

Good is the New Bad

Rethinking sexual freedom

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The ethic of consent

The dominant principle of moral behaviour in post-modern society is the “ethic of consent”, especially in the arena of sexual morals. It is one of the enduring influences of the social revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s. According to the ethic of consent, when third parties are not affected informed consent is the only ground for judging the moral value of someone’s behaviour. In these situations, there is no ‘morality’, only an agreed procedure for individuals to decide “what is right for them”. This radical individualism is the ethical basis of both free market libertarianism and the political and social demands of the liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

It’s now evident that the removal of most taboos and social prohibitions on sexual activity has led to a highly sexualised society in which erotic imagery and sex talk are to be found everywhere in private and public life. Uninhibited sexual expression has become bound up with notions of freedom to the point where, for many people, it provides the path they follow in order to express or validate themselves.

It seems to me that this state of affairs could come about only because the idea of sexual relations has been subtly but essentially redefined. After contraception had eliminated biological reproduction as a factor in sexual decision-making, there seemed to be only one function left — the pursuit of pleasure. Yet I think there is a lost aspect of sexual engagement that goes much deeper than its physical pleasures, and indeed beyond the biology of reproduction.

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This third aspect of sex — hidden rather than lost — concerns the idea of union, both emotional union and what might be called metaphysical union, the direct expression and joining of our inner selves, our essence as humans. The evocation through sexual union of some mysterious power that holds the promise of ecstatic merger gives sex a significance that transcends everyday experience. I think this little-discussed but ever-present aspect of sexual engagement explains our society's astonishing preoccupation with sex in all of its manifestations.

Casual sex

Casual sex, if freely consented to, is engaged in purely for physical gratification and perhaps for the emotional pleasure of a brief social encounter. Sex without love is widely practised among younger adults in Western countries, and few are willing to criticise it. If both parties freely agree and are over the age of consent, what possible objection could there be?

Before attempting to answer this question, we need to think about the context in which casual sex has proliferated, since in practice casual sex is a minefield of potential consensual ambiguities. In the first instance, each party must be old enough, sober enough and sane enough to be able to take moral responsibility for their decisions. In practice, we know that youthfulness, drunkenness and emotional distress among women are sometimes exploited by men to sexual advantage.

But it is not only girls whose emotional confusion can be exploited: the newspapers report cases of schoolboys aged 14 or 15 who are invited or seduced by their female teachers into sexual relationships. The typical reaction of men reading about these cases is to wish they had been so lucky at school, yet it is evident that few of the seduced boys escape without emotional trauma, sometimes severe and long-lasting.

This reminds us that, despite the message purveyed by the media and popular culture that it is no more than good fun, sex is complex, deep and powerful. There is also a wider set of pressures on people, especially young people, to engage in casual sex. The market is saturated with erotic imagery and content whose effect is to create and reinforce the view

that engaging in sex is a natural part of social life and that those who do not participate will be ostracised. The “cool” group at high school acquires its elevated status primarily by engaging in, or giving the impression of engaging in, premature sexual activity. Sex is associated with sophistication, non-conformity and a willingness to embrace life.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the pervasiveness of sex is advertisers’ practice of presenting children in sexually provocative clothing and poses to sell products, a marketing method sometimes referred to as “corporate paedophilia”. This is done by even the most respectable companies. The coexistence of the social panic about paedophilia and society’s apparent indifference to children being presented in the media as sexually desirable stands as a striking testimony to the power of Freudian denial on a mass scale.

Where both parties consent to a casual encounter and no third parties are affected, making moral judgments is a mistake. However, a friend or family member might assume the role of moral adviser. The friend of a young woman considering a sexual encounter might question whether the proposed liaison is really in the young woman’s interests. Is consent freely given or is the young woman feeling pressured? If she gets drunk will she be in a position to consent? Is the sex engaged in for its own sake or is there another objective? Although the scene is presented here as an interrogation, young people engage in these sorts of conversations almost daily, often taking advice from magazines.

If the young woman can answer honestly that none of those factors presents an obstacle and all the conditions of fully informed consent apply, her friend might pose a final question. Will you regret it afterwards? In posing this question, the friend is calling into the conversation the young woman’s moral self, her inner judge.

