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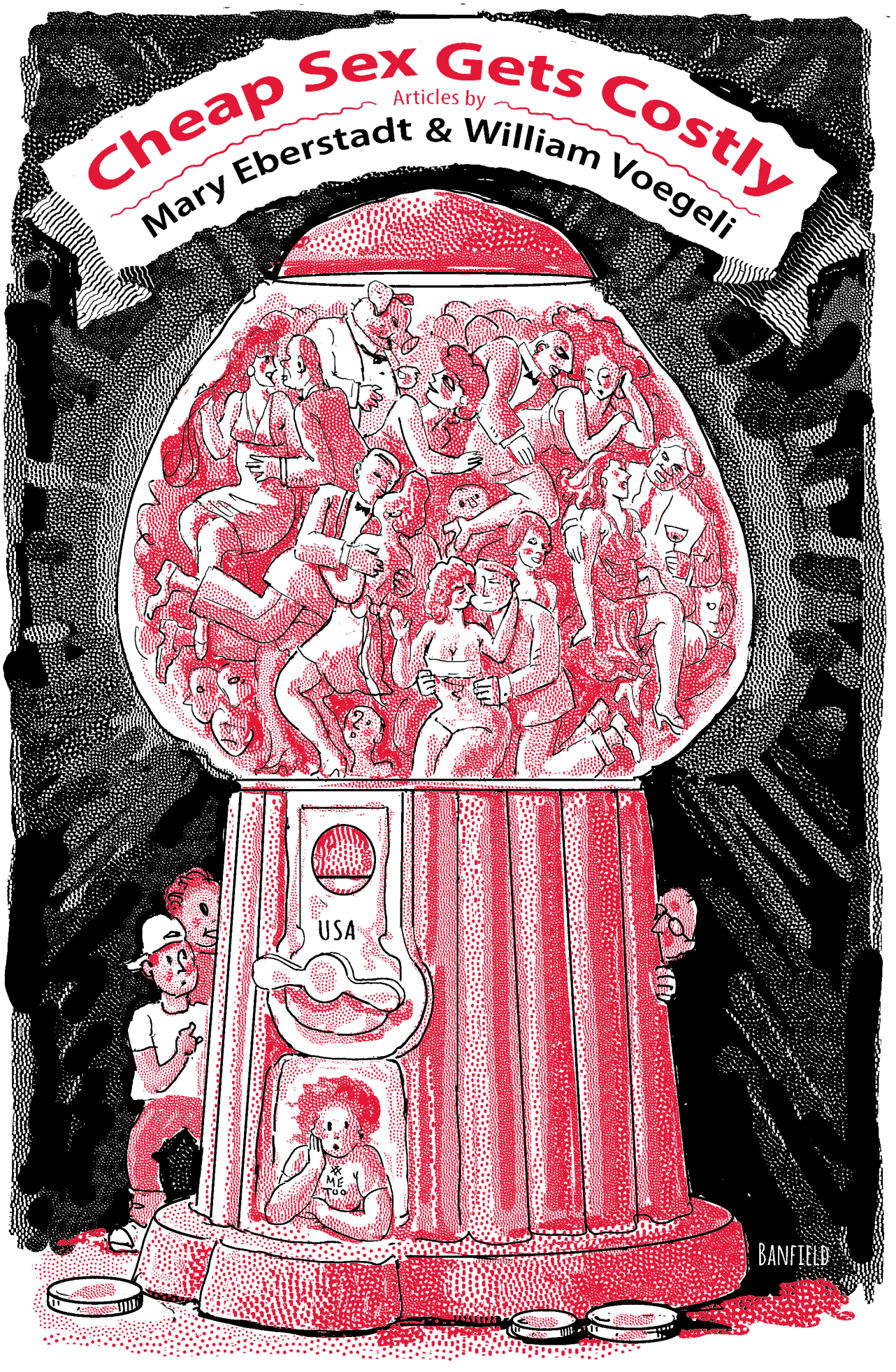

