

# **THE POLITICS OF PLEASURE**

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## **Introduction**

This presentation is a theoretical inquiry into the ethical implications of using pleasure as an instrument to gain political ends. The issue stems from the fact that the field of leisure studies tends to view pleasure as an end in and of itself. The intrinsic nature of pleasure is emphasized and it is assumed that in its ideal state pleasure originates within the individual experiencing it. Any possible instrumental dimensions are downplayed. Indeed, words like “intrinsically rewarding” and “autotelic” are employed to describe the leisure ideal. The value is thought to reside in the doing of something for its own sake, not in external “payoffs.”

## **The Body of the Presentation**

This presentation follows a different tack. The role that pleasure has and continues to play in advancing political positions among and between nations is examined. Based on Breslin’s (2002) *Beyond Pain: The Role of Pleasure and Culture in the Making of Foreign Affairs*, various ways in which pleasure has been used for political purposes is examined, including examples from Asian, European and American history. Questions related to the ethical implications of pleasure’s use in this way as well as its implications for the leisure ideal are then addressed. Is the use of pleasure as a means to some other end rooted in the notion that experiencing pleasure makes us more vulnerable somehow to other influences? Do we let our guard down when pleasuring? Do we exhibit some weakness that is otherwise hidden, and thus become more susceptible to doing what someone else wants from us? Is the use of pleasure to achieve political purposes a corruption somehow of the leisure ideal? Is this a good or bad thing? Or is it just something that is? The presentation closes by considering the pragmatic side – the costs and benefits – of employing pleasure as a diplomatic tool in contrast to the employment of pain. As Breslin ponders, “Were pleasure in its culturally relevant setting acknowledged adequately as an effective diplomatic tool and often a cheap and safe one at that, then pain, which is ever more costly and deadly, might lose both its primacy and whatever shreds of legitimacy it may still have in this nuclear age” (from the Preface).

## **Implications for Practice**

As demonstrated throughout the presentation, there is nothing more pragmatic than politics. At the same time, politics are rooted in cultural core values. Illustrating how such values have influenced the pleasures used in the making of foreign affairs leads us to a better understanding of pleasure’s potential for defending and advancing the long-term interests of contemporary states as well as sensitizing us to the ethical concerns that should be taken into account along the way.

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