Have We Ruined Sex?

Five writers ask whether society has lost its way when it comes to the most intimate of human acts.

Various Authors

July 28, 2023

Contents

Katie Roiphe says we shouldn't police our sexual lives for ideological consistency. **Andrew Sullivan** remembers his sexual awakening in a time before the internet and dating apps. **Mary Harrington** explains why we're talking about sex more but enjoying it less. **Coleman Hughes** asks who really benefits from "hookup culture." And **Agnes Callard** explores what philosophy can teach us about the value of desire.

Back to Escape, Play and Risk

By Katie Roiphe

If a woman has a fantasy of being overpowered by a man, is she a patsy playing out a patriarchal script? Is she a victim of what used to be called "false consciousness"? There is a longstanding belief in certain feminist subcultures that we can somehow "untangle sex and aggression," as Gloria Steinem once put it. Half a century ago, Joan Didion memorably mocked the feminist aspiration surrounding "the 'gentleness' of the sexual connection, as if the participants were wounded birds."

These days conversations in and out of our classrooms seem to be going in the same direction. The brilliant feminist philosopher Amia Srinivasan asks "whether there is a duty to transfigure, as best we can, our desires," and she makes a very clever and nuanced case that there is. In a paper for her college Philosophy of Sex class, my daughter recently quoted the feminist scholar Sandra Bartky: "A thorough overhaul of desire is clearly on the feminist agenda: The fantasy that we are overwhelmed by Rhett Butler should be traded in for one in which we seize state power and re-educate him."

This image of the feminist "re-educating Rhett Butler" after a couple of margaritas is obviously bordering on parody—not to mention the eerie authoritarian undertones of the word "re-educate." But the fantasy that we can somehow police our sexuality for political consistency is more prevalent and even mainstream than one might think.

Emerging from this discourse is a glimmering ideal of everyone being nice and sensible and utterly controlled and perfectly respectful and egalitarian in the most intimate settings. But it seems to me that there is something flawed and sanitized about this ideal of absolute consistency, of desires that adhere to a checklist our conscious mind dutifully assembles. This image neglects the inconvenient reality that, for many people, sexuality involves contradiction, escape, play, risk, experimentation, theater. What is appealing about sex is precisely that one doesn't have to be one's respectable daytime self. The intimate realms elude, and maybe should elude, our attempts to regulate them with things like political convictions or dislike of the patriarchy.

There is an alternative feminist tradition that recognizes and accepts the tangles and complexities of intimate life—how divided and conflicted we are in terms of power and desire. When Simone de Beauvoir was asked if her romantic subjugation to her lifelong partner Jean-Paul Sartre was at odds with her feminist politics, she said, "Well, I just don't give a damn... I am sorry to disappoint the feminists, but it is too bad so

many of them live only theory instead of in real life." Many years later, in her influential novel "I Love Dick," Chris Kraus wrote: "Was I a masochist? I told him, 'No,' 'Cause don't you see? Everything that's happened here to me has happened only 'cause I've willed it."

Katie Roiphe is director of the Cultural Reporting and Criticism Program at New York University and the author, most recently, of "The Power Notebooks."

A Loss of Mystery, for Better and Worse

By Andrew Sullivan

When my hormones first kicked in, I was completely in the dark. And for the next 10 years, my sex life was entirely by myself. It was the 1970s, and I had no access to pornography, not even the slightest idea what I would ever do with another man, no reference points at all to gayness.

But I had my imagination and a sketch book, and I would draw images of men in it. They were cartoonish in a way—big square jaws and shoulders, massive chests covered in thick dark hair. Occasionally, the Sunday newspaper magazine would have some ads in it, featuring men with their shirts off, and I can close my eyes now and see one particular editorial fashion feature, with photos of shirtless boxers in boxer shorts. I cut them out and glued them into my book.

When I come across young gay men today, they already know everything.

When I first screwed up the courage to touch another man, everything was new and inchoate: the stubble, the smell, the feel of body hair. Just the intimacy itself floored me. And back in those days, there was also the strange, elaborate dance of street cruising, catching someone's eye, and, every now and again, a retreat to the apartment.

