

A Postmortem on the Sexual Revolution: What Deregulation of Pornography Has Wrought

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The deregulation of pornography is part of a larger sexual revolution, which aimed to loosen Americans' attachment to a marriage that subordinates sex within an enduring, faithful community of love and responsibility. Advocates sought to deregulate pornography in the name of liberty and with the hopes of ending sexual repression. This deregulation cultivates a culture emphasizing sexual self-expression, but has also had many unexpected side effects. Generally, Internet pornography is much more akin to an addiction than anyone had thought. Its harms may be less spectacular than opponents of pornography had feared, but they are also deeper and more difficult to reverse. Its effects are indirect and subtle, not direct, and its frequent consumption undermines the institutions that make relational beings happy.

American society is more open about and obsessed with sex than at any other time in its history. This change is a product of the sexual revolution, which began in the 1950s. The sexual revolution embraced seemingly small goals like deregulating obscenity and securing public tolerance for sexual minorities, but it has culminated in a large cultural change with untold ramifications. The pervasiveness of pornography, which is accessible to all, for instance, compromises the culture of marriage and fidelity and promotes a culture of sexual gratification.

This transformative revolution was intentionally advanced under two distinct banners: liberalism and sexual liberation. Liberals, in the name of

greater openness and progress, hoped to revoke laws that protected sexual morality. Their victories ended up delivering a new culture of sexual liberation, the beating heart of the sexual revolution.

The theorists and scientists of the sexual revolution thought sexual repression or “civilized” sexual morality undermined human happiness. Liberation from divine proscription, parental authority, and traditional morality would, they thought, make people both happier and healthier. They succeeded in creating a much more permissive society, one which presumed, in theory at least, that any sexual expression was just as good as any other as long as it reached orgasm. Initially, they spawned the “free love” movement that has normalized sex outside of marriage. They brought about an approach to sexual education that emphasized safety and consent, instead of connecting sex to both procreation and marriage. They launched a critique of femininity that embraced sexual independence for women and attacked female modesty. No-fault divorce laws accompanied this revolution.

Among the most important changes brought about by this revolution were the deregulation and legitimization of pornography. Easier access to pornography, proponents argued, would defuse social problems that sexual repression caused. It would also foster greater human happiness through sexual expression and its ensuing fulfillment. Eventually, the Supreme Court of the United States afforded the sexual revolution constitutional protection through a series of cases on obscenity, privacy, and sexual autonomy.¹ A key element of this process was a legal assault on the regulation of obscene books, magazines, and films between 1957 and the early 1970s. These legal changes reinforced cultural changes, and vice versa: As the sexual revolution encouraged people to think of sex as detached from love and marriage, people were less likely to think that such restrictions are necessary or salutary; as people came to oppose regulation, the flood of pornography helped to loosen the commitment to marriage.

Fifty years have passed since America adopted a policy with the avowed object of ending the regulation of obscenity with the confident promise of cultivating a better society and greater individual happiness. As political theorist David Lowenthal argues, “never before in human history had such

1. See David Lowenthal, *No Liberty for License: The Forgotten Logic of the First Amendment* (Dallas: Spence Publishing, 1997), pp. 87–107 and 136–150, and Harry M. Clor, *Obscenity and Public Morality: Censorship in a Liberal Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 14–87. The most prominent Supreme Court cases in effect integrating the sexual revolution into the Constitution include *Roth v. United States*, 354 U.S. 476 (1957), making regulation of obscenity and pornography difficult; *Griswold v. Connecticut* 381 U.S. 479 (1965), invalidating state laws on contraception on the grounds of the “right to privacy”; and especially *Lawrence v. Texas*, 539 U.S. 558 (2003), invalidating state laws outlawing sodomy, and *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) 576 U.S. ____ (2015), requiring that states recognize same-sex marriage.

a volume and intensity of obscene materials been loosed upon the world as has inundated our citizenry, through the mass media, starting about 1960.”² The easy availability of pornography on the Internet—a second revolution that began circa 2000—presupposes the first legal and moral revolution of the pre-Internet era. Americans tacitly accepted the first revolution, so few really asked whether Internet visuals and videos of the second revolution would affect the mind and sentiments the same way books and magazines did in the first. The result has been a large, seemingly untouchable Internet pornography industry.

The most deleterious effects of the first revolution became fully and universally evident only with the second. Yet the sometimes comically grandiose promises of the revolutionaries have delivered devastating results. Generally, Internet pornography is much more akin to an addiction than anyone had thought; it serves to unsettle marriage and enduring, faithful love between a man and a woman, and as it helps to undermine marriage and family, it also undermines the happiness of many men and women.

Three generations into this sexual revolution, serious people must ask themselves whether it has helped to build a better, happier country. Liberals demand that Americans turn a blind eye to the presence of pornography in the name of openness and progress. This has led to a flood of pornography that presents an orgasmic image of sexuality. But this blind eye undermines happiness and virtue—and it demands public indifference on a matter of crucial public importance.

Sexual revolutionaries demand a sexuality emphasizing self-expression that gives vent to an ever-greater variety of sexual experiences (from sex toys to group sex). Society organizes sexuality to some extent as it honors some sexual practices and dishonors others. The sexual revolution, dishonoring what it regards as repressed practices and celebrating self-expression, not only has compromised the goods of civilized sexuality and marriage, but also has poisoned manners that make smooth relations between men and women more likely.

Original Arguments for Ending the Regulation of Pornography

Almost all constitutional arguments presume an understanding of how government reflects society. This is especially true regarding obscenity. As

2. Lowenthal, *No Liberty for License*, p. 140.

political theorist Harry M. Clor writes, “there can be no position toward the obscenity problem which does not involve moral, political, social, and psychological premises.”³ Liberals and sexual revolutionaries wanted to end restrictions for different reasons.

- Liberals favored letting individuals choose how to live, with society requiring only that all live in a way that tolerates others. For liberals, governments should not choose sides between those influences that would foster an atmosphere of self-control and those that favor cultivating an atmosphere of liberation or license.
- For sexual revolutionaries, government had to dismantle institutions of sexual restraint as a means of cultivating an ethic of liberation. The first step in that dismantling process involved stopping government from enforcing the “wrong”—which is to say traditional—morality. Instead, they wanted to legislate a liberationist morality.

Ultimately, liberal arguments proved to be publicly acceptable ways to get people to accept the liberationist project without fully articulating what that project is. Sexual liberationist arguments are the truest and deepest arguments for those who would end regulation.

Liberal Arguments. Liberals who initially advocated deregulation of obscenity began by equating “freedom of speech”—originally understood to serve the exchange of ideas necessary for deliberative politics—with “freedom of expression.”⁴ This freedom of expression, in contrast, serves the liberation of the inner self. The First Amendment, wrote Thomas I. Emerson in *Toward a General Theory of the First Amendment*, encompasses and protects “the whole area of expression.”⁵ Free speech, which seemed to those who wrote the First Amendment to be an effort to protect political speech, ended up protecting pornographic videos and even “expressive conduct” like nude dancing.

