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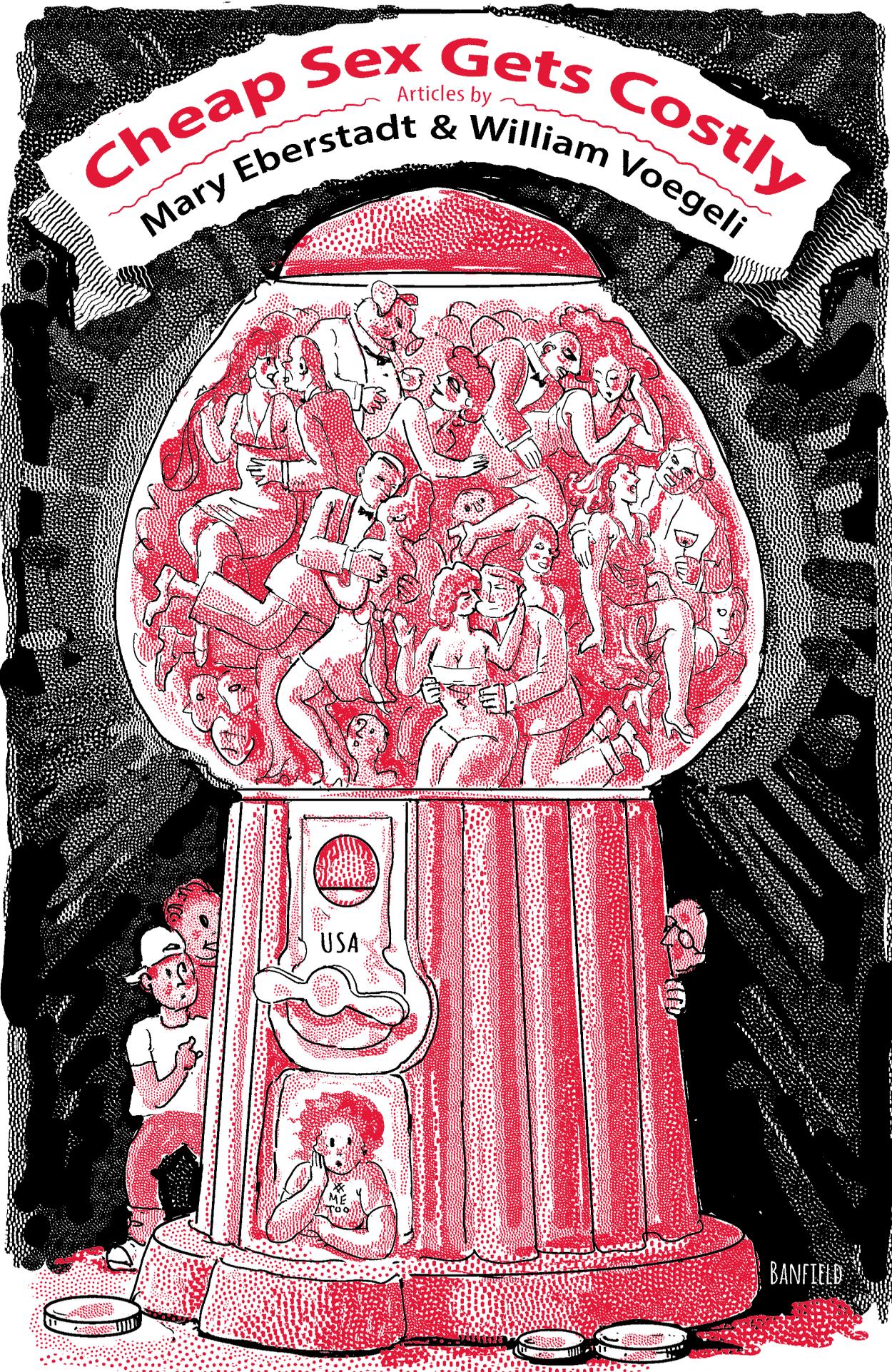
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AFTER THE PERVALANCHE

“LET’S RETHINK SEX,” READ THE *Washington Post* headline, an ominous sign that each and every one of us will pay for Harvey Weinstein’s sins. Weinstein, of course, is the Hollywood producer who became notorious, thanks to the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker*, for using his show-business power to sexually harass, assault, intimidate, and then silence women. As of this writing, 82 have made accusations. Weinstein maintains that he never engaged in “non-consensual sex,” but issued a statement after the *Times* story appeared. “I appreciate the way I’ve behaved with colleagues in the past has caused a lot of pain, and I sincerely apologize for it,” it said. “I cannot be more remorseful about the people I hurt and I plan to do right by all of them.”

