

**LUCY BLAND**  
**British Sexual**  
**Counter-Revolutionaries**



Rose Shapiro's article on the moral Right is useful and informative. It provides a helpful way in for thinking more widely about the issues of morality and the problems in developing a coherent and alternative sense of the sexually 'moral'. However, I felt an immediate unease with the alternative she appears to imply - that of 'sexual revolution'. She also underestimates the very real difficulties of constructing a sexual morality outside the definitions of the Right.

Shapiro presents 'sexual revolution' and 'sexual freedom' as the converse of the

moral Right. She writes as if it's clear what these terms entail, and that by definition they are progressive. I find this a problem. An appeal to 'sexual revolution' conjures up memories of the so-called 'permissiveness' of the 1960s. There were indeed positive gains in this period: important changes in laws on male homosexuality, abortion and divorce, for example. Women gained also in being 'permitted' to be sexual *subjects*, to be sexually active not eternally passive. Unfortunately there was another side to 'permissiveness'. It was *male* sexuality that was chiefly catered for; the representations of sexuality were - yet again - of women's bodies, and 'natural' sex was assumed to refer to heterosexuality. The sexual 'freedoms' and 'pleasures' that took root in the 60s may have extended freedom to men, but it was largely at women's expense. By the late 60s, feminism was forcibly challenging the view that women had gained any real space to express their sexual needs and desires. We cannot use the term 'sexual revolution' in the unproblematic manner implied by Shapiro.

The moral Right also sees itself in opposition to 60s permissiveness, but this is founded on a central commitment to the sanctity of the family and the supposed 'threat' that sexual permissiveness poses to this. Yet although its critique of permissiveness starts from entirely different premises to those of feminism, there is a degree of common ground which we need to recognise before we are able both to understand the appeal of the moral Right (an appeal not as insignificant as Shapiro implies), and the nature of the problem faced in trying to formulate an alternative sexual morality.

To point to common ground is certainly not to argue that we should ever work in tandem with the moral Right. However, there may well be times when it is expedient to work with liberals. Shapiro would



presumably disagree, for she seems to be almost as condemning of the liberal voice in the debate - the BMA, the FPA, the Brook Advisory Centre - as she is of the moral Right. The liberals, she claims, play 'the same melody as that of the Right, but a slightly different lyric'. I would suggest that rather than the 'same melody', liberals are full of contradictions and indecisions in their views on sexual morality, and these very indecisions allow a point of entry for feminists and socialists. Risks to health from sex and birth control, unwanted pregnancy and pressure on girls to engage in sexual intercourse are concerns of the liberal medical profession identified by Shapiro. Surely, these are real problems needing our attention, yet Shapiro refers to them in terms that seem to deny their importance.

To build an alternative sexual morality is exceedingly difficult. As Shapiro rightly points out, 'It is the Right which makes the connection and sets the terms for what is moral or not.' The sexual revolution's celebration of its 'immorality' further reinforced the Right's colonisation of the 'sexually moral'.

There have been attempts in the past by

various progressive groups to claim morality, including sexual morality, for their own. Part of the problem has been that morality has long been claimed by religion. At the turn of the century for example, feminism made a bid for the defining of morality. Their call for an equal sexual moral standard, for men to live by the chastity demanded of women, was presented as the answer to the sexual dangers experienced by women. The problem with this approach was that in utilising the religious concepts of purity/impurity, virtue/vice, feminists sometimes became implicated in a denial of women's sexuality, and a 'protection' against women's sexual activity that had touches of surveillance. Yet to ignore the sexual dangers and simply to celebrate the pleasures is also a denial: of the very real sexual dangers faced by all women.

To construct a new definition of sexual morality, sexual dangers and pleasures must be given full recognition, alongside values that stress the liberties of individuals and groups to make informed and responsible choices. For young people to make *informed* sexual choices obviously requires a sex education that extends beyond the current confines of reproduction and marriage, ideally supporting girls in the control and definition of their own sexuality, and encouraging a sense of sexual autonomy that allows them to stand up to sexual pressures from boys.

All this may sound highly Utopian, given the threats to our access to abortion, the Gillick ruling, the fact that the current inadequate sex education is under constant attack from the moral Right, and young people are experiencing daily erosion of their rights generally. But a programme defending our (dwindling) sexual rights would do well to capture the public imagination, not simply its opinion. The moral Right is unfortunately not too bad at this themselves.

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