

Sexcrime? I Paid for It (Coming of Age in a Consumerist Sexual Democracy)

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Comment:

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"Modern media argue for modern goods without regard for social consequences."
(J. W. Phelan, 1977)

"...Look in the mirror above the bed, start to wonder if you've been misled..."
(R. Price/D. Peverett, 1979)

"...money doesn't mean to me what it obviously means to you/ 'cause I would never steal from kids who don't have a clue."
(M. Herrera, 1998)

Pardon me if I sound like a prude [derived from Fr *prudefemme*, excellent woman--from proud --L *prodesse*, to be useful]; I do not want to preach morality, that would be useless. But, I have to address this issue of sex as a social issue from my perspective. So, as a practicing celibate, my views may be misconstrued as "illiberal." However, my choice to abstain is purely pragmatic, and not for everyone (even so, it is an option worth considering). That said, I'd like to turn away from any discussion of practice or preference; it's not my place to proscribe. What has me concerned and bewildered is what I perceive as an unhealthy obsessive and exploitative fascination with sex in our society, with particular (some would say, "biased") attention to the role mass-media play in promoting the commodification and debauchment of attitudes toward sexuality in society, and in the minds of our children.

In Chapter One of the book *Thinking About Sex and Love: A Philosophical Inquiry*, J. F. M. Hunter (1980) asks and answers the question that puts this issue into focus:

Does sex loom so large simply because it is so pleasant? Although it is uncommonly pleasant, it is not out of all proportion more delightful than having an amusing conversation with a friend, eating a well-cooked meal, or anything else we very much enjoy: and yet it not only interests most of us

more than any other of life's joys, but to be deprived of it bothers us to a degree unknown when we are deprived of other pleasures. Why is this? (pp. 11-12)

What follows is a "laundry list" of plausible reasons for our fascination with sex; from biology to spirituality, with a few stops at seedy hotels and psychologist's couches along the way.

The very last place Hunter visits before embarking upon another path is where I'd like to begin:

A rather different source of our interest in sex is the storybook quality it acquires from films, novels, advertising and everyday chit-chat, a quality accentuated by the aura of forbiddenness that enhances this remarkable pleasure. Even people who do not themselves think sex wicked may savor the idea of doing something so widely felt to be sinful. A love affair can seem like a journey into a magic world of romance and high adventure (p. 23).

I have nothing against romance, even as it is romanticized in the arts and popular culture. Storybook sex "evokes themes of care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge. They speak for a system of values in relationships which make individual autonomy possible while encouraging diversity to flourish (Weeks, 1995)." The sexual revolution of the 1960's and early 70's, for all its mis-steps and indulgences, was rooted in this ideology (Weeks, 1985; Janus & Janus, 1993). A democratization of sex had begun. "Free love" (as in "unbind") was the word of the day. Storybook sex, however, is not the prevailing, or most profitable mode of presentation in popular culture because sex has always been a commodity -- it has been, is, and probably always will be, an item for trade and a tool for attaining power. So, as with any commodity in a democratic atmosphere, privateers saw a profit to be made.

"Sex sells," or more precisely, the promise, or intimation of sex became a marketing mantra. But,

just like any other commodity, sex in its natural state soon turned out to have a slim profit-potential. Permit me to make an analogy -- much like produce, veggies are veggies. With a cornucopia of choice at hand for the consumer, a vendor must make his product desirable. The best way to do this is to inflate the benefits of partaking ("This is good for what ails you!"), or to "niche-market" ("I don't want just any old radicchio, I want baby radicchio imported from..."). Either way, one can increase the price. But this takes processing, packaging, and, above all, skillful advertising. Considering the diversity of sexual inclinations to prey upon, a boomtown virtually sprang into existence. Playing up every angle--"perfect sex," "ultimate sex," "extreme sex," "forbidden sex," etc.--sex became a multi-billion \$ industry, and it is still growing. As it grew, a new paradigm arose: offer increasingly explicit, fetishistic depictions of sex to produce and feed a habituated consumer. In short, "the more you show, the more they want."

