

***Franciscan University Presents***  
***“Catholics in a Post-Liberation World”***  
***With guest, Mary Eberstadt***

Time magazine and Francis Fukuyama, Raquel Welch and a series of popes, some of the world's leading scientists, and many other unlikely allies all agree: No single event since Eve took the apple has been as consequential for relations between the sexes as the arrival of modern contraception. Moreover, there is good reason for their agreement. By rendering fertile women infertile with nearly 100 percent accuracy, the Pill and related devices have transformed the lives and families of the great majority of people born after their invention. Modern contraception is not only a fact of our time; it may even be the central fact, in the sense that it is hard to think of any other whose demographic, social, behavioral, and personal fallout has been as profound.

For many decades now, prescient people have understood as much. Though these days contraception as such attracts little interest in secular academia, being more or less simply taken for granted as a fact of life, such neglect was not always the rule. As early as 1929, for example, fabled social observer Walter Lippmann was calling attention to the radical implications of reliable birth control—even explicitly agreeing with the Catholic Church in his classic book *A Preface to Morals* that modern contraception "is the most revolutionary practice in the history of sexual morals." In 2010—the year that the Pill celebrated its fiftieth anniversary—that early verdict appeared wholly vindicated, as an outpouring of reflections on that anniversary affirmed the ongoing and colossal changes that optional and intentional sterility in women has wrought.

The technological revolution of modern contraception has in turn fueled the equally widely noted "sexual revolution"—defined here and elsewhere as the ongoing de-stigmatization of all varieties of non-marital sexual activity, accompanied by a sharp rise in such sexual activity, in diverse societies around the world (most notably, in the most advanced). And though professional nitpickers can and do quibble about the exact nature of the connection between the two epochal events, the overall cause and effect is plain enough. It may be possible to imagine the Pill being invented without the sexual revolution that followed, but imagining the sexual revolution without the Pill and other modern contraceptives simply cannot be done.

Like the technological revolution that occasioned it, this sexual revolution, too, has long attracted the attention of social observers. In 1956, for example, the towering twentieth-century sociologist Pitirim Sorokin—founder of Harvard's Department of Sociology—published a short book called *The American Sex Revolution*. Written for a general audience and much discussed in its time, it forcefully linked what Sorokin variously called "sex freedom" and "sex anarchy" to a long list of what he argued were critical social ills, including rising rates of divorce and illegitimacy, abandoned and neglected children, a coarsening of the arts high and low, and much more, including the apparent increase in mental disorders. "Sex obsession", argued Sorokin, now "bombards us continuously, from cradle to grave, from all points of our living space, at almost every step of our activity, feeling, and thinking."

Around the same time, another celebrated secular Harvard sociologist, Carle Zimmerman, published his masterwork of history and sociology called *Family and Civilization*.<sup>6</sup> Though less

immediately concerned with the sexual revolution as such than Sorokin had been in his more popularized text, Zimmerman's work likewise casts obvious, albeit tacit, criticism upon the social changes unleashed by modern contraception. Family and Civilization repeatedly linked declines in civilization to the features of what the author called "the atomistic family" type, including rising divorce rates, increasing promiscuity, juvenile delinquency, and neglect of children and other family responsibilities. These were features of modern society that Zimmerman, like Sorokin (and many other people in those days), judged to be self-evidently malignant. "The United States", Zimmerman concluded, "will reach the final phases of a great family crisis between now [1947] and the last of this century"—one "identical in nature to the two previous crises in Greece and Rome".

Of course one need not be a Harvard sociologist to grasp that the technological severing of nature from nurture has changed some of the most elemental connections among human beings. Yet plainly, the atmosphere surrounding discussion of these changes has changed radically between our own time and that of the mid-twentieth century. What Zimmerman felt free to say in the 1940s and Sorokin in the 1950s about the downside of changing mores are by and large not things that most people feel free to say about our changed moral code today—not unless they strive to be written off as religious zealots or as the blogosphere's laughingstock du jour. Again, as the celebrations of the Pill's fiftieth anniversary went to show, the sexual revolution is now not only a *fait accompli* for the vast majority of modern men and women; it is also one that many people openly embrace. Fifty years after the Pill's approval and counting, it is beyond question that liberationists and not traditionalists have written the revolution's public legacy across the West.