When I come across young gay men today, they already know everything. They have watched every imaginable porn movie. They know every conceivable sex position and have developed habits around them; they have complicated fetishes; and the first men they'd ever seen were on a screen. I was forced to create my own fantasies; they received theirs passively on their phones and laptops, prepackaged, clinical, relentless, cold.

There is almost no street cruising; just a constant checking of the apps, head down. There are no mysteries. If you hook up online, the chances are you will have seen every inch of the body you are about to meet, along with measurements and precise predilections. All the hours of frustration and excitement of the past have been streamlined into seconds of tapping on a screen. It's never been easier to have sex anywhere anytime and never more boring.

I don't want to mythologize the past. Growing up gay in the 1960s and 1970s was brutal in many ways. It was, strictly speaking, illegal to have sex in my own apartment until the 1990s. Because of AIDS, for the first decade of my sex life, death hovered at

the edges, always ready to pounce. With HIV in my bloodstream, sex was crammed with rejection and cruelty, as well as an intensity with other men with HIV that no one in the future will ever be able to understand.

There was a darkness to it all—and a lung-filling exhilaration that young gay men today will never know. I hope they never will. But there was something there, something terrifying and essential that I will always remember.

Andrew Sullivan writes the newsletter "The Weekly Dish." He is the author of "Out on a Limb: Selected Writing, 1989-2021."

Reclaiming the Power of Repression

By Mary Harrington

Sexual reproduction is among the most natural and fundamental of our drives, so I doubt we could ever "ruin" it entirely. But for humans, nothing is ever just natural; it is also cultural. And where sexual culture is concerned, we are in trouble. The sexual revolution that set out to make us freer and more sensuous has, in practice, had the inverse effect.

Though the term "sexual revolution" is associated with the Swinging Sixties, it was coined three decades earlier by the psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich. Challenging Freud's view that repression is vital to civilization, Reich thought that utopia could be attained by emancipating human sexuality. Though a fringe figure in the 1930s, he later found an avid audience in the American counterculture, which eagerly embraced his conviction that sexual inhibition was a driver of fascism.

Since the 1960s, progressive America has leaned into the Reichian call for liberation. But to date, this has not produced the sensuous socialist utopia Reich envisaged. Rather, the keenest beneficiary of this liberation of eros from the bonds of repression has been the entrepreneurial class. It is not a coincidence that the era of sexual liberation was also that of Playboy clubs and a booming porn industry.

Half a century on, the revolutionaries are now the Establishment. The sexual-industrial complex reaches into every facet of culture, underwritten by smartphones that afford every consumer a limitless bounty of dating profiles and free-to-view pornography.

But is the resulting sexual culture hot? This is less self-evident. Numerous reports in recent years have indicated Americans are not having more sex, but less. And this appears to be growing worse with every generation.

Veteran sex columnist Maria Yagoda argued in a recent book that this isn't because we aren't talking about sex enough. Young people have grown up saturated with sexual discourse and are adept at analyzing and constructing their sexual identities intellectually. But this has come at the expense of actually enjoying sex, which grows less straightforwardly pleasurable the more self-consciously freighted it is with commercial, political or identitarian meaning.

Far from making the world freer and more sensuous, the drive for sexual openness has neutered pleasure. Escaping the state-mandated sexual-industrial complex means not liberation, but restraint. No more public celebrations of sexuality; more private pleasure. No more openness; more intimacy. Handwritten sexts by mail, or nothing at all. To be truly sex-positive, in the 21st century, means reclaiming the power of repression.

Mary Harrington is a contributing editor at UnHerd and the author of "Feminism Against Progress."

Hookup Culture and Its Discontents

*B*y Coleman Hughes

When I was an undergraduate at Columbia University between 2016 and 2020, I often had discussions about what we called "hookup culture." This was, roughly, the idea that it is normal, good and indeed progressive to have sex without any expectation of a relationship or commitment.

Young men did not need much convincing. Hookup culture aligned well with our "factory settings," as it were——so much so that it would hardly occur to a group of male friends to discuss the issue. A group of college boys discussing hookup culture would be rather like a group of old-school cowboys spontaneously debating the merits of gun culture.

It was really young women who had views on hookup culture——supportive in some cases, negative in others. When a young woman was against it, there was usually a straightforward reason: experience. It would often take only one terrible, commitment-free hookup with a young man, and its psychological aftermath, to let her know that something was wrong with this norm.

