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How Playboy Built A Culture of Libertarianism In Fiscal And Sexual Politics, 1968 to 1972

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Pleasure, Profit, and *Playboy* in the Nixon Administration

How *Playboy* Built A Culture of Libertarianism In Fiscal And Sexual Politics, 1968 to 1972

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Introduction

Where is the scripture of American identity written? Perhaps it lives inside advertisements, scrawled in sans-serif fonts and selling plastic goods. Perhaps it lives inside mainstream media, amongst news broadcasts and political discourse. Perhaps American identity is born out of social exchange, relations between individuals and groups all under the shadow of being in the United States. Perhaps it's best found at the intersection of all three: a media outlet dedicated to filling its pages with political discourse, endless advertising, and meditations on sexuality, masculinity, and self-identity. Perhaps American identity is inscribed in the hallowed pages of *Playboy* magazine.

Beginning with its first issue in 1953, *Playboy* published roughly 250 pages of advertisements, erotica, and articles featuring the work of some of the world's most prestigious writers every month. The magazine is sharp, witty, and expressly political, giving insight into both the quotidian and the extraordinary aspects of modern culture, making it an excellent point of entry into understanding the past. But *Playboy* didn't just report on culture, it made it. As the 1960s ended and the 1970s began, *Playboy* introduced a new concept to its readership: libertarianism. A centuries-old political philosophy was repacked and presented for an audience of 18-35 year old men with disposable income, one which promised the excitement of the New Left without any of the discomfort. In promoting a radical libertarian pathway, *Playboy* also redefined what "empowerment" and "freedom" meant to its readership. This not only affected the way its male audience saw themselves but also rerouted the path of feminist discourse, particularly in the context of the growing Sexual Revolution. The vision of female empowerment in *Playboy* from 1968 to 1972 was written with the same libertarian overtones as their electoral coverage, shifting the popular imagination farther and farther from a communalist philosophy towards an individualist one.

I. The Culture Industry and the Creation of Political Rhetoric

It's not hard to understand that culture reflects contemporary socio-political issues. That makes sense; people want to engage with media that aligns with the values they hold. But the relationship between culture and politics is not a one-way street; this is to say that the politics of cultural output are not simply shaped by popular attitudes, rather, cultural output can be created with the intent of framing discourse and introducing new ideologies. Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman's 1988 book *Manufacturing Consent* outlined this media tendency, which they term the "propaganda model", specifically in the context of news media. One of the most powerful ideas in *Manufacturing Consent*, certainly the most relevant to discussions of popular feminism, is the idea of "flak"—opposition to dominating media narratives that itself must make its way through the media industry. Chomsky asserts that flak does *not* undermine the authority of mass media, but rather reenforces it: the flak that is selected to permeate into mass media sets the boundary points of discourse, framing the edges of "free" political debate while also obfuscating any ideas that exist outside of these boundaries:

"Media policy itself may allow some measure of dissent and reporting that calls into question the accepted viewpoint. These considerations all work to assure some dissent and coverage of inconvenient facts. The beauty of the system, however, is that such dissent and inconvenient information are kept within bounds and at the margins, so that while their presence shows that the system is not monolithic, they are not large enough to interfere unduly with the domination of the official agenda."¹

In the 1997 follow-up film, *The Myth of the Liberal Media*, Chomsky provides the example about political discourses surrounding government-sponsored healthcare: conservative politicians say that Medicare and Medicaid should be reduced, if not abolished, liberal politicians say that they should protect these programs from further budget cuts. The width

¹ Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (London: Vintage Digital, 2010), 2.

of the discourse only goes this far: there is no discussion of universal or single-payer healthcare, there is almost no discussion of expanding the existing systems. As such, it is the illusion of total debate that limits the imagination of the public, the American optimism in free speech covering its scarcity.

Chomsky and Herman's work hold an esteemed place in the canon of communication studies for its articulate deconstruction of the news media. But the monolithic, monopolized production of information is not confined to opinion pieces and cable news; *pop culture* is also manufactured by mass media conglomerates. Popular media is the result of large-scale labour productions making final products laden with political messaging. Creating media—television, film, music, literature—is not only an artistic process but necessarily an economic one, requiring significant capital investment from production to promotion. Media conglomerates are built by capital, it is necessarily in the best interest of the culture industry to ensure that its products explicitly or implicitly reaffirm the structure of capital. But as Chomsky and Herman describe in *Manufacturing Consent*, the public doesn't like to believe they are being propagandized to; people want to move through a media landscape that is the result of artistic expression and the free market rewarding craft and innovation. The culture industry understands this, the culture industry understands the market power of art that proports to be subversive or radical. But much like news media, the culture industry must also be tactical with *how* it presents subversion, the language it uses, how it confines discourse. As such, while popular culture may appear to shift its politics due to an increasing demand for progressive change, it is in actuality a *progenitor* of the language and ideology of counterculture², creating what it deems an acceptable discourse.

² I won't be the first to point out the irony in the phrase "counterculture"—counter to what? Perhaps countering the sensibilities of older generations, sure. But much of what is considered "counterculture" is made by the same corporations that create "mainstream" culture.

II. **Libertarianism and Libertarian Feminism as Opposition to Revolutionary Feminism**

In traditional academic research, the feminism of the latter half of the 20th century was mainly divided into two ideological camps: radical feminism and liberal feminism. While these terms have historic importance, they have also become fraught with their contemporary associations³ and I suggest that they are better divided into “revolutionary feminism” and “reformist feminism” instead. Marxist feminism, Black feminism, and lesbian feminism are all forms of revolutionary feminism, their goals rooted in communalism and require a complete restructuring of political systems, necessitating a materialist analysis of inequality. It is no coincidence, then, that these movements have many overlapping goals and key figures. Reformist feminism takes the viewpoint that existing structures can be modified through existing legal and social channels to provide women’s liberation. Media representation is a central issue for reformist feminism, particularly media representation of women doing things once depicted as stereotypically male. Like revolutionary feminism, reformist feminism contains many sub-sects with differing opinions; unlike revolutionary feminism, most are not named. The immediate term that comes to my mind when thinking about reformist feminism is the phrase “choice feminism”, though it’s largely a critical term and not one of self-identification. I would like to offer the term “libertarian feminism” as the subsect of reformist feminism most oppositional to revolutionary feminism, an ideology

³ Mainly, “radical feminism” becoming shorthand for trans-exclusionary radical feminism

based in centring the rights of the individual as opposed to the revolutionary feminist tendency to work on behalf of women⁴ as a gendered group.⁵

Libertarian feminism arose with the development of libertarianism itself, a process concurrent with the growth of neoliberal and neoconservative ideology beginning in the mid-1960s. Barry Goldwater's 1960 book *The Conscious of the Conservative* would lay the ideological foundation for his 1964 presidential campaigning against incumbent Lyndon B. Johnson; in it, Goldwater asserts that the government reforms of the New Deal in the 1930s created a new political culture of federal spending on social services, and marked an ideological departure from the intended values of liberty instilled by the American Revolution.⁶ Goldwater writes that "conservatism is *not* an economic theory, though it has economic implications,"⁷ which "therefore looks upon the enhancement of a man's spiritual nature as the primary concern of political philosophy."⁸ Goldwater differs from the conservatives of his time, noting that limited government is not solely an exercise in pragmatism but also a social necessity. He stipulates,

"The Conservative has learned that the economic and spiritual aspects of man's nature are inextricably intertwined . He cannot be economically free, or even economically efficient, if he is enslaved politically; conversely, man's political freedom is illusory if he is dependent for his economic needs on the State. [...] The Conservative realizes that man's development, in both its spiritual and material aspects, is not something that can be directed by outside forces. Every man, for his

⁴ Despite my usage of the terms "women's rights" and "women's' liberation" for the sake of brevity and clarity, I also think it is important to affirm that many forms of feminism explicitly note that men also suffer at the hands of patriarchy and that many (if not most) forms of feminism include ideas of male liberation.

⁵ This is not to say that libertarian feminism cannot be revolutionary—indeed, the libertarian feminist utopia would be structurally different than the contemporary federalist United States government. However, libertarian theory often recalls the spirit of the American Revolution and the literature of the Enlightenment, a major point of opposition in the goals of revolutionary feminism.

⁶ Barry Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative* (Shepardsville, Kentucky: Victor Publishing Company, Inc., 1960), 2.

⁷ Goldwater, 10.