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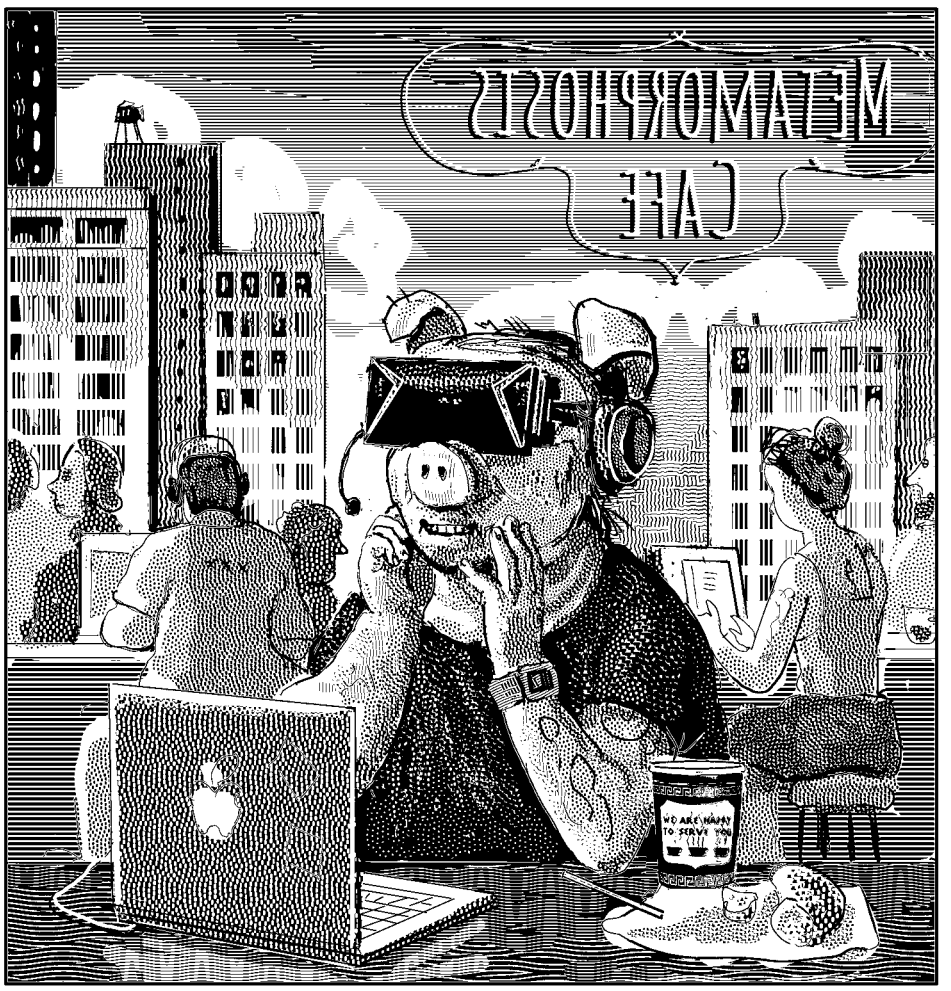
Book Review by Mary Eberstadt

Cupid, Interrupted

Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage, and Monogamy, by Mark Regnerus.
Oxford University Press, 280 pages, $29.95



In *Julius Caesar*, a Roman mob inflamed by the duplicitous Mark Antony seizes upon a poet named Cinna en route to the late dictator's funeral. Mistaking him for a conspirator by the same name, the frenzied citizens call for his head. So choleric are these Romans that they do not even relent upon learning that the man is instead Cinna the poet. "Tear him for his bad verses!" they shout by way of rationalization. Mere facts, Shakespeare suggests, won't trump blind lust for destruction.

A few years ago, impassioned online gangs went after social scientist Mark Regnerus with similar heat—only instead of bad verses, they wanted him cyber-torn for good sociology. Like Cinna, Regnerus was in the wrong place at a devious time. In 2012—just as the push for same-sex marriage was nearing success—this then-associate professor of sociology at the University of Texas at Austin ambled into the public square with an article in *Social Science Research* called: "How different are the adult children of parents who have same-sex relationships? Findings from the New Family Structures Study." While acknowledging that same-sex households exhibit a diversity of behaviors and forms, he also interpreted the results to mean that children in such homes face higher risks of certain outcomes, including unemployment, receiving public assistance, and lowered academic achievement.

In other words, his paper tacitly called into question one of the axioms of the times, which is that sexual minorities are just like sexual majorities, dammit—except when sexual minorities are being better.

As Andrew Ferguson documented in an essay for the *Weekly Standard*, "Revenge of the Sociologists," what happened next was "brute cultural warfare." A letter published in the *Huffington Post* by several of Regnerus's colleagues accused him of "besmirching" the good name of the university. Another letter of protest was signed by 200 scholars and researchers and published in *Social Science Research*. Aspersions were cast about the funding provided for the study by the Witherspoon Institute and the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation. Public condemnations were issued by the American Sociological Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the American Medical Association. A formal complaint of "scientific misconduct" was submitted to his university. And those were just some of the unfunny things that happened on the way to our new public forum, where many things can be said freely so long as they do not pertain to sexual minorities—a group as sacrosanct in some venues today as the Vestal Virgins were in Cinna's time.

What's surprising in retrospect wasn't the ferocity of the attack. It's that despite having become the object of the most orchestrated academic hate-in within recent memory, Regnerus remains a professor at that same university. This credit to the tenure system is all to the good, because from that perch he has now delivered one of the most coolly argued and fiercely true books yet written about the sexual revolution and its contemporary fallout.

