
Charmed by France's sensual joie de vivre

By Glenn C. Altschuler

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In the Middle Ages, the word seduction had moral and religious connotations and was used to describe an effort to lead someone astray. Over time, it became linked to romance and, more broadly, characterized any attempt to experience pleasure by overcoming someone else's inclinations.

In "La Seduction," Elaine Sciolino, former Paris bureau chief for The New York Times, reminds us that no one plays the game better than the French — and suggests, with a soupçon of hyperbole, that seduction is a key to understanding their national character.

Acknowledging that her topic is "not concrete, with arguments easy to organize," Sciolino draws on interviews with philosophers and politicians, writers and rogues, butchers and bakers, in a series of impressionistic essays about how seduction influences French values and behavior — in food and fashion, ballrooms and boardrooms, and all kinds of affairs, foreign and domestic. Deliciously detailed, smart, and sassy, "La Seduction" is one of this summer's not-at-all-guilty pleasures.

The French are great lovers, Sciolino indicates, but they are as interested in the chase as they are in the capture. Ninety-one percent of French women and 83 percent of French men believe that lingerie is an important part of life. Recognizing that the smile is "fraught with too much meaning" to be bestowed indiscriminately or wasted on strangers, the French deploy it deliberately, to create complicity. And, of course, they have perfected "the look" (le regard).

Seductiveness, sexual desire, and prowess, Sciolino points out, are necessities for French politicians. Although secrets remain officially under wraps, the personal lives of presidents and cabinet ministers are part of the national discourse. In 1992, when the magazine *Actuel* asked politicians whether they had cheated on their wives, the answers were delivered with a comic — and easy to penetrate — ambiguity. "What French political man, what man-child would be pure enough?" said a deputy from the Lyons suburbs. "There you go. I answered." But female politicians, Sciolino notes, are expected to be faithful to their partners.

When it works, Sciolino concludes, seduction (with its emphasis on intellectual foreplay and "profound superficiality") "is the best that France has to offer." For decades, however, French culture has been in decline. France is struggling to respond to the imperatives of globalization while preserving its national identity and maintaining its influence on the world stage. Ugly controversies swirl about immigration and the rights of Muslims living in France. English words have slipped into the French language. Three-quarters of all farms and four-fifths of all cafes have disappeared in the last half century; mega-supermarkets now account for 75 percent of all retail food sales; wine consumption has dropped by 50 percent since the 1960s; and the average meal, which a generation ago lasted 88 minutes, now is over after 33.

Sciolino believes that many French people "feel bitter resignation that France is no longer as important as it was." They would be well-advised, she believes, to embrace diversity and reward ambition. But they remain terrified of change. Following a three-month nationwide debate on identity in 2009, the only concrete measures they could muster were requirements that schools fly the French flag, display the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man in classrooms, and have the students sing "The Marseillaise" at least once a year.

Is the France that is seductive in its sophistication and its sensuality now doomed? In the long run, perhaps. But not quite yet. France remains an immensely popular tourist destination, a place, Sciolino demonstrates, "where promises of pleasure are deliverable," where melons can be pinched, women can flirt, and men can exhibit a Chevalier charm.

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