⁸ Goldwater, 11.

individual good and for the good of his society, is responsible for his own development. The choices that govern his life are choices that he must make: they cannot be made by any other human being, or by a collectivity of human beings.”⁹

The seeds of libertarianism were planted by the Enlightenment, largely through the work of John Locke. The Cato Institute—a libertarian think tank established by the Koch brothers—describes the works of Locke as “landmark texts in the modern history of individualism”, alongside Isaac Newton, Adam Smith, and Voltaire.¹⁰ Contempt for the New Deal and Keynesian economics led to a renewed opposition towards government overreach in the American public, best highlighted by the success of the works of Ayn Rand: *The Fountainhead*, in 1943, and *Atlas Shrugged* in 1957. Goldwater’s campaign marked a shift in popular American political thought, wherein economic conservatism was not defined by its negative traits (the things it is opposed to), but its positive traits: conservatism was not based in maintaining a status quo or reverting to a time gone by, but instead it was a radical assertion of personal liberty. Goldwater, alongside political commentator William F. Buckley Jr., promoted libertarianism as an alternative to both mainstream Democratic and Republican politics, the prudence of conservative economic policy met with the promise of infinite freedom. The growing libertarian movement would oppose the Vietnam War¹¹ and demand the full legalization of abortion, but institutional libertarians like Goldwater and Buckley denounced the Civil Rights Act¹² and federal protections for abortions¹³.

⁹ Goldwater, 12.

¹⁰ Wendy McElroy, “Voltaire (1694-1778),” *Libertarianism.org* (Cato Institute, August 15, 2008), <https://www.libertarianism.org/topics/voltaire-1694-1778>.

¹¹ Charles Mohr, “Goldwater Calls for Drive To Finish War in Vietnam; Implies Johnson Did Not Go Far Enough in Air Attacks on Reds—Bids U.S. Seek ‘Peace Through Preparedness,’” *The New York Times*, August 11, 1964, 38, 916 edition, p. 1.

¹² Alvin Felzenberg, “How William F. Buckley, Jr., Changed His Mind on Civil Rights,” *POLITICO Magazine*, May 13, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/05/13/william-f-buckley-civil-rights-215129/>.

¹³ Heather Hendershot, “William F. Buckley Was No Feminist, But He Was An (Unintentional) Ally,” *POLITICO Magazine*, October 2, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/09/william-buckley-feminism-intellectuals-firing-line-women-214301/>.

Libertarian feminism reaffirms the core principles of socio-political libertarianism (henceforth referred to as fiscal libertarianism), mainly that the highest form of political emancipation stems from the idea of unobstructed choice. Both fiscal libertarianism and libertarian feminism prioritize what libertarian philosopher Isaiah Berlin defined in 1957 as “negative liberty”—that is, freedom from external interference as opposed to “positive liberty”, liberty granted by the presence of resources.¹⁴ Libertarian and individualist feminists then oppose revolutionary feminism as it asserts that women are a materially disadvantaged collective whose conditions must be assessed and addressed categorically, rather than individually; the revolutionary versus reformist feminist divide could also be framed as a divide in the prioritization of positive versus negative liberty.¹⁵

If the contemporary libertarian movement was born in response to the New Deal reforms of the Roosevelt administration, it was then refined in response to the Great Society programs of the Lyndon B. Johnson campaign. In his 1964 State of the Union Address, Johnson stated that his administrative goal “is not only to relieve the symptom of poverty, but to cure it and, above all, to prevent it.”¹⁶ Many Great Society programs focused specifically on giving financial aid to families and children, like the Head Start program¹⁷ and the newly-established Office of Economic Opportunity.

Johnson did not beat poverty on the ideological or economic battlefield. Poverty still exists. The mass spending of the Great Society (\$22 trillion since the Johnson administration, according to the Heritage Foundation¹⁸) remains a major conservatives and libertarian

¹⁴ Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays On Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

¹⁵ Despite the prioritization of different forms of liberty, it should be understood that both groups largely concede that both types of liberty are necessary social values, differing on which form is more preferable at the expense of the other.

¹⁶ Lyndon B. Johnson, “Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union,” January 8, 1964.

¹⁷ Lyndon B. Johnson, “Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union,” January 4, 1965.

¹⁸ Robert Rector, “Married to the Welfare State,” The Heritage Foundation, February 10, 2015, <https://www.heritage.org/welfare/commentary/married-the-welfare-state>.

criticism of the Johnson administration, but the ideological opposition to these programs goes much further than their fiscal cost alone. Michael Tanner of the Cato Institute writes that “We may have made the lives of the poor less uncomfortable, but we have failed to truly lift people out of poverty.”¹⁹ A central line in anti-welfare rhetoric is that welfare rewards having children out of wedlock despite an increase in economic stability for households with married parents.^{20,21,22} An article from the American Enterprise Institute endorses the work of policy initiatives to encourage marriage, stating, “We need to build on these models to realize the dreams of marriage and a stable and supportive family life that most Americans, even poor Americans, have.”²³

This sentiment points to an inherent contradiction in fiscal libertarian thought: the individual should be offered free choice in all matters of their life and liberty, but must also be pointed towards producing a nuclear family with married parents—marriage itself being an explicitly governmental contract. From the perspective of negative liberty, there is nothing forcing one into marriage. From the perspective of positive liberty, however, the “free” market reveals itself to be a façade of choice: marriage and the nuclear family become the most advantageous economic position despite being predicated on social and communal relations.

The explicit goals of fiscal libertarianism and feminist libertarianism are to maximize choice for the individual and limit government interference in daily life. But both fiscal libertarianism and feminist libertarianism are necessarily social, political, *and* economic

¹⁹ “The War On Poverty After Fifty Years”, The Cato Institute, May/June 2015, <https://www.cato.org/policy-report/may/june-2015/war-poverty-after-fifty-years>.

²⁰ Bradford W. Wilcox, “Marriage for Single Mothers No Panacea in the War on Poverty”, American Enterprise Institute, January 6, 2014, <https://www.aei.org/articles/marriage-for-single-mothers-no-panacea-in-the-war-on-poverty/>.

²¹ Rector, “Married To The Welfare State”.

²² Robert A. Moffitt, “The Effect of Welfare On Marriage and Fertility”, *Welfare, The Family, And Reproductive Behavior: Research Perspectives* (Washington, D.C., National Academies Press, 1998).

²³ Wilcox, “Marriage for Single Mothers”.

ideologies, ones that supplant the idea that there is no coercion by markets—cultural or economic. The nuclear family is therefore not a collective but an economic unit, an extension of the individual's market needs: mother, father, husband, wife, child, parent are not only social relationships but market relationships.

Both fiscal libertarianism and libertarian feminism laude the idea of the exceptional individual. A woman who is seen to rise beyond the prejudices of the world around her to become a businesswoman or a politician has made an acceptable break from wifedom or motherhood, especially as capital gains allow her more choice in commodity consumption and therefore lifestyle (how she looks, where she lives, who she interacts with). The heroes of libertarianism are exceptional, they possess some skill or talent that makes them *valuable*. These skills then return to the marketplace largely as a mode of profit-making, rewarding not only the individual but also the market itself, reenforcing the idea of capitalism. Libertarian feminism then becomes a tool of capital and capitalists, it is the idea that liberation is achieved by creating enough profit—either for oneself or for a corporation—to be able to consume as desired and therefore assert a commodity-based identity as desired.

While libertarianism was gaining prominence in the mainstream cultural consciousness of the 1960s, so was revolutionary feminism. Two years after the release of *The Fountainhead*, Simone De Beauvoir would publish *The Second Sex*, rejecting the idea of the exceptional woman leading to broader liberation²⁴. Betty Friedan would expound on De Beauvoir's ideas in *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, three years later she would co-found the National Organization for Women (NOW). Other popular revolutionary feminist texts to be published in the 1960s include *Sexual Politics* by Kate Millet (1968), "Radical Feminism and Love" by Ti-Grace Atkinson (1969), and "Women and the Myth of Consumerism" by Ellen

²⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Publishing, 2011), 741.

Willis (1969). Revolutionary feminism manifested in groups like the Redstockings and in the work of women embedded in other revolutionary groups like Audre Lorde, Kathleen Cleaver, and Angela Davis working in the growing Black Panther Party. As with all movements, opinions differed between groups and individuals, but together these movements largely rejected strictly cultural feminism in favour of a restructuring of American political and economic systems.

