

Why Did the Sexual Revolution Happen?

You may wince at the crass behaviour of Donald Trump, roll your eyes at Caitlin/Bruce Jenner's portrait on the cover of Vogue, or lament the legalization of same-sex marriage – but there is something even more painful about these events. We don't know how we got here from there.

Without sugar-coating the past, a bare half a century ago divorce was rare, churches were full, most movies were family-friendly, modesty was praiseworthy. Today, octogenarian mums and dads of that era mutter as they look around at their grandchildren: "whatever happened to the world I remember?"

It may sound naïve, but it's a good question, and one to which historians, sociologists and philosophers need to put their mind. If we don't understand how we got here, we won't know where we are going. It's a bit like the AIDS epidemic. When it was first identified, AIDS was terrifying; its origin was mysterious and its future was apocalyptic. But now scientists believe that it began in the Congo in the 1920s when viruses crossed over from monkeys and chimpanzees, thence spreading to Haiti, and to gay communities in the United States. Equipped with a knowledge of what AIDS is, how it works and how it spreads, they are in a position to contain and cure it.

Similarly, the first step towards helping Western culture recover from its intoxication with unlimited sexual freedom is to understand where the infection began.

One discerning analyst is Augusto Del Noce, an Italian who is regarded in his own country as one of the leading public thinkers and philosophers of the post-War era. He died in 1989 just after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Until now, very little of his work has been available in English. But a collection of essays has recently been published by McGill-Queen's University Press, *The Crisis of Modernity*, which sheds light on the rapid evolution of our culture.

Reading them is not a walk in the park. A philosopher steeped in the Continental tradition, Del Noce is fond of *isms* and *ists*. Be prepared for phrases like "psycho-erotic-Freudian-Marxist de-Christianization",

digressions about obscure thinkers and paragraphs of monumental length. But it's worthwhile persevering. In one particularly insightful essay from 1970, "The Ascendance of Eroticism", he identified three explanations for the rise of rudeness and lewdness: scientism, hatred of Christianity, and capitalism.

Enlightenment scientism

Del Noce's analysis begins with the French Enlightenment and the French Revolution, whose most radical representative (even by the standard of his own day) is the Marquis de Sade. De Sade (1740-1814), whom Del Noce nominates as "the founder of eroticism", was the author of philosophical novels which promoted sexual freedom ("sadism" is named after him) – so extreme that Napoleon threw him in jail and took away his paper and pens.

The French Enlightenment is a complex phenomenon, but amongst its many strands are a deep hostility to Christianity and a corresponding idolatry of science. In the works of de Sade both are significant. Del Noce regards "scientism" as the key to understanding de Sade's incredible obscenity. If God does not exist, then Christianity is a fraud and repression of the sexual instinct is the worst form of immorality, in de Sade's framework. If all that exists is sensation, then empirical science must be the only form of knowledge.

Although this is common currency in today's op-ed pages, it is evident nonsense. The principles of the physical sciences are not self-explanatory; they require meta-physics to be intelligible. Del Noce concludes from the case of de Sade, "The question of eroticism is first of all metaphysical. Only a restoration of... 'classical metaphysics' can truly dismantle the framework of judgements that make up eroticism."

Modern scientism

The 20th Century standard bearer for de Sade's vision of science and sexuality was Wilhelm Reich (1897-1957), an Austrian psychoanalyst who died in an American jail. (He was serving a two-year sentence for distributing "orgone energy accumulators", in violation of the Food and Drug Act. He was convinced that these absorbed a life-force from the atmosphere which could cure colds, cancer, and impotence; the FDA condemned them as sheer quackery.)

During Reich's life he was relatively unknown in the English-speaking

world, but his book *The Sexual Revolution* ([PDF link](#) to the table of contents) became the bible of rioting students in 1968 – and a blueprint for all subsequent developments in the culture of eroticism. Here are some of its ideas; do they sound familiar?

