

### 3 What Is the Sexual Revolution Doing to Men?

#### *Peter Pan and the Weight of Smut*

The number of blogs, columns, books, essays, and articles in recent years dissecting the perpetual adolescence of the American male is far too high to count—as is the even higher number of e-mails, texts, women's television shows, and porch conversations dedicated to that same theme. Ubiquitously, it seems, those who were once husbands and fathers and providers have traded in their ties and insurance cards for video games and baseball hats worn backwards. It is a message that the popular culture also broadcasts nonstop—from vehicles for women like *Sex in the City* and *The View* to those popular among men, including such commercially successful examples as the *Jackass* franchise, the Spike channel, and just about every comedy about idiot males to issue from Hollywood in recent memory.

Even so, the question of why this sea change has come about has for the most part escaped critical attention—with a few notable exceptions. In a searching essay written several years ago, for example, Joseph Epstein analyzed “The Perpetual Adolescent and the Triumph of the Youth Culture”, ultimately attributing the phenomenon to postwar prosperity; “[e]arlier,” he theorized, “with less money around,

people were forced to get serious, to grow up—and fast.”<sup>1</sup> In 2007, Diana West considered the same question in her forthrightly titled book *The Death of the Grown-Up: How America's Arrested Development Is Bringing Down Western Civilization*.<sup>2</sup> Like Epstein, she cited affluence as one cause, adding also the sexual revolution and a generalized vanishing of adult standards of conduct. Kay S. Hymowitz, in her previously mentioned 2011 book *Manning Up*, offered another nuanced answer, citing women's higher performance in education and a job market requiring more years of schooling as causal factors in the rise of the “child-man”.

Yet while these and like-minded thinkers have obviously each got a part of the truth, it is surely the sexual revolution that is the prime mover of the phenomenon they all describe. This seems so for at least two reasons. First, it has led to an atrophying of the protective instinct in many men—because many have nothing to protect. The powerful majority desire for recreative rather than procreative sex has led not only to a marriage dearth, but also to a birth dearth; and as the old saying correctly goes, “Adults don't make babies; babies make adults.”

Second, and as a related matter, what might be called the consumerization of love—the way that many people now go shopping for sex and romance much as they do for inanimate commodities—has had a rather major unintended consequence. It has led to more discerning consumers in an area of life where heightened discernment appears inimical to long-term satisfaction. In other words, the perpetual and

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Epstein, “The Perpetual Adolescent and the Triumph of the Youth Culture”, *Weekly Standard*, March 15, 2004, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/content/public/articles/000/000/003/825grtdi.asp>.

<sup>2</sup> Diana West, *The Death of the Grown-Up: How America's Arrested Development Is Bringing Down Western Civilization* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007).

often successful hunt for sexual novelty ultimately works to the detriment of longer-term romance. This is nowhere as obvious as in recent research on another aspect of the child-man of today: his use of smut, or what might otherwise be called the paradox of declining male happiness in an age glutted by sexual imagery.

Let us approach this paradox by way of an analogy. As any number of impressively depressing cover stories have lately served to remind us all, the weight-gain epidemic in the United States and the rest of the West is indeed widespread, deleterious, and unhealthy—which is why it is so frequently remarked on, and an object of such universal public concern. But while America is on the subject of bad habits that can turn unwitting kids into unhappy adults, how about that other epidemic out there that is far more likely to make their future lives miserable than carrying those extra pounds ever will? That would be the emerging social phenomenon of what can appropriately be called “sexual obesity”: the widespread gorging on pornographic imagery that is also deleterious and unhealthy, though far less remarked on than that other epidemic—and nowhere near an object of universal public concern.

The term “sexual obesity” comes from Mary Ann Layden, a psychiatrist who runs the Sexual Trauma and Psychopathology Program at the University of Pennsylvania. She sees the victims of Internet-pornography consumption in her practice, day in and day out. She also knows what most do not: Quietly, patiently, and irrefutably, an empirical record of the harms of sexual obesity is being assembled piecemeal via the combined efforts of psychologists, sociologists, addiction specialists, psychiatrists, and other authorities.

