



**THE CASE
AGAINST THE
SEXUAL
REVOLUTION**

**A NEW GUIDE
TO SEX IN THE
21ST CENTURY
LOUISE
PERRY**

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‘Those feminists who assume this book is not for them – give it a go. Brilliantly written, cleverly argued, packed with fascinating ideas and information: agree or disagree with the central premise, it is fresh and exciting.’

Julie Bindel, feminist and writer, author of *Feminism for Women*

‘This is a marvellously essential book, brilliantly argued. Perry has written the most radical feminist challenge to a failed liberal feminism. For love of womankind, and based on her profound reading of scientific, cultural and historical material, Perry has committed heresy; namely, she has dared argue that men and women really are different, especially sexually – and that the so-called sexual revolution failed women, especially young and poor women, and in a most spectacular way. Hook-up culture, or “having sex like a man”, is hardly liberating for most girls and women. What Perry has to say about pornography, prostitution and the uber eroticization of culture is both true and heartbreaking – but she is, perhaps, at her best, her kindest, when she writes about feminism and motherhood, about what both children and older women need in order to survive and flourish. Brava for such good writing and for such bold common sense.’

Phyllis Chesler, writer, feminist and psychologist, author of *Women and Madness*

‘Brilliantly conceived and written, this highly original book is an urgent call for a sexual counter-revolution. A book as stimulating as the splash of icy water that wakes someone from a nightmare.’

Helen Joyce, author of *Trans: When Ideology Meets Reality*

'Perry tackles the costs of the sexual revolution head-on. Wending her careful way through liberal narratives of progress and conservative hand-wringing over decline, Perry demonstrates that beginning with the priorities of women changes too how we must think about politics. Perry is a clear-sighted and unflinching guide through all of the major areas of contemporary sexual politics, from dating to marriage and children, pornography, and violence against women. We live, she suggests, in an era of "sexual disenchantment". What we need today is a new morality, a new set of virtues: the sexual revolution failed, but women and children were the greater losers. This is a brave and unflinching book: we have it in us to treat each other once more with dignity, Perry suggests. The party's over - long live love, virtue, commitment and kindness.'

Nina Power, author of *What Do Men Want?*

'For a generation now, we have been sold the lie that feminism means celebrating "sex work", violent pornography and casual hook-ups. To feel otherwise brands a woman not just as uncool and uptight but as an enemy of social justice. How the hell did the misogynist global sex trade manage to enlist feminism as head cheerleader? Enter the laser intellect of Louise Perry, who, in this thoughtful, timely and witty book, exposes the travesty of "sex positive" feminism as neither positive nor sexy and argues for new thinking that puts women's true interests, desires and happiness at its heart.'

Janice Turner, *Times* columnist and feature writer

Dedication

For the women who learned it the hard way

The Case Against the Sexual Revolution

**A New Guide to Sex in the 21st
Century**

LOUISE PERRY

polity

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I depend, as ever, on the love and companionship of my husband and family, including my beloved son, who was born during the writing of this book, and my most faithful reader, my mum, who has read every word I've ever published.

The little respect paid to chastity in the male world is, I am persuaded, the grand source of many of the physical and moral evils that torment mankind, as well as of the vices and follies that degrade and destroy women.

Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

he said they'd found a brothel
on the dig he did last night

I asked him how they know

he sighed:

a pit of babies' bones

a pit of newborn babies' bones was how to spot a brothel

Hollie McNish, 'Conversation with an archeologist'

Foreword

by Kathleen Stock

What did the sexual revolution of the 1960s ever do for us? In this brilliant book, Louise Perry argues that it depends which 'us' you're talking about. The invention of the contraceptive pill reduced women's fear of unwanted pregnancy, enabling them to provide the kind of sex a lot of men prefer: copious and commitment-free. Many women claim to enjoy this kind of sex too. But, as Perry explains, there's good reason to disbelieve at least some such reports. For we now live in a culture where, though it isn't taboo for a man to choke a woman during sex, or anally penetrate her, or ejaculate on her face while filming it, it *is* taboo for a young woman to express discomfort about the nature of the sexual bargain she's expected by society to make. This bargain says: sacrifice your own wellbeing for the pleasures of men in order to compete in the heterosexual dating marketplace at all.