3. Clor, *Obscenity and Public Morality*, pp. 102–103.

4. Lowenthal, *No Liberty for License*, pp. 124–135, and Harry M. Clor, *Public Morality and Liberal Society: Essays on Decency, Law, and Pornography* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), pp. 134–148. The difference between liberal and libertarian, so important today, receives classic expression on this issue in the debate between the liberal John Rawls and the libertarian Robert Nozick. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), and Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974).

5. Thomas I. Emerson, *Toward a General Theory of the First Amendment* (New York: Vintage, 1966), p. 61, n. 21. This expansion is present especially throughout William B. Lockhart and Robert C. McClure, “Literature, the Law of Obscenity, and the Constitution,” *Minnesota Law Review*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (March 1954), pp. 295–395, <https://scholarship.law.umn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3545&context=mlr> (accessed April 28, 2020).

Liberals embraced this expansion because “self-expression” is “a good in itself.” Further, they claimed that “the achievement of self-realization commences with the development of the mind,” which unregulated self-expression promotes.⁶ Self-expression implies that one’s individuality must not be educated or civilized or affected by civil society. Instead, one must be free to make oneself whatever one wants to be. The purpose of education is self-discovery, and laws should not impede such self-discovery except to avoid a clear social harm.

Choice in how to make the self presupposes exposure to a variety of ideas, images, and performances, fair or foul, so people develop a standard to guide their lives. While self-expression concerns more than sexuality (artistic performances, for example, or using vulgar language), choice and expression in sexuality are especially important, the argument goes, because sexual development is a key part of human personality. Obscene literature and art must therefore be unshackled from regulation. Laws regulating (most) nontraditional sexual practices would have to be rescinded for the sake of self-expression. Liberals believed—and still believe—that regulation enervates the mind toward a complacent “normal” sexuality through thought control.

In addition, liberal opponents of regulation argued, free expression is crucial to a free society, to moral progress, and to artistic greatness. In a series of influential articles between the mid-1950s and early 1960s, William B. Lockhart and Robert C. McClure, professors of law at the University of Minnesota, provided many of the arguments about how shaping and limiting sexual appetites undermined a free society.⁷

For Lockhart and McClure, civilized societies must embrace sexual self-expression in order to remain free to change and progress. Securing freedom for self-expression suffices to secure a better future: Bad practices, like rejected hypotheses in science, must be disconfirmed and would atrophy, while individuals would bless good practices, much as scientists endorse scientific laws. Future social growth comes from an open-ended valuing of free expression:

The view that literature may be proscribed because of the risk that it may influence a change in the accepted moral standards of the community flies in

6. Emerson, *Toward a General Theory of the First Amendment*, pp. 4 and 6.

7. For an account of the impact these articles had on the Supreme Court’s obscenity jurisprudence, see Robert A. Stein, “Robert C. McClure: A Tribute on His Retirement,” *Minnesota Law Review*, Vol. 69 (1985), pp. 1217–1220, <https://scholarship.law.umn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3236&context=mlr> (accessed April 28, 2020).

the face of the very purpose for guaranteeing freedom of expression. Back of this fundamental freedom lies the basic conviction that our democratic society must be free to perfect its own standards of conduct and belief—political, economic, social, religious, moral—through the heat of unrepressed controversy and debate. The remedy against those who attack currently accepted standards is spirited and intelligent defense of those standards, not censorship.⁸

On this view, society is held together through a common commitment to free expression. Government has no interest in what particular opinions its citizens adopt—or at least it cannot act on that interest. Government action is concerned solely with “controlling action that harms society” and must “stop short of what men think and believe.”⁹

Liberal opponents of regulation also sometimes appealed to relativism: No rational basis for standards of obscenity exist, and no standard should be implemented through law. Justice William O. Douglas, writing in dissent in *Ginzburg v. United States* (1966), states: “Some like Chopin, some like ‘rock and roll.’ Some are ‘normal,’ some are masochistic, some deviant in other respects.... But why is freedom of press and expression denied them? When the Court speaks of ‘social value’ does it mean a ‘value’ to a majority?”¹⁰ A society that limits free expression, on this reading, is censoring to flatter itself while making minorities suffer under its yoke. All sexual tastes are equally valid, and none should therefore be disfavored under the public authority.

Sometimes liberal opponents of regulation admit that there may be rational standards for identifying and regulating obscenity, but they also argue that democratic majorities, taken with repressive passions and beset with zealous demagogues, would rarely ground regulation on reasonable standards. No public, they think, can be trusted to draw any line without unleashing an uncontrollable escalation in the size and scope of regulation. As Lockhart and McClure assert, only “an emotionally disturbed person” would want to censor.¹¹ Regulation is contagious, fostering more and more regulation once the majority begins to feel its power and enjoy wielding it. Aiming at *Fanny Hill*, ignorant and bigoted regulators will end up censoring *The Scarlet Letter*.

8. Lockhart and McClure, “Literature, the Law of Obscenity, and the Constitution,” pp. 374–375.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 374 and 382. Consider also: “Certainly it is entirely appropriate for the *church* to discourage reading that turns the mind from spiritual to carnal thoughts, but under our constitutional system the *government* can scarcely claim authority to impose controls on literature for the purposes of directing minds away from the physical interests of life toward more spiritual and worthy thoughts.” *Ibid.*, p. 381. Emphasis in original.

10. *Ginzburg v. United States*, 383 U.S. 463, 489–490 (1966).

11. Lockhart and McClure, “Literature, the Law of Obscenity and the Constitution,” p. 320; see also pp. 371–372.

Lockhart and McClure further argue that:

Although the whole structure of obscenity regulation hinges upon the unproved assumption that “obscene” literature is a significant factor in causing sexual deviation from the community standard, no report can be found of a single effort at genuine research to test this assumption by singling out as factor for studying the effect of sex literature upon sex conduct.¹²

Granting that the harm comes only from upsetting the “community standard,” a given harmful effect must be significant, permanent, and primarily traceable to obscene works in order to demonstrate harm under this dispensation.¹³ Yet few if any social science studies could achieve such scientific rigor in any simple social phenomenon, much less a complex, private, and hidden one such as the formation of human sexual habits and their relation to marriage.

The Arguments of Sexual Revolutionaries: Pseudoscientific and Theoretical. Sexual revolutionaries came in two varieties as well: those who emphasized the need to liberate sexuality through social scientific “studies” and those who explicitly harbored broader revolutionary hopes about a civilization. The pseudoscientists thought in terms of therapy and accepting new medical practices and adjusting contemporary practices to accommodate greater mental health. The revolutionary liberationists thought in terms of overthrowing repressive social institutions like the family, the modern military, and capitalism so that individuals could be free and liberated.