Regardless of how feminism presented itself, by the late 1960s one thing was evidently clear: women were unhappy. Unrest was growing across the United States, the economic prosperity of the post-World War II economy no longer able to mask the vast inequalities across identity lines. These two schools of feminism offered two different solutions: work hard and say yes to the things that make you happy or totally re-evaluate your relationship to labour, the state, and womanhood. It was clear that the social standing of women could no longer remain static, and at the outset of the 1960s, the culture industry would have to decide exactly how it was to present women's liberation.

III. Transformation and Change in the Late 1960s and Early 1970s

1968 and 1972 bookend what may well be one of the most radical and transformative four-year periods in United States history. Between the launch of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam in January, 1968 and the indictment of the Watergate burglars in September, 1972, the American cultural and political landscape experienced a series of major political events: the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy; riots at the 1968 Democratic convention and the resulting trial of the "Chicago 7"; the moon landing; the Woodstock festival; the Manson family murders; the invasions of Cambodia and Laos; the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency; the murder of four student protestors at Kent State University by the National Guard; the lowering of the federal voting

age from 21 to 18; the publication of the Pentagon Papers revealing the truth of mass military failure in Vietnam; the Attica Prison Uprising, which left 42 dead, 38 of which were shot by the National Guard; and the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment in Congress, which would be sent to the states for a ratification vote that would never come.

As such, the culture of this time period uniquely reflects—and manufactures—American socio-political identity. The popular culture in the United States between 1968 and 1972 was diverse in its political leanings and aesthetic sensibilities, not only capturing an audience of emerging radicals and dissidents but also the “Silent Majority”, a term coined by Richard Nixon in a 1969 speech to capture the large swaths of Americans who quietly opposed progressive and anti-war activism.²⁵ Reproductive freedom was at the centre of the women’s rights debate; through *Griswold v. Connecticut* in 1965, the Supreme Court established the right to contraceptive use for married couples through the legal principle that the 9th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution guarantees a reasonable right to privacy.²⁶ The availability of the oral birth control pill—though not universally available until 1972²⁷—meant that women who chose to be sexually active no longer had to risk pregnancy, something that previously would have ended collegiate and career aspirations.²⁸ A 1971 survey of 18 and 19-year-old women in college revealed that 42% of sexually active women had taken the pill and 5.3% had had an abortion.²⁹

Sexual politics were not—and have never been—strictly about sex. What makes someone sexually liberated? There was not one answer during this time. There is not one answer. The politics of sex did not solely concern the relationships individuals had with

²⁵ Richard Nixon, “Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam”, November 3 1969.

²⁶ *Griswold v. Connecticut*, 1965.

²⁷ *Eisenstadt v. Baird*, 1972.

²⁸ Claudia Golden and Lawrence F. Katz. 2002. “The power of the pill: Oral contraceptives and women's career and marriage decisions. *Journal of Political Economy*”, 110(4): 730-770

²⁹ *Ibid.*

themselves and each other, but also with institutional structures. “Free love” was a core tenant of many countercultural beliefs at the time, and anti-monogamy sentiment was not only embraced but, in some cases, mandated by left-wing groups. Tom Hayden, a founding member of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), said of SDS in the late 1960s, “It was no place for couples. They had smashed monogamy, which was a way of giving yourself to the revolution. Monogamy was a form of possessive individualism to be abandoned.”³⁰ In 1970, Black Panther Party leader Huey Newton instructed his members to “abandon romantic fictional finalisms”, mainly monogamy, as monogamy was seen as indicative of ownership and thus capitalism.³¹ Being sexually liberated in the New Left meant taking part in mandated (by men like Hayden and Newton) cultures of casual sex, failure to do so was thus then not only personal but expressly political. Feminist thought was divided on how to best address sexual liberation—some advocated for free and open sexual exchange³², some advocated for celibacy³³, and some advocated for lesbianism, oftentimes by choice. In 1971, lesbian separatist collective The Furies would establish a short-lived lesbian commune in Washington D.C., of which member Ginny Bronson said, “Lesbianism is not a matter of sexual preference, but rather one of political choice which every woman must make if she is to become woman-identified and thereby end male supremacy.”³⁴

The politics of *sex* and the politics of *pleasure* are not synonymous. In 1970, Anne Koedt published the essay “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm” speaking to the incomplete pleasure during heterosexual intercourse. Critiques of the sexual revolution for encouraging

³⁰ Clara Bingham, *Witness to the Revolution: Radicals, Resisters, Vets, Hippies, and the Year America Lost Its Mind and Found Its Soul* (New York: Random House, 2016).

³¹ Andrew Lester, “‘This Was My Utopia’: Sexual Experimentation and Masculinity in the 1960s Bay Area Radical Left”, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, September 2020.

³² David Allyn,, *Make Love, Not War* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Co, 2000), 141.

³³ Figureheads like Dana Denmore

³⁴ *Lesbian Feminist Monthly*, Issue 01, January 1972.

sex without pleasure would later be elaborated on by Audre Lorde and in the landmark 1975 essay "On Sexuality As Work" by Silvia Federici. Feminist critics of the embrace of casual sexuality noted that, for women, the performance of pleasure often supersedes the acquisition of pleasure itself. Federici writes, "Sex is work for us, it is a duty. The duty to please is so built into our sexuality that we have learned to get pleasure out of giving pleasure, out of getting men excited."³⁵ The sexual revolution was exactly that: sexual. It was not the Erotic Revolution, not the Pleasure Revolution, but the Sexual Revolution. Federici writes that the performance of pleasure became yet another axis of labour which women were expected to perform, one that no longer came with the economic security of sex within marriage. Women were now expected to conduct unpaid domestic labour, to conduct wage labour, and additionally to conduct sexual labour wherein they must not only perform sexually but perform sexual *satisfaction* for the gratification of their partner.³⁶

Free love was a central principle of many forms of reformist feminism, including libertarian feminism. Access to reproductive healthcare free from government intervention was a central (and justified) tenet of libertarian feminist thought and the choice to participate in casual or premarital sex was an accessible way for women to assert their independence. But much as the "choice" to get married was not one wholly of free will but also of economic and social importance, the "choice" to engage in casual sex was similarly complicated. After all, if casual sex was seen as a political necessity to rebel against institutional power, then the politically liberated woman must also be sexually liberated, terminology that had a specific and intended definition beyond equal and free choice. Not only must she *have* casual sex, she must also like it (or at least appear to), as a desire for love and intimacy could be misconstrued as a replication of patriarchal structure.

³⁵ Silvia Federici, "Why Sexuality Is Work" from *Revolution at Point Zero*, 1975, 90.

³⁶ Federici, "Why Sexuality is Work", 92-93.

From 1968 to 1972, libertarian feminism meant that women could find wage jobs or move through the higher education system, have no-strings-attached sex, and then become wives and mothers or careerists after their youth. None of these things are unilaterally good (or bad) for women. But for men? The *expectation* that women enter the workplace meant that men were no longer required to financially provide for their partners, the burgeoning availability of birth control and abortion meant that sex no longer required the pretence of commitment³⁷ and extramarital affairs bore no imminent visual giveaways. Disproportionately low wages and discriminatory hiring meant that most women still had to marry to achieve financial stability, amplified by the fact that it wasn't until 1974 that women were protected from discrimination from financial institutions, the inclusion of sex and marital status only possible following a secret last-minute addition from Congresswoman Lindy Boggs.³⁸

If—as previously established—culture has the power to dictate discourse specifically by setting the language and limits of its own opposition, how could the feminist movements of the time be manipulated by media presentation to best suit the interests of capital? Should the end of feminist discourse be the abolition of gender, capital, and the United States itself? Or should it be that the pathway to liberation means more men getting laid while also getting to split the check on dinner dates?

IV. **Herbert Marcuse, Marshall McLuhan, and Karl Hess: *Playboy* And Its Role In Sexual-Political Discourse**

³⁷ Again, not necessarily a bad thing.

³⁸ Chris Good, "Former Congresswoman and Ambassador Lindy Boggs Dies at 97", ABC News, July 27, 2013, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/congresswoman-ambassador-lindy-boggs-dies-97/story?id=19792180>.