Young people who have been exposed to pornography are more likely to have multiple lifetime sexual partners,

more likely to have had more than one sexual partner in the last three months, more likely to have used alcohol or other substances at their last sexual encounter, and—no surprise here—more likely to have scored higher on a “sexual permissiveness” test. They are also more likely to have tried risky forms of sex. They are also more likely to engage in forced sex and more likely to be sexual offenders. As for the all-purpose cop-out that “all this shows is correlation”, it can be refuted as Dr. Johnson famously refuted the immaterialism of Bishop Berkeley—by kicking a stone. No one who is reasonable would doubt that there is a connection between watching sex acts and trying out what one sees—especially for adolescents, who rather famously and instantly ape the other influences on their lives, from fashion to drug use and more, as has also been copiously studied by academic experts and nervous parents alike throughout the ages.

And this list is just one possible way of starting a conversation about the consequences of the novel obesity that the sugary smut of the Internet has induced. There is also the question of what the same material does to adults—about which another empirical record is also being amassed. Pornography today, in short, is much like obesity was yesterday—a social problem increasing over time, with especially worrisome results among its youngest consumers, and one whose harms are only beginning to be studied with the seriousness they clearly deserve.

The parallels between the two epidemics are striking. Much like the more commonly understood obesity, the phenomenon of sexual obesity permeates the population—though unlike regular obesity, of course, pornography consumption is mostly (though not entirely) a male thing. At the same time, evidence also shows that sexual obesity

does share with its counterpart this critical common denominator: It afflicts the subset of human beings who form the first generation immersed in this consumption, many of whom have never known a world without it—the young.

Consider some of the newly available data about the immersion of young Americans in pornography. One 2008 study focused on undergraduate and graduate students ages eighteen to twenty-six across the country found that more than two-thirds of men—and one out of every ten women in the sample—viewed pornography more than once a month.<sup>3</sup> Another study, in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, showed that first-year college students using sexually explicit material exhibited these features: increased tolerance, resulting in a turn toward more bizarre and esoteric material; increased risk of body-image problems, especially among girls; and erroneous and exaggerated conceptions of how prevalent certain sexual behaviors, including risky-to-dangerous behaviors, actually are.<sup>4</sup>

In 2004, the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University reported that 65 percent of boys ages sixteen and seventeen reported having friends who regularly download Internet pornography<sup>5</sup>—and, given that pornography is something people lie “down”

<sup>3</sup>J. S. Carroll et al., “Generation XXX: Pornography Acceptance and Use among Emerging Adults”, *Journal of Adolescent Research* 23, no. 1 (2008): 6–30.

<sup>4</sup>D. Zillman, “Influence of Unrestrained Access to Erotica on Adolescents’ and Young Adults’ Dispositions toward Sexuality”, *Journal of Adolescent Health* 27 (2000): 41–44.

<sup>5</sup>The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, “National Survey of American Attitudes on Substance Abuse IX: Teen Dating Practices and Sexual Activity”, August 2004, p. 6. For a summary see C. C. Radsch, “Teenagers’ Sexual Activity Is Tied to Drugs and Drink”, *New York Times*, August 20, 2004, p. A14.

about in surveys as well as in life, it seems safe to say those numbers underestimate today's actual consumption, perhaps even significantly. And to connect the dots between "monkey see" and "monkey do", a 2004 study in *Pediatrics* conducted by several researchers from the Rand Corporation and the University of California at Santa Barbara reported, in the words of its title, that "Watching Sex on Television Predicts Adolescent Initiation of Sexual Behavior"—surely a problematic finding for anyone wanting to argue that we are not much influenced by what we see.<sup>6</sup>

Of course all the social science data now accumulating cannot answer a question almost as ubiquitous as pornography itself: So what? Why should people who are not part of that consumption even care about it? Pornography indeed may be wrong, many of those people would also say (and of course major religions would agree), but, apart from the possible damage to the user's soul, if you even believe in such a thing, what really is the social harm of smut?

This lackadaisical attitude—this entrenched refusal to look seriously at what the computer screen has really wrought—is widespread. Religious people, among other people simply disgusted by the subject, understandably wish to speak in public of almost anything else. Consumers of pornography will probably already have stopped reading these words—or any others potentially critical of their chosen substance—for reasons of their own; such complicity is probably the deepest font of omertà on the subject. And chronic users above all have their own fierce reasons for promoting the

<sup>6</sup>Rebecca L. Collins et al., "Watching Sex on Television Predicts Adolescent Initiation of Sexual Behavior", *Pediatrics* 114, no. 3 (September 2004): e280–e289.

anything-goes-as-long-as-it's-private patter—an interesting phenomenon about which more will be said further on.