As Perry documents in sometimes shocking vignettes, whatever ill effects the sexual revolution had for women in the twentieth century have been supersized in the digital age of the twenty-first. There is little doubt that contemporary sexual culture is destructive for younger women in particular. It sells them a sexbot aesthetic, pressures them into promiscuity, bombards them with dick pics and violent pornography, and tells them to enjoy being humiliated and assaulted in bed. It says that, as long as they choose it, being exploited for money is 'sex work' and that 'sex work is work'. It also tells women not to mix up sex with love and to stay disconnected and emotionless from partners. It encourages them to change their bodies in ways that match pornographic ideals. And, worst of all, it

says that to comply with all of this is empowering – ignoring the obvious fact that telling women to subdue their minds and submit their bodies to physically stronger strangers can be lethal.

Perhaps surprisingly, the taboo around discussing the costs of the sexual revolution is enabled by popular feminism. This is because popular feminism is a version of liberal feminism, and liberal feminism in its populist guise is focused mostly on a woman's 'right to choose' or 'consent', construed incredibly thinly. Everything and anything goes as long as you choose or consent to it at the time. What this misses out, of course, is that people can be pressured – by peers or partners or wider cultural forces – into believing that they want things which later they come to recognise as bad for them. In a culture dominated by male sexuality, there's an obvious interest in convincing women that they want to have sex like men do, and many women go along with things they later come to regret.

At this point, the inner liberal feminist in many readers may be howling: but what if I genuinely *want* all that stuff? Well, good for you if you genuinely do. But, as Perry shows, even if this sort of sex works for some women, there are many other women for whom it does not. And they aren't 'pruders', or 'frigid', or 'asexual', or 'in a moral panic', or any of the other insulting words produced by the culture to keep the whole man-pleasing machinery working. Nor need they be religious. There are plenty of reasons to be wary of contemporary sexual mores that are perfectly secular.

Both liberal feminism's narrow focus on choice and its incapacity to discuss deep differences between women and men stem from its intellectual forefather: liberalism, a political tradition heavily focused on freedom of choice as the thing definitive of personhood. The fantasy of a liberal subject is of an ostensibly sexless individual, defined mostly

by the presence of a free will, untethered by family ties or community expectations and pursuing private preferences in a relatively unfettered way. I say 'ostensibly sexless', because - in a point made by second-wave feminists and brought up to date by Perry - this idealised figure of a liberal subject sounds more like a man roaming around getting his oats than a woman whose life is intertwined with the kids that are the outcome of her own sexual activity.

How then can we start talking about what might work for women, specifically? Perry turns to biology and evolutionary psychology, asking: What does a woman tend to desire, given the kind of female animal she is, with the specific reproductive capacities she tends to have? (Talk of animals is not insulting. We are all animals, though hubris tries to make us forget it.) Given the vexed history of discussion about nature vs nurture within feminism, this move towards the natural is a bold one. But Perry's approach deserves open-minded attention - especially when you remember that, according to the currently more popular narrative, human bodies as well as minds are plastic. Yes: such is liberal feminism's fear of limits upon personal freedom that - in tandem with its BFF capitalism - it now construes facts about healthy bodies as obstacles to freedom. Don't like your breasts? Buy new ones, or cut them off altogether! (Delete as appropriate.) Incredibly, in some feminists, the degree of denial stretches even to telling us that biology itself is a myth or a construct. Yet, as Perry argues, once we acknowledge the 'hard limits imposed by biology', we can make informed inferences about female wellbeing in particular - rooted in the real, and not what is projected or fantasised by men.

