

# Opinion

## 'Brave New World' and the Huxley trap

How technology and masturbation tamed the sexual revolution.



Ross Douhat

There are times in any columnist's life when you worry about being too much oneself, too on-brand, too likely to summon from one's readers the equivalent of the weary line delivered by a colleague listening to J.R.R. Tolkien read aloud from his Middle-earth sagas: "Not another [expletive] elf!"

The appearance in the same week of a Politico magazine essay on how conservatives lost the culture war over pornography and an Atlantic cover story on the decline of sexual intercourse makes me concerned about this possibility — that if I weave both pieces into an argument about our culture's decadence, my readers will find it to be a little bit predictable, a little, well, *too much*.

But like Tolkien with his beloved elves, I'll persevere, because the articles are worth the recommendation. For Politico, Tim Alberta tells the story of

**The pornified, permissive post-sexual revolution order today seems much more stable than conservative pessimists expected 30 years ago.**

how the internet essentially killed off the anti-pornography movement, by making pornography so ubiquitous and porn use so pervasive that trying to regulate it in any meaningful way seemed like giving orders to the tide. Then Kate Julian's Atlantic examination of what she calls the "sexual recession" looks at a surprising reality of life in the sexually liberated

West — the fact that despite (or because of?) our permissive culture and the sweeping availability of entertainments that cater to every kind of sexual desire, the sexual act itself has fallen somewhat out of fashion, along with its usual accompaniments (relationships, marriage, childbearing), while onanism and long-term celibacy are on the rise. What both writers are describing is a post-sexual revolution landscape that almost nobody expected — with one notable exception, to be discussed below.

Conservatives didn't expect it because they believed that sexual liberation would inevitably lead to social chaos — that if you declared consent the only standard of sexual morality and encouraged young people to define fulfillment libidinally, you would get not only promiscuity but also a host of dire secondary consequences: Teen pregnancy rates and abortion rates rising together; a pornography-abetted spike in rape and sexual violence, higher crime rates among fatherless young men . . . basically everything that



YUI MOK/PA IMAGES, VIA GETTY IMAGES

seemed to be happening in the 1970s and 1980s, when the anti-porn crusade Alberta describes was strongest.

But many of those grim social trends stabilized or turned around in the 1990s, and instead of turning teenage boys into rapists, the internet-enabled victory of pornographic culture had, perhaps, the opposite effect. Rates of rape and sexual violence actually fell with the spread of internet access, suggesting that the pleasures of the online realm were either a kind of substitute for sexual predation, a kind of sexual tranquilizer, or both. And that tranquilizing effect seems to extend beyond predation to the normal pursuit of sexual relationships, because some combination of Netflix, Tinder, Instagram and masturbation is crucial to the decline-of-sex story that Julian's Atlantic essay tells.

So the pornified, permissive post-sexual revolution order today seems much more stable than conservative pessimists expected 30 years ago, with no social collapse looming on the horizon.

But liberal optimists were wrong as well — wrong to expect that the new

order would bring about a clear increase in sexual fulfillment, wrong to anticipate a healthy integration of sexual desire and romantic attachment, wrong to assume that a happily egalitarian relationship between the sexes awaited once puritanism was rejected and repression cast aside.

Instead we've achieved social stability through, in part, the substitution of self-abuse for intercourse, the crowding-out of real-world interactions by virtual entertainment, and the growing alienation of the sexes from one another. ("I'm 33, I've been dating forever, and, you know, women are better," one straight woman in Julian's story says. "They're just better.")

This isn't the sex-positive utopia prophesied by Wilhelm Reich and Alex Comfort and eventually embraced by third-wave feminists. It's a realm of fleeting private pleasures and lasting social isolation, of social peace purchased through sterility, of virtual sex as the opiate of the otherwise sexually unsuccessful masses.

And the one person who really saw it coming was Aldous Huxley in "Brave New World," the essential dystopia for

our times, which captured the most important feature of late-modern social life — the way that libertinism, once a radically disruptive force, could be tamed, domesticated and used to stabilize society through the mediation of technology and drugs.

True, none of our pharmaceuticals quite match his "soma" — the "perfect drug," a booster calls it, with "all the advantages of Christianity and alcohol" but no hangover or religious guilt. (Our own versions are more dangerous and unevenly distributed.) But our hedonic forms of virtual reality are catching up to his pornographic "feelies" and his "Violent Passion Surrogate." ("All the tonic effects of murdering Desdemona and being murdered by Othello, without any of the inconveniences.")

And on the evidence of many internet-era social indicators, they increasingly play the same tranquilizing and stabilizing roles.

Above all Huxley nailed the way that a society sufficiently far gone into hedonism will lose even the language to describe clearly why, say, "a single-use silicone egg that men fill with lubricant and masturbate inside" (a

recent Japanese innovation mentioned by Julian) might not be a positive development.

The people trying to argue against porn in Alberta's article, or the people struggling to articulate their sexual and romantic discontents in Julian's, are trying to find their way back to a worldview that takes moral virtue and human flourishing seriously again. But they inhabit a society that often recognizes only arguments about pleasure versus harm, and that at some level has internalized the logic of Mustapha Mond, one of the Controllers of Huxley's world civilization: "Chastity means passion, chastity means neurasthenia. And passion and neurasthenia mean instability. And instability means the end of civilization. You can't have a lasting civilization without plenty of pleasant vices."

