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When Sex Becomes Cheap

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Cultural norms—the tacit, taken-for-granted expectations that structure human society—adapt to institutional and technological change. In our day, as the life tasks and realms formerly integrated within marriage—sex, intimacy, shared residence and meals, childbirth, raising children, economic sharing, and career planning—increasingly uncoupled from that institution, the related norms shift. When, as in America today, most children experience the dissolution of their parents' relationship, the norms of mating and parenthood implicitly shift from the prospect of stability to the prospect of instability. When less than ten percent of women experience sexual onset within a permanent relationship, the norm shifts from regarding virginity with admiration to regarding it with ridicule. When more than half of births to women under 30 occur outside marriage, the norm of “first comes marriage” shifts to “marriage comes second”—if marriage comes at all.

In his book *Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage and Monogamy*, University of Texas sociologist Mark Regnerus argues that this shift in marital and mating norms has now extended to sex itself. Bringing to bear an impressive array of data, including Regnerus' own large survey of over 15,000 Americans (called the Relationships in America [RIA] survey project) and over 100 interviews conducted for the book, he ably demonstrates that “cheap sex is plentiful—it's flooding the market in sex and relationships—and ... this has had profound influence on how American men and women relate to each other, which has in turn spilled over into other domains” (29). In case we need to be convinced, he presents detailed data and evidence that young Americans of marriageable age (ages 24–32) engage in sex relations more quickly, casually, frequently and with more variety than ever before. Waiting until marriage is becoming a rare option; many do not wait until the second date. Or even the first date. In the RIA data, Regnerus reports, over a third of men and a quarter of women reported that they had sex with their current or most recent partner before the relationship actually began (97). Like text messaging has replaced, for young Americans, the intrusive investment of time and interpersonal energy in an actual phone call, Tinder and the hookup has rendered almost quaint the notion of investing time and interpersonal energy in an actual date. If you think that this is a description of the commodification of sex, you are beginning to get the idea.

Sex has become cheap, explains Regnerus, not because it leaves young people feeling cheap or is less desired by them—in fact, quite the opposite—but as a matter of hard-headed rational social exchange: “Sex is cheap if women expect little in return for it and if men do not have to supply much time, attention, resources, recognition or fidelity in order to experience it” (28). This definition follows the little-known branch of sociology known as “sexual economics,” which analyzes sex relations on the model of a transaction in which a man offers his resources—summarized above as “time, attention, resources, recognition or fidelity”—in exchange for sexual access to a woman's body. The popular formula which says that men give love to get sex, while women give sex to get love, expresses roughly the same idea. But sexual economics goes further, analyzing the sum of these transactions as a kind of mating market, using the tools and concepts of classical economics to expose what many would call cultural insights.

In the mating market of young Americans, explains Regnerus, well-documented gender differences show that men are largely the source of demand for sex, while women function as gatekeepers controlling supply. Sex has become cheap not because demand has decreased—male sexual desire is reliably constant—but because supply has become much more plentiful. The key drivers of this change, he maintains, are not cultural or even sociological, but something more fundamental: technological change. Since the 1960s, and particularly since the turn of the present century, norms of sex and marriage have been upended by the confluence of “three distinctive technological achievements: 1) the wide uptake of the [birth-control] Pill as well as a mentality stemming from it that sex is “naturally” infertile, 2) mass-produced high-quality pornography, and 3) the advent and evolution of online dating/meeting services” (11). The Pill has eliminated the perceived risk of pregnancy, thereby greatly lowering risk which had formerly inhibited casual sex relations, particularly for women; Tinder and similar online meeting sites have increased the supply of willing short-term partners, particularly for men; and ubiquitous pornography allied with masturbation (“the cheapest sex” [107]) has made sexual experience available for men (and for women, but mostly for men) without even troubling to find an actual partner.

The result of these technologies is that women’s gatekeeping power is largely undermined in the sexual exchange. If men give love to receive sex, and women give sex to receive love, then in today’s mating market, young women must give much more sex in exchange for much less love.

The young women who do so, in the vast majority, are not reluctantly lowering their moral standards (though they may have other reasons for reluctance), but conforming to a new standard, a shift of norms, as abundant non-fertile sexual experience has become for them an assumed social fact. “[Cheap sex],” Regnerus observes, “is a presumption, widely perceived as natural and commonsensical, and hence connected by persons to expectations about their own and others’ future sexual experiences (as similarly low-cost). It has become normative, taken for granted” (30). In the popular mentality and cognition of today’s young Americans, sex is for fun, not for procreation.