Why might the young woman regret engaging in casual sex even though she goes into the encounter fully informed and consenting? In his defence of “sex with love”, ethicist John Hunter argues that impersonal sex always falls short of an ideal. Loving sex goes far beyond physical gratification: it includes “mutual trust, total mutual acceptance, and an intimacy distinguished by the sharing of one’s innermost thoughts as well as one’s body”. Sex in the context of love and intimacy becomes part of a rich relationship marked by

security and reciprocity, which nurtures the sense of value and specialness in the lovers that infuses their entire relationship and advances their health and emotional wellbeing.

Although this is a compelling case for the superior value of sex with love, it does not mean that impersonal sex is of no value. Hunter's argument is that casual sex does not live up to an ideal, but for our young woman the choice is not between casual sex and ideal sex: it is between casual sex and no sex.

Moreover, the ideal is open to challenge. In his book *Good Sex*, Raymond Belliotti, for example, argues that people who pursue sex without love might be seeking only the inherent pleasure of sex and value a life free of emotional entanglements. Impersonal sex may be more enjoyable, he says, because it is free of oppressive expectations and obligations:

Non-lovers experience adventure and shared risk, they sense mutual appreciation for freedom and non-possessiveness, they entertain feelings of specialness as they exercise unique opportunities, and they perceive sex as an inherently valuable human enterprise that transcends instrumentalist concerns.

This is the position taken to the extreme by author Catherine Millet in her memoir *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.*. It is a powerful argument with widespread appeal. Yet there is something missing because we know that feelings of regret often follow casual sexual encounters (not to mention paid ones). It is implausible to propose that it simply falls short of the ideal of loving sex, in the same way as it is implausible to argue that feelings of regret arise because a one-night stand does not fulfil hopes of adventure, liberation and an inherently valuable enterprise.

If, after the event, the young woman's inner judge rules against her, the disturbance she feels will be for something she has lost, something she has sacrificed. The metaphysical intimacy of joining essences she and her partner experienced has no emotional context and so might feel like a violation of her bodily integrity and a trivialisation of sexual union. For both men and women, if emotional intimacy is absent metaphysical intimacy feels hollow, for its special character seems to require care and respect.

Perhaps this is why many people are left with a vague feeling that each time they have casual sex they give away a little of themselves, that something sacred is profaned and they are diminished as a result. Casual sex truly is meaningless sex.

In an era when premarital sex attracts no stigma and, indeed, abstinence must be defended, this seems to be at the heart of the decision by some young women, and even some young men, to go against the trend of sexual licence and “save themselves” for their partners in long-term committed relationships. So let’s consider the first signs of a return of chastity.

Chastity redux

For teenage girls in the 1950s the price of breaching the chastity rule could be high, especially if they became pregnant. By the 1970s virginity had become a sign of oppression, a denial of the right to free sexual expression. But 30 years on chastity is making a comeback.

I read recently of one young woman, now 20, who said that when her school friends became sexually active at about 15 she noticed that depression, confusion and rejection often went with it. In a sex-saturated culture her peers felt they had no choice. “They were blind in a way”, she says, “doing what they thought they had to do with their boyfriends. They should have been told they didn’t have to behave that way.” But the only message from the adult world was “Use a condom”.

So this young woman made a bold decision—to remain chaste until she feels willing to give her entire self to another. Her friends saw it as a bit weird but also fascinating.

So perhaps the wheel has turned. Where once teenage sexual activity was a sign of rebellion, now the virgin is the dissenter and chastity signals independence of mind. I am not, of course, talking about officially sanctioned abstinence campaigns or those creepy ceremonies where daughters promise their fathers to remain virgins. I am talking about young women, and men, who make a considered choice and decide on the basis of their own free will.

Once the timid and compliant held back from sex; now it is the confident and courageous who refrain. Which leads us to wonder: who is more free—the young woman who is “saving” herself or her friends who became sexually active at 15 because it was expected of them?

Who’s in control?

What has happened to bring about this incipient reversal? The victories of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s were necessary and inevitable. The sexual revolution blew away strictures that caused so much misery—the shame of pre-marital sex, imprisonment in unhappy marriages and the neuroses that stood in the way of sexual pleasure.