Perry's background as a journalist, commentator, and campaigner against 'rough sex' criminal defences perfectly places her to tackle these issues, and she does so with

characteristic style and fearlessness. Her book does several things that are unusual for a modern feminist text. It refuses the easy wins of the Cool Girl Feminist, swimming against the pink tide of sex-positive vacuity to spell out some uncomfortable truths. It is uninterested in liberal feminist buzzwords such as freedom and equality, focusing instead on women's needs and wellbeing, independently from a consideration of men. Whether you ultimately agree or disagree with Perry's analysis, the book takes the interests of women deadly seriously and carves out a space for them to talk properly about the costs of the sexual culture in which they must sink or swim. It's essential for the wellbeing of young women that we do this, and we should all be grateful to Perry for advancing this important conversation.

1

Sex Must Be Taken Seriously

Hugh Hefner and Marilyn Monroe - those two icons of the sexual revolution - never actually met, but they were born in the same year and laid to rest in the same place, side by side.¹ In 1992, Hefner bought the crypt next door to Monroe's in the Westwood Memorial Park Cemetery in Los Angeles for \$75,000,² telling the *Los Angeles Times*: 'I'm a believer in things symbolic ... [so] spending eternity next to Marilyn is too sweet to pass up.'³ At the age of ninety-one, Hefner got his wish. The long-dead Monroe had no say in the matter. But then she had never been given much say in what men did to her over the course of her short life.

Marilyn Monroe was both the first ever cover star and the first ever naked centrefold in the first ever edition of Hefner's *Playboy* magazine, published in December 1953. 'Entertainment for MEN' was the promise offered on the front cover, and the magazine evidently delivered on that promise, since it was a commercial success from its very first issue.

Marilyn Monroe's naked photos were four years old by the time of their publication. In 1949, the 23-year-old Monroe had been paid \$50 for a two-hour photo shoot with pin-up photographer Tom Kelley, who had promised that he'd make her unrecognisable, and almost delivered on his promise.⁴ The woman curled up on a red velvet bedspread is not obviously Monroe, since her hair was a little more brunette at the time, her pained face was half hidden

behind an outstretched arm, and her pale, pretty body was indistinguishable from the bodies of most of the other models in *Playboy* (which would not feature a black centrefold until 1965 – the eighteen-year-old recipient of this dubious honour, Jennifer Jackson, later described ‘Hef’ as ‘a high-class pimp’).⁵

The clothed Monroe on the cover of the magazine beckoned in readers with the promise of a ‘FULL COLOR’ nude photo of the actress for the ‘first time in any magazine’, and Hefner later said that her centrefold was the key reason for the publication’s initial success. Monroe herself was humiliated by the photo shoot, which she resorted to only out of desperate need for money, signing the release documents with a fake name.⁶ Hefner didn’t pay her to use her images and didn’t seek her consent before publishing them.⁷ Monroe reportedly told a friend that she had ‘never even received a thank-you from all those who made millions off a nude Marilyn photograph. I even had to buy a copy of the magazine to see myself in it.’⁸

The courses of these two lives show us in perfect vignette the nature of the sexual revolution’s impact on men and women. Monroe and Hefner both began in obscurity and ended their lives rich and famous, having found success in the same city and at the very same historical moment. But, while Hefner lived a long, grubby life in his mansion with his playmates, Monroe’s life was cut short by misery and substance abuse. As the radical feminist Andrea Dworkin later wrote:

She grinned, she posed, she pretended, she had affairs with famous and powerful men. A friend of hers claimed that she had so many illegal abortions wrongly performed that her reproductive organs were severely injured. She died alone, possibly acting on her own behalf for the first time ... Her lovers in both flesh and fantasy had fucked her to death, and her apparent suicide stood at once as accusation and answer: no, Marilyn Monroe, the ideal sexual female, had not liked it.⁹

Monroe's life followed a similar trajectory to that of her pin-up predecessor Bettie Page, who survived into old age but spent her final decades in a psychiatric institution. So too the pop star Britney Spears, who at the age of sixteen gyrated in a school uniform and begged viewers to 'hit me baby one more time'. Spears has since suffered a protracted and very public nervous breakdown, just like the countless other Monroes - some of whom we will meet over the course of this book - who have been destroyed in much the same way as the original icon.

