses Elias on this point precisely because he himself takes the moralising turn against which the latter repeatedly warned: ‘One can observe again and again that members of groups which are, in terms of *power*, stronger than other interdependent groups, think of themselves in human terms as *better* than the others.’⁶ Duerr’s opinion that the whole idea of a civilising process, or eve – as I sometimes get the impression – that any theory of civilising processes is by necessity based upon this feeling of Western superiority, follows from misunderstanding the use and meaning of the term superior. On the

⁶ Norbert Elias, ‘A Theoretical Essay on Established and Outsiders Relations’ in Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson, *The Established and the Outsiders*, Sage, London 1994: p. 7.

whole, the personality structure of people from the upper classes forms *one* of the power resources on which basis they are able to outplay and dominate lower classes, and the same goes for the relationship between states and/or continents. This can be stated as a fact; it does not necessarily imply a moral or evaluative statement. It does *not* mean that people from those classes or societies who are accustomed to being more powerful than other classes or societies – and who do indeed derive some of their power surplus from their pattern of self-regulation, developed under particular social constraints – are also *better* people in human terms. Many representatives of ‘old families’ with ‘old money’, for example, have received a ‘social inheritance’ – that is, in growing up they have acquired a degree of psychic flexibility and flexible social skills, from which part of their ascribed and acquired power is derived. But it would be foolish and arrogant to conclude this makes them better people. People in superior positions quite often demonstrate the opposite to be true. Moreover, in analogy, colonial history *does* show a long period of Western superiority in power, but it also shows them *not* to have been superior as human beings.