

'New conservatism' brings changes in sexual attitudes among American youth, study shows

It seems that when cultural tendencies look particularly bleak that providence provides a peek at a glimmer of change and indicates that perhaps all is not in fact lost. Exiled Soviet dissident and author Alexander Solzhenitsyn in his now famous Harvard commencement address observed that "if the world has not approached its end, it has reached a major watershed in history, equal in importance to the turn from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance."

Jim Rogers

Although in the past I have typically been of the mind that the West would almost certainly choose the wrong pattern of social life, I'm not so pessimistic now. There appear to be some cracks forming in the once solid foundation of Western materialism. One of these cracks — and oh so slight of one at that — is the beginning of change in American sexual attitudes and beliefs.

Evidence continues to mount that the conservative shift among the young is much more than merely a political phenomenon. Northern Iowa University Professor Marilyn Story has made just such a conclusion from her recently released study of changing sexual patterns.

Story surveyed students in 1974 and then again last year. She observed several important shifts in sexual behavior. Most noticeable of these shifts were an increased desire for lifelong commitment as a part of physical intimacy (an increase from 46 to 64 percent); decreased participation in dehumanizing sex acts such as orgies and sexual contact with animals (14 to 5 percent, and 11 to 3 percent respectively); and a doubling in the percentage of students regretting engaging in the acts of sex (increasing from 22 to 44 percent).

The results, if true, bode well for a possible strengthening of America's social fabric. Inasmuch as personal commitment actually accompanies the increased desire for sexual relations with the intent to marry, one would think that families on a whole would become stronger. Intimacy only in physical respects — and that with many partners, or even animals — cannot help but to dehumanize sexuality as a whole and thus cripple the broad intimacy necessary to sustain a strong marriage and to raise well-balanced children.

The concept of commitment runs through the reported beliefs like the proverbial scarlet thread, and this renewed emphasis on commitment, even when not explicitly present, seems to underlie the rest of the reported beliefs.

If in fact a growth in "other-regarding" commitments is at the foundation of the change toward a more conservative attitude toward sexual activity, it tends to disprove the oft-repeated claim of this last election year that the remarkable shift toward conservatism on the part of youth was primarily due to an increase in narcissistic sentiments, that is, a strong "me" orientation.

A crass hedonism is consonant only with the treatment of other humans as simply object-means to a pleasure-end. (This sort of objectification is in fact the reality of the so-called sexual revolution, even if it was not the movement's professed intent). On the other hand, this type of attitude does not characterize the individual who commits himself or herself to another through "thick and thin." Clearly, then, this type of attitude indicates a maturing of the American social character beyond the fundamental weakness so manifestly characteristic of the last twenty years.

Perhaps, all in all, I am making much ado about nothing. Perhaps, in fact, statistical blips in youthful sex patterns really do not tell us much

about possible trends on other social patterns. However, the tendency of the Western mind is to categorize and isolate attributes of humanity from one another and thus ignore linkages between different patterns of social behavior.

Such linkages do exist and the changes reported by Story just may herald at least the possibility of cultural renewal in America; a strengthening of the fortitude of the American people.

In his Harvard address, Solzhenitsyn correctly observed that "the Western system in its present state of spiritual exhaustion does not look attractive." He said this in 1978. Little has changed since then, but perhaps the attitude change indicated by Story's survey does indicate the Solzhenitsyn remedy for Western ills may, just may, be being followed: "Only by the voluntary nurturing in ourselves of freely accepted and serene self-restraint can mankind rise above the world stream of materialism. . . . we shall have to rise to a new height of vision, to a new level of life where our physical nature will not be cursed as in the Middle Ages, but, even more importantly, our spiritual being will not be trampled upon as in the Modern Era."

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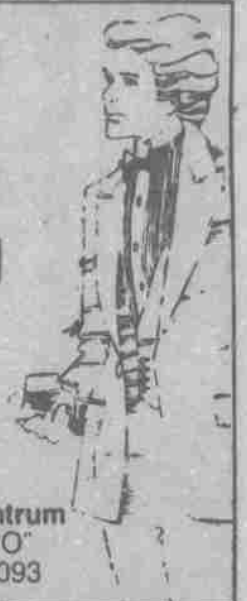
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