

The New Criterion

Notes & Comments April 2011

Groves of depravity

Academic freedom debased.

Longtime readers of these Notes will recall our fondness for Daniel Patrick Moynihan's essay "Defining Deviancy Down," which appeared in *The American Scholar* back in 1993, before that magazine descended to its current state of politically correct irrelevance. In that essay, Senator Moynihan outlined some of the manifold ways in which our society has attempted to deny deviancy by redefining it as normal or even, in some instances, as glamorous. In case after case, he showed how behavior that would have been considered unacceptable just a few years ago is excused or championed as normal. The result has been a blunting of our sensibilities and an increasing impotence in the face of social breakdown. Inured to the outrageous, we can barely recognize deviance as such, much less take effective action against it.

Senator Moynihan was concerned primarily with such glaring urban pathologies as illegitimacy, drug abuse, unemployment, and violence. But his diagnosis is equally applicable to the realms of culture and morality. There, too, we have witnessed concerted efforts to deny deviancy by redefining it. As a result, basic standards of propriety, taste, and accomplishment have been eroded—where, indeed, they have not collapsed altogether. Much that would formerly have been rejected as repulsive trash is now not only countenanced but also celebrated. The contemporary art world offers a Caligari cabinet of examples; so do our colleges and universities.

For nearly thirty years, *The New Criterion* has regularly reported on these cultural and educational deformations. Back in 1999, for example, we alerted our readers to an "interdisciplinary" writing class taught in the College of Letters at Wesleyan University called "Pornography: Writing of Prostitutes." It was, we noted, one of the new-breed sex classes that have recently infested American universities, especially in the politicized intellectual slums populated by women's studies, gender studies, gay and lesbian studies, and kindred forms of academic grievance-mongering. The official description of this educational travesty is still worth savoring:

The pornography we study is an art of transgression which impels human sexuality toward, against, and beyond the limits which have traditionally defined civil discourses and practices—defined, that is, by regimes of dominance and submission, inclusion or exclusion, in

the domains of organ and emotional pleasure. Our examination accordingly includes the implication of pornography in so-called perverse practices such as voyeurism, bestiality, sadism, and masochism and considers the inflections of the dominant white-heterosexual tradition by alternative sexualities and genders, as well as by race, class, age, mental, and physical competence. We also attempt to identify the factors, intrinsic and extrinsic, which align the pornographic impulse with revolutionary or conservative political practices. But our primary focus is on pornography as radical representations of sexuality whose themes are violation, degradation, and exposure.

Note the deflationary “so-called” before the word “perverse.” The “dominant white-heterosexual tradition” might regard (say) “voyeurism, bestiality, sadism, and masochism” as perverse, but not a professor at Wesleyan University! The reading list for this class included such monuments of cultural insight as works by the Marquis de Sade and *Hustler* magazine. When it came to student projects, the teacher boasted that “I don’t put any constraints on it. It’s supposed to be: ‘Just create your own work of pornography.’ ” One young woman, a freshman, shot photos that “included oral sex with her ex-boyfriend”, while another partially disrobed, “bound her wrists with rope and asked others to flog her with a cat o’ nine tails.” Ah, bright college years, with pleasures rife!

The smug, minatory insouciance of the professor presiding over this tawdry display was repellent. But somehow even worse was the smarmy, invertebrate response of Douglas Bennet, then President of Wesleyan, who contented himself with circulating a memo to the faculty questioning “the appropriateness of this course in the Wesleyan curriculum” and ordering a review of but otherwise supporting “one of Wesleyan’s most dedicated, serious, and effective” teachers.

You might think that what happened at Wesleyan was a freakish outlier, a lamentable but also exceptional occurrence. Freakish it was, but, far from being exceptional, the academic embrace of graphic and outré sex has become business as usual in American higher education today. We think, for example, of “Revolt Behavior: The Challenges of Women’s Sexual Freedom,” a conference that took place at the State University of New York at New Paltz in 1997 and featured the investigation of such important educational topics as “How to Get What You Want in Bed” (an “interactive group workshop”) and “Sex Toys for Women,” at which the owner of a New York City sex boutique displayed, and illustrated the uses of, various appliances—all of which were on sale later in the day.

Or think of Annie Sprinkle (*née* Ellen Steinberg), the former prostitute and porn star reborn as a “feminist porn activist,” who travels around the “women’s studies” circuit inviting the curious to employ a speculum and flashlight to inspect her cervix and (as one report put it) “educating students and faculty on how better to pleasure themselves.” Who says a liberal arts education is bereft of practical application?

The latest episode in the continuing saga of campus sex follies comes to us from Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. In February, John Michael Bailey, a popular psychology professor who has been at Northwestern for twenty-one years, organized a special after-class session as part of his class on human sexuality. Some 120 of the 600 students in the class attended.

