

## The Price of Freedom

### On the Sexual Revolution

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[ BEATRIS RITSEMA ]

'Everyone boozed and fucked / All Europe was one big mattress,' Remco Campert wrote of the post-war years, even if this flush of liberation remained restricted to a small, marginal group of artists and writers living from hand to mouth in distant Paris. The rest of Europe, poverty-stricken, was preoccupied with restoration, leading a traditional life under the umbrella of pre-war values and norms. Only in the course of the 1960s did the focus on the mattress, along with the associated drinking behaviour, take on outside bohemian circles, reaching full bloom in the 1970s. Two elements lay at the foundation of what is now known as 'the sexual revolution': money, or economic growth, and reliable contraception (the pill). Without those two conditions the mattress idea would not have had the remotest chance. That was far too dangerous for girls and women.

I myself (born in 1954) am at the tail end of the baby boom generation and have never experienced anything other than sexual freedom. When I went to university at seventeen and took a room in a student flat, total freedom prevailed. It was a newly mixed flat (having previously only housed men) with a single toilet, a urinal, a shower and a small kitchen for sixteen inhabitants. A couple lived in a room of three by three and a half metres, and the place was full of girls who did not live there but stayed the night with their boyfriends. Nothing in all this struck me as remarkable or inappropriate, although unmarried cohabitation and fooling around with friends certainly did not belong among the values I had been brought up with at home. I was mainly glad of my new-found independence and the freedom to come and go as I pleased without having to account for my movements. Sex was not on the cards for me in that first year of university, but when the moment came, there would be the freedom for it – there could be no misunderstanding about that.

It is sometimes said that the Paris student protest of May 1968 was really about the abolition of gender segregation in student accommodation, free access for the boys to the girls' rooms and vice versa. Of course students throughout the Western world were angry about authoritarian structures, demanding a say in all areas and a year later occupying the Maagdenhuis, the administrative centre of the University of Amsterdam. In America the protests arose from the civil rights movement and rage at the Vietnam War, but apart from that students also demanded the abolition of restrictive regulations relating to their accom-



*Couple Making Love, Edam, 1970*

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modation. This was quickly and quietly granted, because how can you keep on forbidding sex to young adults who are allowed to drive cars, vote and be conscripted to perish on the other side of the world? With sensible use of contraceptives, no one needed to fear unwanted pregnancy anymore.

### **The free sex and relationship market**

The availability of the pill to unmarried women (later even underage girls without the knowledge of their parents) meant control over one's own fertility and therefore constituted an enormous boost to the sexual liberation of women. Simply by taking a pill a day a woman could indulge in sex as men had been accustomed to: the pleasure without the pain. Not that that meant equal partnership in sex and relationships. Relationships between men and women were far from modernised. I saw that in my student flat, where the female half of that live-in couple stood stirring pans at the stove, after which they ate together in their room. The routine disgusted me – not so much the fact that the girl did the cooking as the

clingy married couple act, which struck me as stiflingly tedious. Surely people did not leave home to lounge around on the sofa (or in their case a single bed) like their parents?

Feminism came a couple of years after the sexual revolution. It is no coincidence that the two liberation movements took place separately, unlike the civil rights movement for black people and the general resistance of youth towards authority. Besides an autonomous battle by women to wrest themselves free of patriarchal structure (discrimination in education and the job market) and for self-fulfilment, feminism was also a reaction to that previously joyfully embraced sexual revolution. The pill had emerged as a double-edged sword which might allow women the freedom to have sex whenever and with whomsoever they wanted, but at the same time made it more difficult to reject men. Fear of pregnancy, for centuries a tried and tested excuse with which to parry unwelcome advances, was suddenly no longer an argument for saying no to sex, neither in stable relationships, nor on the free sex and relationship market, where every young woman who followed modern trends was assumed to take the pill, if only as a precaution.

'Mad Mina' (Dolle Mina), first feminist movement in the Netherlands, showing their slogan 'Masters of our own belly' © Nationaal Archief



According to one story, apocryphal but probably not completely plucked out of thin air, the seed of feminism in the Netherlands was planted at the Maagdenhuis occupation, when the boys were all sitting around deliberating and speechifying while their girlfriends campaigning with them were sent downstairs to make coffee and sandwiches. Women did not get a look-in when it came to the content. Their function was the same as it always had been: in the kitchen and in bed.