The Weinstein story, which broke in early October 2017, triggered a social phenomenon, the #MeToo campaign. Women (and some men) complained, particularly on social media, of sexual misconduct by other male factors—many of whom the accusers named, some of whom were famous. On Twitter, the cascade of allegations came to be known as “The Pervalanche.” Within weeks it buried the careers and reputations of Louis C.K., John Conyers, Al Franken, Mark Halperin, Garrison Keillor, Alex Kozinski, Matt Lauer, Roy Moore, Charlie Rose, Kevin Spacey, and Leon Wieseltier.

The less prominent men affected include ones at the publications that first outed Weinstein. The *Times* suspended reporter Glenn Thrush in November for his “history of bad judgment around young women journalists,” in the words of a Vox.com article. In December, the *New Yorker* fired political reporter Ryan Lizza for what the publisher described as “improper sexual conduct.” The Pervalanche even swept away one woman’s career, a Kansas Democrat who abandoned a race for Congress despite insisting that “false allegations” about harassing a male subordinate were “disgraceful.”

What the *Post* article wants us to rethink, specifically, is sexual morality. Columnist Christine Emba contends that the #MeToo movement shows the need for “a clearer, more boundaried sexual ethic.” Having one, she believes, would improve upon the current dispensation, vague and unboundaried, wherein

sex is “just recreation” and consent is “the only moral sensibility we need respect.”

A Real Reckoning

TO DEVISE NEW SEXUAL ETHICS IS A formidable task, not least because so much of the nation’s attention is presently absorbed by sexual politics. #MeToo’s setting is the Donald Trump presidency. Nearly one year to the day before the *Times* published its Weinstein story, the *Washington Post* reported on the 2005 *Access Hollywood* videotape, recorded without Trump’s knowledge, in which he boasted graphically about taking advantage of a celebrity’s sexual opportunities. Several prominent Republicans called for him to withdraw from the race in the days after the tape became public. Speaker of the House Paul Ryan stated that he would no longer support or defend Trump’s candidacy, and that Republican House candidates should feel free to use their own judgment about whether to support the party’s presidential nominee.

And yet, Trump won. For most Americans, his victory was shocking, in the sense of being unexpected. Feminists, poised to celebrate the election of America’s first female president, found Trump’s victory shocking in the further sense of being a mortification. Even public awareness of his crude boasts did not doom his candidacy. “For feminists,” the *Nation*’s Katha Pollitt wrote, “Trump’s triumph is yet more proof that there is no penalty for misogyny and that the least qualified man can beat the most qualified woman.” Pollitt quoted Michelle Goldberg, now a *New York Times* columnist: “Living under this president as a woman is so f---ing degrading. It’s an insult that I’m basically aware of every waking moment; it poisons every day.”

Through her despair, Goldberg has been prominent among liberal writers trying to determine why Democrats have not gained a clear advantage over Republicans on the question of sexual harassment. In November 2017, MSNBC’s Christopher Hayes tweeted, “As gross and cynical and hypocritical as the right’s ‘what about Bill Clinton’ stuff is, it’s also true that Democrats and the center left are overdue for a real reckoning with the allegations against him.” A conclusion might be

valid, it seems, but those of the wrong political persuasion have no standing to say so.

Goldberg’s efforts to have things both ways have been more ambitious. She took up Hayes’s challenge in a *Times* column, “I Believe Juanita”—Juanita Broadrick, that is, who claims Bill Clinton raped her in 1978, when she was doing volunteer work in his first gubernatorial campaign. Finding Broadrick’s allegation credible, Goldberg says that “Bill Clinton no longer has a place in decent society.”

Of course, if the 2016 election had turned out as Goldberg hoped, Clinton would have had an extremely prominent place: an ex-president returning to the White House as the new president’s First Spouse. She laments, however, that Clinton’s conduct toward women was “weaponized” against his wife, and insists that “it’s not simply partisan tribalism that led liberals” to regard the accusations against him skeptically or even dismissively. During the 2016 campaign, when writing for *Slate*, Goldberg had tried more forcefully to inoculate Hillary Clinton from her husband’s bad reputation, calling it “grotesque to blame Hillary for the way Bill’s staff managed the crises brought on by his priapic indiscipline.” The worst Goldberg could bring herself to say of Mrs. Clinton is that she was “a betrayed woman who nevertheless fought to salvage a marriage and political project she believed in. Perhaps she shouldn’t have.”