A synopsis of the timeline, followed by a cognitive "sidestep," might best explicate this phenomenon. Bear with me a moment...

Post WWII, American attitudes relaxed -- Prohibition was seen to be ineffective in, if not antithetical to, ameliorating the inherent vices of society. So, a loosening of moral constraints was popularly embraced. The now iconic pinup girl quickly became *passee* in the 1950s and early '60s. Hugh Hefner founded an empire on what may now be considered as artful nudity. At the time, it was considered *risque*. But all too soon, it was no longer enough to show a partially clad body. Full-frontal nudity, suggestive poses, and an inviting look trailed behind a "back-alley-black-bar-over-the-best-parts" mentality that wanted more. Along came a certain Mr. Flynt, publisher of *Hustler Magazine*, and others such as the Mitchell Bros. (opened first chain of adult theatres), and *Screw Magazine* (the first magazine to feature "full penetration"). These "sex" entrepreneurs made the "trench coat" crowd a powerful political-economic movement. Freedom of press/expression was put to the test, and became a bulwark for those who wished to profit from the exploitation of the basest part of human nature. The rest, I leave to your imagination... (Stop looking at me that way)

It didn't take long for "mainstream media to glom onto this newfound freedom.

Advertising [curiously -- the word 'advertise' is derived from Fr *advertir*, to warn] and commercial entertainment, at first, played upon suggestion and innuendo [is this perhaps Italian for "suppository"?] to increase their market-share. But this is perhaps a slippery slope. . .

Here are a few statistics to think about regarding sex and mass-media:

In the United States, young people spend 6 to 7 hours each day on average with some form of media. A national survey in 1999 found that one third of young children (2-7 years old) and two thirds of older children (8-18 years old) have a television in their own bedroom. Many of those televisions also are hooked up to cable and a VCR. (Roberts, 2000)

It is expected that by 2010 most U.S. homes with children will have access to the Internet. (Taylor, 1999)

Sexual talk and displays are increasingly frequent and explicit in this mediated world. One content analysis found that sexual content that ranged from flirting to sexual intercourse had increased from slightly more than half of television programs in 1997-1998 to more than two-thirds of the programs in the 1999-2000 season. Depiction of intercourse (suggestive or explicit) occurred in one of every 10 programs. (Kunkel, Cope-Farrar, Biely, Farinola, & Donnerstein, 2001)

One fifth to one half of music videos, depending on the music genre portray sexuality or eroticism (DuRant, et al., 1997)

Two thirds of Hollywood movies made each year are R-rated; most young people have seen these movies long before they are the required 16 years old. (Greenberg, et al., 1993)

The word sex is the most popular search term used on the Internet today. (CyberAtlas, 2001)

...of young people (10-17 years old) who regularly used the Internet, one out of four said he or she had encountered unwanted pornography in the past year, and one out of five

had been exposed to unwanted sexual solicitations or approaches. (Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolak, 2000)

These statistics highlight the prevalence of sexually-oriented material in mass-media, but do not address the deeper issue of content:

Despite increasing public concern about the potential health risks of early, unprotected sexual activity, most of the mass media rarely depict the three C's of responsible sexual behavior: Commitment, Contraceptives and consideration of the Consequences. (Note: The preceding statistics and quote are referenced under a blanket reference in Brown, J. D., 2002)

As if that weren't enough to raise a red flag, some of the most popular video games in the past few years depict scantily-clad, disproportionately-endowed females who inflict physical damage through contortionistic acts of violence. Another very popular video game (Grand Theft Auto) depicts the "protagonist" being rewarded for having sex with prostitutes and receiving extra rewards for killing the prostitute in lieu of payment.