From the beginning there were two schools of feminism: equality feminism, which was largely socially oriented and aimed for equal treatment of the sexes in all areas, and difference feminism, with the slogan 'the personal is political'. In equality feminism the biological differences between the sexes were played down; in difference feminism, which tended to present women as weak, potential victims or, by contrast, as morally superior beings, those differences were emphasised. Both schools sought to liberate women and, not surprisingly, sex became the big point of contention.

## Hedonism?

The sexual revolution was first and foremost a time of hedonism. People rapidly threw off their social and religiously inspired shackles. Sex could perfectly well take place recreationally before and outside marriage, and ultimately without the need for a relationship. Space opened up for acceptance of homosexuality, group sex, sadomasochism and swinger clubs – there was even support for paedophilia in the 1970s. An ideological injection of the Marxist philosophy popular at the time led to experimentation with communes, which dispensed with all private property including exclusive relationships. Jealousy and territorial behaviour were seen in such circles as bourgeois tendencies which inhibited true freedom.

It was difference feminists who applied the brakes on unlimited free sex, observing that the sexes still tended towards different points of departure despite the apparent freedom. Hedonism is all well and good, but women were exploited through pornography and prostitution, ran the risk of abuse and rape within relationships as well as outside them, suffered sexual harassment, judgement based on their appearance and date rape, and when they said no they were not taken seriously or were dismissed as prudish. In short, women were sidelined not only as victims of a male-dominated society, but also in their personal lives. The sexual revolution primarily served excessive male desires, while women's wishes were ignored.

The two feminist schools of thought persist today. On the one hand you have the statistical figure fetishists of the equality standard who are preoccupied with the percentage of women on boards of directors, girls opting to study the exact sciences, women breaking through the glass ceiling, statistics on media attention for women writers, artists and presenters, and income by gender, showing unequal pay and the double burden on working women. On the other hand the personal victimisation of women by badly behaved men continues to provide fodder for criticism. Take, for example, the sexist way in which hateful male trolls insult women on social media or the repeated sex scandals used to ruin famous politicians and senior executives.

*On the Beach, Zandvoort*  
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### Looking back nostalgically on light-hearted sex

The sexual revolution burnt out long ago. Its demise began with the manifestation of the AIDS virus in the mid-1980s. Even if gay people and heroin addicts ran the greatest risk of the disease, carefree promiscuity in general was a thing of the past. The era of free sex, with no fear of unwanted pregnancy, when the worst-case scenario was contracting an STD, easily tackled by antibiotics, had only lasted fifteen years. Funnily enough, that period coincided precisely with my years as a student and single adult. On entering the sex and relationship market I encountered a ready-made bed of limitless possibilities. I enjoyed all the freedom of no-strings sex and complicated relationships, and when the AIDS alarm sounded, I entered marriage.

Perhaps for that reason I have retained a weakness for the 1960s (which, as everyone knows, only really got going in the '70s). It is currently the done thing to refer to the 1960s as something of a black page in human history, a wild mess, during which everyone egocentrically chased after their own desires with excesses such as child porn, but I primarily remember the light-heartedness with which one could approach sex. The feminist victim philosophy, on the other hand, made it a highly charged issue. Sex emerged as something to watch out for and handle with care, with trauma always lurking around the corner. The best example is the rules of conduct for sexual encounters between students, as they are proclaimed at many American universities, forbidding male students from attempting sex with drunk female students and stipulating that they must ask for explicit consent before every intended act, from kissing to touching to removing clothes. These codes are supposed to prevent rape.

In my day, such regulations would have been utterly inconceivable. That is not to say that I only have positive, comfortable experiences to look back on. Of course things went wrong due to the complicated entanglement of sex with

relationships and rivalry, which led to endless difficult conversations. But things went wrong with sex itself too. Some people behaved like egotistical boors, leaving a sour taste. Sometimes I went to bed with someone out of politeness or pity, simply because he so wanted to, or I had sex with someone to take revenge on someone else. All the wrong motives, and certainly in retrospect the wrong kinds of encounters, but no reason to feel tainted or abused. Sex just was not that important. Occasionally I look back nostalgically on that light-heartedness with regard to sexual matters, because the current social discourse is certainly on the heavy side. Particularly when it comes to teenagers, there are regular eruptions of moral panic instigated by media reports on sexting, grooming by paedophiles, 'loverboys' or sex slavery. Very unpleasant excesses, to be sure, but the average kid has nothing to do with all that. They have other things to fear, the most important being divorce.