Liberal Tribalism

THE PROBLEM WITH THIS FORMULATION is that it has been unclear since they became globally famous 26 years ago whether Hillary and Bill Clinton’s union is primarily a marriage or primarily a political project. Suspicions that it’s the latter make it difficult to believe the portrayal of Hillary Clinton as a loyal, trusting, credulous wife. That interpretation, moreover, cannot be reconciled with the idea, shared by most Hillary supporters, that she has distinguished herself for decades as a tough, shrewd politician.

Nor does putting the blame on “Bill’s staff” exonerate Hillary. The staff included James Carville, who dismissed one Bill Clinton accuser with the words, “If you drag a hundred-dollar bill through a trailer park, you never know what you’ll find.” Another member was



Sydney Blumenthal. According to the late Christopher Hitchens, Blumenthal was busy throughout 1998, the year Monica Lewinsky became famous, spreading the White House party line that the young woman was no concubine, just a stalker and a loon. I can find no evidence that Hillary Clinton has ever publicly repudiated Carville or his trailer-park comment. As for Blumenthal, he was on the staff of her 2008 presidential campaign, after which she tried to get him appointed to a State Department position in 2009. When the White House rejected any formal role for the Clinton operative who had been especially aggressive in attacking Barack Obama during the 2008 primaries, Blumenthal went to work for the Clinton Foundation, and gave Secretary Clinton advice informally.

Perhaps, as Goldberg might say, Hillary Clinton shouldn't have tolerated staffers whose management of her husband's scandals was so aggressive and sexist. But she did, which went a long way to weaponizing Bill Clinton's priapic indiscipline against her own presidential ambitions, and a long way to defusing the *Access Hollywood* bombshell. Many voters, including the 41% of all women and 52% of white women who voted for Trump, seem to have concluded that liberal tribalism explained enough of the denunciations of Trump and equivocations about the Clintons for the whole question of sexual misconduct to be a wash.

Rumors persist that Chelsea Clinton will, in due course, seek public office. In the meantime, the post-Weinstein Pervalanche finds the Clinton political project on hiatus, a circumstance that both necessitates and facilitates the reckoning Hayes called for. Now that liberals' tribal loyalties no longer encompass any Clinton political campaign, some are suggesting that de-Clintonization is the better part of valor. Democrat Kirsten Gillibrand of New York, Hillary Clinton's successor in the U.S. Senate, said that President Clinton should have resigned after his affair with an intern came to light, a position she subsequently qualified. *New Yorker* editor David Remnick thought it a good thing that "many have come to reconsider some of the claims against" the former president. One of his writers, Amy Davidson Sorkin, went so far as to say that Clinton's prominence in his wife's 2016 campaign cost her the election by cancelling Trump's biggest liability. "As hard as it is to hear," Sorkin writes, "particularly given the historic nature of Clinton's candidacy and her laudable record on everything from climate change to children's health, her nomination compromised the Democratic Party."

The compromises started long before 2016, however. The fitfully emerging liberal consensus, after Weinstein, is that Bill Clinton's

affair with Monica Lewinsky, albeit consensual, "was textbook sexual harassment of a subordinate," the kind of thing that would now get any manager fired. But that's not how the situation looked 20 years ago. "It will be a great pity if the Democratic Party is damaged" by the Lewinsky story, feminist writer Anne Roiphe said at the time.

The resulting damage-control required scoffing at the idea that the president had mistreated Ms. Lewinsky. When the story broke, the *New Yorker's* Larissa MacFarquhar wrote that "it would be a rare young woman who could resist...a chance to sleep with a man who is (a) the President and (b) a babe." If we start with the premise that "there's something intrinsically dubious about sex between people who have different amounts of power," MacFarquhar warned, we might wind up with "the proscription of sex altogether."

Liberalism's sanctimony-industrial complex instructs all Americans how to act, speak, think, and feel, but very different rules prevailed behind the walls.

Two weeks later, *New Yorker* editor Tina Brown's account of a White House state dinner made *her* sound like a stalker:

Now see your President, tall and absurdly debonair, as he dances with a radiant blonde, his wife.... Forget the dog-in-the-manger, down-in-the-mouth neo-puritanism of the op-ed tumbrel drivers, and see him instead as his guests do: a man in a dinner jacket with more heat than any star in the room (or, for that matter, at the multiplex).