“One-Dimensional Man is actually nothing more than a rehash of Marcuse rhetoric for the laity. The book characterizes American society as an industrial experiment in which ‘the logic of domination’ has triumphed. American ruling capital is held responsible not only for robbing the coffers but for conditioning the voters to accept their impotence. Marcuse fears most the passive acceptance of limited affluence, which threatens to negate the lust for liberation that the author views as the ultimate life-affirming force.”³⁹

Playboy’s profile of Herbert Marcuse in the September 1970 issue pits the Marxist philosopher against an anti-intellectual faux-radicalism that the author, Michael G. Horowitz, sees in the SDS movement. Horowitz succinctly summarises the impasse between Marcuse and his students at the University of California, San Diego: “The children want to fuck without guilt, while he wants them to study without shame.”⁴⁰ Horowitz’s characterization of Marcuse is two-fold: he is both far more informed and analytic than contemporary youth activists while also being too traditional, too uptight, and too serious. As *Playboy* will continue to demonstrate in its writing on the New Left and the sexual revolution, Marcuse serves not as an author or philosopher but as a debate point in culture wars.

It is unclear if Horowitz ever read *One-Dimensional Man*, but he was a student of Marcuse nonetheless, at Brandeis University in 1965. When Horowitz meets Marcuse five years later after his lecture, he is deeply personally offended when Marcuse does not remember him nor the class he taught. *“What was 196b?’ How could Herbert Marcuse forget Politics 196b? 196b was the most advanced course in modern political theory ever offered and if you didn’t commit Kant to memory, there was no point in taking the exam. Marcuse used to harangue about Hegel’s concept of reason in history, and the liberals and the Marxists used to shout at each other until the janitor complained.”*

The way that Horowitz speaks about the course, and about Marcuse overall, reveals how he (and *Playboy*) see political radicalism. Marcuse is good, insofar as he rejects the passion and energy of the SDS students in front of him. He is good because he allowed for

³⁹Michael Horowitz, “Portrait of the Marxist as an Old Trouper”, *Playboy*, September 1970, 175.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

the author to debate the merits of history and politics as an undergrad. He is good because he preaches a measured approach to activism and opposes “spontaneity”⁴¹. And of course, Marcuse is good because he writes about sex and having sex and how great sex is. But to Horowitz, Marcuse’s writing has little practical purchase beyond the value of his name in academic conversation. Upon Marcuse’s arrival on campus, the crowd

“[...] Came in droves. In a wire-wheeled Triumph came The Most Wanted High School Radical this side of Levittown in a silk, solid-color shirt carefully opened three buttons down, the better to seduce PTA housewives and keep latent principals unusually gentle. Beside him, his microdressed Sweet Sixteen rapping sensuously about Marcuse’s possible program. ‘I hope he talks about *Eros and Civilization*,’ she sighed, while fondling her beau’s curls. ‘It’s so Reichian!’

‘Don’t be ridiculous!’ Most Wanted retorted, pulling himself away. ‘It’ll all center around *One-Dimensional Man*. Capitalism is collapsing and all you can think about is your damned orgasm!’ Ach, women! Useless in a revolutionary situation! Why’d he bring her along, anyhow?”

Marcuse was not an author to be read, he was an author to be seen reading; his Marxism was permissible as it was an expression of the elite university student’s intellect. Horowitz praises Marcuse’s carefully planned approach to direct action, commending him for not giving into the fast-paced tendencies of campus radicalism. He praises Marcuse for his openness towards sexuality, but ignores his writings on the necessity of gender equality to throw in a cheap shot at a young woman clearly familiar with his work. Horowitz also remarks that when he was 40 minutes late to a 50 minute class taught by Marcuse, Horowitz was shocked that his professor was angry at his tardiness.⁴² He questions Marcuse’s revolutionary capability, apparently Marcuse is traditional enough to provide suitable antagonism to student protestors but too old-fashioned to excuse Horowitz’s lackadaisical attitude towards his lectures.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

Marcuse was offered an interview with *Playboy*, which he declined, stating that he would only accept if he was allowed to be the centerfold for that issue.⁴³ He turned down the interview citing the magazine's penchant towards misogyny,⁴⁴ a tendency that would be realized towards Marcuse's own female readership within the article on his lecture. And unlike the underlying philosophy of *Playboy*, *Eros and Civilization* posits that it is capitalism that reduces our capacity for the erotic, transforming what would be meaningful physical encounters into manufactured sexual exchanges.

In *Eros And Civilization*, Marcuse writes, "The 'struggle for existence' is originally a struggle for pleasure: culture begins with the collective implementation of this aim. Later, however, the struggle for existence is organized in the interest of domination: the erotic basis of culture is transformed."⁴⁵ Culture, then, is the authority on access to pleasure. One must first access culture—created and disseminated by whomever possesses the capital—to see how it presents pleasure and therefore existence.

On page 62 of the same September, 1970 issue of *Playboy*, the following advertisement for Canterbury belts appears:

⁴³ Christopher Pollard, "The Philosopher Who Was Too Hot for Playboy", *The Conversation*, October 3, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/the-philosopher-who-was-too-hot-for-playboy-85002>

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 125.

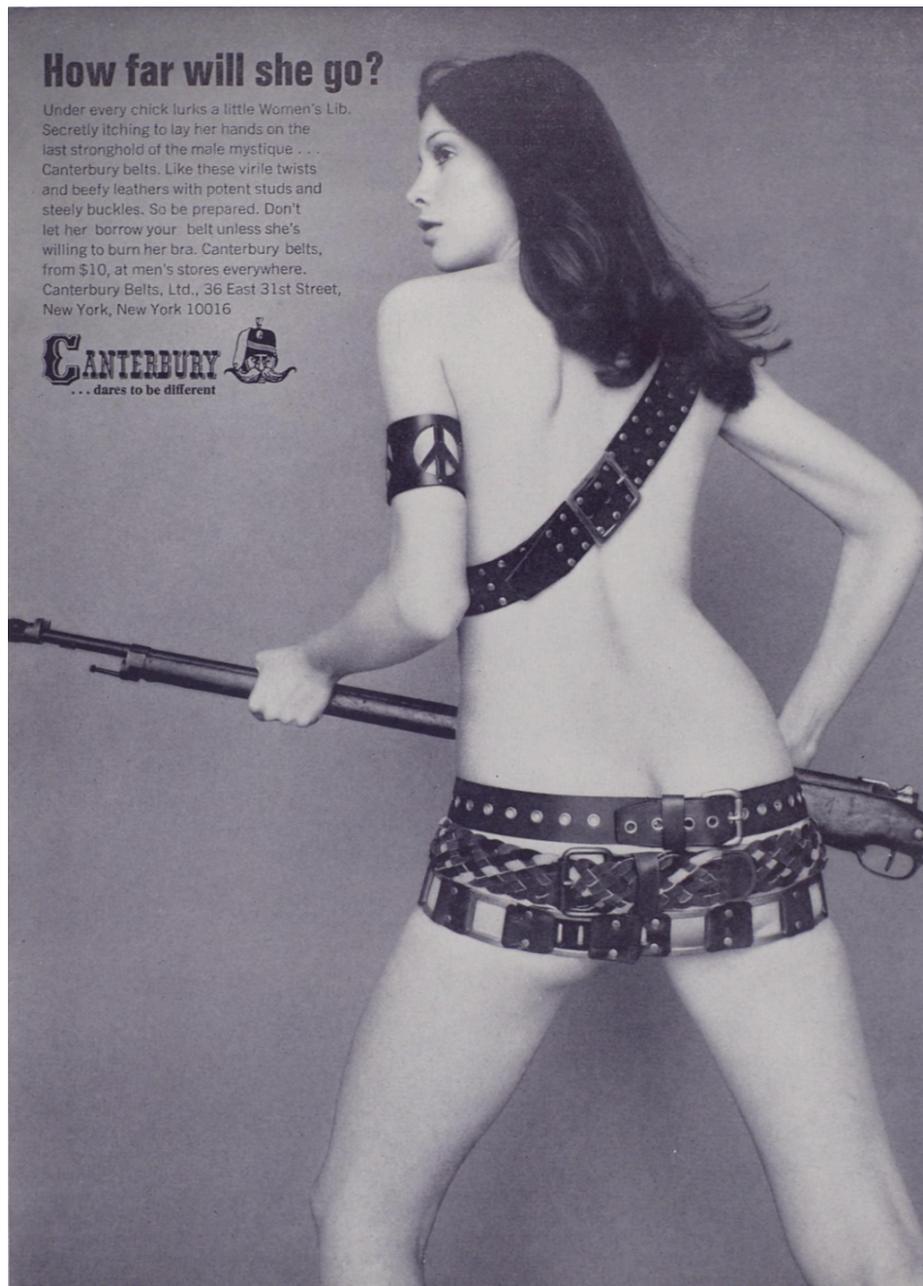


Figure 1: September, 1970, p. 62

The advertisement could not be more apt for Marcusean analysis: the woman, ostensibly armed to fight for her liberation, is bound by the “virile twists” of men’s leather belts. She is both uniquely radical, armed and ready to fight, and universal, labelled “every chick”. She is beautiful and thin, her stare is non-confrontational and only holding her gun by its barrel, not the trigger. Her desire for liberation is both “secret” and infinite—how far *will* she go? Despite her aspirations towards liberation, the model is still physically bound by “the last

stronghold of the male physique”, and she is still an object of desire *because* of her temperament (“don’t let her borrow your belt unless she’s willing to burn her bra”). The advertisement promises access to the erotic through consumption, but also access to one’s own identity: the company slogan instructs consumers to “dare to be different”.