- the abolition of lifelong, monogamous marriage
- encouraging infantile sexuality, because suppressing it leads to perversity in late life
- promoting frank sexual education and sexual freedom for adolescents
- abstinence is pathological
- freedom for people with “abnormal” sexualities such as homosexuality to pursue their inclinations
- legalizing abortion

Del Noce regards Reich as a mediocre but rigorously consistent thinker. “If Reich deserves any credit,” he says, it is for having pushed the practical judgement of the libertine type to its ultimate consequences.” His starting point was De Sade’s scientism: that nothing exists apart from empirically verifiable facts, nothing at all. Man is a mere bundle of physical needs. And from there he reached the same conclusion: the necessity of absolute sexual freedom.

Reich began by trying to reconcile psychoanalysis with Marxist theory. But he was more radical than Marx, Del Noce says. Although Marx was a materialist and an atheist, he did locate values in something objective, which for him was the progress of history toward utopian Communism. This ultimately meant that the Soviet Union – a bit like Christianity – regarded unlimited sexual freedom as “the last stage of disintegration and degeneration of bourgeois society”.

Reich grasped that all discussion of finality and ends, all metaphysical notions whatsoever, implied the existence of God. To assert that something had an innate purpose would be an obstacle to the attainment of universal happiness through full sexual satisfaction. Consequently, to say that sex *is intended* for procreation is not only repressive but covertly religious. Sex has no purpose apart from pleasure. In Reich’s words:

"To bring forever to ruin the abominable Christian notion of sin, of original fall, of redeeming love, to replace them without hesitation with the idea of the divine union of man and woman ... Morality based on the exaltation of pleasure will, sooner or later, wipe away the vile morality of suffering and resignation, preserved by the vile morality of suffering and resignation, preserved by forms of social imperialism and the Church."

Surrealism did not have much direct influence upon mass culture, but as the cultural counterpart of Freudian psychology, it did have a significant impact upon intellectuals and artists. Through Hollywood and Madison Avenue its message of the "exaltation of pleasure" reached millions.

Consumer capitalism

It is common to say that the "gay agenda" is a refinement of Marxist praxis. There is some truth in this, but Del Noce points out that Reich believed that America's consumer society offered more fertile ground for his sexual revolution than the USSR ever did. Reich replaced the class struggle with a "struggle against repression". This meant, in practice, that complete sexual fulfilment and happiness was not inconsistent with economic inequality.

"But here, as nowhere else, there is the possibility of striving for happiness and for human rights. ... The present volume, The Sexual Revolution, has also been favorably received. In America, there are powerful and well-established parent-teacher organizations which defend the principle of self-regulation and, with it, of sex-economy for the child. Universities teach the life principle, including its sexual elements. Here and there one encounters hesitation, silence, even hostility, but sexual hygiene for the masses is making strong progress."

Something about this rings true. Left-wing American politics has redefined social justice as sexual freedom. Once upon a time the West resonated with the spine-tingling opening words of the Communist Manifesto, "A spectre is haunting Europe," the spectre of justice for the proletariat. A latter-day Marx would have to write, "A spectre is haunting Europe, the spectre of unfulfilled sexual desire."

A paradigm example of this was Hillary Clinton's response to a

question in her third debate with Trump the other day. She was asked to identify the most important priorities for the Supreme Court. Of the three, the first two were abortion and gay rights. Workers were invisible. Reich would have applauded.

What lessons does Del Noce's analysis have for us? He was writing in 1970, but the factors he identified as contributors to the "ascendancy of eroticism" are on the money. Scorn for religion, the belief that science and metaphysics are mutually exclusive, hatred for Christianity as the principal agent of repression, and support from the business world are all are playing their roles in advancing same-sex marriage and transgenderism. Where "eroticism" originated, how it works and how it spreads can be identified. Equipped with that knowledge, we are in a position to contain and cure it.

Michael Cook is editor of MercatorNet.