In this standard celebratory rendition, the sexual revolution has been a nearly unmitigated boon for all humanity. Along with its permanent backup plan, abortion, it has liberated women from the slavery of their fertility, thus freeing them for personal and professional opportunities they could not have enjoyed before. It has liberated men, too, from their former chains, many would argue—chiefly from the bondage of having to take responsibility for the women they had sex with and/or for the children that resulted. It has also enriched children, some would posit, by making it easier to limit family size, and hence share the pie of family wealth and attention among fewer claimants. "In my mind," as one modern historian summarized the standard script, "there can be no doubt that, on the whole, the sexual revolution of the '60s and '70s improved the quality of life for most Americans."

It is the contention of this book that such benign renditions of the story of the sexual revolution are wrong. That is to say, they are critically incomplete when measured against the weight of the evidence now before us.

Thus the chapters ahead tell a different version of what the sexual revolution has wrought than the Panglossian version that is standard today. They examine from different angles a wide body of empirical and literary and other evidence about what really happened once nurture was divorced from nature as never before in history. My aim in these pages is to understand in a new way certain of the human fallout of our post-Pill world—to shed light on what Sorokin once provocatively and probably correctly called a revolution "more far-reaching than those of almost all other revolutions, except perhaps the total revolutions such as the Russian".

The evidence presented in the following chapters, I believe, roundly confirms two propositions that are—or ought to be—deeply troubling to serious people. First, and contrary to conventional depiction, the sexual revolution has proved a disaster for many men and women; and second, its weight has fallen heaviest on the smallest and weakest shoulders in society—even as it has given extra strength to those already strongest and most predatory. For decades now, and apparently out of view of many people telling the tale, a compelling record has been building of the real costs that have been mounting since procreation became so effectively amputated from sexual behavior for so many people. It is a record rich now in detail from a variety of sources ranging from the social sciences—especially psychology and sociology—to more microscopic accounts of the revolution's real and permanent consequences in many lives. Like a mosaic, it is also a record that reveals and sheds light variously depending on which angle we choose to view.

Revealing that mosaic is the substance of this book. Chapter 1 concerns the contemporary secular intellectual backdrop inherited from the tumultuous 1960s. For decades now, it argues, the negative empirical fallout from the sexual revolution, while plain to see, has persistently been met with deep and entrenched denial among academic and other cultural authorities. So thoroughgoing is this denial, the chapter details, that it bears comparison to the deep denial among Western intellectuals that was characteristic of the last great debate that ran for decades—namely, the Cold War. Hence, the subtitle is "The Will to Disbelieve", which takes its name from a famous essay on intellectual denial from that other debate past. This opening of the book examines the evidence of such intellectual denial and the probable reasons for it.

The book then moves from theory to the ground, as it were, to examine the effects of the sexual revolution on actual human beings: women, children, and men. "What Is the Sexual Revolution Doing to Women? What Does Woman Want?", a chapter examining trends in current fashionable writing about women and marriage, exhumes the pervasive themes of anger and loss that underlie much of today's writing on romance. This chapter includes discussion of the latest sociological literature arguing for the "paradox of declining female happiness"—that is, the unexplained gap between the unprecedented freedoms enjoyed by today's women and their simultaneous increasing unhappiness as measured by social science. The fact that women disproportionately bear the burdens of the sexual revolution, I argue here, might explain that hitherto unexplained paradox.

The following chapter, "What Is the Sexual Revolution Doing to Men? Peter Pan and the Weight of Smut", examines more paradoxical fallout from the revolution. Even as widely available contraception and abortion have liberated men from husbandhood and fatherhood, it has also encouraged in many a new and problematic phase of prolonged adolescence—what sociologist Kay S. Hymowitz has perspicaciously identified as "pre-adulthood". Then there is the other paradoxical consequence of sexual liberation: widespread pornography on a scale and with a verisimilitude never seen before. This chapter cites interesting and recent work by psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists, and other experts on a range of issues relating to Internet pornography: the sharp rise in pornographic addiction, the evidence of serious psychological problems of the addicted, the chilling effect of increasing pornography in the public square, and other measures of social harm.

Chapter 4, "What Is the Sexual Revolution Doing to Children? The 'Pedophilia Chic', Then and Now" covers one uniquely disturbing legacy of sexual liberation, which is the assault unleashed from the 1960s onward on the taboo against sexual seduction or exploitation of the young. This chapter argues that ironically, the Catholic priest-boy sex scandals that erupted in 2002—which evoked widespread revulsion across the West at these repeated violations of the taboo against sex with the young—have effectively served to interrupt this profoundly destructive former trend. Interestingly, this makes the taboo against sex with youngsters the only one of those considered in this book in which some "rollback" of the sexual revolution has been demonstrated.