In the profile on Marcuse, Horowitz lambasts the young woman attending as only able to care about her orgasm, forsaking the political importance of *One-Dimensional Man*. Pages later, the *Playboy* reader is told that if he buys this belt, he will not only buy a sense of individual identity but also a radical identity. This form of radicalism will give him access to the newfound sexuality of young women, women wanting the sexual freedom allowed to men while still maintaining their feminine sensuality. The gratification of consumption subsumes the erotica of sensuality, the consumer believes he has found his existence because he believes that his purchase will provide him with pleasure. In this way, pleasure does not come from *being* liberated, it comes from the idea of *liberating oneself*, perpetually engaged in an existential struggle as a reminder of one’s existential existence. As Marcuse says, “The ego experiences being as ‘provocation’ as ‘project’; it experiences each existential condition as a restraint that has to be overcome, transformed into another one. The ego becomes preconditioned for mastering action and productivity even prior to any specific occasion that calls for such an attitude.”⁴⁶ The centering of the ego, the desire for personal self-fulfilment, the assertion of power over natural forces—including sensuality and the erotic—all of these ideas return to the Enlightenment, to John Locke, and for the function of the American state to valorise the individual.

The March, 1969 issue of *Playboy* contains writing from two prominent thinkers: an interview with media theorist Marshall McLuhan and an opinion piece penned by Karl Hess, then-editor of *The Libertarian Forum*.

⁴⁶ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 110.

The interview with McLuhan largely covers contemporary media technology and its impact on the collective psychology of Americans. In this interview, McLuhan writes about the impact of literacy on individuals and cultures, asserting that mass literacy creates a frenetic and disjointed sense of self, the abstract human emotional range reduced to spoken and written word. To McLuhan, it is not language altogether but the phonetic alphabet that creates this feeling: sounds act as non-representational pieces of non-representational words, the actual construction of vocabulary removed from its physical actuality. The complexity of human nature is then limited to the characters in the alphabet, a systemic form of categorizing the unorganizable. “The whole man became fragmented man; the alphabet shattered the charmed circle and resonating magic of the tribal world, exploding man into an agglomeration of specialized and psychically impoverished “individuals,” or units, functioning in a world of linear time and Euclidean space. It is this disconnect between language and matter that separates the individual from the world and his fellow man, a persistent problem of all literate societies.”⁴⁷

He writes,

“Schizophrenia and alienation may be the inevitable consequences of phonetic literacy. It’s metaphorically significant, I suspect, that the old Greek myth has Cadmus, who brought the alphabet to man, sowing dragon’s teeth that sprang up from the earth as armed men. Whenever the dragon’s teeth of technological change are sown, we reap a whirlwind of violence.”⁴⁸

According to McLuhan, this schizophrenic condition then, ironically enough, renews feelings of tribalism in phonetic-language-based societies. The alienated individual creates groupings based on what they can relate to, heavily attached to these bonds as they alleviate the perpetual sense of disconnect reinforced by language. McLuhan cites the

⁴⁷ “Playboy Interview: Marshall McLuhan, A Candid Conversation with the high priest of popcult and metaphysics in media”, *Playboy*, March, 1969. 54.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

invention of the printing press as the beginning of nationalism in Europe⁴⁹, codifying the written word as a visual and linguistic system with which one can identify.

McLuhan sees the increase in media culture to be a driving force between the chaos and discontent of the late 1960s, each book or radio show or song or television show operating on systems of language and visual imagery that artificially separate consumers into identity categories, further driving their social breakdown. Spiritually impoverished by language, individuals then must resort to identity politics to find meaning that language fails to create. McLuhan sees both the tribal group and the hyper-individual as two sides of the same coin: unable to truly relate to other human beings, groupings are created along socially constructed lines that lack the ability to grow into meaningful connections. McLuhan makes a distinction between the individualist—who is also the tribalist—and the *individual*, the singular unit of the human being.

McLuhan says that “All our alienation and atomization are reflected in the crumbling of such time-honored social values as the right of privacy and the sanctity of the individual.”⁵⁰ While not an expressly libertarian sentiment, McLuhan’s insistence that self-fulfilment will come in the form of freedom *from* the structures of government certainly reaffirms libertarian ideology. His interview is not an exercise in libertarian thought, it truly is a discussion with a cutting-edge media theorist, which happens to critique identity groupings (like race and gender) while reaffirming that government overreach is a major factor in the confusion and dissatisfaction of contemporary life.

But libertarianism isn’t the implicit philosophy of *Playboy*: it is clearly the explicit one. In the same issue, Karl Hess authors the opinion piece “The Death of Politics” with the description “a polemicist who has been there and back on both the left and right, makes a

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

persuasive case for a new libertarian ethic". The article is accompanied by the image of a broken cigar, barely lit, spilling tobacco: the crumbling image of corporate American masculinity fractured and bleeding.

Hess introduces his readers to the concept of laissez-faire and anarcho-capitalism, describing them as "simply the economic form of libertarianism"⁵¹. Hess would later describe his politics in a 1983 documentary as somewhere between Emma Goldman and Ayn Rand, "but without any of the sort of crazy solipsism that Rand was so fond of,"⁵² maintaining his attachment to anarchism throughout his political career.

For *Playboy*, Hess writes extensively on his involvement with the Barry Goldwater campaign in 1964 as Goldwater's speechwriter. Hess notes that Goldwater's campaign was unique in forging a proto-libertarian politic in the mainstream American political imagination, but massively failed on its foreign policy. Libertarianism, he argues, is definitely isolationist.⁵³ In 1963, Hess implored Goldwater to capture the farmers' vote, promising them a right to economic security in Goldwater's America, to which the politician replied, "But he doesn't have a right to it. Neither do I. We just have a right to try for it."⁵⁴ Hess left the Goldwater campaign disillusioned with the still-corporate operations of the Republican party, before briefly affiliating with SDS and Tom Hayden. Hess sees a righteousness in the critique of corporate capitalism, corporations being an offspring of capitalism and federal government, but find its "unfortunate that many New Leftists are so uncritical as to accept this premise as indicating that all forms of capitalism are bad, so that full state ownership is the only alternative."⁵⁵

⁵¹ Karl Hess, "The Death of Politics", *Playboy*, March, 1969. 102.

⁵² *Anarchism In America*, dir. Joel Sucher and Steven Fischler, Pacific Street Films, 1983.

⁵³ Hess, "The Death of Politics", 103.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Hess, 104.

Hess's fundamental politic is the promotion of unrestricted negative liberties. Conservatives are too concerned with social politics, leftists are too concerned with expanding authority. To Hess, the riot is the truest form of political expression, a form of speech that is "directed against the prevailing violence of the state--the sort of ongoing civic violence that permits regular police supervision of everyday life in some neighbourhoods, the rules and regulations that inhibit absolutely free trading, the public schools that serve the visions of bureaucracy rather than the varieties of individual people."⁵⁶ The riot is the spontaneous, anti-structural violence that opposes vertical hierarchy, it is the expression of the embittered individual whose free will is stronger than the power of the state. Hess believes that the individual must empower themselves, that liberation cannot be given by a state. On racial equality, he asks: "What, actually, can government do for black people in America that black people could not do better for themselves, if they were permitted the freedom to do so?"⁵⁷, stating that monetary assistance is meaningless if people lack the ability to self-govern.

As Hess flits between anarcho-capitalism and libertarian socialism, he continues to insist that justice and equity are found not in organized community, but in collections of motivated individuals. This seems self-contradictory, best exemplified by Hess's idea of starting a socialist kibbutz in Harlem which itself would be anarcho-capitalist; Hess believes that socialism by choice is a form of capitalism, unlike the (purportedly) inherently coercive state socialism. The article is full of these instances of circular logic; if anything, it seems that Hess is promoting a form of hyper-local, direct democracy before any economic system. As such, Hess's politics return to promoting the *feeling* of choice and negative liberty, a feeling granted with the abolition of most government.