Pleasant vices and stability: With some technological assistance, that's the sexual culture we've been forging. The only good news, and the best evidence that we might yet escape Huxley's trap, is that we retain enough genuinely-human aspiration to be unhappy with it.

## The alt-right's favorite meme is 100 years old

'Cultural Marxism' might sound postmodern, but it's got a long, toxic history.

Samuel Moyn

At the chilling climax of William S. Lind's 2014 novel "Victoria," knights wearing crusader's crosses and singing Christian hymns brutally slay the politically correct faculty at Dartmouth College, the main character's (and Mr. Lind's) alma mater. "The work of slaughter went quickly," the narrator says. "In less than five minutes of screams, shrieks and howls, it was all over. The floor ran deep with the bowels of cultural Marxism."

What is "cultural Marxism"? And why does Mr. Lind fantasize about its slaughter?

Nothing of the kind actually exists. But it is increasingly popular to indict cultural Marxism's baleful effects on society — and to dream of its violent extermination. With a spate of recent violence in the United States and elsewhere, calling out the runaway alt-right imagination is more urgent than ever.

Originally an American contribution to the phantasmagoria of the alt-right, the fear of "cultural Marxism" has been percolating for years through global sewers of hatred. Increasingly, it has burst into the mainstream. Before President Trump's aide Rich Higgins was fired last year, he invoked the threat of "cultural Marxism" in proposing a new national security strategy. In June, Ron Paul tweeted out a racist meme that employed the phrase. On Twitter, the son of Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil's newly elected strongman, boasted of meeting Steve Bannon and joining forces to defeat "cultural Marxism." Jordan Peterson, the self-help guru and best-selling author, has railed against it too in his YouTube ruminations.



Anders Breivik in court in Oslo in 2012. The far-rightist, who killed 77 people in 2011, invoked "cultural Marxism" in his manifesto.

[Discover the most compelling features and reporting from The New York Times Opinion section, selected by our editors. Sign up for the Sunday Best newsletter.]

"Cultural Marxism" is also a favorite topic on Gab, the social media network where Robert Bowers, the man accused of shooting 11 people at a synagogue in Pittsburgh last month, spent time. Mr. Lind may have only fantasized about mass death as a comeuppance for cultural Marxists, but others have acted on it: In his 1,500-page manifesto, the Norwegian far-rightist Anders Breivik, who killed 77 people in 2011, invoked "cultural Marxism" repeatedly. "It wants to change behavior, thought, even the words we use," he wrote. "To a significant extent, it already has."

According to their delirious foes, "cultural Marxists" are an unholy alliance of abortionists, feminists, globalists, homosexuals, intellectuals and socialists who have translated the far left's old campaign to take away people's privileges from "class struggle" into "identity politics" and multiculturalism. Before he executes the professors, the protagonist of Mr. Lind's novel expounds on his theory to their faces: "Classical Marxists, where they obtained power, expropriated the bourgeoisie and gave their property to the state," he says. "Where you obtained power, you expropriated the rights of white men and gave special privileges to feminists, blacks, gays, and the like." It is on the basis of this parallel that the novel justifies carnage against the

"enemies of Christendom" as an act showing that "Western culture" is "recovering its will."

Some Marxists, like the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci and his intellectual heirs, tried to understand how the class rule they criticized worked through cultural domination. And today, it's true that on campus and off, many people are directing their ire at the advantages that white males have historically enjoyed.

But neither the defense of the workers nor of other disempowered groups was a conspiracy on its own, and never was there a malignant plot to convert the first into the second — which is what "cultural Marxism" implies. Deployed to avoid claims of injustice, the charge functions to whip up agitated frenzy or

inspire visions of revenge.

And while increasingly popular worries about cosmopolitan elites and economic globalization can sometimes transcend the most noxious anti-Semitism, talk of cultural Marxism is inseparable from it. The legend of cultural Marxism recycles old anti-Semitic tropes to give those who feel threatened a scapegoat.

A number of the conspiracy theorists tracing the origins of "cultural Marxism" assign outside significance to the Frankfurt School, an interwar German — and mostly Jewish — intellectual collective of left-wing social theorists and philosophers. Many members of the Frankfurt School fled Nazism and came to the United States, which is where they supposedly uploaded the virus of cultural Marxism to America. These zany stories of the Frankfurt School's role in fomenting political correctness would be entertaining, except that they echo the baseless allegations of tiny cabals ruling the world that fed the right's paranoid imagination in prior eras.

The wider discourse around cultural Marxism today resembles nothing so much as a version of the Judeobolshevik myth updated for a new age. In the years after the Russian Revolution, fantasists took advantage of the fact that many of its instigators were Jewish to suggest that people could save time by equating Judaism and communism — and kill off both with one blow. As the historian Paul Hanebrink recounts in an unnerving new study, according to the Judeobolshevik myth, the instigators of communism were the Jews as a whole, not some tiny band of thinkers, conniving as a people to bring communist irreligion and revolution worldwide.

The results of such beliefs weren't pretty. According to Professor Hanebrink, PAGE 11