

— LETTERS
on LIBERTY



**FREEING SEX FROM
LIBERTINES AND PURITANS**

Jenny Holland

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It's not always easy to defend freedom. Public life may have been locked down recently, but it has been in bad health for some time.

Open debate has been suffocated by today's censorious climate and there is little cultural support for freedom as a foundational value. What we need is rowdy, good-natured disagreement and people prepared to experiment with what freedom might mean today.

We stand on the shoulders of giants, but we shouldn't be complacent. We can't simply rely on the thinkers of the past to work out what liberty means today, and how to argue for it.

Drawing on the tradition of radical pamphlets from the seventeenth century onwards - designed to be argued over in the pub as much as parliament - *Letters on Liberty* promises to make you think twice. Each *Letter* stakes a claim for how to forge a freer society in the here and now.

We hope that, armed with these *Letters*, you take on the challenge of fighting for liberty.

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FREEING SEX FROM LIBERTINES AND PURITANS

'High culture made itself obsolete through modernism's neurotic nihilism... popular culture is the great heir of the Western past.'

- Camille Pagliaⁱ

If you are in possession of a set of eyeballs and an internet connection, you may have noticed that we are living through a time of sexual anarchy. Everything seems turned on its head. Boys are girls, Satan is fun, old people are foolish and young people, wise. Even by the standards of the 1970s - the era most associated with sexual excess in living memory - we seem to be drowning in sex. For those of us old enough to remember the norms of the past, it feels like nothing is as it once was.

Excessive sexual behaviour is a constant topic of conversation across social media - among influencers and public intellectuals alike. Women are, as always, at the centre of the debate over sexual behaviour. For my entire lifetime, the idea that a woman's sexuality should be controlled by forces outside herself has been absolutely anathema. But the excess that is evident from our porn-saturated culture, celebration of promiscuity and extremely niche sexual identities

throws up some uncomfortable questions for people like me, who assumed the ultimate value was sexual freedom.

Feminists might not agree with me, but women are both the gatekeepers and the tone-setters of our sexual politics. After decades of sex-positivity, ladettes and girl-bosses, we have reached a point where the purported 'bad behaviour' of women - especially young ones, with things like 'high body count' - is driving a movement toward a more conservative morality. This backlash has its most perfect representation in the 'trad wife' trend, where women post videos of themselves in the act of making sandwiches and washing their husband's underwear. At the same time, a steady flow of images from porn-sick men filming themselves doing degrading things and posting it on the internet raises profound questions for liberal centrists of where the line is, exactly, between personal freedom and unacceptable transgression.

There is a lot that both liberals and conservatives get wrong in this heated debate. In judging and analysing our new reality, they seem to be using a playbook that is out of date. A renewal of morality is needed. Three distinct factions are emerging from the online debate: the sexual radicals, the sexual liberals and the sexual puritans.

The sexual puritans seem naively unaware that decadence and sexual excess have always existed - even in times of high religiosity and social cohesion. The sexual liberals, on the other hand, still cling to an equally naive assumption: that almost all sexual activity is pleasure-based and should be treated as equally valid.

The sexual arms race escalates ever upward - and this sex war is being fought unconventionally.

This misses the increasingly obvious fact that disordered sexual compulsions are not harmless activities. Many still see porn as a freedom of expression issue, but this ignores a deeper truth about sex - which is often addictive - and excessive promiscuity which can be harmful physically and mentally to the person engaging in it. Porn has shown us that, like drugs, things that give us a pleasurable high early on in our usage no longer work after prolonged exposure, leading us to chase extremes.

Then there are the sexual radicals - those for whom norms and boundaries were made to be smashed. With the traditional conservative-liberal framework proving weak, the sexual radicals now dominate much of the online world, gaining real-world power while they're at it.

These distinct groups are competing for the hearts and minds of the normies who are just going about their business asking, 'what on earth is going on?' What is going on is that the gates of the sexual marketplace have been bust wide open - and all sorts of things are flooding in.