Leading feminists were—at the time, when it counted—equally resourceful at dismissing the Lewinsky controversy. Susan Faludi, author of *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991), disparaged Lewinsky as someone "sleeping her way to the bottom of the Revlon empire." (Before stories about her relationship with the president were published, Clinton ally Vernon Jordan had arranged for Lewinsky to get a job interview with that com-

pany.) Roiphe said that if not for the horrible publicity and scandal—the fault of Clinton's enemies rather than Clinton—the affair would have been a memory that Lewinsky "would treasure...for the rest of her life as a special thing that had happened to her in her early 20s."

The most prominent feminist was one of the president's most unyielding defenders. President Clinton, having resisted the Religious Right and appointed Ruth Bader Ginsburg to the Supreme Court, was women's "most crucial champion" and "vital" to "preserving reproductive freedom," in Gloria Steinem's words. Of course, "if Clinton had raped women, beaten up Hillary—real private sins would not be forgiven, no matter what the value of the public behavior."

Yet Steinem has never retracted or modified this opinion, even as others, such as Michelle Goldberg, have concluded that Clinton behaved despicably. Paula Jones, for example, alleged that when she was an Arkansas state employee in 1991, Governor Clinton summoned her to his hotel room, exposed himself to her, and asked her to perform oral sex. This sounds like the sort of episode that explains why there is a women's movement. Yet according to Steinem, the crucial exculpating factor in Jones's account is that when she declined the governor's thoughtful invitation, Clinton let the matter drop, so to speak. Since he took "no" for an answer, Steinem wants the court of public opinion to accept a plea bargain: Clinton did not harass or demean Jones. He "just seems to have made a clumsy sexual pass," she wrote in the *New York Times* in 1998.

Political Imperative

THE POST-WEINSTEIN RECKONING WITH the allegations against Bill Clinton has created a generational divide among liberals. Those too young to have been combatants in the 1990s are inclined to criticize the former president. Goldberg was born in 1975, for example, and Hayes in 1979. In the course of arguing that Clinton should have been forced to resign the presidency "in disgrace under pressure from his own party," Vox.com's Matthew Yglesias makes a point of noting that he was still a high school student in 1998.

Though born in 1972, Jonathan Chait became a staff writer for the *New Republic* in 1995. He feels now, as he did in 1998, that the Republican effort to impeach Clinton was a travesty, and no reassessment of Clinton's character justifies any other conclusion about the GOP's "procedural extremism." Michael Tomasky, born in 1960, goes further: Clinton was right to resist both impeachment *and* calls to resign. The idea that he should have resigned was "in-



sane” at the time, since conservatives wanted to “nullify a presidential election” on the basis of a “consensual adult relationship.” And it’s insane now, since conservatives are determined “to smear and discredit both Clintons” as “part of a larger effort to discredit the whole project of progressive governance.”

On *that* point, the paramount importance of progressivism and the derivative importance of every other consideration, all discussants of all ages agree. Tomasky does criticize Clinton for the Lewinsky scandal, but entirely on the basis of this political imperative: the president’s consensual relationship was “unfathomably irresponsible” because, knowing his enemies’ ruthless determination, Clinton must have realized that “reckless behavior on his part could imperil not just his presidency, but...potentially, Democratic and progressive politics for years.” By the same token, Yglesias observes that once Hillary Clinton began her New York senatorial campaign in 2000, “she immediately became America’s presumptive first woman president, creating a kind of reputational vortex that shielded her husband’s behavior from scrutiny” by “people in leading positions in American progressive politics.” He parts company with Tomasky about the current situation only in making a different tactical calculation. “Now that Hillary is out of electoral politics...there’s no excuse for Democrats not to look back on these events with more objectivity.”

The question of how best to protect and advance progressivism is harder when it concerns politicians who still have careers, and might have futures. Michelle Goldberg wrote two anguished *Times* articles after a woman publicly accused Democratic senator Al Franken of Minnesota of sexual misconduct. “[T]orn by competing impulses,” such as “to see sexual harassment finally taken seriously” without “participating in a sex panic,” Goldberg argued for and against the necessity of forcing Franken from the Senate.

Franken himself was conflicted. He responded to the first accusation by calling for a Senate Ethics Committee investigation, then resigned weeks later after several more accusers came forward, without waiting for the committee to consider any evidence. In his speech to the Senate, Franken said he was “confident” that the Ethics Committee would

have exonerated him, inasmuch as some of the allegations “are simply not true” and “others I remember very differently.” (He implicitly denies, by not listing it, the existence of a third category: accusations that were essentially accurate.) Nonetheless, Franken ultimately resigned because, he explained, it would have been impossible to discharge his senatorial duties while defending himself before the committee.