⁵⁶ Hess, 178.

⁵⁷ Hess, 179.

Despite speaking on Black liberation and an opposition to the Vietnam War, Hess the word “women” never appears in the nearly 10,000 words of the article. Using his philosophy on Black liberation, one could believe that Hess felt similarly about women’s liberation: the solution is not government action or consideration of women as a categorically disadvantaged group, but by giving women as individuals access to an unrestricted market they may find their own personal form of liberation.

The most explicit account of *Playboy’s* attitude towards the sexual revolution comes in the form of the 10,000 word article, “Up Against The Wall, Male Chauvinist Pig!” by Morton Hunt from the May, 1970 issue. It’s an account of what Hunt calls “neofeminism”, the radical form of feminism that arose in the post-World War II cultural landscape dictated by a revolutionary drive to restructure American gender roles. It opens with an account of a feminist performance by Cell 16, a vanguard group advocating feminist separatism. A young woman stands in front of the crowd, her long, beautiful hair shorn by other members of the group in a rejection of male beauty standards. Cries ring out from the audience cautioning her to stop, one woman yells “Women have been denied so much for so long, [...] why deny any part of our femininity that makes us feel good?”⁵⁸

It is unclear if this is Hunt’s first-person account or a secondary report, but nonetheless he goes on to examine the material, psychological, and political groundings of Cell-16 and other revolutionary feminist organizations. Throughout the article, Hunt characterises this movement as both a laughable exercise in theatricality and an existential threat to the concept of gender as a whole. He writes,

“While snickering at the follies of the neofeminists, one is likely to underestimate both their seriousness of purpose and the legitimacy of many of their complaints. The women's liberation movement is unique: No other recent struggle for human

⁵⁸ Morton Hunt, “Up Against the Wall, Male Chauvanist Pig!”, *Playboy*, March 1969. 96.

rights has been so frivolous and yet so earnest, so absurd and yet so justified, so obsessed on the one hand with trivia and, on the other, with the radical restructuring of male-female relationships, of family life and of society itself.”⁵⁹

Morton’s article is vast in scope, moving between cinematic accounts of feminist action, theoretical analyses of feminist thought, and social and legal histories of gender. He repeats the apocryphal narratives of the 1968 Miss America Protest, an event where members of the group New York Radical Women allegedly burned their bras and copies of *Playboy* on the steps of the pageant before crowning a live sheep to be the real Miss America. In actuality, nothing was ever set ablaze, simply discarded into bins labelled “Freedom Trash Can”⁶⁰, but the moniker stuck and the image of the “bra-burning feminist” was born. Morton issues a clear disdain for the members of Cell-16 and New York Radical Women, labelling them “neurotics, uglies and dykes”.⁶¹ Morton characterises the neofeminist movement as both gender and class based, an extension of the New Left, describing its goals as uniquely radical and oppositional. He writes, “Not many seek, as do feminists from the New Left, the total overthrow of male-dominated, sexist, family-based, capitalist-militarist society.”⁶²

Of course, each *Playboy* author does not share a singular viewpoint nor is one mandated by the magazine. But the inclusion of “capitalist-militarist” society as a point of ridicule within *Playboy* reads as illogical. The linguistic purpose of its inclusion serves to make feminists seem too demanding, too concerned with overly loft goals, focused dismantling insurmountable systems. But *Playboy*, on the whole, was an anti-Vietnam War publication. Hess and Marcuse both opposed the war in Vietnam, the March 1969 issue

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Nell Greenfieldboyce, “Pageant Protest Sparked Bra-Burning Myth”, NPR, September 5, 2008. <https://www.npr.org/2008/09/05/94240375/pageant-protest-sparked-bra-burning-myth?from=mobile>.

⁶¹ Hunt, “Up Against the Wall”, 96.

⁶² Ibid.

featured six political cartoons opposing the war and labelling its racketeers as profit-driven warmongers (and none supporting the war). In the very same issue as Hunt's article is an interview with proto-libertarian and Goldwater affiliate William F. Buckley. The interviewer (named only as **PLAYBOY**) probes Buckley about his neutrality on the Vietnam War, saying, "[Playboy] agrees with the increasingly popular opinion that our adventure there has always been a disaster—to us, as well as to South and North Vietnam—from the beginning."⁶³



Figure 2: *March*, 1969, p. 185

If *Playboy* is as opposed to the military-industrial complex as the neofeminists, then what is left of Hunt's statement is that these revolutionary feminists are seeking to revolutionize cultural ideas of gender. Hardly groundbreaking journalism.

⁶³ Hunt, 88.

Like Karl Hess and Michael G. Horowitz, Hunt often concedes that the base of radical thought is coming from a historically informed perspective. Hunt questions the need for a continuing feminist movement following the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920, which granted women the right to vote. Why, now, are women so unhappy? Hunt notes that by the 1920s, access to birth control was beginning to expand⁶⁴ (though fails to mention the restrictions on access to reproductive healthcare in 1970) and by the 1940s the war effort provided work for women and a sense of grand, nationalist purpose. The end of the war meant an appreciation for the security of the family, no longer necessitating industrial labour and allowing for greater material comfort.⁶⁵ As the United States moved from an industrial economy to a post-industrial economy, the “comfort” of domesticity then became a place of entrapment. Hunt writes that the women of the 1960s had believed they had achieved liberation given greater opportunities to study and work, but instead found that they were,

“[...] Settling into suburban domesticity and fecundity, only to find, within a few years, that they were bored, trapped by household and maternal duties and resentful of men, who, it seemed, had somehow tricked them into all this. They wanted to be wives and mothers and had their wish, but somehow it meant less than they had thought it would; besides, they wanted to be people, deal with adults, use their minds, be considered interesting, ‘do something.’”⁶⁶

Hunt notes that this environment was ripe for the work of Betty Friedan to emerge, to address the ennui of womanhood, especially for married women. Establishing NOW gave women a place to organise on gendered issues in particular. Hunt also—perceptively—notes that one of the key draws of revolutionary feminism was its distance from the male-run structures of the New Left. Hunt points to sexist cultures within SDS, objectifying comments

⁶⁴ Hunt, 102.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

made by Stokely Carmichael, and the overall conception on the male left that women's sexual liberation existed as a reward for men who had reached radical politics.⁶⁷

Throughout the article, Hunt will agree with the neofeminist discontent while balking at their ideas about a solution. When he asserts that all neofeminists have rejected sex outright (a claim whose truth rests wholly in which groups Hunt chooses to include in his 'neofeminist' designation) as a response to sexism, Hunt says it is unwise to label these women as unattractive and *therefore* irrelevant, but reminds his audience that they are unattractive anyways.

To ground his opposition to neofeminist ideology, he gives a (very abridged) history of man-woman relationships through time and space. Hunt finds that the root of neofeminism is the belief that "Man has always enslaved and oppressed woman, assigning better roles to himself and worse ones to her; and since it is immoral to treat equals this way, eliminating all male-female role differences should be the goal of every fair-minded person. The morality is flawless, but the assumptions on which the major premise rests are hopelessly faulty."⁶⁸ He goes on to describe non-patriarchal structures in pre-Neolithic Revolution society, tribal groups in the Philippines, and among wealthy Aristocrats in the Victorian Era. He lists these exceptions as a rebuff of the feminist argument that misogyny has been a fixed position of history, which, in its own way, serves the feminist cause: Hunt notes that misogyny is *not* a fixed state of nature and that gender roles and characterizations are not innate to our biology. He says that "we have had not one but several notions of the masculine roles and of the feminine ones" and to categorize women as always dominated and men as always dominators "is a gross distortion of human history."⁶⁹ The purpose of listing these groups is not to accept the fluidity of gender relations across time and space,

⁶⁷ Hunt, 104.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Hunt, 203.

but rather to simply prove the feminist argument wrong, to find selected examples contrary to his condensed recapitulation of their rhetoric. Even then, Hunt contends that “one must grant that in Western civilization, the balance has been tipped to one side.”⁷⁰

Throughout the article, Hunt will provide a glimpse of genuinely radical thinking in his attempt to come across as both correct and considerate in his opposition to neofeminism. He notes that scientific studies prove that men and women are of approximately equal intelligence, but women are limited by being socialized to believe they are not as smart or fundamentally illogical. As he says, “Men think better because they think they can; women don't think as well because they think they can't.”⁷¹⁷² Hunt notes that gender relationships are largely driven by our perception of our gender rather than our physical realities; if one is to believe that men are categorically physically stronger than women, what good is that in an urban, post-industrial landscape? Hunt argues (and I would agree with him) that it falsely presumes a uniquely male competency in military leadership, construction oversight, and operating machinery, leading women to believe they cannot do these things. Women and men are told that men are more powerful, as such, a woman does not believe in her own strength, both in the social world and in her ability to oppose or defy the men in her life.⁷³

Hunt agrees with all of the major neofeminist talking points: that women are underpaid, that women have been the subject of centuries of psychological conditioning to see themselves as inferior, and even that gender roles appear to be biological but are largely cultural. He concludes his history of gender by stating that,

“When we say that man is logical and woman illogical, man creative and woman fit only for routine chores, man decisive and woman vacillating, we are speaking of

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Hunt, 204.