Cheap Sex is not the first exercise in applying economic principles to the radically changed marketplace of sex, as its author notes. Previous thinkers including Anthony Giddens—whose formative book *The Transformation of Intimacy* appeared a quarter-century ago—influence these pages, as do economists and social scientists like Roy Baumeister, Kathleen Vohs, Gary Becker, George Akerlof, Janet Yellen, Timothy Reichert, and others. Even so, Regnerus's achievement in *Cheap Sex* is singular. He builds on a variety of foregoing insights to turn economic analysis of the sexual revolution into a gripping, panoramic portrait of the times, illustrated in vivid statistical color.

Drawing on surveys and other sources—particularly a data collection project headed by the author called *Relationships in America*, which interviewed just under 15,000 Americans between the ages of 18 and 60 in 2014—and written with empathy and verve, this is a book that even its most ardent detractors should find hard to dismiss. It's often said—or was often said by President Bill Clinton's defenders, anyway—that everyone lies about sex. Not here. *Cheap Sex* delivers the empirical truth about life after the contraceptive revolution. The result is "not an elegy for a lost era," Regnerus insists, but instead a sober and sobering "account of how young Americans relate today: what they think about relationships, how they interact sexually with their partners, what they hope for romantically."

Data sets and regression analyses aside, the argument of *Cheap Sex* is straightforward. Sex is now less expensive than ever before, because its highest "costs"—pregnancy, childbearing, childrearing, and the rest of the procreative bundle—have been reduced by technological revolution(s). As Regnerus puts it, "Cheaper sex has been facilitated by three distinctive technological developments: (1) the wide uptake of the Pill as well as a mentality stemming from it that sex is 'naturally' infertile; (2) mass-produced high-quality pornography; and (3) the advent and evolution of online dating/meeting services."

So just how cheap *is* sex today?

Cheap enough to explain, for starters, two commonly dissected and lamented phenomena—the failure of many men to launch, and to commit. The rising numbers of men procrastinating or opting out of the marriage market aren't due to the commonly held belief that these men are "afraid" to settle down. It's rather that cheap sex, whether via pornography or the real thing, has demolished for many the incentive system of mating for life. Tinder and related apps, meanwhile, make finding a partner for sex cheaper and sometimes easier than mailing a letter. In another interesting measure of the declining price of sex, prostitution is apparently diminishing—just as the book's economic analysis would have suggested, given the inundated marketplace.

Like any other revolution, this one has winners and losers; to say that sex is cheap isn't to say it's evenly distributed. But in a time when 20-25% percent of men and women say they first had sex with their current partner "after we met, but before we began to consider ourselves in a relationship," and 45% of women say they "first had sex with their current partner no later than the first two weeks of the relationship," buying the proverbial bovine makes less sense than ever. Consider a story the author cites from *Vanity Fair* about one male subject, who reports having "'hooked up with three girls,' thanks to the Internet and to Tinder, and…over the course of four nights… spent a total of $80 between them. And he got what he came for with all three." How's that for the arithmetic of cheap sex?

Regnerus does a lively job of illuminating some of the paradoxes afloat in this flooded marketplace, among them that women are often more likely to have sex early on with men they *don't* see as marriage partners; and that women are less dependent on men's material resources than ever before, even as the same change has made it harder for them to secure what many want most, i.e., marriage and family. Yes, there are innate differences between the sexes, and they aren't sugarcoated here. That fact alone will ensure that some people who ought to read this book won't, and that some of those who do read it will be agitated beyond reason. The author correctly anticipates such objections, though: "You may prefer I not speak about sex in this way. That's fine. But your preference for a different lingo about sex does not make any of this untrue."

Chapter Four, "The Cheapest Sex," is a particularly eye-opening 36 pages on the subject of contemporary pornography—who uses it, how often and how much, and how that use is affecting relationships with live human beings. "Men can [now] see more flesh in five minutes than their great-grandfathers could in a lifetime," Regnerus notes. "In other words, humans are not evolutionarily familiar with the accessibility, affordability, and anonymity that Internet pornography offers." The result of this tsunami, he also shows (albeit without "judging") is exactly comparable to the glut of cheap sugar in the modern food market: obesity, compulsion, and sickness. Pornography has become our newest disease of civilization.

Readers might be curious to know just how many men out there, proportionately, may be looking up from their laptop or phone with what journalist Pamela Paul has called "pornified eyes." In their *Relationships in America* survey, Regnerus and his team ask the simple question, "When did you last intentionally look at pornography?" Forty-three percent of men and 9% of women reported having viewed it in the preceding week. Among 18 to 39 year olds, the numbers increased to 46% of men and 16% of women. Just as salient, 24% of men reported their most recent use of pornography as either "today" or "yesterday"—a number that points to "possible compulsive behavior," the author explains.