The question of whether the progressive cause required sacrificing Franken’s career was so tortured that the debate continued even after his resignation speech. On the one hand, Minnesota’s Democratic governor would appoint Franken’s successor, which meant that the number of Senate Democrats would stay the same. To cite this fact, as several columnists did, strongly suggests that liberals would have assessed Franken’s situation differently

resignation subsequently expressed regret for having done so.

The Eternal 1960s

BILL CLINTON GOT THE BENEFIT OF THE doubt from liberals, which Franken did not, because 1998’s political calculations yielded a different result than 2017’s. But more fundamental questions were in play. The adamant defense of Clinton cannot be explained in terms of his being irreplaceable. Had he been forced to resign, he would have been succeeded by Vice President Al Gore, who was equally committed to the liberal cause.

The insistence that Clinton must not be cashiered or even criticized too strongly became entwined with a bigger task, defending the sexual revolution. The result was furious disdain for the reactionaries attacking Clinton.

They wanted, his defenders alleged, to restore pre-1960s sexual mores. David Frum wrote a few weeks after Monica Lewinsky became famous that at the heart of the scandal and debate was “the central dogma of the baby boomers: the belief that sex, so long as it’s consensual, ought never to be subject to moral scrutiny at all.” Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinsky was no big deal, his defenders said at the time. But the fact that they said it so often and insistently meant that it was a *very* big deal that consensual sex be regarded as no big deal.



Getty Images

if his resignation had flipped a Senate seat to the GOP. On the other hand, the urgency of pressing Franken to resign was that his presence would complicate Democratic attacks on Roy Moore, the Republican who had been expected to win an Alabama Senate seat in a special election, despite sexual misconduct accusations against him, some involving teenage girls. It was imperative for Franken to resign immediately, said *Slate*’s Mark Joseph Stern, because “Democrats’ credibility on sexual harassment is at stake.” Five days after Franken announced his resignation, however, Moore lost to Doug Jones, the first Alabama Democrat to win a U.S. Senate election since 1992. Democrats immediately began wondering if there was a way to keep their credibility on sexual harassment *and* keep Senator Franken. Some Democratic senators who called for his

Clinton’s victory against independent counsel Ken Starr and congressional Republicans, which allowed him to serve out his second term, and his wife to be regarded as a president-in-waiting for the ensuing 16 years, also marked the last gasp of the anti-’60s sexual counter-revolution. It is unthinkable, Frum said in the aftermath of the Lewinsky scandal, that liberals would have shrugged at the strong evidence that Clinton had committed perjury and obstruction of justice for any other purpose, such as concealing racist remarks or cheating on his taxes. But in 1998, “when the test came, a very great many American liberals decided that the president’s right to pursue sexual pleasure without interference mattered more to them than his obligation to uphold the rule of law.”

The feminists of our day have good reason to reconsider the bargain feminists made 20



years ago in order to save Clinton and vindicate the sexual revolution. Like every deal with the devil, the necessary concessions never stopped and always increased. “I came of age in the 60’s and 70’s,” began Harvey Weinstein’s statement, “when all the rules about behavior and workplaces were different. That was the culture then.”

And so it was. The “post-Harvey Weinstein purge of sexual harassers has been largely confined to liberal-leaning fields like Hollywood, media and the Democratic Party,” Michelle Goldberg wrote. The reason is that feminists “know they can’t expect accountability from Republicans, but they’ve forced it from people who claim to share their ideals.”

Perhaps, but the discovery of brazen, pervasive hypocrisy always compels attention. The effort to keep the 1960s alive forever was a central concern of Hollywood, the media, and the Democratic Party, the interconnected power sources that, along with academia, make liberalism’s sanctimony-industrial complex function. Since the complex uses its cultural influence to instruct all Americans how to act, speak, think, and feel, it is of more than passing interest to learn that a very different set of rules prevailed behind the walls. Weinstein was one of the most powerful figures in Hollywood, his “misconduct” so well known that even a college student from Vermont seeking to become a film actress had heard rumors warning about him, according to the *New Yorker*. Yet such politically active stars as George Clooney and Meryl Streep, who had worked with Weinstein and spent decades in Hollywood, drew on their formidable acting skills to play the roles of naïfs, shocked and appalled, who had *no idea* that the producer who advanced their careers and reputations was a less bashful Caligula. Streep referred to Weinstein as “God” in her 2012 Golden Globe awards speech.

