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Editorial: Sycophancy

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I suppose every scholar can recall a turning point in a research project where something turns up that somehow turns out to be crucial to what one was looking for all along. Often enough, such "discoveries" are arrived at by accident or in a moment of inattention, perhaps punctuating one phase of work while inaugurating another. My own finds include an old diet and exercise manual by the father of the subject of one of Freud's case histories, displayed in the window of an antiquarian bookseller in Frankfurt, that seemed to provide the key I needed to unlock the delirium of both patient and doctor. There is also the footnote Marx appended to his economic notebooks, which I had skimmed over in several previous readings, that showed me the other side of alienated labour in idleness and unproductive work. And there is the day I found Norbert Elias' history of the role of medieval manners in defining our senses of "civility" and "civilization," mistakenly shelved under the "Etiquette" section of my neighbourhood used bookstore. Later on I will elaborate a bit on the particular relevance of each of these chance encounters to the present review of Alphons Silbermann's *Grovelling and Other Vices: The Sociology of Sycophancy* (2000). For now, we might just consider Weber's (1946: 136) reminder in "Science as a Vocation" that it is impossible to force insight or induce inspiration, and though they only see the light after long periods of disciplined study, they often come upon us as we recline on a couch with a good cigar, or take a long walk up a slowly ascending street. Such a moment of undisciplined distraction seems to have provoked the main idea for Silbermann's exploration of "the sociology of sycophancy," *Grovelling and Other Vices*, or as the original German title has it, his manual "on the art of arse-crawling" (*Von der Kunst der Arschkriecherei*). One day while browsing through his messy book collection, Silbermann came upon his forgotten and unread first edition of Adolph von Knigge's *Über den Umgang mit Menschen* (*On Social Intercourse*, or somewhat more literally, *On Keeping Company with Humans*), published in 1788, which he notes is "generally regarded by Germans as the ultimate guide to etiquette" (4). The book immediately brought him back to his youth, when his parents would wield the name of Knigge like an "imperious truncheon" (without, apparently, ever having read him), whenever his naughty behaviour needed to be held against a model of good manners. Although Knigge's treatise on the struggle between reason and passion does not seem to be preaching flattery or servility, he does invite his readers to acquire "flexibility, sociability, compliance, tolerance, self-denial at the right time, control of violent passions, guardedness, and the serenity of a constantly even temper" (Knigge, quoted in

Silbermann, p. 8). As Silbermann sees it, however, by "failing to eschew corruption," Krigge seems implicitly to embrace sycophancy as indispensable for maintaining social intercourse. His book is therefore "virtually a compendium of complaisance, a manual of grovelling" (9), and so serves as a kind of companion-piece and counter-text to Silbermann's own.

Of course, it is one thing to hinge a scholarly thesis on a discarded or overlooked historical document while celebrating one's happy good fortune in rediscovering it. It is quite another to establish the foundation of one's own argument on an *absence* in such a text, on what an author does not say, presumably because such contents (here Krigge's supposed endorsement of grovelling and sycophancy) have either been silently suggested or deliberately suppressed. And yet, this is indeed Silbermann's curious starting point (and frequent point of return), and the phenomenon he claims to have identified in this way goes under many names: "This corruption may be called obsequiousness, submissiveness or opportunism, sycophancy, flattery, crawling, toadying, servility, self-abasement, or indeed baseness - in the last analysis, let us say it loud and clear, it is the behavioural pattern of *grovelling* in all its facets" (9).

While German linguistic usage tends to call for "arse-crawling," which the translator usually renders as "arse-licking," in everyday speech in North America, we tend to use the expressions "sucking up," "brown-nosing," or "ass-kissing." Unable to find an explicit source for the ordinary arts of grovelling in Krigge's obscure treatise, Silbermann then turns to the most venerable literary classic in the history of German letters, Goethe's *Faust*. But here it is not the "official" *Faust* of the standard editions and respectable artistic adaptations, but rather the play as Silbermann remembers it from the performances of his childhood, and as presented in Albrecht Schöne's stage version, itself based on one of Goethe's early drafts, in which Mephistopheles, playing the Master of Ceremonies in the Walpurgis Night scenes, displays his bare bottom to the audience:

MASTER OF CEREMONIES: The gentleman is kindly requested to kiss Satan's backside.

KNEELING MAN: That doesn't confound me. I kiss back or front. (Satan turns around). While your nose above seems to penetrate all the worlds, down here I see a hole to swallow the universe. What odour comes from this colossal mouth! There can't be so good a smell in Paradise, and this well-built abyss arouses the desire to crawl into it.

(Breathless silence, then a frantic outcry from the crowd).

What more shall I do?

SATAN (straightens himself, turns around): Vassal, thou has passed the test! Hereby I enfeoff thee with millions of souls. And having praised the devil's arse so well, though shalt never want for terms of flattery.

(Goethe's *Faust*, Schöne edition, prose translation, quoted in Silbermann, p. 20).