It may seem odd that these groups fall into the same category. Both, however, trace their general approach and aims to the works of Sigmund Freud. They aim to end repression but differ as to the sources of repression. The pseudoscientific advocates worked within the universe of the revolutionaries and served their aims. This relationship still holds today, as many seemingly scientific studies serve unstated (and typically unexpressed) broader revolutionary aims. When it comes to ending obscenity, each group imagined that ending regulation would bring about the positive goods of sexual liberation.

Eberhard and Phyllis Kronhausen’s *Pornography and the Law*, a classic in the pseudoscience on pornography, argued that exposure to obscene

12. Ibid., p. 385; see also pp. 383–387.

13. Clor, *Obscenity and Public Morality*, p. 148.

literature (and presumably other obscene performances) allows expression for “anti-social impulses (sexual or otherwise) through the operation of fantasy instead of by direct action.” An obscene work is “more often than not, a *safety valve* for the sexual deviate and potential sex offender.”¹⁴ Letting off a bit of steam, in other words, prevents the hydraulic sexual system from exploding. Others agreed. “Contrary to popular misconceptions,” wrote Benjamin Karpman in *The Sexual Offender and His Offenses*, “people who read salacious literature are less likely to become sexual offenders than those who do not, for the reason that such reading often neutralizes what aberrant sexual interests they may have.”¹⁵

Other pseudoscientists propagated liberation under the guise of scientific detachment. Alfred Kinsey and his colleagues hoped to bring about a modern or demystifying sexuality free from taboos, hang-ups, and guilt. Sex is a physical matter, no different from sex among animals.¹⁶ It is a “normal biologic function,” wrote Kinsey, “acceptable in whatever form it is manifested.”¹⁷ All means of achieving orgasm are good.

Kinsey propounded a permissive attitude toward premarital sex, bestiality, onanism, and pornography. He believed that the old ethic, which looked askance on these and other things, had enveloped sexuality in mystery and associated sex with love, procreation, marriage, and responsibility. Such psychic burdens made it more difficult for people to find pleasure in sex. A freer, less burdened, less idealized sexuality would foster more pleasure and comport better with the already permissive society.¹⁸ Pornography, on this view, demystifies sex by presenting it as a merely physical act unburdened with tender concerns and concerned with pleasure instead of relations. Sex as depicted in pornography helps people to overcome barriers to “free and open communication with others” and aids people in seeking “the unique development of their personalities.”¹⁹ Pornography relates good information about the real world of sexual pleasure, unlike the fake world that favors married life.

14. Eberhard and Phyllis Kronhausen, *Pornography and the Law* (New York: Bell Publishing Company, 1959), pp. 273–274. Emphasis in original.

15. Benjamin Karpman, *The Sexual Offender and His Offenses* (New York: Julian Press, 1957) p. 485. See also Justice William O. Douglas, in *Memoirs v. Massachusetts* 283 U.S. 413, 428 (1966): “Literature of the most pornographic sort would, in many cases, provide a substitute—not a stimulus—for anti-social conduct.”

16. Paul Robinson, *The Modernization of Sex: Havelock Ellis, Alfred Kinsey, William Masters and Virginia Johnson* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), pp. 55–56.

17. Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, and Clyde E. Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1948), p. 57.

18. Clor, *Obscenity and Public Morality*, p. 202–203.

19. Fred R. Berger, “Pornography, Sex, and Censorship,” *Social Theory and Practice*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Spring 1977), p. 190.

The “safety valve” and “demystifying” arguments further a deeper, more revolutionary theory of sexual liberation. The great sexual liberationists of the 1950s and 1960s—Wilhelm Reich, Herbert Marcuse, and Norman Brown—combined elements of Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx in a revolutionary mix. For Freud, the superego, defined as the socially constructed rules that each individual internalizes, represses or channels sexual pleasure until it simply must find an outlet. Sometimes it bursts out in satisfying sex. Sometimes it leads to artistic creation or scientific discovery. But sexual repression is also the cause of violence, crime, and war. Freud’s followers, adopting Marx’s promise of a fundamental revolution, thought liberation from the repressions and conventions of civilization would create a good society. A sexually liberated society would bring about “the elimination of sexual repression” (Reich) or “the abolition of repression” (Brown) or, more modestly, would abolish “surplus repression” (Marcuse).²⁰

Ending regulation of pornography is part of the broader effort to eliminate sexual repression and demystify sex. Natural sexual desires would be healthy in an atmosphere without repression. The desire for food is dangerous when food is scarce. For these activists, the same holds true for sex: The desire for sex is dangerous when the availability of sex is kept artificially low through repression. As Wilhelm Reich argues:

That “morality” which all people affirm to be self-evident (not to rape, not to murder, etc.) can be established only if natural needs are fully gratified. But the other “morality” which we reject (abstinence for children and adolescents, absolute and eternal marital fidelity, compulsory marriage, etc.) is itself pathological and causes the very chaos it feels called upon to master.²¹

Note that the sexual revolution must extend to children, including at least the ability of children to consume pornography and have sex when they are able and interested. Eliminate repression and people will be happy and free and will no longer murder, rape, or commit antisocial

20. Wilhelm Reich, *The Sexual Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974), p. 19; Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1959), p. 307; and Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), p. 197. Reich’s book was first published by Orgone Press in 1945. For a treatment of the sexual revolution generally, see Kevin Slack, “Liberalism Radicalized: The Sexual Revolution, Multiculturalism, and the Rise of Identity Politics,” Heritage Foundation *First Principles* No. 46, August 27, 2013, <https://www.heritage.org/political-process/report/liberalism-radicalized-the-sexual-revolution-multiculturalism-and-the-rise>.

21. Reich, *The Sexual Revolution*, p. 28.

actions. Waitresses will no longer be harassed, and the casting couch will disappear.²² Nor will there be authoritarian politics or wars.²³

According to Reich and his followers, sexual desires are safe *only* if they are left alone, are untutored, and can be fully satisfied. Nature itself would present no problem if we could eliminate repression and conventions and see and act according to their view of nature.²⁴ What laws call obscenity, literary critic Stanley Edgar Hyman contends, actually helps “to free child and adult from fear, inhibition and guilt. As such it is life-giving; a stimulus for joy.”²⁵ Sexual revolutionaries wanted to repeal repressive laws against homosexuality, nonmarital and extramarital sex, the age of consent, and obscenity. They sought to undo supposedly repressive mores that supported marriage and family life, especially by encouraging expressions of sexuality among all people starting at the earliest ages through non-repressive, open sexual education. Regulation of obscenity and the civilizing process it serves are part of the problem.

Postmortem: Results of Ending the Regulation of Pornography

The policy of ending obscenity was based on claims that experience can test, sometimes with empirical evidence but also with studied reflection on the presuppositions of the arguments. Enough time has passed to enable us to conduct a postmortem on the pornography debate.