The sexual radicals

Has there ever been a time where fretting over sexual behaviour wasn't a major pastime? Probably not. But nor has there ever been a time when simply scrolling through your timeline - the twenty-first-century equivalent of scanning your newspaper over breakfast in the morning - might bring you face-to-face with videos of strangers performing extreme or aberrant sex acts on themselves and others. I recently saw a widely shared video of an old, fat man simultaneously sodomising himself with a petrol pump and masturbating, at what looked like an American gas station. You used to have to put some effort into satisfying your sexual urges, you had to take some risk to seek them out, especially if they were outside the norm. Not anymore.

The sexual arms race escalates ever upward - and this sex war is being fought unconventionally. All over

social media we see unorthodox romantic pairings of three or more people, young American teachers turning classrooms into shrines to Pride flags, rancorous debates at school board meetings over sexually explicit books in children's libraries, buoyant-breasted, scantily clad women filming themselves in public gyms and men in dresses photographing themselves in women's changing rooms and toilets.

Six decades after the sexual revolution, mutual understanding between the sexes - much less happiness - seems farther away than ever.

This is the doing of the sexual radicals, who are small in number, but very loud. These are men and women who want to smash to pieces everything we thought was acceptable, reshaping society as a place where the freedom to do whatever you want, sexually, is the norm. They are boundary-less and transgressive. They are often on the far-left of the political spectrum - like *Abolish the Family* author Sophie Lewis, who analyses mainstream feminist 'whorephobia',ⁱⁱ calls for replacing the home kitchen with 'central canteens'ⁱⁱⁱ and opines about 'the promise of the reproductive commune'.^{iv} The radicals seem to have the upper hand, at least when it comes to stirring up outrage with their excesses.

Perhaps the most extreme of these, in a world of extremes, is OnlyFans star and prostitute Aella. She is frequently to be found arguing in favour of things like rape porn, incest porn and ‘wound-fucking’. ‘The censorship of violent porn on the internet is anti-feminist’,^v she wrote on X recently. Her argument is based partly on her own desires and partly on the polls she conducts, which she claims consistently show that women consume more violent porn than men do. For her birthday this year, Aella’s partner ‘and some friends’ organised a large group of men from the internet to show up and have sex with her, an experience she carefully documents on her Substack, with the cutesy title ‘My Birthday Gangbang: a slutistical breakdown’.^{vi} Like a perky elementary school teacher doling out stars for good behaviour, ‘upon banging the birthday girl, men got a sticker (blue for banging, gold if they came)’.

There has never been a time of sexual innocence - not really. In times of social conservatism, there has always been a sexual underground. It’s all been done before. But does the frank openness of Aella and her radical cohorts really create a sexually healthy mindset? Does breaking ancient mother-father-child bonds, like authors like Lewis wants, make for happy kids?

For most of us, the answer is no. Recent studies show real-life sexual activity is down among young people -

perhaps a surprising fact. And surveys routinely show that the mental health of children and young people is terrible.

Leigh Janet Marshall is a former trans-identified woman who describes herself as ‘a product of LGBTQ science’, born to a bi-sexual single mother who had artificial insemination from a gay man in San Francisco.^{vii} Marshall did not meet him until she was a young adult, which she says left her with a yearning that could not be filled, even with her mother’s abundant love. Marshall had a hysterectomy in her late twenties as part of a transitioning process. This drastic decision, and her years of wanting to be male, she now attributes to trauma from the ultra-open sexual culture of her university, where orgies were the norm and her boundaries were repeatedly violated in sexual assaults. She was also exposed to porn in childhood, accessing explicit material at her local library. This, she argues, warped her perception of what it is to be a woman. In her words, a sexual woman was no better than an animal. The resultant anguish drove her to sterilise herself.

Six decades after the sexual revolution, mutual understanding between the sexes - much less happiness - seems farther away than ever. Many liberals and progressives - including a member of the United States Supreme Court and the prime minister

of the United Kingdom - can't confidently say what a woman is.