Silbermann's aim is thus to uncover what has remained hidden, to speak frankly about what others pass over in silence, and to speculate on or bring to light what has been forgotten. To do so he draws on two contrasting and complementary scholarly traditions which he himself has contributed to since the 1950s. On the one hand, he explores here the "other side" of the sociology of the arts, especially of literature and music. Besides the crucial Goethe passage, there are interesting discussions of Heine's ultimately fruitless conversion to Christianity (160-64), Gerhardt Hauptmann's and Richard Strauss's capitulation to the Nazi regime (151), and Wagner's opportunistic dealings with Mathilde Wesendonk, whose rich husband Wagner courted as a patron (51-53). In each case, Silbermann keeps to the level of biography rather than attempting to illuminate the work itself or even its social and historical context, so that the reader must draw his or her own conclusions concerning the role of servility in the production of great art. Also tantalizing are the black and white sketches which preface each chapter, apparently dug up by a research assistant, but unfortunately not given any mention in the text itself. Besides the fascinating line drawings by Paul Klee, Kafka, and A. Paul Weber, the sketch by Peter Brueghel the Elder in particular, "The man with the money bag and his flatterers" (1568/69), which precedes Chapter VIII on "Intrigue and Perfidy: Secret Machinations" and provides the frontispiece for the book, is especially suggestive: a crouching giant dispenses gold coins as a host of small men crawl up his ass. Here, too, the book does not elaborate in any detail on either the economics nor the psychology of obsequiousness which seem indispensable in illuminating this image. Rather, Silbermann's principal model and method is taken from the sociology of everyday life, which he draws upon even as he is discussing his favourite aesthetic examples. From this vantage point, sycophancy is treated as a "manifestation" of ordinary experience (29), as a "mode of social interaction within a system of communication" (47), and is thus understood as a habit or custom, as a strategy of concealment or purposive ideology. Ladislaus Löb's English version of the title is therefore somewhat misleading, since grovelling is only one aspect of ass-licking (or arse-crawling), which in turn may not always be a vice but is often a virtue or even a necessity (as the Jews learned in the concentration camps; 158-60). Indeed, Silbermann's book is carefully constructed to amplify this discordant "counterpoint" (109) between the stratagems of self-serving opportunism, deceit, and hypocrisy (Chapters I-VIII) and the sociable vicissitudes of romantic love, family life, and social conflict (Chapters IX-XIII).

For this reason, ass-kissing should be understood to be more than a skill (it must usually be learned through imitation rather than by instruction), since it often appears in sublimated form as an art:

'Refinement' leading to artistic perfection generally begins with a learning phase, followed by practice and repetition, till it achieves the autonomy and responsibility that we commonly call *mastery*. It is only at this point that arse-licking can be applied in a strategically astute and meaningful manner, holding its ground in difficult situations, succeeding even in unfavourable circumstances, and becoming potentially pernicious (176-77).

With the field of sycophancy marked off this exalted way, the most challenging and provocative illustrations emerge from descriptions of rather prosaic scenes of "sucking up" and "kissing ass": Who has not bent over backwards (or forwards) to flatter a superior, to please a child or a parent, or to seduce the object of one's desire (155-58, 128), however noble or base one's intentions? And on a grander scale, to what extent can the post- War trend (and corporate advertising strategy) of pandering to youth culture and the cult of feminine beauty be treated as a perniciously widespread species of "arse-crawling" (134, 113)?

Though Silbermann has little to say to shed light on these matters, by raising them in this context he at least invites us to deepen the study of everyday life by considering a broader vision of the sociology of sycophancy.

For whatever reason, however, Silbermann has chosen to write a very thin volume which emphasizes the suggestive and scandalous nature of his subject while keeping clear of the "troublesome depths of psychological reflection" (15-16). This weakens the intellectual, ethical, and aesthetic impact of his argument considerably, since he is anxious to avoid invoking any conceptual framework which would ask even the most obvious questions or provide the most basic answers, as did Simmel with his commonsense sketch of voluntary subordination in *Sociologie* or Nietzsche in his challenging analysis of the "servile morality" of *ressentiment* in the *Genealogy of Morals*. Instead, the phenomenon under study appears chaotic and intermittent, hard to name because hardly recognizable:

Arse-licking depends on circumstances and occurs sporadically in the life of a person, whether choleric, sanguine or of any other type. From a sociological point of view it is unintegrated, incoherent, and inconsistent, whether in its rudimentary form, its moderate form, or its highly developed intellectual form. Unlike a personal characteristic, arse-licking - seen as an interpersonal relationship based on actions, or as a pattern of behaviour - cannot be grasped in terms of properties (60).

We are not even given any crude speculations about why the *ass* (*Arsch*) should figure so prominently in ordinary speech about sycophancy, despite the observation that "the reality [of grovelling] is perceived via the symbol [of the arse]" (17). In one of Freud's rare (and very brief) forays into "characterology" (which Silbermann too is careful to avoid: 59-60), he famously outlines that "triad of properties" which invariably seem to distinguish the "anal character," namely, orderliness, parsimoniousness, and obstinacy. The fact that Freud was explicitly drawing on notions already available in the common culture, particularly on widely shared experiences with early childhood toilet training, and that the subsequent psychoanalytic codification of these traits as "anal" still circulates in everyday speech, could well be useful in understanding the socio-logic of humiliation and submission, or even of sadism and avarice.