Liberals claimed that removing restrictions on obscenity was a morally neutral act that allowed some to consume pornography while others lived chaste lives of marital monogamy: The freedom used by some to indulge would not compromise the ability of others to live chastely.

The liberal argument against regulation denies that political communities have an interest in the beliefs and opinions of their citizens and holds that laws should be free from the taint of morality. Some deny that society needs a moral framework at all. Others contend that, although society may need a moral framework, government can play no legitimate role in cultivating or sustaining it. Still others think that all frameworks are essentially arbitrary because there is no moral truth.

22. Wilhelm Reich, *Listen, Little Man!* (London: Souvenir Press, 1972), pp. 111–112.

23. See Kronhausen and Kronhausen, *Pornography and the Law*, pp. 283–289.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 274: “If...erotic literature or art tend to lead to sexual acts, we would consider this a natural phenomenon that much more likely than not would enhance mental health and human happiness.”

25. Stanley Edgar Hyman, “In Defense of Pornography,” in *Perspectives on Pornography*, ed. Douglas A. Hughes (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1970), p. 40.

Sensible, experience-based reflection shows that this liberal argument fails to recognize that self-expression itself constitutes a new moral framework. The choice of whether to allow choice in any given area is itself a choice that is shaped by particular moral considerations and entails inevitable long-term moral ramifications. This liberal regime promotes, in Lawrence Friedman's words, "the republic of choice'...a world in which the right 'to be oneself,' to choose oneself is placed in a special and privileged position; in which *expression* is favored over *self-control*."²⁶

Self-expression is not a neutral value that allows all sorts of lives to be lived; it is itself a moral framework that makes some thoughts more thinkable and some actions more doable while discounting alternative ways of life. When civil government leaves people free to choose to view pornography, it signals either that obscenity is not a concern to the political community and hence not a threat to the long-term health of citizens or that it favors the view that individual choices to consume pornography are to be elevated over the common good of supporting self-control at the root of marriage. Either way, laws and the withdrawal of laws reverberate throughout the culture.

The palpable increase in the consumption of pornography also shows that deregulation was far from the neutral act that liberals claimed it was. Liberal advocates of ending regulation claimed that their arguments could even lead to *less* consumption of pornography. Pornography would challenge restrictive moral standards, but an "intelligent defense" of those standards after significant "controversy and debate" could bring those standards back informally. If pornography is unnatural and bad, it will be ignored or fall into disuse, so there is no reason for a law against it. If it is natural and good, laws against pornography are unnatural and bad. Either way, laws restricting pornography are unnecessary.

This liberal pretense reflects a poor understanding of human psychology and behavior. Political philosophers and not a few scientists agree that for most people, the human capacity for rational reflection is grounded in pre-rational sentiments and commitments or opinions. Few people arrive at their views on the good life generally or the place of sex in a good life in particular simply through the rational process that the critics of regulation imagine. Moreover, few people can give a fully rational defense of a community's standards.²⁷ As a result, pornographic videos, magazines, and images, once unloosed on the world, affect the sentiments, affections,

26. Lawrence M. Friedman, *The Republic of Choice: Law, Authority, and Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 3. Emphasis in original.

27. Clor, *Obscenity and Public Morality*, pp. 121-122.

motivations, and attitudes of people as well as their ideas of right and wrong, noble and base. These images come to be regarded as less problematic and more normal, as less base and disgusting, and more as objects of toleration; the result is more sexual images and declining standards for modesty. By shaping minds, pornography shapes judgments and affects actions.

The political act of easing access to obscene materials has changed the moral training of citizens and hence also has changed the way they think about obscenity. As a result, obscenity is consumed more today than it was when it was proscribed. Reliable data on pornography consumption are difficult to discover because the same questions have not been asked of the American public over time. However, several findings endure:

- Men consume more pornography than women;
- Men are more likely to consume pornography as videos and images, while women tend to prefer stories;
- The young consume more than the old; and
- Each generation consumes more than the previous one.

The most reliable historical estimate of pornography use comes from the General Social Survey, which has asked people whether they “have seen an X rated movie in the past year” in surveys since 1973. Results suggest a sharp increase from an already high starting point (the deregulation of pornography was already 15 years old by 1973). Between 1973 and 1980, 45 percent of men 18 through 26 years old and 28 percent of similarly aged women answered the question affirmatively. By 1999–2007, those numbers had jumped to 61 percent and 36 percent, respectively, for similarly aged men and women. The numbers for every age cohort and both sexes increased by as much as 50 percent between 1973 and 1997—and continued to increase slowly in subsequent years.²⁸

Questions based on “the past year” are less reliable and probably underestimate the amount of pornography viewed. Mark Regnerus, a sociologist at the University of Texas, estimates that about 46 percent of men and 16 percent of women between 18 and 39 years of age in the mid-2010s had

28. Joseph Price, Rich Patterson, Mark Regnerus, and Jacob Walley, “How Much More XXX Is Generation X Consuming? Evidence of Changing Attitudes and Behaviors Related to Pornography Since 1973,” *The Journal of Sex Research*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (2016), pp. 15–17.

consumed pornography during the preceding week; 24 percent of men had watched during the preceding day—suggesting, perhaps, that their use was compulsive.²⁹ This survey is a snapshot,³⁰ not a time series, but if this reliable question is asked over time, we will get a better picture of pornography use, and if it tracks the less accurate question about use during the preceding year, the numbers are probably rising substantially with each generation.

The New Moral Training: Pornography Erodes Connections at the Heart of Marriage

Ending the regulation of obscenity was hardly a morally neutral act. It provided a new moral training. Both sexual liberationists and those who would maintain regulation thought this would be the case. Both generally described this new moral training in very similar terms: The end of obscenity turns sexuality away from enduring love, responsibility, and marriage and toward less relational, enduring expressions of sexuality. They differ on whether this new moral training conduces to human happiness and social health.

The evidence shows that the prevalence of pornography compromises self-control and enduring human relations. The question is therefore not *whether* pornography shapes the actions and affections of those who consume it. It does. The question is *how* it shapes actions and affections and whether that shaping is connected to a host of benefits (as sexual revolutionaries contend) or compromises social and individual happiness (as proponents of regulation contend). The defenders and critics of regulation see much the same new moral training afoot in the post-regulation age.

Pornography affects human character indirectly and subtly. All human beings have sexual desire. How society conceives of and trains sexual desire has great effects on the life courses of all and on the future of society.³¹ Several general conclusions can be drawn from what we have learned.

- Viewing much pornography affects one's view of sex, love, responsibility, fidelity, marriage, and childhood sexuality.

29. Mark Regnerus, *Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage, and Monogamy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 114–115.