In particular, today's female porn performers - the most successful of whom now inhabit much the same cultural space that Monroe inhabited in her day - are far more likely than their peers to have been sexually abused as children, to have been in foster care, and to have been victims of domestic violence as adults¹⁰ - all misfortunes that Monroe suffered too.¹¹ The libidinous public asks a lot of the women it desires. And when it all goes horribly wrong, as it usually does, this public labels these once-desired women 'crazy' and moves on. There is never a reckoning with what sexual liberation does to those women who follow its directives most obediently.

Hugh Hefner experienced 'sexual liberation' very differently from Monroe, as men typically do, although his

example is no more worthy of emulation. As a younger man, he was the true playboy – handsome, charming and envied by other men. He lived the fantasy of a particularly immature adolescent boy, hosting parties for his celebrity friends in a garish ‘grotto’ and then retiring upstairs with his harem of identical twenty-something blondes. He supposedly once said that his best pick-up line was simply the sentence ‘Hi, my name is Hugh Hefner.’¹²

Unlike Monroe, Hefner lived to grow old and, as he did so, lost much of his glitter. By the end of his life, he was more often publicly portrayed as a pathetic figure, and various former playmates provided the press with unflattering accounts of life in the Playboy mansion. Jill Ann Spaulding, for instance, wrote of the elderly Hefner’s uninspiring sexual performance: ‘Hef just lies there with his Viagra erection. It’s just a fake erection, and each girl gets on top of him for two minutes while the girls in the background try to keep him excited. They’ll yell things like, “Fuck her daddy, fuck her daddy!”’¹³

Other women spoke of soiled mattresses, a bizarre playmate uniform of matching pink flannel pyjamas, and carpets covered with dog faeces.¹⁴ It was revealed that Hefner took an obsessive and coercive attitude towards his many girlfriends, dictating how they wore their hair and make-up, keeping a detailed log of all his sexual encounters,¹⁵ and becoming angry if refused sex.¹⁶ His acolytes forgave ‘Hef’ when he was still young and attractive, but as time went on he was revealed to be little more than a dirty old man. The glamour of the playboy – or the ‘fuckboy’, in modern slang – doesn’t last forever.

Hefner’s reputation may have diminished over time, but he never experienced any guilt for the harm he perpetrated. Asked at the age of eighty-three by the *New York Times* if he regretted any of the ‘dark consequences’ of the *Playboy*

revolution he set in motion, Hefner was confident in his innocence: 'it's a small price to pay for personal freedom.'¹⁷ By which he meant, of course, personal freedom for men like him.

After his death in 2017, the original playboy was described again and again in the press as a 'complex figure'. The *Huffington Post* wrote of his 'contradictory feminist legacy',¹⁸ and the BBC asked 'was the Playboy revolution good for women?'¹⁹ One British journalist argued that Hefner had 'helped push feminism forwards':

[Hefner] took a particularly progressive stance to the contraceptive pill and abortion rights, which the magazine often plugged, and kept readers up-to-date with the struggles women were facing; leading up to the legalisation of abortion in 1973, Playboy featured at least 30 different commentaries on the Roe V. Wade case and large features from doctors.²⁰

None of these eulogists seemed to recognise that Hefner's commitment to decoupling reproduction from sex had nothing to do with a commitment to women's wellbeing. Hefner never once campaigned for anything that didn't bring him direct benefit, and, when fear of pregnancy was one of the last remaining reasons for women saying 'no', he had every reason to wish for a change that would widen the pool of women available to him.