And yet this hands-off approach to the matter of sexual obesity—this unwitting collusion of disparate interested parties masquerading as a social consensus—remains wrong. Consider a 2009 document signed by fifty academic and other authorities representing various fields and distilling just some of the recent empirical evidence.<sup>7</sup> Called “The Social Costs of Pornography: A Statement of Findings and Recommendations”, it is not the work of one or two but rather scores of people. Most of them academics and medical professionals, they represent a true rainbow coalition of the spectrum: left and right, feminism and conservatism, secularism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It is a collective attempt to render for the public good just some of the accumulating academic and therapeutic and other evidence of the harm and devastation now traceable to pornography abuse.

Bursting through the academically neutral language of the report—the studies, the survey data, the econometrics and the rest—were the skin and bones of the very human stories that went into it all: the marriages lost or in tatters; the sexual problems among the addicted; the constant slide, on account of higher tolerance, into ever edgier circles of this hell; the children and teenagers lured into participating in various ways in this awful world in the effort to please romantic partners or exploitive adults. This report, in sum, like the conference that preceded it, answers definitively the libertarian question of “So what about pornography?” with a solid list of “Here’s what”—eight documented findings about

<sup>7</sup> Full disclosure: the document in question, “The Social Costs of Pornography: A Statement of Findings and Recommendations”, was co-drafted by Mary Ann Layden and me (Princeton, N.J.: Witherspoon Institute, 2010).

the risks of warping the sexual template with pornographic imagery.

Of all the untruths about this subject today that are belied by the factual record, let us focus here on just three of the most influential and reckless.

*Pornography use is just a private matter.* Perhaps the queen bee of lies about the subject, this is also the easiest to take down. For while *consumption* of the substance may be private (or not, as airline travelers and library patrons and others in the public square have lately been learning), the fallout from some of that consumption is anything but.

Consider just a few examples from recent studies on people younger than eighteen. Several separate studies have found among adolescents a strong correlation between pornography consumption and engaging in various sexual activities. Adolescent users of pornography are more likely to intend to have sex, to have sex earlier, and to engage in more frequent sexual activity.<sup>8</sup> The exceedingly well-documented social costs of adolescent sexual activity, alongside the health costs now accumulating, alone torpedo the refrain that Internet pornography use today is “private”.

Now consider a few more findings concerning adults rather than adolescents. At a November 2003 meeting of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers (comprising the nation’s top 1,600 divorce and matrimonial-law attorneys),

<sup>8</sup> More likely to intend to have sex: see K. L. L’Engle, J. Brown, and K. Kenneavy, “The Mass Media Are an Important Context for Adolescents’ Sexual Behavior”, *Journal of Adolescent Health* 38, no. 4, (2006): 186–92. Earlier initiation: J. Brown and K. L’Engle, “X-Rated: Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors Associated with U.S. Early Adolescents’ Exposure to Sexually Explicit Media”, *Communication Research* 36 (2009): 129–51. Having sexual activity more frequently: L’Engle et al., “Mass Media”. See also G. Wingood et al., “Exposure to X-Rated Movies and Adolescents’ Sexual and Contraceptive Related Attitudes and Behaviors”, *Pediatrics* 107, no. 5 (2001): 1116–19.



62 percent of the 350 attendees said the Internet had played a role in divorces during the last year.<sup>9</sup> Divorce, as everyone knows by now, is associated with a variety of adverse financial and other outcomes as well as with problems for children and adolescents affected by it. To the extent that pornography use increases the likelihood of marital breakup, such private behavior is clearly exacting public costs.

*Pornography use is a guy thing. It only bothers women.* In fact, some of the saddest and most riveting testimony on this topic concerns exactly this: the harm that pornography consumption can do to men immersed in it.

Consider the research of Pamela Paul, a former reporter for *Time* magazine, who interviewed in depth more than one hundred heterosexual users of pornography—80 percent of them men—for her 2005 book *Pornified: How Pornography Is Transforming Our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families*.<sup>10</sup> This book—the best yet written in laymen’s terms about the impact of Internet pornography on users themselves—is remarkable for several reasons. Just one is the unforgettably sad portrait that emerges, sometimes unwittingly, from habitual users themselves. “Countless men”, she summarizes from the interviews, “have described to me how, while using pornography, they have lost the ability to relate to or be close to women. They have trouble being turned on by ‘real’ women, and their sex lives with their girlfriends or wives collapse.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Reported by Pamela Paul, “The Porn Factor”, *Time*, January 29, 2004.