Further compounding the problem of growing up in this day and age is the general message that mass media presents with regard to consumerism as individualism, and the equation of individualism to individuality. I find this highly offensive on so many levels. Suffice to say that individuality is not in any way, shape, or form the same as individualism. As far as consumerism as individualism is concerned, I think that social historian Stephanie Coontz (1992) highlights this shift in meaning when she states that "between 1870 and 1900, the volume of advertising multiplied more than tenfold.... The word consumption increasingly lost its earlier connotations of destroying, wasting, or using up, and came instead to refer in a positive way to the satisfying of human needs and desires (p. 170)." Previous to this era the word consumption was the layman's term for tuberculosis, a disease that caused a person's body to waste away. Webster's definition of consume reads -- 1 to destroy, as by fire; to do away with 2 a) to use up b) to spend wastefully; squander (time, energy, money, etc.) 3 to eat or drink up; devour 4 to absorb completely; engross or obsess [consumed with envy, a consuming interest]. That pretty much sums it up for me; how this obviously negative word came to equate with individuality must be a very convoluted story.

But, literal meaning aside, consumerism sends a message, but it's not much of an improvement on the previous meaning. Coontz writes:

Consumer culture insists that we can pick and choose from the "free market" of goods, emotions, images, relationships: If we are "smart shoppers" we can "have it all" and "still stand out from the crowd." . . . We have begun to believe that we can shop around not only for things but also for commitments, that we can play mix and match even with our personal identities and most intimate relations. Simultaneously, we experience a blurring of the distinction between illusion and reality, people and goods, image and identity, self and surroundings (p. 176).

The impact of this "blurring of distinction" is a general devaluation of life's most precious gifts; an emergent relativism that denies a certain *je ne sais quoi* of a serendipitous life. That is, when all things in life can be bought, no things in life are priceless. Jim and Ingrid Croce (1973) personalize the human cost of such a "trade" in life--"...I've traded love for pennies, sold my soul for less, lost my ideals down this long tunnel of time..."

This "loss of ideals" has a profound effect upon the "fabric of social life." The substitution of personal desires for human needs creates an adversarial atmosphere which supersedes a deeper connectedness that defines "the social basis of [their] identity.... (Coontz, p. 177; brackets mine)." Rather than "wanting what we have versus having what we want," we learn "to want what the other has," not because it is what we want. But, to possess it as well symbolically devalues that which we perceive to be "unfairly distributed." In other words, "If I can put a price on it, then it isn't so special after all." This sort of rationalization lies at the heart of a larger "depersonalization of human experience," one that serves to alleviate one's own sense of "worthlessness" by making all things worthless in and of themselves.

Consumerist philosophy argues that it is only by the accumulation and display of everything that we define our worth, not by the special appreciation and application of our unique gifts and limitations that make us who we are. The message of consumerism falsely places all of life's experiences on an even plane outside of a learning dimension that the uneven

distribution of experience, and the individual experience of life contribute to the special nature of social interaction. This special nature of social interaction refers to the fact that social progress is dependent upon a diversity of human experience within a common reality, not a universality of experience in a diversity of realities. We grow as people not by being more or less the same, but by being uniquely qualified to share what makes us special for a common good--If I have, or can acquire, all that you have, why should I care about you?

At this point, I'd like to return to the increasingly explicit portrayal of sexual behavior in mass media and its effect upon society, particularly upon those without the learned deliberative skills that accompany adult behavior. When considered against the background of consumerism, the world of pornography appears to be not so much a freeing of sexuality as it an endorsement of the enslavement of humanity. What was once a delicacy for some has become part of an "all you can eat" smorgasbord that invites not discrimination of taste, but a ravenous feeding frenzy of desire, indifferent to the ecological impacts of indiscriminate consumption.

Dolf Zillman and Jennings Bryant (1982) illustrate this indifference engendered by the commodification of sex in their hallmark study, *Pornography, Sexual Callousness, and the Trivialization of Rape*:

Specifically, it could be contended that students who were massively exposed to pornography may have inferred that such materials are harmless, because if they were not, the researchers would not have subjected them to these stimuli. Favorable evaluations of pornography, then, may have resulted from the fact that the researchers legitimized exposure. While this possibility cannot be ruled out, it should be noted that this form of legitimization closely parallels what happens outside the laboratory: pornography is culturally legitimized by the lack of censure. If the students inferred innocuousness from the researchers' tacit sanction, the so-called man in the street is likely to infer innocuousness from the fact that no one in any position of authority objects to people being liberally exposed to

pornography in public movie theatres and elsewhere.