The radicals' project of total liberation has perhaps served their own desires, but it's clear that wider society has not benefitted at all.

The liberals

The liberal culture of tolerance and self-fulfilment - a culture people like me grew up taking for granted - is not fit for purpose in a world of infinite sexual variety. For both the radicals and the liberals, past repression of healthy sexual instincts distorts their perception of the present, because those moral panics were almost always followed by punitive action directed at pre-marital sex, homosexual sex or inter-racial coupling.

I would argue his critics come from a fear of eating shit. By liberal standards, does that make me authoritarian?

Though the sexual liberals sit between the radicals and the puritans, and they share certain stances with conservatives - transitioning children is bad, for

example - they also frequently run interference for the dubious behaviour of the radicals. This is because they foolishly mistake a healthy disgust response for repressive, punitive morality policing.

In April, liberal philosopher Peter Boghossian defended a gay Spanish politician who had resigned after a video of him eating faeces appeared on social media.^{viii} The man's job? He was a member of the main left-wing party in Spain and a counsellor for youth, children and families in his town near Madrid.^{ix}

'Unpopular opinion: mind your own business and leave the guy alone', wrote Boghossian. The responses to this tweet were genuinely entertaining and showed that Boghossian's take was deeply unpopular - even among his audience, who are hardly fire-and-brimstone types. He called the backlash 'authoritarian' and said, 'they demonstrate pervasive normative rigidity that comes from Christian fear of judgement'.^x I would argue his critics come from a fear of eating shit. By liberal standards, does that make me authoritarian?

The hypocrisies and blind spots of the sexual liberals are frequently derided by both the puritans and radicals, as they use the muddled thinking as motivation to push toward increasingly extreme positions.

The puritans

The sexual puritans are a subset of more genteel conservatives, in a similar way the radicals are nested within the warm bosom of the liberals.

And on many issues the conservatives have the upper hand. That's because we all know, deep down inside, that extreme promiscuity is not good for anyone. Even a sexual extremist like Aella admits to feeling that her behaviour is not good: 'I am not immune to the heavy-handed social narratives that I must be damaging myself somehow.'^{xi}

But is it a 'heavy-handed narrative' telling Aella she's damaging herself, or her innate moral compass? There is a growing unease that, when it comes to approved sexual behaviour, things have simply gone too far. But the sexual puritans take this concern, and spin it into something far darker and nastier.

Take, for instance, the Instagram channel @MotivationHouse0 - a large social-media account that focuses on women behaving badly and men correcting them, or embarrassing them, for that behaviour.^{xii} In one of the videos, a woman who looks disconcertingly like Victoria Beckham in her heyday, goes on a little rant about 'party girls' and the sad,

husband-less fate that awaits them once they reach the ripe old age of 30. ‘All the good guys are gone’, she gloats. ‘You missed your chance being a fucking whore, bitch!’^{xiii} Take away the obscenity-laced language, and this woman is right out of another era - one that we do not want to go back to.

As extreme as her particular brand of sexism sounds, she is expressing in stark, strident terms what a lot of people are now thinking - that women need to reconsider what the consequences are to choosing a life of sexual choice and adventure over monogamy and stability. It’s as if there are only two choices on offer for women - the ‘whore, bitch’ or the Madonna.

Women have always worked outside the home. We have always engaged in promiscuous or devious behaviour, and we have always had desires that refuse to be kept under control - even in the kind of repressive culture the puritans wish to recreate.

While the judgement-heavy sexual puritans grab attention on social media, they are still a long way off regaining the ground they lost in the sexual revolution. While sexist views of women’s freedom might have gone unchanged throughout the ages among some men, hostility towards a ‘traditional’ life has grown

among women. In a recent column, American journalist Nicholas Kristof explored the widening gap in moral values and social aspirations between young men and young women. As he described, many educated young women now see men as a burden, and marriage as a trap.^{xiv}

The sexual puritans present a far-too-rosy picture of what domesticity used to mean for women. And just as the young radicals smugly think they are the first people in history to engage in outrageous behaviour, young puritans don't seem to realise that women have always worked outside the home. We have always engaged in promiscuous or devious behaviour, and we have always had desires that refuse to be kept under control - even in the kind of repressive culture the puritans wish to recreate.

