

OPINION

The Unexamined Brutality of the Male Libido

By Stephen Marche

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After weeks of continuously unfolding abuse scandals, men have become, quite literally, unbelievable. What any given man might say about gender politics and how he treats women are separate and unrelated phenomena. Liberal or conservative, feminist or chauvinist, woke or benighted, young or old, found on Fox News or in The New Republic, a man's stated opinions have next to no relationship to behavior.

Through sheer bulk, the string of revelations about men from Bill Cosby to Roger Ailes to Harvey Weinstein to Louis C.K. to Al Franken and, this week, to Charlie Rose and John Lasseter, have forced men to confront what they hate to think about most: the nature of men in general. This time the accusations aren't against some freak geography teacher, some frat running amok in a Southern college town. They're against men of all different varieties, in different industries, with different sensibilities, bound together, solely, by the grotesquerie of their sexuality.

Men arrive at this moment of reckoning woefully unprepared. Most are shocked by the reality of women's lived experience. Almost all are uninterested or unwilling to grapple with the problem at the heart of all this: the often ugly and dangerous nature of the male libido.

For most of history, we've taken for granted the implicit brutality of male sexuality. In 1976, the radical feminist and pornography opponent Andrea Dworkin said that the only sex between a man and a woman that could be undertaken without violence was sex with a flaccid penis: "I think that men will have to give up their precious erections," she wrote. In the third century A.D., it is widely believed, the great Catholic theologian Origen, working on roughly the same principle, castrated himself.

Fear of the male libido has been the subject of myth and of fairy tale from the beginning of literature: What else were the stories of Little Red Riding Hood or Bluebeard's Castle about? A vampire is an ancient and powerful man with an insatiable hunger for young flesh. Werewolves are men who regularly lose control of their bestial nature. Get the point? There is a line, obviously, between desire and realization, and some cross it and some don't. But a line is there for every man. And until we collectively confront this reality, the post-Weinstein public discussion — where men and women go from here — will begin from a place of silence and dishonesty.

The masculine libido and its accompanying forces and pathologies drive so much of culture and politics and the economy, while remaining more or less unexamined, both in intellectual circles and in private life. I live in Toronto, a liberal city in a liberal country, with Justin Trudeau for prime minister, a half-female cabinet and an explicitly feminist foreign policy.

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The men I know don't actively discuss changing sexual norms. We gossip and surmise: Who is a criminal and who isn't? Which of the creeps whom we know are out there will fall this week? Beyond the gossip, there is a fog of the past that is better not to penetrate. Aside from the sorts of clear criminal acts that have always been wrong, changing social norms and the imprecision of memory are dark hallways to navigate. Be careful when you go down them; you might not like what you find.

So much easier to turn aside. Professionally, too, I have seen just how profoundly men don't want to talk about their own gendered nature. In the spring, I published a male take on the fluctuations of gender and power in advanced economies; I was interviewed over 70 times by reporters from all over the world, but only three of them were men. Men just aren't interested; they don't know where to start. I'm working on a podcast on modern fatherhood, dealing with issues like pornography and sex after childbirth. Very often, when I interview men, it is the first time they have ever discussed intimate questions seriously with another man.

A healthy sexual existence requires a continuing education, and men have the opposite. There is sex education for boys, but once you leave school the traditional demands on masculinity return: show no vulnerability, solve your own problems. Men deal with their nature alone, and apart. Ignorance and misprision are the norms.

Which is how we wind up where we are today: having a public conversation about male sexual misbehavior, while barely touching on the nature of men and sex. The (very few) prominent men who are speaking up now basically just insist that men need to be better feminists — as if the past few weeks have not amply demonstrated that the ideologies of men are irrelevant.

Liberalism has tended to confront gender problems from a technocratic point of view: improved systems, improved laws, better health. That approach has resulted in plenty of triumphs. But there remains no cure for human desire. ("It isn't actually about sex, it's about power," I read in *The Guardian* the other day. How naïve must you be not to understand that sex itself is about power every bit as much as it's about pleasure?)

Acknowledging the brutality of male libido is not, of course, some kind of excuse. Sigmund Freud recognized the id, and knew it as “a chaos, a caldron full of seething excitations.” But the point of Freud was not that boys will be boys. Rather the opposite: The idea of the Oedipus complex contained an implicit case for the requirements of strenuous repression: If you let boys be boys, they will murder their fathers and sleep with their mothers.

Freud also understood that repression, any repression, is inherently fluid and complicated and requires humility and self-searching to navigate. Women are calling for their pain to be recognized. Many men are quite willing to offer this recognition; it means they don't have to talk about who they are, which means they don't have to think about what they are. Much easier to retreat, into ever more shocked and prurient silence, or into the sort of reflection that seems less intended as honesty, and more aimed to please.

Sex is an impediment to any idealism, which is why the post-Weinstein era will be an era of gender pessimism. What if there is no possible reconciliation between the bright clean ideals of gender equality and the mechanisms of human desire? Meanwhile, sexual morality, so long resisted by liberals, has returned with a vengeance, albeit under progressive terms. The sensation of righteousness, which social media doles out in ever-diminishing dopamine hits, drives the discussion, but also limits it. Unable to find justice, or even to imagine it, we are returning to shame as our primary social form of sexual control.

The crisis we are approaching is fundamental: How can healthy sexuality ever occur in conditions in which men and women are not equal? How are we supposed to create an equal world when male mechanisms of desire are inherently brutal? We cannot answer these questions unless we face them.

I read recently that we are living in a Tucker Max culture. Mr. Max, bro icon, was the author of libidinal epics like “I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell” that sold millions of copies by celebrating cruelty and a total lack of concern for women's humanity. But Mr. Max eventually realized that his casual, unthinking misogyny was destroying him and everyone he loved. He undertook a substantial course of classic Freudian analysis in an attempt to become a decent man. I can only wish we were living in a Tucker Max culture. That is the culture we desperately need.

I'm not asking for male consciousness-raising groups; let's start with a basic understanding that masculinity is a subject worth thinking about. That alone would be an immense step forward. If you want to be a civilized man, you have to consider what you are. Pretending to be something else, some fiction you would prefer to be, cannot help. It is not morality but culture — accepting our monstrosity, reckoning with it — that can save us. If anything can.

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