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Sentimental Repression

by Nathan Schneider

It has been a welcome relief from the busy romantic adventures of a single fellow in his mid-twenties in New York City, with my cellular phone by happenstance out of commission, to indulge in a reverie of reflection. Its occasion—in addition to the missing phone—was the discovery of Mark Greif’s challenging new essay at *n+1* “On Repressive Sentimentalism.” And, with it, the arrival in my apartment, by way of a roommate and a generous book giveaway, of Leo Tolstoy’s *The Kreutzer Sonata*. Their powers combined, I have found myself with a chance to spend the better part of two days digesting two opposite utopianisms concerning the future and possibilities of civilized sexuality.

Greif writes in the moment of a liberal president who has embraced the right’s narrative about abortion (i.e., that it is bad) and a LGBTQ movement that has succumbed to straight culture’s late-capitalist worship of marriage. Abortion is “tragic,” then, and marriage (even the sequence of “serial marriage” that we more likely practice today) is the imprimatur of sexual legitimacy and, worse, the all-in-one fixer of our unbearable anomie. Such compromise, Greif suggests, represents a betrayal of the promise that safe abortion and gay-rights stand to offer.

He prefers to phrase abortion as “freedom” rather than “choice”—the former being a rather more effulgent sensation that is self-justifying and infinitely entitling, as we learned from the last president’s use of the word in foreign affairs. Abortion is good, and we should have lots of it. He imagines public service announcements with children saying, “Thank God my Mom had me when she could afford to care for me.” It is a welcome reminder of how God has so abhorrently and so often been proclaimed an enemy of sensible family planning.

Gay marriage, in turn, “is a preparation for institutions beyond marriage.” Gay sexuality (excepting what he hideously terms “the brief shifting of gravity during the AIDS plague”) represents the future of sexuality writ-large, one not defined by the consequences of childbirth or the institutions of marriage but laid finally open to the vistas of positive probation.

You have to defend sex because we still have no better model than the actual, concrete sexual relation for a deep intuitive process opposed to domination. We have no better model for a bodily process that, fundamentally, is free and universal. It does not produce (there is no experiential remainder but pleasure) nor consume. It is cooperative (within the relation of the lovers) and, in that relation, seems to forbid competition. It makes you love people, and accept the look and difference of their bodies.

Doesn’t such economic logic just turn you on? Most of us have learned some way or another that sex has rather more to do with money than we might prefer to admit. Yet Greif, in his celebratory sexual economy, harbors hope that it actually could be otherwise.

“Sex without consequences” becomes the metaphor for cooperative exchange without gain or loss. For basing life on the things that are free. For the anticapitalist experience par excellence.

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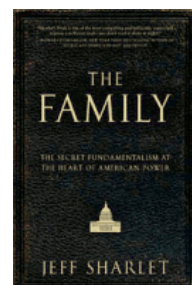
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The Kreutzer Sonata harbors a quite opposite sexual anthropology. Tolstoy, fresh from his discovery of “original” Christianity, deems sexual appetites and their consummation to be fundamentally base. The story tells of a man driven by lustful jealousy to murdering his wife. Tolstoy meant it as a condemnation of his aristocratic contemporaries, whose doctors prescribed intercourse and whose marriages seemed chronically lost to adultery.

In his reading of Jesus Christ (which meant overlooking a few key biblical texts) Tolstoy found a different kind of ethic, one that sought after a condition of ideally permanent abstinence, seeking “to replace sexual love by the pure relationship of brother and sister.” He cast himself as defender of women who, naturally pure and abhorring sex (or, as Doris Lessing suspects, “Tolstoy was no good in bed”), become lifelong victims to the endless sexual appetites licensed onto their husbands. Though the father of thirteen children himself, the writer preached the mortification of sexual relations in favor of cleaner, better, higher expressions of love for one’s neighbors.

Though more than a century apart, the two offer themselves as the opposing poles to which the sexual side of spiritual utopianisms have eternally rushed. In one, we become great by declaring conquest over our animal urges, sublimating those powers into Promethean accomplishments of progress and benevolence. History—as Tolstoy assumed—drives toward the perfection of chastity, first through the civilized strictures of marriage and then into true celibacy. If we’re to be on the right side of history, we’d best gird our loins for the journey. In the other corner, Greif preaches the gospel of liberation (“New forms, new forms,” as Tolstoy’s friend Chekhov would have a character exclaim), in which finally, now, we are free to touch each other at will and, in the process, even the economic crisis will duly dissolve in the gooey acid of free love.

Marriage, that irrepressible bogeyman which rears its head somehow in human societies across the world over and time immemorial, wins out in neither scenario. Still they venture quixotically in pursuit of it: the more omnipresent an enemy, the higher the ecstasy of its eradication. We unfortunately do live in a time in which marriage is celebrated with such idolatrous fervor that the truth can only be served by getting out our crowbars to smash it (I once found myself in an evangelical service in which all the married people were called to the front, blessed, and then asked to turn to the rest of us and pray that the rest of us might not tarry long before also entering their condition). Yet lowercase marriage is, at least, an arrangement of negotiation, of consolation, of sentimentality, of rest, of compromise, and of choice, things which neither of these mighty authors want to permit us.