What surprised me more were the young women who supported hookup culture. To them, hookup culture went by a different name: "sex positivity." They viewed sex positivity as a form of feminist rebellion against a patriarchal orthodoxy that slut-shamed women for having commitment-free sex while giving men a pass for the same behavior. They tended to dislike men, especially straight white men.

The irony is that the biggest beneficiaries of hookup culture were the very men they claimed to dislike. Naturally, those men did not oppose it; they enjoyed participating in it far too much. But they also did not support it too vocally, lest it become obvious which gender was really benefiting. By and large, young men were happy to stand on the sidelines as the women hashed it out among themselves.

I suspect that at least part of the reason why so many young women were receptive to the moral panic over sexual assault on college campuses during the 2010s——when politicians and media figures were routinely repeating the false claim that one in five college women are sexually assaulted——was that many of them felt displaced anger directed at young men resulting from hookup culture.

In other words, the real issue was not war-zone levels of sexual assault on campuses. The real issue was a culture that not only sanctioned but encouraged young people to have sex without any expectation of courtesy, follow-through or commitment—— particularly from the male side. While they couldn't get mad at young men for participating in hookup culture, which was supposedly a feminist and progressive innovation, women could direct their anger at young men on the issue of sexual assault.

Hookup culture must be discussed honestly if young men and women are to develop healthy attitudes toward sex and relationships. In repudiating the patriarchal norms of the past, we should not go so far in the other direction that we end up hurting the very people the feminist revolution was supposed to help.

Coleman Hughes is a political analyst at CNN, a contributing writer at the Free Press and host of the Conversations with Coleman podcast.

The Flatness of Consent

By Agnes Callard

How much do we know about sex? We know it when we see it, we know it when we do it, and we know that it has significance. But when it comes time to state what that significance is, we are much less certain. This pattern in what we know and what we don't know suggests an answer to the question "What is sex?" Sex is a ritual.

A ritual is a sequence of behaviors that symbolically enacts an idea. A handshake or a bow enacts the idea of mutual acknowledgment; a wedding enacts the coming into existence of a commitment. We tend to need such symbols most for ideas we have some trouble expressing directly. For example, we have trouble with the idea of death, to the point of sometimes saying of a loved one, "I can't believe she's dead." The funeral enacts the idea that "she's not just not missing on this or that occasion; she is permanently gone." A bedtime ritual, such as a story and a kiss good night, enacts the idea "I still care about you, even though I'm leaving you alone in the dark with nothing to do"—and it does so better than simply saying those words.

The idea that sex enacts is one of the trickiest: thoroughly reciprocal desire. Aristotle asks us to imagine a choice between two lovers: the first desperately wants to have sex with you, but can't, while the second can and will, but doesn't really feel like it. Aristotle says that if you are a truly erotic person, you will choose the first. What makes a desire erotic is that it is satisfied simply by being reciprocated.

I can want you in all sorts of ways—for president, as a bridge partner, and so on—but when I want you in such a way that all that I want is for you to want me in exactly that same way, then my desire is sexual. Nonsexual desires might seek reciprocation, but not mere reciprocation. If I want you to go for a walk with me, you don't satisfy that desire by wanting to go on a walk with me—because what about the actual walk? A desire that is satisfied just by being mirrored in another is a strange desire, strange

enough that instead of expressing the idea of such a desire directly, we enact it by way of a ritual. Sex is that ritual.

The idea of consent, or continuous consent, or continuous enthusiastic consent—those are all two-dimensional projections of the three-dimensional idea of reciprocal desire. That is why consent feels flat or thin as an attempt to capture what sex, the ritual, is about. It shouldn't surprise us that consent, which is restricted to the domain of what can be directly, non-symbolically expressed—you have to be able to specify what you are consenting to—fails to communicate the relevant idea. To communicate that idea, we have sex.

Agnes Callard is a professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago.

Various Authors
Have We Ruined Sex?
Five writers ask whether society has lost its way when it comes to the most intimate of human acts.
July 28, 2023

<www.wsj.com/lifestyle/relationships/have-we-ruined-sex-241c57eb>