Many of the developments Regnerus documents were predicted 25 years ago, in the influential analysis of modern sexuality presented in Anthony Giddens’ 1992 volume *The Transformation of Intimacy*.^[1] Giddens, a pre-eminent Marxist sociologist who is the longtime Director of the London School of Economics, proposed that the emergence of “plastic sexuality,” i.e., sexuality freed from the needs of reproduction, reflected a fundamental transformation in the constitution of sexual relationships. Sexuality, love and eroticism were increasingly being shaped by aspirations for personal fulfillment, sexual attraction (and repulsion), and psychic needs, and decreasingly by collective control imposed by the state, tradition or moral norms. The result was a restructuring of sexual intimacy, not around marriage and family or any social or moral norms, but around what Giddens called (ironically, to Catholic ears) the “pure relationship,” which is “a social relationship which is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it.”^[2]

Although marriage, through the rise of the romantic love complex, had played a major role in the rise of the pure relationship, eventually the connection between love and sex via the pure relationship would undermine marriage.^[3] Women tended to lead, while men lagged, in the present and future development of such relationships; they were therefore the most advanced, in many ways, among lesbian couples. Regnerus examines Giddens’ predictions throughout the book, partly as a kind of guide, and partly as a foil to his own analysis. He finds that most of Giddens’ predictions and insights hold up well, although he is less positive about them than Giddens may have been, as evidenced by the

fact that what Giddens called a “pure relationship” roughly corresponds to what Regnerus calls “cheap sex.”

For women, the Pill has reduced the ability to form a good marriage by splitting the mating market into parts: at one extreme, persons looking for casual sex with a minimum of strings, and at the other extreme, persons looking to marry. Consistent with the sex differences already noted, Regnerus notes, “there are more men in the sex corner of the pool than women, and more women in the marriage corner of the pool than men” (35). Due to the imbalance of males in the sex corner, although sex is cheap for men, it is still much easier, as we all know, for a woman to have casual sex, if she wants to, than it is for a man. As Regnerus points out, men looking for a no-strings sex partner often come up short, but “[w]hen women signal interest in [casual] sex, men pounce” (35). But at the other end of the pool, where there are far more women than men who are interested in the “expensive” sex of marriage, men dominate the exchange.

Since women are less likely to marry a man with lower education and earnings than themselves, the pool of men available to marry has grown even smaller as women become, on average, more highly educated and employable than men (another, less direct, effect of the Pill). The result is that women who want to marry struggle to find a marriage partner and some will fail to do so. Others may settle for a less than optimum partner, which contributes to increased rates of divorce—the large majority of which are initiated by women—and relationship churning. In this way, cheap sex directly lowers the quality and duration of marriage.

But the effect of cheap sex on women is dwarfed by its effect on men. A central concern of the book, pursued in a chapter with the same name as the subtitle, is that “cheap sex has transformed modern men ..., undermined and stalled the marital impulse, and stimulated critics of monogamy” (191). This is more than just a matter of the proverbial milk and cow effect. Shorn of the need to offer significant resources in exchange for sex, cheap sex has not just lowered men’s interest in marriage, but more importantly their *marriageability*: that is, their economic and social capacity to marry, or to attract a marriage partner. The rise of underemployed and underachieving young men in the past 15 years has been a widely observed trend, puzzled over by a spate of books across the ideological spectrum, from Hanna Rosin’s left-leaning *The End of Men* to Lionel Tiger’s right-leaning *The Decline of Males*. One largely overlooked reason for the lassitude of young men today, Regnerus argues, may be cheap sex. “Cheap sex, ...”, he writes, “does little to stimulate the [men] of our modern economy toward those historic institutions—education, a settled job, and marriage—that created opportunity for them and their families” (154). Faced with no need to attain a higher education or well-paying job in order to attract a woman, many young men lose the motivation to attain a higher education or well-paying job at all.

It gets worse. Because marriageability and productivity are closely allied, the decline of marriageability resulting from cheap sex has also reduced young men’s general social productivity. On this point Regnerus cites the sexual economists Baumeister and Vohs: “giving young men easy access to abundant sexual satisfaction deprives society of one of its ways to motivate them to contribute valuable achievements to the culture” (152). The Freudian idea here is that sexual deprivation energizes the development of civilization. Catholic thought arrives at the same place by a different route, affirming that as marriage (the only proper realm for sex) contributes to the common good, when men fail to contribute to marriage they also deprive the common good of valuable accomplishments. In this way, however understood, cheap sex beleaguers not only men and marriage, but society more broadly.

The overall effect of this book is like watching a train wreck in slow motion. Each well-documented

fact, each clinical insight, contributes to the growing realization that marriage is in more trouble than is currently imagined, and in a way that is not likely to recover very soon, if at all. By the end of the book it has become clear that the analogy of market exchange, which has helped to explain male-female interactions throughout the book, has now become the defining reality of sex relations for young Americans. As Regnerus explains, it is not just that “marriage ... is in the throes of deinstitutionalization” (195) but that cheap sex is in the throes of mass-market commodification, becoming “a synthetic compound of our Western penchant for bigger, cheaper, better, diverse and more—an ironic postmodern intersection where Wal-Mart meets [explicit sex advice columnist] Dan Savage” (197).