Marilyn Monroe was scraped out again and again by backstreet abortionists because she died almost a decade before the Pill was made available to unmarried women in all American states. *Playboy* magazine existed for twenty years in a country without legalised abortion. The sexual revolution began in a society fresh from the horrors of the Second World War and enjoying a new form of affluence, but its outriders initially bore a lot of illegitimate children and suffered a lot of botched abortions. The 1966 film *Alfie*

stars a gorgeous young Michael Caine bed-hopping around London and enjoying the libertine lifestyle promised by the swinging sixties. But his actions have consequences and, in the emotional climax of the film, Alfie cries as he is confronted with the grisly product of a backstreet abortion he has procured for one of his 'birds'.

The story of the sexual revolution isn't only a story of women freed from the burdens of chastity and motherhood, although it is that. It is also a story of the triumph of the playboy - a figure who is too often both forgotten and forgiven, despite his central role in this still recent history. Second-wave feminists were right to argue that women needed contraception and legalised abortion in order to give them control over their reproductive lives, and the arrival of this technology was a good and needful innovation, since it has freed so many women from the body-breaking work of unwanted childbearing. But the likes of Hefner also wanted this technology, and needed it, if they were to achieve the goal of liberating their own libidos while pretending that they were liberating women.

Sexual liberalism and its discontents

In Sophocles' *Antigone* - a play particularly attentive to the duty and suffering of women - the chorus sing that 'nothing that is vast enters into the life of mortals without a curse.' The societal impact of the Pill was vast and, two generations on, we haven't yet fully understood both its blessing and its curse. There have been plenty of periods in human history in which the norms around sex have been loosened: the late Roman Empire, Georgian Britain, and the Roaring Twenties in America are the best remembered. But these phases of licentiousness were self-limited by the lack of good contraception, and thus straight men in pursuit of extramarital sex were mostly obliged to seek out sex either

with women in prostitution or with the small number of eccentric women who were willing to risk being cast out permanently from respectable society. The Bloomsbury set, for instance, who famously 'lived in squares and loved in triangles', had plenty of illicit sexual encounters. They also produced a lot of illegitimate children, and were protected from destitution only as a result of the privileges of their class.

But the sexual revolution of the 1960s stuck, and its ideology is now the ideological sea we swim in - so normalised that we can hardly see it for what it is. It was able to persist because of the arrival, for the first time in the history of the world, of reliable contraception and, in particular, forms of contraception that women could take charge of themselves, such as the Pill, the diaphragm, and subsequent improvements on the technology, such as the intrauterine device (IUD). Thus, at the end of the 1960s, an entirely new creature arrived in the world: the apparently fertile young woman whose fertility had in fact been put on hold. She changed everything.

This book is an attempt to reckon with that change, and to do so while avoiding the accounts typically offered by liberals addicted to a narrative of progress or conservatives addicted to a narrative of decline. I don't believe that the last sixty years or so should be understood as a period of exclusive progress or exclusive decline, because the sexual revolution has not freed *all* of us, but it has freed *some* of us, and selectively, and at a price. Which is exactly what we should expect from any form of social change 'that is vast', as this one certainly is. And although I am writing against a conservative narrative of the post-1960s era, and in particular those conservatives who are silly enough to think that returning to the 1950s is either possible or desirable, I am writing in a more deliberate and focused way against a

liberal narrative of sexual liberation which I think is not only wrong but also harmful.

My complaint is focused more against liberals than against conservatives for a very personal reason: I used to believe the liberal narrative. As a younger woman, I held the same political opinions as most other millennial urban graduates in the West – in other words, I conformed to the beliefs of my class, including liberal feminist ideas about porn, BDSM, hook-up culture, evolutionary psychology, and the sex trade, which will all be addressed in this book. I let go of these beliefs because of my own life experiences, including a period immediately after university spent working at a rape crisis centre. If the old quip tells us that a ‘conservative is just a liberal who has been mugged by reality’, then I suppose, at least in my case, that a post-liberal feminist is just a liberal feminist who has witnessed the reality of male violence up close.