In the words of a college newspaper, the session featured “a naked non-student woman being repeatedly sexually stimulated to the point of orgasm by . . . a motorized phallus”—i.e., a hand-held reciprocating saw with a custom-fitted dildo attached.

Professor Bailey’s classes included other educational highlights. “This year,” he said in a statement, “we have had a panel of gay men speaking about their sex lives, a transsexual performer, two convicted sex offenders, an expert in female sexual health and sexual pleasure, a plastic surgeon, a swinging couple, and the February 21 panel led by Ken MelvoinJBerg [sic], on ‘networking for kinky people.’ ” *A full-service emporium, this psychology class at Northwestern University. No wonder, as the university’s catalogue boasts, “This course counts toward the Weinberg College social and behavioral sciences distribution requirement, Area III.”*

It is not surprising—at least, we hope it is not surprising—that news of the “naked non-student woman’s” performance unleashed a cataract of criticism. Professor Bailey repeatedly noted that attendance at the event was strictly optional and that students were warned about the graphic nature of the performance. Are those extenuating observations? Not really. For what we are dealing with in Professor Bailey’s course on Human Sexuality is yet another symptom of an educational establishment that has been perverted out of all recognition. Professor Bailey proudly reports that “student feedback” for this “singular college experience” was “uniformly positive.” You don’t say? We suspect that a free trip to the local red-light district would also elicit “positive feedback” among many eighteen- to twenty-one-year-olds. The question is whether it has any place in a college curriculum. As the enrollment of 600 students in this course on Human Sexuality suggests, Professor Bailey is an enormously popular teacher. But what does that tell us? Pornography is a multi-billion-dollar business. It is popular. Does that make it salubrious? Does it, moreover, make it fit for inclusion in a liberal arts curriculum?

As we noted in this space when Annie Sprinkle brought her act to Hamilton College a few years ago, the response of the professoriate when faced with criticism of such pornographic exhibitions always begins by invoking the protection of academic freedom. But academic freedom has nothing to do with the case. As the sociologist Edward Shils observed, academic freedom is not a universal human right. On the contrary, it is a “qualified right,” a “privilege” extended to people fulfilling a certain role in exchange for the performance of certain duties. At bottom, Shils wrote, academic freedom is “the freedom to seek and transmit the truth.” It does not, he pointedly added, “extend to the conduct of political propaganda in teaching.” Nor, we might add, does it extend to the misuse of grotesquely altered hardware appliances on “naked non-student women” exhibitionists. As we noted when writing about Annie Sprinkle, academic freedom does not purchase a blanket immunity from moral censure; it is not a license to engage in moral subversion. There is no reason that parents, for example, need countenance the corruption of their sons and daughters because some college dean or women’s studies professor claims the prerogative of academic freedom.

In the end, however, any talk about “academic freedom” is out of place in discussing Professor Bailey’s circus of perversity. To invoke academic freedom is to dower it with a rhetorical

seriousness it doesn't deserve. What we're dealing with here is a fundamental failure of educational leadership. Morton Shapiro, the President of Northwestern, issued a spineless statement about the incident: he was "troubled, disappointed, and disturbed" about the "demonstration in psychology" (is that what it was?) in Professor Bailey's "popular [see: it is popular! That counts for something, right?] Human Sexuality course." The demonstration took place after hours, President Shapiro bleated, and it was optional. Still, he thinks it "represented extremely poor judgment on the part of our faculty member." You don't say? And what is President Shapiro proposing to do about this exhibition of "extremely poor judgment"? As of this writing, nada. Rien. Or, in plain English, nothing. Keep your heads down, comrades, this too will pass.

We've been hearing more and more about the "higher education bubble" recently. Usually, the bubble in question is the financial bubble, the hypertrophy of college tuition at a time of economic contraction. But there is a moral and intellectual bubble evident in academia as well. It is the bubble of decadence: that situation that ensues when an institution has abandoned or betrayed its defining principles and yet continues to mouth the rhetoric and enjoy the perquisites those principles bequeathed. Consider this statement by a college administrator about the Bailey motorized dildo parade: "Northwestern University faculty members engage in teaching and research on a wide variety of topics, some of them controversial and at the leading edge of their respective disciplines. The university supports the efforts of its faculty to further the advancement of knowledge."

"Controversial." "The leading edge of their disciplines." "The advancement of knowledge." What rubbish! What is on view here is the advancement of perversity and the exhibition of decadence. To an astonishing extent, the liberal arts in this country have lost their moral and intellectual compass. They employ a language that is reminiscent of the humanities but is put to anti-humanistic ends—ends which, as Joseph Epstein noted in a fine essay on this sorry episode in *The Weekly Standard*, are "exploitative, coarsening, demeaning, and squalid." *It used to be that colleges served in loco parentis to their charges. These days, they are more and more just loco.*

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 29 Number 8 , on page 1

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