Shed of transcendence and uniqueness, disconnected from larger life goals or relationships, cheap sex has become a rationalized commodity, discounted even further for being mass produced in bulk. Cheap sex has become junk sex. Like McDonald’s burgers—the prototypical rationalized commodity—it has become a kind of ersatz product which can be obtained ever more quickly, cheaply and reliably, and which is tasty and attractive, but not very nourishing as a steady diet. Regnerus, citing Wendell Berry, terms it “industrial sex”: “Industrial sex, characteristically, establishes its freeness and goodness by an industrial accounting, dutifully toting up numbers of ‘sexual partners,’ orgasm, and so on, with the inevitable industrial implication that the body is somehow a limit on the idea of sex ...” (198). Regnerus sums up the accounts from his interviewees of “orgasmic experiences, partner numbers, time in pursuit, exotic accounts, one-night stands, regrets, pain, addictions, infections, abortions, wasted time, and spent relationships” as metrics “of an industrial sex whose promises consistently exceeded its deliveries” (198).

When sex becomes this cheap—affordable to all like a Big Mac—, marriage by comparison becomes prohibitively expensive, like a five-star dinner affordable only to the select few. The problem industrially cheap sex presents for marriage is not only that fewer young men will marry—that process is well advanced—but that fewer older ones will marry as well. The metrics of good industrial sex listed above by Berry and Regnerus omit, not by accident, the most important measure of good sex relations in Catholic and traditional thought: children. Older men, more than younger men, have typically eventually settled down to become more open to marriage for the sake of children and family. If, in their minds, sex is really for fun and not for children, and women can have and raise children without their lifelong commitment, there is little need for them ever to step up to parental responsibility, nor for women to demand of them that they do so. In the era of cheap sex, men (and women) who in the recent past may have married for these very reasons (and then perhaps divorced) are increasingly likely never to marry at all.



To make this point Regnerus presents the above figure (146), which shows, from Census data, the proportion of young Americans who have not married by the age of 35. Strikingly, just since the turn of the century, that proportion has risen by almost 20 percentage points, from a third of young Americans in 2000 to well over half of them today. At the turn of the century, by the age of 35, over half of young Americans had married; today, over half remain unmarried. For decades, even though younger Americans have increasingly deferred marriage, by the time of their mid-thirties the vast majority of Americans had eventually married. Figure 5.1 suggests that that cultural pattern no longer holds. Regnerus attributes this change to the fact that the new norms of cheap sex are still diffusing gradually throughout the population:

[M]any people are marrying because they are still following the cultural practices of their parents

and grandparents, even though historically compelling reasons—like babies, financial and physical security, or the desire for a “socially legitimate” sexual relationship—no longer hold. ... The next generation, today no older than teenagers, will wonder why they should marry at all. (147)

The picture Regnerus paints is a grim one, not because marriage will fully disappear—marriage rates will remain high among the wealthy and the very religious—but because the rise of cheap sex and its consequences are the result of technological change, which is generally irreversible, rather than social or cultural trends which may recover. After several generations of predicating sexuality on effective infertility due to the Pill, as Regnerus points out, “a return to the patterns witnessed prior to the ‘sexual revolution’... is very unlikely” (8).

And yet. In a world of commodity sex, industrial sex is not just emotionally unsatisfying, as Regnerus observes, but may contain the seeds of its own destruction. Literally. The logic of the sexual economics which Regnerus deploys so well can be maintained only by treating children as an externality to coupled pleasure, the cost of which, like polluting smokestacks in an industrial market, is largely ignored. But children are not merely external to sex: they add distinct value to the exchange. Children, of course, do not negotiate or offer any exchange goods to the sexual partners who may produce them. But more than marriage, it is the prospect and eventual presence of children that, like religion, lifts the perspective of sex partners from the present experience to the future, not only a future state of society in which their children can thrive, but also the future beyond the horizon of their own lives. Children personalize sex and endow it with meaning, an exchange to be sure, though one that may be better understood in terms of *gift*, rather than a sexual economics based on transaction.

The value of children is pertinent, because what Regnerus does not address is that the Pill’s promise of reliably preventing conception, which he, like his study subjects, accepts largely at face value, is false. As a matter of simple fact, hormonal birth control fails to prevent pregnancy in actual use at a rate—between 10 and 20 percent of the time in most studies—unacceptably high to be reasonably considered a foolproof method of preventing pregnancy. The effect of the Pill, then, is not technological, as Regnerus holds, but symbolic, because as a technology, it clearly fails to deliver. Like mythology, young Americans believe in the efficacy of contraception because it enables and explains the hypersexualized world in which they have been socialized. More than a few discover, after much pain and regret, that that world is a lie.

The mythology of the Pill’s infallible bar to conception is maintained only by the prospect of the efficient elimination, through widespread legal abortion, of the children who slip past its provision. This is not a new social dynamic. Children inconveniently resulting from illicit sexual liaisons have long been cheapened, considered “illegitimate” and denied the recognition and care of their natural parents. Today’s bastards are the “unwanted” children, who comprise about half of conceptions in America, who are denied both parental and social recognition before birth and are routinely subject to death. One could say—and many do—that the technology of abortion completes the technology of effective contraception, but this ignores the inconvenient externality even more blindly. Cheap sex is enabled only by cheaper children; and the low value placed on unwanted, unborn infant life is not a product of technology but of a culture, possibly reparable, that has forgotten what it means to be human.

[1] Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Stanford University Press, 1992).

[2] *Ibid.*, 58.

[3] *Ibid.*, 154.

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