Depoliticising sex

Sex has been a power game since time immemorial. It's just that, in the past, the stakes were total social exclusion, penury - even death.

For some, sexual morality has always been hugely flexible. In the podcast *The Rest is History*, hosts Tom Holland and Dominic Sandbrook took a deep dive

into the life of Lord Byron. It struck me as an important reminder that history cycles through periods of great excess, followed by periods of repression.

Even by today's standards, Byron was a sexual radical. His first sexual experiences happened when he was still a child and abused sexually by his maid. He went on to Harrow and then Cambridge University, where sexual activity between the boys was widely practised. He continued having same-sex relationships - mostly with much younger men and boys - well into his adulthood. But he was most famous for his magnetic effect on women, becoming perhaps the first international celebrity playboy. On top of all this, he managed to find the time for the most transgressive, boundary shattering, taboo activity of them all: bedding his own sister. And, of course, writing some of the most famous verse in English literature.

There have always been small groups of sexual radicals - elites and intellectuals - thumbing their noses at established morality. But our current era is the first time I can think of where the exceptions seek to become the rule.

As the American school board wars have shown, government bureaucracy is now in the business of schooling children and young people in the existence

of sexual behaviours and sub-cultures that used to be private, if not hidden. Identities ranging from pangender to asexual, and practices from masturbation to mutilation, are now being openly discussed with children. As a worldly adult and a mother, I reject any claim - even if made by an 'expert' - that children need to be informed of these adult experiences as part of a mandatory government education.

It's time we all grew up and realised that sex isn't the be all and end all of adult life - and it certainly shouldn't have anything to do with children's lives.

If history tells us anything, we should know that if we continue down this path of sexual excess celebrated in front of children, we risk a Taliban-style backlash. Sanity must be restored before this excess bleeds into public support for government regulation of consensual, non-violent, adult behaviours. Sexual relationships exist in the realm of feelings - and feelings should never be the basis of law. Fairness and objectivity are in short supply in most relationship breakdowns - we do not want to create the circumstances where the law could intervene in our most intimate disagreements.

So where is the line? I would say very much in the privacy of our own four walls. And while the law should stay out of policing our personal desires, I think there is a role for public opprobrium and a very important role for disgust and disapproval. Shame and disgust both have a very bad rap these days but are actually innate safety mechanisms - especially for children and teens - that keep us away from predators and people who are not in control of their sexual compulsions. Adults have gaslit a generation of kids to 'be kind' over their instinct that tells them not to be comfortable with certain behaviours.

In the cacophony of endless sexual indulgence, the instrumental purpose of sex - to make and raise the next generation - is being devalued. As a result, children have seen their needs disregarded and their boundaries trespassed upon. The normalisation of sex for pleasure was one of the great wins of adult freedom, with the invention of contraception unshackling women from the maternity bed and enriching adult relationships. But adults need to wrestle their own impulses under control and reimagine a celebration of the humdrum requirements of a society that benefits children and raises them to be healthy adults. In short, it's time we all grew up and realised that sex isn't the be all and end all of adult life - and it certainly shouldn't have anything to do with children's lives.

For all categories, the liberals, puritans and the radicals, sex has become uber-politicised - a means of showing off which tribe you belong to. As a very human thing, perhaps sex will always be in some way political. But the politicisation of sex as something which matters in the public square, rather than an act for private bedrooms, is warping our view of sexual norms - and even our enjoyment of sex itself.

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Her first job in the news business was as an assistant at the *New York Times*, in the years immediately before the digital revolution, which was a bit like being one of the last people to board the lifeboats on the Titanic. Twenty years on, she frequently writes about watching the ship sink, from her small dinghy in the north Atlantic.

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