⁷² It is unclear what Hunt means by “think better” in this scenario.

⁷³ Hunt, 203.

traits that are socially prescribed and no more central to masculinity and femininity than styles of hairdress or clothing. Most forms of work, many forms of leisure activity, most styles of dress and ornament are considered masculine by some societies but feminine by others. To the people in any one society, however, their own mores and tastes seem to be timeless, natural and right--so much so that they attribute them to their own gods and make them divine edicts."⁷⁴

Later, Hunt notes that women's liberation is often likened to Black liberation, but this is a false dichotomy given that race is not a biological reality, while sex differences are. After spending thousands of words agreeing that gender differences are socially prescribed, Hunt returns to the idea that they are also biologically necessary.⁷⁵ He writes that heterosexual love is predicated on biological difference, that women will want to feel protected and that men will want to feel comforted, that women desire "a man to be romantic before going to bed but a stallion in it; it pleases most men to have a woman be a wildcat in bed but demurely seductive beforehand."⁷⁶ Though he uses different words, it seems like he is saying that men and women don't want different things at all; it appears that Hunt states that men and women want to feel secure and loved, that men and women want to feel like someone cares about them and also to have good sex.

The article concludes with Hunt affirming that the world, as it is in 1970, is good for women. Hunt offers that there is sexism in culture, unfair conditions for women are certainly present. Women should be allowed to work, their intellectual capabilities on par with any man (though Hunt still cautions against letting menstruating women fly planes), but they must also understand that they will be happiest within heterosexual marriage, their career secondary to their domestic duties.⁷⁷ One of Hunt's strongest opinions is that women not

⁷⁴ Hunt, 206.

⁷⁵ Hunt, 207.

⁷⁶ Hunt, 208.

⁷⁷ Hunt, 209.

only hold themselves back, but each other: their failure to feel liberated is wholly their own as they reenforce the idea of their own weakness and oppression.

There is no need to point out that Hunt's article or even *Playboy* as a whole are sexist artifacts. Hunt's opinion isn't particularly groundbreaking, his argument effectively boils down to "women have it worse than men in many regards, but that's no reason to burn down America." More interesting is the framing of feminist discourse as a whole by *Playboy*, the way in which feminism is presented and discussed by the magazine, a microcosm of its politics as a whole.

V. The Magazine Is The Message: *Playboy's* Fundamental Libertarian Drive

Playboy defined itself by its intellectual overtones. An ad for the magazine within its own pages asks, "Who reads *Playboy*?", the question is then answered by a 1968 study. The study reveals that one-third of men ages 18-34 in a professional or managerial occupation read the magazine, and that *Playboy* reaches half of all households with an annual income of \$15,000⁷⁸ or more (\$121,000 today adjusted for inflation).⁷⁹ The "Who Reads *Playboy*?" series of ads boasted its readership's income, style, and education, clearly priding itself on the cutting-edge thinkers whose writing dot its pages. It is highly concerned with its political presentation—making sure to inform William F. Buckley that the magazine was opposed to his opinion on the Vietnam War. From 1968 to 1972, *Playboy* featured an opinion piece on the taxation burden the United States puts on unmarried men (March 1968), an article about how government overreach stifles free speech (September 1968), the economic promise of a growing porn industry (July 1971), and "The Death of Liberalism", an article arguing that an embrace of big government has led to the irrelevance of a supposedly

⁷⁸ *Playboy*, March 1969, 72.

⁷⁹ Calculated with usinflationcalculator.com.

progressive institution (April 1971). These articles do not represent the totality of opinions within *Playboy*, but rather, speak to the magazine's desire to introduce libertarianism as an alternative to the bureaucratic expansionism of the Democratic party and the moralism of the Republicans. Libertarianism had an obvious and instant attraction for *Playboy's* young, male readership: the political ideology did not require the transformation of daily life as left-leaning counterculture did, libertarianism embraced (or at least permitted) the use of drugs and casual sex, and its emphasis on reducing government services—and therefore taxes—made it a pleasure-oriented politic for young men.

But the politics of *Playboy* are not found just in its text or authors or readers, but in the structure of the magazine itself. After all, it was Marshall McLuhan that reaffirmed that the medium is the message; in a November, 1970 issue, media theorist Edmund S. Carpenter would write that,

“Any medium abstracts from the given and codifies in terms of that medium's grammar. It converts ‘given reality’ into experienced reality. [...] Man has culture. Culture is his means of selecting--structuring--classifying reality, and media are his principal tools for this end.

[...] Today's invisibles demand visible membership in a society that has hitherto ignored them. They want to participate in society from the inside and they want that society to be reconstituted to allow membership for all. Above all, they want to be acknowledged publicly, on their own terms. Electronic media make possible this reconstitution of society.

But this also leads to a corresponding loss of identity among those whose identity was defined by the old society. This upheaval generates great pain and identity loss. As man is tribally metamorphosed by electronic media, people scurry around frantically in search of their former identities and, in the process, they unleash tremendous violence.

[...] We wear our media; they are our new clothes. TV clothes our bodies tattoo style. It writes on our skins. It clothes us in information. It programs us. Nudity ceases to have meaning. How natural that we would now write ads and headlines on nudes.”⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Edmund S. Carpenter, “They Became What They Beheld”, *Playboy*, November, 1970, 121, 192.

Playboy as a medium is defined by sex and sexuality, to be certain. It is also defined by its own self-identity as a place of cultural refinement, one which speaks to film and art and music and writing and politics. *Playboy* captured the art and writing of some of America's best creatives. It is saturated with ads, sometimes indistinguishable from its formal content. And its consumption is meant to be an open secret: one cannot read *Playboy* in public, since it contains pornography, but its cultural impact was undeniable. *Playboy* was at its circulation peak in 1971, with a reader base of 7 million, massively profitable and perhaps the voice of the young American male.⁸¹

So what is the medium-politic of *Playboy*? Simply, the politics of pleasure. Sexual pleasure, yes, but also identity-fulfilment pleasure. To return to Marcuse, *Playboy* affirms the existence of readership by inventing it, as defined by the "Who Reads *Playboy*?"⁸² ads. *Playboy* sells the idea of a man who is sexually virile, in control of the image of female sexuality. It sells the idea of a man who is cultured and political, his exact tastes and politics unimportant so long as they are refined and well-informed. He is masculine but never brutish, cosmopolitan but never nebbish. *Playboy* does not write for the man who fits that description, *Playboy* creates it. And once that man is created, his political reality must fit his existence needs: access to sex, access to material accumulation, access to social status.

As *Playboy* promoted libertarianism during its mainstream naissance, it was able to define the libertarian movement. The writings of Buckley and Hess are paired by the image of the open frontier, the libertarian becomes its lonesome cowboy. During the 1968-1972 period, American identity was in existential peril; loud, public demonstrations concerning inequality called into question the alleged guarantee of freedom reiterated in the American

⁸¹ Phillip H. Dougherty, "Playboy To Cut Circulation Rate Base", *New York Times*, November 2 1982.

⁸² It is apt that the advertisement specifies who *reads Playboy* rather than who *subscribes* to *Playboy*. By prioritising the "reader" rather than the "subscriber", the semiotic and thus commercial value of the man who engages with the entirety of *Playboy* including its explicit, written politics subsumes the casual viewer who engages only with the pornography.

constitution and its Declaration of Independence. Libertarianism responded with an optimistic candour: *America is not free. But it can be. By returning to the ideals of the Enlightenment and the American Revolution, the political project that is the United States of America can be rejuvenated. Gone will be the overreach of government, the morality of geriatric Senators, and the need for dominant populations to answer for the inequities imposed on the people they marginalized. The free market will correct for these ills, allow people to choose how they want to conduct themselves, and liberate all people.* In the explicit messaging of *Playboy*, libertarianism meant no draft, more drugs, more sex, and lower taxes.