Among the virtues of *Cheap Sex* is its tacit demolition of the libertarian pretense of pornography as harmless spectator sport. As Regnerus observes and documents, digital pornography "replaces sex (for some), augments it (for others) and alters real sexual connection with real persons. *It has changed sex and altered relationships in ways that iTunes has not changed music*" (emphasis added).

Twenty-four-year-old "Carlos," for instance, illustrates just some of the ways in which putting pornography first disrupts relations with 3-D humans. He keeps a collection of sex tapes made with former partners; his serial girlfriends dislike this habit of his and sometimes break off relations because of it. It also annoys his current partner when "I can't function just cuz I'm too desensitized," as he puts it. The dissatisfaction with "real life" people, i.e., typically women, that's fomented by smut is also part of this picture. As another subject puts it, "If you're, you know, looking at porn every single day, you're gonna want something else. You're not gonna want what you've got. There's no way you could be happy with it." A third makes the point succinctly: "You become dissatisfied with the person you're with. How could you not?"

Regnerus ventures the thought that this variant of sexual obesity, particularly, is having political reverberations—in effect, skewing the polity in a more liberal direction. "Viewing pornographic material is OK," for example, is a statement that maps adroitly onto the spectrum, with 63% of "very liber-

al" respondents agreeing, as opposed to only 19% of "very conservative" ones. Even more intriguing, "last pornography use" emerges as "(very) significant predictor of men's support for same-sex marriage." Why might that be? "Contrary to what very many people might wish to think," Regnerus hypothesizes in one of the book's countercultural digressions, "men's support for redefining marriage may not be the product of actively adopting ideals about expansive freedoms, rights, liberties, and a noble commitment to fairness. It may be, at least in part, a passive byproduct of regular exposure to the diversity of sex found in contemporary porn."

Cheap sex closes with a list of predictions about what Regnerus foresees by the year 2030: even cheaper sex, as ever-more sophisticated pornography combines with computer operating systems of the kind portrayed in the 2013 movie *Her*, resulting in human beings who form their emotional bonds ever more online; a weakening of age-of-consent laws; a continuing increase in unmarried Americans; a recession of same-sex marriage now that the right to it has been established; more experimentation with same-sex behavior, due largely to the "teaching" role of pornography; increased polyamory; and the failure of organized religion to interfere beyond the margins with any of the above. These are bold prognostications, and readers can adjudicate them best by studying the book and its data in full.

Does all of it mean we're doomed? No doubt some readers will find these pages dystopian—a swirling mass of many Paolos and Francescas, destined by the world after the Pill never to connect. That said, it's also possible that the encouraging appearance of this book itself is of a piece with, and signals, something else.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of *Humanae Vitae*, the Catholic papal encyclical whose reiteration of traditional moral teaching and unapologetic rejection of the sexual revolution made it one of the most reviled documents of the modern age. For many years afterwards, few people could be found in public forthrightly defending those disparaged teachings apart from those popes charged with speaking *ex cathedra* (and not all churchmen, at that).

Now, half a century into the revolution, it's a different scene. The most vigorous defenses of traditionalist teaching these days are emanating for the most part from *outside* the Church. A rising tide of refugees, fleeing the damages chronicled so well in *Cheap Sex*, now contributes new voices, new critiques, and sometimes even new communities designed to counteract exactly what Regnerus and others describe—all dedicated to a more expansive and ennobled vision of human worth than the one now dominant.

Religious and social groups that didn't exist a decade or two ago, pledged to a different kind of "resistance," have sprung up on even some of the most secular campuses. Online and other resources for undoing the harms of pornography and addiction abound, religious and non-religious. The popularity and wide discussion of Rod Dreher's call for a "Benedict Option" is more proof of a growing desire among some to say good riddance to what the revolution hath wrought. Even in one of the most unpromising precincts of all—Hollywood—overdue revulsion against men cloaked in the revolution's prerogatives has finally broken through to the surface, as the belated yet seemingly authentic massive outcry over disgraced director Harvey Weinstein, et al. and ad nauseum, goes to show.

As Leo Tolstoy once said after reporting in excruciating detail about the goings-on in a slaughterhouse, "We can't pretend we don't know these things." The same is true of the empirical and human record of our time, following the technological shocks and aftershocks chronicled by Mark Regnerus in *Cheap Sex*. Like a number of other revision-minded books published during the past few years alone, this one will make it harder to plead ignorance about the wreckage out there. Maybe all this movement under the cultural surface is registering somewhere. Maybe, just maybe, the Great Pretend over the sexual revolution is starting to crack.

Mary Eberstadt is a senior research fellow at the Faith & Reason Institute.