

The Sexual Revolution's Unwanted Progeny

A few months ago, I wrote about [the sexual revolution that needs to happen, but won't](#). Partly because the more powerful can, and often do, elicit grudging “consent” from the less powerful, seeing mutual consent as the sole moral criterion for sexual interactions is problematic. That's one of the sexual revolution's unwanted progeny. We need a richer understanding of freedom and human relatedness than American individualism now allows. That would be a great sexual revolution.

But the consent problem is only one of the old revolution's troublesome progeny. The brood is so big that we need to be asking some fundamental questions about the progenitor itself.

Earlier this month Mary Eberstadt, senior researcher at the Faith and Reason Institute and author of [Adam and Eve After the Pill](#) and [How the West Really Lost God](#), reminded students at the University of Notre Dame of truths about the sexual revolution that too few are ready to acknowledge: “The most globally reviled and widely misunderstood document of the last half century is also the most prophetic and explanatory of our time.”

That document was a papal encyclical: [Humanae Vitae](#) by Paul VI. What occasioned it was the mass marketing of the recently invented birth-control pill. Against the recommendation of a recently appointed papal commission, the document reaffirmed the ban on contraception that the Catholic Church has upheld for as long as we have records, and which the rest of the Christian world also upheld until the Anglican Communion's 1930 Lambeth Conference.

So, what is the legacy of [Humanae Vitae](#)?

Well, Eberstadt notes that *every one* of the document's doleful predictions about the social and political consequences of widespread contraception have proven correct. And then some.

For instance, one argument for contraception was, and in some quarters still is, that making it cheap and easy to obtain would reduce abortion and out-of-wedlock births. Of course, the opposite has happened—as Paul VI predicted. Another argument was, and still is, that cheap and easy contraception would empower women by freeing them to make sexual choices without fear of unwanted pregnancy. To be sure, that is sometimes the case. But it is not *reliably* the case; otherwise, abortion and out-of-wedlock births would not have increased, partly as a result of contraceptive failure.

And what about women's empowerment, anyway? Paul VI also predicted that men would be more inclined to treat women with disrespect if they could have sex without, as it were, "consequences." Can anyone seriously argue that women today are less often treated as sexual objects by men than they were 50 or 100 years ago? Quite the contrary. Encouraged by contraception, as well as by cheap and easy access to online porn, men today treat women as sexual objects *at least* as often as they ever did.

While studies and stats are understandably lacking, it's plausible to believe that the problem today is worse than ever. And Eberstadt [explained](#) why.

"While women may appear freer, [Eberstadt] said, contraception has diminished men's sense of responsibility for pregnancy, and therefore eroded their sense of responsibility toward pregnant women. "By making the birth of the child the physical choice of the mother, the sexual revolution has made marriage and child support a social choice of the father," she said, citing analysis by George Akerlof, Janet Yellen, and Michael Katz."

When men's sense of responsibility for pregnancy diminishes, so that they feel little inclination to marry the mothers of the babies they beget, not only are women more inclined to abort, men are more inclined to believe they are *entitled* to sex without consequences. We can thank cheap and widely available contraception for that. Indeed, from the standpoint of Supreme-Court decisions, the "rights" to contraception and abortion go hand-in-hand. In practical terms they have to, because contraception is not totally reliable and abortion is needed as a backup—if not always from the women's standpoint, then quite often from the man's. That's why many women who abort are pressured to do so by the fathers.

Humanae Vitae also predicted that some governments would actually coerce people into contracepting and aborting. Soon after HV was published, the Chinese government did just that with its "one-child-per-family" policy—ended only last year, because of its disastrous demographic consequences. And if you don't think that nice, forward-thinking Western nations could condone such policies, think again. Much-needed aid to poor African nations is sometimes conditioned on their accepting widespread distribution of free contraceptives.

Pope Francis has [called](#) that "ideological colonialism."

In the same vein, Eberstadt cited Obainuju Ekaocha, a Nigerian-born author, who responded to a contraceptive initiative by billionaire Melinda Gates in an open letter.

"I see this \$4.6 billion buying us misery," Ekaocha [wrote](#). "I see it buying us unfaithful husbands. I see it buying us streets devoid of innocent chatter of children.... I see it buying us a retirement without the tender loving care of our children."

That's pretty much what we're seeing in much of the developed world.

Of course all these problems don't *prove* HV's central point,

which was that contraception is “intrinsically evil.” But they are inductively useful evidence that seeking sexual pleasure while taking steps to suppress the main biological purpose of sex is somehow disordered.

Unfortunately, the people who most need to hear the bad news about this fallout from the sexual revolution are those least disposed to do so. How bad must things get before people start rethinking the revolution?

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