The demand was to replace a society of oppressive rules and conventions with a society of autonomous individuals committed to the welfare of all and discriminating against none. For the first time we would be free to control our own destinies. Yet today, despite the advances, we have never experienced more pressure to define ourselves in ways other people want us to. As *The Times* (of London) observed:

It is the paradox of our lives. We’ve never had more freedom to shape ourselves in the way we want but we’ve also never been subject to so many pressures telling us what is desirable. While we stand in front of a supermarket display confronted with more bewildering choices than ever before, the voices telling us what to reach for are more insistent, and insidious, than ever.

For decades psychologists have collected data on a personality trait called the “locus of control”, a measure of the extent to which we believe we control our own lives rather than being subject to outside forces. The research (by psychologist Jean Twenge) shows that since the 1960s young people in the West have become *more* inclined to believe external forces control their lives.

Remarkably, declining scores on locus of control tests are greater among young women, despite the opportunities for women delivered by feminism. Perhaps we should expect no more of an era in which for many the desirable life is the one lived out of control —

binge drinking, indiscriminate sex and capitulation to every desire. Equality came to mean freeing girls to behave as badly as boys and created a new gender — “girls with balls” as one writer put it — where once we imagined perhaps something closer to boys with ovaries. Contrary to the arguments of some “pro-sex” feminists, when young women mimic the boorish behaviour of young men it is still men who set the standard. Raunch culture debases the dream of liberation.

Although the objectives were noble, the demand for individual rights in the 1960s and 1970s released a self-centredness that has grown into full-blown narcissism. In the 1950s only 12 per cent of US teenagers agreed with the statement “I am an important person”; by the late 1980s, 80 per cent described themselves this way.

In our pursuit of tolerant pluralism we created a society of radical individualism, a phenomenon dubbed “boomeritis” by author Ken Wilber. Appeals to the principles of equality and freedom often allowed egocentric demands to flourish. Slogans such as “Let it all hang out” and “Do your own thing” were soon interpreted as “No one can tell me what to do”. Self-worth became self-worship.

The marketing language used today mirrors this development precisely. Narcissistic interpretations of liberation are the bread and butter of modern advertising. Consider these tag lines from magazine ads: “Go on, you deserve it.” “Just for you.” “If it makes you happy, it’s a bargain.” “I don’t care what it is, I want it.”

It is now apparent that the radical demands of the liberation movements dovetailed perfectly with the logic of hyper-consumerism. The self-creating individual was the agent ideally suited to the needs of the market. Among the first to understand the opportunities this presented were the tobacco companies, which turned feminism into dollars by associating smoking with women’s emancipation and empowerment. As early as 1968 Phillip Morris launched Virginia Slims, a cigarette brand targeted specifically at women, famously deploying the slogan “You’ve come a long way, baby”.

The strategy worked: more teenage girls took up smoking. A magazine ad in 1978 juxtaposed a photo of an elegant woman in an evening gown with one of a housewife

hanging out the washing. The text read, “Back then, every man gave his wife at least one day a week out of the house. You’ve come a long way, baby. Virginia Slims – Slimmer than the fat cigarettes men smoke.” Sadly, the tumours women developed were no slimmer.

Corporate corruption of the 1960s ideals of youth rebellion and the counter-culture is unmistakable if we compare the original Woodstock festival in 1969 with Woodstock 99, an attempted reprise of the famous love-fest.

Woodstock 69 was imbued with a sense of harmony and tolerance and was everywhere seen as a “victory of peace and love”. When the number of young people turning up exceeded expectations, the organisers threw open the gates to make it a free concert.

The only reporter to attend the entire event, Barnard Collier of the *New York Times*, had to resist his editors’ demands to put a negative spin on the festival: they wanted “a social catastrophe in the making”. He wrote instead of the “fascinating cooperation, caring and politeness among so many people” and of an “amazing and beautiful accident”.

Thirty years later Woodstock 99 was an unapologetically corporate venture, with sponsors, vendor malls and ATMs. It was criticised for gouging patrons with “grossly overpriced water, beer, and food”. Ticket holders were frisked on the way in to ensure they carried no contraband bottles of water.