30. Another snapshot shows that in times of decreased productive activity, people “us[e] sex as a coping mechanism for dealing with their fear of disease and death.” During the coronavirus pandemic of 2020, for example, many have turned to watching pornography as a way to pass the time, and the need for sexual novelty, fueled by Internet pornography, has prompted the production of coronavirus-themed pornography. See Justin J. Lehmiller, “How the Pandemic Is Changing Pornography,” *Psychology Today*, posted March 23, 2020, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-myths-sex/202003/how-the-pandemic-is-changing-pornography> (accessed April 28, 2020).

31. Edward O. Laumann, John H. Gagnon, Robert T. Michael, and Stuart Michaels, *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 3–33, states the position in the context of scientific modelling. This is just a deliverance of Aristotle's ancient regime theory, which holds that how the public imagines the good, advantageous, and just shapes the way of life of a people.

- Widespread presence of pornography organizes sexuality toward embracing individualistic, nonjudgmental, and nontraditional sexual acts and attitudes.
- As a result, society becomes increasingly tolerant of different kinds of sexual practices, sexuality becomes more concerned with achieving individual pleasure instead of contributing to a common good in a marriage, and nontraditional norms are at first destigmatized and then celebrated.

Consumption of pornography erodes the connections and habits central to marriage and family life. Those who consume pornography are more likely to be concerned with personal pleasure and sexual orgasm and to be skeptical of connections between love, marriage, and reproduction (on one hand) and sex (on the other), just as the revolutionaries hoped and regulation advocates feared. Mark Regnerus shows in his book *Cheap Sex* that those who view pornography regularly are more likely to support same-sex marriage, to affirm the equivalence of same-sex and opposite-sex couples, to have fewer inhibitions about sex with children, and to believe that being a stay-at-home mother is bad.³² A population increasingly taken with these attitudes is less likely to support the laws or mores that are needed to promote married life.

Consumers of pornography also act differently. They are, among other things, more than three times more likely to pay prostitutes for sex and more than three times more likely to cheat on their spouses.³³ Two university of Oklahoma sociologists, among many others, have shown how divorce and pornography consumption are also correlated.³⁴ Men especially are prone to want the cake without the calories: sex without love, responsibility,

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32. Regnerus, *Cheap Sex*, pp. 124-126; Ogi Ogas and Sai Gaddam, *A Billion Wicked Thoughts: What the World's Largest Experiment Reveals About Human Desire* (New York: Dutton, 2011). Other studies confirm much the same findings. See, for example, Paul J. Wright and Ashley K. Randall, "Pornography Consumption, Education, and Support for Same-Sex Marriage," *Communication Research*, Vol. 41, No. 5 (July 2014), pp. 665-689; Martin J. Downing Jr., Eric W. Schrimshaw, Roberta Scheinmann, Nadav Antebi-Gruszka, and Sabina Hirshfield, "Sexually Explicit Media Use by Sexual Identity: A Comparative Analysis of Gay, Bisexual, and Heterosexual Men in the United States," *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, Vol. 46, No. 6 (August 2017), pp. 1763-1776; and L. Monique Ward, "Media and Sexualization: State of Empirical Research, 1995-2015," *The Journal of Sex Research*, Vol. 53, Nos. 4-5 (2016), pp. 560-577, which shows that pornography is associated with a diminished view of women's capacity and competence or with viewing women more as sex objects.
33. See Steven Stack, Ira Wasserman, and Roger Kern, "Adult Social Bonds and Use of Internet Pornography," *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 85, No. 1 (March 2004), pp. 75-88.
34. Samuel L. Perry and Cyrus Schliefer, "Til Porn Do Us Part? A Longitudinal Examination of Pornography Use and Divorce," *The Journal of Sex Research*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (March-April 2018), pp. 284-296, and Pamela Paul, *Pornified: How Pornography Is Damaging Our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families* (New York: Times Books, 2005), pp. 166-168.

trust, or strings.³⁵ Exposure to unlimited pornographic sex leads men to doubt the importance of fidelity in marriage and to expect nontraditional sex practices. Since the deregulation of pornography, there have been significant increases in the number of sexual partners each person has, as well as corresponding decreases in the number of people who say that sex should be limited to stable, loving relationships and decreases in the age of first sexual experiences, across the globe.³⁶

Adding pornography to the moral environment makes it more difficult to defend enduring, faithful marriage centered on having and raising children to responsible adulthood.³⁷ It contributes to a slow-motion revolution in ethical beliefs and in the delicate sensibilities, tastes, and expectations that can lead human beings toward lives of common love.³⁸ The sexual revolutionaries welcomed this disconnection of sex from love and familial responsibility, and advocates of regulation thought it a degradation. Who was right?

The “Safety Valve.” The “safety valve” argument, as we have seen, holds that seeing images about sex and cruelty through pornography dissipates the inclination to perform acts of sexual violence and violence generally: Slow release of a little steam prevents an explosion.

This argument cannot be dismissed. The rise of Internet pornography has coincided with declines in the number of rapes, though not in all violent crime. The easy availability of Internet pornography has also coincided with

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35. There is a strain of literature suggesting thus that relationship quality suffers when men consume much pornography. See, for example, Ana J. Bridges and Patricia J. Morokoff, “Sexual Media Use and Relational Satisfaction in Heterosexual Couples,” *Personal Relationships*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (December 2011), pp. 562–585.
36. See Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker, *Premarital Sex: How Young Americans Meet, Mate, and Think About Marrying* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 38–39. A corresponding increase in anal and oral sex and in favorable attitudes toward each is seen in the generation before the effective legalization of pornography (1960) and the generation afterward. See Laumann et al., *The Social Organization of Sexuality*, pp. 98–99, 103–108, and 157, on sexual practices and Alan Petigny, *The Permissive Society: America, 1941–1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 122–124, for a discussion of attitudes toward premarital sex. In 1963, 70 percent of Americans thought premarital sex was wrong; in 1972, the number declined to less than 40 percent.
37. Compare this emphasis with the last great public effort to expose the problems of pornography, an effort that was spearheaded by U.S. Attorney General Edwin Meese III. The final report of the Attorney General’s Commission on Pornography, released in July 1986, argues, among other things, that pornography causes crimes such as rape and other acts of violence. See *Attorney General’s Commission on Pornography: Final Report*, U.S. Department of Justice, July 1986, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015058809065&view=1up&seq=1> (accessed April 28, 2020).
38. Clor, *Obscenity and Public Morality*, p. 170: “People are influenced by what they think others believe and particularly what they think are the common standards of the community. There are few among us whose basic moral beliefs are the result of their own reasoning and whose moral opinions do not require the support from some stable public opinion. The free circulation of obscenity can, in time, lead many to the conclusion that there is nothing wrong with the values implicit in it—since their open promulgation is tolerated by the public. They will come to the conclusion that public standards have changed—or that there are no public standards. Private standards are hard put to withstand the effects of such an opinion.”

declines in the number of teens having sex.³⁹ These declines no doubt have a number of causes, and we do not know enough to say that the “safety valve” theory is responsible for them.