Even Freud's (1977: 215) claim to find "no very marked degree of 'anal-character' in people who have retained the anal zone's erotic character in adult life, as happens, for instance, with certain homosexuals," might lead us to a consideration of "ass- licking"

practices that have more to do with pleasure and love than grovelling and sycophancy. Finally, however predictable or crude we might find Freud's suggestion that "the devil is nothing else than the personification of the repressed unconscious instinctual life" (Freud, 1977: 214), it at least provides a point of reference for examining the scene from Faust quoted above in view of its socio-symbolic significance. (Mozart's notorious aria, "Leck mir den Arsch fein recht schön sauber," might also be considered from this standpoint).

Although Silbermann acknowledges that he was induced to write this book by "a desire to penetrate behind the veil hiding our notions of the correct or incorrect treatment of people of our own, or of a different, class" (15), in fact he gives almost no consideration to the structural and historical dimensions of this crucial dimension of his topic. To do so would have required a much more robust conception of the sociology of everyday life than can be captured in passing comments on family and courtship, undeveloped anecdotes on the lives of great musicians, or brief discussions of the suffering of the Jews. In a footnoted passage from the *Grundrisse* notebooks that few readers have even noticed, much less considered seriously, Marx argues that the ideological justification for and social structure of capitalist surplus value production in fact requires the formation of a leisure class, if not of a stratum of idle outsiders and arse-crawlers:

The creation of surplus labour on the one side corresponds to the creation of minus-labour, relative idleness (or *not-productive* labour at best), on the other. This goes without saying as regards capital itself; but holds then also for the classes with which it shares; hence of the paupers, flunkeys, lickspittles, etc. living from the surplus product, in short, the whole train of retainers (Marx, 1973: 401n).

Of course, this is not to argue that ass-kissing is a creation of capitalism; indeed, the association between feces and gold as made by Brueghel the Elder, by Freud, and occasionally by Marx himself bears witness to its pre-modern (or even infantile) sources. Rather, Marx's point is that this pattern of behaviour comes to be stamped with a capitalist character under conditions of structurally necessary economic scarcity and chronic un(der)employment, and within a culture of repressive tolerance and enforced voluntary servitude.

Whatever puerile pleasure or intellectual teasing may be in store for anyone who encounters this book, for this reader its most serious shortcoming consists in scrupulously staying clear of "the labyrinths of a history of manners" (15), indeed, in not taking very seriously its own inspiration in Knigge's influential book *On Social Intercourse*. In this, Silbermann may be trying desperately to ward off any charge of academic sycophancy against himself by carefully avoiding any reference to, or acknowledging any influence from, the great sociologist and historian of manners, Norbert Elias. However careful he may be not to commit any of the ass-licker's "*perceptible* breaches of social norms, customs, and morality" (such as false lightheartedness, innuendo, long windedness, affected openness, oblique questions, and so on; 174- 75), his own modest claims for his work's originality are not beyond criticism. Early on in the first volume of *The Civilizing Process*, which treats an enormous variety of manuals of social etiquette as "practical

instruments" for conditioning emotions and as "social models" for fashioning sensibilities, Elias cites a telling rhetorical question posed by Knigge: "Where more than here [in Germany] did the courtiers form a separate species?" (Knigge, quoted in Elias, 2000: 23). Elias' aim in this context to point out the conflict which was becoming increasingly evident by the late 18th century between, on the one side, an emphasis among the rising middle classes on scholarship, sound education, and a preference for virtue rather than honour, and on the other, a contrasting insistence among the declining courtly nobility on compliance, courtesy, and fine manners. Knigge's reflections thus articulate a painful tension at the heart of this emerging self- image of the middle-class intelligentsia (or, the *Bildungsbürgertum*), who held the separate life of the mind, books, scholarship, and art (*Kultur*) in higher esteem than the mundane concerns of economics and politics (*Zivilisation*). In fact, he himself was sometimes dubbed "the nobleman as bourgeois," as Silbermann notes (6). Where Knigge waffles and "fails to condemn the corruption" of grovelling, Silbermann will hold firm and assert the moral of his story in no uncertain terms: "As a manifestation of moral reality, arse-licking aims directly at the quasi-'sacred' personality of a human being. By penetrating its enclosure, arse-licking violates this personality, as it does goodness as such" (178-79). In his seductive sociology *a tergo*, with its fixed gaze on the "well- built abyss" of his own childhood, Silbermann ends up defending the anti-social fortress of *homo clausus*, Elias' name for that magnificent creation of the modern civilizing process, and thereby misses the ordinary arts of deference and humility which are the very hallmarks of human sociability.

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