The concert had an impregnable perimeter fence, and 500 private security guards were employed to keep out those who had no ticket. But security inside the enclosure was inadequate, and the concert was marred by arson, looting, violence and several allegations of rape. In sharp contrast with the harmony, peace and love of Woodstock 69, Woodstock 99 was noted for its exploitation, fights and “palpable mood of anger”.

Inner freedom

In *The Freedom Paradox* I call for a reconsideration of the state of freedom. Writing in 1944, the high priest of free-market libertarianism, Friedrich von Hayek, observed that the success of the expansion of individualism and commerce had surpassed man’s wildest

dreams: “What in the future will probably appear the most significant and far-reaching effect of this success is the new sense of power over [our] own fate, the belief in the unbounded possibilities of improving [our] own lot ...”

Despite the advances in market freedoms and the victories of the liberation movements, we look around today for signs of true autonomy, of inner freedom, that is, in Hayek’s words, “the extent to which a person is guided in his actions by his own considered will, by his reason or lasting conviction, rather than by momentary impulse or circumstance”.

The opposite of inner freedom is not so much coercion by others. Rather, it is the influence of temporary emotions or of moral or intellectual weakness; if we succumb to these influences we become slaves of our passions.

But is not the absence of inner freedom the dominant characteristic of modern consumer society, where the cultivation of momentary impulse, temporary emotions and moral and intellectual weakness has become the essence of the system? Is not the purpose of the marketing society to make us slaves of our passions?

In the era of hyper-consumerism the urge to satisfy any desire has reached sublime levels. It is now possible to buy capsules filled with 24-carat gold leaf which, when swallowed, make your excrement sparkle. Created by New York designer Tobias Wong, the gold pills are promoted as a signifier of excess and a means of “increasing your self-worth” — although presumably for only as long as the digestion process takes. At \$425 each, they are the ultimate confirmation of the ancient association, often noted by anthropologists, between gold and excrement.

This is the freedom of the market. Rosa Luxemburg, the German revolutionary, once wrote: “Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently”. She was right; thinking for ourselves is the ultimate form of liberty. Yet who truly thinks differently today when our universities have become locked in to the demands of the market, corporations infiltrate the academy and governments drain funds from the critical disciplines?

Who thinks differently when the mass media saturate the culture with triviality, and vast resources are devoted to capturing our attention with new television programs designed to amuse, titillate, disturb or revolt us, all with the sole purpose of exposing us to advertising? And when children's brains develop in a vat of commercial messages who believes we are creating a generation of critical thinkers?

Where is the space for different thinking when "the end of politics" has been announced, where a particular form of liberal capitalism has achieved such hegemony that there is no substantive difference between the main political parties because they have converged on a belief in unfettered markets, consumer choice and the primacy of economic growth?

Bad girls

The narcissistic and self-destructive elements of boomeritis converge in the figure of Paris Hilton. In September 2008 Republican presidential contender John McCain ran a television ad subliminally associating Barack Obama with the emptiness of Hilton's celebrity; like Hilton, suggested the ad, Obama is the creation of pop culture. The Republican's strategy failed because, in conspicuous contrast to the previous Democrat president and unlike Paris Hilton, Obama represents the antithesis of pop attitudes to sex.

Barack and Michelle Obama's public kisses and embraces have turned them into the "hot couple" who are making sex in marriage look not only desirable but better than the alternative.² In the mind-frame of 60s rebellion sizzling matrimonial love seems an oxymoron, but the Obamas are making it cool to be monogamous. For young people who have chosen sexual autonomy, perhaps even abstinence, the Obamas seem to provide a model of how intimacy and commitment can be combined with an exhilarating sex life.

Post-modern academics see the "bad girl" as the heroine who sticks two fingers up at the puritanical repression of healthy sexuality. But against Michelle Obama, the bad girl looks more and more like the puppet of a hyper-sexualised society whose demands to conform are every bit as insistent as those of the 1950s conservatives. She is a victim of

² See JoAnn Wypijewski, 'Obama as sex symbol', *The Nation*, August 4, 2008

the teen culture satirised in films like *Mean Girls* and in Chris Lilley's character Ja'mie in *Summer Heights High*. All Ja'mie wants is to be "hot".