Nevertheless, stimulating undesirable impulses hardly seems an effective way of controlling them. Would we recommend that a person fighting alcoholism indulge moderately? The “safety valve” argument does not promise individual virtue or self-control. It assumes that individuals are incapable of self-control and the construction of an environment in which peace and law-abidingness are accomplished without self-control. This leads to some unexpected results.

Systematic indulgence in sexual imaginings and desires is bound to lead to some bad social results, if not to sex-related crimes in particular.⁴⁰ For instance, studies show that pornography fosters a hope among many that their sexual practices will come to mirror the pornographic images they consume: Those who view child pornography are more likely to abuse children sexually; those who consume pornography are more likely to force people into having sex, to talk crudely to those of the opposite sex, and to harass female coworkers.⁴¹

Those who view a lot of pornography become numb to milder forms and escalate their demands. A set of researchers at Cambridge University in England has summarized the literature on this. The desire for “greater novelty” and “sexual deviancy” such as child pornography follows from the habitual consumption of pornography.⁴² Just as many of those who use narcotics build up a tolerance to low dosages, many of those who consume pornography demand greater variety and perversion.

The frequent viewing of pornography depersonalizes sex and compromises enduring and respectful relations. Men who view much pornography

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39. The wide availability of Internet pornography coincided with a precipitous drop in rates of rape. See, for instance, Michael Planty, Lynn Langton, Christopher Krebs, Marcus Berzofsky, and Hope Smiley-McDonald, “Female Victims of Sexual Assault, 1994–2010,” U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics *Special Report* No. NCJ 240655, March 2013, revised May 31, 2006, <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/fvsv9410.pdf> (accessed April 28, 2020), and Michael Castleman, “Evidence Mounts: More Porn, Less Sexual Assault,” *Psychology Today*, posted January 14, 2016, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/all-about-sex/201601/evidence-mounts-more-porn-less-sexual-assault> (accessed April 28, 2020).
40. Clor, *Obscenity and Public Morality*, pp. 156–157.
41. See the extensive review of the literature in James R. Stoner, Jr., and Donna M. Hughes, eds., *The Social Costs of Pornography: A Collection of Papers* (Princeton, NJ: Witherspoon Institute, 2010), pp. 228–234, 236–239, and 241–246, and Jochen Peter and Patti M. Valkenberg, “Adolescents and Pornography: A Review of 20 Years of Research,” *The Journal of Sex Research*, Vol. 53, Nos. 4–5 (2016), pp. 523–524.
42. Paula Banca, Laurel S. Morris, Simon Mitchell, Neil A. Harrison, Marc N. Potenza, and Valerie Voon, “Novelty, Conditioning and Attentional Bias to Sexual Rewards,” *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, Vol. 72 (January 2016), pp. 91–101. See also Dennis Howitt and Kerry Sheldon, “The Role of Cognitive Distortions in Paedophilic Offending: Internet and Contact Offenders Compared,” *Psychology, Crime and Law*, Vol. 13, No. 5 (2007), pp. 469–486. The tendency, it seems, is that an increase in pornography consumption is connected to viewing children as sexual beings instead of as innocents to be protected from sexual interest.

are more likely to be listless, suffer from loneliness, and suffer from a spiritual apathy than they are to be rapists and criminals. Pornography deadens desire and can detach it from actual sex without teaching self-control. It is crucial to remember that its effects are indirect and subtle, not direct.

These complications in the “safety valve” argument bring us to the central issue of whether pornography and ending sexual repression deliver on their promise of human happiness and greater goodness.

Pornography, Love, and Human Happiness. An environment that is accepting of pornography destroys the connections and habits at the center of marriage. Pornography fails to deliver on its original promise—not insofar as it erodes marriage or disconnects sex from marriage (it in fact promised to do that), but rather insofar as marriage and enduring faithful relations contribute to greater human happiness, virtue, and social well-being.

Americans seem unwilling to complete the sexual revolution, which perhaps suggests that it is not an unvarnished good. For instance, Americans and other modern peoples generally still oppose the public display of pornographic movies, among other things. Only a few radical liberationists counsel for the early and repeated exposure of children to pornography,⁴³ and almost everyone opposes child pornography as such.

Charles Rembar, author of *The End of Obscenity* and the lead attorney in several Supreme Court cases on obscenity, recognizes that there might be a need to protect children from obscene expression, but he refrains from saying why.⁴⁴ The answer is obvious. Decent behavior between the sexes is hardly the spontaneous product of our natures, and any nation has an interest in pointing sexuality toward enduring loving relations. Chief Justice Warren Burger, writing in *Paris Adult Theatre v. Slaton*, which allowed for the regulation of adult movies in theaters, articulated it well:

The sum of experience, including that of the past two decades, affords an ample basis for legislatures to conclude that a sensitive key relationship of human existence, central to family life, community welfare, and the development of human personality, can be debased and distorted by crass commercial exploitation of sex.⁴⁵

43. Exceptions include Kronhausen and Kronhausen, *Pornography and the Law*, pp. 282–289, denying that restraints on children are healthy. See esp. p. 286: “Attempts to shelter children from the pleasant and unpleasant realities of life are of questionable therapeutic value; the chances are that this will produce the opposite of the desire effects.” Reich, *The Sexual Revolution*, p. 28, also points to emancipation of childhood sexuality.

44. Compare Charles Rembar, *The End of Obscenity: The Trials of Lady Chatterley, Tropic of Cancer and Fanny Hill* (New York: The Notable Trials Library, 1991), pp. 437–439 and 501–502, with Lowenthal, *No Liberty for License*, p. 123.

45. *Paris Adult Theatre v. Slaton*, 413 U.S. 39, 63 (1973).

This is especially true when it comes to more impressionable children. Sexual appetites may be natural, but how they express themselves in people's lives is shaped by what they see, hear, and feel and by the overriding atmosphere of the society in which they live—and most do not want to risk corrupting children or making them uninterested in marriage by having them participate in or view pornography. Persistent exposure of children to pornographic videos fosters in them a purely physical understanding of sex and makes it more difficult for them to subordinate sexual passions within a community of love when they are adults. Society takes some action to protect the civilizing process when it comes to children in recognition of the harms that pornography causes. If exposure to pornography is bad for children, perhaps it may also be bad for adults and is bad as such.

The old view was that sex either connects people into enduring relations or degrades people to the point that they become like animals. Repeated consumption of pornography, on this view, inhibits people from forming sacrificial, responsible loving relations over the long term, with sex occupying a subordinate place within an enduring marital community. Shaped in an environment without pornography, sex is more concerned with cementing relations and producing children than it is with achieving orgasmic pleasure. Because forming enduring relations and having children are essential to human happiness and fulfillment for most people, the old view holds that pornography actually is akin to a short-term high with long-term deleterious consequences.