### **The real victims**

For my generation of twenty-somethings the 1960s barely had harmful consequences, but the baby boomers were not the only ones affected. Adults all over the place joined in, in their thirties and forties, often with the entire family. They



*Après-Ski, Switzerland, 1967*

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*Kralingen Pop Festival, Rotterdam, 1970 © Ed van der Elsen / Nederlands Fotomuseum*





*Young Family*, Volendam, ca. 1970

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started open relationships outside their families, experimented with swingers' clubs, alternative family arrangements, anti-authoritarian upbringing and communes. A great deal more went wrong with all this than with autonomous free sex among young people. These were the first families torn apart on a wide scale by divorce. In 1971, the requirement for the so-called 'great lie' (regarding unfaithfulness) was dropped from divorce law and while birth rates dropped divorce rates rose. On the wings of feminism and with self-determination with regard to their own reproduction, a substantial number of women opted to do without men altogether and intentionally embraced unmarried single motherhood.

The real victims of the sexual revolution were the children confronted with the chaos of parents preoccupied with self-exploration, without devoting sufficient attention to their progeny, as heartrendingly revealed by two films. In Ang Lee's *Ice Storm* (2004), a group of married couples, friends and neighbours become embroiled in machinations with car keys in a bowl during a party. Picking a key determines who will go to bed with whom. The children have their own problems, and do not dare to bother their parents with them; their loneliness and emotional neglect is hard to watch, and the end is catastrophic. The other film, Thomas Vinterberg's *Collectivät* (2016) is even more gruelling, if that is possi-

ble. The mother of a fourteen-year-old girl persuades her husband to start up a commune in a large house they have inherited. Tired of just sitting at the table with her spouse, she wants more excitement in her life. Housemates are sought out here and there. The husband later falls in love with a student and brings her to live with them too. The woman cannot bear this and has a breakdown, in response to which the daughter tells her it would be better if she went to live somewhere else, 'because she doesn't fit in with the group'. The child is so consumed by the commune's ideology that 'everything should be possible' that she betrays her own mother.

For my children's generation (in their twenties), in practice sex and relationships do not look so different from when I was their age, except that gay people now have a rather easier time. The parent-child relationship is more intimate, based less on authority and more on negotiation, and all the freedom for which young people previously left home can now be enjoyed under the parental roof. Parents and adolescent children get on much better and are much more involved with one another than in the days of the youth revolt, something which contributes, at least in my view, to making young people rather tamer than in the riotous 1970s. Experiments with free sex and polyamory are now marginal phenomena, more likely to be practised furtively by parents than by their children. In mainstream society the ideal of the nuclear family is back with a vengeance.

The big difference with half a century ago lies in self-determination as a collectively embraced value. Personal freedom and women's emancipation have become definitively fixed in culture. The transition from a hierarchically structured society, in which the interests of the group prevailed above those of the individual, to a society which stands for individual rights and freedoms is seen historically as an irrevocable revolution.

The result is divorce. Family life is always riddled with individual interests and when the conflicts between partners become too great, there is a way out. For children divorce is almost always a hard knock, because their sense of security is undermined. On an individual level it spells loss, grief and fear. On a social level it means weakened academic performance, more criminal behaviour, more psychological problems, plus a greater chance of divorce later in life for those who themselves come from broken homes.

*Translated by Anna Asbury*

## **Acquired rights**

The institution of marriage as a lifelong bond, as a secure foundation for children to grow up in and as cement between two families, has sustained serious damage. Forty percent of marriages end in divorce, and as many as half of second marriages. Divorce forms an enormous social and psychological cost. Nevertheless almost everyone strives for a monogamous relationship within which to share their lives. It is the price of freedom. Everyone is free to enter into a profound bond with another according to their own insight and without interference from anyone else, even with someone of the same gender, and at the same time equally free to end that bond if it fails to live up to expectations. The freedom to move on was won in the 1960s and however much collective weeping and wailing there is about skyrocketing divorce rates, no individual is prepared to trade in personal freedom in this. ■