Since journalists are supposed to be in the business of facts, not fantasies, the media’s record is even more pathetic. It acted as the tribune of high standards while functioning as if exempt from all standards. Mark Halperin was prominent and powerful, but also a journalist whose lewd, aggressive treatment of women was an “open secret,” according to the

Daily Beast. Like Weinstein, he had the ability to advance or impede careers in his industry, a fact people kept in mind when deciding whether to speak up or stay silent. “Everybody knew,” one journalist told the *Daily Beast* (off the record). “I’d been warning young women reporters about Mark for a long time.” In short, “The ‘open secret’ was open to the insiders, but secret to the public,” in the words of columnist Glenn Harlan Reynolds. Ultimately, Reynolds concludes, “the political press, for all its posturing about fearless truth-telling, in practice acts more like an NFL team with a felonious wide receiver, or a corporation with a handsy CEO: More interested in avoiding bad publicity than in telling us the truth.”

The Pervalanche, then, has made clear that the leniency liberals afforded Bill Clinton was no one-time response to the exigencies of the 1990s. *Many* big shots, whose words, works,

Pervalanche that the Catholic Church’s did from the pedophile priest scandal. Growing numbers of liberals seem to realize that they cannot credibly use sexual harassment against conservatives without applying stern standards to the venues in American life they already control. Of course, they resumed playing offense as quickly as possible. Al Franken had barely finished his resignation speech before Democratic senators began calling on President Trump to resign because of allegations against him. Liberals’ qualms about nullifying a presidential election are not what they were in 1998, or even in October 2016.

Affirmative Consent

TREATING DEMOCRATS’ PROBLEMS WITH sexual misconduct as a settled matter in order to pivot to attacking Republicans is not going to be so simple, however. Even as the defense of Bill Clinton 20 years ago entailed a defense of the sexual revolution, the post-Weinstein defenestration of Clinton has led to a reconsideration of it. Specifically, a decades-old intra-feminist debate—between those who are “sex positive” and those who are, we might say, “sex skeptical,” treating heterosexual sex as inherently threatening to women’s well-being—has moved from obscure journals to the center of political and moral debates.



Leann Tweeden/KABC

reputations, and money served the progressive project, enjoyed similar *droit du seigneur* privileges. In Hollywood, “everybody knew” it was grotesque for Harvey Weinstein’s company to distribute the 2015 documentary *The Hunting Ground*, which deplored an alleged “epidemic” of sexual assault on college campuses. But no one privy to the open secret about Weinstein thought the incongruity worth mentioning. “Everybody knew” that Mark Halperin was not the ideal moral arbiter to pronounce Todd Akin’s remark about “legitimate rape” to be “outrageous” and deserving to be “denounced by all.” After all, Halperin said, “Sexual assault is a serious matter.” But the larger cause in 2012 was to save a Democratic Senate seat, which required keeping Halperin’s open secret secret.

Liberalism’s moral authority deserves to suffer the same deep, lasting damage from the

The #MeToo movement has given more power and prominence to the sex skeptics, the “Too” having been interpreted expansively. Women have accused various men of sexual assault, but also of: sending “creepy” text messages, “especially when drunk”; “flirting”; having “inappropriate conversation” and being “in general a huge disgusting sleaze ball.” Senator Gillibrand says, “I think when we start having to talk about the differences between sexual assault and sexual harassment and unwanted groping, you are having the wrong conversation.” In the right conversation, “You need to draw a line in the sand and say: None of it is OK. None of it is acceptable.”

The idea that rape is simply the outermost location on the continuum of male sexual desire and assertion lends itself to interpreting all male sexual deeds as forms of rape and



manifestations of our “rape culture.” This was the view of the radical feminist Andrea Dworkin, who wrote in 1976, “I think that men will have to give up their precious erections.” And it’s the view of columnist Emily Lindin, who wrote dismissively in 2017 about false accusations of sexual harassment: “If some innocent men’s reputations have to take a hit in the process of undoing the patriarchy, that is a price I am absolutely willing to pay.”

The proposition that male sexuality is brutal until proven benign has informed the campus crusade against sexual assault. Antioch College became a laughingstock in 1993 because of its Sexual Offense Prevention Policy, authored by the campus group Womyn of Antioch. The policy stated that “consent must be obtained each and every time there is sexual activity,” and that, “Each new level of sexual activity requires consent.” A *Saturday Night Live* skit portrayed a fraternity member mystified by the policy, while a woman majoring in Victimization Studies understood it perfectly.