Despite the dreams of sexual liberationists that liberation promotes human happiness, repeated viewing of pornography, made possible by the Internet, contributes to a “bad infinity” akin to an addiction. Norman Doidge's book *The Brain That Changes Itself* relates how pornography changes the “wiring” of the brain. According to Doidge, human beings have two separate pleasure systems in their brains: an “appetitive system” involved with “exciting pleasure” that involves anticipating or “imagining something we desire,” such as sex or a good meal, and a calming, fulfilling “consummatory pleasure” that comes from the actual enjoyment of the things imagined. Viewing pornography “hyperactivates” the appetitive pleasures and creates new avenues in the brain that bypass satisfying pleasures: People find pornography exciting but not satisfying. Just as a 2015 review of the neuroscience literature concludes that “internet pornography addiction fits into the addiction framework and shares similar basic mechanisms with substance addiction,” a 2018 review reports that “existing data suggest [that] neurobiological abnormalities”

among frequent users of pornography “share communalities with other addictions such as substance use and gambling disorders.”⁴⁶

Such addictions, while possible when pornography was limited to magazines, novels, or seedy parlors, become much more prevalent when another pornographic performance is just a click away.

Consumers come to demand increasingly graphic and sensual material in order to experience the dopamine-related high they are seeking,⁴⁷ and the Internet supplies it. Repeated or obsessive viewing of pornography is associated in some men with a listlessness, boredom, a deadening of moral sensibilities, and even impotence when confronted with a real woman. As a result, people who use pornography rarely stay satisfied with its milder varieties. They demand ever more extreme displays to get the high from pornography. The result, paradoxical from the standpoint of sexual liberation, is “an addiction, tolerance and an eventual decrease in pleasure.”⁴⁸ From the promise of liberation, in other words, ensues a sordid slavery.

The emancipation of human sexuality from supposedly repressive marital norms has not coincided with a boon to human happiness. Studies conducted over a number of years show that people are not happier under conditions of more sexual liberation when compared with less sexual liberation and that adults have a more difficult time finding contentment in emotionally close adult relationships than they used to have.⁴⁹ Even though pornography shapes the cultural environment within which marriages form, married people are still much happier with their lives and much more fulfilled than are unmarried people. Novelists including Tom Wolfe, John Updike, and Michel

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46. See Todd Love, Christian Laier, Matthias Brand, Linda Hatch, and Raju Hajela, “The Neuroscience of Internet Pornography Addiction: A Review and Update,” *Behavioral Sciences*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (September 2015), pp. 388–433, and Rudolf Stark, Tim Klucken, Marc N. Potenza, Mathias Brand, and Jana Strahler, “A Current Understanding of Behavioral Neuroscience of Compulsive Sexual Behavior Disorder and Problematic Pornography Use,” *Current Behavioral Neuroscience Reports*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (December 2018), pp. 218–231. Individual studies hold much the same thing, although there is no universal agreement on the question of addiction and, clearly, many individuals watch pornography without ultimately becoming compulsive consumers of it. Consider, for instance, Matthias Brand, Christian Laier, Mirko Pawlikowski, Ulrich Schächtle, Tobias Schöler, and Christine Altstötter-Gleich, “Watching Pornographic Pictures on the Internet: Role of Sexual Arousal Ratings and Psychological–Psychiatric Symptoms for Using Internet Sex Sites Excessively,” *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, Vol. 14, No. 6 (June 2011), pp. 371–377, and Vincent Egan and Reena Parmar, “Dirty Habits? Online Pornography Use, Personality, Obsessionality, and Compulsivity,” *Journal of Sex and Marriage Therapy*, Vol. 39, No. 5 (2013), pp. 394–409, along with studies that are more skeptical about likening compulsive porn use to an addiction such as Vaughn R. Steele, Cameron Staley, Timothy W. Fong, and Nicole Prause, “Sexual Desire, Not Hypersexuality, Is Related to Neuropsychological Responses Elicited by Sexual Images,” *Socioaffective Neuroscience and Psychology*, Vol. 3 (2013), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.3402/snp.v3i0.20770> (accessed April 30, 2020). The deliverance of common sense here is that some people are much more vulnerable to becoming compulsive users than others, and the exposure to some pornography leads many to consume increasingly kinky pornography.
47. See Regnerus, *Cheap Sex*, p. 113, and Ana J. Bridges, “Pornography’s Effects on Interpersonal Relationships,” in *The Social Costs of Pornography*, p. 103.
48. Norman Doidge, *The Brain That Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), pp. 107–109. Consider the presentation about escalating pornographic desires in Tom Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), pp. 92–95.
49. See, for example, Jean M. Twenge, Ryne A. Sherman, and Sonja Lybomirsky, “More Happiness for Young People and Less for Mature Adults: Time Period Differences in Subjective Well-Being in the United States, 1972–2014,” *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (March 2016), pp. 131–141.

Houellebecq depict the depravity, emptiness, and misery that comes with sexual liberation and from the failure of enduring relations to thrive.⁵⁰ Some of our films, including the raunchy works of P.T. Anderson such as *Boogie Nights* and *Magnolia* and Ang Lee's *Ice Storm*, do the same thing.⁵¹

Generally, liberationists overestimated the importance of liberation to human happiness for most people. At the same time, they underestimated the importance of enduring love and the moral training that prepares people for enduring love.

Men who view significant amounts of pornography may be no more likely than other men to commit rape, but they are also less likely to think of rape as a problem.⁵² Pornography teaches that sexual activity, like other animal activities, concerns only pleasure and need, and it ignores how sexual activity engages the personality and implicates the core identity of the partner. As a result, viewers of pornography have a more difficult time seeing how sexual assault is different from other assaults. People who watch pornography may shun violence because it is not pleasurable without genuinely respecting the others in whom they are interested. This is consistent with the surprising idea that pornography has a deadening effect on men and leads to listlessness, boredom, and ennui.⁵³ It teaches crudity, if not violence.

