



The East, The West, and Sex: A History of Erotic Encounters

by Kaitlin Bell

Richard Bernstein, *The East, The West, and Sex: A History of Erotic Encounters* (Knopf, June 2009)

It's become a bit of a coming-of-age tradition for young Americans to spend a college semester abroad, or to travel around Europe or Asia, in the year after high school or college. They go to broaden their horizons and all that's sure, but while away, they also manage to squeeze in plenty of revelry—sex very much included. The rules don't apply when you're not at home, or so the thinking goes.

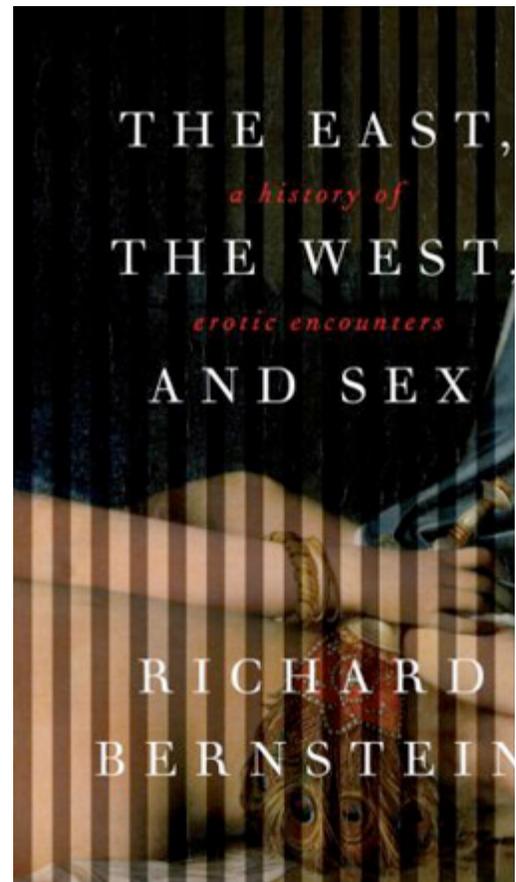
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Richard Bernstein, a former *Time* China correspondent, takes this mindset as his basic premise in his new book, *The East, the West, and Sex: A History of Erotic Encounters*, though he focuses on the exploits of Western men in Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East during the past four or five centuries. He hones in on the East's exotic and erotic allure in the Western imagination—and what he deems a particular attraction between certain Western men and Eastern women.

Early European explorers may have ventured East seeking riches and renown, but they happened to stumble on some additional perks, tales of which eventually made their way back to Europe. While Europe was tormenting itself with “sustained debate about physical versus the spiritual nature of the sublime,” Bernstein argues, most Eastern societies saw more than one path to the divine and, conveniently for the male sex drive, didn't link sex with love and marriage with monogamy as Europe did. Over time, Bernstein argues, Western men indulged in what their Asian and North African counterparts already enjoyed, from the cultured courtesans in the Mughal Indian city of Lucknow to the Japanese “pleasure quarters,” to Bangkok's booming sex tourism industry today.

The obvious problem Bernstein faces in writing about “the East, the West and sex,” is that this history is intimately bound up in centuries of colonialism and imperialism—dirty words in our supposedly enlightened 21st century. Bernstein is well aware of the PC pitfalls he faces; early in the book, anticipating the readers'—and the critics'—objections, he pleads, “[l]et's not be judgmental about this, at least not yet.” He asks us to see the history he is about to recount as “part of the great human pageant, one in



which the women, the girls, and the boys involved were not necessarily passive, powerless creatures swept unwillingly down the river of their experience.”

Bernstein doesn't really pull off this argument. He does, however, succeed in marshalling enough real-life evidence to challenge the post-colonialist argument that Eastern sensuality is a mere figment of the Western (male) imagination. Men such as the French novelist Gustave Flaubert and the famous 19th-century British explorer Richard Burton, who translated the *Kama Sutra* and *Arabian Nights*, may have perpetuated a certain romanticized stereotype with their stories of luscious, exotic maidens ready to put out. However, Bernstein emphasizes that “the freedom of licentious sex was neither fantasy nor stereotype but an affirmable reality.” That is, licentious sex of the kind he describes can't be completely deconstructed and dismissed; it deserves a sober, clear-eyed examination.