I’m using the term ‘liberal feminism’ to describe a form of feminism that is usually not described as such by its proponents, who nowadays are more likely to call themselves ‘intersectional feminists’. But I don’t think that their ideology actually *is* intersectional, according to Kimberlé Crenshaw’s original meaning, in that it does not properly incorporate an analysis of other forms of social stratification, particularly economic class. The advantage of using ‘liberal feminism’ instead is that it places these twenty-first-century ideas within a longer intellectual history, making clear that this is a feminist iteration of a much grander intellectual project: liberalism.

The definition of ‘liberalism’ is contested – indeed, the first line of the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy entry tells us that ‘liberalism is more than one thing’ – which means that, whatever definition I choose to work with, I’ll leave some critics unhappy. But I’m reluctant to bore readers by

offering a long-winded defence of my working definition, so I'll be brief.

I'm not using 'liberal' as short-hand for 'left wing' - in fact, far from it. The American post-liberal political theorist Patrick Deneen describes economic liberalism and social liberalism as intertwined, with a liberal cultural elite and a liberal corporate elite working hand in hand: 'Today's corporate ideology has a strong affinity with the lifestyles of those who are defined by mobility, ethical flexibility, liberalism (whether economic or social), a consumerist mentality in which choice is paramount, and a "progressive" outlook in which rapid change and "creative destruction" are the only certainties.'²¹

Post-liberals such as Deneen draw attention to the costs of social liberalism, a political project that seeks to free individuals from the external constraints placed on us by location, family, religion, tradition, and even (and most relevant to feminists) the human body. In that sense, they are in agreement with many social conservatives. But post-liberals are also critical of the other side of the liberal coin: a free market ideology that seeks to free individuals from all of these constraints in order to maximise their ability to work and to consume. The atomised worker with no commitment to any place or person is the worker best able to respond quickly to the demands of the market. This ideal liberal subject can move to wherever the jobs are because she has no connection to anywhere in particular; she can do whatever labour is asked of her without any moral objection derived from faith or tradition; and, without a spouse or family to attend to, she never needs to demand rest days or a flexible schedule. And then, with the money earned from this rootless labour, she is able to buy consumables that will soothe any feelings of unhappiness, thus feeding the economic engine with maximum efficiency.

Liberal feminism takes this market-orientated ideology and applies it to issues specific to women. For instance, when the actress and campaigner Emma Watson was criticised in 2017 for showing her breasts on the cover of *Vanity Fair*, she hit back with a well-worn liberal feminist phrase: 'feminism is about giving women choice ... It's about freedom.'²² For liberal feminists such as Watson, that might mean the freedom to wear revealing clothes (and sell lots of magazines in the process), or the freedom to sell sex, or make or consume porn, or pursue whatever career you like, just like the boys.

With the right tools, freedom from the constraints imposed by the female body now becomes increasingly possible. Don't want to have children in your twenties or thirties? Freeze your eggs. Called away on a work trip postpartum? Fed-Ex your breastmilk to your newborn. Want to continue working fulltime without interruption? Employ a live-in nanny, or - better yet - a surrogate who can bear the child for you. And now, with the availability of sex reassignment medical technologies, even stepping out of your female body altogether has become an option. Liberal feminism promises women freedom - and when that promise comes up against the hard limits imposed by biology, then the ideology directs women to chip away at those limits through the use of money, technology and the bodies of poorer people.

I don't reject the desire for freedom - I'm not an anti-liberal, and goodness knows that women have every reason to chafe against the constraints imposed on us by our societies and our bodies, both in the past and in the modern world. But I am critical of any ideology that fails to balance freedom against other values, and I'm also critical of the failure of liberal feminism to interrogate where our desire for a certain type of freedom comes from, too often referring back to a circular logic by which a woman's