Even those taken with the liberationist vision generally bemoan the incongruity between pornography's promised liberation and actual human happiness, which is fulfilled through the formation of enduring relations. Feminist author Naomi Wolf agrees. Writing in 2003 and reflecting on her discussions with college students, she found that pornography has especially contributed to the dissatisfaction of women both in dating and in marriage, adding that:

When I ask about loneliness, a deep, sad silence descends on audiences of young men and young women alike. They know they are lonely together, even

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50. For treatments of Updike, see Thomas S. Engeman, "The Technological Culture of Nihilism: John Updike's Protestant Pilgrimage and Walker Percy's Catholic Naturalism," in *Seers and Judges: American Literature as Political Philosophy*, ed. Christine Dunn Henderson (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002), pp. 137–157, and Updike's Rabbit Angstrom series. For Houellebecq, see Michel Houellebecq, *Atomised*, trans. Frank Wynne (London: Vintage, 2000), and Mark Lilla, *The Shipwrecked Mind: On Political Reaction* (New York: New York Review Books, 2016). For Tom Wolfe, consider Carol McNamara, "Men and Money in Tom Wolfe's America," in *Seers and Judges*, pp. 121–136; Tom Wolfe, *Hooking Up* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), pp. 3–16; and especially Wolfe's *I Am Charlotte Simmons*.
 51. On Ang Lee, see Thomas S. Hibbs, *Shows About Nothing: Nihilism in Popular Culture from The Exorcist to Seinfeld* (Dallas: Spence Publishing, 1999), pp. 125–128.
 52. Cf. Christopher J. Ferguson and Richard D. Hartley, "The Pleasure Is Momentary...the Expense Damnable?: The Influence of Pornography on Rape and Sexual Assault," *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, Vol. 14, No. 5 (September–October 2009), pp. 323–329, and Paul, *Pornified*, pp. 89–90.
 53. Regnerus, *Cheap Sex*, p. 127.

when conjoined, and that this imagery [i.e., pornography] is a big part of the loneliness. What they don't know is how to get out, how to find each other again erotically, face-to-face.⁵⁴

But the reasoning here confutes the expectations of those, like Wolf, who see little difference between men and women. If one stipulates that men have a stronger desire for sex and sexual variety while women maintain the power to consent to sexual activity, then pornography allows men to satisfy their desire for sexual variety without having to seek permission from women. There is no real woman in pornography. Pornography, as Mark Regnerus writes, “creates competition,” as real women must compete with virtual women for the attention of men.⁵⁵ Wolf draws out the implications of this competition for women:

For two decades, I have watched young women experience the continual “mission creep” of how pornography...has lowered their sense of their own sexual value and their actual sexual value. When I came of age in the seventies, it was still pretty cool to be able to offer a young man the actual presence of a naked, willing young woman. There were more young men who wanted to be with naked women than there were naked women on the market.... I am 40, and mine is the last female generation to experience that sense of sexual confidence and security in what we had to offer.⁵⁶

Teenagers are having less sex in part because they have less taste for enduring relations with others. Cultural norms informed by pornography make sex more of a commodity, undermine a sense of sexual fidelity, and compromise mutual respect and monogamous, enduring, exclusive relations. This abets a culture of easy sexual access or a hookup culture, which women—generally more interested in enduring personal relations than men are—especially find distasteful and unfulfilling.⁵⁷ Wives who discover their husbands using pornography feel betrayal and file for divorce in increasing numbers.⁵⁸ Pornography compromises both the entering into marriage and the experience of marriage and hastens the leaving of marriage.

54. Naomi Wolf, “The Porn Myth,” *New York*, October 9, 2003, https://nymag.com/nymetro/news/trends/n_9437/ (accessed April 30, 2020). Social science studies point to Wolf’s observations. Consider Destin N. Stewart and Dawn M. Szymanski, “Young Adult Women’s Reports of Their Male Romantic Partner’s Pornography Use as a Correlate of their Self-Esteem, Relationship Quality, and Sexual Satisfaction,” *Sex Roles*, Vol. 67, No. 5–6 (September 2012), pp. 257–271.

55. Regnerus, *Cheap Sex*, p. 109.

56. Wolf, “The Porn Myth.”

57. See Regnerus, *Cheap Sex*, pp. 100–105 and 108–113.

58. Jill C. Manning, “The Impact of Pornography on Women,” in *The Social Costs of Pornography*, pp. 82–87, and Perry and Schliefer, “Til Porn Do Us Part?” pp. 284–296, find that pornography users are twice as likely to divorce as are non-users.

The Permissive Society

The idea that deregulating pornography would create a world beyond the need for the moral frameworks essential to liberalism was always difficult to believe. Liberal arguments for ending regulation were more a vehicle for manipulating public opinion than a genuine argument. Ending regulation fosters a new kind of permissive society based on self-expression.

Both sexual revolutionaries and advocates of regulation believed correctly that ending the regulation of obscenity would provide a new moral training for citizens.

- Ending regulation contributes to an increase in the consumption of pornography—just as both opponents and proponents of ending regulation expected;
- Increased consumption of pornography is part of a new moral training in society—just as both opponents and proponents expected;
- The centerpiece of that new moral training is a retreat from marriage that connects sex, love, and procreation—just as both opponents and proponents expected;
- Fewer adults practice the habits of lifelong love within enduring marriage—just as both opponents and proponents expected;
- Consumption of pornography coincides with greater acceptance of “minority” or “deviant” sexual practices and greater liberalizing in matters of sexual ethics—just as both opponents and proponents expected; and
- Human relations of mutual pleasure informed by an orgasmic understanding of happiness replace a deep community based on love—just as both opponents and proponents expected.

The debate over pornography is at the highest level part of the broader debate about the goodness of enduring, faithful man–woman marriage centered on having and raising children. This new moral training, provided in part through pornography, compromises human happiness because it has undermined the institutions and connections that support human happiness and fulfillment. Yet nearly all persist in seeing this new self-expressive

moral training as problematic in some cases: Few, for instance, would extend this moral training to children in the form of a pornographic, sexualized education.

This fact shows that even most of the revolutionaries worry about the revolution they have unleashed on the world. We keep children away from pornography because we worry, at the least, that it promotes sentiments and habits open to uncomfortable harassment and crudity in relations between men and women or that it desensitizes men and women alike from the delicate sensibilities at the heart of enduring love. We also worry that many children raised on pornography would lack a taste for sexual relations with other people and instead be satisfied with the lonely world of Internet pornography. Adults too, the evidence suggests, are not invulnerable to these same corruptions and worry about the effects of pornography on themselves and on society as a whole. Some civilizing of sexual desire—some self-control—is necessary to a good society and to a good life.

Regulation of obscenity was a moderate solution to the problem of allowing free speech while cultivating an atmosphere in which people would be more likely to choose responsible parenthood and enduring love. Those who defended regulation in the 1950s and 1960s perhaps overstated or misstated the harms pornography unloosed on commercial society. Pornography forces our society to confront the problem of *eros* and its link to human ambition. Pornography discourages human beings from longing for enduring love, immortality through it, and other forms of human greatness. Easy access to pornography seems more related to obesity and masturbation than it does to rape. It dampens lonely spirits more than it induces to violence. These harms are less spectacular than opponents of pornography had feared, but they are also deeper and more difficult to reverse.

The revolutions in pornography are part of a larger sexual revolution—all tending in the direction of loosening the attachment Americans have to a marriage that subordinates sex within an enduring, faithful community of love and responsibility. Frequent consumption of pornography dries the well of human relations. It undermines happiness by undermining the institutions that make relational beings happy.

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