"Bad" no longer signifies rebellion: it signifies compliance. Withholding the body instead of flaunting it—acknowledging one's sexuality but not necessarily sharing it with strangers—is the new "transgression". Good is the new bad.

The reappearance of modesty and constraint does not, however, represent a return to the conservative morality of the 1950s, with all its oppressive baggage. The argument for sexual self-control is an argument for *more* freedom, not less—freedom from the tyranny of expectations imposed on baby boomers' children by the commercial cooption of the aspirations of the sexual revolution and the women's movement.

The task for today's teenagers is to win back their freedom from the adults who run the advertising agencies and girls magazines and the "sex-positive" media academics who insist that "bad girls" are powerful girls.

The idea of empowerment through sexual licence has reached its pinnacle in the case of Natalie Dylan, a 22-year old Californian who is auctioning her virginity to the highest bidder. "I understand some people may condemn me", she said. "But I think this is empowering. I am using what I have to better myself."

In a perfect convergence of the narcissistic interpretation of 1960s liberation and pure market thinking, she declared: "I don't have a moral dilemma with it. We live in a capitalist society. Why shouldn't I be allowed to capitalise on my virginity?" Why not indeed? If he requests it, the purchaser of Natalie's virginity will be able to authenticate the quality of the product by way of a gynaecological examination and then consummate the transaction in brothel. Nice. As if to underscore the perversion of the ideals of feminism, it turns out that Natalie holds a bachelor's degree in women's studies.

Post-modern sexual radicals who urge teenage girls to seize power by being sexually provocative are the new oppressors, because they insist that teenagers behave according to their own 1960s script. The same people defend the liberating possibilities of pornography, which is inherently liberating for women because it breaks through the

regulation of women's bodies to show, in the words of one, "the disordered side of the female body – its orifices and fluids – which are both threatening and exciting". So efforts to regulate porn are always "the puritanical repression of healthy sexuality".

On this view, criticism of any form of sexual behaviour is suspect because all sexuality is natural and because the suppression of one form of sexual expression can only be the thin end of the wedge. This gives rise to some grotesque arguments. Thus one defender of pornography could in all seriousness declare on national television that those who want to regulate advertising to control the premature sexualisation of girls are equivalent to the Taliban who want to cover girls in burkas and make them the property of men.

The debate over the sexualisation of girls has outed these post-moderns. They have always argued that children are sexual creatures and should be allowed to explore and express their sexuality without the guilt imposed on them by neurotic adults and conservative clerics. Luckily, they believe, children are much smarter than neurotic adults and slip easily into a savvy, ironic, critical mode whenever there is any danger of falling under the sway of advertisers or media.

The politics of this are bizarre, for there has emerged an unholy alliance, or concordance of interests, between the "radical" post-modern academics and the most aggressive agents of consumer capitalism, the marketing industry. Both argue that advertising has no untoward influence on consumers, including child consumers, but is merely informational and entertaining. Thus the post-modern radicals, who matured in an era of challenging the powerful and denouncing the oppressive structures that served them, have ended up as their most vigorous apologists.

Rebuilding

The sexual revolution allowed us to discard oppressive moral codes, but it failed to deliver on its promise of a world of uninhibited sexual pleasure in which we could find and express our true desires. Sexual freedom became burdened with expectations it could never meet. Pursuing sexual freedom as an antidote to boredom or as a means of finding personal fulfilment was always doomed to fail. For many it became a means of avoiding

emotional intimacy and repudiating the metaphysical meaning of sexual union. The ideology of sexual freedom did not recognise that, for all of its wonders, sex also has a powerful dark side, one that often gives rise to feelings of betrayal, regret and emptiness.

I have argued that engaging in early and uninhibited sex was once a sign of rebellion against an oppressive orthodoxy; now in a sex-soaked society, in which the imagery and practices of pornography are seeping in to the mainstream, a new orthodoxy has taken control, imposing a set of expectations almost as oppressive as those it replaced. In this new environment, power is now to be exercised by resisting those pressures.

Temperance, even abstinence, can be an expression of self-control, of inner freedom.

Today the historic mission is no longer to attack and tear down, but to rebuild a moral code. In affluent, liberal societies, the task is to understand that freedom cannot be found in a moral free-for-all, but only in the careful exercise of restraint.