But the Womyn of Antioch are having the last laugh. California and New York have passed laws making a college’s receipt of state aid contingent on adopting affirmative consent policies. Other states are considering similar bills. Vox.com’s Ezra Klein welcomed the California law because men at college

“need to feel a cold spike of fear when they begin a sexual encounter.”

The California version states, “Affirmative consent must be ongoing throughout a sexual activity and can be revoked at any time.” The New York standards specify that consent given by a person under the influence of drugs or alcohol does not count, even though being intoxicated does not excuse the person initiating the sexual activity. Furthermore, sobriety is merely necessary, not sufficient, to validate consent. “No” means “no” under affirmative consent, but “yes” doesn’t always mean “yes.” The coercion that nullifies consent, according to one advisor cited by *Ms. magazine*, encompasses “social pressure,” such as “the silent treatment.”

“Affirmative consent,” in other words, really means “enthusiastic consent.” And no matter how enthusiastic, there will still be the potential for “he said, she said” confusion. To address this problem, the Affirmative Consent Project has distributed “consent contracts” on college campuses. People sign one and photograph it with a smartphone prior to having sex. Whether such a photograph would exonerate a student accused of nonconsensual sex is doubtful, however, since there is no way to know if one party signed the contract under the influence of alcohol or the silent treatment. There’s no clear solution here, since many people will decline to have sex if a no-

tary public needs to be in the room at all times. Sex that is safe, legally and socially as well as biologically, turns out to be as erotic as completing the paperwork at the airport rental car counter.

Laura Kipnis, a feminist critic of the rape-culture construct, contends that in the academic “climate of sanctimony about student vulnerability,” the “infantilization of women [is] fused with identity politics, so that being vulnerable, a potential victim—or survivor, in the new parlance—becomes a form of identity.” Kipnis, a Northwestern University professor, reports that Guideline No. 1 at a campus workshop on sexual harassment was, “Do not make unwanted sexual advances.” She says that the workshop leaders were flummoxed by her question: “But how do you know they’re unwanted until you try?”

The academic opponents of rape culture have seen dozens of successful court challenges to campus procedures that punish students for sexual activity deemed insufficiently consensual. Like all zealots, the campus tribunals’ defenders treat each setback as further vindication of their cause. “These lawsuits are an incredible display of entitlement,” said Occidental College professor Caroline Heldman, co-founder of End Rape On Campus, “the same entitlement that drove [the plaintiffs] to rape.” To protest that you were falsely accused,

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#MeToo?

ALTHOUGH #METOO HAS NO HEAD-
quarters or party platform, it already has a clear aspiration: to carry the fight against rape culture far beyond the campus. In doing so, however, it is less likely to remake the world as Planet Antioch than to discredit and marginalize itself. The clearest indication of this goal, and its accompanying dangers, was an article on the webzine *Babe* about comedian Aziz Ansari. In it, reporter Katie Way tells the story of “Grace,” a 22-year-old photographer who had a one-night stand last September with Ansari, who was then 34. It went badly, to say the least. “It took a really long time for me to validate [the night’s events] as sexual assault,” Grace told Way. After dinner followed by prolonged, unsuccessful sexual fumbling at his apartment, Grace took a car home. The next day she texted Ansari: “Last night might’ve been fun for you, but it wasn’t for me. You ignored clear non-verbal cues; you kept going with advances.”

The *Babe* article may be remembered as the moment when #MeToo overplayed its hand, forfeited its moral authority, and began to implode. The clear intention was to make Grace the victim and Ansari the villain, another trophy to mount on the Weinstein wall. (*Babe* had previously invited readers to send in stories about their “personal Harvey Weinstains.”) Predominantly, however, the reaction was just the opposite. Caitlin Flanagan of the *Atlantic* attacked the story as “3,000 words of revenge porn” intended to “hurt and humiliate Ansari.” CNN’s Ashleigh Banfield scolded Grace for letting *Babe* turn a “bad date” into an article that will undermine “a movement that I, along with all of my sisters in the workplace, have been dreaming of for decades.” In the *New York Times*, Bari Weiss said the only thing the article proved was that Ansari cannot read minds. As for Grace, Weiss felt it necessary to explain to her, “If you are hanging out naked with a man, it’s safe to assume he is going to try to have sex with you,” and “If he pressures you to do something you don’t want to do, use a four-letter word, stand up on your two legs and walk out his door.”