The implication of this statement should not be under-estimated. Bearing in mind that the test group for this study consisted of "college-students," who by inference have greater deliberative skills than children or adolescents have, the effect of exposure equating acceptance should not be dismissed. The effect of sustained exposure to sexually explicit media is that "students in our study who viewed the most pornography can be said to have given a "pornography answer" to certain questions tapping perceptions of sexuality and dispositions toward sexual behaviors." (*ibid*) Through the tacit acceptance of sexually explicit material in society, a cumulative belief in the prevalence and acceptability of wanton sexuality emerges.

Another more disturbing result of Zillman's (1982, 1994 & 2000) research into exposure to sexually explicit material (whether depicted or merely suggested) indicated that both male and female moral sensitivity had been significantly reduced. Early research tested college students who were exposed to "tame" pornography (e.g. standard heterosexual intercourse: 1982). Later studies (1994, & 2000) tested the effects of "soap opera sex" (e.g. daytime/nighttime broadcast programming) upon 13 - 14 year olds. The results of each showed a clear decline in empathy for hypothetical "victims" of sexual impropriety. Specifically, marital infidelity was seen as more socially acceptable, and less damaging to the partner who had been cheated on. This finding has been linked to a decreased expectation of fidelity, and increased distrust in one's partner.

Beliefs about the frequency and types of sexual behaviors (e.g. one-night stands, multiple partners, sodomy, and other "less-traditional" sexual acts, etc.) were found to be increased, and deemed acceptable in test groups. These changes of belief are correlated with increased expectations for (and increasing disappointment with) one's own sex life.

But, the most disturbing result of these studies is the reported change in perception of women, particularly with regard to the rape myth. The rape myth is the belief that the victim wanted it, had it coming, and/or, once assaulted, enjoyed it (Zillman, & Bryant: 1982). The findings of this study were that

in groups that had massive exposure to pornographic material (4 hours and 48 minutes of exposure over a six week period), the recommended sentence for convicted rapists was nearly half that which was recommended by the control group which was shown equal time of non-erotic fare. This effect was found in both male and female participants. The effects of exposure also had a negative effect upon the experimental group's support for feminist issues.

Returning to the statistics cited earlier, it seems clear that the most prominent model for social behavior in the lives of children today is that which is portrayed in mass media. "In the absence of acceptable forms of sex education in the schools, the conventional media, now supplemented by the Internet, are de facto providing sex education for our children and adolescents (Zillman, 2000)." Some studies suggest that parents and peers have a substantial role in shaping one's view of the world (Yankelovich Partners, 1993). But, this begs the question, "Where are these "parents and peers" getting their values from?"

There's no doubt in my mind that the use and depiction of sex in the mass media is here to stay, and will only become more prominent and explicit. Placing these trends, and research results into the context of a society faced with such difficult issues as AIDS/HIV, STD's, unplanned/teen pregnancy, high rates of divorce, violence in the family, sexual predators, etc., it is clear that greater scrutiny should be given to the role that mass media play in cultivating attitudes and behaviors in the citizenry, particularly our children. More importantly, the need for educating our children to think for themselves becomes glaringly apparent. A realistic and socially responsible model of sexuality is just one part of this education; the development and implementation of a concentrated program of critical inquiry and deliberative civic education that addresses these and other current issues is an old idea whose time has come.

Final thought: Social constructs with regard to sex, particularly "trade in sex," did not come about arbitrarily; they had, and still have, important meaning with regard to the individual in society. To deconstruct these ideals just for the sake of deconstruction is reckless. To reconstruct meaning

without a socially responsible context, especially for the purpose of turning a profit, is *criminal*.

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