<sup>10</sup>Pamela Paul, *Pornified: How Pornography Is Transforming Our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families* (New York: Times Books, 2005).

<sup>11</sup>Pamela Paul, “From Pornography to Porno to Porn: How Porn Became the Norm”, in *The Social Cost of Pornography: A Collection of Papers*, ed. James R. Stoner Jr. and Donna M. Hughes (Princeton, N.J.: Witherspoon Institute, 2010), p. 6.

The same point has been echoed by medical authorities, including Norman Doidge, a doctor specializing in neuropsychiatry and author of *The Brain That Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science*.<sup>12</sup> Treating men in the early to mid-1990s for their pornography habits, he found it a common refrain that many were no longer able to have intercourse with their own wives. “Pornographers”, he concludes, “promise healthy pleasure and relief from sexual tension, but what they often deliver is an addiction, tolerance, and an eventual decrease in pleasure. Paradoxically, the male patients I worked with often craved pornography but didn’t like it.”<sup>13</sup>

But self-loathing is hardly limited to the most extreme cases. In 2010, the widely followed conservative website *National Review Online* ran an anonymous and widely discussed piece called “Getting Serious about Pornography”. Its author, a mother of five, detailed and deplored pornography’s role as she saw it in the destruction of her marriage. The result was an outpouring of impassioned e-mail—including from some people exploring their own use of pornography and its impact on their own lives. Perhaps most poignant of all was the testimony of users themselves whose lives had been made miserable by the stuff.

As Roger Scruton has put the paradox about men and pornography memorably, “This, it seems to me, is the real risk attached to pornography. Those who become addicted to this risk-free form of sex run a risk of another and greater

<sup>12</sup> Norman Doidge, *The Brain That Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science* (New York: Viking Adult, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

kind. They risk the loss of love, in a world where only love brings happiness.”<sup>14</sup>

*It's only pictures of consenting adults.* Unless it is computer simulated, pornography is never only about pictures. Every single person on the screen is somebody's sister, cousin, son, niece, or mother; every one of them stands in a human relation to the world.

The notion for starters that those in the “industry” itself are not being harmed by what they do cannot survive even the briefest reading of testimonials to the contrary by those who have turned their backs on it. It is a world rife with everything one would want any genuinely loved one to avoid like the plague: drugs, exploitation, physical harm, AIDS.

Nor can the “pictures” defense survive the extremely troubling—or what ought to be extremely troubling—connections between pornography and prostitution. What is now called “sex trafficking”, for example, is often associated with pornography—for example, via cameras and film equipment found when trafficking circles are broken up. Plainly, the reality of the human beings behind many of those images on the Internet is poorer, dirtier, druggier—and younger—than pious appeals to “consenting adults” can withstand.

Perhaps somewhere among our public crusaders against “regular” obesity, there will emerge a person of stature who can spare time for this other epidemic, too. After all, uninviting though these dirty waters may be, the reward for tackling this epidemic could be profound. For amid the squalor,

<sup>14</sup>Roger Scruton, “The Abuse of Sex”, in *The Social Costs of Pornography: A Collection of Papers*, ed. James R. Stoner Jr. and Donna M. Hughes (Princeton, N.J.: Witherspoon Institute, 2010), p. 125.

the unhappiness, and the rest of the bad news about sexual obesity, the bad news is not the only news there is—not at all.

“Where sin increased,” as Paul’s Letter to the Romans has it, “grace abounded all the more” (5:20). The record of what pornography has wrought shows that kind of abundance too, though it may not yet be an issue of academic study. After all, just look at the tremendous effort that goes into attempts to break the habit. Look at the energy fueling all those attempts to repair the damage done—the turns to counseling, the therapists, priests, pastors, and others working in these awful trenches to help the addicted get their real lives back. Look at the technological ingenuity too—the new software, the filters, the countercultural and uphill efforts here and there to thwart pornography’s public crawl.

To survey that multifaceted record of struggle, fledgling but growing by the day, against the also growing empirical record of the beast’s harms, is to grasp a truth about the postrevolutionary male paradox that lies beyond the ridicule of the jaded or the vituperative recriminations of those still in the pit. It is to see redemption. It is to spy hope in a place where desperate people need it most—and plenty of it, too.