Ms. Way is also 22, so it’s tempting to ascribe the immaturity valorized in her Ansari article to *Babe* being written by and for permatoddlers, as the website’s name inadvertently suggests. Yet despite itself, the article raises important questions. For one thing, the fact that Ansari had no professional relationship

with Grace, or any evident way to help or hurt her career, does not mean that he is the first man unfairly attacked by #MeToo. The actions that got journalist Glenn Thrush in trouble, for example, all occurred away from work in social settings (usually bars and restaurants), involved no subordinates (he had none), and no coercion. Basically, he stood accused of hitting on some women in his line of work, usually after both parties had had several drinks. To its credit, the *New York Times* announced that it will end Thrush’s suspension. To its discredit, it will still punish him by taking him off the White House beat, where he made his reputation.

Second, false or at least doubtful allegations of misconduct have been integral to #MeToo from the start, just as they are to the campus jihad against rape culture. (*Reason*’s Robby Soave points out that American colleges have investigated, suspended, or expelled dozens of men following accusations flimsier than Grace’s.) Even before the Ansari story, feminists were warning that #MeToo’s “reflexive and unnuanced sense of outrage,” in critic Daphne Merkin’s words, has turned “a bona fide moment of moral accountability into a series of ad hoc and sometimes unproven accusations.” Novelist Margaret Atwood writes that she has been called a “bad feminist” for contending that charges of sexual misconduct are sometimes treated in the manner of the Salem witch trials: being accused is effectively tantamount to being guilty.

Third, #MeToo has been more interested in punishing than defining sexual transgressions. Nearly three months after its beginning, the *Atlantic*’s Michelle Cottle found it necessary to ask, but impossible to explain, what “sexual misconduct” actually encompasses. #MeToo sprang to life in response to incidents of “clear coercion, intimidation, and violence,” Masha Gessen wrote in the *New Yorker*, but now “seems to have produced the sense that meaningful consent is elusive or perhaps even impossible.”

Failed Revolution

THIS LOSS OF CONFIDENCE IN CONSENT as the criterion of sexual morality is the final issue raised by #MeToo and the Pervalanche. The sexual revolution has followed its logical course to a place that growing numbers of people find sad and ugly. That revolution’s objective was a new moral regime, neither censorious nor hypocritical, in which consensual sex outside marriage was every bit as licit as sex within it. Before the sexual revolution, a man wasn’t supposed to have sex with a woman unless she’d taken his

last name. Fifty years after the revolution, it’s increasingly common for a man to have sex with a woman without ever learning her last name. The sexual revolution has yielded the “hook-up” culture or, as *Vanity Fair* described it, the “dating apocalypse.” Not only are sexual “partners” not required to commit to each other, the hook-up demands that the transitory, transactional partnership must disavow any possibility or hope of commitment. As a result, one writer lamented, “It’s rare for a woman of our generation to meet a man who treats her like a priority instead of an option.”

Seen in this light, #MeToo’s excesses are understandable, even if they are not defensible. Women like Grace conclude they’ve been assaulted because “we no longer have any moral language for talking about sex except consent,” says columnist Megan McArdle. “So when men do things that [women] feel are wrong—such as aggressively pursuing casual sex without caring about the feelings of their female target—we’re left flailing for some way to describe this as non-consensual, even when she agreed to the sex.” McArdle notes that an incongruity of our era is that many women who resent “the expectation of immediate sex without courtship” also accede to it. They do so for reasons that Aristophanes would recognize: the well-known fact that there are large numbers of sexually available women destroys the negotiating leverage of any woman who would like to insist on courtship and commitment.

#MeToo wants to resolve this dilemma with periodic airstrikes on the sort of men who used to be called cads, delivered by internet shaming or campus inquisitions. Knowing there’s a small chance he will suffer this large penalty, a man will feel a cold spike of fear and proceed with caution. The alternative—suffering the smaller penalty of involuntary celibacy—is not presently a credible threat.

A less acrimonious resolution would entail retracing our steps from the beginning of the sexual revolution. Doing so would make consent a necessary condition for licit, respectable, honorable sex, but no longer a sufficient one. Defining the sufficient conditions will be the difficult but necessary aspect of rethinking sex. Part of that debate will be whether the increased freedom promised by the sexual revolution was always a slippery slope leading to the dating apocalypse. The notion may occur in the course of these deliberations that the *ancien régime* that limited licit sex to marital sex was the worst ethic for governing sexuality, except for all the others that have been tried.

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