Chapter 5, "What Is the Sexual Revolution Doing to Young Adults? What to Do about Toxic U?" examines in detail what may be ground zero of the sexual revolution today: the secular American campus. Using sources ranging from social science to popular culture, it sifts the ingredients of the toxic collegiate social brew made possible by the sexual revolution. The feral rates of date rapes, hookups, and binge drinking now documented on many campuses, this chapter argues, are direct descendants of the sexual revolution—one whose central promise is that women can and should be sexually available in the name of liberation, which translated into the reality of the modern campus has empowered and largely exonerated predatory men as never before.

Chapters 6 and 7 move back from the ground to a more abstract plane to examine other society-wide changes wrought by the revolution—in particular, its effect on social mores. They focus on what Friedrich Nietzsche called "the trans-valuation of values", meaning the ways in which the existing moral code would become transformed in a social order no longer centered on Judeo-Christianity. Such a transvaluation, I argue, is being wrought by the revolution in ways we are only beginning to understand. Chapter 6, subtitled "Is Food the New Sex?" argues that the morality once attached to sexual behavior has been transferred onto an unlikely yet fascinating substitute—matters of food. Chapter 7, subtitled "Is Pornography the New Tobacco?" similarly traces the stunning parallels between yesteryear's laissez-faire attitudes about one widely accepted substance—tobacco—and today's laissez-faire attitudes about the substance of pornography.

The book's closing chapter examines what may be the ultimate of the many paradoxes ushered in by the collision between the sexual revolution and human nature itself. "The Vindication of Humanae Vitae" examines the remarkable predictions made in that watershed document just a few years after the Pill itself appeared and examines a large historical irony: that one of the most reviled documents of modern times, the Catholic Church's reiteration of traditional Christian moral teaching, would also turn out to be the most prophetic in its understanding of the nature of the changes that the revolution would ring in. This chapter explores the extraordinary irony of our own particular moment in time, half a century after the sexual revolution—one in which every prediction made by Paul VI has been vindicated, even as the traditional Christian teaching against artificial contraception has come to be reviled by its adversaries and abandoned by Christians themselves as never before.

One final note: These chapters are indeed, as the title suggests, reflections—not manifestos or screeds or roadmaps to activism. It is my hope that readers will bring to them the same spirit with which the pages ahead were written: that of seeking sincerely and without cant to understand something of the manifold and unprecedented fallout of what may yet turn out to be the most consequential social revolution of all.

**From Adam and Eve after the Pill by Mary Eberstadt, © 2012 Ignatius Press**

**This online version of the Introduction eliminates the footnotes found in the print and e-book editions.**

**Titles Mentioned on *Franciscan University Presents*  
“Catholics in a Post-Liberation World ”  
with guest, Mary Eberstadt**

\* *The Loser Letters: A Comic Tale of Life, Death, and Atheism* by Mary Eberstadt. Ignatius Press.

\* *Adam and Eve After the Pill: Paradoxes of the Sexual Revolution* by Mary Eberstadt. Ignatius Press.

\* *Humanae Vitae* by Pope Paul VI. Ignatius Press

*Sex and Culture* by J.D. Unwin. Oxford University Press. Available on [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).

*The American Sex Revolution* by Pitirim A. Sorokin. Porter Sargent Publishing. Available on [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)

*Family and Civilization* by Carle Zimmerman. Intercollegiate Studies Institute. Available on [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)

\* Available through the Franciscan University Bookstore, 1235 University Blvd., Steubenville, OH 43952, 1-888-333-0381, [www.franciscan.edu/bookstore](http://www.franciscan.edu/bookstore).

For the free handout mentioned during the show, visit [www.FaithandReason.com](http://www.FaithandReason.com) or contact us at [presents@franciscan.edu](mailto:presents@franciscan.edu) or 1-888-333-0381.

View previously aired episodes of *Franciscan University Presents* at [www.FaithandReason.com](http://www.FaithandReason.com).

*Academically Excellent, Passionately Catholic*  
**FRANCISCAN UNIVERSITY OF STEUBENVILLE**  
Steubenville, Ohio, USA  
1-800-783-6220/[www.Franciscan.edu](http://www.Franciscan.edu)