The right to privacy from the government became a cornerstone in the discourse of the time, for feminists, libertarians, and the New Left. The question of privacy is ultimately one of choice: how much will the government allow people to choose what to do in their private lives? What can they speak about? How can they use their bodies? If libertarianism were to capture the minds of the youth, they must corner the market on pro-choice, pro-privacy messaging. *Playboy*, as a medium, held the specific power of affirming both simply by its physical existence. It was meant to be read in private, a symbol of rebellion against conservative morality. To hold a copy of *Playboy* was, in some ways, already an act of libertarian rebellion against the proposed morality laws of the Republican party. And if *Playboy* functioned to affirm one's existence and thus create a culture of pleasure, then it would follow that libertarianism would do the same.

Playboy is a magazine about men and a magazine about women. As women demanded a public reconsideration of their roles and personhood, *Playboy* would have to reconsider its presentation of women, and what their demands meant for men. And *Playboy*, finding its way into half of all high-income households, held the ability to define what women's liberation meant for both men and women.

In *Playboy*, “sexual liberation” translated to “casual sex”. “Financial independence” translated to “wage labour”. And most importantly, “empowerment” became “negative liberty”. The language of libertarianism became the language of feminism; the rare presentation of revolutionary feminism, as in Hunt’s writing, is nothing more than a joke, a rhetorical exercise to dissect. The discourse dialectic was then bound to the framing of libertarian feminism: on one end of the spectrum were the imposition of reactionary gender roles, women only able to become daughters and then wives and then mothers. The opposite end was the rejection of political female identity altogether: the empowerment of the woman comes when she is able to move through the world wholly as an individual entity, doing the things she wants, freed by the free market.

The men behind *Playboy* were well aware of the benefit that this carefully constructed version of feminism would bring them. If the reactionary view of gender was that women must remain chaste, then the “choice” offered by libertarian feminism would not be whether or not to have sex, but instead the idea of repression versus the idea of empowerment. The radical action, in that case, must be sex. Many of the *Playboy* cartoons openly acknowledged the idea that women who wanted to feel political liberated were pressured into casual sex to “prove” their politics, exemplified by the following cartoons:

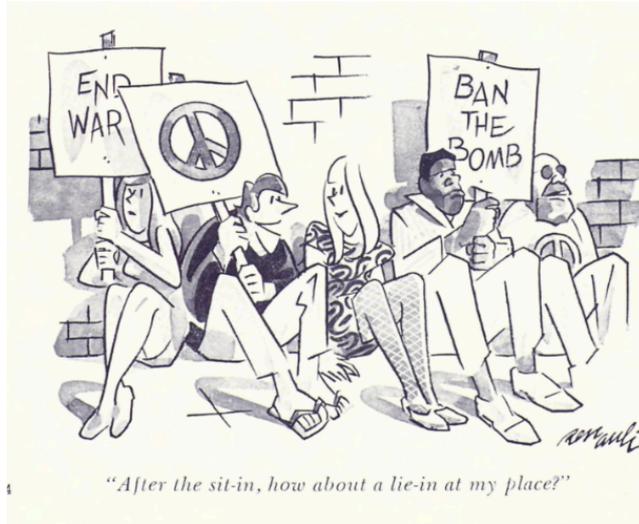


Figure 3: April, 1968, p. 154

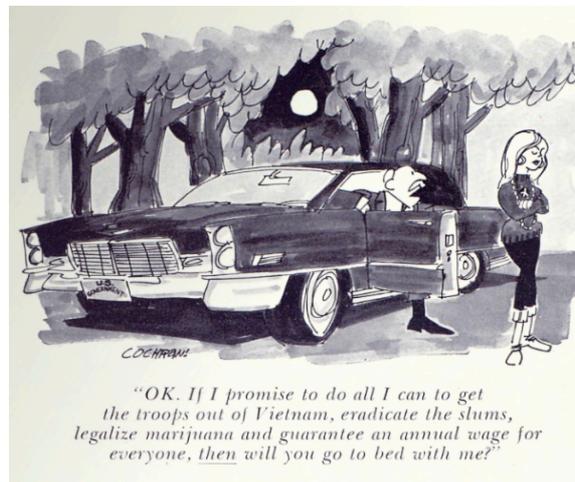


Figure 4: Sept, 1968, p. 200

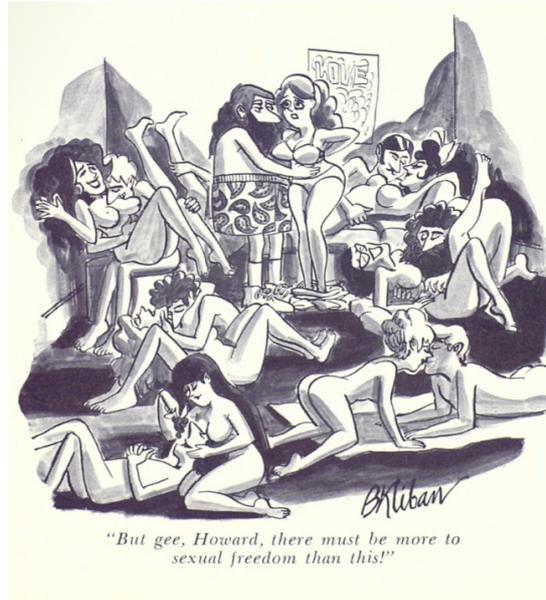


Figure 5: April, 1968, p. 202

“Manufacturing consent” is Chomsky’s language to describe the limitation of discourse in the political landscape through media presentation. But in this context, it also refers to the manufacturing of sexual consent; women who wish to appear progressive must say yes to what has been dubbed liberatory sexuality but is instead compulsory sexuality, lest they be labelled prudes or old-fashioned or reactionary.

VI. Conclusions

In *One-Dimensional Woman*, Nina Power’s twenty-first century response to Marcuse, she writes, “The political and historic dimensions of feminism are subsumed under the imperative to feel better about oneself, to become a more robust individual.”⁸³ Power’s assessment echoes *The Conscious of the Conservative*; she sees contemporary feminist rhetoric as a vehicle for hyper-individualism. The individual, as McLuhan points out, lacks community identity and therefore seeks a sense of self in a constructed political identity. If a woman wants her existence affirmed as an empowered woman, she must first appear to be

⁸³ Nina Power, *One-Dimensional Woman* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009) 27.

an empowered woman, and to produce that image requires a laundry list of commodity-based social signifiers.

Certainly, women should be able to choose how they want to move through the world. Certainly, women should be able to decide what they want to do with their bodies and minds, women as individuals should be allowed to decide their roles within a community. But the libertarian vision of choice is just one definition, just as negative liberty is one form of liberty. Powers asks, “What if the self-commodification of individuals is all-encompassing, as the analysis of the job-market suggests? What if there is no longer a gap between an internal realm of desires, wants and fantasies and the external presentation of oneself as a sexual being? If the image is the reality?”⁸⁴ A libertarian vision of liberation is premised on the idea that our desires are wholly our own, seeds waiting to grow into spiritual self-actualization.

The politically liberatory and the personally pleasurable are not always synonymous. The subjugated individual gains pleasure from acceptance by their subjugator; this may provide joy or recognition for the subjugated, but only by reaffirming the power of the oppressor’s gaze. But rarely do we consider the politically pleasurable as a pathway for subjugated groups: a recognition of community, a comfort from acceptance, the strength of a whole. We may return to the false dialectic of sexual liberation. If conservatism is chastity and libertarianism is meaningless casual sex, revolutionary feminism offers a third way: eroticism, passion, human interaction as the practice of mutual compassion rather than individual fulfilment.

“Choice”, “liberty”, “empowerment”... these terms are meaningless if not reenforced by history and action. They are worse than meaningless: they are tools of power whose meaning can be manipulated to support the continuation of a dominant power structure. Contemporary feminism is born from its ancestors, including those found in the pages of

⁸⁴ Power, 33.

Playboy. We must be wary of any movement that claims that liberation will come solely from the individual actions of the oppressed, denying the power of collectivism and solidarity.

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