To his credit, Bernstein has managed to carry out this sober examination while still evoking the romance and adventure inherent in his subject. Occasionally, though, he comes off as just a bit too enchanted, rhapsodizing about Asian women's “nut-brown skin” at least three times, confessing that he finds it “impossible not to feel the pull of fantasy” in Bangkok's red light district, etc. Now, I don't mean to suggest Bernstein is wrong to recount the exotic pleasures of, for example, a young strapping, six-foot tall Gustave Flaubert (Bernstein deflates the balloon a bit with the delicious aside that Flaubert cried upon leaving his mother in France). However, as Bernstein partially acknowledges, many of the East-West sexual “encounters” seem seedier the closer the book gets to the present-day. In the mid-20th-century, American GIs turned the East-West sexual relationship from a “private and relatively discreet” matter into something “commercialized, democratized and mass in scale.” Easterners facilitated this process, too, he argues. Prostitutes in Saigon saw a way to profit from all the single, sex-starved young soldiers, for example, and the post-World War II Japanese took sexual conquest as a necessary result of their defeat. Bernstein recounts the reminiscences of one American GI with obvious disgust, concluding “[i]n Japan in 1945, for the price of a bar of soap and a candy bar, you could screw the daughters of a defeated and humiliated Japanese couple.” Then, just in case we're not sufficiently outraged, he adds, “You could, if you were so inclined, even read the newspaper and smoke a cigar as you couple, to display your utter mastery over the defeated

nation, your insouciant use of the subjugated other for your own pleasure.”

Somehow, Bernstein seems to empathize more with the American veterans and assorted other expatriates who have more recently settled in Southeast Asia for the cheap living and the pretty—and willing—young women. He acknowledges these men are a little pathetic, dating girls a third their age, hanging out in bars all day, drinking beer and getting fat, while their peers have settled into a comparatively dignified retirement of grandchildren and golf. Yet, he accepts at face value the ex-pats’ whining that back home they could never get women so pretty and so ready to serve their every desire. Well, why should they? After all, in what world, except one in which females have severely constrained choices, would beautiful young women choose to sleep with washed-up, overweight old men?

Bernstein argues that these men may be more appealing than the alternatives. He interviews young professional women in China and South Korea who bemoan the demanding, misogynist men in their own societies and bristle at the men’s overbearing families; Western men, they say, are more respectful and comfortable with gender equality (though one wonders how comfortable they really are if they date women young enough to be their grand-daughters). Bernstein doesn’t really let us hear from the poorest women who seem the most degraded and exploited by the Western transplants; he merely speculates that getting a leg up in society through sex—or sex appeal—may be a more appealing option than scrounging out a living, scavenging through trash heaps.

He might be right. He is probably also right that men who want a certain kind of sexual freedom will seek out that freedom in a society that sanctions it. Bernstein, though, ends up undermining his claim that he has given us the world “as it was and is.” He doesn’t leave us with the story of a real-life couple grounded either in the gritty exigencies of everyday life or in mutual love and respect. Instead, he waxes lyrical about men’s sex drive. The history of the East, the West, and sex, he concludes, is “testimony to the raw power of the urge for a moment of delirious, primal, sublime contact with an exquisite, perfumed creature free from the judgment of an unsympathetic God and far from the domain of restriction and repression that is home.”

Well, yes, lots of men want novel, fleeting, commitment-free sex. And, as

Bernstein has skillfully and extensively demonstrated, Western men have often found this kind of sex in the global East. But I wish that Bernstein, instead of simply hailing the “raw power” of men’s sex drive, or celebrating the sex appeal of the women who stimulate it, had a bit more faith in Western and Eastern men’s ability to control their urges, readjust their expectations about gender and power relations, and show a bit more respect for the desires—and the needs—of the women they so covet.

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