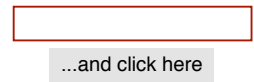
I say this as so much an enemy of capitalized Marriage as the next guy: let folks marry, for goodness sake. Or let them live alone, or as brother and sister, or as tireless bachelors, as they must. Let them fuck if also, indeed, they must. And, if they must, let them repress. Let us repress. We can’t have everything, and we hardly have what we need. Clinging to what precious little we find, and being kind to it, may require us to place some limits on ourselves, whether they be on our Tolstoyan ideals or our Greifian liberation. If all other things be in service to our most abstract aesthetics, let our blessed relationships, at least, be as they must be, as they can be, whatever it takes.

As I write, my new phone has just arrived in the mail. Social life returned to me—no less than by the salvific promise of my first iPhone—I will put aside these questions again and, in the sea of anomie, take what buoyant driftwood I can get.

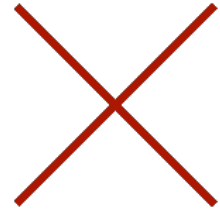
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October 17, 2009

Nathan Schneider is senior editor of *Killing the Buddha* and writes about religion, reason, and violence for a variety of publications. He is also a founding editor of the blog [Waging Nonviolence](#). Visit his website at [The Row Boat](#).



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7 Responses to “Sentimental Repression”

Jeff Sharlet

[October 17th, 2009 at 1:33 pm](#) [edit](#)

“Let us repress.” Brilliant. Seriously. That’s a gentler liberation, one that doesn’t demand of us an ascetic hedonism — crazy joy and nothing but — but rather recognizes our failures to be as free as we might want to be as part of who we are.

leigh

[October 17th, 2009 at 1:53 pm](#) [edit](#)

I will put aside these questions again and, in the sea of anomie, take what buoyant driftwood I can get.

Beautiful line!

Todd

[October 17th, 2009 at 2:18 pm](#) [edit](#)

First off, I wanted to say that this was very well written.

Every Utopian vision has to do something with sex, right? If you’ve ever seen the movie “Enemy at the Gate,” you might remember a line toward the end of the movie that goes something like, “There’s no perfect world, not even a Soviet one.” It’s said by another kind of utopian, a propaganda writer for the Communist party who befriends a Soviet sniper and turns him into a hero overnight. Their friendship comes apart when the writer falls in love with a woman and the woman falls in love with the hero the writer has created. This tears them apart, and the writer eventually sees it as the reason why all utopias are doomed to fail. Sexual relationships don’t seem malleable enough, in my opinion, to change them into something vastly different from something like “serial monogamy”. They are too much a part of the evolutionary history of our species. At the same time, serial monogamy seems at odds with at least some aspect of every utopian ideal. Thoughts?

Steve Schaben

[October 17th, 2009 at 4:41 pm](#) [edit](#)

I really enjoyed this piece. I agree with your conclusions—people should be allowed to do whatever they want with their bodies, but freedom and promiscuity don’t necessarily go hand in hand, etc...

Good article as usual. Beautifully written. Can’t stand Tolstoy though, and I didn’t even know he was a hypocritical puritan. That might be unfair though. Maybe he was just one of those people that realize way to late that they hate kids. Having ten children and not being able to stand any of the little buggers would put a serious dent in my libido too.

Hugh Scott

[October 17th, 2009 at 7:32 pm](#) [edit](#)

Sex between the devil and the deep blue sea, eh? From an unreconstructed 70s gay liberationist perspective, hetero marriage still looks to me as though it’s about mate guarding and procreation. I’m reminded of Sartre’s “to beget children, nothing better. To have them, what iniquity!”. Marriage is fundamentally a control structure...controlling one’s mate and licensing one (as a father) to control one’s children under compulsion of providing for them. And making marriage the only legitimate context for sexual play serves the interest

of society (of course) but also of those whose business is manipulation and control. And from the perspective of a gay man who, forty years ago actually bought into the church's council to abjure sexual expression (gay sex is not an option for the faithful), I can tell you, celibacy is at best, an aspiration. (You might argue that, so is honesty!) And from the perspective of someone who has spent the last twelve years putting in significant level of care for his hospitalised HIV dementia affected partner, there's more to relationship than any control freak wearing any kind of funny hat can speak to.

Meera

[October 19th, 2009 at 10:42 am](#) [edit](#)

Wonderfully written, Nathan!

If only I had Laura Kipnis's "Against Love: A Polemic" here in front of me to quote from, but she too reminds that there is nothing like love (specifically new love, when the heady rush of sex intoxicates) that makes anarchists of us all. Our productivity plummets, we skip out of work, we cheat on our spouses, we neglect the kids. If encouraged, it could initiate the collapse of the industrial age! Taking her argument right to the edge, she wonders why relationships should be "work" at all, as all of us have heard as we struggle to ride out the rocky moments of coupledness. Is it just to prepare us for those other "institutions beyond marriage"? Inevitably, we will repress, and be repressed, but the explorations of other possibilities could be infinitely fun.

Hugh Scott

[October 20th, 2009 at 8:21 am](#) [edit](#)

An afterthought which goes to supporting the premise that, while marriage does have social and procreative utility, marriage is also about licensing sexual expression, thus licensing licensors (who therefore have a vested interest in preserving this institution. To my afterthought (which is really an after, afterthought I suppose). Tolstoy's wife – who had borne him an excessively large number of children – is suspected of having used poison to prevent the great man from bequeathing the royalties from his published works to a christian sect. While his may or may not argue for the incompatibility of a happy sex life and religiosity, my sympathies are, in any case, all with Mrs Tolstoy!

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